Bettina Pousttchi—*The City*

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The longest in the world! Those skyscrapers—
The men who piled their stones so high that they towered over all, anxiously watched from their summits the new buildings springing up from the ground, soon to overtower their own mammoth size. (Some were beginning to fear that the growth of such cities could no longer be stopped, that they would have to finish their days with twenty storeys of other cities above them and would be stacked in coffins which would be buried one on top of the other.)[1]   Bertolt Brecht

The City is a project conceived by Bettina Pousttchi specifically for the Städtische Galerie Wolfsburg, a monumental facade work that fundamentally changes—virtually disguises—the so very familiar sight of Wolfsburg Castle. The installation by the German-Iranian artist born in Mainz in 1971 is one more in a series of large-scale photomontages she has realized in various locations over the past years.

Pousttchi's first large photo installation was a processed view of the Palast der Republik on the facade of the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin. Following controversial discussion, the Palast der Republik had been torn down, and the planned reconstruction of its predecessor, the Stadtschloss, demolished in 1950, had not yet commenced. For the two-year interim, the vacant lot in the center of Berlin had been placed at the disposal of the initiators of the Temporäre Kunsthalle, who had undertaken to promote the public's engagement with contemporary art. From September 2008 to August 2010, group and solo exhibitions took place in the cuboid building designed by the Austrian architect Adolf Krischanitz. In 2009, Pousttchi was invited to carry out a site-specific work on the nearly two thousand square meters that made up the building's outer shell. Pousttchi incorporated all four sides into her concept and designed the conspicuous installation *Echo*. In her own words, *Echo* was "not a reproduction faithful in all its details but rather a subjective interpretation. The focus was on the question of how to approach history and memory, and the role of photography in that."[2]

With her photo work, Pousttchi was not only offering a commentary on the fierce debates that had taken place over the demolition of the seat of the German Democratic Republican parliament but also questioning German society's awareness of the history of the "Berlin Republic": Was there no alternative to the demolition of the Palast der Republik? What does the reconstruction of the Hohenzollern Castle mean? Was the decision dominated by the idea of urban restoration, or was the aim to rehabilitate a supposed symbol of a bygone era? At its historically and emotionally charged location in the center of Berlin, Pousttchi's installation took on the status of a political statement; it was a source of disconcertment, and for some a provocation.

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[1] Bertolt Brecht, *Über die bildenden Künste* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), p. 65; English translation: http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/smonte10/files/2010/08/Brecht-New-York.pdf (accessed January 7, 2015).
[2] Bettina Pousttchi in conversation with Nikolaus Hirsch, in *Bettina Pousttchi, Framework* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012), p. 106.

In 2012, at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt am Main, Pousttchi installed a photomontage that extended along the building's facade and also encompassed its rotunda. Entitled *Framework*, the work bore a formal relationship to the half-timber patterns of houses Pousttchi had photographed on Frankfurt's main square, the Römer, located around the corner from the exhibition gallery. Taking an Oriental formal language as an orientation, she recomposed the individual elements and multiplied them to create an ornamental frieze. With regard to content, this work made reference to the fact that air raids had destroyed much of Frankfurt's old town during World War II and traumatized the city, whose reconstruction—as in many other Western German cities—had oscillated between a radical fresh start and historicist quotation. At the time of Pousttchi's exhibitions, the demolition of two buildings of the 1970s in the vicinity of the Schirn—the Technisches Rathaus and the Historisches Museum—had already reached near completion. Those buildings are now to be replaced by an architectural ensemble intended to recall the cubature, forms, and layout of the historical old town. Fifteen of the buildings making up the so-called Dom-Römer Project will be actual full-scale replicas of houses destroyed during the war.[3] On the part of the urban planners, this decision reveals a flagrant lack of understanding of postwar modern architecture. In the sixties and seventies, the style frequently vilified in the literature as "Brutalism" sought emancipation from historical references and made frequent use of strong sculptural elements. Yet the resolution to demolish the respective buildings indicates not only a fundamental rejection of reform approaches in architecture but also a backward-looking historical consciousness that endeavors to overcome trauma with the aid of simulations.[4] With compensatory nostalgic intentions, buildings are now to be constructed to evoke a past that never existed in that form. The half-timber pattern chosen by Pousttchi as a symbol of this orientation toward the past represents not only a construction technique—half-timber—that lost its significance with the advent of industrial building methods but also a wishful vision of a city, of alleged continuity, and of the re-creation of urban culture. Pousttchi provoked questions about this amnesia by infinitely multiplying an ornament, and made a case for a more critical approach to dealing with the feeling of loss and placelessness.

