AMBIGUOUS ASSEMBLAGES: THE SUBLIME IN ARCHITECTURAL NARRATIVES OF HYPERREAL FOLLIES

Authors:
ANNABEL PRETTY, MANFREDO MANFREDINI

Affiliation:
UNITEC INSITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NEW ZEALAND; THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

INTRODUCTION

Hyperreal architectural assemblages are pervading our daily experience and progressively disrupting our spatial practices. Thought-provoking paradigms using VAM (virtual, augmented and mixed) realities profoundly transform our perception of space, ascribing new spatial qualities to architecture. Instantly activated digital spatial transductions juxtapose, superimpose, permutate and blur the elements of incompatible systems producing spatial assemblages with powerful emergent properties.

Long before digital augmentations, creative practices widely experimented with transductive techniques. Numerous architects, artists, and photographers, such as Giovanni Battista Piranesi, László Moholy-Nagy and Aldo Rossi, and visual arts movements and styles, such as dadaism, surrealism and cinematographic montage, have used representational means to produce speculations in the form of hyperspatial assemblages. Recently though, assemblage research by artists such as Laurent Chéhère, Dionisio González and Noémie Goudal has deployed digital technologies to challenge "reality" by recreating, manipulating and "agencing" [1] spatial qualities that redefine the way we sense, conceive, and perceive space. These artists have in common the prolific production of distinctive works that we propose to call *hyperreal follies*: instances of imaginable futures that offer recombinant, translocalised and deterritorialised visions.

This paper discusses hyperreal follies as artworks that explore the creative power of hyperreality through the most accurate technique of visual reproduction, photography. It aims to shed light on the fundamental connections between analogue and digital creative practices, and to describe what enables photographers to produce assemblages of particular relevance for architecture: *the sublime*.

The sublime, though, is not intended as the superlative or the lofty, but rather as the embodiment of both the fabulous speculative and the awful reinterpretive. Such sublime, in the reading of the follies, is the engagement with the real through the production of fictitious spatial qualities that decode and deterritorialise buildings and environments to constitute assemblages differentially emplaced, synchronised and considerably set within *othered* mundane landscapes. Sublime hyperreal follies are made of components manifestly disembodied from their original contexts to annihilate their beauty, as ascribed by Edmund Burke,[2] and provoke astonishment and mystery, albeit, as Kant[3] observed, appealing to the realm of the "idea" of the sublime rather than the "object" representing beauty.

The approach by which these assemblages are interpreted is dialogic, manifold and heterologous. It firstly addresses the terminology and meaning within the field of art theory that ambiguously

distinguishes, as near-synonymous, pastiche, montage and collage, and assemblage.[4] Insights and readings of their multiple components, sets of relations and narratives will depend on the specific intent and the designated output of each representation. Case studies and analytical methods vary to cope with plural and instable sources, techniques and meanings that often belong to the ever-transforming electronic space where spatial properties are in continuous becoming. Comparative analysis is used to detect differences and repetitions among key *actants* (people and objects), relations and themes of the assemblages. It is anticipated that there will be commonalities across the case studies as well as a new narrative with which to investigate the significance of these works. The Deleuzian concept of "assemblage" (agencement)[5], is used to disentangle the representations of hyperreal follies and expand the understanding of their spatial qualities. This enables a focus on the emergent properties of concatenating heterogeneous elements of the hyperreal follies, which belong to systems liberated from rigid and unproductive relations, by foregrounding the effects of their deterritorialised associations.

Figure 1. Dionisio González, Inter-acciones 8 (2013)

Ambiguous Space

Photography and architecture share an uneven symbiotic co-dependent relationship. While architects progressively use photographic imagery to showcase and describe buildings for actual construction plans, the images used in their presentations abound with hyperreal images that do not require plausible spatial constructs. Such a relation between architecture and photography has profoundly revised the "telegram-approach" montage of the visionary architecture of the 1960s and 1970s. The new hyperreal follies have furthered that approach, which is epitomized by the collaged assemblages of Hans Hollein's *Aircraft Carrier City in Landscape*, Archigram's *Instant City*,[6] and Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis's *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*,[7] by bringing the visionary dimension to the core of the creative production process.

