

The Incongruous Figure

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Figure 1__ Cronopius, Florencia Pita
Images: <http://www.fpmod.com>

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Incongruous figures – this man normally paints the museum walls white.
Cronopius, Florencia Pita
Images: <http://www.fpmod.com>

Taking stock of the present state of the discipline, it is clear that the equilibrium or norms are being destabilized and disturbed. Recent discussions of the messy and crossbred, incongruent, awkward, ambivalent and volatile, can be read as a reaction to the single surface and smoothness debates of the last twenty years, a contemporary reaction to the singular linear gradients, networks and fields of parametricism and a response to the volatile state of the present climate and economy (similar to post-apocalyptic trends in pop-culture, film and art). How can these qualities, that are generally found disturbing, be productive and provocative in architecture, generating new and different outcomes? The qualities of the incongruous figure in the recent work of Florencia Pita and Andrew Zago (amongst others) can be read as such.

Incongruence promotes differences, discrepancies and juxtapositions. A figure is a legible object, body or silhouette. Hence, the incongruous figure, a potential oxymoron, remains a legible object or silhouette, is clearly outline-able, and yet is open to multiple layers of interpretation and difference (see figures 3 & 4). Incongruous figures have connotations to things and provide different spatial and formal stimuli at different scales, angles and to different people. The incongruous figure provides opportunities for architects to subvert qualities and imbue projects with new, abstracted and interesting multiplicities outside parametricism and singular flat pictorial and iconographic notions (see figure 5).

Jeff Kipnis questions the recent resurgence and reinterpretation of the figure and figuration in contemporary architecture – is the recent return to the figure an ‘expedient regression’¹ towards blatant forms and iconography or is there a new ‘untheorised faculty (of figuration) that does not operate simply within or through the regimes of representation’²? This paper is arguing for the later, the incongruous figure, a contemporary faculty of figuration ‘effectively deriving from the pictorial’³ and purely iconographic or representational figures. The visceral, the awkward, the polysemic, the incongruous and the ambivalent are all terms being discussed by the contemporary discipline, which argue for multiple readings, or readings deeper than face value, of the figure and layers of figuration.

There is a scale and spectrum of figuration in architecture ranging from pure representation, iconography and symbolism, through to a blurrier definition where figures get closer to sensate. The incongruous figure tends to destabilize low-res iconic or symbolic figures with qualities of sensate, to defuse simple or singular readings of the figure. When discussing his installation *Go Figure*, Ramiro Diaz Granados labels the two extremes of figuration as *the cartoon* and *the visceral* figure. The cartoon figure refers to the clear, legible and iconographic, where as the visceral figure is linked to sensate and eludes legibility⁴. Diaz Granados defines the figure as ‘not relating to a particular shape’⁵ but identifying or eluding to a reference or something we understand, for example a doorway. Kipnis describes figuration slightly differently; *pictorial figuration* as purely representational effect, but *significant figures* as imbuing architectural form and organisation with more dense qualities⁶.

At the iconographic end of the spectrum, Zaera-Polo’s paper *Hokusai Wave*, promotes the use of the icon, symbol and use of figure directly in architecture. He uses the Hokusai Wave as a symbol for a method of communicating and engaging with clients (see Figure 6) and also as a method of explaining the project to the public, which could be exchanged for any sort of iconography. Although, Zaera-Polo makes the point that the iconography is ‘an excuse to justify experiments with bent surface and shell structures’⁷.

Zaera-Polo makes an argument for iconography, as a short cut way to communicate with clients, enabling his firm to skip all the old methods, such as layers of diagrams. He argues iconography is helpful to justify materials and geometries, which may have otherwise been doubted or cut due to budget constraints. Hence, according to Zaera-Polo, in order for architecture to engage its audience, re-empower the architect amongst the public and maintain a position as ‘relevant expert’ to the public, the discipline needs to work on its methods of communication with the public. Zaera-Polo notes that iconography maybe seen as a primitive choice of language but sees it as an alternative to coded/indexical language⁸.



Figure 2 __ Francis Bacon's figures and figuration with sensate and sensation. Triptych of Lucian Freud.
Image: <http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2011/2/11/1297387448225/Francis-Bacon-triptych-007.jpg>



Figure 3 __ Operations taking figures as pure representations of oil lamps, and fusing them into a single incongruous figure.
2GAX project, Adrian Cortez & Rachael McCall.



Figure 4 __ Striation and distortion of a 2D figure across a façade. 2GAX project, Adrian Cortez & Rachael McCall.



Figure 5__ Figures abstracted into framing ribbon.
 Graphic figures from Rorschach blots striated along edges.
 Layers of figure and figuration scaling from large graphics
 to a fine abstracted filigree of Brisolet. Interior and
 exterior tiling extracted from larger Rorschach figures.
 2GAX project, Adrian Cortez & Rachael McCall.



