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THE GLOBAL VISUAL

Abstract

The idea of transforming architecture from the concepts used in visual arts strongly began with the avant-gardes, where architecture was defined in terms of space, air and perception. From then on, the evolution of photography/visual arts and architecture has remained extremely closed, and sometimes even creating some confusion in understanding the borders between them. Since the appearance of film and movies, ›reproduction‹ of reality has become a characteristic of modern civilization. It is obviously a straight relationship between the development of photography in the early modern architecture and the way both disciplines have walked together till today, a time when architecture is part of our daily mass consumption.

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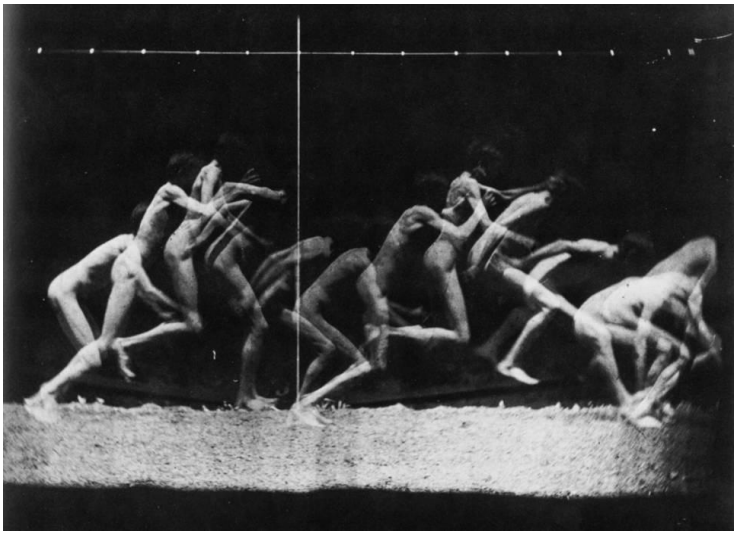
The idea of transforming architecture from the concepts used in visual arts, strongly began with the avant-gardes, where architecture was defined in terms of space, air and perception. From then on, the idea of a complete portrait, or the chance of having a complete reproduction has became one of the obsessions of modernity. In that terms, it is now nearly a century since Walter Benjamin announced that the future will be defined by reproduction, in what became one of the more suggestive texts of the twentieth century. Its very well known essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*[1], first published in 1936, addresses a modern, technologically effected transformation in the nature of art and, by extension, its political implications. The idea of being able to transform a single object or piece of art into a non-unique object or performance that could be experienced not only by audience members willing to make a pilgrimage to the artwork's location was clearly one of the ideas due to change art theory in modernity.



1 Thomas Eakins: *Double Jump*, 1884

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Benjamin contrasts the traditional art object with modern artworks, whose broad spectrum of reproductions as images, sound recordings or film reels, were going to be mechanically copied and distributed widely. A few years earlier, the french thinker Paul Valéry wrote, in the article *La Conquete de l'ubiquite*,[2] that we should »expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art«. This statement made clear that there were common physical components in the arts, which no longer will be considered or treated as it used to be. Obviously the physics of art could not remain unaffected by modern aesthetic theory. Avoiding circling deeply into that consideration and trying to discuss just on the terms which visual perception has come to root modern aesthetics, we could consider to set a departure point in the turning from 19th to 20th century. From then on, neither matter nor space nor time had been what it was from time immemorial. More specifically portraying reality after and through modernism is no more a simple or easy operation involving just an artist and a motif. It becomes not only a reproduction act but also, and here it is genuinely contemporary, a productive art. We might think, just to take one specific example, about the work, programmes and manifestos of the Futurists, Constructivists or Simultaneists. Painting and photographing conceived by Boccioni or Delaunay, with its absolute plastic dynamic, embraced the accelerated rhythms of modern life. Cinema with Vertov's eye machine, for example, rendering all machines synchronous, transformed the act of seeing into something mechanical. Also, and extending the art production to spatial performances, suprematist and constructivist architects transmitted messages and forms as the represented dynamics of builders and ›constructeurs‹.

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In all these situations, mediating with images is not just passive any more, but implies mediation of act, transforming, with no return, art as an active identity, that focuses more deeply into their re/production and less into the essence of what traditionally has been considered as an artistic procedure. The artist, now also called himself a producer, takes into consideration the possibility of not just capturing an outer reality, but putting himself into the essence of the motif and, precisely, auto-portraying at the same time the object and the abstract ability or chance to do it, generating a sort of new family of art objects just by simply identifying or pointing at. Sometimes it is conceived more as a metaphysical approach to the human environment, where the artists is both the director and the actor, rather than plainly watching a performance.