The City is Pousttchi's largest photographic intervention on the facade of a public building to date. It consists of a photomontage of skyscrapers that, at the time of their respective completions, could each claim to be the tallest building in the world. Pousttchi deliberately employs digital archival material, i.e., representations of the buildings found on the Internet, and is not disturbed by the fact that the final product is far removed from her initial artistic material. The project's realization was accompanied by technical questions as well as considerations of the work's reception and the viewer's vantage point in relation to the 2,150-square-meter installation. The Renaissance castle is presently being restored, and to that end is

[3] See the essay by Katharina Dohm, "Framework," in *Bettina Pousttchi, Framework* (see note 2), pp. 30–36.
[4] See Götz Grossklaus, "Das zerstörte Gesicht der Städte. 'Konkurrierende Gedächtnisse' im Nachkriegsdeutschland (West) 1945–1960," in Andreas Böhn and Christine Mielke, eds., *Die zerstörte Stadt. Mediale Repräsentationen urbaner Räume von Troja bis SimCity* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), p. 101.

clad in scaffolding. Pousttchi's work is installed on the scaffolding in front of the main facade, which leaves the archway to the inner courtyard, and parts of the two side facades, free. The historical building's envelopment ends abruptly when the beholder takes a look around the corner. These breaks in the "staging" are deliberate, integral elements of the work's reception. Pousttchi is not striving for perfect simulation, but a pleasingly composed backdrop. The urban constellation she has assembled here makes no secret of its fictional character.

Beginning with New York's Singer Building of 1908 (no longer standing), Pousttchi has combined ten high-rises, including the Empire State Building, the Metropolitan Life Tower, and the (destroyed) World Trade Center, all in New York; the Sears Tower (renamed the Willis Tower in 2009) in Chicago; Taipei 101; the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur; and the Burj Khalifa, opened in 2010 in Dubai (presently the tallest building in the world), in an imaginary skyline. Each of these skyscrapers is to be understood as a signal that was broadcast to the world, as a staging of power and elaborate engineering serving to bejewel its nation. With her architecture of a transnational city, Pousttchi democratizes the competition for the world's tallest building by manipulating the scale and, frequently, cutting off the tops. The leveled skyline is crowned by the dome of Wolfsburg Castle. With its dainty historical form, the "old world"—which in current skyscraper development plays a subordinate role, at least as far as height is concerned—here appears to triumph over the technology-oriented world of skyscrapers.

The agglomeration that results from combining buildings of different eras and regions serves as a reference to hypertrophic building as an expression of absolute power.[5] As the American architect Philip Johnson—who himself designed and realized a large number of high-rise buildings—observed:

> I think the interesting question is why does man want to build to the sky. What is there about the desire for domination, or to reach God, or for private pride—the Pyramids are an example of that, but the tall building is certainly another. Every civilization is touched by that desire—the Aztecs with their great stairs, the pagodas in China, the temples in Southern India, the Gothic cathedrals, like Ulm. They all reached for a dominant height. The impulse may have been different, but that's a common feeling of most cultures.[6]

The hubris of high-rise construction is also manifest in related form in the stronghold-like character of Wolfsburg Castle. Its builders, the von Bartensleben family, and later owners, the counts von der Schulenburg, conceived of their ancestral seat as the well-fortified center of their power, and used the large and imposing edifice to lend obvious expression to their claim to superiority.

In preparation for *The City*, Pousttchi undertook an in-depth study of Wolfsburg's history. Germany's largest planned city, founded in 1938 as the City of the KdF-Wagen (the car later known as VW Beetle) near Fallersleben, had its origins in a

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[5] On this subject, see the publication by Renato De Fusco, *Architektur als Massenmedium. Anmerkungen zu einer Semiotik der gebauten Formen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1972).
[6] Judith Dupré, "Introductory Interview with Philip Johnson," *Skyscrapers* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 1996), p. 7.

blend of socioeconomic progress and totalitarian science fiction. From the urbanist viewpoint, Wolfsburg was intended to create the ideal conditions for an industrial production site. The connection to the traffic network and the workers' accommodations adhered to the most modern principles of the age, while at the same time drawing on historical examples, for example the garden city.

Sold to the city of Wolfsburg in 1943, the castle was an important reference point in the general plan with which architect Peter Koller had been commissioned. The center of power, however, has shifted substantially since that time. The castle is now a place of culture and history, and since 1974 home to the Städtische Galerie Wolfsburg and other institutions. Power is now concentrated in the headquarters of the multinational Volkswagen corporation, which has controlled the city's fate since its founding. The factory superseded the estate owners of former times and replaced the feudalistic structures with new hierarchies. The specific history of the place adds a further level of meaning to Pousttchi's skyscraper montage.

