

DIVISARE

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GENOA FIVE

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Giovanni Galli

To describe an instant

Of Drawings, Photographs, and Buildings

"Here's to you, Genoa Five."

Philip Johnson, *From the Grave*¹

DRAWINGS of architecture are just a means, an index pointed to buildings to be built. Yeah, right. In fact, so many drawings of architecture pretend otherwise: to be observed and valued as an end in themselves. In return, they present us with an idea of *dwelling* going far beyond the object in representation. Images of architecture, be it paintings, or engravings, or drawings, all share this peculiarity, distinguishing them from any other kind of representation genres: that to gather oneself in front of them is to *inhabit* them, with an intensity the exacting effort of living everyday life hardly ever concedes.

Paintings, engravings, drawings. What about

photographs? They too should share the same peculiarity. Yet, this is seldom the case. Photographs' greater adherence to reality may prove to be a handicap to this end...

At the beginnings of the 1970's, Kodak's Italian division marketed a new product aimed at a young public: the *Fotocintura*[®] [Photobelt], an accessory to the parent house's most popular product, the *Kodak Instamatic*. It wasn't a great success. The accessory rapidly vanished, leaving almost no trace: impossible to find a specimen today, not in museums nor on the stands of flea markets, both real or virtual. The only proof that it ever existed is an advertising poster you can still find on the net, albeit with some difficulty. Actually, the poster was probably the most notable feature of this weird product: a two-pages "graphic-novel", in a linework closely recalling those of *Intrepido* and *Monello* (then two most popular comic magazines), telling a brief story about a teenager walking on a beach with a bizarre holster strapped around his hips. Suddenly, "a flock of seagulls", "a quick glance", "hand to the Photobelt, and..." "CLICK, a perfect image": these were the captions to the images.

If the captions seem to suggest some magic immortalizing capacities directly coming from the belt, the images tell a much more ordinary story: the belt is just a holder, for a camera to be quickly drawn. The catchphrase at the bottom

of the poster, “The funniest stunt of this summer”, says a lot about the life expectancy of the product. Yet the belt tried to respond to a real and heart-felt need: one of a more *instant* and *automatic* registration of reality than Kodak *Instamatic* already granted. And since *Instamatic* already was state of the art in that sense, what Italian Kodak was trying to do was to supply with poetic fancy the hard facts of technology. The belt’s iconography, parading leather frills hanging under the holster, was clearly “Far West”; so, thanks to metonymy (the container for the contents), *Instamatic* metaphorically became “the fastest camera in the West”. Moreover, Italian fancy was not alone in its feat of wishful thinking: during the 1980’s, the testimonial of American Kodak’s advertising campaign was Michael Landon, then a well-known star of *Bonanza* and *Little House on the Prairie*. Two westerns, goes without saying.

Today’s advertisings of smartphones are not centered on their excellence in communication technology, which is taken for granted, but on the readiness at hand and the zillion pixels resolution of their embedded cameras. The romantic born dream of “capturing the fleeting moment”, bestowed to people at large by Kodak, has – so it would seem – come true: a high-definition super compact camera ready in the pocket (if not constantly “implanted” in the hand) ready to transform fleetingness into eternity. And, new products are on the way: “camera glasses” promising to deliver the ultimate goal: the direct hard-cop-

ying of anything passing through the eyes. Constant progress in hard-drive miniaturization gives us hope that, before long, everybody will be able to record a POV long shot of his entire life: an uninterrupted sequence of snapshots in a one-to-one relationship with life, like the map of the emperor described by Borges (so much for the “fleeting moment”).

