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Title: *Control Game, Philipp Schaerer vs. Roger Boltshauser*

Roger Boltshauser and Philipp Schaerer met in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1999. Boltshauser, who is slightly older, was the teaching assistant in a design studio taught by the architect Peter Märkli at the École Polytechnique Fédérale, where Schaerer was a student. During this course, and under the influence of Märkli's authoritative voice, Boltshauser and Schaerer developed a relationship of mutual admiration, which eventually transformed into a fruitful collaboration a decade later.

After their short overlap at Lausanne, each of the architects went their separate ways, with Boltshauser focusing on getting his incipient practice off the ground in Zurich and Schaerer graduating and moving on to work for Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron in Basel. During his tenure as a designer at the office of Herzog & de Meuron, Schaerer quickly specialized in the production of digital images for competitions, authoring some of the widely published renderings for the Schaulager project in Basel, the Allianz Arena in Munich, and the National Stadium for the Beijing Olympics. During this period Schaerer also doubled up as the office's knowledge manager, a position somewhere between an archivist and a communication manager, a job title that reflects Herzog & de Meuron's obsession with the problem of the organization of knowledge and their sustained inquiry into the role of images in the architectural.

Interestingly enough, it is precisely in the conflation of these two facets of his work for the office of Herzog & de Meuron - the making of images and the management of information - that Schaerer found the raw material with which to jumpstart his own independent career. During his time at Basel, Schaerer started using a media database to collect and keep track of the thousands of digital files that he managed. After he left Herzog & de Meuron, his first independent project consisted in mining his own collection for the production of a series of digital collages

BILDBAUTEN

The basic structure of all the works in the Bildbauten series (2007–2009) is identical, with a compact architectural object — an imaginary building — dominating the picture from the center, its elevation on many occasions exceeding the extent of the frame. The construction of these images is reduced to the articulation of a limited number of relationships, namely the way that the building sits on an uninterrupted ground plane and the delineation of a recognizable profile against a uniform sky. The intentional lack of information in the composition of these diagrammatic buildings is then tensioned by the photographic hyperrealism of their textures, in a conflict that our eyes repeatedly try to resolve and that accounts for the captivating and oneiric power of these images.

The remarkable consistency of format and structure in the series allowed Schaerer to in turn introduce and test a great degree of diversity in the content of the images. The basic forms abstracted by Schaerer seem to be selected from a wide range of references, domestic or industrial, natural or infrastructural, even from the world of product design. Similarly, there is a remarkable gradient from hard to soft when it comes to the overall forms of the imaginary buildings, which range from the incredibly precise to the amorphous, testing in the process different degrees of opposition between nature and artifice.

Schaerer's first series of collages was a direct development of his dual expertise. His stint at Herzog & de Meuron had allowed him to gain insight on how images are constructed, but also on how they are organized, disseminated, and consumed today, time to reflect on their capacity to operate as vessels for information, as well as on their changing relationship to reality throughout their lifespan. This realization is important to the extent that it sheds light on the different ways in which his work can be read more precisely, depending on whether we try to analyze it in the context of its production or its consumption.

From the perspective of production, one immediate interpretation for Schaerer's *Bildbauten* series is that it operates as a critical response to his own work as a visualization expert for architecture firms, a reaction to the spectacularity and shameless commercialism of digital architectural renderings. In their frontality and spartan austerity, the images in the *Bildbauten* series can thus be understood as a foil to Schaerer's own lavish images for Herzog & de Meuron, with their forced perspectives and intoxicating atmospheric effects. His artwork becomes instead a voluntary act of contrition through reduction, an analytical interrogation into the minimum components that construct an image.

From the perspective of its reception, however, the *Bildbauten* series relates to the current channels and modes of dissemination for the products of architecture, a complimentary phenomenon similarly enabled by digital technology and defined by the transition from a model based on a few professional publications to a proliferation of blogs and social media outlets, from a model of selection and curation to an oceanic flow of images in perpetual renovation.

Within our digital culture of scrolling or browsing, and in the context of an audience of hyperdistracted readers, architecture projects are forced to introduce themselves in quick succession and with an ever decreasing amount of information, becoming identified in many cases with a single image. Within this development, the *Bildbauten* series offers itself as a response to such reduced attention spans, its voluntary lack of information embodying a strategic adaptation to the new formats and speed with which culture is consumed today. In our current condition of linking and reposting, where images are replicated beyond any notion of editorial control and supporting texts are hardly ever reliable, Schaerer's mysterious images present themselves as immune to misinterpretation, navigating the ether of globalized information with ease, as perfectly self-contained capsules of distilled architecture.

