Vers un nouveau Surréalisme. Las fantasías arquitectónicas de Jim Kazanjian.

Resumen.

Desde la aparición del movimiento en la primera mitad de los años 20, el maridaje de surrealismo y fotografía ha tenido a la arquitectura como uno de sus objetos privilegiados, produciendo imposibles fantasías arquitectónicas revestidas por el velo de lo real. Con la llegada de los métodos de foto-manipulación digital, esta experimentación se ha multiplicado, dando lugar a una enorme variedad de aproximaciones que juegan con la imagen fotográfica para producir escenarios arquitectónicos imposibles pero fascinantes. El artículo centra su mirada en la obra de Jim Kazanjian, un autor procedente del mundo de la construcción digital que, actuando desde los márgenes de la disciplina, ha producido a lo largo de la última década una obra que combina la pericia técnica con su interés por las atmósferas sombrías de los relatos de H.P. Lovecraft o Algernon Blackwood para producir improbables objetos arquitectónicos de oscura pero delicada belleza.

Palabras clave: Fotografía, foto-manipulación digital, collage, ficción

Abstract

Since the advent of the movement in the early 1920s, the marriage of surrealism and photography has found in architecture one of its privileged subjects, producing impossible architectural fantasies covered with a veil of reality. With the arrival of digital photo-manipulation tools, this experimentation has undergone a radical expansion, giving rise to a great variety of approaches that play with photographic imagery in order to produce impossible but fascinating architectural scenarios. This article focuses on the work of Jim Kazanjian, an author coming from the realm of digital building who, working on the fringes of the discipline, has produced throughout the last decade—a body of work that combines technical prowess with a fascination for the somber atmospheres of H.P. Lovecraft or Algernon Blackwood's tales as a means to produce improbable architectural objects of dark but delicate beauty.

Keywords: Photography, digital photo-manipulation, collage, fiction

On October 11 1924, André Breton formalized the official entry of Surrealism into the history of art movements with the publication of the first *Surrealist Manifesto*, which defined it as a "[p]sychic automatism in its pure state... [d]ictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason" (Breton, 1924[1]) that the Surrealists would embrace due to its possibilities for artistic creation. Be it the producer of monsters or not, the sleep of reason was fundamentally productive and, in its visual incarnation, Surrealism would exploit the free combination of bodies and spaces of diverse, incompatible, or antagonistic natures. Following this dialectical liberation from reason, photography was soon incorporated in the repertoire of Surrealism's production techniques. Loaded from its very beginnings with an alleged built-in objectivity, photographic images were particularly appealing for several reasons: on the one hand, because they provided a particularly vivid simulation of the sensible world and their distortion *looked* like a subversion of the rules of reality itself. On the other, because using photography as a means to recreate imaginary worlds undermined the basic conditions of the camera as a mechanical eye that captured reality in an unmediated way, which would prompt Salvador Dalí to state that "nothing will prove Surrealism right as much as photography[2]."

Photography, even with its technical limitations, presented the Surrealists with a whole catalog of techniques to *de-familiarize* reality: multiple exposures that merged bodies together and with architecture, long-exposure photography, reverse printing, and rotations were combined with works in which the efforts focused on the staging of the scene—which became surrealistic when photographed. Alongside the human body, architecture also played a seminal role in the construction of the collective imagination of Surrealism. The images of an emptied but very real Paris captured by Eugène Atget would later be endorsed as their own kind by Man Ray and the Surrealists, while an altered modern city became the subject of photomontages such as *Ne gaspillez pas votre temps* (1927) by Maurice Tabard, among others[3]. Conversely, photographic Surrealism would later reveal as a powerful producer of architectural imagery. In the early decades of the twentieth century, photographers and artists such as Paul Citroen, Otto Umbehr, and Erwin Blumenfeld had discovered the power of photographic collage for the creation of urban cacophonies engendered in the fragmentation of vision. Surrealism introduced a higher degree of freedom where not only the perceptual apparatus, but the depicted reality itself was altered. Thus, although even the sheer possibility of the existence of surrealistic architecture is contested today, its photographic simulation has produced a continuous output of striking imagery throughout history, both in collages put together by architects such as Hans Hollein or Kenneth Browne, and, above all, in the works of photographers such as Tsunehisa Kimura, Scott Mutter, Thomas Barbèy, Fred Scott, and Jerry Uelsmann—artists who, located outside the boundaries of the discipline, freely

1 André Breton: *Manifeste du surréalisme*, poisson soluble. Éditions du Sagittaire, 1924. Translated and reprinted in: André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* transl. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press 1971, p. 26.

