



**Glass/Wood in New Canaan**

Connecticut, USA, Kengo Kuma and Associates 2010. © Erieta Attali 2013

# transient topographies: a photographic language for impermanence

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*The Glass/Wood photographic project started as a research initiative by architectural photographer Erieta Attali under the auspices of Melbourne RMIT's Doctorate program. This paper examines the discussion that led to the project's conception, the process behind it and finally the outcome: a case-study monograph by the same name. The aim is to demonstrate how a photographic narrative can articulate an architectural argument and feed back into the design discourse, transgressing the limits between documentation and interpretation of architecture. Attali photographed Glass/Wood in New Canaan, Connecticut, a guesthouse extension by Kengo Kuma in 2010 to an existing modernist pavilion buried deep within a deciduous forest, in the course of two years. As the passage of eight seasons narrates the continuity between landscape and architecture, both architect's and photographer's ambitions become apparent: architecture that dissolves into the landscape and photography as a medium that communicates shifting relations instead of static, iconic images. The challenge we faced was how to communicate this synergy and the reciprocal processes that feed it. The paper has a tripartite structure. The first section examines Attali's photographic language formulated in landscapes and archaeological sites, its translation into architecture and the narrative that it builds around Glass/Wood. The second section approaches the architectural subject of the series by dissecting some of the theoretical foundations of Kuma's practice, especially its ambiguous relation to image representation in general and photography in particular. The third and final section recounts the creation of the Glass/Wood book through a multidisciplinary effort towards the articulation of a consistent visual argument in the form of a hybrid architectural/photographic monograph.*

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## introduction

Photography is often likened to a visual language. The “most literary of the graphic arts”<sup>1</sup> is, after all, a formal system with commonly accepted structure and recognizable motifs. Ezra Stoller, while using the ‘photography as language’ analogy, positioned the architectural photographer between architect and audience, in the role of interpreter and communicator of the architectural idea<sup>2</sup>. Such an approach invites several questions: how idiosyncratic can that interpretation be, to what a degree it depends on the visual language of the photographer and finally whether the particularities of an architectural space invite or prohibit the use of a specific photographic vocabulary. While in the fifty years since Stoller wrote that article media platforms for Architecture have exploded in number and variety, it remains true that we communicate architecture mainly by image. Yet, instead of witnessing a parallel growth of photographic “dialects” the opposite is the case: increasing homogenization of image, oftentimes driven by the need to present architecture as an easily consumable visual product, expected to survive extremely short attention spans in an environment of information over-saturation. While alternative approaches do exist, they tend to operate at the fringe of commercial architecture photography, employing buildings as a pictorial element in a photographic practice that does not, in principle, concern itself with architectural communication. This kind of photography is seldom, if ever, commissioned by architects and mainly belongs to the world of fine art.

Attali initiated the Glass/Wood photographic project as an extended case study with the aim of testing the limits of architectural communication through a non-standard photographic language, on a subject that demands expressive flexibility: the Glass/Wood guesthouse in New Canaan, Connecticut, by Kengo Kuma and Associates. Kuma’s design doctrine has been to ‘make architecture disappear’<sup>3</sup> not by visually concealing it, but by dissolving the concept of the self-standing architectural ‘object’ through the decomposition of tectonic elements into smaller particles and a compositional logic that draws upon traditional Japanese concepts of spatial flow and continuity. Kuma’s ‘object’ is an autonomous, visually iconic media construct that imposes a one-way relationship between architecture, its audience and the landscape, with its antithesis found in the ‘anti-object’: an entity that is defined through spatial relations and whose context is a fundamental component of its function. In that sense, and ‘anti-object’ is more akin to a landscape, or a garden, than to a work of architecture.

This design philosophy is complementary to Attali’s photographic approach. Having started her career as an archeological and landscape photographer before venturing into architecture, Attali chooses to focus on relations between architecture and its continually shifting environment. She employs architecture in her work as a figurative lens that filters and translates the landscape: human constructs morph into contemporary ruins, having surrendered to nature and its cyclical processes of disintegration and regeneration. Attali makes extensive use of ambient conditions, atmospheric phenomena and spatial layering in order to compose transient spaces where boundaries are blurred. The seasonal series of Glass/Wood set in the forest of New Canaan, Connecticut, represents a culmination of this pursuit. The final product of a two-year effort is a hybrid book that is neither architectural nor photographic monograph and yet, communicates a spatial experience that resists reduction to a straightforward textual or even graphical description.

