Computing the Paranoid Critical

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COMPUTING THE PARANOID CRTICAL

"Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicated then by the content of the communication."[1]

And yet what about our tools? Has enough been said about the 20th century and the use of technology and how architecture has changed, perhaps? This conversation has necessarily returned within the past decade from a different vantage point as we are being confronted with another important moment where the digital revolution and its array of increasingly powerful tools of mediation have led us to a new phase of architectural rationalization and control. The explosion of new computing tools, most explicitly computation has inevitably redirected the profession towards another type of project on architectural autonomy with a different array of issues, values and possibilities.[2]

Undoubtedly the rise of digital technologies within the last 20 years has reorganized the discourse and allowed for unparalleled types of control and standardization over the means of representation and over production; for the first time in history of our discourse where they have become enveloped by one and the same tool.

This paper aims to review some of the significant effects of the computer's ability to collapse image and production and proposes a way for the discourse to engage forms of criticality and social participation within the use of the computer, by opening up and rethinking necessary strategies of distance and resistance within the ideas of the surrealists and computation.[3]

CRITICAL REPRESENTATION

Criticality within the production of the architecture had been built around the movement between forms of representation. A movement from various drawing methods and scales to models and back again, producing a necessary distance and resistance on the part of the author, allowing each medium to be pushed to a semantic limit before distilling aspects of the project in to the next. This space and movement between representational forms builds a field of differences, a transformative sequence predicated on acts of translation that build resistance for the author. This design sequence during any given generation is predicated on the changing sets of tools and techniques which will bring to bear its own biases on the process and imprinted on the realized project.

Robin Evan's diagram below, *Projection and its Analogues*, describes the realization of an architectural project as it moves through a sequence of "projective transactions", from idea (#9,10), through the sketch (#2,4,6), described to the client using perspective (#5), rationalized through orthographic projection (#3), and then materialized.[4]

Evan's diagram has been surpassed because of the collapse of the design process within a single tool and for not acknowledging that most architecture is experienced through circulated images and not through and embodied experience. The quote by Evans below begins to address these issues and necessarily frames a few critical questions when addressing other possibilities within computation.
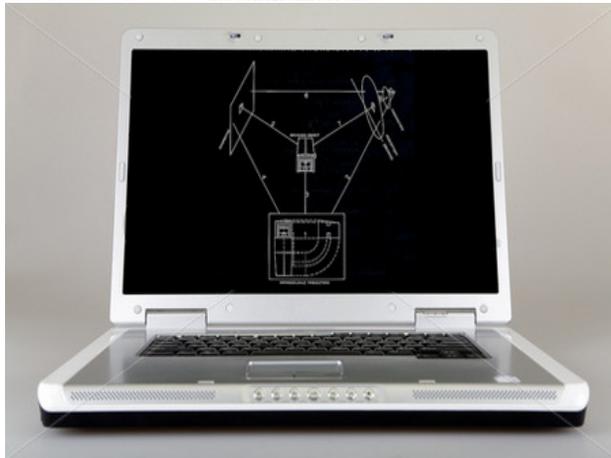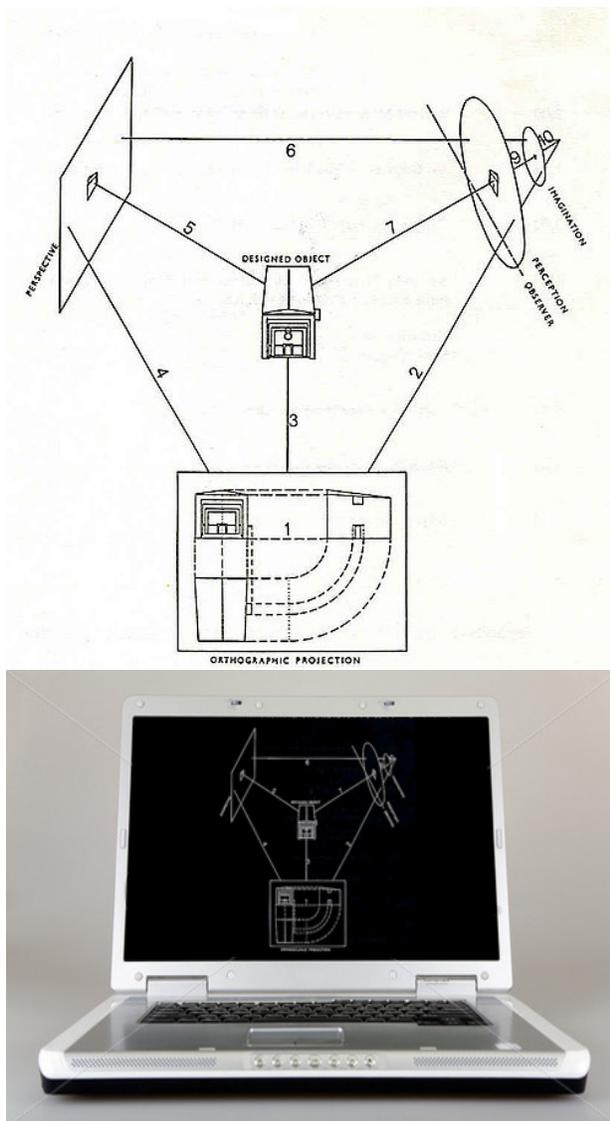
Projection and its Analogues, R. Evans, [1995]