2 Quoted in Rothman, R.*,* 2012, 60.

3 See: "Atget and Man Ray in the Context of Surrealism", by John Fuller (1976).

combine architecture with other elements extracted from our reality in order to produce images as intellectually abhorrent as visually enthralling.

Surrealism and photography in the digital era

The digital era, with its advancements in the techniques of photo-manipulation and three-dimensional modeling, has only multiplied the number and variety of these games that play with photographed architecture. Sometimes, these excursions into surrealism happen in complete overlap with disciplinary architecture, with authors such as Philipp Schaerer, architect in charge of the visualization of many designs in the firm Herzog & de Meuron, whose architectural fictions overlap with his photographic work for De Wylder Vinck Taillieu. Meanwhile, the photographs staged by Bas Princen, frequent collaborator of OFFICE Kersten Geers David van Severen, show the same will to unveil the surrealistic dimension of reality that we can find in photographers such as Atget or André Kertész. The possibilities increase as we trespass the strict limits of the profession, presenting a new generation of artists who actively embrace surrealism, finding in architecture an argument and a catalyst: some of them, such as Dariusz Klimczak, use the photographic medium as a means to recreate compositions akin to those in René Magritte and Paul Delvaux's pictorial worlds. Some others, such as Paul Hollingworth and Laurent Chéhère, make architecture the main element of anti-gravitational fantasies. In other cases, there is also an overlap with the history of the discipline and with those moments where surrealism and the visionary went hand in hand. That is the case with Barbara Nati, whose series *No farewell, only endless goodbye* (2012) and *The house of this evening. All mine.* (2013) amalgamate architecture with vehicles and trees, producing images that combine their visual appeal with an ability to create intertextual readings in their involuntary revisions of archetypes that range from the Corbusian liner to Ron Herron's *Walking City* and Luc Schuiten's *Habitarbres* [series].
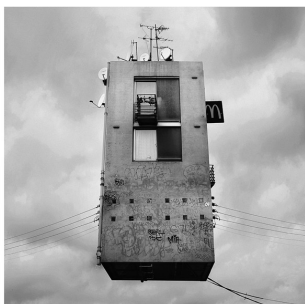
Within the latter group, the work of American artist Jim Kazanjian is perhaps the one that shows in a most telling way the morphological opportunities that breaking the veil of reality can offer for architectural (re)imagining. A Masters of Fine Arts graduate since the early 1990s who made his professional debut working as a 3D modeler and concept artist for the video game industry, Kazanjian is not an architect and has no specific training in that field. He is not a photographer either, working exclusively using preexisting materials that he appropriates, which are already in digital form. This has not prevented him, on the other hand, from producing a para-photographic work in the last decade, which is as fortuitous in its genesis as consistent in its interest and dedication to architecture. Starting with the collage *untitled (sun)*, in 2006, Kazanjian would produce in subsequent years a series of images linked together by a few common parameters: all of them have been assembled using photographs from the digital archive of the Library of Congress and all of them are only modified using photo-retouching software.

Figure 2: [2.1] Jim Kazanjian, 'untitled (sun)', 2006, and 'untitled (structure)', 2007.

