Invisible Cities: Photographic Fictions of Architecture

Maria Levitsky
University of New Orleans, msmaria@earthlink.net

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uno.edu/td
Part of the Art Practice Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Other Architecture Commons, and the Photography Commons

Recommended Citation
Levitsky, Maria, "Invisible Cities: Photographic Fictions of Architecture" (2012). University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations. 1457.
http://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1457

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. The author is solely responsible for ensuring compliance with copyright. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.
Invisible Cities: Photographic Fictions of Architecture

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts
Photography

by

Maria Levitsky

BFA Ohio University 1997

May 2012
I would like to thank the faculty of the University of New Orleans Department of Fine Art for giving me the opportunity to develop my work in a climate of freedom and support. I would also like to thank Ariya Martin, Kathy Rodriguez and Nick Stillman for their keen editorial guidance.
# Table of Contents

List of Illustrations........................................................................................................ iv
Abstract .......................................................................................................................... v
Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
Looking at architecture ................................................................................................. 3
Early influence of being a dancer ................................................................................ 5
My neighborhood was full of old buildings ............................................................... 5
Artistic influences ....................................................................................................... 7
Photographers who inspired me early on ..................................................................... 11
Looking at New Orleans architecture, a poetic interlude .......................................... 13
The elevated buildings and overpasses ........................................................................ 14
Deconstruction of architectural space ......................................................................... 16
Deconstruction of the photographic object .................................................................. 19
My recent work brings the following techniques into play ....................................... 20
Straight vs. 'crooked' photography ............................................................................. 22
Questions of presentation and display ......................................................................... 24
Future endeavors ......................................................................................................... 25
Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 27
Bibliography ................................................................................................................. 28
Vita................................................................................................................................. 30
List of Illustrations

Maria Levitsky Dixie Brewery Cracked 2011 ................................................................. 3
Maria Levitsky Sheared House 2000 .................................................................................. 7
Gordon Matta Clark Bingo 1974 ....................................................................................... 8
Maria Levitsky Missing Facade 2002 ................................................................................. 8
Gordon Matta Clark Conical Intersect detail 1975 .............................................................. 9
Maria Levitsky In a Gordon Matta Clark Ready-Made 2011 ............................................. 10
Bernd and Hilla Becher Winding Towers 1971-91 ............................................................. 12
John Divola Vandalism 1973-75 .......................................................................................... 12
Maria Levitsky Under the Overpass 2011 ........................................................................... 14
Maria Levitsky Raised House 2011 ................................................................................... 15
Maria Levitsky Haus Mutante 2011 ................................................................................... 16
Maria Levitsky A Few Seconds Later 2003 ....................................................................... 18
Maria Levitsky Treme Mystery House 2012 ........................................................ .......... 21
Maria Levitsky Structural Collision 2012 ......................................................................... 24
Idris Kahn Homage to Bernd Becher 2007 ....................................................................... 26
Thomas Zummer UN Building at 45RPM 2006 ............................................................... 26
Abstract

The artist's process in which she examines the built environment through the medium of black and white photography. By tracing the trajectory of her awareness of architecture from her early career as a dancer, to the making of photographic images, the artist illuminates the process of deconstructing architectural and pictorial space into fragmented yet illusionistically convincing photographic montages. Influenced by the urban localities in which she dwells, she tells the story of being captivated by the post-industrial landscape of Williamsburg, Brookyn, NY, followed by landing in New Orleans and her fascination with post-Katrina architecture. Grounded in the analog techniques of traditional black and white photography, Levitsky describes the various means by which she alters her images to create visionary reconstructions of buildings in transitional states.

Key Words: Architecture, Photography, Interiors, Conceptual Art, Black and White, Analog photography, Structures, Available Light
**Introduction**

Structures in the built environment and structures of image-making are at the core of my artistic pursuits. I look for subject matter through the re-imagination and re-use of obsolete utilitarian objects such as abandoned buildings and discarded materials.

Photography is my primary medium, because of its ability to arrest what is visible into a frozen still moment of time. Architecture, my subject matter, seems anchored to the ground, yet in fact is always moving—toward and away from decay. My interest is in transforming this slow moving state of flux into images, then using the images as material in reconstructing a kind of photo-based re-drawing of architecture. These photographic fictions are made from fragments of how our eyes see reality. I am also interested in dismantling the way we look, both at photography and at architecture. I take the stance of an observer, recorder and re-interpreter by intercepting the stream of visual information coming from the world. I sift through it, take it apart, and re-assemble it into a slowed-down, fragmented version of the original.