> "Design is action at a distance. Projection fills the gaps; but to arrange the emanations first from drawing to buildings, then from buildings to the experience of the perceiving and moving subject, in such a way as to create in these unstable voids what cannot be displayed in designs – that was where the art lay."[5]

In the selected quote Evan's acknowledges 2 issues that will become central to our relationship with the computer. First, that design is always a form of mediation, and various tools allow for the ability to oscillate and create a 'distance' between the designer and the process. If distance is not created within the design process it directly challenges are ability to become critical and for architecture to ad-

dress its own necessary plurality. It quickly delves in to a project of autonomy. Secondly, that we find productive ways to produce 'unstable voids', ineffable moments within the built work that can not be reducible to an image and must be embodied experiences. This allows for instability in the representation because it can acknowledge its own weaknesses, while allowing the realized project to hold unexpected experiences.

Central to the question within the processes of computation is the space that encompasses the tools for the representation (drawing + model) and production (rapid prototyping) offer enough distance and interpretive resistance. Is this collapse too homogeneous and offer too little movement and friction. Is it destined to organize information and remain a muscular calculating device for various pragmatic complexities?

REPRESENTING THE OTHER

A productive historical moment exists in the beginning of the 20th century that parallel's our current condition with the explosion of new tools and methods, one that can be mined for possibilities to better equip the discourse with historical perspective and the ability project anew.

At the turn of the century, modern architecture's politics and ethics became intertwined in propelling forward a fetishization of technology and function, necessarily aligning itself with larger socioeconomic forces. The zeitgeist had a single technological ground in which most of architecture was going to be built upon. Famously as the story goes, the architect became the engineer and the house became a machine, and now the arguably she has become an information architect and the house has become her informed data.

The Other modernists, the surrealists, became an important counterbalance in the early 20th century. Often noted for having an antagonistic relationship with their contemporaries, the white box architectural modernists, because they viewed this movement's singular tendencies toward idealizing technology, function, and denouncing history as a sacrifice of meaningful participatory space. For the surrealists, the fetishization of architecture as a science had stripped space bare, making it impossible as a place for meaningful dwelling of one's own de-

sires and participation. Space in its modern rational conception, realization and inhabitation became measured by its own totalizing autonomy. The total design of the modernist house left no place for the subject to become and agent in constructing her own identity, no space for conjecture.

> "Surrealism is destructive, but it destroys only what it considers to be shackles limiting our vision." Salvador Dali, Declaration, 1929

The material source and base of surrealist practices and methodologies had been built around using mass produced images and standardized materials as the source as a way of operating on the quotidian. This is important that they would inevitability define a critical distance between the technological world and its representations by operating on them directly.[6]

20th Century architecture has been able to make direct use of surrealist methods. Most famously we have examples in Paris by Le Corbusier in the Beistegui Apartment, 1930 (direct influence from Charles de Beistegui an avid collector of surrealist work) and by many works by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (O.M.A.), particularly in the exploration of the *Paranoid Critical Method* in Villa DAll'ava, 1991.[7]
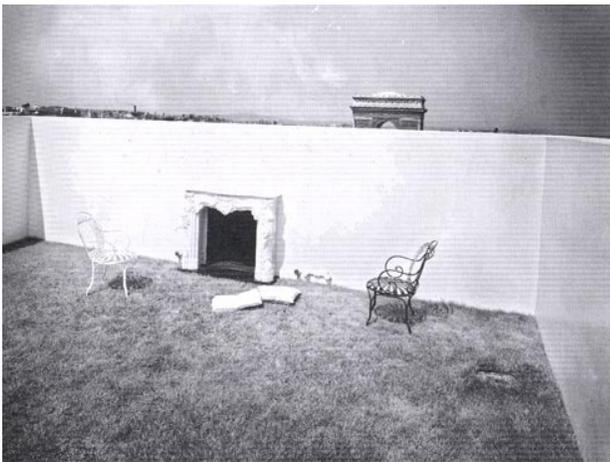
Le Corbusier, *Beistegui Apartment,* [1930].

