Photomontage Practices

Introduction

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Since the nineteenth century, manipulated photographs have been used in presentations to illustrate the impact of architecture and landscape design on urban scenery, particularly in large-scale projects or buildings of historical and artistic importance. While photography has prompted all kinds of experimentation since it first appeared, photomontage has become a representational tool, challenging the relationship between space and time. Further, in the realm of contemporary images, it offers a unique opportunity to shed light on exchanges between disciplines and analyze the changes in the field of representation. In the same spirit, the present issue explores the vast range of photomontage practices, through in-depth historical and contemporary case studies, a translated lecture by Grete Stern, and a portfolio by contemporary artist Caterina Borelli. Both of these women situate their practice in line with the historical avant-gardes. Inspired by the Surrealists, Stern explores the human unconscious through fiction; whereas Borelli questions the relationship between people and the built world, with a more societal focus. While little has been theorized about photomontage to date, there have been a number of significant theoretical reflections on the subject, which we will address in this introduction.

Photomontage and the Avant-Gardes, the Prolific Interwar Period

Like many inventions, the origins of photomontage are difficult to pinpoint. As Laurent Koetz emphasizes in his article on Louis-Auguste Boileau, found in this dossier, one thing is certain: “photomontage is by no means an invention of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes [...], but rather had already established a widespread and diverse presence in nineteenth-century photography.” This is also the case regarding landscape designers, as we will see. Nevertheless, photomontage underwent profound transformation following its adoption by historical avant-garde artists, as they set themselves apart from earlier experiments. At the intersection of photography,
assemblage, montage, collage, as well as ready-made and vernacular samplings often from the mainstream press, the principle of photomontage was omnipresent in artistic creation of the time. Be it in literature, cinema or music, the acts of sampling, clipping and assembling were everywhere.

Used extensively in the interwar period, Dadaists, Constructivists, Surrealists and Futurists all claimed photomontage or photocollage as the expression of a radical break with the past. In this way, they were able to shift away from the idea of artistic creation as a technical skill. Thanks to the multitude of sources, the layered composition and the interplay of different scales, photomontage generated greater diversity, questioning the single vision advocated by linear perspective, and creating a new dynamism and temporality within a fixed, two-dimensional image. For art historian Angela Lampe, such a multiplication of perspectives is the reason why photomontage is so closely linked to modernity. Among the avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s, the Dadaists—notably Dada Berlin, which included Hannah Höch, Georg Grosz, Raoul Hausmann and John Heartfield—developed a significant body of work on photomontage. By the late 1910s, this had become their essential form of expression, to such an extent that they claimed to have invented it. Central to their artistic productions were tactics of appropriation, akin to the cultural ‘poaching’ described by Michel de Certeau. Drawing their photographic clippings from the mainstream press, they developed a strong societal critique. Hannah Höch’s work, for example, raised questions about gender and the place of women. By 1918, Raoul Hausmann had already produced his first photomontage, theorizing the practice in various texts and exhibition speeches. John Heartfield’s photomontages adopted a politically activist stance, denouncing the rise of National Socialism, as Günther Anders explained in 1938 during a speech at the Heartfield exhibition in New York. Russian Constructivists such as El Lissitzky and Rodchenko shared this political outlook, emphasizing its revolutionary nature. For instance, El Lissitzky stressed the immediate expressive power of the image, arguing that text should play a secondary role. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, a prominent teacher at the Bauhaus, also used photomontages, as did Futurist and Surrealist artists, thus initiating the formal, political and social break advocated by the avant-garde.

From then on, photomontage generated new relationships, particularly between art and architecture. These ties were closely knit, based on friendships, exchanges and collaborations. Mies van der Rohe, director of the Bauhaus from 1930 to 1933, spent time with the German avant-garde between the wars. As a close friend of Hannah Höch, he began experimenting with photomontage in 1910, applying it to depict his famous Friedrichstrasse skyscraper project in Berlin-Mitte, 1922. Photomontage became a design and communication process that accompanied him throughout his life, using it like no other architect of the Modern Movement did.

