

Eyes that see: urban *trompe-l'oeil* as a critical act

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Re-presentations of the city

How much can visual representations of the city reveal of their object? And, how to represent an object that is by definition multiple and changing, and always escapes the visual while heavily flirting with it?

In the 1990s architects realized that the conventional quantitative ways of surveying, documenting, representing and informing the city were becoming insufficient to grasp this mutable and by now vastly unknown 'object'. Plans, graphs, maps and statistics of various kinds, subjects and scope could no longer make us understand what we were dealing with - far less so represent, even less control.

The Rem Koolhaas instigated volume *Mutations* (Koolhaas et al. 2000) brought together the work of different researchers and practitioners on the city, in fact introducing new or revised ways to look at it. In this book the essay became inquisitive and polemical, the map mostly referential, the graph turned into a visually charged display, and a multitude of photographs replaced the plan. Representation and understanding needed to become as manifold as the environment they attempted to grasp, and the most effective available way were photographs – always in the plural, taken by a multiplied and mobile eye. This practice of the descriptive, combined with a large quantity of graphically enhanced graphs and diagrams, replaced the plan: an appropriate shift for a city without form and without boundaries. In *Mutations* the city was represented from the outside (the editing of the statistics) or from the inside (the photographs with-in the city), but always from and by an outsider trying to come to terms with a changing reality beyond control.

In the same years architecture had been rediscovering the map as one of its most effective tools, not only to represent but also to intervene in the city and the territory. Reinterpreted and reactivated in Deleuzian (Deleuze and Guattari 1996),¹ the map offered a synoptic plane to simultaneously present the given and its making, together with the projected and its possible forms of implementation. Appropriated and elaborated by architecture, the map became both the tool and the site for re-imagining the city and working in it, and its temporal and qualitative aspects were extended to the space of the project. Emblematic of this shift, James Corner's work had moved from landscape and the redefinition of the tools for taking its "measures" in a non-quantitative way and representing it (Corner 1996), to the identification of the agency of mapping (Corner 1999, 213-52) beyond mere imaging, as a speculative and critical space that opened up representation to the architectural project. I called this the "locus of the project" (Stoppani, 2004, 181-96).

Yet, photo series, redesigned graphs and reinvented mappings proved still insufficient to fully understand the city. In 2006 the International Architecture Exhibition of the Biennale di Venezia, "Cities. Architecture and Society", directed by Ricky Burdett, focused on global cities and "showed a manifesto for the 21st century city" (La Biennale di Venezia). Photographs, satellite imaging, films on mega screens, tridimensionally elaborated graphs of population and growth data and all sorts of statistics, 3D animations and simulations were not enough and continued to need the complement of the qualitative experiential, provided this time by the noticeable presence in the exhibition space of a cacophony of all sorts of urban, metropolitan and cosmopolitan sounds. Exploded, fragmented, multiplied, the image of the city was no longer enough to re-present the city. This vast collective effort paid tribute to the persisting variety and differences that exist within urban globalization, and yet it did so suggesting or employing tools and media that strived to be (or seemed) objective. While the predominance of the visual was questioned here in favour of more complex experiential forms of documentation, the different forms and media employed seemed to suggest an objectivity (even of the qualitative) that concealed authorship.

Urban trompe-l'oeils

The visualization of the city is never neutral or objective, but always already political. Here I propose that it is worth to 'look' at the city again and afresh, that is, with new or different eyes, and to explore forms of visual representation of the city that are not aimed at informative documentation or direct activism, but propose personal investigations, often destined for the art gallery. It is in the gallery that, paradoxically, the subtleties of expression and interpretation of an artwork can play (and trick) each other, filtered by physical removal and temporal delay. It is here that works that produce a social and political critique of the city, framed and legitimized, can infiltrate its very institutions and can denounce them from within. Unlike documentary and quantitative urban analysis, the artworks that take the city as their subject and concern, are free to construct a space that is not linear, not 'resolved', and not intentionally demonstrative. Holding together at play and intersecting a multiplicity of simultaneous readings, crossing times and genres, they produce a synthesis that is very different from that of architecture. The artist's interpretation of a place consists in situating her/himself between the place and the work produced, and the work of art *on* the city is inevitably also *in* the city, producing interferences with the urban space that often remain unexpressed in architecture.