The Paranoid Critical Method was developed by Salvatore Dali in the 1930s and given architectural consequence most recently by Rem Koolhaas; it was a method that was instrumental in repositioning the postmodernist project because of its ability to combine many discursive appropriated referenc-


O.M.A., *Villa DAll'ava,* [1991].
Image: Peter Aaron/Esto and OMA/DACS 2010

es in to a lucid ambiguity that allowed the viewer to see the work as a multiplicity open for conjecture and able to foster possible bouts of mixed criticality and paranoia.

The surrealists had championed at least 30 techniques that focused on taking aspects of the everyday, estranging them, and allowing viewers to directly participate through conjecture. These techniques had been instrumental in all the major movements within artistic practices within the last century.

Central to their practices became the use of montage and collage which had gone on to become the most important spatial devices par excellence of the 20th century. Others abound, from the well documented examples of the Exquisite Corpse to lesser known forms of Cubomania (#1), Heatage (#2), Outagraphy, and Tripography.[8] The focus of all the techniques directly embedded a temporal
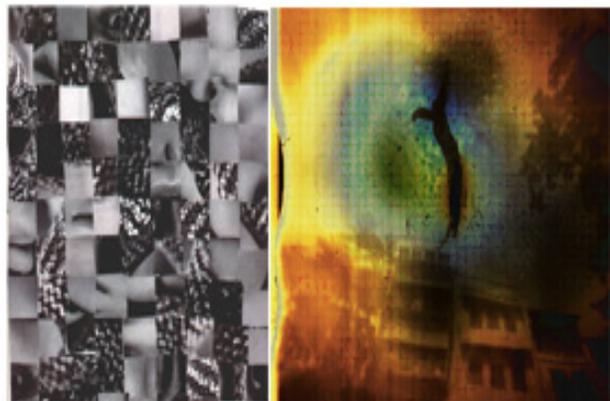
#1. Cubomanie IV,   #2. Untitled,
Gherasim Luca   David Hare

break or punctum within the process of construct-ing the work that invites the reader's direct par-ticipation in its possible completion.[9]   This allowed the rational of the work to be cut and filled in with embodied speculations, her own desires.

CRITICAL COMPUTING

The relationship between surrealist practices and their focus on machines has always been the na-scent catalyst for their power of possible subver-sions. With a goal of allowing the subject to per-form an act of transgression on the means of their creative production instead being circumscribed and defined by it, from Duchamp's *Readymades* to Man Ray's *Rayograms*, examples abound.

Machines have a purpose, a defined set of use val-ues that evolve over the course of its life. It allows for a consistently, applied standards to be repeat-able allowing for a desire or particular question to be satiated; a calibrated device to consistently de-liver predictable results. Because of its focus and arena of specialty, every device necessarily has a type of autonomy a narrowing of its use value. At any given point its libratory promise has its own habitual trappings. The machine begins to perform and construct its user.