Looking at the work from the perspective of its dissemination then puts a positive spin on our interpretation, as it provides arguments for the productive effects of the deliberate lack of context and in some cases even scale in the *Bildbauten* series.⁴ Perhaps these images were initially triggered by a need to critique the environment of

architectural image production, but in their process of becoming they were emancipated, taking on a variety of other themes and developing a specific mood or personality. Schaerer's voluntary omissions can then be read as intentional, capitalizing on a cultural condition of shrinking attention spans and prevalent loss in translation in order to generate a new aesthetic of simplicity. This reading is reinforced by the innocence found in the work, with its playful approach to profile and form, which speaks to us about an essential or elemental quality to which a sense of new possibility is ascribed.

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

While Schaerer's *Bildbauten* was born out of impulse and instinct - as is always the case with the first work by any artist - its emphasis on frontality and its typological sensibility soon attracted comparisons to the photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose images of industrial sheds especially resonate with Schaerer's work. This resemblance between the two series of images, albeit coincidental, frames the radical change of visual language between Schaerer's work as a visualization specialist for hire and his independent production as an artist: In light of this comparison, Schaerer's transition can be characterized as a shift away from the commercial logic of professional architecture photography and towards the analytic tradition of documentary photography.

Schaerer's initial interest was in the field of digital technology and more specifically in its application to architecture, but once the link to photography was noted by the critics, Schaerer himself became interested in the documentary tradition embodied in the work of the Bechers, a photographic lineage that can be traced back to the German masters of New Objectivity in the 1920s or the seminal work of Eugène Atget in turn-of-the-century Paris. This recontextualization of Schaerer's early work within a pre-existing visual tradition is decisive to the extent that it frames all of his subsequent production as an exploration of the displacements produced when a new technology — computer-generated imaging — reenacts the themes and problems rehearsed by a previous one — analog photography.

Schaerer's series of interior renderings *Raummodelle* (2008) can thus be considered in relation to Atget's images of empty Parisian apartments in their saturation of ornamental surfaces. Another example of this parallelism is the series of close-ups of digitally generated vegetation titled *Mines du Jardin* (2012), which uncannily possess the same immersive quality of August Sander's landscape photographs taken in the thick of the wilderness of the Wolkenburg forests. More poignantly, his typologically driven series of still lifes, *Nature Morte* (2010–2011), explicitly refers to Karl Blossfeldt's careful portrayal of plant specimens, as it echoes its ambivalence between scientific description and sculptural insinuation.

Among these series of relationships between Schaerer's digital works and their analog references, the *Nature Morte* series offers the most valuable insights — not only because it is explicitly based on Blossfeldt's series of plant photographs, but also because it clarifies the divide between analog and digital modes of operation. We know today that Blossfeldt's interest in nature was instrumental: Despite the scientific flair of his visual language, he never looked at his plants as a botanist, but rather as a craftsman in search of inspiration for the design of nature-inspired

ornament. Schaerer clearly understands the formal drive behind Blossfeldt's choices and manipulations and sets himself to radicalize this mode of operation. Capitalizing on the weakened indexical link between digital imaging and reality, he departs from the curation of virtual objects found in public three-dimensional model libraries and unleashes their sculptural potential by freely editing their volume and surface texture as independent parameters.

Regardless of whether the connections between Schaerer's computer-generated images and their photographic precedents are intentional or not, what comes across with each of his series is the high degree of specificity and precision with which he interrogates the processes of construction and perception of an image through the lens of technique. His revisiting of the documentary tradition is thus not aimed at eliciting a criticism or a cultural rereading of the work, but rather an analysis of its inner workings and the possibilities that digital technology poses for its transformation. In Schaerer's work the idea of objectivity inherited from documentary photography is unrelated to a social notion of realism, but rather becomes assimilated to a technical position: a drive for precision and control.

TRANSFORMATOR

It was precisely this high degree of exactitude achieved by Schaerer in his early work that prompted Roger Boltshauser to approach him with a proposition a decade after their first contact. Boltshauser had become fascinated by the visual language developed in the *Bildbauten* series and discerned in it a level of exactness that enabled a certain essential quality to emerge in the images. There was a particular work in the series — number 13, a depiction of an amorphous mass of dark sediment sitting on a barren landscape — that especially attracted Boltshauser as he saw in it a striking similarity with his own experiments with rammed earth construction.