Figure 6 __ Figure described as pure iconography. The Hokusai wave painting and Foreign Office Architect's Yokohama Port Terminal project. Images: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Great_Wave_off_Kanagawa.jpg <http://www.lucybullivant.net/html/showcase/publications/foa.html>

Jeff Kipnis and Sylvia Lavin, argue for deeper and denser readings of the figure in architecture, vehemently rejecting Zaera-Polo's argument for iconography. In the title of his paper, *What we ~~get~~ need is failure to communicate*, Kipnis is rebutting Zaera-Polo's argument and alluding to his proposed new faculty of figuration that is more ambiguous and diffuse. Kipnis describes Zaera-Polo's *Hokusai Wave* as a 'flirtation with vulgar symbolism'⁹. Sylvia Lavin writes, metaphor and iconography are simply not 'intellectually seductive or aesthetically exciting' and 'do not add to the ecology of design'¹⁰. Lavin implies that some of Zaera-Polo's metaphors appear to be a *toupee* – a wig to cover a bald spot. A metaphor can become 'a self fulfilling prophecy that can overcome design'¹¹. She suggests architects strive for the seductive oscillation 'between object and image'¹² – the incongruous figure.

Kipnis defines incongruity as 'a requirement to maintain yet subvert received data'¹³. Kipnis suggests 'coherence forged out of incongruity'¹⁴ as an alternate to post-modern collage; this is evident in the recent work of Florencia Pita and Andrew Zago. Florencia Pita's work (and since 2010 including Jackilin Bloom) fuses both ends of the figuration spectrum from iconography to sensate. She juxtaposes incompatible found objects to develop new incongruent forms. This is summarized in her recent statement: 'architecture cannot be homogenous and congruous rather it is messy and crossbred; it can glimpse at the past, but is obliged to be rooted in the present'¹⁵.

There are three categories under which Pita describes her work with incongruous figures; 'the affair of the incongruous', 'the theory of the incongruous' and 'the visual of the incongruous'¹⁶. Under 'the affair' she describes the surface debate from post-modernism through to Greg Lynn's recent work, which gives her a base for 'the theory of the incongruous'. Her idea of the incongruous is to oppose the single ontology of the previous surface debates and develop further complexity by combining multiple ontologies and parameters¹⁷. Pita is interested in treating surface as volume or solid and working with mass using Boolean operations rather than surfaces and planar treatments¹⁸.

Pita describes her work with Jackilin Bloom as 'looking at the awkwardness of the mass, as the incongruous'¹⁹. The 'theory of the incongruous figure' in Pita's terms is a 'messy diagram', 'a hybrid system of elements...compound tectonics', and a system of complexity where surface is treated as volume, carved and given depth²⁰. Such depth of surface is obvious in the incongruent figures of Pita & Bloom's Taichung City Cultural Center (see Figures 7 & 8), 'the visual of the incongruous'. This project displays their work with incongruent figures in both 2D & 3D, where on the facades the 2D shapes on the facades become 2.5D deep masses. Their Orchard Park project juxtaposes figure and figuration in 2.5D (see Figure 9), where as their Maribour Housing (see figure 10) and Busan Opera House (see Figure 11) projects work as 3D objects. The later two projects play with the awkwardness, figure, character and posture of cubby masses offset yet responding to each other.

Greg Lynn argues the desire for incongruity in architecture was initiated/ignited by post-modernism beginning with Venturi Scott Brown's *Complexity and Contradictions in Architecture* and Colin Rowe & Koetter's *Collage City*;

Both Venturi and Wigley argue for the deployment of discontinuous, fragmented, heterogeneous and diagonal formal strategies based on the incongruities, juxtapositions and oppositions within specific sites and programmes... The internal orders of Neo-Classicism, Neo-modernism and regionalism conventionally repress the cultural and contextual discontinuities that are necessary for a logic of contradiction²¹.

