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Javier Fernandez Contreras, Benedetta Tagliabue

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BENEDETTA TAGLIABUE IN CONVERSATION WITH JAVIER FERNÁNDEZ CONTRERAS



Benedetta Tagliabue at dining table
Texas, USA. 2000. 100.5 x 70 cm



ENRIC MIRALLES AND THE HOCKNEY COLLAGES

‘For the first few months of photographing (approximately February–July 1982) Hockney’s medium was predominantly Polaroid film and the results are different in character from later photocollages. Apart from the special color quality of the Polaroid stock (due in part to the technical process whereby the development of the image takes place *within* the film sheet itself), all the Polaroid joiners were mounted with an equal white border around each image. By the time Hockney had picked up a conventional 35mm reflex camera he was ready to experiment with direct mounting without borders, so that the work became *collage*.’¹

In 2021 Arts Santa Mònica organised in Barcelona the first retrospective exhibition on architect Enric Miralles' photo collages, largely inspired by those of artist David Hockney.² In this interview, Javier F. Contreras explores with Benedetta Tagliabue the origins of Miralles' interest in the photographic work of Hockney, as well as the further exploration of the photo collage as a design mechanism in the work of Miralles/Tagliabue in the 1990s.

JFC According to some colleagues,³ Enric Miralles could have first discovered the photo collages of David Hockney in the exhibition *Hockney Fotògraf*, in Barcelona in 1985.⁴ What are your memories on the origins of Miralles' interest in the photographic work of Hockney?

BT It is nice to know that Enric might have visited that exhibition in 1985. I am not sure, but I remember very well when we visited the Hockney retrospective exhibition together at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1988. Hockney was there, and Enric kept telling me that the photo collages were fantastic. We loved these kinds of photographs. The one of the mother was incredible, and he decided that we had to start making photographs in this way – the *Hockney Collages*, as he called them. He had not done any photomontage before that, to my knowledge. He might have seen the exhibition in Barcelona in 1985, but the one that convinced him to start this kind of visual experimentation was the New York retrospective in 1988.⁵ It was only after that he started to carry out this type of work. I am not aware of any photo collage done by Enric prior to that. We started together after this visit.

JFC There are two main types of photographic work by Hockney: the Polaroids, which are very systematic and grid-like, and the collages, which are clearly the ones preferred in your practice. Can you elaborate on this preference?

BT The grid-like, Polaroid-type was never really considered. We had a Polaroid camera, but it took longer from click to click. Enric was interested in the speed of displacement, multiplicity of views and time intervals incorporated in the collages, which feel closer to the human eye. He was interested in the thought that architecture is closer to a multiple-viewpoint photograph, which at the time was not the predominant view because magazines always favoured wonderful single-viewpoint shots. Another artist we were aware of who was also using this type of technique was Gordon Matta-Clark. His work was very much part of our conversations too. He was already well-loved by architects; he was himself an architect of sorts but his work was never used directly. We do have his books though.

JFC The *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition at MoMA took place in the same summer, in 1988.⁶ Hence, we saw two different types of space fragmentations, one visual, the other structural.

BT We visited that exhibition together, and I remember meeting Mark Wigley too. I was

very young at the time and mentioned to Enric that he should feature in this exhibition. He replied that he was different, too classic for it. I was studying at the Cooper Union at a time when they were obsessed with the idea of the section, while Enric insisted that he was interested in the plan view rather than the section.

JFC However, the photo collages construct a different kind of section. The first ones that Miralles published are those of the Hostalets Civic Center, with an accompanying essay about the architectural eye, "Under Construction."⁷

BT There are many photos of the construction process of the Hostalets project, and Enric started to portray the building with a series of collages – a type of montage in which he insisted you should be able to follow lines while clicking on different parts of the photographs. It was like drawing. Here, you would follow a beam on one side, the wall on the other, then the light coming in. He was very insistent on the way the photo collage should be made by calculating what you sought to follow with your eyes.

JFC In a way, it is similar to how you arrange a plan in your work, because there are fragments. But there are also clear lines that tangentially connect the fragments together, creating an idea of continuity.

