

Transient topographies: a photographic language for impermanence

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© Erieta Attali 2013, Glass-Wood in New Canaan by Kengo Kuma and Associates, 2010

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ABSTRACT: The Glass|Wood photographic project started as a research initiative by architectural photographer Erieta Attali under the auspices of Melbourne RMIT's Doctorate program. This paper examines the discussion that led to the project's conception, the process behind it, as well as the outcome: a case-study monograph by the same name. The aim is to demonstrate how a photographic narrative can articulate an architectural argument and feed back into the design discourse, transgressing the limits between documentation and interpretation of architecture.

Attali photographed Glass|Wood in New Canaan, Connecticut, a guesthouse extension by Kengo Kuma in 2010 to an existing modernist pavilion buried deep within a deciduous forest, in the course of two years. As the passage of eight seasons narrates the continuity between landscape and architecture, both architect's and photographer's ambitions become apparent: architecture that dissolves into the landscape and photography as a medium that communicates shifting relations instead of static, iconic images. The challenge we faced was how to communicate this synergy and the reciprocal processes that feed it.

The paper has a tripartite structure. The first section examines Attali's photographic language formulated in landscapes and archaeological sites, its translation into architecture and the narrative that it builds around Glass|Wood. The second section approaches the architectural subject of the series by dissecting some of the theoretical foundations of Kuma's practice, especially its ambiguous relation to image representation in general and photography in particular. The third and final section recounts the creation of the Glass|Wood book through a multidisciplinary effort towards the articulation of a final, visual argument in the form of a hybrid architectural/photographic monograph.

a. Introduction

Photography, “the most literary of the graphic arts”¹ according to Walker Evans, is often likened to a visual language; admittedly, it is a formal system with commonly accepted structure and recognizable motifs. Ezra Stoller, while using the ‘photography as language’ analogy, positioned the architectural photographer between architect and audience, in the role of interpreter and communicator of the architectural idea². Such an approach invites several questions: how idiosyncratic can that interpretation be, to what a degree it depends on the visual language of the photographer and finally whether the particularities of an architectural space invite or prohibit the use of a specific photographic vocabulary. While in the fifty years since Stoller wrote that article, media platforms for Architecture have exploded in number and variety, it remains true that architecture is still communicated mainly by image. Yet, instead of witnessing a parallel growth of photographic “dialects” the opposite is the case; increasing homogenization of image, oftentimes driven by the need to present architecture as an easily consumable visual product, expected to survive extremely short attention spans in an environment of information over-saturation. While alternative approaches do exist, they tend to operate at the fringe of commercial architecture photography, employing buildings as a pictorial element in a photographic practice that does not, in principle, concern itself with architectural communication. This kind of photography is seldom, if ever, commissioned by architects and mainly belongs to the world of fine art.

Attali initiated the Glass|Wood photographic project as an extended case study with the aim of employing an idiosyncratic photographic expression for architectural communication. Attali tests the limits of her particular photographic language, on a subject that invites -if not demands- expressive flexibility: the Glass|Wood guesthouse in New Canaan, Connecticut, by Kengo Kuma. Kuma’s design doctrine has been to ‘erase architecture’³ not by visually concealing it, but by dissolving the concept of the architectural ‘object’, by decomposing tectonic elements into smaller particles, through a compositional logic that draws upon traditional Japanese concepts of spatial flow and continuity. Kuma’s ‘object’ is an autonomous, often iconic media construct that imposes a one-way relationship between architecture, its audience and the landscape, with its antithesis found in the ‘anti-object’: an entity that is defined through spatial relations and whose context is a fundamental component of its function.

This design philosophy is complementary to Attali’s photographic approach; having started her career as an archeological and landscape photographer before venturing into architecture, Attali chooses to focus on relations between architecture and its continually shifting environment. Architecture in her work is employed as a figurative lens that filters and translates the landscape; human constructs morph into contemporary ruins, having surrendered to nature and its cyclical processes of disintegration and regeneration. Attali makes extensive use of ambient conditions, atmospheric phenomena and spatial layering in order to compose transient spaces where boundaries are blurred. The seasonal series of Glass|Wood set in the forest of New Canaan, Connecticut, represents a culmination of this pursuit; the final product of a two-year effort is a hybrid book that is neither architectural nor photographic monograph and yet, communicates a spatial experience that resists reduction to a straightforward textual or even graphical description.

b. a photographic language for the transient landscape

Erieta Attali developed her visual vocabulary outside the context of architectural publication, before proceeding to become an architecture photographer. The origins of her photographic gaze can be traced in one decade spent as landscape and archaeological photographer. While archaeological photography varies in scale from the small found object up to the full edifice restoration, it was during Attali’s long involvement in the documentation of excavation sites that she compiled a distinct visual vocabulary; one that reads structures as inseparable components of a site.



