

KUNSTHALLE MÜNCHEN

Press release

THRILL OF DECEPTION From Ancient Art to Virtual Reality 17 August 2018 – 13 January 2019

Art invariably plays with our senses, reminding us how easily we are deceived. From the frescoes of antiquity that simulate spatial depth, baroque church interiors that seem to soar aloft, joining the earthly realm to heavenly spheres, right through to modern computer-generated virtual worlds that offer an interactive experience, artists have invariably availed themselves of prevailing optical and technical developments to contrive new elements of design that outwit the beholder and confound him with their skill.

With examples from painting, sculpture, video, architecture, design, fashion and interactive virtual-reality works, the exhibition weaves a wide-ranging and highly entertaining path through (art) history and the visual forms of appearance and illusion. By juxtaposing objects from different centuries according to theme, the exhibition reveals surprising traditions and invites visitors to keep an open mind while engaging with their surroundings.

Playing with perception

In seeking to deceive the beholder, art focuses on very different levels of the subconscious processes of vision and realisation: it takes advantage of the fact that our perception is susceptible to suggestion. Our eye sees more visual information – and at greater speed – than our brain can process. The sheer volume of sensory input provided by the eye has to be filtered, organised and evaluated in comparison with past experience. The fascinating effect of illusory art is created when the observer is fooled by the visual deception, while realising that it must be some kind of trick. Despite having seen through the design, it is impossible to resist the attraction of works such as Hans Peter Reuter's *Kachelraum (Tiled Room)* (1976) or James Turrell's *Elliptical Glass KEPLER 452b* (2017). The amusing interplay of illusion and disillusion also touches on existential philosophical questions: just how reliable is our perception after all? And what consequences does this have for our image of perceived reality? In the era of Photoshop and digital film animation, for example, Evan Penny's photographic representations of hyper-realistic portrait busts (2011) remind us that we tend to consider photographic images to be 'real' – and how easily we are misled.

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Nowadays, we encounter a great many visual deceptions in our daily lives. At the same time, the history of visual appearance and artistic illusion is inextricably bound up with the technical evolution of media. Legend has it that, at a screening of a film by the Lumière brothers in 1896, the audience was dumbfounded by the illusory effect, convinced that a train was hurtling directly towards them. The film no longer has the power to disorientate modern cinema goers. Nonetheless, the exhibition offers a similar unexpected experience: just put on a virtual reality headset and step into Chris Milk's *Evolution of Verse* (2015). The medium is still so new and the execution so surprising that our perception is fooled spectacularly.

Seeing is believing

Artistic optical illusions have always been used to fulfil very different functions. For example, the exhibition demonstrates how the church turned the intuitive persuasiveness of images to account at a very early stage, by using illusionist paintings to visualise religious beliefs. One such work, the extraordinarily lifelike head of John the Baptist by the Spanish sculptor José de Mora (1642–1724), still arouses both horror and compassion, bearing compelling witness to the demise of the saint as a direct physical presence. These visualisations served as an important means of *contemplatio*, empathy and prayer. Above all, the embellishment of baroque churches with impressive ceiling tableaux created a direct connection to the Kingdom of Heaven, as can be seen in the exhibition in Johann Jakob Zeiller's design for the cupola fresco of Ottobeuren Abbey (circa 1760).

Exploring the visible world

The Renaissance saw the rise of a new interest in the visible world and its optical phenomena. For example, research led to the discovery of the rules of central perspective, which added convincing depth to two-dimensional works. The first anamorphoses were produced as part of perspective studies: their motifs can only be discerned from a single angle or by using a special curved mirror. Not only did this visual sophistication fascinate scientists, it also inspired some magnificent artworks, such as the 1642 fresco from the church of Trinità dei Monti in Rome, some 20 metres long, which has been reproduced for the exhibition. Moreover, the manifestations of nature – with its often imposing forms of deception – were collected and examined: animals that mimic the colours and forms of their surroundings, natural stone formations that resemble painted landscapes (*pietra paesina*), or dried rays that take on the guise of monsters. These whimsical illusory objects were displayed in spectacular art chambers, cabinets of curiosities and optical collections for the purpose of edifying audiences, while amusing them and inspiring a sense of wonder.

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The classic trompe-l'œil

During the 17th century, several painters in the Netherlands – and subsequently in France especially – specialised in illusionistic compositions that are referred to today as trompe-l'œil paintings, or 'deceiving the eye'. Rather than giving the impression of depth, the main appeal of these works lies in the subject appearing to emerge from the image towards the beholder. Works by Cornelis Gijsbrechts (1630–1683), Wallerant Vaillant (1623–1677) or Edwaert Collier (1640–1708) still have an impact to this day: the perfection with which these masters impart three-dimensionality, texture and substance to objects like pinned scraps of paper, broken panes of glass or draped fabrics, remains extraordinarily powerful. Artists such as Gerhard Richter or Thomas Demand revisit this type of illusion in works like *Sheet Corner* (1967) or *Glass* (2002).