Here I look at recent works by three young artists which have the power to make us see a city that our eyes do not (or do not yet want) to see: a city of continuity, intertwinings and interpenetrations, beyond the ties of community, the types of architecture and obsolete notions of public space. Beyond recent discourses on a city of fragmented space, gated exclusivity and lost identity, these works define a new form of 'city-ness': a city of change and of new continuity, whose essence lies not in objects and in walls that divide, but in a new connective tissue that is yet to be understood – and which these works try to represent. Representations of the city that are not only selective of the realities they register, but also performative of 'other' spaces that exacerbate and re-compose those realities (fleeting, or so engrained that we no longer 'see' them), produce an important critical *trompe-l'oeil*. The traditional painterly *trompe-l'oeil* produces the illusion of spaces that are not there as an extension of our space. The contemporary urban *trompe-l'oeil* produces the illusion of spaces that are familiar and conventionally represented (and are therefore conventionally perceived in distraction), while in fact it confronts us with city images that we normally do not (want to) see. Masked in established representational conventions and styles, these images include and celebrate those details which, because we are too used to them, are unconsciously edited out: clues of forms of development, occupations and transformations that have long replaced established canons and daily reinvent the contemporary city.

Eyes that see

"Eyes that do not see" is the title-provocation of a chapter of Le Corbusier's 1923 book *Towards An Architecture* (Le Corbusier 1923). For Le Corbusier, the eyes that do not see the changes that are taking place in front of them are those of the architects. Blinded by the history of their discipline, architects are unable or unwilling to address the rapid changes of the modern city that Engineers have, instead, produced, designed and managed. Faster than architecture, the city has changed, and the discipline, Le Corbusier argues, has to catch up and reinvent itself.

Almost one century later, our eyes are 'not seeing' again. The city is, again (or still) changing faster than architecture. Engineers are at the forefront of this flight forward of infrastructuring and networking, but the role of 'social designer' that Le Corbusier had claimed for architecture and urbanism – a design of measurement and reorganization (*tabula rasa*), division (zoning) and hygienic improvement (housing standards) is escaping the discipline. Today's architecture needs to define (or find) the critical role of its participation in the engineering feat of current metropolitan hyperdevelopments. This means, most importantly, to re-learn to see, in order to respond to those developments that are happening in the city (in fact 'making' it) beyond the formal, the controlled, the designed. A new

form of imaging is required to bring to the front the 'invisible', the unofficial, the deteriorated, the discarded.

Ego and the city: Sohei Nishino's memory collages

Japanese photographer Sohei Nishino (born in Hyogo in 1982) composes thousands of 'discarded' photographs to construct throbbing personal images of world cities. Entitled *Diorama Map*, his worldwide project has so far produced very unusual 'maps' of Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima, Shanghai, New York, Paris, Hong Kong, Istanbul and London, and the project is ongoing. These composite city portraits, while somehow faithful to their originals, are city maps reconstructed by memory with thousands of photographs taken by Nishino in his personal explorations of the cities.

In fact these images are mappings of the artist's personal experience of the city, solipsistic visual narratives of the city he walks through, photographs and then rediscovers as he develops and prints his black and white images, and painstakingly reconstructs with his photo fragments, armed with scissors and glue, cutting and pasting and reassembling. Photos and map at once these images are in fact closer to the city bird's eye views of the 16th and 17th century tradition in their construction, a piecemeal and laborious reconstruction by montage of many different images (with their different points of view) to simulate a view from outside and above. But Nishino's camera eye moves with the city and inside it and his photographs zoom in and out in a dizzying combination of minute detailing and encompassing views. So, while we are offered a reconstructed city, this remains a personal map in which we get lost. If this is a map it does not provide us with directional or locative information. What it does though is to offer multiple points of entry, represented by recognizable landmarks, monuments, and peculiar topographical characteristics, which Nishino is always careful to include. Distorted, this is a city we can always recognize. And here our own search of identification starts: as we scan the image to place ourselves in the city (or in Nishino's memory of it), in search for the familiar, we are forced to face the 'other', the unknown, the otherwise unnoticed, the ephemeral, and the 'stuff' that grows beyond the control of design, of legislation, of planning, of statistics and of census – and very often more quickly than the making of Nishino's composite 'non instant' photos.