This obsession with spectacularizing individual life has often been described as a major symptom of a generation caught in the midst of a “narcissistic turn”. But an alternative take could be one of interpreting hypertrophic imaging as a cognitive prosthesis, coming from a need of reassurance of “being there”, a need to give existence a tangible *meaning*. But precisely here is where the problem of photography’s relationship with reality emerges. Because meaning is exactly what snapshots *cannot* deliver. The purely retinal nature of snapshots is what gives the illusion of a *direct* connection between – in semiotic terms – the signifier and the referent, dispensing altogether with the signified. But the noumenal character of the referent is what makes it approachable only through the infinite strata of signified supplied by the process of a forever lasting semiosis. Without signified there literally is no meaning. And this is what we could call the “pornographic effect” of snapshots: again, what distinguishes pornography from eroticism is the will to exactly mirror material reality. Pornography is where any act is strictly referentially reproduced (no place for imagina-

tion), with an obsession for close-ups (the more detailed, the more real); above all, where no recourse is made to the typical devices by which the seventh art adds meaning to images by compressing or dilating neurobiological time. This same kind of obscenity is what normally can be found in snapshots. Not on moral grounds, of course, but from the point of view of the etymological meaning of the word: “*ob skēnè*”, as “in front of the scene”, i.e. where everything is exposed and nothing is concealed, alluded, or connoted in any other fashion.

Truth, in snapshots, ought to be found in the *presentness* of things. But, the problem is, “present” is just a noun, standing for a grammatical tense without counterparts in phenomenological time. In actual life, the present is just an illusory diaphragm between the past and the future; a line with no depth. “Being there” is just a void, filled with what is not materially there: recollections, regrets, fears, desires; each of them giving meaning to every single fleeting event of the now. Indeed, snapshots only acquire meaning with the passing of time. Much of the endearment we feel encountering some old copies buried in a drawer, or piled up in a website, comes through the appreciation of what time has made visible: the white frames of Polaroids, the impossible reds and golds of Cibachrome, the haircuts, the shape of dresses and automobiles; all of them acquiring meanings they did not have when they were shot. Thus they become still frames of pasts and of future pasts, illuminat-

ing what we are now and what we expect to be (even pornography undergoes the same process: colours, shapes, and hair habits of “vintage pornography”, all contrive to subside physical excitation beneath the thickness of the “historical document”).

Photographs of architecture tend to share this same kind of “obscenity” (again, not on moral grounds). Not always: there are times when an artist photographer succeeds, by distancing himself from the object to represent, to thicken images by the superposition of his particular interpretation’s multiple layers (mostly, this happens when his purpose is not, or not only, one of representing a building *per se*). But most of the times, and mostly in the specialized magazines contest, fetishism for objecthood takes over. Here, the principal aim is not one of *presenting* us with an architecture, but of *documenting* it, as if in wonder of its having been actually built. Then, space prevails on place; normally, it is a completely empty space: nothing must distract from the object’s objecthood. According to the same rationale, all traces of abiding to real life necessities (pipelines, cables, signposts, gizmos of all sort) are smoothly photoshopped away. And naturally, obsession with details is paramount: close-ups are almost larger than life, transforming useful devices into abstract trappings. Most often, however, the overall result is smaller than life. Than real life, imagined life, desired life.

Drawings of architecture (or paintings, or en-

gravings) generally avoid this kind of pitfalls. A greater distance, inscribed in their nature, between what is representing and what is represented, endows them with greater narrative qualities. The principal aim of a good drawing of architecture (one pretending to be enjoyed as an end in itself) is never to *represent* something but to *tell a story* about something. Countless choices, whether or not conscious, precede the making of a drawing: the quality of the linework and of the hatching, the palettes of colours and shades, the degree of abstraction. Together, they each time produce a unique overall style, setting up a complex network of intertextuality between the particular image produced and the long history of all the ones preceding it, construing that particular image as the outcome of a complex, meaningful past. Drawings are often overcrowded with people, frozen in their act (specially drawn, or outlined from other pictures: more intertextuality in play): drawings are more interested in possible lives than in possible buildings. Entrenched as they are between deep pasts and possible futures, drawings present themselves as echronias: long, and possibly everlasting, descriptions of instants, frames of ek-static time to savour in their depth.

But, drawings are not buildings. To talk about them as “architecture” is to contradict the very first commandment of architectural orthodox thinking:

“*Thou shalt hold as true architecture fabricated architecture alone*”.

