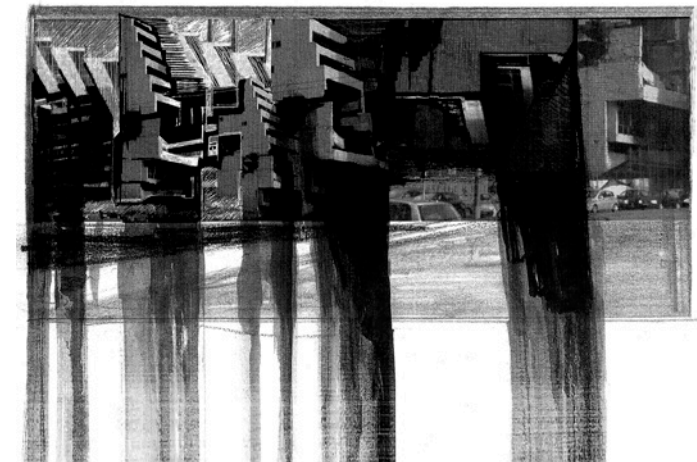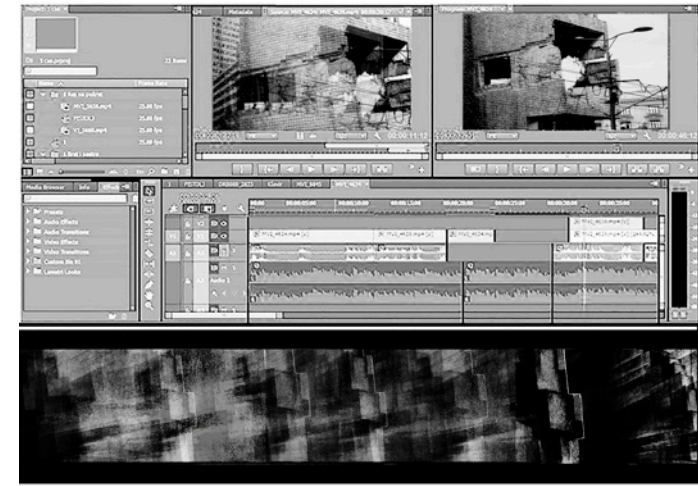# Visually reinventing architecture in the pre-cinematic scenario of Idris Khan's photographs

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Abstract

This essay analyses a visual reinvention of architecture in media by using Idris Khan's photographs to show how the expression of a new reality of the Anthropocene changes the experience of architectural space in our collective imagination. From ancient ideas of how to animate form, to attempts by early cinema at decomposing life's movement, and to the most recent features by groundbreaking digital technologies manipulating visual narratives, the relentless recreation of the world has long been the concern of artistic expression. Could inanimate representations, such as photography, committed to the literal recording of reality as perceived from the eyes of the observer, be considered as a mechanism for animating form?

Keywords: photograph, architecture, animate form, pre-cinematic, time.

[Fig. 1]
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Capturing the consequence of destruction and reconstructing the image of bombing following the compression and prolongation of time. Montage in the film software Adobe Premiere, 2014–2015

Visually reinventing architecture in the pre-cinematic scenario of Idris Khan's photographs

With consideration for the potential of digital technology to surpass the binarities of what is "alive" in form and "non-living" in life, this essay proposes that Idris Khan''s production of photographs contribute to reveal animate form as a critical philosophical issue in human perception, and in the same time as a fundamental manipulative agent of cinema's very own temporal composition. I argue that Khan's attempt to animate form in the image can be understood as counteract to Bataille's "formless", in anticipation of the mechanism for diagnosing the effects of digital technology on reopening the time of the image. Regarding the fact that the forms we see in Khan's photographs evade "a linear flow of sequential statements" (characteristic of language) and remain "stubbornly simultaneous" (characteristic of cinema), search for an expression of new reality opened the isolated moment in time and established visual layering. Taking this tendency to engage the temporal mode as mechanism for creating architecture in his photographs, conditions have been provided for connecting Khan's conception of architecture with the painter's pre-cinematic mode of representation. Analyzing the common cinematic features they use, such as montage, editing and temporal progression, I examine how Khan's disintegration of composition can be related to Bergson's understanding of painting as "thinking through time" and to Edgar Degas'' pre-cinematic method of temporalizing space as "animating form".

Affected by the human since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, as atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen claimed in 2002, the planet entered a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene. The anthropos had overpowered nature in this period and the long-established axiomatic divides between humans and nature, living and non-living, global and local, were infringed. These binarities were also recognized as the basic tool in Khan's work on establishing new conceptual relationships with the space. In search of an alternative understanding of visual space, he is subverting the idea of stabilizing human life that characterizes the human-made. Driven by Heraclitian thesis that "man can never enter the same stream," he operates like a critical cartographer who explores the Anthropocene by charting shifts in the ways that humans move through, dwell in, and dream of space and place in a world where our grasp of visuality of space has been fundamentally shaken. Khan's choice is to capture and describe the major monuments of durability of the present world (The British Parliament, St. Paul's Cathedral, The London Bridge) through the dimension of its instability. The idea of the human artifice, once a symbol of durability and solidity, now enters the artistic language to become the subject of ephemerality, temporality and friability.