Fig. 1. Atacama Desert 2007 © Erieta Attali

Several years devoted to the exploration and documentation architectural ruins around the Mediterranean world solidified an understanding the reciprocal connection between structure and landscape; a knowledge that eventually became the foundation of her transition into architecture photography. The photographic language of Attali is therefore one that based on inversions of established hierarchical structures: buildings turn into geological formations and natural structures into architecture, often within the same photograph.

A photograph that epitomizes this approach is Figure 1. In the midst of a vast desert, with no points of reference in sight apart from volcanoes, dry lagoons and scattered boulders, Attali treats the natural formations as ruins, traces of human activity engaged in a losing battle with time in one of the harshest environments on earth. When the object happens to be an actual habitable structure, the aforementioned inversion takes place. Eso Paranal in Atacama (Fig. 2), is approached and photographed as if it were yet another land formation, inseparable from the layers of crushed stone that surround it; concrete and mineral surfaces alike are equally accentuated by the harsh sunlight. The viewer is standing among a carpet of shards, chiseled off a solid block of rock that lies sunken in the background; a mere pareidolion of a building.



Fig. 2. Eso Paranal by Auer & Weber architects, Atacama Desert, 2007 © Erieta Attali

This language of contextual inversion has the potential to expose of the mutual relationship between architecture and its diverse environmental contexts: a novel visual apparatus in the discourse of contemporary architecture, where photography is used as the means for a reverse excavation. Archaeologists remove strata of earth to reveal structures and re-establish their former dependencies to each other and to the –now changed- landscape. Attali, however, allows the landscape to coagulate around the structure in order to reveal a network of underlying interactions, showing that despite the common cultural convention that separates nature from human-made structures, they both face similar transformations through time. This simple recognition forms the beginning of a discourse between artefacts and landscape thereby permitting the use of architectural photography as a potential instrument of analysis and interpretation.

Attali first came across Kuma's work in 2001 during a period of research into glass and urban transparency; their first collaboration was on Water Glass, a guesthouse pavilion perched on a hill over the Atami seaside, in Shizuoka, Japan, which Attali photographed in 2002. The Atami Pavilion, which incidentally had launched Kengo Kuma into the international architecture scene, was conceived as an apparatus that regulates relations between inhabitant and landscape. The work of architecture resists the framing of fixed views; instead, there is an overlap, a seamless continuation between building and seascape. This dynamic, an integral component of the original architectural idea, resonated with Attali's use of photography as a receptive screen where temporal processes played out equally on nature and architecture. Attali has since collaborated with several architecture practitioners and compiled a body of work that spans five continents in continuation of practice that oscillates between landscape and architecture photography.



Fig. 3. Water/Glass by Kengo Kuma and Associates, Shizuoka, Japan, 1995, © Erieta Attali 2002

The two-decade long body of work was recently organized into a systematic research project, which would become Attali's 2016 PhD thesis; the Glass|Wood series was part of that research. The idea of a seasonal narrative existed well before the decision was made to focus on the new Canaan pavilion as a case study. However, it solidified in a full-fledged project after a visit to the site during autumn 2013 when autumnal hues were at their peak and the site presented a radically different picture compared to its mid-of-summer photographic portrayals. The original plan for photographing Glass Wood involved a three-day photographic session; for Attali, this is the minimum time required for familiarizing oneself with, and grasping the intricacies of a given landscape. After the initial three day period, however, it was decided that the setting offered a complexity that extended well beyond circadian transformations. The mirrored envelope of the building reflects a story, revolving around the seasons and the people who inhabited it. In order to unfold that story, an extended study of the place was necessary.