Admittedly, the lineage of such vanguards can be found in contemporary spatial constructs created by subversive photographers, the likes of Chéhère, González and Goudal, who break the normative boundaries of their discipline. With the introduction of incompatibilities, disturbances, uncertainties and conflicts, these authors force the viewer to reappraise and rethink their relationship with the partitions, systems, and values of their societal, environmental and cultural existential condition. Yet, by creating multi-referential, multi-scalar and multi-narrative spatial instances, their speculative-

hyperreal spatial constructs move beyond the elements of plausible buildings, creating objects, relationships and manifestos characterised by unlimited openness, multiplicity and recodeability.

This paper ventures into the spatialities of these subversive photographers to explore the unique deployment of their "transductive method." This method, which we define as a *creative despatialisation,* was initially described by Gilbert Simondon and latterly by Paulo de Assis and David Scott [8] as a means to restructure given systems by suffusing iterative processes that produce consistent domains with incompatible juxtapositions of heterogeneous elements. This method allows photography to produce innovative spatial conceptions of great importance for the field of architecture. On the one hand, architectural photography contributes to the deployment of complex representative methods that use new technologies to blur the boundaries and operate in the liminal space of the progressively digitally augmented architectonics. On the other hand, photographic representation enables seamless merging of the opposite realms of material structure and digital construct into hyperreal formations of hybrid utopia, as elaborated by Cristian Farinella and Lorena Greco, and Luis Miguel Lus Arana. [9]. Such hybridity of the representative and representational spatial-conceptual nexus makes the photographic representation of the hyperreal sublime follies a unique, yet *inconsequential* laboratory for the novel representation of space: an uncharted heterotopic topoi where discourses on spatial emplacement and temporal synchronization have the potential to affirmatively sublate the limits of the sublime.

Through a visio-centric analysis of these purposefully manipulated images, we study the visual elements, relations and narratives of the hyperreal follies and describe their deliberate abandonment of any formal attempt of documenting "objectively" actual architectural spaces. On the one hand, the affirmative sublation builds upon critique of the "functionary" role of the photographer by Vilém Flusser, [10] who submits that an inescapable hierarchical relation of power between the author and the audience prevents any documentary non-judgmental viewpoint. On the other hand, this sublation brings to bear the emancipatory power of representation. It uses the capacity of imaginative appropriation to subvert the illusory eye and gaze of the objective representation that, as Henri Lefebvre posited, "fetishises abstraction and imposes it as the norm. It detaches the pure form from its impure content—from lived time, everyday time."[11]

The multiple relationships created by the hyperreal follies produce new understandings about the production of placeness in the hybrid spatialisation of actual and digital age. In Lefebvrian terms, the layer of the photograph as an expression of the "lived" and emancipatory experience and the layer of the photograph as a "conceived" and dominating instrument are dialogically engaged with oppositional agencies that the "perceived" dimension records and moderates in their normativity. The dissonances intrinsic to this triplectic enable the affordances of the object to serve, at the same time, for the opening affirmation of individuality (the lived space), the enclosing formulation of overcoded subjectification (the conceived space) and the networked territorialization of transindividuation (perceived space). Once unveiled, such a dissonant realm exposes these representations as complex entanglements of differentiation, abstraction and tensional reconciliation, showing that photography is much more than "the most realistic, therefore facile of the mimetic arts."[12]

This approach shows a gap in the current discussion on architecture and photography, highlighting its transdisciplinary flaw. Architecture, primarily concerned with the control, organization and predictability of its creative realm fails to mobilise the germinative and emancipatory power of emergent, indeterminate and open systems produced by visual arts that the sublime folly embodies. Rather, it reduces this power to illustrative scopes that alienate and fragment the utopian dimension, which has been described by Fredric Jameson as *"textualities"* or textual production.[13] Theoretical studies on narrative are commonly employed to describe *"complex"* meanings informing the forms

and materiality (architecture) of expressions (representation), yet these often remain within the limits of the architectural discipline and miss the contribution of a substantive body of literature advocating for the capacity of assemblages to address the new complex systems composed of heterogeneous and incompatible elements such as the studies of Lus Arana and Pedro Leão Neto. [14]

Figure 2. Dionisio González, Inter-acciones 9 (2013)