Organic processes and narrative structures

Taking these premises as a starting-point, each manipulation project develops organically from the very rules set by each photograph. Kazanjian admits he feels comfortable working with[in a] series, but still, each idea stems from the suggestions of an initial image that is subjected to a progressive manipulation and developed without a predetermined goal. As if in a process of fictional, visual *maieutics*, the photo-manipulator interrogates the image, which—establishing connections with his extensive digital archive of photographic materials—defines the route to take: "It is very much an 'organic' process, but also a bit like a puzzle. I just let the materials tell

me where they want to go. If I conceptualize the project too much in advance the process is less interesting and not as effective. [4]"

Each image goes through a slow transformation where it intermingles and overlaps with fragments of up to seventy different photographs, resulting in a "hyper-collage," in which the original disappears. It is fundamental to Kazanjian both that the image he starts with becomes unrecognizable at the end of the process and that this first image, as well as all the other fragments, are not only as anonymous, but also as unremarkable as possible. On a basic level, this stems from an intent he shares with some other digital photo-manipulators, such as Filip Dujardin, who are concerned with turning the architecturally inconsequential into something interesting. It also relates him to the work of artists such as Kris Kuksi, who makes his sculptural ensembles by putting together inexpensive objects, which merge into complex compositions covered by a common textural patina. As it happens with those, Kazanjian's work is immediately recognizable, appearing as part of the same genealogy, regardless of the unique personality of each piece, where buildings, vehicles, industrial structures, and elements from nature are merged together in different proportions.

Figure 3: Jim Kazanjian, 'untitled (chateau)', 2011: Excerpts of the process and finished collage.

Of course, part of this immediately recognizable common identity stems from the layout and the chromatic characteristics of the final image. Invariably photographed in a centered position, often a frontal one, with an empty, human-less landscape behind them, Kazanjian's *natures mortes* are always presented with a strict black-and-white palette and in a square format, appearing as *objets trouvés* whose purposeful anonymity is underlined by the nomenclature chosen by the author. All of them are adamantly named as "*untitled*," followed by a word in parentheses that offers a dispassionate description of the subject: (vehicle), (station), (object), thus reinforcing their collective appearance as an architectural taxonomy in the vein of Bernd and Hilla Becher's *objective* compilations of industrial remains. Only this time

4 Author's interview with Jim Kazanjian conducted in August-October 2017.

they seem to come from a parallel reality, possibly bred in Edgar Allan Poe's tales. However, as in Philipp Schaerer's equally fictional *Bildbauten*, which shares this historical filiation, the illusion of reality disappears as the spectator's eye analyzes the image.

Figure 4: Taxonomies from a parallel reality. Complete series of collages by Jim Kazanjian from 2006 through 2016, starting with the most recently completed, 'untitled (probe)' (2016), and ending with the earliest, 'untitled (sun)' (2006).

While some of Kazanjian's images are evidently fictional constructions, in some others this is not obvious at first sight. However, when carefully examined their collage nature starts revealing itself: an impossibly homogeneous focus, an excessive *sfumato*, [and] slight discrepancies in lighting reveal that we are contemplating a suture of moments and places that become animated once the observer enters the space contained in the image. This does not happen by chance and takes us back again to the need for the anonymity of the individual images. In one of his better known statements, John Berger concluded that "[p]hotographs in themselves do not narrate." (Berger 1978) However, as Diane Waldman notes, a collage combines "the original identity of the fragment or object and all of the history it brings with it; the new meaning it gains in association with other objects or elements; and the meaning it acquires as the result of its metamorphosis into a new entity.[5]" (Waldman 1992, 11). Kazanjian—an author fascinated by the atmospheres of the tales by Horace Walpole, Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, and Algernon Blackwood—uses architecture specifically because of "its potential to generate narrative structures[6]." Often his impeccable works of digital suture could be taken for stills of a surrealist film, stories

5 Quoted in Shields, Jennifer A. E., 2017. *Collage and Architecture.* New York: Routledge, s.n.

6 Jim Kazanjian interviewed by Patrick Brakowsky in "Surreale Architekturcollagen" (2015).

we find *in medias res*, as in Lovecraft's texts. Actually, instead of frozen instants they are, on the contrary, collections of different moments that are shown to the viewer articulated in a cacophonic—*schizophrenic,* according to Fredric Jameson's terminology (Jameson 1982)—*hyper-reality,* an augmented reality where every moment is presented at the same time with isotropic intensity, making him experience an indefinable but noticeable cognitive dissonance[7].

Figure 5: Architectures in medias res. [5.1] 'untitled (facade)', 2010 [5.2] 'untitled (exterior)', 2010 [5.3] 'untitled (backyard)', 2011 [5.3] 'untitled (bungalow)', 2016.