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But contemporanism, considered the natural evolution of modernism, sets both perspectives into a unique one. All the agents of the work of art come together to fusion into the creative act. The director, the actor and now also the spectator are no longer different perspectives or approaches, but just different personalities of the multi-polar art character. This is exactly what Sugimoto, the Japanese photographer, in its absolute and complete portrait of a film, is doing. Sugimoto, deeply influenced by the writings and works of Marcel Duchamp, as well as the Dadaist and Surrealist movements as a whole, has also expressed a great deal of interest in late 20th century modern architecture. His use of an 8x10 large-format camera and extremely long exposures have garnered Sugimoto a reputation as a photographer of the highest technical ability. He is equally acclaimed for the conceptual and philosophical aspects of his work.[3] Sugimoto is producing its work by selecting a scenario, waiting and watching through a couple of hours, in order to get produced a pure and blank square that contains a whole universe, as if it were Borge's aleph: that miraculous point of space that contained all other points in the universe.[4] In Borge's story, the one who gazes into it can see everything in the universe from every angle simultaneously, without distortion, overlapping or confusion. Sugimoto's aleph contains not only every single frame of the movie, but also every single experience of the spectators and all of them into a single unique blank square that provides a fully abstract view. By this operation, he is able to translate the representation of the whole, moving image, into something specifically static and abstract.

2 Hiroshi Sugimoto: *Winnetka Drive Inn*, 1977

3 Hiroshi Sugimoto: *Radio City Music Hall*, 1977

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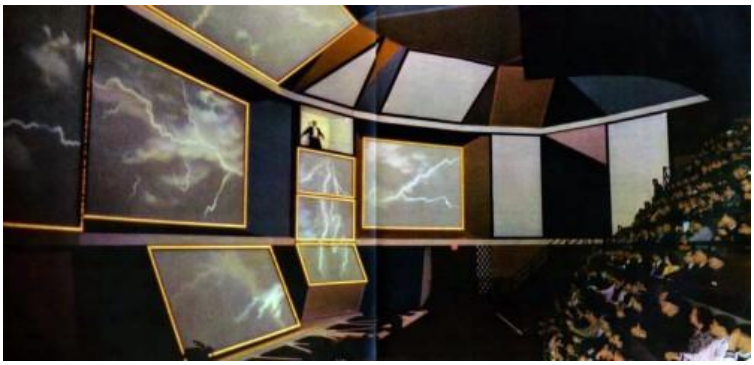
The well known German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has described society as a complex network system of spheres, a mixed and hybrid reality.[5] He suggests the existence of »spaces of coexistence«, spaces commonly overlooked or taken for granted that conceal information crucial to developing and understanding of the human. Basically, it is a kind of personal and intimate microspheres of immunity where everyone can construct or control the context. In our contemporary society, where we are surrounded everywhere and constantly by hundreds of arrays – sometimes aggressively – of multiple and simultaneous images, the idea of just having a single and silent image commanding our attention becomes absolutely

rare. It seems as if we need to be distracted in order to concentrate. The words of Beatriz Colomina explain that concept perfectly:

»We are surrounded today, everywhere, all the time, by arrays of multiple, simultaneous images. The idea of a single image commanding our attention has faded away. It seems as if we need to be distracted in order to concentrate. As if we – all of us living in this new kind of space, the space of information – could be diagnosed en masse with Attention Deficit Disorder. The state of distraction in the metropolis, described so eloquently by Walter Benjamin early in the twentieth century, seems to have been replaced by a new form of distraction, which is to say a new form of attention. Rather than wandering cinematically through the city, we now look in one direction and see many juxtaposed moving images, more than we can possibly synthesize or reduce to a single impression. We sit in front of our computers staring with a fixed gaze at many simultaneously ›open‹ windows through which different kinds of information stream towards us. We hardly even notice it. It seems natural, as if we were simply breathing in the information.«[6]



4 Charles & Ray Eames: *People Wall*, IBM Pavilion, 1964

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Nevertheless, the future of image, as defined by Rancière,[7] is becoming the current present. Evolving from the media image, when TV sets began taking part of our families, contemporary society is realizing that, we are not anymore considering TV as a passive broadcasting media, but using the internet as a participative world wide broadcast of even what we are just thinking in the current minute. The reproduction age, in which the original object has still the category of icon to be reproduced, has evolved into the streaming and digital age, where there is another reality, as an illusion, streaming itself online, even more real than the real one where we are living. We have got examples, never imagined by Benjamin or Valéry, as global webcams, global satellite streaming images or even global on-time geo-location, that permits to having our world pictured several times at a time, in what has been defined as the contemporary multiperception. But multiperception should be

defined as something else than mere moving image practices and technologies that exchange the white cube of the exhibition space for the black box of image projection.[8]