Several photographic precedents have helped frame the approach that we chose for Glass/Wood. Yasuhiro Ishimoto’s extensive documentation of Katsura Imperial Villa in 1952 strings together a procession of scenes focusing on details and geometric assemblies, thereby communicating an almost abstract space reminiscent of Ukiyo-e prints. It is a very different approach to the one followed in Glass/Wood where the field of view is much wider and ambience replaces intricate detail, but Ishimoto did in effect pursue a similar aim: to

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contemplate existence in space and communicate it through picture. Luigi Ghirri has been a major reference on how to infuse a scene with a narrative depth in complete absence of human subjects, especially by capturing atmospheric elements in transition. Finally Ernst Herzfeld's panoramas from the Excavation of Samarra in 1911-1913 offer a very early blueprint on how to unfold structures and landscape in one continuous, seamless visual account. The two most valuable references guiding the research immediately preceding *Glass/Wood*, were both seasonal series found in landscape photography: Richard Misrach's 'Golden Gate' and Jean Luc Tartarin's 'Arbres'.

### a photographic language for the transient landscape

Erieta Attali developed her visual vocabulary outside the context of architectural publication and before proceeding to become an architecture photographer, throughout a decade spent as landscape and archaeological photographer. The years devoted to the exploration of architectural ruins in the Mediterranean periphery solidified an understanding of the reciprocal connection between structure and landscape; a knowledge that eventually became the foundation of her transition into architecture photography. While archaeological photography varies in scale from the small found object up to the full edifice restoration, it was during Attali's long involvement in the documentation of excavation sites that she compiled a distinct photographic language, which reads structures as inseparable components of a site through the inversion of established hierarchies between the visual elements of a given scene. The result is that buildings morph into geological formations and natural structures into architecture.



**f1\_Atacama Desert**  
Chile. © Erieta Attali 2007

A photograph that epitomizes this approach is that of a boulder set in a gravel plain in Atacama (**f1**). In the midst of a vast desert, with no points of reference in sight apart from volcanoes, dry lagoons and scattered rocks, Attali treats the natural formation as a ruin: a trace of human activity engaged in a losing battle with time in one of the harshest environments on earth. When the object happens to be an actual habitable structure, the aforementioned inversion of hierarchies takes place and architecture becomes a geographical feature. *Eso Paranal* in Atacama (**f2**), is approached and photographed as if it were inseparable from the layers of crushed stone that surround it;

concrete and mineral surfaces alike are equally accentuated by the harsh sunlight. The viewer is standing among a carpet of shards, chiseled off a solid block of rock that lies sunken in the background; a mere pareidolon of a building.



**f2\_Eso Paranal by Auer & Weber architects**  
Atacama Desert, Chile. © Erieta Attali 2007

This visual language of contextual inversion has the potential to expose of the mutual relationship between architecture and its diverse environmental contexts: an apparatus for architectural discourse where photography performs a reverse excavation. While an archaeologist removes strata of earth to reveal structures and re-establish their former dependencies to each other and to the landscape, Attali allows the landscape to coagulate around the structure. In so doing, a network of underlying interactions is revealed, showing that despite the common cultural convention that separates nature from human-made structures, they both face similar transformations through time. This recognition forms the beginning of a dialogue between artefacts and landscape thereby permitting the use of architectural photography as a potential instrument of analysis and interpretation.

Attali initially encountered Kuma's work in 2001 during a period of research into glass and urban transparency; their first collaboration was on Water Glass, a guesthouse pavilion perched on a hill over the Atami seaside, in Shizuoka, Japan, which she photographed in 2002. The Atami Pavilion, which incidentally launched Kengo Kuma into the international architecture scene, was conceived as an apparatus that regulates relations between inhabitant and landscape. The work of architecture resists the framing of fixed views; instead, there is an overlap, a seamless continuation between building and seascape. This ambivalence, an integral component of the original architectural idea, resonated with Attali's use of photography as a receptive screen where temporal processes played out equally on nature and architecture. She has since collaborated with several architecture practitioners and compiled a body of work that spans five continents in continuation of practice that oscillates between landscape and architecture photography.

