

## ACTS OF INTERPRETATION: THE PLANE OF NON-AGREEMENT

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*'The collage can illustrate the distance between the specific utopias of our profession and its actual professional means and possibilities, and, moreover, you can vivisect architectural trends and tendencies by collages whose composed images come closer to actual architecture than the written word.'* (Nils-Ole Lund, 1990)

*'One rainy day in 1919, finding myself in a village on the Rhine, I was struck by the obsession which held under my gaze the pages of an illustrated catalogue showing objects designed for anthropologic, microscopic, psychologic, mineralogic, and paleontologic demonstration. There I found elements of figuration so remote that the sheer absurdity of that collection provoked a sudden intensification of the visionary faculties in me and brought forth an illusive succession of contradictory images, double, triple and multiple images, piling up on each other with the persistence and rapidity which are peculiar to love memories and visions of half-sleep. These visions called themselves new planes, because of their meeting in a new unknown (the plane of nonagreement). It was enough at that time to embellish these catalogue pages, in painting or drawing, and thereby in gently reproducing only that which saw itself in me, a color, a pencil mark, a landscape foreign to the represented objects, the desert, a tempest, a geological cross-section, a floor, a single straight line signifying the horizon... thus I obtained a faithful fixed image of my hallucination and transformed into revealing dramas my most secret desires – from what had been before only some banal pages of advertising.'* (Spies, 1988)

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The paucity of architectural representation in thoughtful relationship to time and experience becomes apparent when we acknowledge an overwhelming bias towards static methodologies. More seldom than not, the means by which we conceive of the spaces that we inhabit are derived from motionless techniques that do little to acknowledge the trajectory of sun and moon, the atmospheres of place, or the trace impressions of our own interactions. Currently, the written word and other allied arts come closer to Lund's idea of "actual architecture" than architectural representation's own conventions. One

can easily argue that the techniques of collage are inherently suited to convey the temporal qualities almost completely lacking in traditional methods of architectural representation.

In *Atmospheres*, architect Peter Zumthor describes what he calls the “Magic of the Real” in referencing a 1930’s photograph by Baumgartner. He writes:

*‘A question. A question I put to myself as an architect. I wonder: what is this [Magic of the Real] – Café at a students’ hostel, a thirties picture by Baumgartner. Men, just sitting around – and they’re enjoying themselves too. And I ask myself: can I achieve that as an architect – an atmosphere like that, its intensity, its mood. And if so, how do I go about it? And then I think: yes, you can. And I think: no you can’t.’ (Zumthor, 2006)*

Zumthor’s closing question and unsure response highlights the perceived limits of the architect when the product is considered without the advantages of time, architecture as frozen in time. Yet he recognizes how the photograph was able to move beyond the split second of the frame and capture the unique qualities of the environment. In that image, our mind is able to read soft conversations, cigarette smoke, and dishes shuffling around a kitchen. These elements, seldom captured in architectural representations, serve as the most fertile territory for the designer.

Architect John Hejduk also places great importance in the role of the photograph as a form of architectural representation. In his essay “The Flatness of Depth,” he poses the following: “What is the reality of architecture? What are architectural representations of reality? Is its (architecture) realization absolutely necessary?” (Hejduk, 1980) These questions frame what he describes as a “haunting obsession” (Hejduk, 1980) with all the “numerous masks of apparent reality” (Hejduk, 1980) and the complexities attached to the representation of architecture — *its conception, image, representation, and realization*. The essay, and the questions it poses, clearly hold great significance for Hejduk as it not only serves as the forward to *Judith Turner Photographs: Five Architects* but also appears twice in his seminal work *Mask of Medusa*, printed a half decade later.