Moving along major contemporary issues, such as ecological instability, socially deviant posthumanism, global circulation of garbage and uncontrollable phenomena caused by work of natural forces, Khan's approach to the medium of photography embodies architecture as animated form of life, as both theme and medium, in light of the new forms of consumption, disposal, interaction, and the effects of contamination in the age of the Anthropocene.

In this context, Idris Khan's photographs are not so much about artistic image as they express desire to see the changing image of space in our experience of the everyday life. In negotiating the "epitomizing life" through his photographs, we read how the production of visual knowledge configures the expression for what is "alive" in photography, carried out in a moment-to-moment, repeated, concentrated, overlapped. Nevertheless, by bringing life to an inanimate form of a building, Khan's method discloses the opposite direction of his thought: the so-called search for "epitomizing life" in our living world is strongly related to predicting an apocalyptic scenario. Surpassing the vast natural catastrophes: tsunami, volcanic eruption or an earthquake, as natural and human induced causes inhabited uncanny silence after the devastation, life has only been saved in the binary meaning of Khan's animated form. This is recognized in the enigmatic effect of the form of a building. On one hand, the "epitomization of life" was only maintained in the materiality of the building that resists the trace of time. It is essentially reflected in the line expression of its bare structure. On the other hand, the "epitomization of the apocalypse" is expressed in forcing the truth of the catastrophe that we are moving to at the age of the Anthropocene. The image is distilled until it reveals some new truth. Lines in the foreground are replaced by their alternate appearances in the background, in the manner of manipulating elements like "fire" while "burning" through the layers of the visual display. While layering the image, parts of the photograph are blurred and disappear, but gradually a space and an image emerge which gather traces of overlapping over time.

Accordingly, a representation of time in the photography is attained through narrative/anti-narrative visual devices, repetition and a layering of images. By detecting a representation of time in the photography, Khan''s disintegration of composition can be related to Bergson''s understanding of painting as "thinking through time" and to Edgar Degas'' pre-cinematic method of temporalizing space as "animating form". It can be traced in the painter''s pre-cinematic method with which the composition became close to "framing". By applying the technique of temporalizing space in a denaturalized way, Degas was a forerunner of the method of modern cinema. If, according to Bergson, "there are ways of thinking through time when observing the painting", in Degas'' hands these methods staged the very medium of painting as transitory moving set of rules[1] to make it possible; and it goes in package with the instructions for viewing. His choice of repetitive study of the dance rehearsals is conducted to observe and analyze a subject that is structurally based on repetitive movements and reinvention.

1 Graw, I. and Lajer-Burcharth, E. (eds.). (2016). Painting Beyond Itself. The Medium in the Post-medium Condition. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
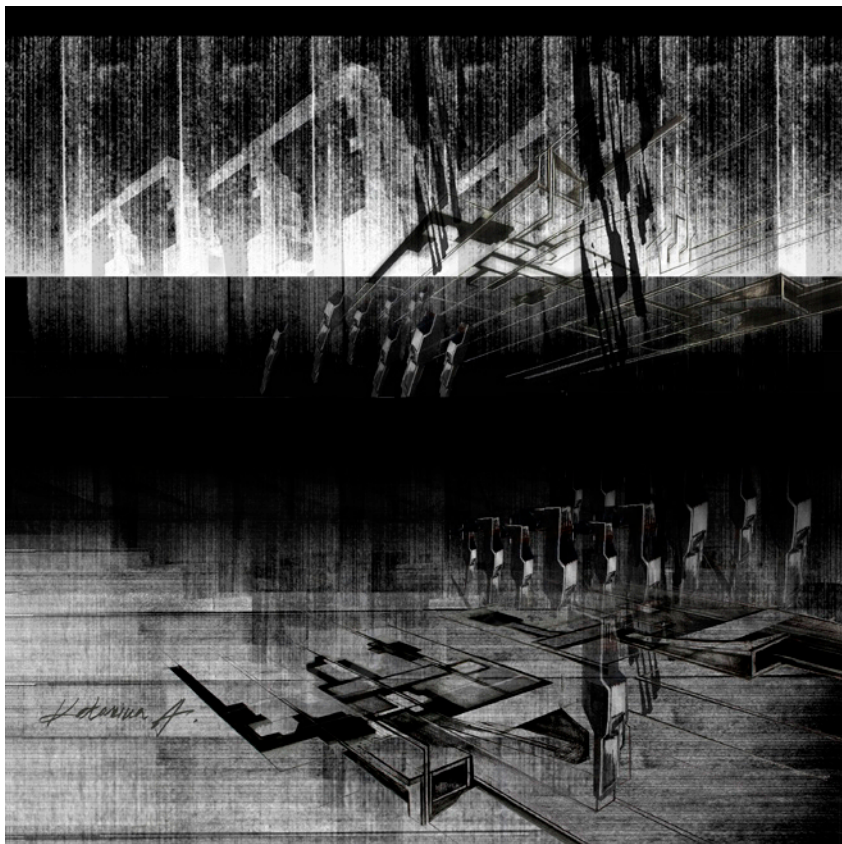
[Fig. 4]