Looking at structures in the real world—three-dimensional, solid, heavy, spatial—my gaze is arrested by buildings that are in a state of transparency resulting from demolition or construction. A building being torn down reveals it soul as it gives up its usefulness. The materials it was built out of become visible and there is an abject poignancy to the exposure of what was once methodically hidden away.
Other kinds of engineered, architectural structures such as elevated billboards, rollercoasters and bridges, which do not enclose—are open structures—become source material as well. Their qualities of porosity and transparency lend themselves to my kind of visual investigations. This subject matter is open to the process of deconstruction because it is already half-way there. By this I mean that the layers of a building are being peeled away by time and nature, and the infrastructure becomes visible. They can be looked at as massive three-dimensional drawings.

The abandoned structures have been rendered useless by the passage of time, and have become liminal objects, on the border between solidity and airiness.

My method for finding material to photograph is to explore a city, usually by bicycle, looking for areas that seem to be in transition. Whether it is an abandoned neighborhood or one in the process of renewal, this is where I am likely to make the most fruitful discoveries.

I am entering with the camera’s eye, into empty interior spaces lit by available light. I am thinking about translating the skeletal and spatial structures into two dimensions using conventions and non-conventions of photography. How does ‘taking’ or ‘making’ a photograph of the three-dimensional structure make it into something else? I wish to take the photographic form beyond being a ‘window’ through which a scene is seen, paying attention to the materiality of both the process and the end result.

The photographs are the artifacts of this process. They are subjected to a deconstruction as well, being altered by means of scissors, tape, paint and glue. A translation takes place, flattening the three-dimensional world into pictures—photographic drawings of sorts, which reveal the graphic,
monumental, sculptural and psychological facets of the buildings. When a building is laid flat onto paper and made of silver and light, when its right angles are collapsed and a room is cracked in half and folded back, yet is still flat upon the paper, this is a *photographic drawing* of a three-dimensional built object.

Maria Levitsky  Dixie Brewery Cracked   2011

With the objects I'm making I hope to evoke in the viewer a renewed sense of wonder about the built environment while taking a closer look at overlooked vernacular architecture and neglected buildings that are not long for this world. My aim is to make visual objects that can be experienced in some way, like a journey for the eyes that brings the viewer to an altered viewpoint vis a vis architectural space.

**Looking at Architecture as more than just the space we dwell within**

I am looking at architecture in several different ways: as utilitarian lived, experienced space, and as aesthetic, performative and sculptural space. Leaving the last category (sculptural) for later, I will try in a nutshell to trace a development of lived space. As humans we grow up in rooms in
houses, like mice in burrows or bees in hives: bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, dining rooms and bathrooms are our domestic domain. Typically enclosed by four walls with some windows for light and a door for access, the room is a utilitarian unit, providing shelter, quiet, privacy and protection. The first room was probably a cave. The room is lived space, lived environment. Used for survival and comfort. This is what I mean by 'utility'.

At some point, boredom must have set in and people started doing things to their dwellings that moved them beyond utility. Walls were decorated in rooms used for gathering and meeting. Buildings constructed to please the gods. For beauty's sake, to imbue the space with a sense of wonder and reverence, to make it different and more special than the places for sleeping and eating, gathering places for worship were decorated. Before that was simple utility. The use of space for ritual was the beginning of performative space. Was this the beginning of Architecture with a capital A? In the myth of Daedalus who personified the first western architect, he designed a chora, a dance platform, the site of ritualistic performances.¹

The artfulness of built space (Architecture) is sometimes very deliberate, and sometimes comes about by alterations and augmentations due to necessity. It can also come about by accident. It consists of the factors of a building that are not useful but are in the aesthetic realm. The primacy of the aesthetic over function turns these structures into sculptures. I look at buildings that are beyond utility and performance space as purely sculptural objects: the state of a building under construction; an abandoned roller coaster; the skeletal scaffolding of a half-built abandoned New Orleans home; this is architecture as sculpture.