7 Frida Grahn uses this term to characterize the uneasiness felt by the observer when scanning Philipp Schaerer's photo-collages, which feed him with impulses both supporting and undermining the authenticity of the photographed object. See: Frida Grahn, "Die Macht des Bildes" (2016).

Figure 6: [6.1] Jim Kazanjian, 'untitled (station)', 2014 [6.2] Kris Kuksi, 'Neo-Roman Opera House', 2013 [6.3] Jim Kazanjian, 'Vehicle (Station)', 2013 [6.4] Kris Kuksi, 'Church Tank Type 7B', 2009.

Towards a new Surrealism (architectural, photographic, and digital)

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the possibilities of the marriage of Surrealism and architecture were glimpsed and desired from both sides of the binomial. The intersections of architecture and Surrealism were subsequently explored by Frederick Kiesler, and perhaps most ~~notoriously~~ remarkably by Le Corbusier in his well-known attic for the Beistegui apartment in Paris in 1930[8]. However, long before that, Le Corbusier and Surrealism had already crossed paths in the realm of photographed architecture, through the snapshots of Versailles taken by the former, which overlapped with Paris as photographed by Atget[9]. Working in the

8 For an analysis of Surrealism in Le Corbusier's work, see Alexander Gorlin, "The Ghost in the Machine: Surrealism in the Work of Le Corbusier" (1982).

9 This topic has been analyzed by Armando Rabaça, in his article "Le Corbusier, Atget, and Versailles" (2012).

heart of the digital era, the work of artists such as Jim Kazanjian exemplifies how productive the meeting of architecture and surrealism may be when developed in a photographic medium. With the advantage of the perfected suture of realities provided by the new means of image production, those new surrealists recover a narrative potential which is inherent to architecture, but which is also often forgotten, and use it to open windows onto other surreal worlds while, at the same time, discover fiction as an ideal crucible to generate architectural image/form.

In a moment where architecture reconsiders its relation with photography, which seems to threaten to reduce it to a mere two-dimensional image of itself, and where at the same time, digital construction tools seem to displace real images, photographic fiction comes to vindicate the latter's validity. If in *Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture* (2016) Jesús Vassallo shows how Bas Princen's work is an integral part of the architectural design processes of OFFICE, which the architects do not regard as finished until they have been photographed by Princen[10], Kazanjian's oeuvre appears as a vindication of photography, of that native stratum which adds that undefinable element to the image, while he brings new life to photographs whose time is long past.

References

Breton, A., 1969. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, transl. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Brakowsky, P., 2015. Surreale Architekturcollagen. *Schwarzweiss*, nº 105, pp. 20-27.

Berger, J, 1978. Uses of Photography. For Susan Sontag. En Berger, J., 1980. *About Looking*. New York: Pantheon, pp. 48-63.

Fuller, J., 1976. Atget and Man Ray in the Context of Surrealism. *Art Journal*, Vol. 36, Nº 2, 130-138.

Gorlin, A., 1982. The Ghost in the Machine: Surrealism in the Work of Le Corbusier," *Perspecta*, Vol. 18 (1982), pp. 50-65.

Grahn, F., 2016. Die Macht des Bildes. *Archithese*, blog, Zurich. English Version.

Jameson, F., 1982. Postmodernism and Consumer Society. En Foster, Hal (ed.), 1983. *The Anti-Aesthetic.* Port Townsend: Bay Press.

Rothman, R., 2012 *Tiny Surrealism: Salvador Dalí and the Aesthetics of the Small*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

Rabaça, A., 2012. Le Corbusier, Atget, and Versailles. *Joelho: Revista de Cultura Arquitectónica*, abril 2012, pp. 157-166.

---

10 Jesús Vassallo, *Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture,* Zurich, Switzerland: Park Books, 2016.

Shields, Jennifer A. E., 2017. *Collage and Architecture.* New York: Routledge.

Vassallo, J., 2016. *Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture.* Zurich: Park Books.

Waldman, D., 1992. Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object. New York: Harry N. Abrams.