In outlining all the numerous forms in which architecture can present itself, drawing, photograph, model, as well as the physical building, Hejduk concludes that the photograph, “a single, still, fixed photograph,” (Hejduk, 2008) embodies an emotional integrity that comes the closest to approximating architectural experience. Hejduk goes on to argue that spatial perception evolves from a series of still frames captured in unequal intervals. While static in their composition, they are anything but in the sense that the subject brings a multitude of experience to the visual conversation. Hejduk concludes that in seeing a photograph “the mind of the observer is heightened to an extreme, exorcising out from a single fixed photographic image all its possible sensations and meanings.” (Hejduk, 2008)

Hejduk’s “total architecture is made up of parts and fragments and fabrications” (Hejduk, 2008) and Zumthor’s *Magic of the Real* resides beyond mere quantitative measurement. The key to both of these arguments is that they transcend the mere mechanical eye of the camera and consider time as an integral component of any still frame. In other words, our memories are most clearly engraved when their source is created by the ever-changing simplicity of the everyday. In Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire*, the lines delivered by Peter Falk to the archangel as he stands in front of a snack stand in Berlin exemplify this idea. “To smoke, have coffee. And if you do it together it’s fantastic... Or when your hands are cold you rub them together. That’s good. That feels good. There are so many good things.” (Wenders, 1987) Ultimately, these simple pleasures, described as synergistic experiences, convince the angel to descend to earth. Likewise, multi-sensory temporal atmospheres are at the core of architectural experience but are seldom invoked in representational processes when creating form and

meaning. It goes without saying that the allied arts such as writing and film could not have survived had their characters not wrinkled with time. It is hard to argue against the thesis put forth by Hejduk and Zumthor about photography's ability to transcend the mere physical reality of space and evoke memories that reside at the core of human experience. But the photograph is not a design tool as it portrays an architectural reality that is complete in most respects. *What happens when you are conceiving of an unbuilt architecture and the photograph is not yet a possibility? Where might the origins of the creative process reside?*

*'Everything is known, including that which is still unknown. The Paranoid-Critical Method (PCM) is both the product and the remedy against that anxiety: it promises that, through conceptual recycling, the worn, consumed contents of the world can be recharged or enriched like uranium, and that ever-new generations of false facts and fabricated evidences can be generated simply through the act of interpretation.'* (Koolhaas, 1978)

Thomas Carlyle wrote in *Sartor Resartus* that "tangible products" are said to be reduced to the categories of "Cities... Fields... and Books" with the worth of books "far surpassing that of the two others." (Carlyle, 1999) The intent behind citing this passage emerges not from being partial to the written word, but to establish a sympathizing companion to the more often cited chapter "This Will Kill That" and out of optimism that the transformative power of literature evident here will inspire architecture and expand upon traditional practices of imagining and representing space. In the foreword to *Collage and Architecture*, Juhanni Pallasmaa quotes the poet Joseph Brodsky, reminding us that even though collage has long been associated with visual art and film, "it was poetry that invented the technique of montage, not Eisenstein." (Shields, 2014)

Drawing upon the aesthetic nature of language as defined by Borges as he describes the near symmetry of the English *moon*, the signifier plays a central role in searching out a vocabulary that describes qualities seldom associated with the errant trajectories initiated by the hand in the early design process. While the sketched line as well as the typewriter's hammer both create shapes that evoke symbolic associations, sketching, or *disegno* as it is referred to in Italian, relies more heavily on composition and geometry and drawing convention in its primary reading. So while two parallel lines might create an almost instantaneous reading of a wall, either in plan or section, and a series of these lines might further begin to evoke a sense of materiality, language possesses the ability to, with the same effort, open the reader's eyes to a scale unimagined by first marks in graphite and ink. When James Agee describes the material of the sharecroppers houses as *bone pine hung on its nails like an abandoned Christ*, he is metaphorically connecting the structure's skin to that of the human body while reinforcing the daily even religious struggle inherent to the life of its occupant. (Agee, 2001) The signified image thus plays a vital role in expanding the potential of a simple subject to command an emotional quality seldom achieved through drawing alone. Collage provides a method that transcends the present tense that so consumes the static systems of architectural representation. Collage is simultaneously a fixed frame, a collection of parts, and a distortion that in the words of Jorge Luis Borges possesses 'as many readings as there are readers.' (Borges, 2001)