Attali recently organized the two-decade long body of work into a systematic research project, which would become the basis of a 2016 PhD thesis; the Glass/Wood series was part of that research. The idea of a seasonal narrative existed well before the decision to focus on the New Canaan pavilion as a case study. However, it solidified into a full-fledged project after a visit to the site during autumn 2013 when autumnal hues were

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at their peak and the site presented a radically different picture compared to its mid-of-summer photographic portrayals. The original plan for photographing Glass Wood involved a three-day photographic session; the minimum time required for grasping the intricacies of a given landscape throughout a full circadian cycle. After the initial three-day period, however, we realized that the setting offered a complexity that extended well beyond day-to-night transformations. The mirrored envelope of the building reflects a story of seasonal transformations. In order to unfold that story, an extended study of the place was necessary.



f3\_Water/Glass

by Kengo Kuma and Associates, Atami, Shizuoka, Japan. Chile. © Erieta Attali 2002

## relational space and the image of an anti-object

The choice of architecture for the case study was not incidental. There is a particular design philosophy behind the Glass/Wood pavilion that allowed us to visually articulate the idea the only adequate reading of architecture is one that embraces context; an idea that resonates with Kengo Kuma's concept of the "anti object". Kuma intentionally creates architecture that eludes photographic documentation by avoiding self-standing artefacts in favor of layered architectural landscapes. His formative 2008 manifesto<sup>4</sup> underlines the foundations of an architecture that relies on creating connections and blurring the boundaries between a built space and its context. Several of the earlier works of the Tokyo based practice were performative in nature<sup>5</sup>, rendered incomprehensible when separated from context. Kuma himself admitted to the fact that this approach has to be sometimes mitigated: clients often resist the idea of a building that does not offer a recognizable image, but is instead composed of a series of interlinked voids and disintegrating filters. Naturally, such a design philosophy has the side-effect of producing a decidedly anti-photographic architecture; one without definite outlines, recognizable borders and typical views. In order to unravel this relational space of intangible tensions and associations, simple photographic documentation does not suffice. Our argument is that Attali's photography, which treats architecture as a landscape under the influence of transformative forces, offers an alternative and more suitable translation of this particular architectural concept into image. By selecting Glass/Wood as a seasonal case-study we aimed for a convergence in conceptual scope, since ultimately, both Attali through her photographic output and Kuma through his built work have been challenging two persisting notions about architecture, which are side-effects of the increasing proliferation of architectural image: permanence and autonomy.

The idea of permanence and the related illusion of timelessness is common in architecture photography; it produces photogenic entities that are self-reliant, self-explanatory and disconnected from any notion of senescence. Architecture however, unlike its photographic avatars does not seem to be permanent in any way; human geographies have come and gone, dotting natural landscapes with ruins as they follow an inevitable cycle of decay and renewal. Materials age and wither, while plant life grows to reclaim any space bereft of human activity. It is the mediated icons of singularity and permanence which acknowledge neither temporal variation nor situated context, which Kuma chooses to call 'objects'. Architecture however is not immutable; it reacts to daily and seasonal transformations, inevitably embedded in some sort of natural or artificial environment, as well as a cultural substrate. Performance demands are defined by local climate conditions, available materials and established lifestyles. While an image enjoys certain autonomy and can be evaluated as a stand-alone object, the reality of architecture is a messy network of dependencies, which change through time and without which we cannot have a complete understanding of built space. An awareness of that context does not only provide us with a better understanding of the architecture being photographed; it also offers a glimpse into the natural processes that act on it and, conceivably, shaped its original conception.



**f4\_Glass/Wood in New Canaan**

Connecticut, USA, Kengo Kuma and Associates. © Erieta Attali 2014

Attali's photographic language, which evolved primarily through the interpretation of natural landscapes and subsequently through the documentation of archaeological sites offers a unique chance to visually communicate the formative ideas behind a situated, aging structure – all the more so in the case of a uniquely non-visual subject such as Glass/Wood. The research initiative, which culminated in the Glass/Wood monograph, was an opportunity to extend the dialogue around architecture's perceived autonomy and permanence, by embracing the temporal dimension in a scale that is rarely attempted in the context of architectural publication. Through an exhaustive two-year study that almost amounts to a post occupancy analysis, we evaluate the success of the original goals set by the architects during the project's conception: a space that feels like a continuation of the woods, receptive to circadian and seasonal change. In the context of 2015 Tin Sheds Gallery exhibition in Sydney, Kuma commented that: "Every other architecture photographer shoots the isolated object; she [Attali] carefully picks out the qualities of the place. It is still an image of a house, but the protagonist is the landscape itself. That is exactly what I am intending in the design"<sup>65</sup>.

