BILD BAUTEN

PHILIPP SCHAERER

STANDPUNKTE

ARCHITECTURE IN THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD

MARTINO STIERLI

Developers and investors have long used the evocative aesthetic power of digital imaging to convince the public of the architectural qualities of a proposed project or prestigious public building. The software available to produce these renderings has reached such a degree of perfection that the digitally manipulated images can hardly be distinguished from reality by the untrained eye. Continual advances in computer-assisted imaging techniques are dissolving the boundaries between image and simulacrum, presentation and representation. The images' photorealistic aesthetic suggests an amalgamation of the virtual and the real. This aesthetic allows them to be read as authentic records of reality. Their dissemination by global mass media accentuates this reading: the more frequently we come across a rendering on a broad range of communication channels, the more inclined we are to assume that the vision it offers is already a part of built reality. For not only newspaper illustrations but also the photographic medium itself are both still widely believed to warrant authenticity and present an accurate depiction of reality. And those who produce architectural renderings consciously draw on the aesthetic of photorealism to suggest that the buildings thus portrayed are not only potential but also desirable components of reality. The digital production of images is, in this way, always image politics: it helps cement economic and social interests,

interests with which architecture—at least as it is actually built—has always been closely intertwined.

Are digitally created renderings of fictitious buildings thus essentially little more than manipulated images of a different kind? Do they ultimately aim to delude or at least anesthetize the public by means of their aesthetic appeal? Critical voices maintain that digital imaging, better able to generate a reality effect than any other medium to date, has opened up an entirely new and potent dimension of image manipulation. Seen in this way, architectural representation, in this digital image practice, could be said to have reached a historic low. But there are, of course, other ways to see this. The theory of photography has always insisted that the medium is by no means merely a tool for the accurate representation of facts and circumstances. On the one hand, a photographer has the power to shape the perceived world according to his imagination before, during, and after taking a photograph; on the other hand, the photographic image is subject to conditions dictated by the technical *dispositif*, or apparatus, of the camera itself. Architects were among the first to understand the power of the photographic image and the possibility of its manipulation as a means to represent their spatial and architectural visions irrespective of any functional or economic constraints. That precisely avant-garde architects have often put architectural photography in the service of their spatial imaginations has been discussed in a number of critical studies in recent years.[1] The manipulation of images is thus not an invention of the digital age but has rather played a consistent role in the intimate relationship between architecture and photography. Accordingly, a critical reflection on the digital architectural image contributes to the development of a more nuanced understanding of architectural photography in general.

The *Bildbauten* are one of several series of digital architectural images from the studio of the Zurich-based architect Philipp Schaerer. They depict

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fictitious buildings that draw on fragments of "real" architectural typologies but originate in essence in Schaerer's imagination. The digital imaging techniques employed in their fabrication imbue these virtual buildings with a surprisingly realistic appearance. Schaerer began his career as an architect but quickly put his visual skills in the service of his practicing colleagues, particularly at the office of Herzog & de Meuron, where he left a lasting impression on the firm's in-house visualization aesthetic. The *Bildbauten* series, by contrast, is fundamentally different from this kind of commissioned work. Here, as in the *Meereshorst* series that he worked on simultaneously, Schaerer makes a case for the architectural image as an artistic genre in its own right and, in the same vein, for architecture's liberation from the practical constraints to which it is permanently subject. Both series are bold statements for the cause of the image and equally for that of architecture more generally. In his *Bildbauten*, Schaerer subversively eludes the very economic conditions that provided him with the technical means with which to produce the series. This critical dimension is evinced not least by the visual content, for it is virtually impossible to attribute a function or typologies to the buildings portrayed. The arrangement of apertures appears to run counter to or even in diametric opposition to functional requirements. The *Bildbauten* are, in this way, an avowal of the autonomy of architecture, an act of resistance against architecture's compromise by practical constraints of any kind, an act of resistance in the medium of the image.

In their structure and content, the *Bildbauten* are distinguished by a number of recurrent themes. Consistently rendered in portrait format, each image depicts a fictitious and strongly sculptural architectural volume that is composed of a few planes and presented at a limited distance from the standpoint of an ideal viewer. The foreground and the patch of sky visible in the background are left vague and nondescript and serve primarily to provide a frame for the architecture. Their subordinate role in the image

betrays nothing of the depicted volume's urban or rural context and only a hint, at best, of the season in which we should imagine it to be. It is exactly this paucity of contextual information that further emphasizes the remarkable strangeness of these uninhabited architectural objects that seem to be totally bereft of human presence. The single-plane arrangement of the facades underscores the flatness of the images, thereby self-referentially drawing attention to the fundamentally two-dimensional quality of each visual representation. Yet while the individual buildings are presented as self-contained, isolated entities in space, in many cases they are visible only partially, as their lateral limits extend beyond the frame. Schaerer's visual aesthetic is characterized by further idiosyncratic qualities: a particular attentiveness to the portrayal of the tactile properties of surfaces; a preference for simple stereometric volumes, textures, and patterns; and an almost symmetrical organization of the image that, in combination with the low-slung line of the horizon, lends a certain static monumentality to the buildings portrayed. They appear as self-conscious counterparts, each with an almost anthropomorphic presence.

