

'Renderillas' and 'Oraxotans'

Research Plan

Contents:

Introduction

- *Image is everything, and everything is already an image* 2
- *Alienation as a pictorial practice* 2
- *But what is an image?* 4

Theoretical Background 5

Problem Statement 5

Research Question(s) 6

Method 6

(Un)Expected Results 7

Design Ideas 7

Bibliography 8

Image is everything, and everything is already an image

The title “Renderillas and Oraxotans” expands on the comparison between architectural workers and various primate species first introduced with the term “CAD-monkey” and more recently succeeded by its more modern version “BIM-panzee”. More than simply anecdotal, I identify this comparison as an entry point to much wider and more significant issues within the profession. The increasing importance of visual representation, or more precisely the production of affective imagery has given rise to new architectural worker-primate species. The primate comparison is evidence for the recognition of a sphere-wide alienated state which can be accredited to the lack of understanding of the radically altered modes of production. Unable to grasp the shift in the processes that shape our work, we resemble the common anecdote of primates, who, when exposed to unfamiliar tools and environments are utterly incapable of interacting with technology way past its level of comprehension, and therefore, worthy of our laughs.

The shift in question is outlined in John May’s essay “Everything is Already an Image” where he makes the compelling argument that we are way past orthographic production, and in fact producing in a post-orthographic regime (May, 2017, p.19). Meaning, that there is no longer such a thing as an “architectural drawing” due to the absence of its “technical-gestural basis.” Rather, it has been replaced by a visually similar, yet radically different in its production, mode of post-orthography (May, 2017, p.20). The term “drawing”, which we apply to both notational and affective output, is only a remnant from an orthographic past, a signpost of familiarity, a vital element of comprehension, that helps us cope in the face of unfamiliar conditions, that is our technical milieu. As practitioners, educators, and architects-to-be we find ourselves in a position, where, image is everything in architecture, and everything is already an image.

Once completed with its notational or rhetorical function, architectural imagery takes on a second life in the form of content. Sentenced to either circulate endlessly the array of internet platforms subjected to endless reformatting, modulation, recycling etc, or to be forgotten in the dark corners of data caches. In its new role, the affective capacity of images is no longer targeted at clients, bosses, or critics but at a much wider public. Whether it ends up on Instagram, Pinterest, architectural journals, flyers, or billboards this content becomes formative of values, ideas, social norms, aesthetics, and public perception. This illustrates the bi-directional nature of images because, although produced, they also hold the potential to influence and produce, hence the accuracy of Nelson Goodman’s observation that images are “ways of worldmaking”, not simply world mirroring (Mitchell, 2005, p.xv).

Alienation as a pictorial practice

None of what we mentioned previously would be a problem if architectural representation was still the productive force that we have perceived it as for centuries. In its current condition, architectural content is governed by a set of prescribed postulates within the closed, ultra-stable, self-referential system of architectural representation (Kousoulas, 2022, p.35). Although undeniably useful, the indoctrination of such axiomatic thinking, when used hastily, can install a

fake sense of reassurance. In that sense, pictorial practices nowadays perform as coping mechanisms in situations of self-doubt when uncertainty creeps in to question the core of our decisions and presumptions as designers, threatening the futurity of our brain-child. That is when we seek shelter in pictorial practice, it provides “stability” and assurance, presumed due to its longstanding reign as a template for rightness stemming from the tradition of the Western-centric episteme of positivist thinking obsessed with logic and control. The canonical prosecution of error in favour of the pre-established notions of “rightness” and “truth”, the use of representation to fortify what has already been recognised, its blatant self-referentiality, and exploitation of its own tradition actively promote a “dogmatic image of thought” that suffocates any deviation from the established norm. Representational thinking in the architectural sphere is infested with hylomorphic schemas and practices that actively isolate practitioners from their associated milieus and prohibit any future processes of becoming. That is what Gilbert Simondon describes as “alienation”.