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This ambiguous term holds a context where reality is not linear, but complex and even contradictory. It has the ability to put together not only the representation of the objects into their context, but also the meaning of that reality and its singularities.[9] Some artists and critics predicted that the rising of the moving image format as video, holography or new forms of computer-based rendering, will modify the status of the work of art in our age of information. In fact, as the collage technique and photography replaced oil-paint, the LCDs will replace the traditional canvas. But it is not only technological determinism. The projected and multi-framed image has surprisingly found its way into the museums and also into the discourse of modernity. Probably, this has something to do with the curious theory of spectra, very popular and famous on 19th century, that suggested that the photographic image retained the very outer skin of the objects and people to retain it, physically, into the photographic paper. That gave the image and photography, the power of having physically inherited the spectra or soul of reality. Also this has a lot to do with the evolution of the discourses between cinema and art, as cinema and all its derivations, have become one of the most representative fields of work in contemporary art.

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As Peter Wollen pointed out in his essay *The Two Avantgardes*,[10] it is necessary to define a clear-cut categorical distinction between an avantgarde critically and creatively dealing with the established language of cinema or media and an avantgarde formalistically focused upon the self-reflexive use of the medium, or what has been termed ›Greenbergianism‹ as applied to film. But these seemingly opposed categories actually required and mediated each other and in our present situation, it is quite clear that there is no longer a desire for clear-cut categories any more, but for integration of apparently very opposite intentions. In this respect, the history of photography is very significant. As Jeff Wall defended in his lucid essay *Marks of Indifference*,[11] photographers such as Walker Evans worked as photojournalists in the 1930s while striving to achieve the status of a modern artist, while avantgarde artists in the 60's – such as Dan Graham or Robert Smithson – used the model of the photojournalist to reject the false heroism and formalism that was part of the image of the modern artist.

5 Star VanderBeek: *Moviedrome*, 1969

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Extending the field to architecture and in a similar way, this seems what contemporary architecture is expecting from architects. As architecture is also the expression of our contemporary society, mixed form and more and more abstract materialization of space are transforming the way we used to think about space, specially in terms of utilization. The abstraction and pure reflections of the no-where has nothing to do with the pseudo-minimalisms of the 80's, but to a deep conviction that space could be defined just by the superimposition of our own reflection images. Nevertheless, this rhetoric supposes that photographers, film-makers, artists and, by extension, new media devices, might strive to achieve the status of an avangarde artist, but the fact is that real avangarde artists, architects included, use the media of film, photography and the broad visual field without fine-art ambitions and many times simply to provide and contextualise visual concepts into space.

6 SANAA: Serpentine Summer Pavilion, London 2009

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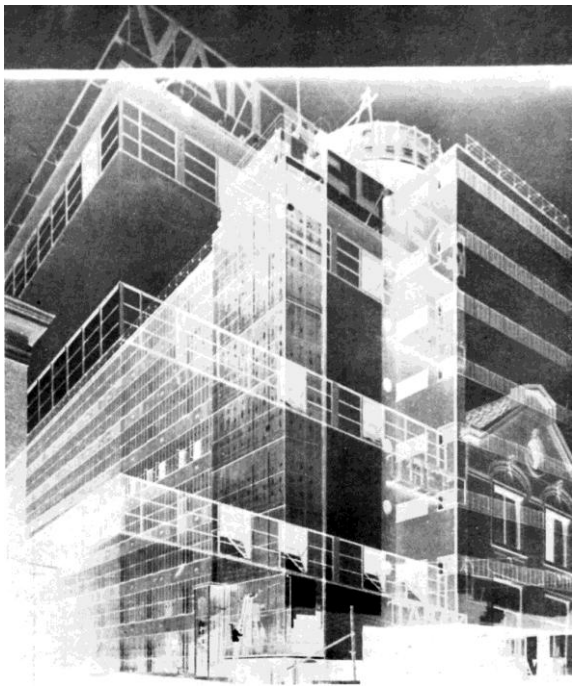
In this era of extreme and absolute visuality/virtuality, architecture usually gets involved in a process of only-reproduction and not just constructing and still images are being replaced more and more by video. The world of ideas and the heterodox avantgarde is getting somehow impossible in our so called real life world, and only possible in the mirror, in that neo-platonic more real place where categories are pure, absolutely abstract and, maybe, even more real than reality itself. On the other hand, if the photographic image assumed the category of a manifest icon during the modern movement, embodying its own autonomy with respect to the represented object, now it is contemporary, global and instantaneous society that lets reality be recreated in each of our homes. It is no longer necessary to have seen the reality itself, no even through public events at which the author narrates the personal history of his work. This filtered and nuanced trip has today become a personal and intimate show, letting viewers participate in these private and almost secret travels via new media.