For Charlotte Perriand, photomontage was also an important medium; though not for design or communication, but rather as a means of expressing political and social views. Working closely with the artistic avant-garde, she collaborated with Fernand Léger and also met Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. In 1935, she created her first giant photomontage, La Misère de Paris, which adorned the walls of the 1936 Brussels World’s Fair. For the 1937 Paris International Exhibition, she worked alongside Fernand Léger to design the giant photomontage for the Ministry of Agriculture Pavilion. Perriand also defended an activist and political stance and, as Véronique Bergen argues, her use of photomontage was to support an ongoing project of resistance which, through the
creation of works that captured the socio-political playfield, sought to achieve emancipation and justice for the greatest number of people. Art, architecture and politics were thus brought together, as they were for many artists of this era, and photomontage could be seen as a common expression of this.

The photomontages created by artists and architects during this period continue to inform many works today. Although none of the articles in this dossier deal directly with this era, which has been covered in numerous publications on the avant-garde, the photomontages in Caterina Borelli’s portfolio displayed in her essay “bodies of architecture, an Essay on Photomontages” are clearly part of both its visual and social legacy. Working in layers and confronting different scales, like Hannah Höch and Charlotte Perriand, Caterina Borelli draws on magazines distributed in hotels, by airlines and in the mainstream press. In this way, she highlights the tormented relationship between bodies and the built environment, from which humans emerge literally drained, exhausted and even dominated.

Photomontage and Discourse

Avant-garde artistic experiments opened up new possibilities for twentieth-century architects, allowing them to deviate from the classical means of architectural representation. In Italy in the 1930s, the use of photography and experimenting with its various forms became particularly significant, not only in giving shape to architectural projects, but also in enabling architects to express their views in public spaces.

Fabio Colonnese’s article, “The Architectural Photomontages of Piero Bottoni,” underlines the extent to which this form of representation served primarily as a means of communication for design projects. For Bottoni, this anti-academic approach enabled him to place his work at the heart of the European artistic avant-garde, and to engage in a critical and ironic discourse on Fascist rhetoric. Another motivation lay in the architect’s deep interest in cinema. However, the example of Bottoni also demonstrates the value of photomontage in architectural design, without theorizing on the subject. For example, his photomontage for the Piazza Fontana project in Milan reveals an unconventional use of model photography, insofar as it abandons realistic illusion in favor of meaningful visual expression.

Model Photography

Model photography has a long history among architects, as Laurent Koetz clearly demonstrates in his article, “Louis-Auguste Boileau’s Model Photography and Collage: A Prefiguration of Architectural Photomontage in the Second Half of the 19th Century.” Here, he analyzes the representational techniques developed by Boileau in the 1850s; which in many ways have similar aims to those of photomontage. Indeed, in photographing the model of a religious monument, Boileau sought to produce an illusion of reality characteristic of certain photomontages. Using a perspective with human figures, he experimented with the technique of incorporating people, which involved cutting, collage and photography. The author thus invites us to explore the prehistory of architectural photomontage, explaining the operations involved and
encouraging us to reflect on the transformations that have affected Architects’ relationship toward images.

10 The use of photomontage, which blends drawings and models with real settings (models photographed with large format photo prints in the background), has often been applied in order to create a representation that seems to have actually been built—such as in the work of Le Corbusier. Yet, it can also be used for more conceptual purposes. Denis Delbaere illustrates this through the montages found in the archives of urban planner Théo Leveau. Through photography, Leveau shaped his park project with the city skyline below in mind. For him, photography was a quicker, more efficient way of measuring the horizon than a perspective drawing, which was more tedious and uncertain.

Montage for Design

11 In the 1990s, the field of landscape architecture began to debate the use of photomontage as an image used for design, and not for communication or project rendering. In this way, James Corner’s landmark article, “Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes,” argues for an eidetic image, capable of conveying ideas and project intentions, and playing a role in the design process itself. He distinguishes between two types of images: eidetic and illusionistic. The latter allows us to anticipate a desired result and to show a project that does not exist; its design thus residing in an independent process. For him, photomontage would represent an appropriate technique for supporting the design process, insofar as the suggestive image accompanies the act of creation, which is an intellectual act. Although this debate is not new—Grete Stern’s 1967 text, “Notes on Photomontage”, which is published in this issue, stresses the intellectual dimension of photomontage, and not just its technical components—it gained renewed interest and developed new forms of expression at the end of the 1990s. Corner’s work focuses on large-scale, territorial projects. These figurative innovations focus on cartography, which hybridizes with other forms of representation. The images produced are the result of a photographic montage inspired by film editing techniques and the work of artists such as David Hockney, applying photomontage in an abstract way. Annette Freytag compares Corner’s approach to that of French landscape artist Yves Brunier, who also explores the power of representation through montage, using it to express the tactile dimension of landscape, combining painting techniques and photography. Brunier’s visualizations for Park Euralille (OMA) between 1989 and 1991 exemplify the spatializing qualities of photomontage. Through collage, space is visualized within its sensitive dimensions, where landscape’s notion of ambiance, revived by Bernard Lassus, offers a syncretic understanding.