Copy, appropriation and forgery

A further section is dedicated to special forms of contrivance like artistic appropriation, copying and forgery. For many centuries, imitating the style of great masters was one way of establishing an artist's reputation. It was also common practice to paint faithful replicas of masterpieces. By the time the concept of intellectual and artistic property arose during the Romantic era, and with photography greatly simplifying the reproduction of artworks shortly thereafter, there was a new appreciation of the original. The act of copying was now deemed to be morally reprehensible – even a crime, if there was intent to deceive. Since the second half of the 20th century, artists have consistently focused on exploring the question of original and copy. With works such as the *Circumcision of Christ* (1594) by Hendrick Goltzius, *Christ and the Adulteress* (1942) by Han van Meegeren, *Johns' Flag* (1966) by Elaine Sturtevant or the *Brillo Boxes* (1964) of Andy Warhol, the exhibition offers insight into this enthralling field of art history. The perfection with which 3D printing now makes it possible to reproduce masterpieces, like the paintings of Vincent van Gogh, so accurately that every brushstroke is replicated in relief has re-ignited the discussion of what constitutes the original.

Fashion and design

When illusory objects are randomly incorporated in our daily lives, we are more likely to be duped by them. Thus, the hosts of 18th-century banquets revelled in guests' astonishment when the cabbage on the table turned out to be a soup tureen made of porcelain. Objects are still manufactured in the tradition of 'showpiece' dishes to this day. Material deception is a particularly frequent theme in furniture design: although Marcel Wanders' *Knotted Chair* (1996) appears extremely flexible, it is actually covered in epoxy resin and thus completely solid. Meanwhile, Sam Durant's seemingly ubiquitous plastic lawn chair (2008) is actually

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made of fine, fragile porcelain. Moreover, various strategic devices have dictated fashion over the centuries: corsets worn under outer garments suggest a ‚wasp waist‘, padded undershirts give the appearance of muscles and wigs conjure up a full head of hair overnight. By contrast, in their creations, couturiers such as Jean Paul Gaultier or Viktor&Rolf take a highly playful approach to our concept of the perfect body.

Spatial illusions

The exhibition concludes with intriguing spatial illusions, ranging from ancient Egyptian and Pompeian trompe-l'œil architecture to baroque ceiling frescoes and sumptuous historical tapestries, right through to contemporary room installations. Amongst other things, it highlights the tradition followed by the latest virtual reality technology, which is able to (re) create rooms to unprecedented illusionistic effect. On the virtual tour of the Imperial Hall of the New Residence in Bamberg, under development since 2016, visitors find themselves transported back in time to the Princes' 18th-century world. On the other hand, Laurie Anderson and Hsin-Chien Huang's spectacular VR installation *Chalkroom*, which was nominated ‚Best VR Experience‘ at the 2017 Venice Film Festival, invites the visitor to escape reality and fly through a captivating, imaginary universe.

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KUNSTHALLE MÜNCHEN

OPENING HOURS

daily 10am–8pm | **19.9, 17.10. and 21.11.:** 10am–10pm | **24.12.:** closed | **31.12.:** 10am–5pm

Special opening hours for school groups:

each wednesday 9am–10am, by appointment only: kontakt@kunsthalle-muc.de

DIRECTOR

Roger Diederer

CURATORS OF THE EXHIBITION

Roger Diederer, Anja Huber, Franziska Stöhr (Kunsthalle München)

Andreas Beitin, Annette Lagler (Ludwig Forum Aachen)

EXHIBITION DESIGN

Martin Kinzmaier, stage designer and stylist

PRESS ENQUIRIES

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PRESS IMAGES FOR DOWNLOAD

www.kunsthalle-muc.de/en/press_area/thrill-of-deception/

ADMISSION FEE

Standard: € 12 | **Reduced fees:** Senior citizens (60+): € 11 | Students (< 30 years) and unemployed: € 6 | Young people (6–18 years): € 1 | Children under 6: free of charge | school classes: € 1 per pupil (pre-booked) | Family pass for 2 adults and their (grand-)children (< 18 years): € 22 | On Mondays 50% discount on all admission fees

GUIDED TOURS

Guided tours for groups: guided tours in languages other than German: Tue–Sat: 10am–8pm, by appointment only: kontakt@kunsthalle-muc.de

ACCOMPANYING PROGRAMME (SUMMARY)

»Re-Act!« Harry Klein goes Kunsthalle and Afterwork^{KH} evenings, **concerts** midst the exhibition, **lectures** at the Kunsthalle and a **movie series** at the Filmmuseum. Furthermore there will be curator's tours and guided tours for children.

CATALOGUE

Accompanying the exhibition Hirmer Verlag has published an extensive catalogue with over 200 colour illustrations. Edited by Roger Diederer and Andreas Beitin. With essays by Andreas Beitin, Ute Engel, Marion Kern, Rudolf E. Lang, Susanne Partsch and Monika Wagner.
ISBN 978-3-7774-3139-0

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