¹ Perez-Gomez p.16
Early influence of being a dancer (working within space as a body in space)

I believe that my years of studying dance made me aware of the non-utilitarian aspects of built space. I experienced space as theatrical and performative within the context of highly ritualized and disciplined culture of dance.

Studying dance composition as an undergraduate involved thinking about not only conceptualization and formation of dance pieces, but also consideration of the space in which the dance took place. In addition to the space, the audience and its placement was an influence on the way the work came together. This created a heightened awareness of the relationship between the visible world and the subject. At this point in the history of dance, there was an intense interest in the performer/audience connection, and this relationship was often acknowledged in pieces that referenced both the audience and the process of making the dance.

My dance predecessors of the 1960s—Trisha Brown, Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer—who conceptually re-arranged the dance event, had a profound influence on my creative processes both then and now. Theirs was a way of looking at mundane activities and spaces that elevated them to the level of art, while at the same time bringing art practice down to the level of the street, or 'pedestrian' sphere. (Rainer, Brown). This provides a background for my efforts in photography to engage in an aesthetic examination of pedestrian subject matter.

My neighborhood was full of old buildings.

As a photographer, I am very influenced by where I live. In the 1980s and 1990s around the time I began making photographs, my old neighborhood was full of transitional spaces. Like many
other post-industrial areas in the United States, Williamsburg Brooklyn was the site of many abandoned industrial buildings, casualties of the departure of industry. For a certain time period, before the massive redevelopment that took place in the 2000's, these buildings were available for exploring, photographing and other creative interventions. There was a feeling of things being wide open at that time. One could discover a scene that no-one else had seen, and do something with it. There was a picturesque randomness about the mile-long swathe of land between the last street and the east river, scattered with abandoned cars, a railroad steam engine, turbine rooms, wharfs, docks and warehouses that had been neglected and abandoned for some 25-30 years. It wasn't safe to go there, but it wasn't terribly dangerous either, and one could go by oneself and bushwhack in the urban wilderness that went right down to the waters edge. The openness of the landscape at that time gave rise to many DIY projects, some more public than others. The freedom to manipulate and interact with the landscape is something I can connect to my own kind of manipulations of images that came later.

This possibility of discovery made a deep impression on me when I first started doing photography seriously. I am fascinated with the hulking carcasses of a defunct industrial society: they are the evidence that once upon a time things were made here. The brick and mortar buildings the things were made in reflect this attention to the materiality of the built world: the time and effort taken to forge, to cast, to assemble, to brew. I mourn the loss of the handmade, and even the machine made object, and this is reflected in how my work relates to the subject matter. The value I see in the made object is expressed both through my choice of subject matter and the handmade way in which I create my work.
Artistic influences making me more aware of the possibilities of architecture as Art

Early in my photographic explorations of architecture and incidental, un-designed dwellings, I once made several photographs of a house that had its facade sheared off—either by accident or vandalism or both.

I showed the print to someone and they remarked that it looked reminiscent of a Gordon Matta Clark work.
I replied that although I was aware of his work and admired it I didn't have him in mind when I photographed that house. I had, however, been thinking about architecture, and a kind of fragmented cataloguing of the mundane elements of dwellings. Thereafter, I became more and more conscious of the affinity I felt with him as an artist, with the common theme of deconstructing architectural artifacts.
In some manner, I feel that I am carrying on an aspect of Matta Clark's work. He was physically deconstructing architectural structures, creating idealized geometric intersections in the form of elegant voids cut into the space. The only remaining traces/evidence of most of these architectural interventions consist of the photographic documentations he made, and these, although criticized as being 'institutional objects' by some of his contemporaries, are often the only manner in which to access the works and have come to be recognized as artworks unto themselves.

Additionally, late in his short life he increasingly came to see the photographs as the art, as so few people actually ever had the chance to see the 'real' thing. He also indicated that he was
moving away from the extremely labor intensive cuttings toward other more constructive rather
than deconstructive pursuits.\textsuperscript{2}

One major difference however is that I am not as much concerned with the material aspect of the
building itself, but in the information contained in the spectral shadow of the building as
captured by the camera and the film. The building is a container of visual information that is
transferred to the photograph, and I am translating the information into a kind of photographic
dialectic. There is formal information in the shape and lines, the positive and negative spaces and
the many perspectival angles of the structure. And there is the narrative information of historical
and social inferences that can be gleaned from the appearance of a building and its rooms.

