

# From Nonchalance to Innocence

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## Post-digital Architecture in the Environment of Social Networks

### Architecture Drawings are Alive and Well

The March 2017 issue of *Metropolis* contains an article by Sam Jacob titled *Architecture Enters the Age of Post-Digital Drawing*.<sup>1</sup> In it, the former FAT partner discusses the contemporary condition of the architectural drawing,<sup>2</sup> which “after decades of absence [...] has returned to mark a generational sea change in architectural culture”<sup>3</sup>. The main theses of the article are hardly new and can be summarized as follows: a) since the 1990s, the progressive colonization of architectural offices by part of computers, with the consequent massive adoption of digital representation technologies, has ended up marginalizing the technique of drawing; b) this, in turn, has impoverished architectural design at its core: once an instrument for producing—rather than simply communicating—architectural ideas, digitalized drawing has been reduced to a visualization tool subjected to the spectacular and homogenizing language of the photorealistic render; c) even “paper architects” who in the ‘70s and ‘80s experimented with representation, abandoned their experiments as soon as they started to build and not surprisingly, since interest in drawing lasts as long as the lack of construction jobs; d) just when drawing seemed to be expelled by design practice, a small circle of architects<sup>4</sup> resorted to it in a new way, establishing a strong link with its millenary tradition while at the same time exploring the expressive potential of digital tools. The kind of architectural imagery flourished from this process, mainly resulting in mixed-media drawings and collages, is called “post-digital” by Jacob, who nevertheless refrains from explaining what the word post-digital means.<sup>5</sup>

The very same narrative—now a sort of undisputable myth about a mostly European community of architects in their fifties—can be also found in an article by Luca Molinari, published in the March 2012 issue of *Domus*. Titled *Drawing is dead. Long live drawing*,<sup>6</sup> the text opens by mentioning a symposium on the (uncertain) death of architectural drawing held at Yale School of Architecture in February 2012,<sup>7</sup> to then concentrate on the Italian scene as

1 See Jacob 2017.

2 Due to the impossibility to clearly distinguish the technique of digital drawing from that of digital collage and montage, being often used together, in the text I use the word “drawing” to indicate the three of them.

3 Jacob 2017.

4 Jacob mentions: OFFICE, Fala Atelier, Maria Morais, Point Supreme and his former practice FAT.

5 An earlier mentioning by Jacob of the term “post-digital” can be found in an interview published on *Core77* in November 2014, in which he claims the following: “I’d say that we’re moving into a post-digital phase—or perhaps it should be christened the real digital age. For a while, there’s been a real obsession with digital tools in terms of what they can technically do. Now I think we’re getting over that. Instead, what we’re beginning to see is a kind of convergence of intelligence in the design process—that cultural, physical, representational, sociological issues are becoming far more entwined in the way we can piece things together. Just as all kinds of information converges on our screens, I think it is beginning to in the things we design.” See: Currey 2014.

6 See Molinari 2012.

7 Is drawing dead? Held at YSoA between 9 and 11 February, 2012.

8 Molinari 2012: 71.

9 Molinari mentions: Beniamino Servino, DOGMA, baukuh, Cherubino Gambardella, Salottobuono, 2a+p/a, Francesco Librizzi, Matilde Cassani, Luca Diffuse, Laboratorio Permanente, YellowOffice and Alessandro Scandurra.

10 The most influential of which was the one gravitating around the magazine San Rocco.

11 In his article, Molinari doesn't use the word "post-digital", which in 2012 wasn't hip among architects yet.

12 Molinari 2012: 73.

13 Jacob 2017.

14 The use of the word "plunder" makes reference to Jon Savage's 1983 text *The Age of Plunder*, in which the cultural critic blames the "inundation of images from the past" that was (and still is) typical of POP culture, since in his opinion it turns the past into "the most disposable of consumer commodities [and therefore] dismissable: the lessons which it can teach us are thought trivial, are ignored amongst a pile of garbage." See Savage 1983.

