Zarch #9: Architecture, the act of looking and visual culture

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In the book "The Perception of the Visual World", written by James J. Gibson and commissioned by the US Air Force at the start of World War Two, the author distinguishes between what he calls the visual world and the visual field. The former refers to how we usually look, in a manner that is all-embracing and dynamic from a spatial and physical point of view, whereas the visual field is static and spatially restrictive. The visual world is the three-dimensional reality we observe, while the visual field is a two-dimensional semblance of this reality, the optical interpretation our eyes make. This leads to a polarisation between what things are and what we see and how we visually interpret them, between description and interpretation. Photography, as a visual recording mechanism, refers to 'that which surrounds us and remains,' as María Zambrano famously defined reality. It is a medium that combines its documentary characteristic, found in natural signs, which Roland Barthes called 'spectatorial' consciousness, thus differentiated from the 'fictional' consciousness of painting and other forms of expression, with a language open to connotation and interpretation of this reality. Whether visual language is photographic or not, it brings together the representation of what we see and the more or less subjective perception arising from it. Visual language, as a sensory channel, should, therefore, accommodate emotion and artistic appreciation. In 1920 Paul Klee wrote that 'art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible'.

In architecture and the urban space, photography is primarily an informative, documentary and analytical instrument that has been used since it was invented in the nineteenth century, and especially since the advent of the modern era, to candidly capture their features, their disciplinary future and their own historiography. However, the postmodern glorification of mass visual culture—the way we are now swiftly in thrall to everything our retinas see—has undoubtedly given it such excessive power that it has silenced other sources of knowledge and spatial comprehension. The 'unending rainfall of images,' as Italo Calvino put it, has led to image severing from reality, a situation aggravated by our obsession with the virtual world. And by perverting our cognitive discernment, our attention focuses first on how things look on the outside rather than their

essence and identity. If looking involves not merely describing, but also perceiving and, therefore, expressing, this oppressive rule of the visual world urgently requires a critical reassessment of the operational principles that make it credible. The popularisation of the visual world requires an educational effort that seeks the approval of a coherent, strict and sensitive visual language.

Looking is not an innocuous action. ‘There is no innocent eye,’ Ernest Gombrich pronounced. Appreciative looking surely favours the construction, or rather reconstruction, of some individual and collective aesthetic principles. Looking, and photography as an operational mechanism of visual expression, must reconstruct their heuristic value to help us explore non-verbal methods of knowledge in a disciplined fashion. When faced with a saturated and, therefore, obfuscated and insensitive visual field, the subsequent visual agnosia undoubtedly requires teaching that resets the vectors of the visual world and explains the fertile spatial and objectual relationships of the physical world based on a cultivated memory. ‘We think in images rather than in ideas. Ideas are distilled from images. Ideas are images,’ Federico Soriano wrote. Yet images do not always result from an act of conscious or intentional looking. Soriano also said: ‘Actually, looking is no longer remembering, or thinking. The arts of looking are unpredictable, informal, unconscious. They have no permanent value. None is essential. They are fleeting, inconsequential.’ Given that László Moholy-Nagy warned back in 1927 that future illiterates would not be ‘ignorant of writing, but rather ignorant of photography,’ we could reread that premonition as an incentive for educational and academic activity. We are interested in rethinking image as a result of the act of looking, and photography, as Rosalind Krauss views it, as an expression of the processes that form and decant the visual world.

Consequently, we feel justified in beginning the scientific spectrum of the ZARCH journal with a debate, which, although not necessarily new, is still open to in-depth examinations that are in line with its undeniably interdisciplinary dimension. Architecture, the city and the urban landscape—in sum the built environment—are conceived and shaped by the act of looking. But we have yet to unravel the past and current role this looking plays and its operational influences. That is why we intend to produce a monographic issue that instead of covering specific aspects of photography as an auxiliary and instrumental discipline in relation to the space we inhabit, will contain ambitious and novel contributions linked to subject areas such as the following:

- The emotional act of looking: phenomenological and spatial dimension of visual narratives in architecture
- The act of looking at the urban landscape: redefining the cultural landscape as the landscape of visual culture and mass (lack of) culture
- The act of looking as an analytical and operational tool and teaching strategy in an architect's education
- The hybrid act of looking: graphic narrative and visual interactions between official culture and popular culture
- The project-based act of looking: making to see, seeing to construct
- The unfocused act of looking: originality and convention of the modern project
- The informed act of looking and visual communication: critique and dissemination of architecture as an image
- The technical act of looking and graphic and plastic construction of visualisation in and of architecture

- The historiographic act of looking: historical and cultural construction based on images and texts
- The heritage-based act of looking: definition and conservation of contemporary heritage-based imagery
- The evocative act of looking: the built space as a visual scenario for artistic and social practices
- The typological and structuralist act of looking: functional instrumentalisation and iconographic objectivation of architecture
- The private domestic act of looking transferred to collective urban life: from the camera obscura to the rear window
- The act of looking as visual grammar: signs and codes of spatial definition
- The ethical act of looking: truth, fiction and simulations of built and virtual (hyper)reality
- The encapsulated act of looking: time, memory, archive and history of architectural imagery
- The interior and silent act of looking: spatial emptiness and critical non-referentiality
- The gestural act of looking: formal plastics of architectural imagery

After realising that the act of looking and its lack of continuity and contradictions are generally relevant from multiple perspectives, we can also appreciate a more apprehensive and critical attitude, as put forward by Martínez Santa-María, and worth considering as a final point: ‘training in the act of looking necessarily involves learning not to look, to refuse to see, to dismiss the ordinary’.

Reference:
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