\textsuperscript{2} Diserens, p. 114
There were many other contemporary artists whose work referenced architecture who I became aware of in my early years of working. I regard Siah Armajani's follies, miniature bridges and other architecturally referent, pared down structures, not as false constructions, but as architectural constructions as art. Similarly, Bernard Tschumi's park of architectural follies outside of Paris, La Villette, is architecture as primarily aesthetic structure. Additionally, Ricci Albenda's direct interventions into the gallery sheetrock walls and Alan Wexler's architectural constructs were instrumental in pointing out a direction in which to pursue this kind of subject matter, as well as teaching me how to see architecture through the eyes of art. All of these artists were dealing with ideas coming from architectural observations, and some of them with the relationship of the body to the built environment.

**Photographers who inspired me early on**

Bernd & Hilla Becher's typological studies of structures from the 70s, 80s and 90s made me intensely aware of the possibility of architectural photography as art. Early in my career, their photographs had a big impact. The frontal, formalist images of water towers, mine shafts and other generic industrial structures caused me to look at this kind of engineered architectural structure in a new light. They made beautiful desirable objects (photographs) out of standard utilitarian industrial objects. Their work made me aware of how the camera beautifies man-made things that otherwise might have gone unnoticed. I appreciated how they seemed to not impose themselves stylistically into the photographs, but let the objects and the repetitive nature of the imagery create the vision. I didn't intend to emulate their approach except to adopt their neutral manner of photographing 'interesting' things and then let the image speak for itself. At that point
in my work it was a process of discovery and gathering of information that led to my image-making, and the Bechers were more than sufficient role models for that kind of approach.

The precedent of John Divola's photographs of abandoned spaces from the mid 1970s helped me to contextualized my work. On the West Coast, photography had gained a stronger footing as a contemporary art form earlier than on the east coast. His work comes across as both formally beautiful and conceptually interesting. He, like me, was also working in black and white silver prints, going in to the scenarios with spray paints and making casual interventions before photographing the empty rooms.
Looking at Local New Orleans architecture: a poetic interlude

Post-katrina architectural solutions, according to the provisional nature of things:

–That everything is up on stilts
–That structures are faulty
–That the ground is shifting
–That the water rises
–That the house must be raised
–That the house may be razed
–That the land is no-man's land, under the overpass
–the poetry of decay, the celebration of renewal
The elevated buildings and overpasses as massive engineered sculptures begging to be set into photographs.

As a response to being in a floodplain many structures in the city of New Orleans have been elevated to sometimes seemingly absurd heights, lending them an aesthetic aspect beyond their utility which makes me want to document the infrastructure as if it were a folly (a decorative architectural object), which it is obviously not.

Coming to New Orleans had a profound effect on my photography. Not only were there many buildings in various stages of falling down and decay, but there were many buildings being rebuilt in very interesting ways. In post-Katrina New Orleans the architectural solutions to rising waters have resulted in a myriad of unusual housing forms, many of them elevated to great heights. Some of these forms, though they are a utilitarian response to a very real problem, are surprisingly surreal looking structures, particularly when the height to which a house is raised
borders on the absurd, resulting in a once-typical local shotgun style house towering over its neighbors by several feet. In one instance a brick house of complicated design with a semi-enclosed courtyard towers above its former resting place, complete with garage door elevated some ten feet above the driveway.

This raising-up of the house creates a kind of doubling-up of the form of the house, using structure both as support and enclosure of shelter. The structure that once made up the entire form of the house is now only the enclosure; the new supporting structure underneath bears the weight of the house that the ground or the earth or the foundation once did. This elevation of the house in space also 'elevates' the idea of the house as mundane object into an idealized object. The house is raised up to protect it from rising waters and it is also held up to scrutiny: the house, once hugging the ground on its underside now reveals its underside to all who go under it. The underside has become a ceiling; the house is floating up in the air, a three-dimensional object visible on all six or more of its sides and surfaces. This newly revealed aspect of the house-object begs to be documented, recorded, noticed and acknowledged.
My re-examination of these elevated structures has provided me with material both for thought and for image making. I have begun to engage in the reconstructing of the house-form through photographing and re-configuring it further, because the transformation in real life has suggested another transformation through that of the imagination. I have seen houses on wheels, houses on stilts, houses moved from one location to another, and entire buildings moved across city lots. The mobility of once-grounded, anchored structures in both the vertical realm and the horizontal is a phenomenon I have not experienced anywhere else.