The stolid assuredness by which this commandment is normally uttered (or even just implied) bears a close resemblance with the one about drawings as just means this paper began with. Funny thing is, most of those who profess such credo are among those who build less, making it sound more like a “wish to power”, than a credo (because, actually, he who really builds a lot tends to think not in terms of “architecture”, but of “cubic meters”). But the implied self-righteousness, and apparent self-evidence, makes it nonetheless almost unbeatable. What we tend to forget, though, is that “architecture” is just a name. And *names* are not, not directly, *things*.

(Those who do *not* believe that architecture is an art – a *fine* art, just to be clear – can stop reading now. For those who maintain the opposite stance, what follows is meant as an extremely brief introduction to the paradoxical and fascinating implications of such stance.)

To begin with, the greatest fortune one can wish to an architecture is to be forgotten as “an architecture” in order to be successful as an equipment. A museum distracting from the works of art it contains is probably a beautiful building, but a bad museum. So is a theatre, and so is any other thing constructed to be used. To live in a work of art can be a very tough experi-

ence, as Loos presciently warned and as M.me Savoye (to name but one) very well knew. Built architecture should become the frictionless, perhaps endearing, but nonetheless unobtrusive, scenario on the background of human life. To live constantly in awe, in the midst of “perfect proportions”, or “vibrant spaces”, or “haptic materials”, or “refined details”, is not sustainable in the long run, albeit by some hyper-aesthetizing windbag not useful as a token for the average building user.

Or else, what normally happens, you altogether forget to be living in an “architecture”, to soundly use it as a “building”: whether you use a building, or you meditatively gather yourself in front of it, as any work of art worthy of that name reclaims. This is why only in drawings architecture can really and completely be art: where no use (life) is at stake; or, better, where every possible future use (life) is present in imagination. Only in drawings *and* in ruins: meditative mood matches well with ruins, where the uses that be can only become a matter of absorbed fantasizing. Here, the catalogue of failed futures’ arrested images accompanies as a counterbalance the universe of possibilities presented by drawings.

So, perhaps, architecture is not a thing, but something that “happens”: at the very beginning and, with the favours of fortune, at the very end of a building’s life. And, perhaps, during some other, rather brief, lapses of time: sometimes,

perhaps at the end of the day (children and husband/wife safely asleep), perhaps sitting in an armchair, absorbed in a *reverie*, when in some mysterious ways a particular view synesthetically strikes a chord with some memory (or fear, or desire); and, there and then, architecture will happen, for a fleeting moment. But no *Instamatic*, smartphone, or camera-glasses, will ever be able to capture it.

†Fake quotation

Valter Scelsi

Minima mnemonica

THE images that accumulate in our mind constantly vie with each other, in a permanent state of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, in an attempt to gain a favourable position so they can emerge in that short, very short list of references that our memory habitually comes up with.

These images that survive and recur seem able to contain, without bridging it, the original gap between appearance and essence, and for us they are the place where the visible and invisible are found together, before acquiring a form. Moreover the map of these iconographic particles suggests the geography of the imaginative threads that run between them and come

together to form other images. In other words, at the base of that selective operation which is the composition of an image (and also its perception, at least according to Georg Groddeck) there is the conviction that we must reach the seam that we call “our references”.

What follows is a very short personal list of images that for me have produced other new images. They are representations of various subjects that I believe – though I don’t have any proof – have helped me in my profession as an architect. This list is suspended in the *hic et nunc* (which is midsummer 2017, in Genoa) and the five examples could be taken as an awkward tribute to the five groups of architects who asked me to write this.

The hypothesis is that this short list that relies on an iconological-analogical support (the language of architecture has, in my opinion, a weak status that requires a support to be understood) may have the characteristics of a style or, if you prefer, a trend.

Here is a short description of the five examples that are substantially analogies existing in a transitory dimension that I try to fix in this list, they are: the encyclopaedia *Io e gli altri*, the Bayeux Tapestry, the Gronchi Rosa postage stamp, *Forma Genuae* and the cover of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*.

