Gregor
Sailer

Staged
From the Potemkin Series

Pedro Bandeira

Shall we play a game?

(*The Potemkin Village* by Gregor Sailer)

"There is no longer a stage, not even the minimal illusion that makes events capable of adopting the force of reality (...) we are in the era of events without consequences (and of theories without consequences). There is no more hope for meaning. And without a doubt this is a good thing: meaning is mortal. But that on which it has imposed its ephemeral reign, what it hoped to liquidate in order to impose the reign of Enlightenment, that is, appearances, they are immortal, invulnerable to the nihilism of meaning or of non-meaning itself. This is where seduction begins."

The last paragraph of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacres et Simulation* (Simulacra and Simulation), could have been the starting point for Gregor Sailer's project *The Potemkin Village* — a journey across the world around urban landscapes and artificial architectures — military training camps in the USA, replicas of European buildings designed in China, vehicle test tracks in Sweden, among others. The photographic evidence of this 'fabricated' reality will certainly evoke today's world which is built on appearances, a *society of the spectacle* in which, to quote Guy Debord, "everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation".

There is this collective, conscious construct around spaces with an evident artificiality. Regardless of whether we are talking about theme parks such as Disneyland, holiday resorts, or city centres overtaken by tourism or gentrification, we often encounter prisons which have been transformed into art museums, factories into shopping centres, markets into hotels, or churches into dance clubs. Most architectural works in our cities show, without a hint of shame, a relativism not very compatible with the objective representation of "truth". But even before addressing "where seduction begins" (according to Baudrillard), we shall try to evoke this need for meaning we usually claim from architecture, and which leads us back to the restlessness of *The Potemkin Village* project.

Architects' training is still structured around the notion that "form follows function", a trace of a modernist heritage imbued with moral and functionalist values, as well as something else from the past such as economic, sustainable principles upon which the production of forms was based to the point they became archetypes. Architecture hardly frees itself from that need to represent what 'is', when what it is not can be considered somehow extravagant or a "folie", in a romantic kind of way. It is no coincidence that, under the guise of Romanticism, ruins stand out as the true beauty

of architecture which, free from any function, and similarly to classical monuments, allows for a subjective, poetic and desirably eternal interpretation.

It is precisely the assumption of the "fair" relationship between representation and functionality, form and function, that makes its opposite possible, and one is able to build the meaning of simulation used, for instance, as a deliberate strategy to conceal different military structures. There are several widely known camouflage techniques to hide vehicles, weapons or soldiers, which use paint and fabrics with organic patterns that emulate more or less green landscapes. The most interesting of all, as far as camouflage techniques are concerned, are bunkers, built by the Germans in the French coastline during World War II, and whose shape, resulting from paintings or additional structures, simulated the archetype of house.

From an architectural point of view, there is not a big difference between transforming a military structure into a simulation of civil architecture or simulate civil architecture in order to build a military training camp. In both cases, the goal is to create a fairly credible illusion that is able to anticipate a real scenario. The closer the "lie" is to the "truth", the more efficient it becomes. But if in the first case — the camouflage – simulation's goal is the 'other', when it comes to the training camp it offers itself to the simulation, by creating a lie; and being aware of this makes us think of it as a game.

John Badham's movie *WarGames* (a big box–office success in 1983) is the perfect example of the game and simulation theme. The plot revolved around major nuclear arsenal ending up in the hands of a high school student who was a hacker. Despite being fiction, it raised questions about the internet (which was taking its first steps) and artificial intelligence. The young hacker, played by Matthew Broderick, who did not realize he had accessed the American missile defense system, started what he believed to be just a game. It was, in fact, a strategic defense/attack system in a cold war scenario with real consequences. Of course we could consider the movie's plot to be somewhat naïve (it is reassuring to some extent), but reality tells us that most wars today are planned around the kind of technology that turns soldiers into mere computer–game players. Technologically advanced armies are increasingly more focused on remote warfighting by using drones, where apparently soldiers' chance of risk is almost zero. Only apparently, it seems, because a simulation with real consequences is always bound to cause guilt–related psychological damages on someone who fights a war without honour (the sort of war no one is ready to die for).

When Gregor Sailer, in his project *The Potemkin Village*, decides to present military training camps along with Chinese replicas of European cities or monuments, we cannot help comparing soldiers to tourists. They both seem to get along with the idea of simulation, at least until guilt haunts them in their search for authenticity. And how are we supposed to get authenticity in a world enveloped in representation? Soldiers and tourists share the same display technologies, both worlds are mediated by images that foresee and simulate scenarios where the action, also mediated by images, shall take place. About this lack of real experiences (due to the absence of discovery, risk, time, a connection with the 'other'), Marc Augé has written a book entitled *L'impossible voyage*, in which he proposes a few arguments that could also make us rethink the current concept of war.

But where does seduction begin?

The images on Gregor Sailer's *The Potemkin Village* make us see the world from its contradictions and complexity. In this sense, we could state that its documentary nature includes a critical awareness. But there is something more to it, and this might well be where seduction begins. First of all, the images themselves are beautiful, on their surface, a kind of beauty which is indifferent to content and brings us to format, precision, framework, light, etc. Content refers us back to a stage–like ephemeral architecture made evident by the structure or scale of the objects. It also refers us to the idea of ruin (sometimes in a romantic sense), despite some of the spaces still being new. As far as the photographer is concerned, these are abandoned spaces because they are devoid of people, but, still, they are functional and serve some purpose even if sporadically. Besides all that, photography's silence offers us a strange tranquillity — are the soldiers gone in order to take refuge in a computer game instead? Are tourists gone to escape Coronavirus?

Seduction begins with the ambiguity of several possible interpretations and it is not exempt from the photographic medium which tells a whole story between objectivity and subjectivity, document and fiction. A few of the buildings in *The Potemkin Village* are covered with images that emulate surfaces which mirror the sky, thus broadening the game of representation. Gregor Sailer uses all that. A simulation's simulation. Negative with negative. All is real. That is the only way to get rid of guilt.