*Acts of Interpretation* represents a set of first year assignments that draw heavily upon the unique attributes of collage and considers an alternative design methodology for the conception of spatial ideas. This pedagogical approach incorporates a series of steps that biases writing, embraces qualitative accident, and finally yields representational artifacts positioned somewhere between the written word and the physical construct. For this particular series of assignments, the beginning design student is asked to accumulate brought-together elements and place them into what Max Ernst referred to as his *plane of non-agreement*. The source material for the assignment, *the worn, consumed contents of the world*, is language culled from issues of *Vogue* magazine that is by default a

representation of contemporary culture. Students scour its pages for wording that strikes them as having a strong visual and auditory component. These fragments are then crafted into written prose with the underlying charge to challenge the perceived limitations inherent to conventional representational techniques. In many ways, this work is more closely related to the development of a screenplay where one's ideas about what constitutes *place* are quickly inhabited by dripping gutters and coke bottles filled with sand. The process evolves with the translation of the student's prose into visual triptychs that expand upon their newly discovered *hallucinations* and *secret desires*. Text from the first assignment is positioned on the middle panel. On the left, students generate a diagram that serve as a kind of construction manual that illustrates the organizational strategy of their prose. The right panel consists of images that draw heavily upon what the surrealist artist Salvador Dali, in describing his PCM, defined as a "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectivity of the associations and interpretations of delirious phenomena." (Koolhaas, 1978) These images are not meant to infringe upon the freedom of the reader but instead expand the potential visualization of their written prose and *touch the viewer's soul to some degree*. As a new thesis begins to emerge out of the exercise, the project evolves into a series of drawings that continue to provide alternate readings and form the foundation of a time-based composition that incorporates sound and triggers interstitial readings. Ultimately, through this process of "conceptual recycling, the worn, consumed contents of the world can be recharged or enriched like uranium." (Koolhaas, 1978)



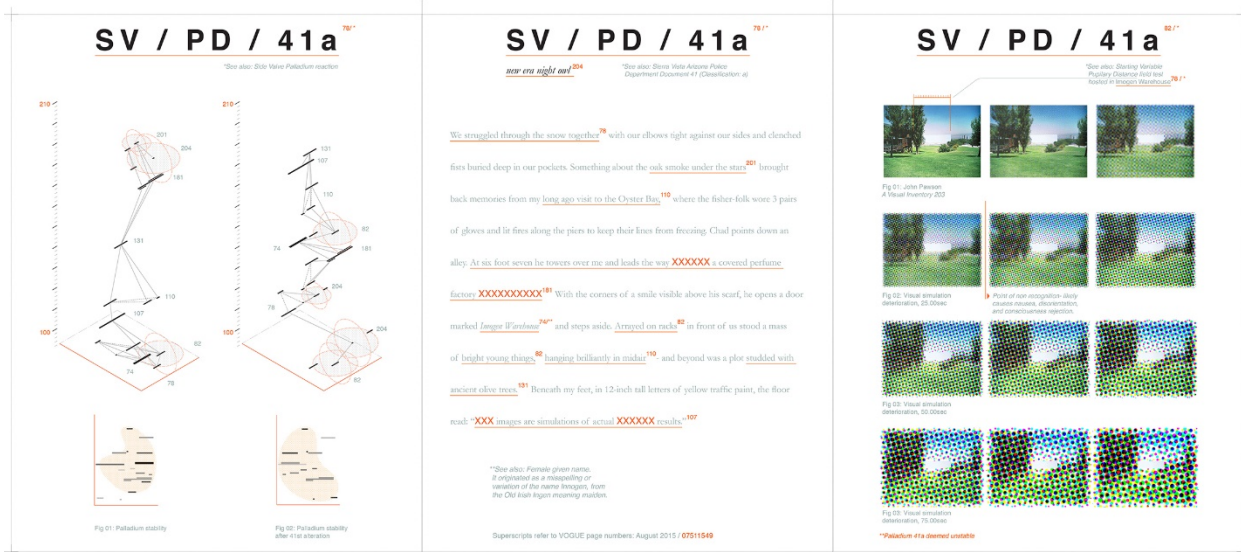
Figure 1 Kelsey Jillian. Vogue Magazine Triptych: Assignment 01 + 02. August 2017