15 Jacob 2018.

16 Carpo 2018.

an exemplary case study in the field. According to the historian from Milan, in fact, "if we were to identify an architectural culture today that has turned drawing into a sophisticated, widely circulated and independent art, instead of being simply a way of representing a project [...] Italy would undoubtedly fill the bill as an undisputed and enduring center of that culture"<sup>8</sup>. Like all claims based on national identities, this too can be regarded as a myth. Nonetheless, it is true that during the first decade of the 21st century, a small number of Italian architects,<sup>9</sup> belonging to a small number of cultural circles,<sup>10</sup> have developed a powerful set of visual languages based on post-digital<sup>11</sup> representation techniques. Rather than speculating on what keeps this common interest group together—their works are too diverse, both in outcome and value, to be compared—it is instead worth to stress one fundamental difference between Molinari's and Jacob's texts. The former, on the one hand, substantially disregards the question of the relationship between architectural drawings and the technologies they are based on, arguing that it is not "a significant theme likely to upset the idea of drawing as a medium for the critical expression of a vision of the world"<sup>12</sup>. The latter, on the contrary, insists on the effects produced by digital technologies on architectural design, remarking that "it was the super-collage possibilities of Photoshop and the extreme flatness of Illustrator that established a different kind of image discourse: one that considered other types of digital space, other forms of graphic quality, and simultaneously a set of alternative architectural propositions"<sup>13</sup>. In other words, the flatness of the drawings by OFFICE KGDVS—the same kind of flatness that can be found in the paintings by David Hockney, often plundered<sup>14</sup> by post-digital architects—is not neutral but instead productive of a particular conception of space, which informs the architecture of Geers and Van Severen. Indeed, as Jacob observes somewhere else, "space is not a natural phenomenon, but something constructed"<sup>15</sup>, and this construction, also depends on the technologies by means of which it is represented.

## The Post-digital Querelle

The problem of the relationship between post-digital drawings and technology has been recently addressed by Mario Carpo in a critical piece titled *Post-Digital "Quitters": Why the Shift Toward Collage Is Worrying*<sup>16</sup>, published in the digital edition of *Metropolis* in March 2018. In it, the author of *The Second Digital Turn* disqualifies as anachronistic what he sees as some contemporary architects' "renewed interest in the figural", drawing a line that brings back the post-digital phenomenon (PoDig) to Postmodernism (PoMo), with the crucial difference that while PoMos shared a programmatic aversion to technology, PoDigs simply "don't care" about it. For the sake of precision, it should be first of all observed how Postmodernism and post-digital are hardly comparable terms, since the former indicates an overarching cultural program while the latter a much less ambitious attitude, and in this sense, Carpo's line seems to be roughly drawn. Having said that, the fact that post-digital drawings can be indifferently based on non-digital and/or digi-

tal techniques—“even Photoshop is OK”—is criticized by Carpo as resulting from a “strategy of technological nonchalance” that he deems highly problematic in the current period of rapid technological change. “If we don’t care about technology today—he writes—it is not because there is no technology out there, but because there is too much of it; it’s not because we are bored, it’s because we are quitters. And, as always, if architects stop caring about technology, someone else will in their stead”<sup>17</sup>. To say the truth, it is Carpo’s standpoint to be worrying and anachronistic, being it the synthetic expression of an absolutist, technophilic ideology that has already shown its limits during the past century. It is not that newer technologies such as computation, A.I. and robotics don’t matter: they do matter as far as they provide a field of research and experimentation that architects have the possibility to choose (as many of them already do). But to confine the scope of design research to the most recent products of technological innovation, means not only to reenact a modernist myth that is by now over, but especially to miss at the very core what it means to operate inside of a digital culture. Rather than simply prescribing the objects that we are supposed to deal with, digital technology shapes the deep structures according to which we engage with reality, by means of a form of education that cultural historian Milad Doueihi calls “digital literacy”. Digital culture, as he writes, “is made up of communication and information exchange modes that displace, redefine, and reshape knowledge into new forms, formats, and the methods for acquiring and transmitting such knowledge”<sup>18</sup>. To be digital, in other words, means to *engage digitally* with whatever material at hand, be it digital or not, adopting “the new concepts, metaphors and operations of a computer and network era”, as media theorist Lev Manovich<sup>19</sup> writes.