It was late 2011, and as the two architects were seeking opportunities for collaboration, an offer came to Boltshauser to exhibit his work at Architektur Galerie Berlin. Faced with the impossibility of showing architecture in a gallery space, and dissatisfied with the idea of showcasing standard documents such as plans or models, Boltshauser suggested that Schaerer would reimagine the work of his office through the visual language of the *Bildbauten* series, producing in the process a radical transformation of his oeuvre as well as an autonomous body of work.

Originally the project's scope comprised both built and unbuilt designs, in an attempt to capitalize on the power of Schaerer's digital craft to equalize the various stages of development through his representation techniques. However, and as work progressed through a period of almost a year, both architects gradually decided to focus on revisiting Boltshauser's built projects for the exhibition, fascinated by the capacity of Schaerer's images to bring back the essence of the original design and the possibility that they presented to reopen the work for interpretation, to somehow continue to construct these projects beyond their completion.

The exhibition, fittingly titled *Transformator*, was inaugurated in Berlin in November 2012 and comprised fourteen prints by Schaerer as well as a set of original sketches and four bronze castings by Boltshauser. The massive reliefs, based on volumetric

studies of Giuseppe Terragni's main facade for Casa del Fascio, became in their bold massing and deep materiality counterpoints to Schaerer's flat and synthetic images. Interestingly enough, because of lack of space in the gallery, Schaerer's digital prints were mounted on the walls in two groups of pivoting frames carefully detailed by Boltshauser's office with solid bronze profiles, further contributing to the interplay of opposites between the sculptural and the photographic components of the exhibition.

While Schaerer's work for the Berlin show was originally conceived as an extension of his first series of speculative collages, the context of the commission induced a number of subtle deviations which developed into a substantially different result. The most relevant of these differences has to do with framing and the relationship to context: While the images in the Bildbauten series are almost completely removed, the buildings in the Berlin show are depicted in their actual sites, capturing enough of the surroundings in the frame as to establish a dialectic relationship between the constructions and their environment.

This duality is reinforced by the conflation of two different perspectival systems in each image: the buildings are depicted according to the logic of parallel projection — as pure elevations made from photographic material — and the sites are rendered naturalistically in perspective. This visual paradox points towards a subtle but definitive contradiction between building and context, one that is presented to us as intrinsically irreconcilable, effectively setting up an opposition that becomes the defining trait of the series.

The exactness and lack of hierarchy in the depiction of the buildings—all parts of each elevation are treated equally with a maximum amount of detail—defines a schism between the impenetrable starkness of the projects and the softness and immersive imprecision of their sites. The tension between abstract geometry and photographic hyperrealism of texture, already present in the Bildbauten series, here achieves a mesmerizing effect which keeps our eyes moving back and forth between the buildings and the landscape around them, as they snap in and out of synchronicity, in an impossible parallax effect.

The uncoupling of building from context in the Boltshauser series is related to Schaerer's capacity to reclaim the finished constructions for the realm of the architecture project. In this case, the reincorporation of the work into architecture is literally equated with its extraction from reality, reinforcing in the process not only an understanding of architecture and nature as opposites but also an insistence on architecture's disciplinarity and autonomy as its essence.

The split between nature and artifice is not solely a product of Schaerer's vision; it is already embedded and to a large extent explicit in the work of Boltshauser, an architect who defines his insistence on the box as a basic form in terms of its capacity to embody the maximum contrast between the man-made and the natural. Similarly, Boltshauser's fascination with Schaerer's exact and measurable photographic constructs reveals a belief that dimension and proportion are the true qualities of architecture, that in fact a project expresses its essence only in its state of absolute geometric precision.

BOLTSHAUSER

It is then in their simultaneous need and capacity for control that Schaerer and Boltshauser find common ground, as both of them understand their profession in terms of an analytic effort of clarification. This is evident in their willful reduction of the number of elements involved in each work, but also in the rigor put into the articulation and legibility of the relationships between those elements. This analytical drive is also evident in the way that the two architects deal with precedents, in the exhaustive effort of abstraction that allows them to look at history in a way that is detached from cultural readings, focusing instead on identifying a series of primary components and the inherent logics that bind them together.