Computation constitutes a muscular writing de-vice with its own affinities, promises, and regime of autonomy. It is a writing automatism perfected because of it is founded on a language. Never has a machine been so closely linked to language. Al-lowing us to do and undo with a promise of ease in reversibility. It allows us with the aide of the computational possibilities to meander and deliv-er rationalized images that are the intersection of quantifiable variables. Contingent on the data in-put, questions that it's author is pursing, it seeks out efficient forms of rationality only to produce a mirror image, normalcy of a language of architec-tural output.
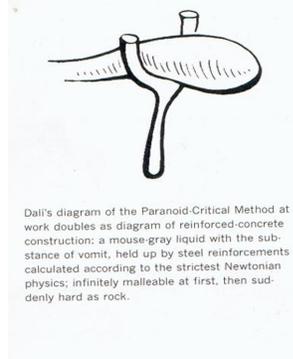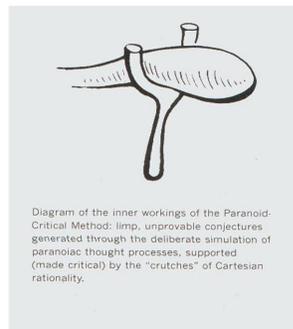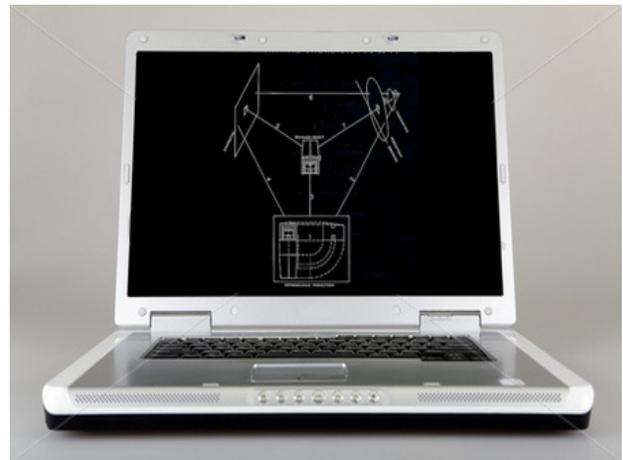
CONCLUSION

This project does not exist.
The aim of the paper is begin to develop another prospective narrative of the way computation can be positioned to address necessary discursive pos-sibilities within computation. A series of tangents aim to describe the value and necessity to position

other possibilities with computation within archi-tecture by describing the shift in the means of ar-chitectural production, and changing status of criti-cality with the means of design practice, and the possibility to think anew of the computation and its instrumentalality in redefining discourse.
The Paranoid Critical method begins posit a neces-sity to privilege an initial set of semantically rooted questions in the making a participatory architec-ture of social agency.

Diagram of the inner workings of the Paranoid-Critical Method: limp, unprovable conjectures generated through the deliberate simulation of paranoiac thought processes, supported (made critical) by the "crutches" of Cartesian rationality.

Dali's diagram of the Paranoid-Critical Method at work doubles as diagram of reinforced-concrete construction: a mouse-gray liquid with the sub-stance of vomit, held up by steel reinforcements calculated according to the strictest Newtonian physics; infinitely malleable at first, then sud-denly hard as rock.

Paranoid Critical Method Diagram, pp. 236
R. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York,* [1978].

ENDNOTES

1   M. McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message, An Inventory of Effects*, (San Francisco: Hardwired, 1967), 5.
2   The project of architectural autonomy can be aligned with 3 main technological shifts in the twentieth century and subsequent reactionary movements; mechanical modes of production (W. Benjamin), electronic modes of production (M. McLuhan), and digital modes of production.
3   T. Mical, *Surrealism and Architecture*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 5.
4   R. Evans, *The Projective Cast: Architecture and its Three Geometries*, (London and Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1991), 147-148.
5   Ibid., 363.
6   A. Perez-Gomez and L. Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 376.
7   R. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York, A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, (New York, Moncaelli Press, 1978), 238-248. The Paranoid Critical Method developed by S. Dali and architecturally championed by Rem Koolhaas was method was instrumental in repositioning the postmodernist project because of its ability to combine historical references in to an ambiguous reference that allowed the viewer to see the work as a multiplicity open for conjecture and to foster possible bouts mixed criticality and paranoia.
8   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealist_techniques. *Paranoiac-critical method* is a technique involving the use of the active process of the mind to visualise images in the work and incorporate these into the final product. An example of the resulting work is a double image or multiple image in which an ambiguous image can be interpreted in different ways. *Cubomania* is a method of making collages in which a picture or image is cut into squares and the squares are then reassembled without regard for the image. The technique was first used by the Romanian surrealist Gherasim Luca. *Heatage* is an automatic technique developed and used by David Hare in which an exposed but unfixed photographic negative is heated from below, causing the emulsion (and the resulting image, when developed) to distort in a random fashion. *Outagraphy* is a image in which the subject, what the photograph is "of," is cut out. The method was invented by Ted Joans.   *Triptography* is an automatic photographic technique whereby an image is used three times (either by the same photographer or, in the spirit of Exquisite Corpse, three different photographers), causing it to be triple-exposed in such a way that the chances of any single image of having a clear and definite subject is nearly impossible.
9   R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27, "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me, ...for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole--and also a caste of the dice."