

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



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Introduction

A space of exploration, discussion and reflection towards new ideas on the use of photography

Pedro Leão Neto

“Today we chase after information, without gaining knowledge. We take note of everything, without gaining insight. We communicate constantly, without participating in a community. We save masses of data, without keeping track of memories. We accumulate friends and followers, without encountering others. This is how information develops a lifeform: inexistent and impermanent.”¹

Han Byung-Chul

This 6th issue of *Sophia Journal* brought together a diverse group of researchers, architects, visual artists, and curators of international relevance, gathered on the *International Conference Visual Spaces of Change: photographic documentation of environmental transformations*, in an exercise of joint reflexivity about photographic documentation of environmental transformation from different perspectives and visual constructs. These international conferences embody an important stage during the process of the annual call and publication of each number of *Sophia Journal*. This means they enable an active dialogue between researchers, authors and the public, contributing to the identification of new avenues of research and artistic expression related to how photography can be explored as a meaningful instrument of inquiry about today’s processes of urban change and architectural spaces.

The importance we invest in these international forums for debate and exchange of ideas, having as basis the presentations of selected theoretical articles and visual essays that investigate and critically think through the intersections between the image and architecture, is linked to our belief that these spaces of discussion and thinking are an important antidote to the saturated stream of information and imagery of present-day societies. Then it is also worth referring that this saturated universe of information, as Byung-Chu Han points out, is treated as big data and object of AI processes of analysis and there is no data-driven thinking, because thinking² is not allowing numbers to speak for themselves, for how much data we may have.

In fact, thinking requires wonderment, for to wonder is “the feeling of a philosopher”, as written in the *Dialogs of Plato* quoting Socrates. It is, as noted by Hannah Arendt when speaking about Heidegger’s philosophy, the ability to be bewildered with the simple, explaining that

1 Han Byung-Chul, *Unding: Umbrüche der Lebenswelt* (Berlin: Ullstein Verlag GmbH, 2021) as quoted in Gesine Borchardt, “Byung-Chul Han: How Objects Lost their Magic”, translated from the German by Liam Tickner, *Art Review*, August 11, 2021, <https://artreview.com/byung-chul-han-how-objects-lost-their-magic/>.

2 Han Byung-Chul, Alain Badiou and Erik Butler, *The Agony of Eros* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017).

thinking pushes away what is near, distancing itself from the near and bringing the far to the near, while pointing out also Heidegger's idea of the acceptance of this bafflement as the place of thinking³. Thus, with *Sophia Journal* the idea is to provide an instrumenta mentis, enabling critical and innovative questioning and extending our speculative knowledge about architecture in its relationship with the image, and the image in its relationship with architecture.

Sophia Journal and its international forums support the reflection towards new thoughts and research paths about these issues and, in this way, encourage society to look and act more critically, making the observer even more sensitive and knowledgeable about images and the world. A strategy that we believe can balance the growing disappearance within the digital universe of all "discrete quantities"⁴ and make us more cultured about images and the world because these theoretical articles and visual essays become the motto and reason for discussion and debate. A curatorial work that aims to explore and open these diverse projects and ideas both to academia and society as is reclaimed by many authors and institutions. Within this context, it is worth referring that our conferences have been following other international academic events around the topics of *Photography on Architecture* since 2010, while trying to create a network of researchers and initiatives around this universe of common interest.

Accordingly, in our *Sophia Journal* conference held at FAUP in May 2021, significant debates took place and diverse works were presented addressing how we may understand landscapes and their identity in the contemporary transformation processes resulting from the dynamics of change and the disrupting habits of contemporary life. In fact, societies seem to be too obsessed with digital devices and victims of the massive production and reproduction of images, too often at the expense of a critical debate and awareness about urban transformation processes⁵. The discussion of how time, space, scale and movement dimensions are critical in visual discourses proved to be essential, as well as understanding the potential of a visual language of photography that situates itself in the space between the document and artistic subjectivity. Then, our attention was also drawn upon how different approaches to the digital manipulation of images for creating photography constructs can foster critical debates about the urban environment transformations.

Hence, this 6th issue of *Sophia Journal* follows the path of former *Sophia*'s publications bringing to fore visual constructs and theory that encourages the reflection on the concerns related to the transformation of the territory, the public space, and the environment. It embodies a significant collection of investigation using and exploring photography as a meaningful instrument for research into contemporary processes of urban change, producing

3 Hannah Arendt and Jerome Kohn. *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953–1975*. (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2018).