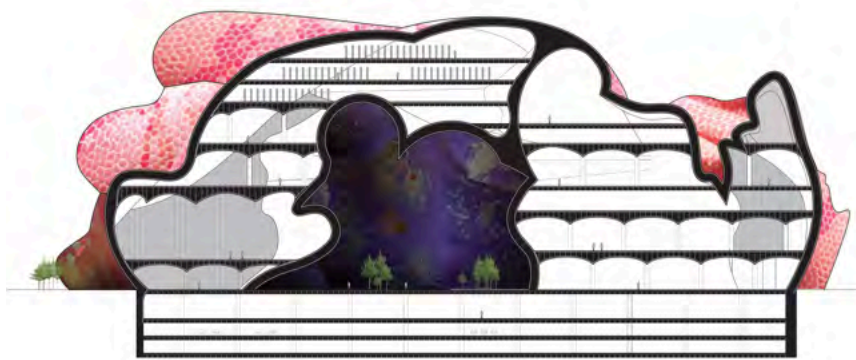
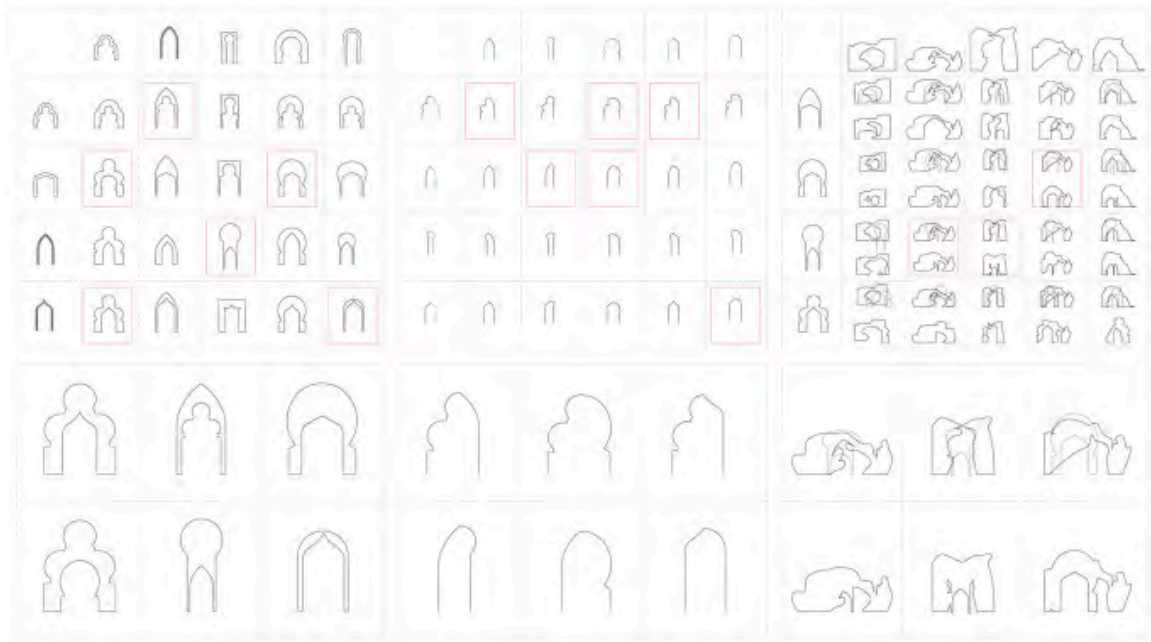


Figure 7 __ Incongruous Figures, Taichung City Cultural Center
 Pita and Bloom. Images: <http://www.pita-bloom.com>



Figure 8 __ Incongruous Figures, Taichung City Cultural Center
 Pita and Bloom. Images: <http://www.pita-bloom.com>



Figure 9 __ Figuration, Orchard Park.
Pita and Bloom. Images: <http://www.pita-bloom.com>