relational space and the image of an anti-object

The choice of architecture for the case study was not incidental. There is a particular design philosophy behind the Glass/Wood pavilion that allowed us to articulate through photography the idea the only adequate reading of architecture is one that embraces context; an idea that resonates with Kengo Kuma's concept of the "anti object". Kuma intentionally creates architecture that eludes photographic documentation by avoiding self-standing artefacts in favor of layered architectural landscapes. His formative 2008 manifesto⁴ underlines the foundations of an architecture that relies on creating connections and blurring the boundaries between a built space and its context. Several of the earlier works of the Tokyo based practice were performative in nature⁵, rendered incomprehensible when separated from context. Kuma himself admitted to the fact that this approach has to be sometimes mitigated, since paying clients resist the idea of a building that does not offer a recognizable, striking visage but is instead composed of a series of interlinked voids and disintegrating filters. Naturally, such a design philosophy has the side-effect of producing a decidedly anti-photographic architecture; one without definite outlines, recognizable borders and typical views. In order to unravel this relational space that is built on intangible tensions and associations, simple photographic documentation does not suffice. However, Attali's photography, which treats architecture as a landscape under the influence of transformative forces, offers an alternative and, we argue, more suitable translation of the architectural concept into image. By selecting Glass/Wood as a seasonal case-study we aimed for a convergence in conceptual scope, since ultimately, both Attali through her photographic output and Kuma through his

built work have been challenging two persisting notions about architecture, further exaggerated by the increasing proliferation of architectural image: permanence and autonomy.

The idea of permanence and the related illusion of timelessness, is common in architecture photography; it often produces photogenic entities that are self-reliant, self-explanatory and disconnected from any notion of senescence. Architecture however, unlike its photographic avatars does not seem to be permanent in any way; countless human geographies have come and gone, dotting natural landscapes with ruins as they follow an inevitable cycle of decay and renewal. Materials age and wither; plant life grows to reclaim any space bereft of human activity. It is the mediated icons of singularity and permanence which acknowledge neither temporal variation nor situated context, which Kuma chooses to call 'objects'. Architecture however, is not immutable; it reacts to daily and seasonal transformations, inevitably embedded in some sort of environment, be it natural or artificial as well as a cultural substrate. Performance demands are defined by local climate conditions, available materials and established lifestyles. While the image enjoys autonomy and can be evaluated as a stand-alone object, the reality of architecture is a messy network of dependencies, which change through time and without which we cannot have a complete understanding of built space. An awareness of that context does not only provide us with a better understanding of the architecture being photographed; it also offers a glimpse into the natural processes that act on it and, conceivably, shaped its original conception.



Fig. 4. Glass/Wood by Kengo Kuma and Associates, New Canaan, Connecticut, USA, 2010, © Erieta Attali 2014-2015

Attali's photographic language, which evolved primarily through the interpretation of natural landscapes and subsequently through the documentation of archaeological sites offers a unique chance to visually communicate the formative ideas behind a situated, aging structure – all the more so in the case of a uniquely non-visual subject such as Glass|Wood. Attali's research initiative, which culminated in the Glass|Wood monograph, was an opportunity to extend the dialogue around architecture's perceived autonomy and permanence, by embracing the temporal dimension in a scale that is rarely attempted in the context of architectural publication. The exhaustive two-year study almost amounts to a post occupancy analysis, evaluating the success of the original goals set by the architects during the project's conception: a space that feels like a continuation of the woods, receptive to circadian and seasonal change. In the context of 2015 Tin Sheds Gallery exhibition in Sydney, Kuma commented that: "Every other architecture photographer shoots the isolated object; she [Attali] carefully picks out the qualities of

the place. It is still an image of a house, but the protagonist is the landscape itself. That is exactly what I am intending in the design.”⁶

c. (re)building space through a photographic narrative

Glass/Wood, an extension of a modernist residence in New Canaan, Connecticut, belongs to the same conceptual continuum as many of Kengo Kuma's works smaller-scale works; yet, it stands in contrast to Water/Glass. In Atami, the visitor encounters a continually shifting seascape rising out of a manmade pool, both of which are exposed to the tiniest changes in wind pressure, prone to sudden fluctuations. Water, despite being a fixed architectural feature, becomes literally and figuratively a mirror of the atmospheric conditions. However, the inherent instability of water also endows coastlines with a certain homeostatic balance and mild seasonal fluctuations; a waterscape does not change dramatically within the course of a year. The opposite holds true in New Canaan: a stable, hushed landscape that offers little variation throughout the day, barring the angle of the sunlight filtering down through the treetops. Once we attempt to follow that same landscape throughout the year however, an astonishing sequence of seasonal transformations unfolds. Unlike the seascape of Atami and the open desert expanses that occupy much of Attali's work, the deciduous forest in Connecticut forest represents a spatial realm of seemingly infinite depth and no discernible horizon; it offers no immediate clue as to its location or any external points of reference. The diaphanous residence floats in a virtually limitless cloud of vegetation; structure and forest merge in a synergistic, hybrid space.