Alienatory practices that have resided within representational traditions have been transferred to the post-orthographic mode of production in which we operate. The dogmatic images of thought have found a place in the presets, toolboxes, and layouts of our digital tools. In this setup, any form of designerly production becomes a Cartesian given. Following are a pleiad of issues that are entailed and find their expression in architectural representation, content creation, and image production. Those include the fixation with the static architectural object; exclusion of environmental, social, political, ethical, and economic issues; abuse of the powers of affect and increasing attunement to marketing strategies; propagation of frontal ontology; endless recycling of contents and increasing self-referentiality; importation of foreign values that valorise technical precision over impurities that foster novel thoughts; perceiving our tools as neutral vessels for our ideas; complicity with market and informational (computational) capitalism and others.

We have to confront the power of the fictional realities we create and their capacity to produce very real effects. Echoing Helene Frichot, in presenting future outputs as static, polished and idealised objects lies the danger of how easily the images we produce can “prescribe realities”, essentially predetermining processes of subjectification and dismissing the possibility of alternative future expressions (of both spaces and people) (Frichot, 2014, p.163). As Carol Fritz points out in his essay “Alienation Beyond the Human”, in a state of alienation, the potential for novelty is smothered and futures are foreclosed (Fritz, 2021, p.26-7). We need to understand that, in our current mode of production, architectural abstraction - the events playing out on our 3D modelling playgrounds - has exponentially increased its significance. Any variety of forms generated in our representations is now very easily translated into built form due to the increasingly intimate bond between the tools we use to make digital representations and industrial production. Hence, image truly becomes architecture. To quote Frichot once more, “The affective labour of images, and how they operate in a reciprocal, if disjunctive, relation with the concepts and discursive statements architects enunciate” (Frichot, 2019, p.165). In other words, what we produce blindly, unaware of the systems that it is going the enter, once entangled in networks out of our realm, gains entirely new meaning which is contrary to what we claim to fight for.

Representation emerges as the meeting point of an immense amount of architectural issues that are manifested in pictorial practices, whose behaviour and modes of production we fail to grasp, ultimately resulting in alienation.

The first step to overcoming alienation is to recognise that architectural output does not perform in isolation from other forms of visual culture. The longer we refuse to lift the veil of familiarity which May refers to, the longer it is going to take to realise that architectural output is part of a much larger ecology of images, and as such it is subject to the processes that come with it. Failure to acknowledge such processes makes architects incapable of grasping the onto-epistemology of the outcomes they produce, rendering them illiterate, a-political, and effectively disconnected from and oblivious of their surroundings. Hence, the accuracy of the primate comparison.

But what is an image?

Image ontology has long transcended the traditional understanding of signifying semiotics- the common understanding of images as signs, or as Martin Schwab puts it “signs that present their meaning in an iconic mode.” Meaning, that they communicate through structural analogues of what they want to convey, and as a mode of re-presentation rely on mimesis or similarity (Schwab, 2019, p.110). With the radical changes in modes of production, signification has been industrialised, colonised, and automated. Transcending its sole purpose of representation, it now involves a much wider range of agents that play a constitutive role in its formation, yet remain invisible. Hence, any venture in image production that does not acknowledge these processes is alienated already in its conception, blindly cohering to structures of informational/computational capitalism.

Images are not merely signs and their signifying qualities are progressively deemed as less important. Rather, as proposed by Gilles Deleuze, they perform at an a-signifying level as well. Meaning that the focus is no longer on their physical properties and semiotic orders, but on their capacities to produce percepts and affects. Deleuze also emphasises the bi-directional nature of images and their capacity to act on and react to other images (Deleuze, 1997, p.58). Such notions are also present in Gilbert Simondon’s understating of the genetic and transductive nature of the image. The image is regarded as a process of becoming, in constant formation, susceptible to changes from its environment but also capable of changing the environment itself (Oliveira, Palazuelos, 2016, p.3). The work of Deleuze and Simondon has indicated a shift towards the non-visual, the non-representational and the virtual which although not represented in images is nevertheless there, informing its processes of becoming.