17 Carpo 2018.

18 Doueihi 2011: 12.

19 Manovich 2001: 6.

Carpo is right when he writes about the technological nonchalance of Po-Digs. What is questionable, though, is whether this nonchalance is a problem or not. To bring the speculation further, it could be helpful to dig briefly into the origin of the term “post-digital”, in order to better understand its meaning and potential. Not surprisingly, in this case too, architecture has been late in catching up with trends and discourses emerging in other disciplines. Literature on the post-digital dates back as early as 2000, when musician Kim Cascone coined the term in the field of electronic music, so to name a movement of mostly self-taught composers who were experimenting with the failures of digital technologies, incorporating “glitches, bugs, application errors, system crashes, clipping, aliasing, distortion, quantization noise and even the noise floor of computer sound cards”<sup>20</sup> into their music. In the same year, media artist Ian Andrews expanded the concept into that of “post-digital aesthetics”, which he used to criticize the “teleological movement toward ‘perfect’ representation” that was typical of digital art, which according to him was “both a technological movement towards ‘transparency’ and, at the same time, a movement towards more powerful illusion”<sup>21</sup>. Today, the word expresses a sort of disenchantment: not simply with digital tools, but with the very idea of technological progress. Quite different from that of a “quitter”,

20 Cascone 2000: 13.

21 Andrews 2000.

such an attitude can be understood in the frame of a society that, having already absorbed the disruptive power of digital technologies, has become used to seeing them as a banality rather than a novelty—and as a consequence, has become skeptical about their emancipatory power. Once de-ideologized, digital and non-digital technologies become interchangeable, both providing useful tools for artistic production, which can be either combined or employed separately. Which ones to choose depends then on the needs of the post-digital author, for whom newer and older technologies belong to the same pool of available media. From this point of view, the concept of post-digital “stands in direct opposition to the very notion of ‘new media’”<sup>22</sup>, as Florian Cramer writes. Also, according to the Dutch media theorist, the “post” prefix in “post-digital” should not be understood in the sense of a linear progression from one state to another, as in “postmodernism”, but rather as something describing “more subtle cultural shifts and ongoing mutations”<sup>23</sup>, as in “post-punk”, “post-feminism” and “postcolonialism”: the post-digital, in this sense, criticizes but at the same time continues the trajectory of the digital revolution, being an integral part of it. Finally, the way in which post-digital practices repurpose older technologies in relation to newer ones is twofold: on the one hand, they exploit the specific qualities of the former in order to make up for the limitations of the latter; on the other, they apply the sensibility of the latter in their engagement with the former, providing them with new functions. This mutual relationship between older and newer media can be understood as a particular case of “remediation”: a term coined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusing to indicate the kind of ecological interaction that media establish among themselves, competing, adapting, evolving, disappearing and sometimes reappearing in a Darwinian-like struggle for existence. According to the two media theorists, media should not be understood as things in themselves, but in their mutual interplay, to the point that media can be defined by the very act of “remediating”, that is: of appropriating “the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media” in the attempt “to rival or refashion them”<sup>24</sup>.