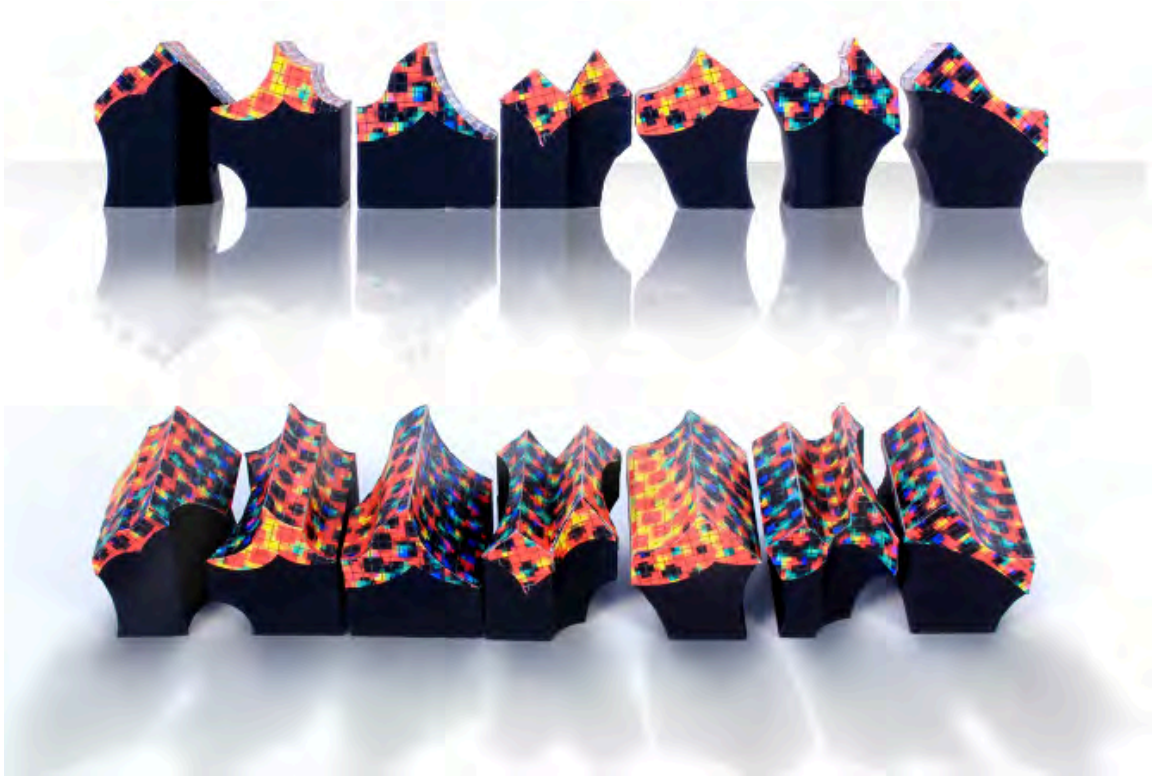


Figure 10 __ Maribour Housing, Pita and Bloom.
Image: <http://www.pita-bloom.com>

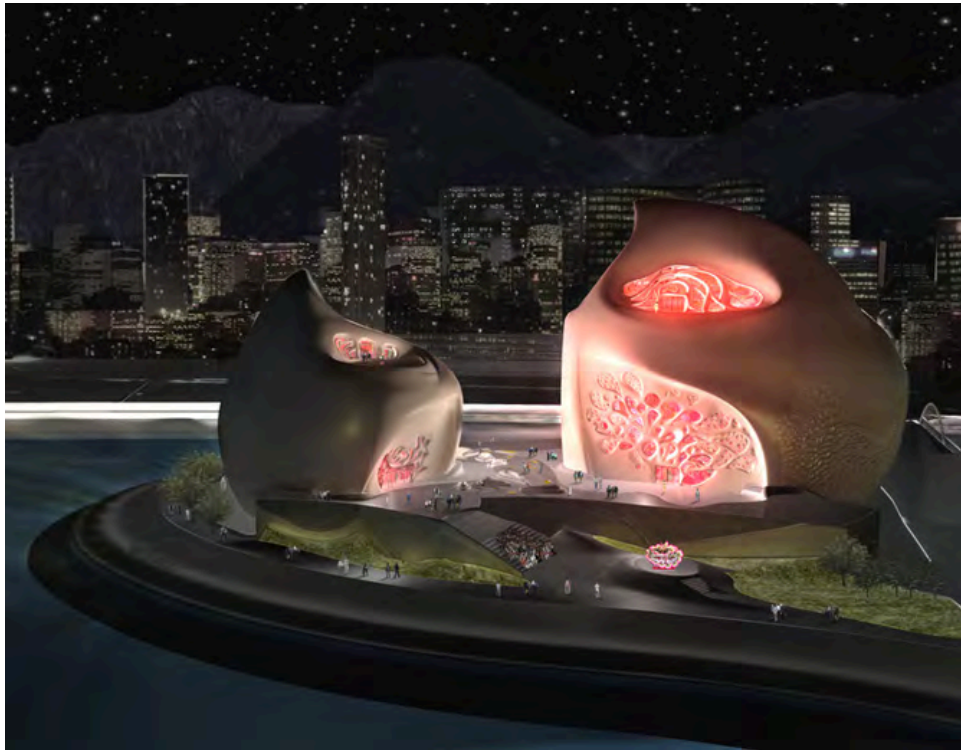


Figure 11 __ Busan Opera House, Pita and Bloom.
Image: <http://www.pita-bloom.com>

Charles Jencks can also be argued as a post-modernist alluding to the incongruous figure in *The Modes of Architectural Communication*, in his text *The Language of Post Modern Architecture*. He discusses the 'phrases', 'semantics', 'syntax' and 'analogies'²² brought back in post-modernism, which were rejected during modernism. Like in Jencks' era, architects are presently searching for phrases and syntax to discuss their work. For example, Florencia Pita uses terms including 'the incongruous', 'the gang', 'the eccentric', 'the suave'²³ to describe her work as characters. Andrew Zago uses 'the awkward'²⁴ to describe the character, posture and position of his work in contemporary discourse.

Such descriptions were preconceived by Jencks when he wrote 'we may expect to see the next generation of architects using a hybrid language with confidence'²⁵. An incongruous figure, as terms meaning difference and wholeness, is definitely a hybrid term. The difference between the post-modern and contemporary discussions is that the present semantics are being used to describe the qualities of objects and figures in terms of their character and posture, rather than Jenck's discussion where terms were being used as metaphors and 'symbolic signs' where something is like something else. Ramiro Diaz Granados recently stated that the contemporary discussion surrounding the figure is 'not about a metaphorical figure'²⁶.