Once we gain access to the worlds of these images we are in fact in Nishino's land – be it Osaka, Tokyo, or another city in his series – and what we discover are similarities and continuity rather than differences and estrangement. This is another moment of recognition and identification – of the same rather than the different, of the generic rather than the specific. So Nishino is more than a *flâneur* with a camera. Post-situationist, this contemporary *flâneur* returns to his studio and composes not poems but a cartography of the mind, reinvented maps of the familiar that show us what our distracted eyes normally do not see. This becomes even more evident in *I-land*, a corollary project of the *Diorama Maps*, a nowhere island collaged out of photo fragments from Nishino's urban explorations in different cities of Japan. While this work does not even attempt to reproduce or recreate existing topographies or trigger recognitions, its space looks and feel uncannily familiar, a sort of "generic city" without Rem Koolhaas's wordiness (Koolhaas 1995). While we look for recognizable traces of reality we are faced with the unsightly, and come out of the experience with the feeling that the city is in fact much more than the sum of its parts, and certainly much more than the sum of its buildings.

Cityscape time-warp: Yang Yonliang's impossible landscapes

Shanghai born and based artist Yang Yongliang (1980) makes pictures and video animations that resemble traditional Chinese landscape paintings, but are in fact narratives of a suspended vertical Shanghai constructed from still photographs stitched together - digitally in this case. His landscapes of mountains, streams (*shan-shui*, mountain and streams) and clouds are made of cranes, skyscrapers and powerlines, tightly and vertically congested to reinvent a new nature of the hyper-urban. The structure and the style of these terrifyingly beautiful views are in keeping with the genre

of tradition - Yongliang trained in classical Chinese painting and calligraphy - but the images are digitally manipulated photographs of fragments of real cities.

Sohei Nishino's solipsistic *flaneurie* makes him an involuntary cartographer of urban dystopias: his project is introverted, but because it is a project, it goes out to the gallery, it travels and even returns to the city it portrays, and in the process it *becomes* critical. Yang Yongliang's work instead is intentionally critical and ethically motivated from the onset, but its provocation takes place in the realm of the aesthetic: his beautiful images portray and exaggerate in a visionary way a foreseeable future of urban cataclysm and ineluctable loss. The criticism here is voiced by the artist himself (Collie et al. eds. 2011, 24-9): a deep discomfort for the scale and the speed of the developments that have transfigured Chinese cities and landscapes, turning them into a sameness that has incorporated the erasure of the past. In Yongliang's images it is instead the traditional medium and its iconography that appropriate the contemporary digital technique to represent a future-able present. It is the framing of the quotidian, the ordinary, appropriated by a historical genre, and rendered with a new technique, that makes it a work of art. Yongliang's landscapes/cityscapes are made of skyscrapers, construction cranes and trafficked urban motorways and other elements of Shanghai's (or other urban dense conglomerations') everyday. Assimilated to nature, the urban "catastrophe" - thus Le Corbusier had called Manhattan when he had visited it for the first time in the early 1930s (Le Corbusier 1948, 36)² - is both appropriated by art and assigned to a post-metropolitan 'natural' imaginary. This visual message contains both hope and despair. Hope resides in the fact that the appropriation performed by the image and in the image allows for a form of understanding, and possibly, through this, for a call for attention and action. Despair sits in the very assimilation of the hyperartificial to nature: far from idyllic, this new man-made nature is uncontrollable (recent catastrophic events in Japan, but also in Australia and New Zealand have produced images that are terrifyingly alike to Yongliang's visions). Yongliang is not an "accidental witness", as critic Rajath A. Suri has suggested (Suri 2010, 17) but an attentive critical observer.

In his essay on the work of Yongliang, Suri evokes L.B. Alberti's definition of *beauty*. In *De Architectura* Alberti writes that beauty is "that reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body, so that nothing might be added, taken away or altered, but for the worse." (Suri 2010, 16) This reference in relation to Yongliang's work may seem puzzling at first, but it is revealing: Suri proposes it not only to challenge the traditional dichotomy between Eastern and Western art, but also to concentrate on the idea of the "body" that Alberti refers to. And the "body" that Yongliang represents is that of the contemporary Chinese city and its uncontrollable proliferation – the "societal bastardizations" of the "autocratic neo Socialist centralized state" and of the ruthless "corporate globalization" and their "viral media diffusion" (Suri 2010, 17). Yongliang's works are beautiful (full of beauty) not only because they stunningly carry forward a traditional genre, but because they are capable of portraying, critically, all the parts of this shifting "body".