12 In the article, “Photomontage, an Atlas Under Construction: Three research-creation art workshops dedicated to the composition of an atlas for the future of industrial heritage,” Chimène Denneulin also refers to the notion of eidetic image, questioning the conceptual value of images used to produce photomontages in a design situation. She highlights the cognitive dimension of collecting, cutting, collaging and editing as gestures, which are analyzed in detail. The choice of photographic images and the way they are arranged to create meaning strongly influence design intentions. However, photomontages also contribute to communicating the project to the various
players involved, thanks to their eloquent visual discourse. This is where the argumentative role of photomontage comes into play, which is clearly demonstrated by its use in the political arena. From an educational point of view, photomontages are often called upon for their ability to produce both a critical analysis and a forward-looking vision.

While depicting the subjective experience of landscape is an inherent preoccupation of landscape architecture, the development of collage and photomontage techniques in the 1990s made a significant contribution to an already extensive history in this field.

**Landscape Architects and Montage**

Montage has been used by gardeners ever since the late eighteenth century to illustrate their designs, and is considered a fundamental means of representation for garden designers and landscape architects. In this respect, Humphrey Repton's famous *Red Books* are a major reference. In his books, Repton developed a before-and-after landscape visualization device that showed the present state of a given setting and its transformation, through the use of flaps. A panoramic view could have several flaps, offering different versions of alternative proposals, both peripheral and central. According to Stephen Daniels, the *Moveable View* process, which expresses a sense of movement in time and space, closely resembles theatrical and entertainment techniques that were popular back then, such as mirrors and optical lenses. Repton's process makes clear the cut-and-paste technique that lies at the very heart of the montage process.

Although, according to Rosalind Krauss, photomontage is part of a history of representation, the notion of picturesque in landscape painting, garden design and photography needs to be examined in greater depth. James Ackerman argues that studies and debates on “picturesque” throughout the nineteenth century showed that it was not only a visual composition style for landscapes and gardens, but also a representational code that enabled vernacular landscapes to be read and interpreted. Moreover, the patterns that make up this code can also carry ideological and political values. The notion of picturesque was imported to France, where it has been associated with the defense of landscapes through movements to protect them from the effects of industrialization and urban growth. For example, the Société de protection des paysages de France (SPPF; or the French Society for Landscape Protection) was founded in 1901 and was also associated with the development of tourism, as clearly shown in Rachel Floch's article “The Orientation Tables of the Touring Club de France (1903-1960): Practice and Knowledge of the landscape through images”. By analyzing the production of these landscape markers and their use of photography and photomontage, she demonstrates the extent to which these devices rely on the aesthetic category of “picturesque” to produce a landscape through the image and experience of the body in motion. She even argues that new forms of the landscape profession are being invented through this particular process of exploring landscapes through images, as a means of transforming them.

The images used to interpret the landscape are mostly composite, i.e. they are made up of several sources: subjects observed on site, but also elements taken from other images, maps, texts, imaginary objects, memories of the past or future projects.
The Composite Image in the Digital Age

With the transition from analog to digital images, montage is no longer used to express design ideas, but rather to describe objects and environment more realistically. Whereas before, editing and collage were used to reveal the construction of the image, this new approach instead uses these very techniques to mask it. According to Karen M’Closkey, photo-realistic montage works perfectly as a communications image. The digital transition has facilitated this communicative function, because the photographic image possesses an authority not found in other modes of representation.

However, as shown in Oscar Barnay’s article “Photomontage as the Embodiment of the Architectural Project: the FRAC of Dunkerque, Lacaton & Vassal, 2009-2013,” the contrast is not quite so clear-cut. Through a detailed analysis of the context, design process and meaning behind the photomontage produced by Lacaton & Vassal for the competition to build the FRAC de Dunkerque, the author demonstrates that, in the widespread practice of digital photomontage, images are not limited to their communicative function. Instead, they can fully convey the project’s intentions. For example, the architects’ idea of extending the historic hall through duplication is perfectly expressed in the aerial and pedestrian photomontages. A detailed analysis of the photomontage—which breaks down the digital processes in terms of the initial photographic image, project phases and uses of the image—reveals the way in which photomontage allows us to both create the project and talk about it, by drawing on the characteristics of the photographic image.