Jencks argues that Le Corbusier's Ronchamp is 'over coded with metaphor' – 'how frustrating, how enjoyable it is this game of signification, which we know rests most on imaginative brilliance'²⁷. In contrast, Jencks argues for less direct, more incongruous and illusive metaphors, such as Cesar Pelli's Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles. This discussion can be read as a prelude to the contemporary search for incongruous figures in Los Angeles. Jencks makes a point, relevant today and inherent in the concept of incongruous figures, that there is 'no way to deny a potential metaphorical level of meaning'²⁸. Even if one tries to ignore metaphor 'the result is that metaphors take metaphorical revenge and kick you in the behind'²⁹.

In Andrew Zago's *Awkward Position*, he discusses the canonical issues of mastery and authenticity and expectations of how they have changed since post-modernism. Zago suggests that a new way to master the canon is to strive for the traditional elements such as form, proportion, composition, ornament, tectonics etc. yet at the same time intentionally challenge these in a new way, similar to how Pita & Bloom are developing incongruous figures out of found shapes and objects.

In Zago's case, he's labeled these qualities an *awkward position* – sitting in-between normal and a 'critique of normative manners'³⁰. Due to the increasing number of *awkward positions* appearing in many fields Zago suggests there may be 'some emerging vein of aesthetic and social possibility' based around conditions of 'unease and discomfiture'... 'distinct from formal elegance'³¹. 'It gains its special resonance by maintaining a clear relationship to the larger cultural norms while constructing an alternate logic with them; neither in step nor totally out of step'³². According to Zago 'the awkward, in capable hands, can continue on an asymptotic trajectory towards perfection'³³.

Incongruous figures appear in Zago Architecture's recent projects, following the trajectory of Zago's interest in *the awkward*. Different incongruent figures can be read in each façade of the Taichung Cultural Center (see figure 12). The booleaned boxes generate different readings according to the individual at each façade. In his *Property with Properties* project (see figure 13), Zago plays with the juxtaposition of incongruous figures in a formal sense and with the figuration of an offset pattern in 2D over the facades. This juxtaposition of figure and figuration in 2D is evident in his *Elevation Studies* weaving slices of familiar cereal and washing powder boxes, generating new layers of figuration (see figure 15). In Zago's Museum for Modern Korean History, he blackens and diffuses the figure (see figure 14).