BT Before I ever met Enric, we published the work of Miralles/Pinós in a student magazine in Venice, and we added a black frame to each drawing, or each picture, that we published. When I met Enric, I brought him this publication. He later told me that he was shocked. He hated that the graphic designer had added a black frame around the drawings. I had not met him while editing the magazine, of course. Other colleagues of mine had come to Barcelona before and had visited the office to collect material. The plans are always made of thin lines, which at a certain point dissolve, but they never end. The photo collages are the same – they are never framed.

JFC I would like to jump to the 1990s. You gradually enter the office, which will become EMBT Miralles/Tagliabue, and the collages are soon a part of the dynamics of everyday work. They are used in different ways; there are photo collages of construction sites and trips, which aim to document things or reflect upon the visits, but there are also others, a hybrid approach, such as the ones for the Bremerhaven and Thessalonica projects, in which the photographs mix with drawings, threads, etc. Can you explain how these were used at the office?

BT It changed in time. At the very beginning, the idea was to apply Hockney's technique to document architecture, but then it became a way of explaining a project. You have to remember how difficult it was to enter a competition at the time. It was very



Staircase of San Giorgio, competition Venice School of Architecture second phase, Venice, Italy, 1998. 100.5 x 70 cm

Invited competition for the Swatch/Mercedes Benz car showroom in Europe, Germany, 1994. 88.5 x 62 cm



difficult to communicate what you wanted – to explain the project. There were no renders and very few ways to explain a project. So Enric used a lot of cuts. There were two techniques: Hockney-like photomontages, and photo cuts, which were a little more surrealist and consisted of cutting out pieces. We used this technique and mixed both at times. At a certain point, it stopped being only a way to document existing things and started to become a way to express desires for a project.

JFC That is very beautiful. I have always been quite curious about the cuts for the Smart showroom project because they are collages, but they also look like modified photographs of reflections on cars.

BT They are. The building was for a small car whose design was not yet finished when we received the commission. It was a secret. Nobody could know what it would look like. We had to design a place to store and display it – the kind of showroom done at the time, where the cars become part of the publicity. We thought that the cars in the city are like reflective elements with colours; whose shape deforms the architecture reflected on their surface. Hence, we walked around Barcelona with a piece of reflective material, like mirror cardboard, and we bent it in specific places, taking pictures with this material. It was really beautiful, and things came out from that experiment. However, Smart did not want to pay us because they deemed the material was useless. In truth, though, they used it to complete the car's design, at least in part, because this material went into the hands of skilled industrial designers who understood how to use it.

JFC For architects or for people with a background in art and design, the photo collages are readable. As in the example of the Smart showroom, how would other clients, not necessarily professionals in the field, react to the collages and the architectural ideas they express?

BT The people who ultimately decided to work with our studio were people who liked an investigative and experimental type of approach. In a way, most clients preferred architects like Chipperfield because they felt safer and more readable. Some people who were looking for something new and special understood our ideas. For example, the architect-in-chief of the city of Hamburg wanted to design a music school and liked what we brought to the table. He was special and looked out for special people. And then, little by little, when people know more about you, you get the opportunity to confirm that you can indeed create buildings, you are reliable, you can deliver. There is always a moment when the client makes the jump and starts believing in you.

JFC It was the period when everyone was shifting to renders, and computer-generated images. You were probably one of the few relevant offices in the world to produce images physically, creating a different understanding of architecture.

BT In the late 1990s, renders were still very rough and most of the time quite horrendous. We called them 'horrenders'. Now they are impossible to avoid because most of the time, people want to see a photograph of what the project will look like, but at that time, it was different. Hence, we avoided renders and tried to explore architecture through drawings, models, and collages – this was our approach, and most of the time, people did not understand; I realised that when we brought our many models to the Scottish Parliament, most of the people present in the meetings could not read them.

JFC It is important to understand the physical dimension of these objects. Scale models can mobilise a few people and prompt design conversations around them, but what does the working mechanism, either individual or collective, of the collages look like?

