

# Steffi Klenz Concrete Thinking

Essay by Duncan Wooldridge

However much the photograph might appear to resemble a window - however much it appears committed to flatness - it functions as both image and object, occupies and extends into space, and draws a line, from one site to another, tracing a passage of distance, light and time. The image transfers one world to the another, modifying space as it does so. Photographs both multiply and manifest, showing and influencing. An image is not only a view, and the photograph does not simply depict: it *projects* into the world.

Ibn Al-Haytham, in his study of optics, *The Shape of the Eclipse*, observed precisely that the transmission of light through an aperture took the form of two interrelated cones: light narrows from an object to find its way to the aperture or lens, before expanding again to form itself as an image upon a receiving surface. One cone is a compression, the other an expansion. In today's photographic device, this is hard to imagine, but in what we would now call a camera obscura, as Al-Haytham used it to study light and physics, this could be witnessed by the body, studying the visibility and growth of the eclipse across space. The embodied experience of the photographic installation has a potential that we rarely exploit to produce tangible, sensory knowledge, and an the expansion of photographic images, as enlargement, as physical object, and here as installation, show two sides to the photograph: a process where the image moves from the reduction of capture to the production of encounter.

Steffi Klenz's recent bodies of work explore installation and space in the photograph to draw parallels between the image and architecture. Klenz uses installation in concise ways, where the image neither takes over the space nor floats miraculously within its boundaries, and her images accrue layers of association, gesture and meaning through contact, without becoming exhausted. *Tensed Muscles* and *A Scholars Rock*, brought together in the exhibition *Concrete Thinking*, revisit modernist architectures but do so by giving weight to both image and architecture: Modernism set out to give form to the world in compressed, idealized configurations, but lacked the expansiveness of use or wear and tear: here, in Klenz's treatment, they are set into encounters where voices, cultures and spaces overlap and become dense, affective and perceptual layers, however much their original objects it might aspire to the category of the prototype. Design meets use, and Klenz revisits the capacities of image and architecture to go beyond containing (reproducing) the world, to give rise to the generative, productive space of the *that has been but is also not yet*.

Reception and sensitivity characterizes *Tensed Muscles*, which Klenz produced as a commission for the London Borough of Camden. The Maiden Lane Estate, a modernist complex of homes and community facilities, which fell from its ideals of socialized living into cost-cutting exercises, ghettoization, and the atomizing individualism of privatization and right to buy, can be thought as an accelerated depiction of the disconnect between Modernist planning and the political and social realities of its uses. The building is marked by its histories, and Klenz takes the object of the estate and draws links between the human body and the building, here a diagram, so that gestures of sign language and typography reflect on architecture's condition as its state of use, signaling the ultimate impact of architecture on the body. From static objects, buildings and images, emerge a polyphonic array of sounds and gestures, that stretch across space in an installation where structural frames break into the foreground, revealing the tension and engineering of architecture, image and space.

We might consider the analogy between photography and architecture in greater depth than just the camera obscura allows, recognizing that the compound technology of photography is an amalgam, an interconnection of compression and expansion, shadow and light, optical device and sensitive surface. A touchstone for Klenz is James Welling's studies of American modernist architectures, especially his series *Glass House*, which figures architecture as a device for seeing, and for shifting perception. In Welling's series, the Philip Johnson structure of the same name is photographed through a series of coloured filters which transform the transparency of modernist architecture into an apparatus (Welling describes the Glass House as itself a lens in the landscape). The dark chamber of the camera body is complemented by the model of the lens, which positions us as not only as receivers, but as producers. We make the world with our images, and the image makes us.

The cones that Al-Haytham describes in *The Shape of the Eclipse* make sense of some of the early confusions of optics in Western science, where for a long time it was believed that extramission, light emitted from the eye, illuminated the world to make it seen. Image and world are in balance, and the anthropocentrism of extramission cannot simply be replaced by the passivity of a total intromission in its place: the passivity of the photographer as documentarian, and the image viewer as active looker, has its own peculiar, unbalanced logic. In our encounter with images, we still possess the problematic assumption the photographer does not step into the scene, but that a viewer can. In fact, the photographer is present, and the work comes to us: the image steps into space to meets its receiver: pictures travel as do we.

*A Scholars Rock* takes Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion as another lens. Seen through filters, but refracted through folds making the image three-dimensional, Klenz brings the Barcelona Pavilion into dialogue with labour-intensive hand drawn representations of scholars rocks, naturally occurring forms valued for their infinite complexity and resistance to a singular viewpoint. Encouraging us to seek a multiplicity of views, the scholars rocks suggest that, if Mies' pavilion has become a series of iconic and often-reproduced views, the building can also be a refracting lens, escaping modernist economy to embrace complexity, so that image, ground and environment are blended.

Klenz demonstrates this spatiality by calling upon El Lissitzky's *Kabinett der Abstrakten*, or *Abstract Cabinet*, which proposed the assembly of ever new intersections in a radical revision of the gallery where image, object and architecture collide. From new combinations will arrive new potentialities, Lissitzky asserts: the overt affirmation of the new expressed in his series of *Proun* compositions, which Klenz cites as structures for new photographic installations, project the hypothetical space of the image out into the world so that image and object are one. Structures and frames just out, support and extend the world of the image: the *Proun*, reiterated here, describes a return to thinking forward, looking towards a utopia that Lissitzky figured not as a 'no place' but as a place to seek and bring into being.

Where the image meets architecture, Klenz constructs a multiplication of the spatial. We can go further by observing how photographic installation brings out these spaces, whilst image and architecture come into direct interrelation, collapsing the discrete separations we assume mark inside and outside, image and object, reduction and expansion. Taking up space, the image acts in the world.