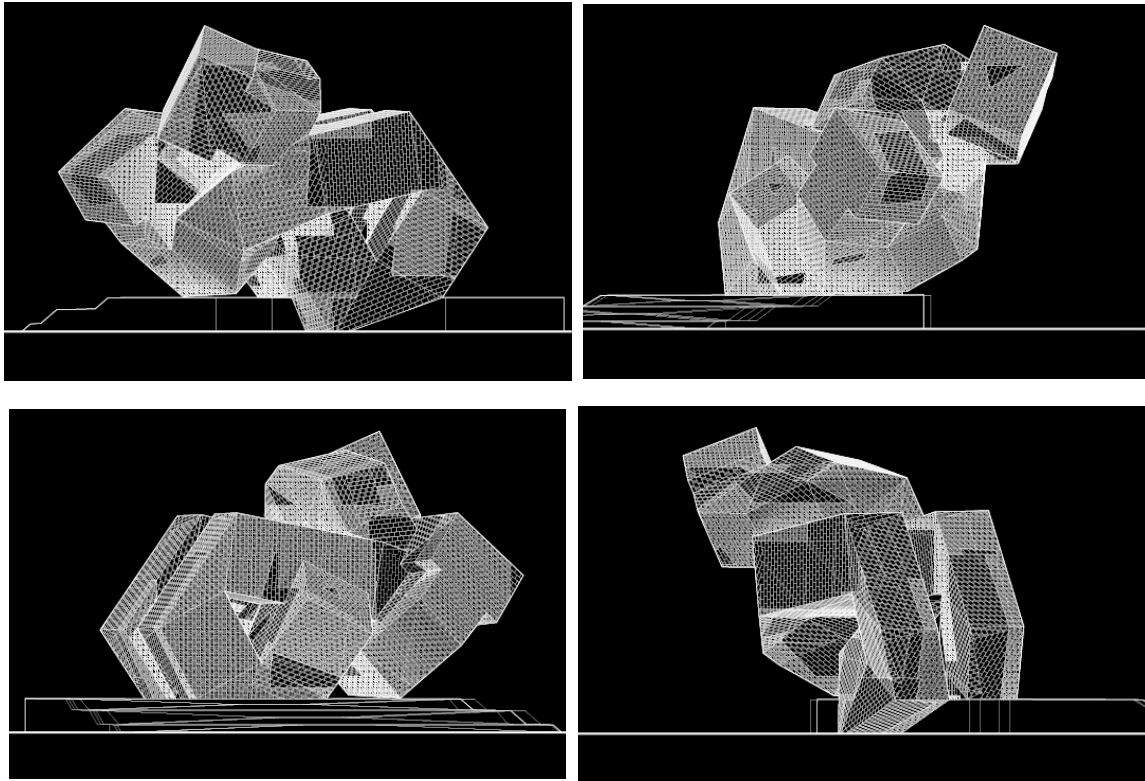


Figure 12_ Incongruous figures in each elevation. Taichung Cultural Center by Andrew Zago with Jonah Rowan. Images: <http://www.zagoarchitecture.com>



Figure 13_ Incongruous formal figures juxtaposed with offset figuration of the applied patterns. Property with Properties, Zago Architecture. Images: <http://www.zagoarchitecture.com>

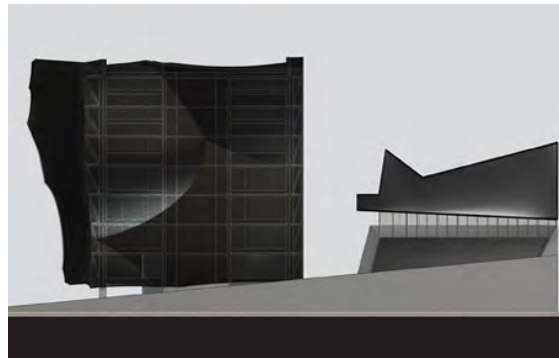
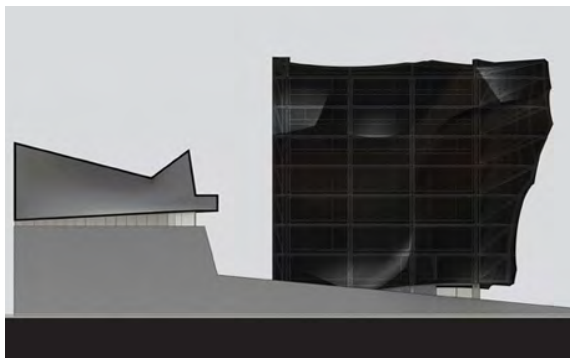
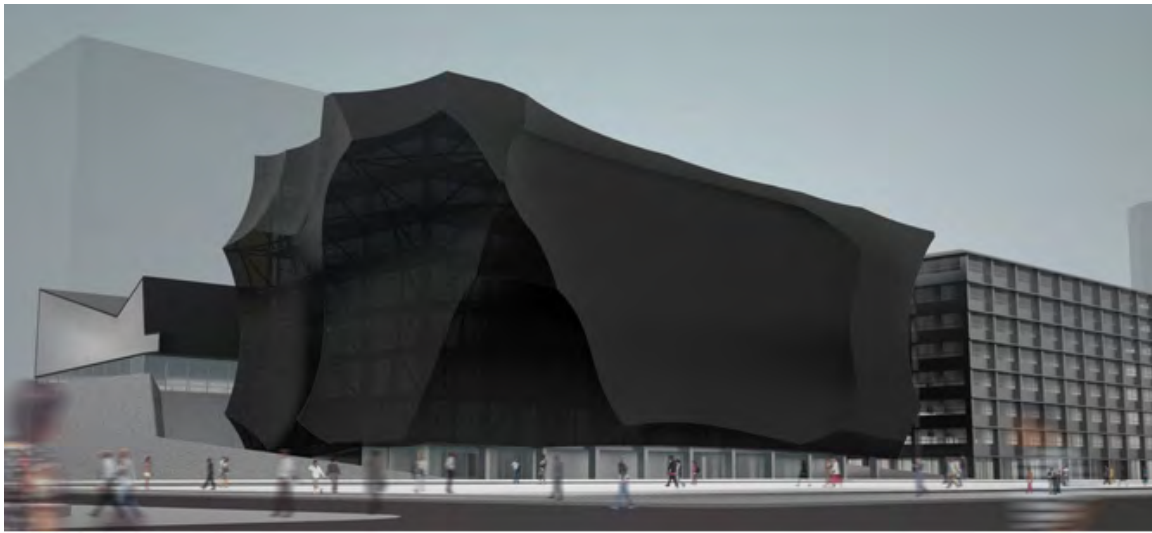
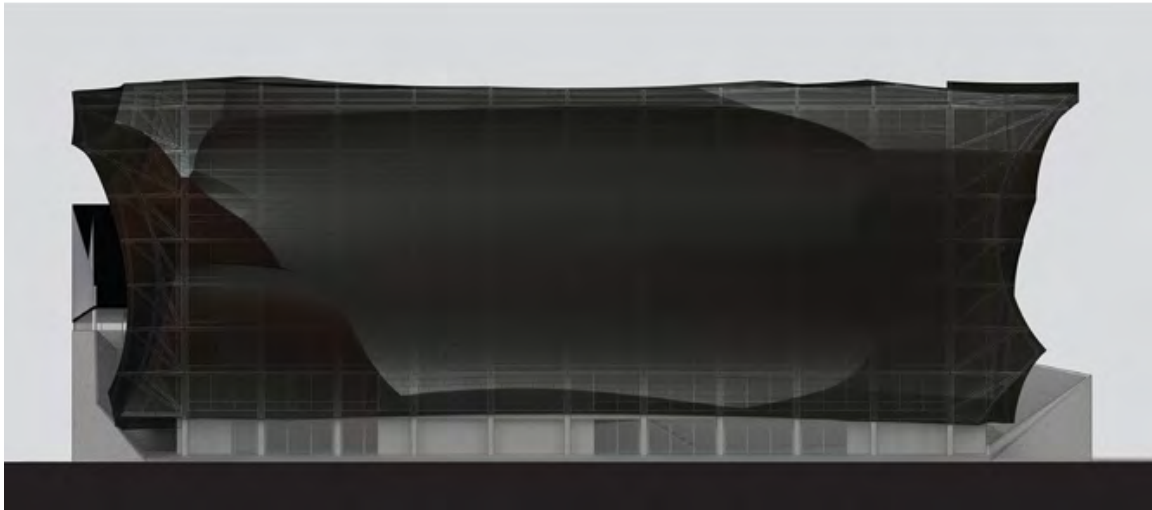


