

# BILD BAUTEN

## PHILIPP SCHAERER

EDITED BY RETO GEISER

CONSTRUCTING IMAGES — 69

MARTINO STIERLI

ARCHITECTURE IN THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD — 72

NATHALIE HERSCHDORFER

WHEN THE VIRTUAL BECOMES REAL — 80

AFTERWORD BY PHILIP URSPRUNG

VANISHING IMAGES — 90

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# CONSTRUCTING IMAGES

RETO GEISER

When Russian artist El Lissitzky credited himself as “book engineer” in Vladimir Mayakovsky’s 1923 *Dlia Gólosa* [For the Voice], he suggested that art, architecture, typography, and engineering would, ideally, merge into an inseparable yet distinctive field. Similarly, we could call Philipp Schaerer, initially trained as an architect, an “image engineer.” His digitally conceived works—among them those presented in this volume—are the outcome of a skillful amalgamation of photographic knowledge, compositional skills, digital craftsmanship, and the specificities of architectural practice. Schaerer’s imaged architectures do not correspond with actual buildings but instead both challenge the role of the photograph as documentary evidence and, equally, critique how architecture is consumed today.

When first released in 2010 in German and French, this book was the only comprehensive presentation of Philipp Schaerer’s work available. And while the perpetual development of information technology and digital photography is continuously rebalancing the relationship between architecture and its visual representation, the architect’s synthetic images continue to occupy a relevant position within this debate. The *Bildbauten* series, assembled here in its original twenty-four plates and extended by eight additional new works, speaks a powerful visual language that transcends the barriers of any written text.

Over the past few decades, visual literacy has become a vital skill and an integral part of any ambitious architectural practice. But while the rapid proliferation of images seems to be inescapable in our daily routine, our individual capacities to express ourselves effectively within this congested sphere are still relatively underdeveloped. Today, there are many professionals who have the skills to produce imaginary depictions of three-dimensional artifacts, but only few master the differentiated cohesion between space, light, and texture. Through his architectural imagery, Schaerer significantly contributes to this visual world and positions himself as an inherent part of it. The collection of selected fragments extracted from what can seem to be a waterfall of information is the starting point of his visual journey. The creation, classification, and organization of these visual resources are the foundation of Schaerer's work. Over the last few years, he has gathered a massive pool of photographic images, a collection which is continually growing. Traveling the world with his camera at hand, the architect is constantly on the hunt for new visual inspiration, for endless varieties of weather conditions, surface textures, and sceneries to eventually merge into a cohesive image.

As opposed to the typical rendering, which numerically maps patterns, material textures, and light effects onto the surface of an abstract digital model composed of points, lines, and surfaces, Schaerer's digital collages achieve a seamless textural and material reality based on the compilation of individual photographs. Like a plastic surgeon, the architect eliminates the scars caused by the collapse of fragments, creating an appearance that barely allows us to determine whether we are looking at representations of built works or purely imaginative creations. The effect is further augmented by the exclusive use of seemingly objective, flat, frontal perspectives, very much in the tradition of the documentary photography established in the context of the Dusseldorf School. Schaerer was a digital archivist at the office of Herzog & de Meuron in Basel for more than five

years and, this training considered, he seems to occupy a spot at the intersection of knowledge management and artistic creation. The work is driven by a meticulous process of digital editing and the careful manipulation of individual pixels toward an unprecedented degree of what might be called photographic hyperrealism.

We once accepted photographs as the true representations of reality, accepted them without much hesitation or doubt about their validity. In his *Bildbauten* series, Schaerer cunningly takes advantage of this historical condition. By means of imaginary buildings, he consciously blurs the boundaries between authenticity and manipulation. Negotiating the fields of architecture, landscape, and photography, the architect operates without the typical limitations of physical reality. As the architect of his two-dimensional constructions, he has the ability to overcome the laws of gravity, structural necessities, and very basic functional needs of architecture. In his taxonomy of monolithic and abstract buildings with a shared horizon line, he forcefully stresses a flatness of perspective that equally removes the images from their context and from the subjectivity of their creator. And yet, by precisely positioning architectural indicators of scale, such as openings, seams, or detailed material textures, Schaerer repeatedly subverts our assumptions by infiltrating an unprecedented sense of realism in his designs. This tension between the fictitious and the real, as is suggested in the very title of the series, reminds us that architecture is a discipline not restricted by construction but rather one that can excel beyond the limits of the built realm.

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