Sonia Curnier and Véronique Mauron-Layaz’s article, “Collage as a Collective Exploratory Tool in the Design of Public Spaces,” presents an analysis of two Swiss park projects designed twenty years apart: one in 1998 and the other in 2018, the former using classical representation techniques and the latter digital. Here, the difference in the nature of the tools used to produce the collages is seen as less important than their role in the development of the project, the way in which they express ideas and their significance within the design process. The approach adopted to understand the origins of the collages and their roles is based on an ethnological investigation that focuses on gestures as the bearers of creative thought. Collages also serve as a means of appropriating public spaces, such as parks, because they create possibilities, provoke fiction and value incompleteness.

At the heart of most of the articles in this dossier is an analysis of the gestures involved in photomontage, which can be seen as both skills rooted in techniques and knowledge in action. Philosopher Vilem Flusser says, “There is no thinking that has not been articulated through a gesture,” as quoted by Sonia Curnier and Véronique Mauron-Layaz. The physical gestures of collecting, cutting, assembling and collaging are also carefully described by Grete Stern in her text, claiming them to be intellectual acts. Hence the importance of her work in this dossier, in addition to providing an insight into Grete Stern’s biography and personal engagements.

Debated and Challenged Photographic Approaches

Photomontage and collage are techniques for creating images made up of disparate elements or fragments. Found in various fields such as photography, architecture, the
visual arts, as well as popular and vernacular images, photomontage is both part of photography and part of the transformation of images through gestures (cutting, assembling, collaging, montage, sampling, and combining).

22 At the crossroads between technical and visual images, reproducibility and authenticity, creation and design, as well as professional and vernacular practices, opinions on photomontage are diverse, and little has been written on the subject or on its definition, form, origin or disciplinary scope. Although the subject is occasionally addressed in monographs on artists, photographers and architects who have used the technique, and articles, books and definitions can be found, photomontage seems of little interest when compared to the overwhelming literature that exists on photography. Indeed, while photography has been a topic of fierce debate and contention for almost two hundred years, questioning its relationship to drawing, painting, art, reality, technique, representation, language and text, the same cannot be said of photomontage.

23 Nevertheless, photomontages remain images and we can thus mention phenomenology and semiotics as having a major influence on their analysis, like Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl. While it is beyond the scope of this issue to develop the positions of these thinkers, the authors of the articles featured in “Photomontage and Representation” do refer to them, often indirectly. While phenomenology regards images primarily as a perceptual phenomenon, including subject and subjectivity in its analysis, semiotics sees the image as a system of signs, involving notions such as referent, icon, symbol and, in the case of photography, index.

24 Until the 2000s, semiotics was frequently used as a model of analysis, with iconic texts such as Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography and Susan Sontag’s On Photography. However, some authors openly opposed it, such as André Rouillé, who criticized semiotic explanations in his book La Photographie. Although Rouillé does not discuss photomontage, his text does shed light on the subject. According to him, no photograph is as directly linked to reality as an imprint.

25 Today, the comparison between phenomenology and semiotics is less pronounced, and analyses often opt for intermediate, more open positions, sometimes inspired by American visual studies or German Bildwissenschaften. Georges Didi-Huberman, for example, supports the heterogeneity of all visual devices, arguing against an essentialist vision. He believed that “no visual device has meaning in and of itself […], [and] can never be brought together under the authority or unity of a single heading in an iconographic dictionary. Understanding a form of vision depends entirely on its focus, why it is used, how it is used and where it is directed.” Finally, we can agree that photomontage reflects the ideas of art historian Roland Recht, in that “the photographic image preserves heterogeneous elements within its field, and that this is what will henceforth be accepted as capable of producing meaning.”
NOTES


3. Such as “L’Homme à la camera” by Dziga Vertov; see Jean-Marc Lachaud, ibid., p. 11.


13. Ibid., p. 229.


21. James S. Ackerman, “The Photographic Picturesque,” in Charles Waldheim and Andrea Hansen (ed.), Composite Landscapes..., op. cit., p. 37-53. See also the introduction of issue n. 5 of the
29. Andrè Rouillé, La Photographie, Paris, Galliamard (Folio), 2005, p. 94
30. Montage, photomontage, collage and photocollage are not included in the concept index.

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