Unlike drawing, which generally starts with the blank slate of the page, collage starts with referential source material. Through a process of literary collage, the various components are juxtaposed and reanimated in a newly assembled composition while maintaining some history of their previous life. By virtue of this process, a collage oscillates between retaining some of its original truth or patina and its new narrative infused by assemblage.

The theorist Ben Nicholson speaks to the role of source material described by Ernst when he emphasizes the importance of an artist appropriating raw material that is directly associated with the age in which he lives. (Nicholson, 1990) In his book *Appliance House*, the source material for his collages comes from the *Sears Catalog* and the *Sweets Catalog*, "the American institution for store bought articles and the encyclopedic collection of brochures aimed at the building industry," (Nicholson, 1990) respectively. In describing the transformational capacity of collage into a "new



unknown plane of non-agreement.” (Nicholson, 1990) Serendipitously, Nicholson references a work by Ernst in which a human-sized slug occupies the same couch as a group of distracted musicians, stating that after seeing this collage “it is never again possible to see someone reclining on a couch without a slimy afterimage.” (Nicholson, 1990)



Dillon Canfield. Vogue Magazine Triptych: Assignment 01 + 02. August 2017

The actual time of making must, out of necessity, account for the search for one’s source material. Whereas artists like Kurt Schwitters, who relied on trash dumpsters in alleyways, used readily available resources for their source materials, others such as Joseph Cornell put great importance on the pre-assembly process of seeking. Cornell’s search was meticulous and involved combing through antique shops for precious objects. Through this exhaustive reconnaissance he created archives or files on each of his obsessions - movie stars, ballerinas, etc. When collaged together, this range of objects possessed the greatest possible metaphorical association. While most renderings maintain some degree of uniformity through the choice of medium, one that binds a composition into a singular reading, collage intentionally generates some degree of perceptual distance between its parts so as to have greater latitude to manipulate the viewer’s subconscious readings. The disparate parts tend to align more closely to an overarching thesis and less to the episodic project, as it might be perceived under conventional terms.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Like collage, and processes inherent to the making of graphic images, the Acts of Interpretation series privileges the unexpected act. However, rather than relying on a visual language that requires an education in compositional rules and systems, the assignment expands upon preconceived notions within the framework of language; using techniques with which all first years come well equipped as they pertain to the rules of grammatical syntax. So whereas the combination of images register new possibilities in traditional forms of collage, the combination of words achieves a similar goal but with a greater degree of confidence by students that have spent the greater portion of their formative years using words and numbers rather than images.

Ultimately, the assignment juxtaposes language with mental image and demonstrates to the student how one might create new readings from a series of fragments. Once the collage is realized through language, visual equivalents are then generated. The use of the triptych allows for this translation to occur both as an exercise in diagramming (left panel) as well as one in metaphorical and narrative

structure (right panel). At this point in the project, examples of the formation of various artistic consciences are presented that include such works as the notebooks of Walter Benjamin's Arcade Project, Gerhard Richter's Atlas, and surrealist examples of automatic writing practiced by authors such as James Agee. These precedents are extremely useful in demonstrating how a system of collage mimics the formation of one's artistic conscience. While the traditional educational system might seem linear and systematic, the student begins to perceive that it is perhaps in large part non-linear and relies heavily on happenstance and that it operates in a present tense.

Currently, the outlined project has been expanded to include a multitude of next-steps that take the form of visual adaptations and transformations. Once the student has considered the role of linguistic collage and becomes comfortable with its possibilities in the described context, they incorporate such techniques as the graphic novel as well as film in steps that continue to expand upon their newly generated worlds.

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