Fig. 5. Glass/Wood by Kengo Kuma and Associates, New Canaan, Connecticut, USA, 2010, © Erieta Attali 2014-2015

With the original house designed by Black Leigh in 1956, the extension by Kuma did not only question the architecture's relation to the landscape but also to itself and the different components that comprise it. The guesthouse in New Canaan belongs within a series of works by Kuma, designed with the intent of blurring the separation between natural context and human-made object. It therefore presented an ideal platform for experimentation in a time-scale that is rarely attempted in architecture photography. The idea for a seasonal series was further reinforced by the complexity of this deceptively simple building and the need to assemble a consistent narrative encompassing the totality of the experience. While

Attali's photographic strategy already presupposed a prolonged engagement with the subject matter, it was decided that Glass|Wood required an alternative, two-year-long extended approach. Thereby, the hourly vibrations of sunlight are complemented by the seasonal variation in materiality, color, and atmospheric density; the viewer is invited to experience living in, as opposed to just looking at, Glass/Wood and the New Canaan Forest.

When assembling the photographs, our central intention was to communicate the complete embodied experience: the "walk" of the visitor/photographer/inhabitant around the architecture, capturing movement within the subject itself. Attali has used long exposures to illustrate movement in her past work; in this project, however, we focused on the introduction of multi-picture sequences, which offer vastly more freedom in the exploration of the complex site. Historian Diana Hulick acknowledged that *"In a series, images are strengthened by context, and an implied narrative is created much as in a family album"*⁷. By reading a series of photographs as a continuum, we seek to communicate the sense of approaching the work of architecture from multiple standpoints as it unfolds into the landscape. The series builds a narrative, which we believe is necessary in order to translate space into image as something experienced rather than merely seen. A static photograph cannot –and should not- compete with motion film in the communication of movement through space. Nevertheless, we employ it as a tool for storytelling, in which fragmented instants aggregate, temporal and spatial layers collapse onto each other and reveal unseen relations. In that respect, the static, two-dimensional nature of photography - instead of inhibiting- has the potential of enhancing the narrative element.



Fig. 6. Glass|Wood by Kengo Kuma and Associates, New Canaan, Connecticut, USA, 2010, © Erieta Attali 2014-2015

Attali often employs glass and overlapping layers of reflections in order to capture a multiplicity of standpoints. While this also happens within the Glass|Wood series, the methodology is broadened by the inclusion of transparent natural elements as well as the juxtaposition and combination of several photographs into diptychs and triptychs. Two existing studies offered a road-map for the development of the project: Richard Misrach's 'Golden Gate' and Jean Luc Tartarin's 'Arbres'. Both works focus on the theme of temporal variation through extended site studies, albeit with in radically diverging scales and from different vantage points; in Misrach's work movement is produced by the volatile atmosphere while

in Tartarin's it is the photographer's personal advance through the space of the forest. Additionally, both works have been created outside the conceptual boundaries of architecture photography.

Jean Luc Tartarin layers vegetation in a series of pictures with very narrow depth of field, within anonymous woods while Attali follows a parallel strategy using transparent screens of vegetation and porous architectural surfaces. The stratified networks of branches coming in and out of focus throughout Tartarin's pictures have a counterpart in the several layers of reflections collapsing in an ambiguous space of foliage mixed with slender structural members, as the viewer floats between Glass/Wood and the forest. While Tartarin's work is rather obscure, 'Golden Gate' by Richard Misrach has been celebrated as a milestone in landscape photography. Misrach engaged a recognized landmark -Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco- which had been repeatedly pictured as an iconic object, and photographs it on a daily basis in the course of three years. Instead of communicating the power of the object however, he translates the bridge as part of the landscape: a transitional territory where San Francisco Bay merges with the Pacific Ocean. Eventually, we tried to distill a similar sense of place in spite of, or perhaps precisely on account of, the fluctuations of its natural context.

In the case of Glass|Wood, the process of selecting sixty-five images out of more than one hundred and deciding the final sequence was central to the investigation of narratives, and it took a considerable amount of time and coordination between photographer, architects and graphic designers, notably Kenya Hara's team from Nihon Design Institute. We decided against serializing the photographs chronologically and chose instead to direct an imaginary itinerary throughout which the seasons fluctuate, revealing different aspects of interaction both within the building itself and between building and context. The Glass|Wood monograph is a 'walk' around and through the house that while spanning the four seasons, exhibits a spatial continuity. The rhythm of the walkthrough is set by alternating sequences of approach-to and departure-from the glass pavilion, through the forest; a story board narrating the life cycle of architecture and landscape alike.