4 Han Byung-Chul and Erik Butler, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 47.

5 Ibid.

visual synthesis about how architectures, places and spaces are used and experienced, rendering visible aspects which are difficult to perceive without the purposeful use of image and photography⁶. A significant reference for the importance of looking at architecture through photography, just to make a case in point, is Pedro Gadanho's article, *Architecture Photography: New Territories in the MoMA Collection*⁷, in which he defends the legitimacy and the need for the MoMA collection of Photography of Architecture to include authors whose works straddle the universes of Architecture and Art. Another case in point that is worth recording is the work of Wilfried Wang as Editor and author of various essays and monographs on the architecture of the twentieth century, namely through the O'Neil Ford series of books, particularly the *Monograph* and *Duograph* collection. These constitute significant examples of the potential of using the book support as a unique narrative tool for the construction of a visual discourse able to capture and communicate the complex nature of architecture and its character, as well as the potential of photography for making us perceive the identity of places, as well as the materiality of those architectures.

A word should be said about the opening of *Visual Spaces of Change: photographic documentation of environmental transformations* exhibition using the VSC Mobile Projector during the conference, which is also available online. The exhibition experience was recorded for research purposes, being analysed in the context of the ongoing *Visual Spaces of Change* (VSC) research, which aims at exploring how photography is a medium that can align artistic practice and academic research, while at the same time positioning itself critically before these universes. VSC intends to unveil the potential of the photographic image as a critical and inquisitive instrument used to reinforce and expand communication and interaction capacities among agents involved in creative, cultural and artistic processes. About the visual language of photography when used not only as a sign or a type of register and form of expression of architectural culture, but also as an artistic strategy to advance a new discourse about the real, as happened in VSC, it is worth mentioning the author and curator David Campany, who offers a critical analysis on the inclusion of a series of photographs which take up architecture as their artistic object in the book *Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the modern Age*, as well as other authors as Iñaki Bergera and Enrique Jerez⁸ or Jesús Vassalo⁹.

6 Alona Pardo and Elias Redstone (Eds), David Campany (Contributor), *Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age* (Prestel Art, 2014).

7 Pedro Gadanho, "Architecture Photography: New Territories in the MoMA Collection" in *scopio International Photography Magazine* (scopio Editions, 2014); Paolo Rosselli and Pedro Gadanho, *A Talk On Architecture In Photography* (scopio Editions 2018).

8 Iñaki Bergera and Enrique Jerez, "Arquitectura expuesta. Tránsitos artísticos de la representación fotográfica de la arquitectura / Exhibited architecture. Artistic transitions on architectural photographic representation", *RA. Revista de Arquitectura*, no. 21 (October 2019): 68–83, 228–234, ISSN: 1138–5596. ISSN-e: 2254–6332. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15581/014.2168-83>.

9 Jesús Vassallo, *Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture* (Zürich: Park Books, 2016).

A few words about the published content in Sophia's other sections besides the peer reviewed articles and visual essays, having the former been integrated in the journals structure as a way of enriching the publication with diverse viewpoints from experts in the field and other types of readings outlined apart from the articles of the call.

Thus, we present in *Featured Texts* or *Projects* the invited authors for this 6th issue of *Sophia Journal*: the photographers and artists Iñaki Bergera and Michael Ruetz and the architect and critic Jesús Vassallo.

Jesús Vassallo is a Spanish architect and writer, and currently an associate professor at Rice University, who has spent many years many conducting an incredible personal research on architecture, photography and the problem of Realism, and is the author of two compelling works titled *Seamless: Digital Collage* and *Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture and Epics in the Everyday*, both published by Parks Books, which serve as a critical lens and agenda for contemporary practice of photography on architecture. Jesús is the author of the probing essay about Iñaki Bergera's photography series *Where the Dust Has Settled*.

Iñaki Bergera, an architect, photographer and writer, and Professor at the School of Engineering and Architecture of University of Zaragoza, who presents us with an insightful photography series about the reality of the abandoned villages in the hillsides of the Spanish Pyrenees. Bergera challenges our understanding about the processes of urban change documenting this process through its absence and "architectural gaze", bringing a deeper and novel perspective about these processes of change.

In *Timescapes* by Michael Ruetz, a distinguished author and artist based in Berlin who has an extensive work documenting hundreds of urban scenes and landscapes around Europe, time is made visible through photographic documentation. The series is based on a comprehensive documentation project where the main subject is time: the impermanence of life and settlements. A ground-breaking and ontological work that questions our reality and existence through a photography series showing us how architecture, cities and territory change over major periods, making us reconsider our perceptions and the meaning we attribute to city spaces and architecture.

Finally, and looking back on the past year, we'd like to thank all those who have contributed to this *Sophia Journal*.

Thank you to all authors, editors, reviewers, and readers of *Sophia*.