

Phantoms and Other Illusions

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Illusions – what first springs to mind? Magic, perhaps, or visual deceptions. We may think of things reproduced so realistically that it seems as if you were actually looking at them. Illusions have a long tradition: already in antiquity we find *trompe-l'oeil* effects, simulations of spatial depth or suggestions of material qualities using completely different substances.

We perceive something that really exists as something other than what it is. The illusion, therefore, is based less on the things themselves than on our perception: it arises in the mind as a result of the way our brain processes sensory impressions.

Illusions are figments of the imagination, also in a figurative sense. Oftentimes, the realisation of our highest aspirations, for instance, or the reciprocated affection of a certain person, unfortunately remain nothing but an illusion. Lurking even beneath collective illusions are disillusionment, disappointment. When sociologist Andreas Reckwitz diagnoses *The End of Illusions*, he is referring to the “hopeful expectations that many have harboured in Western countries since the end of the Cold War in 1989/90”.¹ These were based on “a grand narrative . . . of economic, political, social, cultural and technical progress”,² which from today’s perspective has, at best, been only partially fulfilled.

Illusions thus represent a play with what is visible or what we believe we see or perceive with our other senses. Yet we also speak of illusions when it comes to purely mental phenomena or projections.

The exhibition *Phantoms and Other Illusions* exemplifies an investigation of various kinds of illusion in contemporary art. The play with different materials between the natural and the artificial is juxtaposed with objects and installations that fictionalise our experience of space. Here, aspects of visual deception are always connected with psychological or political levels of meaning. Likewise called into question are the illusionary promises of advertising and fashion, as are the often unnoticed “frames” underlying digital simulations and computer-controlled production processes designed to create the illusion of objectivity.

We are increasingly surrounded by images and things that reveal less and less of how they were created and what degree of reality they possess. What hovers between reality and fiction, as it were, is “ontologically ambiguous” – a “phantom”, as the philosopher Günther Anders noted in the 1950s: for example, what was brought to us in our homes through the then new television.³ By phantoms, we commonly understand ghosts or figures such as the criminal character Fantomas who always hides his true identity, as the artist Banksy does, for example. The ghost stories Anders recounts in his discussions on the outdatedness of human beings are about hand-knitted jumpers sent to broadcasters as gifts for fictional characters from TV series or about neglected husbands who send blackmail letters to their phantom rivals.⁴

¹ Andreas Reckwitz, *Das Ende der Illusionen*, Berlin, 2019, p. 9, (quote trans. B. Lang).

² Ibid.

³ Günther Anders, *Die Welt als Phantom und Matrize. Philosophische Betrachtungen über Rundfunk und Fernsehen*, in: *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, (The Obsolescence of Man; The world as phantom and as matrix: philosophical considerations on radio and television), Munich, 1961, pp. 97–211, (quote trans. B. Lang).

⁴ Cf. ibid.

The deceptive – even personal – closeness that Anders notes here is the opposite of a “distance, however close it may be”, the phenomenon Walter Benjamin refers to as aura.⁵

Aura, which was also closely related to uniqueness and real time, would be lost through media multiplication, as Benjamin described in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in 1935. While, for Benjamin, aura was still perceptible in early photographs, for example, it was virtually fought against aesthetically by radical modernists – and with it any form of illusion clouding the clarity and unambiguity of structures. László Moholy-Nagy, for instance, who taught at the Bauhaus, praised “repetition as a spatio-temporal structuring motif that could only arise in this richness and accuracy through the technical-industrial multiplication characteristic of our time”.⁶

It was not only among technology fetishists that illusion and deception were increasingly disapproved of. As the art historian Ernst H. Gombrich notes in his book *Art and Illusion* (1960), the craftsman’s ability to imitate nature faithfully was no longer widely considered as a genuine artistic quality in Modern Art.

The renunciation of illusionistic imitation reflects an inclination toward puritanism, culminating in the perception of art as a linguistic system whose visualisation is of secondary importance. This applies above all to radical representatives of early Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 1970s. The concepts devised here, usually in written form, comprised the parameters of their realisation, preprogrammed, as it were.

Much of what today can be preprogrammed with the help of algorithms then still lay in the distant future. Nonetheless, as early as 1964, the Polish writer Stanisław Lem already had rather concise thought about all the things that would need to be considered in order to create convincing virtual worlds: “How do we create realities for the intelligent beings that exist in them, realities that are absolutely indistinguishable from the standard reality but that are subject to different laws?”⁷ Lem called the science that might be devoted to the creation of such illusions “phantomatics”.⁸ In describing what could be possible in the future, Lem employs vivid images, such as “Miss World will be responding to his words and kisses; . . .”⁹ He views the use of technical terms inappropriate, if only because “there is as yet neither a phantomatic machine nor programmes for this”.¹⁰

A great deal of what Lem once envisioned has long since become reality. While artistic fiction may precede reality, it is just as likely to pervade it time and again. *Phantoms and Other Illusions* is an exhibition in which the participating artists – drawing on a broad range of media, spanning painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, installation, video and digital animation – delve deeply into the phantomatic realms of our contemporary reality.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction), Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 15, (quote trans. B. Lang).

⁶ László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, (Painting, Photography, Film), Mainz, 1967, p. 49, (quote trans. B. Lang).

⁷ Stanisław Lem, *Summa Technologiae*, Minnesota, 2013, n.p.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 321 et seqq.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 329.