Alternative Identities

As presented in *A Thousand Plateaus,* the central tenet of the assemblage theory is that emancipation results from the formation of alternative identities and possibilities via a mechanism of deterritorialisation. Deterritorialised elements are freed from constraining systems, *plateaus,* constitute wider *constellations, bodies without organs,* and can be associated in assemblages that make "worlds of worlds"[15] to "capture forces that are not thinkable in themselves." [16]

Within our study context, the assemblage thinking addresses the follies' deterritorialising concatenations as this,

offers four things to contemporary social-spatial theory that, when taken together, provide an alternative response to the problematic of "relational" thought; an experimental realism orientated to processes of composition; a theorisation of world of relations and that which exceeds a present set of relations; a rethinking of agency in distributed terms and causality in non-linear, immanent, terms; and an orientation to the expressive capacity of assembled orders as they are stabilised and change. [17]

Anderson et al. further elaborates on this, noting that assemblage thinking is a technical operator *"that enables heterogeneous phenomena to be classified and ordered."* [18] For them, it draws multiple insights and readings that depend on the specific intent or designated output of each undertaking. Indeed, the articulation, terminology and meaning of "assemblage theory" also vary conjuncturally, as demonstrated by the perceptual and conceptual distinction in its adoption in different disciplinary fields. For example, within the field of art theory, it is synonymous with allegory and continued metaphor, as well as montage and collage[19] (all pertinent to hyperreal follies).

The complexity of assemblages is moderated by a central engine that—using Deleuze and Guattari terms—can be defined as a *revolutionary machine*. In the hyperreal follies, this machine determines the optical or rather visual determinations of conceptions and actions, offering to perception multiple possible associations and, thereby multiple productive readings. These readings circle around and come back to the image, subverting, opening slippages, interrupting paradigms and disrupting codings that are conventionally attributed to it as originary, intrinsic and permanent content.[20] A critical

analysis of the vital play of signs that produces these lenses or viewpoints shows the evolving and complex multidimensionality of the representational, conceived, and perceptual machines upholding the follies. This not only illuminates the holding together of the machines as mutually formant and inclusive, it also detects the potential overcoding through which these machines are controlled and disciplined to produce dominated *milieus* and *negative reterritorialisation* that constrain their reading within the imposed logics and make it not valuable and pertinent to describe the novelty of the follies. The multidimensionality of the assemblages also mobilises the disciplinary domains of architecture and photography. As posited by Portuguese architect and curator Pedro Gadanho, in his essay "Coming of Age: On the Furtive, Shifting Nature of Architectural Photography," architecture and photography have a deep-rooted relationship in "the adoption of photo-collage as a standard design procedure, or the use of photography as a privileged means."[21] He further affirms that

architectural photography seems to be at a curious crossroads. While still having the built environment as its subject matter, its artistic autonomy is now arising from the ability to establish an expressive dialogue with…, more than a portrait of contemporary architecture and urban landscape.[22]

The assemblages producing negative deterritorialisation create what Baudrillard defines as hypotyposis[23]: a plagiarism and self-recopy of anything, such as a vivid, picturesque description of scenes which can transform and influence the manner in which a building can be viewed, consumed and valued. The hyperreal follies are not immune from this as photography can create highly dominant and prescriptive views of the world that are more akin to annihilating creativity and innovation.[24] This sheds its decoding and deterritorialising agencies, and produces commodities of consumption that lose the lively, dialectical, full, dramatic relationality of the imaginary.

Figure 3. Dionisio González, Inter-acciones 15 (2013)

Positive assemblages, however, liberate extraordinary vehicles, the *abstract machines* of Deleuze and Guattari,[25] which give access to a new world, the *cosmos*. Whether these be fantastical or brutalist hyperreal follies, their production of hyperreality has complex workflows: the camera shutter clicking is but a part of the journey that uses a toolbox that includes multiple digital and analogue devices that are integrated much like paintbrush, palette and canvas of the traditional painter.[26] New means for moderating representation through light allow the photographer to transform the static reproduction of the camera into a process of continuous reproduction with reproductive capacity: the image as production point, rather than medium for consumption, is an open assemblage, a *mutable mobile* akin to evolutionary incremental architecture.[27]