In a contemporary condition of digital ubiquity, Web 2.0, industrialisation and colonisation of the signifying, financialisation of data, etc., what we understand as an image has become an incredibly complex and intertwined network constituted of a wide array of agents. Within an evermore intrusive presence of media platforms in our daily routines, they become places of subjectification and the formation of social relations. Within the vast clouds of data, images circulate, constitute, disrupt and inform various networks. This condition has been the subject of

research by the Center for the Study of the Networked Image for the past ten years, which has given rise to the term “networked image” itself. Its name is indicative of its nature which is defined by its emergence through networks that intertwine visuality, politics, technology, and social relations. As such, the networked image is a “socio-technical image assemblage” emphasising its reliance on a technical structure, but also its active participation in governing social relations (Centre for the Study of the Networked Image, 2021, p.42).

When applied to architectural output, this new understating of the image as an assemblage of dense and intricate networks opens up a discussion of how our alienated labour is geared towards the formation of social and cultural norms, as well as new forms of production and distribution of knowledge, all of which we remain oblivious of. Once elucidated, this novel onto-epistemology becomes a potent ground for the constitution of counter-cultures of imaging.

This new counter-culture requires a way to be recorded. Therefore a way of archiving has to be developed, one that involves a broader spectrum introduced by the novel means of understating imagery. The way in which we remember/record ultimately affects the way in which we act in the present and envision the future.

Theoretical Background

My understanding of the issues with architectural representation is informed by the works of Robin Evans, - *“The Projective Cast”, “In Front of Lines That Leave Nothing Behind”, “Translations from Drawing to Building”*; John May, - *“Everything is Already an Image”, “Signal. Image. Architecture.”*; Hélène Frichot - *“Creative Ecologies”, “Gentri-Fiction and Our (E)States of Reality”*; Kiel Moe - *“Non-linear Perspective”*; Bruno Latour and Alben Yaneva - *“Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move”*; and Carson Fritz - *“Alienation Beyond the Human”*.

With regard to image ontology and epistemology, signifying and a-signifying semiotics, key texts have been *“What Images Do”* edited by Backlund, Oxvig, Renner, and Soberg; *“What Do Pictures Want?”* by William Mitchell; *“After Art”* by David Joselit; *“Imagination and Invention”* by Gilbert Simondon; and *“Cinema 1: The Movement-Image”* by Gilles Deleuze.

Lastly, in terms of understanding our contemporary condition and what is termed “the networked image”, I have relied on the works of Hito Steyerl - *“The Wretched of The Screen”, “Too Much World: Is The Internet Dead?”*; Yuk Hui - *“For a Planetary Thinking”, “One Hundred Years of Crisis”*; and Center for the Study of the Networked Image and the output from its members - *“The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity & Contemporary Art”, “Affordances of the Networked Image”, “The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture”*.

**For a complete scope of my sources please refer to the full bibliography, where the most influential texts are in bold.*

Problem Statement

The issue with architectural representation is that it is deeply rooted in the traditional understanding of signifying semiotics. Although architectural output is increasingly reduced solely to imagery, architects are unaware of the actual ontology of images and only partially aware of their capacity to produce affects which they abuse blindly to achieve their goals. Images, quite literally, become architecture, however, architects fail to comprehend what constitutes images. Alienated from their work and output, they remain oblivious to their surroundings, rendering them apolitical, and disconnected from reality.

Research Question(s)

How can an understanding of the networked image inspire new modes of expression that foster a counter-culture of imaging that actively opens up and acknowledges the non-visual, non-representational, the “out-of-field”, the operative, the relational, the processual etc.?

How can we move away from architectural representation and towards architectural presentation? What does it mean to present potentialities? What happens to them when they are presented? Does re-presenting them limit other appropriations, possible future uses, or alternative imaging? The virtual shall remain unseen for its constitutive qualities to be preserved, so how do you open up actualisations (in the form of presentation) to actively point towards the virtual? How to evoke a feeling of unscripted potential?

How can indeterminacy be incorporated into digital design tools? Is it a question of the invention of new tools? Or infestation/modification of current ones? What does technodiversity in architecture look like?

How can you complement new ways of “seeing” with new modes of recording and archiving?

Method

Approaching the image as an apparatus rather than an object. Using the image qua apparatus to make processes and networks, which previously remained in the background, visible. Therefore, understanding the networked image (or the “exploded image”) as a mixed “visual” system that extends the boundaries of the visual, overcoming the inherent bias or limit of human perception. As Aurora Hoel puts it, “Amplified visual systems see more and differently” (Hoel, 2021, p.122).