Io e gli altri was a children’s encyclopaedia full of illustrations, published in Genoa in the

1970s. On the glossy pages Flavio Costantini's drawings went very well the entries, they were edged in black, which made them independent, well defined and essential like minimal units, as evident as an illuminated letter, and they were nearly always freestanding on the white page, not framed. You could use them in other contexts as though they were fonts, or cut them out carefully and paste them somewhere else, like stickers, or you could make them into ink stamps, but, above all, you could easily trace them onto a page from your exercise book.

I had a reproduction of the Bayeux tapestry that came with some magazine, only a partial one of course, though I couldn't figure out which section it was. It was like watching someone else's life quite by chance, when you don't know what has gone before, and naturally you don't know what will happen next. Here it was the life and exploits of William the Conqueror, embroidered in vivid colours on white linen. Perhaps it was frivolous, but what struck me most was the hues of the clothes and the hairstyles in the bloody tumult of the Battle of Hastings. The slim figures chasing each other brandishing lethal weapons were as stylish as the mannequins in a boutique.

There were two things I found perfect about the Gronchi Rosa postage stamp, which I unfortunately didn't possess: the Italian president's journey to the countries of South America is simply represented by a plane crossing the At-

lantic Ocean, and the different shades of pink complete the story, pale pink for the sea, medium pink for the continents, and dark pink for the countries of departure and arrival.

The cover of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, designed for Genesis by Hipgnosis in 1974, and the plates for *Forma Genuae*, published for Genoa City Council by Piero Barbieri in 1938, are both works printed in black on a white ground. Barbieri's Genoa can be seen as a transparent city where the buildings look like rocks floating in the water, as in Giovanni Battista Nolli's rendering of Rome, according to Giulio Carlo Argan. That is how I saw it, in fact, I once tried to reproduce my version of it from memory.

The sequence reproduced in the six squares on the covers of the Genesis album, illustrates through photomontage, the story written inside. In the first scene, starting from the right, the protagonist literally comes out of the image leaving a white silhouette in his place. This silhouette, the profile of a man with his hands on his hips, has always been imprinted in my memory, rather than everything else.

Essentially, these examples have had many different consequences – and looking at them I think this is true today – for the images that I have produced and my preferences, styles, judgments and attitudes.

Indeed, for all the things I have done.

Small talk

- «I don't think we should go for a *manifesto*. Our shared working method doesn't come from a school of any sort: neither we have a specific assumption to respect nor Masters to follow. »

- ✕ «True. I think that this may also depend on a local factor: the fact is that we all studied in Genoa, where Architecture School is actually pretty lay, composed by a motley staff lacking of a main leading figure. »

- «That's true, in fact... what do you think about these few lines? "We come from a non-school. Our first common root is the deflection of paradigm and super-ordinate interpretations, being it an absolute belief or corporate codes: so

far we do have a responsible approach open to critics and changes.»

- ✕ «It makes sense, but to me it sounds like the typical snobbish *curriculum vitae*... so conformist...»

- * «We have to admit that Genoa's factor strongly influenced us: The Faculty of Architecture is small but its intromission in the city fabric led to an extraordinary urban success. The school has been for all us a happy place where to hang out during university years and, above all, where to confront and discuss. That place surely trained our approach to the discipline, this continuous need of comparison that is still very vibrant today.»

- «It's clear that to join forces and collaboration for us is definitely more complicated. We are all complementary professionals, we don't differ much in competences. Yet this is a convenient way to free our mind from assumptions and aprioristic certainties.»

- ◆ «This I think is something important to be explained. Nowadays the act of creating a network of different professionals is a commonplace, to collaborate in a co-working is too often taken for granted as it was a kind of mandatory method to accomplish a complex process such as the architectural design.

We tend to the exact opposite: we all are overlapping figures, each one of us is an Architect. Teamwork for us does not simplify things but builds up a conflict of opinion and matters between each other's piece of mind. Moreover, we believe - and we happened to prove this in multiple occasions - that this conflict allows us to reach further goals, and that from such dialogues we achieve an otherwise unreachable synthesis. May this will to create a community of relations be our very common ground? Anyway, this is the inner sense of architecture itself, as any other medium is...»