Despite the isolation and monolithic presence of each of these volumes, the *Bildbauten* easily lend themselves to being read as a series. Schaerer quite explicitly references methods of conceptual photography as well as artistic practices centered on the encyclopedic documentation of reality. The picture sequence brings to mind Dieter Roth's photos series of Reykjavik, for example, as well as the proto-documentary aesthetic of Ed Ruscha's seminal artist's books of the 1960s—*Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, *Real Estate Opportunities*, and *Some Los Angeles Apartments* for instance—all of which were based on typological visual research in the urban landscapes of southern California. The most obvious reference for the *Bildbauten* however seems to be the serial documentation of obsolete industrial buildings produced from the 1960s onward by German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. Like the Bechers, Schaerer treats his motifs as isolated enti-

ties but embeds them in extensive series. His *Meereshorste*, by contrast, recall the utopian architectures conjured up in the 1920s, in particular El Lissitzky's *Wolkenbügel* (the montage technique of which Schaerer has cited as a reference) or, equally, contemporary photographs such as Wolfgang Tillman's *Macau Bridge* from 1993. There are also references to realized contemporary architectural projects in the *Bildbauten* series, both in the sculptural presence of the architectural objects and in the complete treatment of visible surfaces with a uniform materiality, characteristics familiar today first and foremost in Dutch architecture particularly in the work of practices such as MVRDV. Here, the aesthetic of the digital architectural image appears to have spilled over onto the executed building. If not for the hard edges and clearly defined lines of Schaerer's *Bildbauten*, associations with Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapped monuments would also be conceivable. Such diverse references to built reality illustrate how intently Schaerer seeks to blur the boundaries between the real and virtual. His *Bildbauten* are architecture in the subjunctive mood: not faithful representations of reality but, rather, architectures of potentiality without direct reference to a reality beyond the image.

The photorealistic aesthetic of Schaerer's *Bildbauten* easily overshadows the fact that these computer-generated and digitally manipulated renderings have little to do with photography in the strict sense of the word. Computer software has replaced the camera as the primary tool of image production. Photographs of real buildings may be part of the inception of the *Bildbauten* but they remain, nonetheless, mere source material and are subsequently modified and reconfigured into imaginary architectures during a long procession of creative steps. The fragments of original photos underlying the *Bildbauten* ultimately dissolve completely within the new configurations and are no longer identifiable as distinct elements.[2] This synthetic process of image production resembles the technique of photomontage, which, very much like the *Bildbauten*, consists in compiling fragments of

existing photographs into a new pictorial composition. Paul Citroën's work *Metropolis* (1923) could be cited as a classic example of this technique within the field of avant-garde architectural representation. While in this case the individual photo fragments are juxtaposed and the breaks and ruptures within the image are clearly highlighted as a deliberate means for the creation of meaning, in the *Bildbauten* these ruptures are completely erased. Referencing Ulrich Weisstein, one could distinguish between, in the former case, a "demonstrative" and, in the latter, an "integrative" form of montage and, accordingly, read Schaerer's method as the perpetuation of avant-garde montage techniques achieved under different technological conditions.[3] Yet while photomontage is usually limited to the synthesis of photographs or fragments recycled in the sense of *objets trouvés*, the image manipulations that underpin Schaerer's *Bildbauten* involve numerous additional interventions. In this respect, but also with regard to the concealed respectively "integrative" montage of pictorial elements, the *Bildbauten* can be seen to have more in common with traditional genres such as the architectural *capriccio* or the pastiche. Architectural fantasies, such as Joseph Michael Gandy's *Comparative Architecture* (1836), are like-wise based on true-to-life representations of structural elements but ultimately conjoin these so as to create fictitious buildings. But while Gandy's drawing attests to a proto-postmodern avowal of stylistic pluralism, Schaerer, by contrast, uses digital interventions to highlight the formal unity of the buildings portrayed. Both approaches share a ready access to the visual memory of the Western architectural tradition as an imaginary archive that can be called upon at any time in the creation of a new image. In this regard it is telling that Schaerer worked for Herzog & de Meuron not only as a renderer but also as a "knowledge manager." He was thus responsible for organizing the office's digital (image) data files in a way that would make them easily accessible for their reuse in future projects. The production of (digital) images and the organization of knowledge mutually determine each other.

In his *Bildbauten* and in his insistence on the currency of images vis-à-vis the building, Schaerer represents a concept of architecture that runs counter to the professional ethos by which the architect understands himself first and foremost as a person who builds. His approach could be termed "conceptual," not least because it closely approximates the eponymous art genre. In Schaerer's view, the executed architectural project is merely one possible manifestation—and by no means the one and only form—that architecture might take. The predominant activity of Schaerer's architect consists not in actual construction but rather in transforming his conception of architectural space and its organization into images that can become manifest in such diverse visual media as drawings, photographs, photomontages, models, exhibitions, or built objects themselves. Schaerer spelled out the distinction between the photographer and the architect against this background: while the former is interested in the world as it is, the latter focuses his attention on the world as it could be.[4] Against this idealistic understanding of architecture, Schaerer's manipulated images appear not so much as instances of illusion or deception than as inventions intended to render visible the realm of architectural ideas. Their critical dimension lies in their resistance to the power of what is.

NOTES

1. See, for example, comments on Le Corbusier's manipulation of images in Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994); Claire Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). See also my forthcoming study *Montage and Architecture: Studies on the Conception and Representation of Space in Modernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

2. Individual steps in the creative process, as exemplified by the work *Bildbau N° 11* (2008), can be viewed on Schaerer's website, http://www.philippschaerer.ch/e/w-bildbauten-mak.html.

3. Ulrich Weisstein, "Collage, Montage, and Related Terms: Their Literal and Figurative Use in, and Application to Techniques and Forms in Various Arts," *Comparative Literature Studies* 15, no. 1 (1978): 124–39.

4. It goes without saying that this understanding of photography as mainly representational is at odds with many artists' photographic practices.