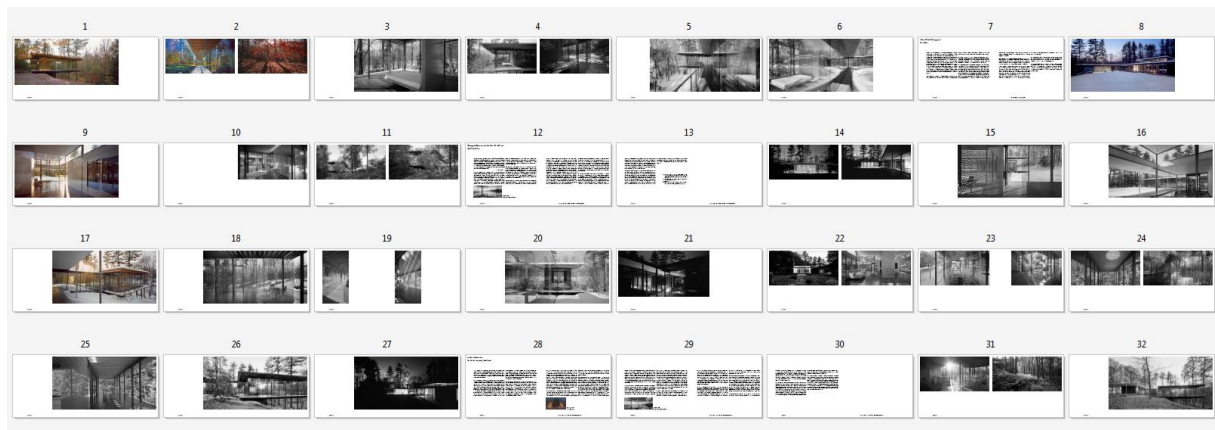


Fig. 7. Glass|Wood monograph, © Erieta Attali 2015

d. Conclusion

What we hope to contribute in the ever expanding but not necessarily diversifying field of architectural photography, is to communicate both the photographer's and the architect's concerns to a greater audience and open a dialogue for the use of photography as an interpretative tool in the study of space. Architectural photography has an under-used capacity to capture transitions and therefore inform the

viewer -or architect- of the rich network of interrelations between the building and its context. The use of architectural photography as a tool of analysis furthermore showcases its potential as a visual language with considerable flexibility; a language that welcomes manipulation into ambiguous word-play, thereby testing not only the limits of the medium and its expressive spectrum, but also our perception of what is finally a real, faithful or useful photographic depiction of architecture.

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f. CV

Erieta Attali, PhD

Attali began her photographic career in 1993 as a landscape and archeology photographer. For over ten years she photographed extensively excavation sites and archeological findings, working with museums in Greece, Turkey, Italy, France and UK. Her corpus of archeological work includes thousands of photographs, produced for scientific documentation and archaeological publications. Since 2003 she has been an Adjunct Professor of Architectural Photography at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University, NY and visiting professor in KADK Copenhagen, AA in London, RMIT in Melbourne and the University of Tokyo among others. In parallel, Attali photographed landscapes in different parts of the world. Her work has been supported by prestigious institutions, such as Fulbright, Japan Foundation, Graham Foundation and others, culminating to numerous international exhibitions and publications. During the past 20 years, Attali has been preoccupied primarily with architectural photography, both as a profession and as a fine-art photographer.

Aris Kafantaris

Aris Kafantaris is an architect and multimedia artist based in Tokyo, Japan. After receiving an Architectural Engineering Degree from Athens NTUA he moved to Japan to conduct research funded by the Japanese Government MEXT scholarship under Kengo Kuma, in the University of Tokyo. Currently employed at Kengo Kuma and Associates, he engages in parallel research on the architecture/media interface, especially through locative technologies. He was the executive editor of the Glass|Wood monograph.

¹ Evans, "Photography", 644.

² Stoller, "Photography and the language of Architecture", 43-44.

³ Kuma, *Anti-object: The Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Noh Stage in the Forest, Bubble Wrap Theater, Kiro San Observatory and others

⁶ "Tin Sheds Gallery Exhibition, Erieta Attali and Kengo Kuma Interviewed by Dr Lee Stickells."

⁷ Hulick, "Photography: Modernism's Stepchild.", 77-78.