Maria Levitsky  HausMutante   2011

Deconstruction of architectural space via the 2-dimensional space of the photograph

Much of my early work was held in thrall to the sanctity of the intact photographic print, contained within its four straight borders. Coming to school coupled with experiencing the architecture of New Orleans, I gained a sense of freedom that allowed me to experiment further with the materials of my image making, to the extent that I have begun deconstructing the images in the studio after they are printed in the darkroom. I have come to see this part of my
artistic practice as a way of staking a claim over the architecture. Rendering the building into a paper artifact allows me to tear it apart and put it back together in a manner utterly impossible in the real world. There are a few artists whose practices include the construction of actual three dimensional uncanny interior structures that appear to be real yet are from the stuff of dreams-- Mike Nelson and Christophe Bucher are two that come to mind, but their work is limited by its physical nature to the time and place in which it is installed, therefore has the same constraints as most actual non-art buildings. I choose to work within the mostly two-dimensional medium of photography because of the freedom it provides to make almost anything I can dream of out of a building I have photographed.

When I photograph buildings my intention is not to document the scene for posterity, although that is an inevitable side effect of photography. I am in fact gathering material like a salvage operation-- visual material of buildings in states of decay, demolishment, deconstruction or construction. I am looking for materials out of which to build an image of a building.

By its very nature the camera takes bites out of the visible world and frames them into artificial fragments. It makes hard edges where there were none. It freezes the scene into a fixed perspective. A straight photograph is a little piece of the world, which the photographer 'takes' and then presents to the viewer as if to say 'look what I saw'. This single image is where most photographs begin and end.

The camera's framing device creates fragments of the world as well as a distortion of "natural" perspective through the lens' single point perspective. My early work began with simple single-
frame photographs of architectural elements. I was working with the single image inside the photographic square or rectangle, i.e. 'straight' photographs. The deconstruction of the original material was accomplished by the camera lens with its single point perspective, and the fragmentation of space through the selection process of what to photograph and what to leave out. Moreover, the very act of photographing a constructed building flattened the three-dimensional space into a lattice-work of angles, creating a kind of map of the reality that was in front of the camera. To overcome the constraints of the square image I began to create diptychs of two squares side-by-side that may or may not have been contiguous spaces in the original scene. In the beginning his was the result of an in-camera accident, which I then embraced and furthered, creating deliberate diptychs by splicing both negatives and finished prints together.

Using the diptych is a way of breaking away from the square, and also of putting two moments together in adjacent places. The filmstrip of moving images is referenced here, as well as pointing to the idea that a photograph captures one in an infinite string of moments. So why not put two or three or more next to each other and begin to cut and overlap them in order to construct a fictional image that resembles reality?
Questioning my intense interest in exploring ideas around fractured architecture, I have come to see it as a contemplation upon the insecurity, unreliability and precariousness of some structures of thought, as well as reflecting upon the psychological implications of a fragmented society. Conversely, I am also seeking a sense of openness—Creating and/or exploring the gaps in what is otherwise sealed-up; trying to release the contained energy of solid things; bridging the river between the real and the surreal.

**Deconstruction of the photographic object**

My photographic process is really very much about *making* things. My creative impulses drive me to make things out of other things, specifically to build images out of images of buildings. Like pickup sticks, I am gathering the pieces of the buildings I photograph. From ephemeral images made of light, silver and paper, I make a material construction that resembles the original yet is not. I want to engender the idea that there is still a good use for this building; that it can become a work of art, notwithstanding that art is useless in the way that buildings are useful. But, if there could be a use for the images that I make it might be that they become an occasion where the mind's eye can go to a place where the physical body cannot go. It looks real, because it is a photograph. And it is real, because all the little cuts and splices are there in plain sight, and yet these real cuts and splices are an invitation to the mind's eye to come in and look around, and not have to worry about the hindrance of the body, with all its attendant disabilities and obstacles.