Constructing sets or settings in which what usually remains “invisible” can be made comprehensible. Exposing the relational processes and politics of the networked image and curating a practice of systematic experimentation that aims to explore the possibilities of amplified “vision” and expanded literacy.

Question whether content is inseparable from the forms and formats through which it is rendered. Are form and content necessarily intertwined? Can you think beyond form and format? Can you do beyond form and format? Can you express beyond form or format?

**Exploring how knowledge can be transmitted or recognised as other than what can be shown. Going beyond explanation. Oriented towards what knowledge can become not what it is.*

(Un)Expected Results

An amplified, not necessarily visual, system that “sees” more and differently which is capable of acknowledging the political and technical processes that are involved in image-making and the cultural and social effects it produces, as well as shining a light on the “out-of-field”. Literacy beyond the representational modes of human sense-making. Develop ways of archiving that are capable of capturing the processual, the non-representational, and the unexpected future interpretation.

Short essay(s) or thought experiment(s).

Documentation of the experimental process.

“Out of field” = social, political, ethical, ethnographic, environmental, and economic exclusions which are never included in traditional representation.

Design Ideas

The design proposal will be focused on the reflection of the processual nature of the design process, its implementation, and its afterlife. I will be looking for ways to make the relational networks that give rise to it visible. Perhaps a small-scale intervention that can be prototyped and can be situated in several different places, expecting several different outcomes. The intervention itself should be able to accommodate continuous use and misuse. Together with the intervention itself, I would like to establish a framework for archival practice that is able to display the processual, performative, and variable dynamics that will define the project after its “completion”.

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PAK

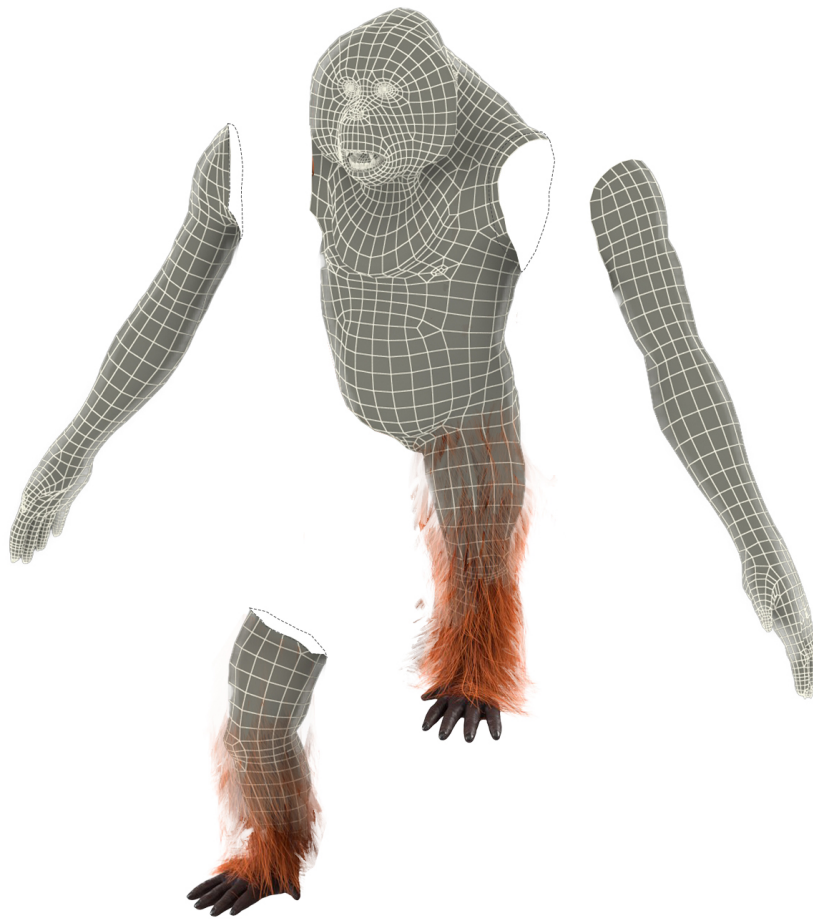


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