Timeless non-places: Emily Allchurch's Urban Chiaroscuro

British photographer Emily Allchurch (1974) makes digital urban photocollages combining fragments, materials and found objects of the contemporary city – which include, for instance, rubbish, graffiti, telesurveillance devices, etc. - together with ancient stones, archaeological remains, and pieces of classical architectures.

What are these images? Where are these images? In the series *Urban Chiaroscuro* the frames and structures for the composite images – their 'sites' - are provided by Giovanni Battista Piranesi's etchings the *Carceri d'Invenzione* (Prisons of Inventions, Rome 1761), visions of a fictional ancient Rome of partially buried underground spaces and heavy infrastructural stonework (aqueducts, sewers, burial sites and family tombs, etc). Far from being enclosed prisons, the vast spaces represented in Piranesi's views are reinvented fragments of an ancient city, seamlessly collaged by using multiple impossible perspectives. Timeless, or actualized by his work, Piranesi's city is both past

and present, possibly a 'live' view of antiquity (as in a documentary) or, more likely, a view of present inhabitations (re-inhabitations) of ancient remains.

Somehow continuing Piranesi's work and his trans-figurative trans-temporal collage, Allchurch appropriates these images and squats them with the present. Scattered in her reconstructed *Carceri* are elements of today's life in the city, and its so-called problems: rubbish, graffiti (political and not), ubiquitous surveillance cameras, road works in progress, squatted housing, etc. It is through this process that the images become city. Identity, specificity and language are conferred by the traces of ephemeral occupations captured (or inserted) by Allchurch's photographs. In her work Piranesi's impossible architectural frames become, through their contemporary inhabitations, a composite and equally impossible - and yet very very real - generic European city, in which, as Freud had observed on Rome (Freud 1991), history and the present coexist and overlap and interact.

The clues that Allchurch incorporates in her images allow the viewer to recognize fragments of Rome, Paris, and London. They also alert us that in the fictional 'generic' European city the relationship between history and the present is not exclusively an architectural one: here the physical presence of the past coexists with - and very often hosts - a present of immigration, as-yet-undefined forms of integration, ephemeral occupations, and social and political discontent.

Beyond capriccio and the "stuff in between"

If we leave aside for a moment social and political concerns, and consider these images of cities as such, that is, visually, we can argue that these photographic urban rearrangements – by Nishino, Yongliang and Allchurch - very different in style, genre, and scope, perform new versions of Canaletto's mid-18th century urban *capriccios*. But there is a crucial difference here: in Canaletto's paintings fictional city views dislocate and replace objects - built or designed architectures – but they do not question, rearrange, or redesign the space in between. They in fact do not deal with the space of the city, but only with its image as reinvented through the camera obscura. What remains untouched in the capriccio, and what is instead specifically and intentionally addressed in these contemporary works of urban *trompe-l'oeil* (whether the artist cares to admit it or not), is the quality and the inhabitation of the space in between architectures and beyond the control of design. These contemporary urban views - or visions - in fact show us of that "*ad hoc* stuff in between" that had baffled Colin Rowe in his proposal of the *Collage City*. In his book Rowe looks to 17th century Rome as an "alternative to the disastrous urbanism of social engineering and total design" (Rowe 1978, 107), to propose his urban architectural collage. Rowe is fascinated by the "*interstitial debris*" that he finds in the urban "collision[s]" of 17th century Rome, but also in the grid of Houston Texas (Rowe 1978, 106). But while for Rowe the "*ad hoc* stuff in between" is "a dialectic of ideal types plus a dialectic of ideal types with empirical context" (Rowe 1978, 106), the contemporary representations of cities that I have considered here go beyond a space of oppositions and dialectics, to make us 'see' a space of fusion and constant change. Their "beauty" – if we still want to rely on a reinterpreted Albertian definition (but this is really a stretched reconceptualization) – lies in the fact they are able to grasp and make us see change as it happens, and even before it does.

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(Endnotes)

1 ['What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields. \[...\] The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation. \[...\] A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back "to the same." The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged "competence."' \(Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 13\).](#)

2 [New York is a vertical city, under the sign of the new times. It is a catastrophe ... though a beautiful and worthy catastrophe.' \(Le Corbusier 1948, 36\)](#)