Figure 14_ Diffused figure, Museum of Modern Korean History.
Zago Architecture. Images: <http://www.zagoarchitecture.com>

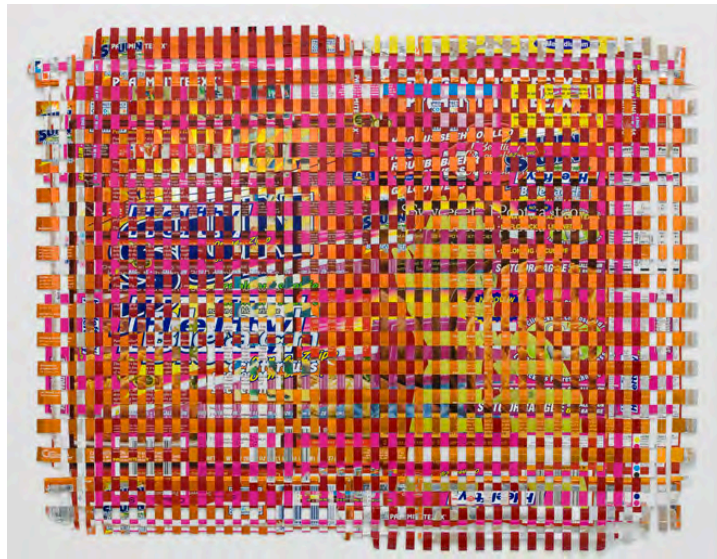


Figure 15__ Juxtaposed 2D Figures and outlines.
Elevation studies. Zago Architecture.
Images: <http://www.zagoarchitecture.com>

The contemporary scale and spectrum of figuration from expedient strong outlined figures to defused, sensational and layered figuration can also be described by comparing Robert Somol's low-res cartoon figure, with Deleuze's analysis of Francis Bacon's work where the figure, figuration, sensate and sensation begin to merge (see figure 2). Deleuze describes Bacon's work as finding the very moment where figure breaks away from the figurative³⁴. He questions the ambivalence of the figure and its ability to promote 'affects', 'sensations' and 'instincts'³⁵. Deleuze describes sensation as unifying different senses at once³⁶, generated by the movement of a figure within or against its outlines/contour. He summarizes Bacon's work as interested in 'the precision of sensation', 'the clarity of the figure' and 'the rigour of the contour'³⁷. These three qualities can also be used to describe the incongruous figure in Florencia Pita and Andrew Zago's work.

At the opposite end of the spectrum to figure verging on sensation, Somol's cartoon theory helps define the contemporary resurgence of figuration in contrast to the fields and networks of parametricism and previous intricacy debates. Greg Lynn describes intricacy's 'visual sensibility' as 'emerging from technique rather than figuration or content'³⁸. Somol sees the cartoon as a model of collage that erases the parts in preference for the overall, what he describes as a 'low-res project'³⁹. Rather than starting with a part and differentiating it, the cartoon, takes parts and fuses them into a new collective identity, such as Pita & Bloom's work sampling archway profiles and fusing them into new profiles, shown in Figure 7. Somol describes cartoon plans as 'custom massifications'⁴⁰ with strong outlines, as exemplified in the recent formal studies of Pita & Bloom and Zago Architecture (see Figures 7-14).