Up to the present, and most likely into the future, I have eschewed using digital techniques such as photoshop specifically because of the physical disconnect between the mysterious digital origins and the final results of the image. Digital imaging extrapolates the light into bits of
computerized information, and as an artist I wish to have a more immediate relationship with the original source of light. With a tendency towards what has come to be called 'nostalgic' style of image making, for me partially founded on a distrust and perceived inauthenticity of contemporary modes of mass-produced photographic (re)production, as well as a deep appreciation for the handmade object, I choose to continue working with analogue photographic techniques in spite of the prevalence of digital image making. The direct physical/chemical relationship between the object being photographed and the film/print process means that the negative bears an actual trace of the light reflected off the object, and is a kind of residue of that object. This is intrinsically important to my working process.

In my quest to create a new kind of imagery that is grounded in photography but departs from conventional forms, I have begun to take apart my images. I want to bridge the gap between the intangible image as seen by the eye, and the physical universe in which the actual photograph exists. I have been using various techniques to alter and re-construct the original photographs.

**My recent work brings the following techniques into play**

To disrupt the picture plane on both a visual and material level, and to play with illusions of surface and depth I make cuts into the actual print. These cuts are sometimes along perspectival lines or around shapes within the image. This creates a frisson between the illusion of depth and the optical illusions generated by isolated shapes that float within the image in their own perspectival reality. I try to incorporate these elements into the image in such a way as to make them difficult to detect at first, thus slowing down the viewer's gaze as she attempts to navigate the labyrinth. I also make use of the diptych and triptych forms, one, to overcome the constraints
of the square frame of the medium format negative, and two, to create an artificial picture space. This extending of the image into a longer form is intended to produce a kind of visual narrative, i.e. a series of images connected by spatial illusion that can be 'read' from one direction or another. In this example from the series *Treme Mystery House* I have created several connected panels out of individual frames, connected with a labyrinthine logic.

The types of buildings I seek out to photograph, both interior and exterior, are in a condition that draws attention to the porosity of structure. For example, architecture under construction is open to the elements, contains much negative space, and lends itself to the idea of *building as drawing* because the lines of the structure are more visible than in a finished building. Similarly, a building under demolition, or one that shows visible signs of decay has let down the protective armor of the exterior skin, and becomes available to interpretation. This porosity gives room for a kind of visual reconstruction—a process of imagining and giving form to what I call *impossible architecture*. This impossible architecture exists for the eyes of the mind, in the aforementioned artificial picture space created by conjoining images and weaving them together.
Straight vs. crooked photography

The notion of the 'straight' photograph, one that more or less resembles the scene in front of the camera, has become but one option among thousands available to photographers, now that digitally manipulating images is accessible to everyone with a computer. Most photographs show more or less than what was really there, but the term still remains in limited use. For this purpose, a straight photograph has not been altered for illusion's sake. I once dealt strictly in straight photographs. I have strayed, and will stray further. But before going too far I would like to enumerate some of the things shared by straight and 'crooked' photography in terms related to my own work.

Available light is a salient feature of my work whether it is altered later or not. I enter a space like a gatherer of evidence. I bring nothing to the site but cameras, tripods and other necessary recording equipment. It is important to confront the space as it is found. This often results in long exposures to collect any and all light that is available in the scene- from windows and other openings, and if lucky, there may be a few artificial lights scattered about if the building is not completely dejected. I never bring in lighting from the outside. Often there would not be any electricity to operate such a thing regardless. Straight photography also results in the aestheticization of utilitarian objects simply by the fact of representing them in a new form. This is related to the intentionality of looking that is created by taking a photograph. There is a focus required beyond the mere look or glance that passes over the thousands of things seen every day. The photograph is the result of this intentional look, the moment of the reverse blink of the camera's shutter. This blink freezes the moment of looking and can also reveal what the naked eye may not see- be it in time or space. In addition to showing what the naked eye might miss the
straight photograph gives the viewer access to a scene that may otherwise be impossible to reach, as well as providing a document of a structure that might not be here tomorrow.