In the case of Schaerer, this detachment is expressed in the medium specificity with which he interrogates the work of Sander, Blossfeldt, or the Bechers, always in terms of the internal construction of the photographs rather than in terms of their critical look on reality or their significance within German culture. A similarly aseptic and analytic use of history is true in the case of Boltshauser, an architect able to discuss Doric temples, Baroque urbanism or Le Corbusier's Ronchamp with equal fluidity, but always through their reduction to a set of solids and voids.

The underlying assumption behind Boltshauser's take on precedents is that the great works in the history of art and architecture are regarded as such because of their capacity to accurately respond to the rules of human perception, a set of rules that have a physiological basis and that remain stable throughout centuries and continents. This preference for the physiological or the perceptual versus the cultural or ideological is of course a highly reductive view, and one that can be argued against in many ways. However, it is highly productive for Boltshauser in that it narrows the scope of his architectural agenda to a very specific and radical proposition: the consideration of mass and its impact on space across all different scales nested in a project. For Boltshauser, the process of design, from site to volumetry, interior organization to detailing, consists of the reiteration of a process where the architect patiently balances a composition with the minimum number of elements possible. This entails a highly sculptural interpretation of architecture, one in which all stages and scales of the project are dealt with as interdependent massing exercises.

Despite its willfully reductive *modus operandi*, Boltshauser's work deviates from other strains of minimalism in substantial ways. While his buildings can be compared at times with those of Peter Zumthor, they are different in that they do not rely on a romantic notion of authenticity or an arcane cult of materiality, but rather utilize a wide palette of materials, indistinctly industrial and preindustrial, authentic and inauthentic, as for example in his juxtapositions of glass brick, adobe, and reinforced concrete. Similarly, Boltshauser's drive for simplicity does not entail an expression of puritan spirituality or starved aestheticism, as is the case with John Pawson, nor does it relate to a notion of estrangement or self-absorption as with his master Peter Märkli.

Conversely, Boltshauser's analytic reductionism departs from a rigorous study of form to derive expression from its manipulation. His architecture can then be characterized as a mannerism in that it assumes that there is always a correct dimension and proportion for a given architectural element which can be derived from technical and compositional considerations, and that the introduction of a certain

level of excess or distortion in size is enough to activate the spaces in the project and lend the work its character.

Examples of this mannerist sensibility can be found in all of his projects, from the fat rammed-earth piers and slim concrete lintels of the school in Allenmoos to the deep sculptural windows at House Rauch, or the massive brise-soleil frames at the sports hall in Hirzenbach. In all of these cases, the architect relies on foregrounding certain elements and exaggerating their dimensions in order to generate rhythm and tension in the work in a way that reminds us of Terragni's mastery of redundancy in Como, but also of Michelangelo's exuberant distortions of scale in the Laurentian Library.

SCULPTURAL VS. PHOTOGRAPHIC

It is precisely through highlighting dimensional precision that Schaerer's vision simultaneously challenges and clarifies the nature of Boltshauser's work, as it allows us to step back for a minute from its overpowering sculptural presence and witness the calculated process of composition through which those effects are achieved. Schaerer's flattened images can then be read not so much as a transformation but a translation, one that enables Boltshauser's intentions to be disseminated through a different medium, while bringing the work closer to a contemporary idiom that privileges photographic abstraction versus sculptural sensuality.

This tension between the photographic and the sculptural is a very present theme in the tradition of documentary photography with which Schaerer is now in conversation. A particularly direct and clear approach to dealing with the sculptural in photography is the case of Blossfeldt, who in his plant studies strived to produce a synthetic depiction of the volumetric object by emphasizing legibility of profile and mass through the use of light and framing. Bernd and Hilla Becher then took this *modus operandi* out of the controlled environment of the photographic studio and used it to elevate a series of anonymous industrial architectures and pieces of machinery to the level of works of art, always based on their perceived sculptural merit.

Around the same time, in the early 1970s, another photographer, Lewis Baltz, started to make different use of frontality as a technique inherited from documentary photography. In Baltz's *Prototypes* series (1965–1971), for instance, we find a collection of side elevations of industrial sheds and commercial buildings, abstract compositions in which volume is expressed at the level of a bas-relief, articulated only by the shadows cast by the occasional receding or protruding of a window frame, a gutter or an air conditioning vent. Even closer to our time, Thomas Ruff, in his *Häuser* series (1987–1991), appropriated and radicalized this approach to negate the possibility of sculptural description — as a response to his mentors Bernd and Hilla Becher — by instead using frontality to completely flatten his architectural subject matter, to cancel the legibility of space and volume in the photograph.