22 Cramer 2014: 12.

23 Ibid: 5.

24 Bolter and Grusing 2000: 65.

### The Gap between the Drawn and the Built

Going back to architecture, a good example of this remediation process is offered by the already mentioned competition between post-digital drawings and photorealistic renders. In their impossible search for the transparency of the image, renders try to imitate photography so to make every element of a project visible as if it was built. For this reason, renders can be defined as “obscene”—from the Latin *ob-scaena*, “in front of the scene”—because they aim at showing everything that there is, leaving nothing to imagine. As it can be easily observed, nowadays, the photorealistic render is the mainstream representation technique in the field of architectural design: and it is, because it provides a pragmatic answer to the demands of the market, and more precisely of clients who wish to keep the design process under control—from the first sketches to the laying of the last bricks—so to minimize the share

of risk associated with their investments. As “postcards from the future”<sup>25</sup>, photorealistic renders are not suggestions but prescriptions: together with BIM (Building Information Modelling), they function as insurance policies on the buildings to come, transferring the construction site in a virtual environment “where different figures involved in a project can interact by avoiding a noisy and dirty place such as the building area,” as Marko Pogacnik<sup>26</sup> writes. Nonetheless, from the moment it is supposed to literally confirm the instructions contained in a set of digital documents, the building site ends up losing its creative potential and “sense of a collective adventure (epic and playful)”<sup>27</sup>, being reduced to a purely technical, economic and bureaucratic matter. Post-digital drawings, on the contrary, intentionally leave a gap between them and what they represent: a gap that, according to architecture historian Tahl Kaminer, “is a fundamental and determining feature of the discipline (since) the drawing always represents something slightly different than the actual building: an ideal building”<sup>28</sup>. This fundamental gap is also what allows architects to extend the design process into the construction phase, adapting the project to found conditions and exploring different options for its materialization: something impossible to do *a priori* by means of a collage. If compared to the way renders relate with the building site, post-digital drawings can be thus understood as “cold media” in McLuhan’s sense of the word, that is: low-definition images whose perception involves a certain degree of participation. While photorealistic renders behave as high-definition “hot media”, which demand little effort from the observer.

These observations allow me to expand on another issue regarding the relationship between drawn and built architecture, which in the post-digital debate has remained somehow unaddressed. Post-digital architectural drawings are not all the same, but can be grouped in at least three categories, according to their degree of autonomy. I propose to name these categories *illustrations*, *imaginings* and *drawn theories*. The first category gathers drawings whose scenographic character is meant to anticipate, enriching it with a narrative dimension, the spatial configuration of a built or unbuilt project, in a similar way to what renders do—although with a non-photorealistic language. The work of Fala Atelier provides one of the best examples for this category, although in a quite peculiar way. If, in fact, one of the values of post-digital drawings is that they leave a gap between the representation and the represented, the way in which the Portuguese architects carefully stage the photographs of their projects, meticulously reproducing the composition of their drawings so that photos and drawings end up mirroring each other, generates an epistemological short-circuit in which the difference between the drawn, the photographed and the built becomes suddenly unclear. When confronted with the many images documenting the *House in Rua do Paraíso* (fig. 1, 2), for example, it is hard to define with absolute certainty what is it that represents what. Is the photo a representation of the drawing? Is the drawing a representation of the space? Is the space a representation of the drawing? Or are they all representations of something else? Fala’s paradox-

25 Jacob 2017.

26 Pogacnik 2015: 46.

27 Ibid.

28 Kaminer 2001: 3.



Fig.1 Fala Atelier, House in Rua do Paraíso, 2017.

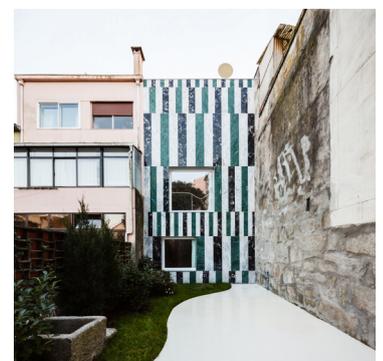


Fig.2 Fala Atelier, House in Rua do Paraíso, 2017.



Fig.3 Point Supreme, *Athens Heaven*, 2007.



Fig.4 Point Supreme, *Athens by Hills*, 2010.