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Nikola Dobrovic, Serbian Military HQ (The Generalštab building), Belgrade 1963.
Photography by author, 2016

Repetition invokes a process-related way of painting-in-progress with endless new beginnings and overworking that point to the impossibility of its completion. Creating an ongoing process of constructing, revising, defining rules, which precede his painterly "choreography", could be compared with the dance rehearsal that happens before the public performance. Not least the topos of the rehearsal allowed Degas to visualize often long periods of time his compositions needed to be "completed," or, to refer to Davis Joselit's and Isabelle Graw's conference papers, such modes of depicting the dance rehearsal can be seen as a way to store labor time. This raises the question of whether and how the timing of the ballet rehearsal can reveal a more functional than substance-oriented or even a conceptual idea of the medium of painting. This way, Degas brought together qualitatively different practices into the medium of painting to testify time as being a discovery of new opportunities. Likewise, the animated form of depicted architectural spaces in Khan's images testifies to the identification of the functional element of "choreographing" time in painting and photography. New age of the Anthropocene is seen as a process-related way of the changing experience of our reality. It is visually configured through inscribing changes in the repetitive process of manipulating photographs. By focusing on its temporal aspects where space is considered a journey instead of a destination, to confirm that the human artifice is not absolute, eternal, solid, Khan's artwork sees architecture as part of this processuality. His work, be it an implementation of new narratives or a stubborn exploitation of old ones, speaks of a fascination with the layers of photographic materiality that reveal some new meaning in lines of writing. By introducing these integrated spaces of change, the architecture becomes an agent that alleviates the current pressure of accelerated life adaptations and time scenarios. Perceiving, capturing and constructing reality in repetitive fashion in the binary game of life and apocalypse, Khan's photographs pay homage to Deleuze's skepticism regarding the "survival" of the time-image of cinema in the digital age. His concepts and representations seem to synchronize our nostalgia for visually reinventing architecture.

To test how the expression of the Anthropocene changes the experience of architectural space in our collective imagination, I performed an experiment in my native city of Belgrade. The project "The Generalštab Building: Fragments of the visual image" (figs. 2-3) explores the history of a building through a sequential visual representation. Dealing with the digital tools, as part of probing the possibilities of image creation, the project is searching for possibilities to expand the practice of photography. My research focuses on the representation of time in the case of the Generalštab building (Serbian Military HQ, architect Nikola Dobrović, 1963) during the NATO military operation against the federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1999). The ruined state of the building can be seen as a reminder of the past, once whole but now broken and exposed to further destruction. As an incomplete whole, the building has taken on both the connotations of the nostalgic past and the apocalyptic future.

The form of the building is set in action to reconstruct the image of the event in a process-related way. It is seen as a way to extend the practice of photography on creating of imaginary scenarios of the ruined building. I took particular shots to convey the layers of meaning in the image, simultaneously transcribing the disposition of the frames, the pictorial composition, and the movement within each cinematic sequence. The historical event of the bombing is reconstructed following the compression and prolongation of time, induced by the difference in repetition"[2]. The result are fictional scenarios of existing spaces devised for visually communicating multiple and overlapping dynamics of change in contemporary urban spaces after the "Apocalypse" (the event of the bombing, in this case).

To conclude, using Idris Khan's methods from his pre-cinematic scenario provided a new intellectual environment for rethinking the role that photographs may play in visually reinventing architecture in the age of the Anthropocene. In other words, to relate our human experience in architectural and artistic terms, we would insist to remain caught in an intellectual pattern that has recurred from Descartes to the poststructuralists. In that regard, the essay has demonstrated how Idris Khan's projects contest the cinematic worlds of Tom Gunning's phantasy metamorphosis using the animated image's potential to evoke a form of experience grounded in the living world. At least in Europe and the United States, at the turn of the century, the use of time-lapse photography to reveal the movements of plants, for example, was promoted and received as a wondrous special effect that brought nature to life, frame by frame, as in a stop-motion animated film[3]. The resemblances stem from an important overlap between the flow of time inscribed in Khan's photograph and the first animated forms emerged by the use of time-lapse photography. In that sense, Khan's critique of the Anthropocene, by digital manipulation of image, reveals the relation between humans and technologies to be one of mutual construction rather than domination, or in Esther Leslie's words, "in animated nature, technology and magic are one"[4].

2 Deleuze, G. (1968). Différence et Répétition. Paris: Presse Universitaires de France.
3 Williamson, C. (2015). Hidden in Plain Sight: An Archaeology of Magic and the Cinema. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
4 Leslie, E. (2014). Animation and History. In K. Beckman (ed.). Animating Film Theory. Durham: Duke University Press.

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