## **(re)building space through a photographic narrative**

Glass/Wood, an extension of a modernist residence in New Canaan, Connecticut, belongs to the same conceptual continuum as many of Kengo Kuma's works smaller-scale works; yet, it stands in contrast to Water/Glass. In Atami, the visitor encounters a continually shifting seascape rising out of a manmade pool, both of which are exposed to the tiniest changes in wind pressure, prone to sudden fluctuations. Water, despite being a fixed architectural feature, becomes literally and figuratively a mirror of the atmospheric conditions. However, the inherent instability of water also endows coastlines with a certain homeostatic balance, meaning only mild seasonal fluctuations. A waterscape does not change dramatically within the course of a year. The opposite holds true in New Canaan: a stable,



**f5\_Glass/Wood in New Canaan**

Connecticut, USA, Kengo Kuma and Associates. © Erieta Attali 2015

hushed landscape that offers little variation throughout the day, barring the angle of the sunlight filtering down through the treetops. Once we attempt to follow that same landscape throughout the year however, an astonishing sequence of seasonal transformations unfolds. Unlike the seascape of Atami and the open desert expanses that occupy much of Attali's work, the deciduous forest in Connecticut forest represents a spatial realm of seemingly infinite depth and no discernible horizon; it offers no immediate clue as to its location or any external points of reference. The diaphanous residence floats in a virtually limitless cloud of vegetation; structure and forest merge in a synergistic, hybrid space.

With the original house designed by Black Leigh in 1956, the extension by Kuma did not only question the architecture's relation to the landscape but also to itself and the different components that comprise it. The guesthouse in New Canaan belongs within a series of works by Kuma, designed with the intent of blurring the separation between natural context and human-made object. It therefore presented an ideal platform for experimentation in an extended time-scale. The idea for a seasonal series was further reinforced by the complexity of this deceptively simple building and the need to assemble a consistent narrative encompassing the totality of the experience. While Attali's photographic strategy already presupposed a prolonged engagement with the subject matter, we decided that Glass/Wood required an alternative, two-year-long extended approach. Thereby, the hourly vibrations of sunlight are complemented by the seasonal variation in materiality, color, and atmospheric density; the viewer is invited to experience living in, as opposed to just looking at, Glass/Wood and the New Canaan Forest.



**erietta attali, aris kafantarisi**

When assembling the photographs, our central intention was to communicate the complete embodied experience: the “walk” of the visitor/photographer/inhabitant around the architecture, capturing movement within the subject itself. Attali has used long exposures to illustrate movement in her past work. In this project, however, we focused on the introduction of multi-picture sequences, which offer more freedom in the exploration of the complex site and build continuity through variation. As historian Diana Hulick acknowledged: “In a series, images are strengthened by context, and an implied narrative is created much as in a family album”<sup>7</sup>. By reading a series of photographs, we seek to communicate the sense of approaching the work of architecture from multiple standpoints as it unfolds into the landscape. We believe that this narrative structure is necessary in order to translate space into image as something experienced rather than merely seen. A static photograph cannot –and should not- compete with motion film in the communication of movement through space. Nevertheless, we employ it as a tool for storytelling, in which fragmented instants aggregate, temporal and spatial layers collapse onto each other and reveal unseen relations. In that respect, the static, two-dimensional nature of photography has the potential of enhancing the narrative element, instead of inhibiting it.



**f6\_Glass/Wood by Kengo Kuma and Associates**

New Canaan, Connecticut, USA. © Erieta Attali 2014

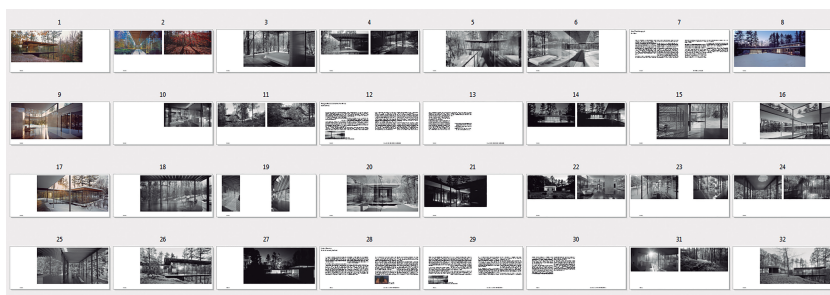
Attali often employs glass and overlapping layers of reflections in order to capture a multiplicity of standpoints. While this also happens within the Glass/Wood series, the methodology is broadened by the inclusion of transparent natural elements as well as the juxtaposition and combination of several photographs into diptychs and triptychs. Two existing studies offered a road-map for the development of the project: Richard Misrach’s ‘Golden Gate’ and Jean Luc Tartarin’s ‘Arbres’. Both works focus on the theme of temporal variation through extended site studies, albeit with in radically diverging scales and from different vantage points. In Misrach’s work movement is produced by the volatile atmosphere while in Tartarin’s it is the photographer’s personal advance through the space of the forest. Additionally, both works were published outside the conceptual boundaries of architecture photography.