29 Jacob 2017.

30 The reference is to DOGMA's Stop City project from 2005.



Fig.5 Point Supreme, *Athens as an Island*, 2011.

ical use of drawing is intriguing because it substantially differs from that of the majority of so-called post-digital architects, who often reduce its expressive power to a simple matter of language. A language that, quite crucially, is now easier to learn and faster to speak (at least at a basic level) than that of the photorealistic render, which is one of the reasons for the recent success of post-digital drawings in architecture. The second category (*imaginations*) gathers drawings that do not strive for spatial precision, but rather construct fictional scenarios meant to unfold an imaginary related to a specific context. Early works by Point Supreme, such as a series of self-commissioned visions for the city of Athens, fall into this group. These drawings don't respect the conventions of perspective, scale, proportion and verisimilitude: on the contrary, they play with small glitches and irregularities that attract and guide the eye of the observer along visual compositions that are mainly obtained by cutting and pasting fragments from other representations. Works such as *Athens Heaven* (fig. 3), *Athens by Hills* (fig. 4) and *Athens as an Island* (fig. 5), construct alternative mental images of the Greek capital, meant to make emerge some of its hidden qualities and open up a conversation on its possible transformations, while not providing architectural solutions yet. The capacity of this kind of drawings to evoke an architectural imaginary without imposing a specific design—a capacity that is precluded to photorealistic renders—is particularly valuable in a moment in which architecture is subjected to a constant process of commodification: instead of offering exciting images to the consumption of the masses, these drawings function as tools for engaging them in a process of critical reimagination.

The third and last category (*drawn theories*) gathers drawings that do not illustrate a design proposal, do not reimagine a specific context, and are not tied by the need for verisimilitude. These drawings are autonomous statements: fragments of architectural theories constructed by means of visual language. They are not, to say it with Jacob, drawings “of architecture” but drawings “as architecture”<sup>29</sup>. In the wider context of post-digital representation, these drawings are the smallest in number and the most challenging ones, since in order to understand them it is necessary to suspend traditional interpretative schemes—the drawing of a white building with no windows does not represent a white building with no windows<sup>30</sup>—and engage them in a different way. These drawings are not images to look at, but sentences to decipher: for this reason, they are rarely produced as stand-alone objects, but rather as parts of more complex narratives made of sequences of texts and images. As far as the contemporary Italian scene is concerned, few are the architectural practices whose drawings belong to this category. If the work of DOGMA is one of the earliest and most successful examples, and if former IaN+ partners Carmelo Baglivo (fig. 6) and Luca Galofaro (fig. 7) have extensively experimented with the potential of digital collage, it is Casertan architect Beniamino Servino who has brought the theoretical approach to drawing to its most refined level.

## From Caserta to Facebook: the Drawings of Beniamino Servino

The visual research of Beniamino Servino takes the move from the interrupted discourse of Aldo Rossi, and particularly from three main ideas: that of an architecture capable of being archetypal; that of the city as a theatrical scene; and that of personal memory as the primary condition for knowledge and action. These and other references are then contaminated by the individuality of the author, whose unique experience of the Casertan landscape—with its self-built rural warehouses (the so called *pennate*, a recurring pitched-roof figure in Servino's drawings), its abandoned industrial sites and its degraded peripheries—helped him build a sophisticated and original narrative, which he has obsessively constructed in the last ten years by means of more than 1300 drawings: each one a fragment of that narrative. Not by chance, Servino's drawings celebrate the culture of the fragment: in their making, pieces of architectures—present or past, known or anonymous, modern or vernacular: every word can become part of a new sentence—are cut and pasted inside of rural and urban contexts, to be then transfigured and corrupted until they reach a new whole, produced by means of subtle montages of physical and digital matter. These mixed-media images are the carriers of Servino's theoretical apparatus, which gravitates around a system of interlinked propositions that provide the key for the interpretation of his massive visual production. These are, in synthesis: a) to design is to graft into the existing; (fig. 8) b) to imagine is to appropriate other people's imaginaries; c) all past architectures offer themselves as a reservoir of ready-made forms; (fig. 9) d) to remember is to corrupt; e) to translate is to betray; f) there exists a democratic need for a monumental dimension in public space; g) this monumental dimension has to be obtained by transfiguring familiar elements; (fig. 10) h) architecture is always autonomous from its context; (fig. 11) i) architecture is empty form; j) architecture has no interior space but only exterior surfaces. (fig. 12)