Bricoleurs and case studies

Chéhère, González and Goudal are three photographers, artists whom one may call "visual interpreters" operating with a medium of prime assemblage capacity. They operate at a multiple disciplinary intersection or liminality, being photographers, visual artists, and architects. One may turn to the notion of the bricoleur in this case, as consolidated by writings of Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln who consider the *"bricoleur"* as a *"person who assembles images into montages."* [28] By using the analogy of the quilt-maker, the researcher (and maker) is perceived as being a bricoleur (maker of montages) Michael Crotty[29] also uses the analogy of Denzin and Lincoln's bricoleur and binds it to Claude Lévi-Strauss' book *The Savage Mind,*[30] albeit Crotty's interpretation of Lévi-Strauss is that of *"A dialogue with materials. Interrogating all the heterogeneous objects."*[31] These multitudinous references, from which Denzin and Lincoln source the definition of bricoleurs have them establish four typologies: interpretative, narrative, theoretical and political. However, fundamentally, the bricoleur is concerning borrowing from multiple disciplines.

French artist Laurent Chéhère's series "The Flying Houses"[32] offers a surreal poetic viewpoint of Paris dislocated and deterritorialised from its normative context and "flying" within the skies. Created contemporaneously between 2012–2020, it details a nostalgic view of elements of the Parisian cityscape, a sort of hyperphantasia (in one's mind's eye) representation of memories connected with possibilities. Details and snapshots of moments within the fabric of the cityscape, loosely tethered to the ground and reality by the power cables, drifting off-frame, left and right.

Spanish artist, architect, and photographer Dionisio González's (1965-) extensive series of more than 25 images entitled in Spanish as "Inter-acciones" (English, Inter-actions; 2013) offers a surreal possibility of contemporary habitable spaces, offering aesthetically crafted architectural "possibilities" within largely barren landscapes, not unlike built follies within the picturesque landscape of the 1700s and 1800s. The more recent series "Trans-acciones" (2014–2015), are in colour and offer more connectedness and context and perhaps more believability for the hyperreal follies within the landscape. The most recent imagery, Wittgenstein's Cabin (2021), set within the Norwegian Fjords, offers a beautifully crafted "image," almost a 1970s version of a futuristic possibility—curves, glass and pods within a fjord—but could just as easily be a set from the 1972 movie *Solaris*.

French visual artist Noémie Goudal (1984-), residing in the UK, creates "fictions" such as the "*Observatoires* 2015"[33] (English, Observatories), which covers a range of imagery made from 2013–2015 which question the relationship of the built form and its relationship with context and landscape. Black and white brutal concrete singular follies reside within a landscape bisected horizontally, some with reflections in what one assumes must be a fine plane of water: potentially a sandbank. The brutalism owes a nod to the types of military structures one would find along the eastern English coastline and Brittany coast of the Second World War "Pillbox" and "Tigers Teeth" which were used as coast defences and, of course, the Martello Towers[34] of the Napoleonic Era, many of which are crumbling into the North Sea: all of which have elements of the folly. However, Goudal's follies have been constructed from photographic evidence of concrete structures and then printed and reformulated, constructed in-situ and then rephotographed, a simulacrum of a folly.

Figure 4. Noémie Goudal, Observatoires III (2013) Lambda Print on Baryta paper

CONCLUSION

Chéhère, González and Goudal's hyperreal follies are conspicuous examples of deterritorialising assemblages that combine exogenous and heterogeneous elements, relations and narratives with unprecedented seamlessness. Their images are highly deterritorialising machines that affirmatively sublate the early assemblages of both fantastic architecture, composite photography and cinematographic montage, allowing the visionary dimension to irrupt with dramatic relationality in the constant present of the advanced digital age. As visual interpretations, they offer bricolages of architectural possibilities that purposefully deal with issues of decoding, displacement and disconnection of cultural superstructures and dominating communicative practices. They create new possibilities within the landscapes, subsequently opening the fields of architecture and photography to the sublime, the transduced and the deterritorialised. Drawing from threads of multiple aligned disciplines, frequently using the plethora of ever-transforming images on the electronic space and constituting assemblages in the form of photographs, they elaborate narratives and discourses of emancipation that liberate the space of representation from reifying hegemonic culture in both the design and implementation practices of architecture and photography. Concurrently, their "sublime" production, both aesthetically deceiving and credible, opens their ambiguous, sublime architectural narratives to open and generative dialogues with the viewer/producer.

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