Andrew Kovac's also suggests a contemporary low-res strategy promoting incongruous objects opposed to parametric field conditions. His paper, *All that Work for Pleasure*, has a section called *Collision, Compaction and Connection*. Kovac's describes new forms and spaces of architecture emerging through the 'collision, compaction and connection of small, tall, fat and flat follies'⁴¹;

*... spaces of colossal and miniature proportion blatantly intersect, resulting in new spatial adjacencies, junctions and joints. Contiguities of differences and combinations of new part-to-whole relationships will produce temporary spatial coalitions, fortunate collisions, momentary glitches, immediate acquaintances, reluctant relationships and new architectural affinities*⁴².

These terms connote similar qualities and delights found in the juxtaposition of incompatible objects and patterns generating incongruous figures as shown in the work of the SCI-Arc 2GAX studio, Pita & Bloom and Andrew Zago. These are the potentially productive qualities and dense multiple readings of incongruous figures, which Kipnis was suggesting could be a new 'untheorized faculty of figuration'⁴³ deeper than pure pictorial representation. Although presently described in a variety of terms, the awkward, crossbred, ambivalent, polysemic etc. the incongruous figure provides opportunities to imbue projects with multiple readings and deeper provocative meaning, than pure pictorial figures.

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- ¹ Jeffrey Kipnis, "What We Got Need Is – Failure to Communicate," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 95.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Jeffrey Kipnis, "What We Got Need Is – Failure to Communicate," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 98.
- ⁴ Ramiro Diaz Granados, Discussion "Go Figure" SCI-Arc Media Archive (2012).
- ⁵ Ramiro Diaz Granados, Discussion "Go Figure" SCI-Arc Media Archive (2012).
- ⁶ Jeffrey Kipnis, "What We Got Need Is – Failure to Communicate," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 98.
- ⁷ Alejandro Zaera-Polo, "The Hokusai Wave," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 80.
- ⁸ Alejandro Zaera-Polo, "The Hokusai Wave," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 86.
- ⁹ Jeffrey Kipnis, "What We Got Need Is – Failure to Communicate," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 95.
- ¹⁰ Sylvia Lavin, "Conversations Over Cocktails," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 90.
- ¹¹ Sylvia Lavin, "Conversations Over Cocktails," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 89.
- ¹² Sylvia Lavin, "Conversations Over Cocktails," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 91.
- ¹³ Jeffrey Kipnis, "Towards a New Architecture," *AD: Folding in Architecture* 63 (1993), 44.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Florencia Pita, "Brutalist Pop" in "Another Fine Mess," *Onramp* No. 4 (2013): 67.
- ¹⁶ Florencia Pita, Lecture "The Incongruous Figure" University of New Mexico (2011).
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Florencia Pita, Lecture "Oh So Pretty..." University of Michigan (2011).
- ²¹ Greg Lynn, "Architectural Curvilinearity: The Folded, The Pliant, and the Supple," *Architectural Design: Folding in Architecture* 63 (1993), 24-31.
- ²² Charles Jencks, "The Modes of Architectural Communication," *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977): 39.
- ²³ Florencia Pita, Lecture "Oh So Pretty..." University of Michigan (2011).
- ²⁴ Andrew Zago, "Awkward Position," *Perspecta* 42 (2010): 213.
- ²⁵ Charles Jencks, "The Modes of Architectural Communication," *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977): 40.
- ²⁶ Ramiro Diaz Granados, Discussion "Go Figure" SCI-Arc Media Archive (2012).
- ²⁷ Charles Jencks, "The Modes of Architectural Communication," *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977): 48.
- ²⁸ Charles Jencks, "The Modes of Architectural Communication," *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977): 50.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Andrew Zago, "Awkward Position," *Perspecta* 42 (2010): 213.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Andrew Zago, "Awkward Position," *Perspecta* 42 (2010): 222.
- ³⁴ Gilles Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation," In Francis Bacon: *The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (2003), 25.
- ³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation," In Francis Bacon: *The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (2003), 29.
- ³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation," In Francis Bacon: *The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (2003), 30.
- ³⁷ Gilles Deleuze, "The Diagram," In Francis Bacon: *The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (2003), 77.
- ³⁸ Greg Lynn, *Intricacy*, exh. cat. Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (2003).
- ³⁹ Robert Somol, Lecture "Cartoon Plan" University of Kentucky (2009).
- ⁴⁰ Robert Somol, Lecture "Cartoon Plan" University of Kentucky (2009).
- ⁴¹ Andrew Kovacs, "All that Work for Pleasure," *Project* 1 (2012): 27.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Jeffrey Kipnis, "What We Got Need Is – Failure to Communicate," *Quaderns* 245 (2005): 95.