In the frame of contemporary post-digital practices, the work of Servino is relevant not only because of its aesthetic quality and theoretical consistency, but also because of the way it relates with digital media. Anticipating what has by now become a common tendency among architects, since 2009 Servino has turned his Facebook profile (and since 2016 his Instagram account) in a curated archive of his drawings, which he publishes on his feed on a daily base, transforming it into an expanding digital exhibition whose works can be searched, liked, downloaded, commented and shared in real time. Servino's use of social media is not a simple strategy for clout, but an integral part of his work, playing an active role in shaping the trajectory of his visual research. The interaction between Servino's drawings and social media can be examined from at least three points of view. First of all, his drawings are accompanied by brief captions that are meant to complete their meaning by means of non-visual language: particularly adapted to the fast reading mechanisms of Facebook and Instagram, these captions can be either made of just a title, or of a title and a short text, which is usually written in the form of an aphorism. At the same time, Servino uses Facebook's comment bar as a tool for expanding

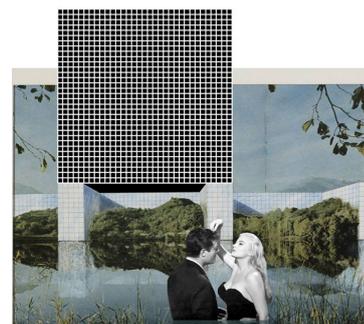


Fig.6 Carmelo Baglivo, *Sul Monumento Continuo*, 2014.



Fig.7 Luca Galofaro, *River Hotel*, 2016.



Fig.8 Beniamino Servino, *Italian picturesque*, 2019.

31 See Olson 2011: 59–63

32 See Vierkant 2010

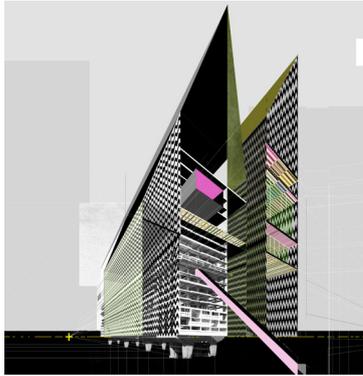


Fig.9 Beniamino Servino, *Unité de Mesure*, 2018.

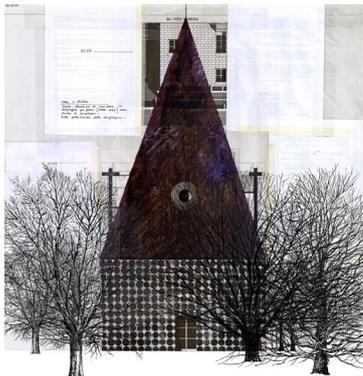


Fig.10 Beniamino Servino, *Chiesetta di campagna/Country church*, 2019.

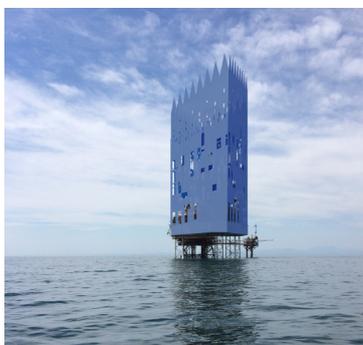


Fig.11 *Vacua Forma Marina. Scena per una Naumachia*, 2016.