BT The photo collages took a lot of time to be mounted. In the beginning, Enric did everything himself. He always travelled with some glue and a Nachi.⁸ He would glue the collages himself and press down with the hand chip. It was the time of physical photos. So he would bring prints to the office, and then if there were collaborators with not so much to do, he would ask them to help finish them. He would let the young architects discover the project visually, then he was always going to the table and teaching them to put the images together. I think some of them are still incomplete. There are around 900 complete photo collages, but some material is still archived and unfinished.

JFC Since you regularly had a camera with you, maybe photography of your everyday life would also get entangled with the collages and, at a certain point, inform the architectural design itself.

BT Definitely, I remember when Caterina, our first child, was born in 1995. A lot of people sent me flowers, and Enric took all of them, brought them to the studio and entered this competition for the Dresden Garden Fair, with photo collages that featured petals of different sizes, which structured the geometry of the project. A few years later, I had to stay in bed because my son was in a difficult position in my belly, and the office was starting to work on a project for the port of Thessaloniki, where the only context was the surface of the water. I remember I told Enric I wanted to make a kind of cut-out, like the women in Venice who do laces. Then he started to create patterns with threads to express the overlapping of the sky over the earth and the geometry of the stars above the water superimposed on the pictures of the site. It was a beautiful, poetic idea. I do not think there are many more photo collages of that sort with a drawing on top. The floor plan for that project is very much related to this image. I see the collage and this geometry, which follows a line – which is not a drawing

but a thread. There was a relationship between the photographic image and the physical line.

JFC There is a clear transition in the use of photo collages from individual documentation of visual memories towards communication, and ultimately towards an open-ended design mechanism, which is sometimes collective. Do you see other lines of evolution in the use of the collages of the 1990s?

BT If you think of the project for the Architecture School in Venice, there is a collage of Caterina moving in a set of urban steps, and she appears many times in different positions. That image was central in designing the project as an open-air stage for learning and prompting informal meetings. This photo collage gathers together a lot of experimentation but also a lot of feelings. There are also some beautiful photomontages, most of which are unpublished, featuring people and family, which are fantastic. These are a systematic way of portraying a family or an everyday situation.

JFC This is interesting because in most published photo collages, except those of Koloniahaven or Venice nobody is ever present. Apart from the ones shown in the exhibition in Santa Monica, are there many more that have never been shown or displayed?

BT In Santa Monica, we could put around 160, but there are around 900 archived photo collages. Many negatives are still archived in drawers and waiting to be mounted. I think Enric was slowly learning to consider the human body as a source of inspiration for architecture. On the one hand, he was doing collages at the office, while on the other, he was using a Leica for personal photos, which are also very beautiful. It is important to understand the relationship between the fragmentation of space and the multiplicity of bodies in different positions. Maybe Enric was becoming more and more similar to Hockney in that sense.

1 Paul Joyce. 'Introduction.' In *Hockney on Photography: Conversations with Paul Joyce* (New York: Harmony Books, 1988), p.10
 2 Miralles. *Photos & Collages*. Arts Santa Mònica, Barcelona. 15 April–30 June 2021
 3 Enrique Granell. 'Una maleta plena de arquitectura'. Josep M. Rovira (ed.). *Enric Miralles 1972–2000*. arquia/temas N. 33. (Barcelona: Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, 2011), pp.38–58.
 4 *Hockney Fotògraf*. Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona. 15 January–9 February 1985. Not included in the official index of the David Hockney Foundation. The exhibition was covered by the Spanish press. See: *El País*, 16 January 1985. *La muestra de fotografías y 'collages' de David Hockney inaugurada en Barcelona, se presentará en Madrid*.
 5 *David Hockney: A Retrospective*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 18 June–14 August 1988.
 6 *Deconstructivist Architecture*. MoMA, New York. 23 June–30 August 1988.
 7 Enric Miralles. 'Under Construction'. *El Croquis* N. 49/50 (1991), pp.30–31.
 8 Nachi is an American producer of cutting tools.