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Realist Ethics

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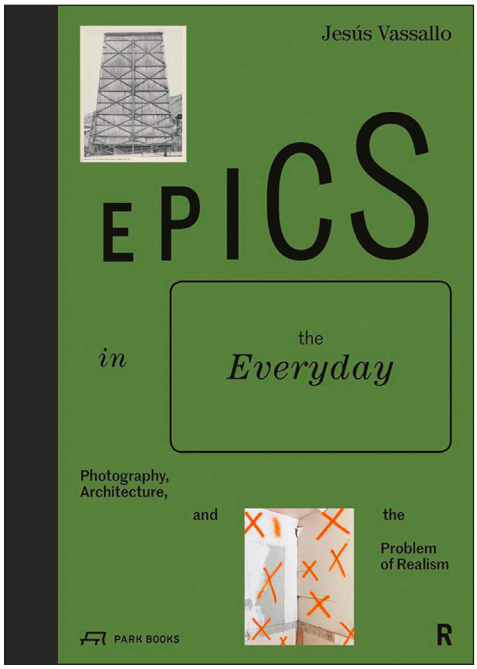
A review of Jesús Vassallo, *Epics in the Everyday: Photography, Architecture, and the Problem of Realism*, Zürich: Park Books, 2019, 328 pages. ISBN 978-3-03860-162-3. Jesús Vassallo's *Epics in the Everyday* explores the question of realism in architecture as it has been mediated by photography's documentary tradition. Synthesizing an immense body of theory and practice, Vassallo argues that architects should address a world that is saturated with images and objects by embracing the banal ordinariness of these remnants.

Keywords: architectural photography; realism; documentary photography; post-modern architecture



As a historian and critic, Jesús Vassallo has sought to chart a course for architects confronting a world that is saturated with both images and objects to the verge of cultural paralysis and ecological collapse. How should we act upon landscapes filled with modernism's detritus, those seemingly endless fields of things no longer invested with ideals? In *Epics in the Everyday: Photography, Architecture, and the Problem of Realism*, Vassallo's response is to embrace the banal ordinariness of these remnants as part of a larger dismantling of the dichotomy between architecture and the built environment. Rather than negating architecture's disciplinary agency, this is instead a question of how architecture's endeavours can align with the larger sphere of what humans produce.

For Vassallo, the theoretical and practical keys to such an alignment lie with realism. The author is careful to distance himself from the term's more conservative and reactionary manifestations; he is not interested in building a present in the image of the past. Following Thomas Crol's presentation of realism as a disruptor and thus a force for renewal, he instead presents his vision for realism as a fundamentally anti-modernist means to challenge obsolete cultural constructs with more accurate — and often disturbing — images of reality.

To define realism, Vassallo first considers modern architecture's engagement with another term: abstraction. He traces the origins of this to two very different sources: industrial engineering and avant-garde art. The former generates a transitive and materialist approach, drawn from pre-existing structures (the train sheds and grain silos that wowed many canonical architects), while the latter's preoccupation with geometric composition and pure form is intransitive and immaterialist. For Vassallo, the latter is a dead end, while the former offers a way forward since it brought architecture closer to the built environment, providing a 'filter with which to make sense of contemporary realities' (24).

Photography — especially the American documentary tradition and its descendants — aligns with this transitive-realist current, mediating the built environment so that architects can engage with it productively. The real is inescapably present in both architecture and photography in a way it simply is not in other forms of art. Unlike

sociological and linguistic approaches, photography's immediacy obviates the semiotic contamination Vassallo feels has been unhelpful in architecture's engagement with realism.

Vassallo lays out his theoretical ambitions and justifies his association of architecture and photography in a lengthy introduction that provides an excellent historical summary of the book's major thematic currents. The following chapters present pairings of post-war architects and photographers drawn from Europe and North America whose use of realism both challenged prevailing conditions at a given historical moment and brought new materials — both cultural and literal — within their disciplinary practices.

The first two chapters present architects as cultural consumers of photographs. 'Picking up the Pieces' recounts Alison and Peter Smithson's engagement with their fellow Independent Group member Nigel Henderson's photographs of London's East End. In them, the architects found a model for critically engaging with reality 'as found', an attitude that Vassallo defines as 'ethical impulse to engage with reality' (76), one that was more democratic and carried new attitudes towards materials, their arrangement, and the sites to which they were added. Henderson's photographs allowed the Smithsons to challenge CIAM orthodoxy, abstract formalism, and the vernacular nostalgia of the townscape movement. Inspired by Henderson's work, the Smithsons' buildings unapologetically juxtaposed new, abstract technological systems with existing fields of found objects. With its wood- and metal-clad volume constructed around a ruined stone cottage, the Solar Pavilion (1959–60) offers a powerful example of this approach.

Just as the Smithsons took the 'as found' from Henderson, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown sought to apply Ed Ruscha's 'visual paradigm of a "non-judgmental attitude"' to their quest for an alternative to late-modernist formalism (117). Ruscha's photographs of gasoline stations, swimming pools, and the Sunset Strip confirmed Scott Brown's instinct to study commercial sprawl seriously and photographically. The chapter entitled 'Inclusive Surfaces' explores the architects' instrumentalization of Ruscha's anti-instrumental techniques to document phenomena, such as the Las Vegas Strip, either demonized or ignored by an elitist orthodoxy.