Jean Luc Tartarin layers vegetation in a series of pictures with very narrow depth of field, within anonymous woods while Attali follows a parallel strategy using transparent screens of vegetation and porous architectural surfaces. The stratified networks of branches coming in and out of focus throughout Tartarin’s pictures have a counterpart in

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the several layers of reflections collapsing in an ambiguous space of foliage mixed with slender structural members, as the viewer floats between Glass/Wood and the forest. While Tartarin's work is rather obscure, 'Golden Gate' by Richard Misrach is celebrated as a milestone of landscape photography. Misrach engaged a recognized landmark - Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco- which had been repeatedly pictured as an iconic object, and photographs it on a daily basis in the course of three years. Instead of communicating the power of the object however, he translates the bridge as part of the landscape: a transitional territory where San Francisco Bay merges with the Pacific Ocean with a distinct sense of place that transcends its individual constituent parts.

In the case of Glass/Wood, the process of selecting sixty-five images out of more than one hundred and deciding the final sequence was central to the investigation of narratives and took a considerable amount of time and coordination between photographer, architects and graphic designers; notably Kenya Hara's team from Nihon Design Institute. We decided against serializing the photographs chronologically and chose instead to direct an imaginary itinerary throughout which the seasons fluctuate, revealing different aspects of interaction both within the building itself and between building and context. The Glass/Wood monograph is a 'walk' around and through the house that while spanning the four seasons, exhibits a spatial continuity. The rhythm of the walkthrough is set by alternating sequences of approach-to and departure-from the glass pavilion, through the forest; a story board narrating the life cycle of architecture and landscape alike.



f7\_Glass/Wood monograph

© Erieta Attali 2015

## conclusion

What we hope to contribute in the ever expanding but not necessarily diversifying field of architectural photography, is to communicate both the photographer's and the architect's concerns to a greater audience and open a dialogue for the use of photography as an interpretative tool in the study of space. Architectural photography has an under-used capacity to capture transitions and therefore inform the viewer -or architect- of the rich network of interrelations between the building and its context. The use of architectural photography as a tool of analysis furthermore showcases its potential as a visual language with considerable flexibility; a language that welcomes manipulation into ambiguous word-play, thereby testing not only the limits of the medium and its expressive spectrum, but also our perception of what is finally a real, faithful or useful photographic depiction of architecture.

## endnotes

1. Walker Evans, "Photography", *The Massachusetts Review* 19, 4 (1978): 644.
2. Erza Stoller, "Photography and the language of Architecture", *Perspecta* 8 (1963): 43-44.
3. Kengo Kuma, *Anti-object: The Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture* (London: Architectural Association, 2008).
4. Idem.
5. Noh Stage in the Forest, Bubble Wrap Theater, Kiro San Observatory and others.
6. "Tin Sheds Gallery Exhibition, Erieta Attali and Kengo Kuma Interviewed by Dr Lee Stickells", accessed April 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQBddTR2BmA>.
7. Diana Emery Hulick, "Photography: Modernism's Stepchild", *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 26, 1 (1992): 77-78.

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### **CV**

**Erieta Attali.** Is a landscape and architectural photographer with work expanding from Eurasia to Australia and the Americas. After studying Photography at Goldsmiths, University of London, she continued as research fellow at GSAPP, Columbia University NYC and Waseda University in Tokyo and recently completed a PhD at RMIT University, Melbourne. For over ten years she extensively photographed excavation sites and archeological findings in working in museums throughout Greece, Turkey, Italy, France and the UK, specializing in the documentation of ancient painting in underground tombs with the use of UV and IR radiation. She is recipient of several prestigious awards and fellowships by the Fulbright Foundation, The Japan Foundation and the Marie Curie Research Fellowship. Her work has toured globally, featured by major publishing houses and design periodicals. Since 2003 she has been an Adjunct Professor of Architectural Photography at GSAPP, NYC and she lectures in several universities around the world.

**Aris Kafantaris.** Is an architect and multimedia artist based in Tokyo, Japan. After receiving an Architectural Engineering Degree from Athens Polytechnic he moved to Japan to conduct research funded by the Japanese Government MEXT scholarship under Kengo Kuma, in the University of Tokyo. Currently employed at Kengo Kuma Architects and Associates, he engages in parallel research on the architecture/media interface, especially through locative technologies. He represented KKAA as executive editor for the Glass/Wood monograph.