his visual narrative, converting it into a digital space where to post outtakes and further elaborations of his drawings. From this point of view, Servino's drawing practice is an editorial practice as well, which perfectly fits and exploits the rules and tools of social media: in a way, it is possible to claim that it is made precisely for them. Secondly, it is interesting to observe how some of the main propositions of Servino's architectural theory can be read in parallel with those of contemporary artists that are influenced by network ideology, which artists Marisa Olson<sup>31</sup> and Artie Vierkant<sup>32</sup> gather under the concept of "post-internet" art. In particular: the adoption of strategies of appropriation, reinscription and remix of found content as creative tools; the dilution of authorship in a stream of infinitely reproducible and modifiable images which travel throughout the Web; the equivalence of all contents once they are translated into the binary code of digital files; and the collapse of physical space into a networked environment made of digital surfaces: all these ideas well resonate with Servino's theoretical standpoint. Finally, it is important to stress how the way in which his images circulate the network is not neutral, but a fundamental part of their making. Servino masters the technique of drawing and his images show a finesse in composition, colouring and texture that is difficult to resist: a quality that makes them perfectly fit for typically social rituals such as liking, commenting and sharing. In return, positive feedback affects the presence of his drawings on social media, since the algorithms of Facebook and Instagram give more visibility to those contents that are capable of generating more and faster interaction. As a consequence, both the audience and the demand for his drawings expand, reinforcing Servino's role of image-maker. At the same time, the instant gratification provided by his peers stimulates him to publish even more drawings and so on. At a closer look, this loop has two correlated consequences which can be described as problematic. On the one hand, it allows only a partial comprehension of Servino's work, flattening it down to its surface value while reducing his Facebook profile to a source of always new visual content to consume. In order to form a more complete understanding of his work, it would be necessary to engage with the other instances that mediate it, such as book, articles, lectures, exhibitions, etc. Nonetheless, the presence of his drawings on social media is so massive that it ends up providing the primary tool for their reception, and therefore, interpretation. In other words: it is not just the *quality*, but also the *quantity* of the medium that defines the message. A similar reduction, on the other hand, applies to the professional figure of Servino, whose participation in current architectural debate is more and more limited to the production of drawings, books and installations for exhibitions and biennales, in a kind of intellectual engagement that replicates that of the radical groups of the 70s, but seems incapable of surpassing it. In other words, the more images he produces, the more his images circulate on social media, the more images he is nudged into producing, the more he turns into an exclusively image-producing architect.

But a similar kind of architect—one that compulsively posts architectural drawings on Facebook and Instagram—is precisely the kind of architect that the two digital platforms crave for: a hyperactive content producer generating high rates of positive engagement among an expanding community of targetable users. Pure gold for Zuckerberg. In this sense, the way in which Servino’s drawing practice is affected by the social network environment it materialises in, expresses a more complex relationship with technology, than the one summarized by the word “post-digital”. A relationship in which the distinction between user and tool becomes suddenly blurred—is Servino taking advantage of Facebook, or is Facebook taking advantage of him?—and in which Carpo’s much-criticised nonchalance begins to assume the more problematic contours of innocence.

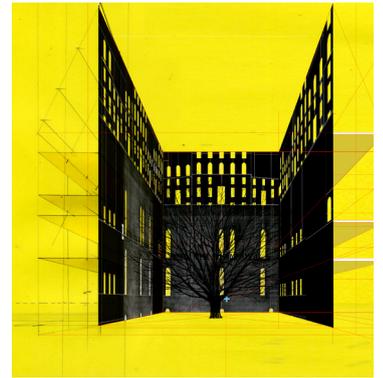


Fig.12 Beniamino Servino, *L'architettura fa da scena alle azioni umane / Architecture is the scene of human actions*, 2018.

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## Figures

*Fig. 1* Fala Atelier.

*Fig. 2* Ricardo Loureiro.

*Figs. 3–5* Point Supreme.

*Fig. 6* Carmelo Baglivo.

*Fig. 7* Luca Galofaro.

*Figs. 8–12* Beniamino Servino.

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