In the past decades, the dynamic of skyscraper construction has shifted from the United States to Asia and the Gulf region, mirroring a shift of economic power. Breaking all the records and striving to the very heavens, the buildings almost invite interpretation as gestures of triumph—triumph over the nonage that many of the nations now sprouting fantastic towers were compelled to endure for centuries of subjection to colonial powers.

The skyscraper links two tendencies that have their origins in the American myth of success. There is hardly any building type that combines material-mindedness and spirituality as closely. Hardly any is as powerful a symbol of the idea that, for anyone adept at business, the sky is the limit. He needn't wait for the kingdom of heaven to come to earth, but can build constructions that lead from earth to heaven like a ladder. The worldly materialism of big business is no irresolvable contradiction to metaphysical idealism. On the contrary, the conditions for the material emergence of the skyscraper are manifest in the skyscraper itself for all to see. In highly paradoxical manner, the realization of the utopia virtually necessitates the convergence of technical pragmatism with age-old dreams, robust business acumen with poetic imagination.

Particularly building types that set new records provoke the question of where their historical precursors ended and their first concrete realizations began. Especially since the Renaissance, ideal urban plans have been designed whose hierarchical geometric radius and quadrant systems centered around a tower—a tradition that has its place in the long history of urban visions and utopias. The medieval San Gimignano can also be considered proof of a historical continuum in which the surviving towers testify to the aspiration of aristocratic families of the fourteenth century to visualize their influence and power with structural height.[7] Pousttchi's photomontage thus combines aspects of historical and contemporary worldviews.

In its monumental reduction, Pousttchi's *City* moreover evokes the hubris of our media-influenced perception. Despite significant gaps in the illustrated sequences,

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[7] See Johann N. Schmidt, *Wolkenkratzer, Ästhetik und Konstruktion* (Cologne: DuMont, 1991), p. 64.

we recognize the iconic buildings. Our pictorial memory adds the tips of the towers, translates the thirty-five-meter-high two-dimensional photomontage into three-dimensionality, and coats the alienating horizontal line effect—reminiscent as it is of the image interference that plagued old computers and tube televisions—with color, thus completing Pousttchi's fiction.

To whatever extent Pousttchi employs means such as reduction, selection of detail, alienation effects, and the renunciation of color to render the subject of her montage as an abstract sculptural image, the pictorial language of *The City* nevertheless sweeps the beholder off on a journey from the cinematic archetype of the science-fiction metropolis through the film history of the mega-cities. The real and the virtual merge in this work to form a Möbius strip of visual perception. The real must no longer necessarily be three-dimensional and haptic. The symbolic character of Pousttchi's facade work functions like a pictogram of the projections, desires, and fears we associate with the city as a living environment.

Pousttchi's oeuvre spans the media of photography, video, sculpture, and installation. She conceives of sculptural and photographic work as complementary elements of her aesthetic practice. In the interiors of the Städtische Galerie, in addition to new ceramic works, she is presenting sculptures from her *Squeezer* series, which takes as its point of departure the bollards encountered in cities. Elements that can be regarded as prototypical aids for the control of traffic flow in urban settings, they now appear distorted by twisting and bending. When we see the coal-gray powder-coated bollards leaning toward and cuddling up to one another, we tend to forget that they are made of metal and not some flexible, rubbery material.

The alienation of barrier elements already played an important role in Pousttchi's work in the past. For the series *Blackout* and *Double Monuments for Flavin and Tatlin*, she availed herself of grids of the kind tellingly referred to as "crowd barriers," because they are used at large-scale events to direct and control crowds of people. Here as well, she used heavy machinery to bring about distortions in the grids.

Both of these readymades are of industrial origin and are manufactured in large quantities; both have directing and regulating functions. They structure public space and, depending on the context, can be symbols of repression and control. The bollards have a less authoritarian character than the crowd barriers, and their effect is subtler. They prevent vehicles from passing and help to tame crowds of pedestrians, attempting in the process to blend in with their surroundings in historicist guise or to adapt inconspicuously with minimalistic simplicity. They hardly differ from one continent to the next, and thus represent an "International Style" of urban furnishing. However permeable, their mission is and remains to delimit. With these sculptures, Pousttchi takes a critical stance on the organization of cities and the exertion of influence on the mobility of their residents.
Bettina Pousttchi's works pose a number of critical questions—about the construction of history and memory, about surveillance and control—comprehensively reflecting on urban life in the digital modern age.[8]

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[8] See Hanno Rauterberg, *Wir sind die Stadt. Urbanes Leben in der Digitalmoderne* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013).