In their built works, Venturi and Scott Brown translated the superficiality of contemporary American culture (which Ruscha had explored ambivalently) into a populist architecture of oversized signs. Appropriating conventional elements in unconventional ways — for example, the Guild House's (1960–64) windows — called deliberate attention to their compositional strategies. For Vassallo, the heavy emphasis on signification in many Venturi–Scott Brown projects — and their paternalist

appropriations of working-class culture — risked overwhelming their photographic engagement with realism.

The third chapter, 'Seriality and Nostalgia', serves as an interlude. It presents 1960s and '70s conceptual art as a historical hinge in the relationship between photography and architecture. Inspired by anonymous architecture, minimalist artists such as Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham, and others explored what Tony Smith declared to be America's "artificial landscape without cultural precedent" (he was referring to the unfinished New Jersey turnpike) (179–80). Their conceptual artworks began by borrowing from both photography and architecture yet came to transform both fields. In their wake came a generation of post-conceptual photographers who thrived on the tension between photography's associations with documentary realism and the artifice of its visual language. While Bernd and Hilla Becher photographed objects that were disappearing (e.g., Germany's industrial vernacular), the suburban landscapes of the American Southwest documented by Lewis Baltz were not going away. In both cases, their works drew from conceptual art to produce 'a more accurate yet disturbing picture of reality' (207).

The fourth and fifth chapters trace the more active collaborations between architects and photographers which followed this conceptualist crossroads. 'Construction Time Again' explores Herzog & de Meuron's and the photographer Thomas Ruff's shared obsession with the actual (as opposed to transcendental) qualities of surfaces. For Vassallo, the Eberswalde Library (1994–99) and other experiments with printing images on the surfaces of industrial boxes offer an architectural response to a then emerging digital paradigm. The building's material presence is undone by all-over patterned surfaces, which point 'towards an immaterial world of pure images and thought' brought about by the glut of electronic media which began to emerge in the 1990s (257). Against Venturi and Scott Brown's distinction between the shed (construction) and the sign (decoration), Herzog & de Meuron architecturalized the 'Venturian billboard' (252), fusing image and construction. The corner was no longer a point of heightened tectonic emphasis; it was the joint between two images.

The chapter 'Images Inside Images' traces Caruso St John's collaborations with Thomas Demand on a series of exhibition projects. These confirmed the firm's move beyond its earlier works, which hewed closely to the Smithsons' legacy of materialist contextualism. Together, Caruso St John and Demand used photography as 'an intermediary or enabler' (296) of their deliberate conflations of representation and construction. With this final pairing Vassallo claims to have reached a historical moment 'in which architecture and photography reveal themselves as constructed by each other, each new click of the shutter reifying the temporary arrangement of elements into a built reality' (289–90).

While Vassallo celebrates Caruso St John and Demand's capacity to summarize the many strands running throughout *Epics in the Everyday*, their museum-based collaborations would provide a strange conclusion for his call to arms for a closer engagement with the built environment. Thankfully, the final chapter, 'Realism or Avant-Garde', explores the production of 21st-century architects working within a world oversaturated with buildings and images. Here, the narrative merges with that of Vassallo's previous book, *Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture* (Zürich: Park Books, 2016), which he acknowledges is an epilogue for *Epics in the Everyday*.

Within this paradigm of saturation, Vassallo champions architects and photographers who turn to what he terms 'dirty realism'. This is an 'aesthetic of defeat' (314), one whose (often well-known) practitioners seek to oppose star-chitectural sleekness by getting closer to the reality of the built environment. The concrete frames photographed by Bas Princen (which Vassallo reads as indications of the failure of modern architecture) are similar to those that OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen includes in its projects. In their 'hunter-gatherer realism' (311), the objects littering the contemporary landscape are simply rearranged, not synthesized.

Ultimately, Vassallo is uninterested in whether collaborations between architects and photographers will keep increasing in their intensity and visual sophistication — elsewhere he notes the digital confluence of the disciplines, which now use the same image-editing software. Rather he asks whether such collaborations can continue to loosen the pernicious distinction between architecture and the built environment. The realist project championed by *Epics in the Everyday* offers practical tools, but it also demands that we 'construct a new attitude, compassionate toward what is already in place, relentlessly progressive in its acknowledgement of the problems around us, and merciless in its ambition to build a better future' (322). As such, *Epics in the Everyday* could easily be titled *Ethics for the Everyday.*

Akin to its realist architectural and photographic examples, *Epics in the Everyday* synthesizes an immense body of theory and practice, rendering it accessible for a broad audience. While *Epics in the Everyday* is commendable in its scope and merits serious intellectual engagement, even the most distracted reader will appreciate its beauty as an object. Impeccably designed by Luis Vassallo, it is an object worthy of the material it presents and the arguments it makes.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.