◆ «Not another rant about *media*, please...»

* «I think this sounds more like “The whole is *other* than the sum of the parts”.»

◆ «In a sense, our opinion is antithetical to the *ideology of professionalism*, because architecture has to be first of all an intellectual activity. Don't get me wrong: not only theoretical speculation, but neither ordinary task-filling. The fact of always changing and adapting for any new commission, competition, graphic or design strategy, team composition... is a *non-professional* approach: a true professional optimizes until the right framework is found, and then repeats it.»

✕ «You know, giving an intellectual meaning to our work beyond use and quantity is the reason why we drain so much energy working

together. Although I don't deny: it's such an effort: nothing ever predefined, nor equal or repeated...»

* «If we have so much time to spend on discussion is because of economic crisis, isn't it?»

◆ «Seriously? Do we want to turn it on crisis talk? I agree with it, this is in fact a portrait of current times, but think about this: we start with localism, now crisis and lack of work... we'll end up with the *manifesto of depression!* »

◆ «Radicals and *La Tendenza* raised from 70s crises, in some way...»

◆ «Do you see the problem in keeping us too long in a locked room? Anyway... If you ask me to go for a specific topic, I would go for our love for drawings. In general. The meaning that we give to the representation of Architecture. »

• «We all agree on this.»

✕ «Drawing never *lies*.»

* «Are you serious? The entire history of Architecture is full of drawings that tamper reality, that doesn't match with it...»

◆ «That is not *lying*. That is meaning something more. Any drawing is representing something more than mere reality, but tells an idea which *differs* from reality. In this sense

drawing never lies on what is core: it can fake a dimension, but it honestly depicts the culture of its maker without uncensored, showing his capacity to handle details, to enhance graphical features, to never settle for an established aesthetic.»

● «“*Drawing is time.*” And I mean... the time spent on *drawing* is the same that you need to *understand* the project.»

◆ «We are talking about operative drawing, not a simple restitution, right? It has to be a tool to read the whole world; for that, it must not be an end in itself.»

✕ «That is what I fear the most: if we focus on our care for representation and its role in our group, we end up describing ourselves as *pencil-addicts...*»

◆ «Obviously not. *Hyper-professionalism* and *pencil-addiction* are two sides of the same coin, two contrapositive stereotypes on architects in general. The first refers to the world of international firms, bond in multi-disciplinary professional networks where different skills and specializations create astonishing designs of futuristic dream cities.

The second describes architects as useless highbrows in love with aesthetic matters which end up with bugged design solutions at their best. Or else: we don't even make buildings, but

drawing, talks, theories... for the sole sake of it.

We could in fact state that our relation with representation does not need to sound narcissist nor managerial...»

● «But, come on guys: let's say that we are having fun! It all sounds so sad...!»

✕ «Right. In the end, what do we usually do? We gather ideas, we have fun, we all lose competitions...»

◆ «Ok, I think we are almost there. On one hand, we have the location-based condition and the contingencies, on the other the centrality of representations, architecture as an intellectual matter - an oxymoron that contains the dual polemical nature of the design process. Now we just need someone to write it down and connect them all.

Do someone offer himself as volunteer to do this?»

● «I was wondering... Why don't we go with a *transcript*? It is actually the most honest way to describe our method: constructing a dialogue.»

✘ «That's it. In a sense that also *this* is a form of representation.»

◆ «It also proves that the *medium is the message*. In other words, the way you represent your idea is equally important as the idea itself.»

✘ «No, please: not *McLuhan*, not again...»

* «It is our *non-manifesto*... It's a dialogue, a stream of consciousness...»

• «Don't you think someone may have already done it?»

✘ «*Everything has already been done*.»

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false mirror office, gosplan, LINEARAMA, pia, and UNO8A are five architectural firms based in Genoa. The founders of these firms are born in the 80s and represent the new generation of architects trained at the University of Genoa and still active in the same city. As part of the box set "NEW ARCHITECTS 1", DIVISARE BOOKS n. 112-116 present the architectural imaginary of the five firms.

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