The area where 'crooked' photography departs from 'straight' photography is a garden of forking paths. Photography purists (the dead ones) would roll in their graves to read the list. For me, this type of image making is in the service of both an intellectual idea and the imagination. Taking these kinds of liberties with the photographic conventions allows for the form to reveal itself as it emerges into being. Straight photography is predetermined the moment the shutter is released. Crooked photography has an 'anything goes' attitude, and for my purposes involves cutting, splicing, eliding, combining and overlapping, by means of scissors, and various adhesives. It also involves double exposures, blurred images, chemical stains and other troubling imperfections. The evidence of the hand is not hidden, as I am not trying to fool the eye with slick seamless features. It is speculative, indeterminate, and deviates from the predictable, and accidents and random events are incorporated into the image making process both in the darkroom and on the prints in post-production. The end results are often unique, non-editioned photo-montages. I liken crooked photography to making drawings by means of photography.
Questions of presentation and display

My work straddles a line between conventional and non-conventional treatment of black and white photography. Historically, the presentation of photographs is rife with conventions. Because of this, I am compelled to grapple with the questions of how to 'finish' the works of art I make. Whereas a painting already has its structure because of the canvas stretchers, a photograph requires a retinue of acoutrements to dress it up for exhibition. A photographic print, essentially a microscopic layer of gelatin and silver coated on a sheet of paper, needs some kind of housing to protect it from the elements (i.e. framing, matting, mounting, glass plexiglass, etc). Concurrent with my formal experiments I have found it necessary to call into question some of these conventions of presentation, while being deeply influenced by the ways photographs historically have been displayed. I have studied many of these forms and observed how various framing devices affect the ways that images are perceived. For example, a daguerreotype needed its own
special velvet lined box and they were always looked at in this way, on a table, intimately. Stereoscopic images required to be looked at with a viewing device held on the bridge of the nose, so that the eyes knitted the two photos together into one three dimensional illusion. In the art arena, up until fairly recently, it was de-rigeur to mount, matt and frame a photograph behind glass. This is still the most common way to see a photo, although more and more various display techniques are being used now.

My thinking process moves toward seeing the image-object as a *thing*, and to emphasize this *thingness* by at times breaking completely with the conventions of display, and making it up from scratch. For example, in the Invisible Cities MFA exhibit, there will be several photographs mounted on industrial felt. It is a substrate that is protective both in a material sense and in a metaphorical sense, albeit this substance will not necessarily protect the image from the elements. I have also in the past mounted photographs directly to construction sheetrock. It is a material that supports, provides rigidity, and is also a referent to some of the elements within many of my images. Other materials I have used include raw canvas, plaster of paris and bookbinders cardboard. With these unconventional supports and mounting materials I wish to call attention to the materiality of both the object itself as well as to the content in the photograph. It remains to say however, that I have not completely abandoned the convention of framing my photographs when it seems the best solution for the image at hand.

**Future Endeavors**

In the near future I want to explore the idea of creating an image out of multiple views of one object, all on the same page. This would be a layering of for example, 360 degrees of views
around a free-standing building, all printed on the same piece of paper. The layered work of Idris Kahn takes the typological shots of the Bechers and superimposes them one upon another.

In effect, this appears as multiple exposures yet is not. It also gives the impression of a building in motion, reminiscent of the drawing of Thomas Zummer, *UN Building at 45RPM*, which sends the building spinning.

This moving of the unmoveable creates a fantasy from a reality – the same goal I have in creating photographic drawings and constructions. In real life a building could not spin around its own axis!
Conclusion

I am trying to make photographs that transform the original material into a complex symbolic drawing of light and structure. My aim is to re-invent a way of making photographic images using very traditional means (silver gelatin prints) as the basis in order to alter the way people see images, and to create surprising, visually subversive photographic labyrinths. I wish to make images and create photographic pictures in addition to simply 'taking' photographs, while still utilizing the medium of silver gelatin prints. I see my experimentations with the forms of photography as making inroads into a deconstruction of making and seeing photographic images, using structural imagery as my raw material.
Bibliography


Vita

Maria Levitsky was born in New York City. She grew up in the United States, Spain and Great Britain. She began dancing at the age of seven and continued dance studies in college at the Ohio University College of Fine Arts. After a career as a dancer, she began studying photography and working in the photography industry as a printer. Primarily self-taught, she started showing her photographic work in galleries in the late 1990s with solo shows in Boston, San Francisco, New York and Houston. She received a fellowship in France from the Camargo Foundation in 1997, and several artist residencies in the USA specifically at the Macdowell colony and the Virginia Center for the Arts. She joined the MFA program at the University of New Orleans in 2010.