7 Jan Kamman: *Architecture*, in: Film und Foto Exhibition, 1929.

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In addition, the idea of transforming architecture and space from the concepts used in visual arts is not new. The exhibition *Film und Foto*, that was held in Stuttgart in 1929, made a very interesting definition of architecture, defined not by words but by a very unique photograph: Jan Kamman's *Architecture*; making explicit that words or tags, have strong limitations in order to describe concepts and images. The definition of architecture was made in the most

modern possible way, without any word and making possible to communicate the essential concepts of modernity and spatiality just by a visual and only reference. From then on, the evolution of photography/visual arts and architecture has remained extremely closed and sometimes even creating some confusion in understanding the borders between them. Contemporary architecture production has still something to do with it. Let's take, for example, the case study of the house built by Rem Koolhaas in 1998 in Bordeaux for a physically handicapped man.

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In the film *Houselife* and after a worldwide screening, its author, Rem Koolhaas, brings the house to viewers by means of different interlinked video sequences. Koolhaas' *Houselife* is not so much an attempt to exhaustively describe the house down to its last details. It is quiet different from the majority of documentaries about architecture. Maybe because *Houselife* explains the building, its structure and its virtuosity to let the viewer enter into that invisible bubble of the daily intimacy of an architectural icon. As the author states, »It is not flattering, it is realistic!«. There is no flattery of the house or the architecture, but merely reality. In the interview at the end of the movie, the architect states the surprise about the working methods of Guadalupe, the cleaning assistant, above all after watching her carefully polish and clean steps that are possibly never used. The main interest of the famous architect is to depict an absolutely daily reality, to give life to one of these master works of architecture. He wants to reveal those times that are never shown, where it is possible to see the daily reality, a tangible reality that perhaps surpasses and restricts the established myths. The canonical spaces suffer from this restlessness, just like Jeff Wall did at the Mies Pavilion in Barcelona, his most radical and evocative transformation. Both are examples that presented a new way of looking at architecture and space, undoubtedly expanding their field of representation. Enlarging the field of representation means offering a new and different perspective, both of the house and the pavilion, as we are already familiar with, both of them due to their propagation in specialized and mass-consumption media.

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It is funny that in *Houselife*, it is Guadalupe, the cleaner and assistant, and other secondary characters and not the owner, who explain the changes, the transformation and the most domestic details about the home. This is what expands our field of representation. It is through those who know its secrets and manage the house that we are shown the artifices of its implementation. Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoîne, the directors of *Houselife*, explicitly propose »to give life to one of these architectural masterpieces that we can see everywhere

without never being able to see them how they ›really‹ are in everyday life«, banishing the iconic and idealized regard of architecture and »demonstrating its vitality, fragility and vulnerability« by observing the daily life, habits and testimonies of the people who live there, using it and maintaining it. While this is true, or aims to be so, and attending a screening of *Houselife*, we are presented with a filtered and different perspective of the house, down to its last detail, sublimated a guided tour of the house not far from what anyone would intend to do in real.

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The fact is that visual production and media are linking all kinds of artistic work, that nearly do not exist without it. There are no longer appropriate or non-appropriate subjects for art, as the rules for appropriateness between particular forms and specific subjects. We live in a kind of representative regime where, somehow, ›Societé de l'espectacle‹ has now been replaced by the society of the non-extraordinary. The non-extraordinary has become the only possible, as every single frame of our every-day is uploaded online for global webcasting in an exaggerated example of the so called ›the result gets bigger than the action‹. Both aesthetical theory and artwork production is right now at a crossroad, not necessarily marked by conflict between disciplines, but by the necessity of defining new spaces and contexts, in and out of fine arts, to explore new media and expressions.

Author's profile:

Ruben A. Alcolea, PhD, Architect, prized Special National award in architecture studies. Visiting teacher and also Visiting Scholar at the Architectural School of Architecture, in London, where he has developed research projects and given seminars. Specialized in photography and modern architecture, has published several articles in magazines, read papers in congresses and given lectures in several cultural international associations. Author of the book *Picnic de Pioneros. Arquitectura, fotografía y el mito de la industria* (Pioneer Picnic. Architecture, photography and the myth of industrialization), (Valencia 2009). Involved in historical and theoretical research, and has developed web-based platforms on Visual Media to teach and discuss around topics related to avant-garde and media. Currently teacher both in design and theory courses at the School of Architecture of the University of Navarre, where he currently is Vice Dean.

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