In this light, Schaerer's collapse of Boltshauser's muscular buildings into partial two-dimensional images is simultaneously a logical continuation and a reversal of this historic trend. What the Bechers, Baltz, and Ruff have in common is that they all survey the untutored built environment in search of anonymous fragments to then

elevate to the category of works of art. In a way these practices - like much of documentary photography and conceptual art - are about finding an unselfconscious project within their immediate landscape and rendering it self-conscious through their vision, imbuing it in the process with a certain aura. Schaerer's act of flattening, contrarily, takes a work of high architecture with a specific authorial voice — that of Boltshauser — and effectively demystifies it, bringing it closer to the realm of anonymous architecture.

What is interesting in this reversal is that the process of demystification is not perceived as an aggression to the work of Boltshauser, but rather that both the architect and the work seem to enjoy this level of anonymity, this newly discovered banality. Quite fittingly, Boltshauser jump-started and grew his practice with a series of commissions that involved minor buildings, mostly small storage depots and support constructions for existing schools, developing in the process a sensibility for these background constructions.

It is indeed difficult, when looking at these early works by Boltshauser, to tell, for instance, if the use of glass brick is a reference to the Maison de Verre by Pierre Chareau or to the Coop supermarket across the street, or if his schematic box-like volumes are responses to a history of modernist abstraction or to the banal landscape of anonymous sheds and housing blocks around them. Similar to his take on history or materials, Boltshauser's take on context is consistently catholic and relaxed, showing clear confidence in his ability to intuitively integrate and restructure different references. In this regard, Schaerer's further abstraction of Boltshauser's work helps to make visible a strategy that boils architecture down to its lowest common denominator in order to enable it to engage its surroundings in a sympathetic and quiet conversation.

Peter Märkli used to say that he preferred side elevations to front elevations, Greek Archaic architecture to Corinthian orders, Romanesque or Protorenaissance to the works of the masters of the Cinquecento. He has also on occasion confessed to a fascination with industrial architecture. Maybe then Schaerer's and Boltshauser's coalescence around the forms of anonymous industrial construction is related to this notion, to the fact that it can be considered as protomodern architecture, a sort of gut instinct modernism, freer to operate intuitively, accept awkwardness, and find beauty in everyday life. Unlike Märkli, however, Boltshauser's lighter approach speaks to us of a condition where imperfection is not an anomaly to be turned into an aesthetic fetish, but rather something that can be assimilated as a prevalent condition. His is an optimistic look on the world around us, a compassionate way to think about how things are, as opposed to how we would like them to be, an architecture of self-acceptance.

A CODA: OZEANIUM

In 2013, Boltshauser was working on the competition entry for the Basel Ozeanium, a large aquarium within the city zoo. The concept for the project was that of a geological cut, with a massive volume simulating the layers of sedimentation of the ocean floor, out of which the aquarium tanks were carved out as individualized voids. This metaphor built on Boltshauser's experience with rammed earth and concrete construction and offered the potential to push it even further: Experimenting with

different mixtures and aggregates allowed for a diversity of textures and transformations as the construction became lighter towards the top.

The scale and the complexity of the material experiments in this project prompted Boltshauser to bring in Schaerer to produce a series of studies trying to foresee how the massive construction could be articulated. What followed was a series of images produced as a collaborative work in which the two architects speculated on the desired material alchemy for the project, trying to approximate the effect of the construction and test different materials and transitions between them. In some of these images the whole height of the wall seems to be articulated by a soft and informal accumulation of materials, while in others distinct sections of rock, brick, adobe, or rammed concrete meet along sharp joint lines.

The Ozeanium project revisits the themes that condition the collaboration between Schaerer and Boltshauser and propels them by setting up a more interactive framework in which the two men are active participants in the design process. In Schaerer's facade studies we revisit once again the strong tension between the rational and the irrational, between nature and artifice. This time however, it seems that both poles of the dichotomy have been engulfed by the thickness of the architecture itself. As the earthen metaphor takes over, the nervous flicker between construction and nature that we detected in the Boltshauser series is replaced by a slower and deeper pulse, a measure of time that oscillates softly between the architectural and the geological, inadvertently taking us beyond the human.