

# Volume

Ways to be

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# CRITICAL



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# CARICATURE, HYPERBOLE AND THE POLITICS OF THE CARTOON

A Conversation with Jimenez Lai and Klaus by Brendan Cormier

Working in America and Spain respectively, Jimenez Lai and Koldo Lus (Klaustoon) are carving out architectural practices with graphic storytelling at their core. Through an extended email back-and-forth over the course of a month, *Volume* engaged them in a conversation about the critical devices of illustration and cartooning, what kind of insight it can produce, and their own personal approach to criticism and production.

Brendan Cormier I'd like to start with a sort of introductory question. You two have come to represent a rather specific area within current 'fringe' architectural trends, using cartoons and comics as a tool to generate critical discourses. What draws you to cartooning as method of architectural expression, and to what degree would you consider it a form of criticism?

Klaus Yes. Well, if I may make the distinction, I would say that if we are talking about 'cartooning' as such, that would fit better what I do. Jimenez's work explores other paths that have to do with graphic narrative, and the possibilities of a comic's sequence and the comic page to represent/reinvent space. This is particularly visible in his latest works, such as the 'Sociopaths' piece for *Thresholds*. Of course, there is also critique contained in his stories, and interesting reflections on the role of architects and on architecture itself. In my case, my works are much more straightforwardly related to the tradition of editorial cartoons, political satire, and graphic humor, with a little intertextuality thrown in for my own amusement.

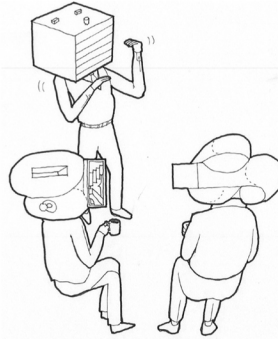
Jimenez Lai If 'caricature' is a form of referencing known characters but spoken with hyperbole, I think cartoon can be a very generative form of criticism. I see cartoon as a sophisticated means to conflate representation, criticism, theory, historicism, and even design – while I have a lot of fun embedding cryptic references that close readers may pick up, the more important aspect I want to explore is for cartoons to become projective. So yes, I would agree with Klaus' reading of 'Sociopaths' – for me, that story was a very satisfying moment in my cartooning career as I felt that I layered my references well, while designing three houses in a single effort. 'Generative' is also one of my interests in Klaus' work, whether or not he sees it that way – when he creates the political caricatures, he speaks in hyperbole. Klaus' work is not so straightforward to me because he relies on the exaggeration of identifiable qualities we generally know – ranging from people's facial and physical features to architectural targets. For example, in his parody of MOS's PS1 project, Klaus exaggerated the curvature on the profile of the piece to be more filleted to establish effects of suggestive motion and liveliness. This, to me, is a moment that sends the caricature off to becoming a new architecture of its own. Saturday Night Live's President Obama vs Mad TV's are very different, and I would say that we have three President Obamas each performing our idea of him. Can we even consider caricature-making to be cultural contextualism?

KL Well, caricature is certainly contextual, and that is particularly vivid in political cartoons (as in any sort of commentary of contemporary issues), whose validity is really ephemeral: As soon as the events and idiosyncrasies that generated them become past, they become totally extraneous to the reader. Even if that same reader actually engaged with them when they first appeared. It's extremely context-sensitive material.

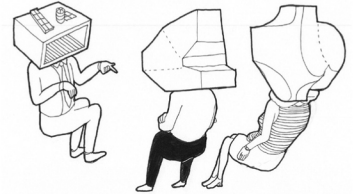
However, the part I'm most interested in, is the way in which context is dealt with. Cartooning relies, using one of my favorite expressions of Vivian Sobchack's, on an interplay between familiarity and processes of defamiliarization which deal with hyperbolic distortion but not only. And this distortion becomes a design force itself, which is what you're pointing at, and something which we both agree on, as we have discussed it before. That is: The interest on copying (the non-spurious interest, let's

## ANNOYING CRITICS

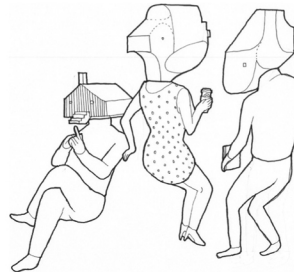
By Jimenez Lai



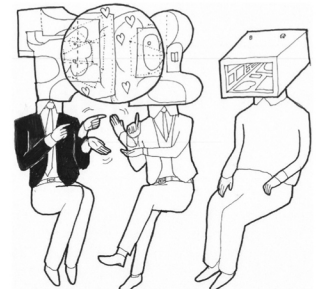
Practical people



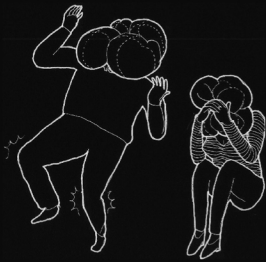
Unspecific cowards who demand others to be 'less timid'



People who don't know the review is over



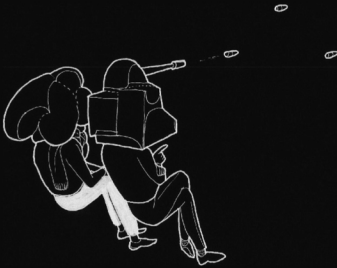
Pillow talk



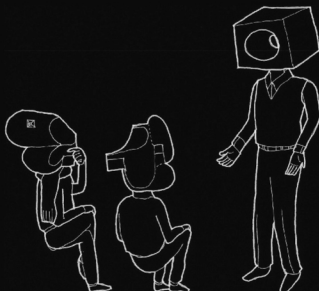
Knee-jerking cringers:  
people who criticize by cringing



Amateurs



People who criticize by bombarding  
rhetorical questions



People who evade the issue by asking,  
'why are we talking about this?'

say) is that if you copy something badly enough, then it becomes something different, something new. And this is very obviously present in caricature, moreover in architectural caricature: when you take an existing building and twist it, distort it, denaturalize it by contaminating it with other stuff that's alien to it outside the specific environment, the suspended reality of the cartoon, it mutates. It moves on in a different direction (or directions). So cartooning becomes a tool to unleash architectural imagination. Of course, one could argue that this is true of any form of doodling and sketching, but to me, there's an openness in sketching that also limits its usefulness, while in cartooning, where there's a certain narrative that one has to adapt to, this very limitation of the possibilities fosters the appearance of specific, productive design strategies. And this addresses the 'not only' part of my argument, which we can discuss later. <Monologue mode OFF>

**JL** In my opinion, abstraction is an active form of criticism. The cave paintings we discover today attempted verisimilitude, but they were unable to copy figurations exactly right. But because of the inability to repeat exact copies, only the intended elements are retained. With that, I'd like to maintain a focus on this question "just exactly what is criticism?" Building upon Klaus's fascination with copies and defamiliarization, I think of abstraction as the retention of critical matters and a thickening of its aboutness. As a process of gradual mutations, abstraction between copies produces language, form, and reflects the zeitgeist of every era. This is doubly why I think representation is critical in the transference between generations, and that criticism simply isn't just the business of wrist-slapping poorly behaved actions.

**BC** There's also a distinction to be made here between fast and slow critique. Klaus, you hinted at this already by associating your work with the word 'editorial', it's a quick response to very current happenings. You reference ephemera like Gagnam Style parodies, the buzz around Rem Koolhaas curating the upcoming Venice Architecture Biennale, even a relatively esoteric nod to Ethel Baraona-Pohl's prolific tweeting. So reading your work is like getting very precise snapshots of a day and a time. This is also reflected in how you broadcast your work through fast platforms like your blog and the online architecture magazine *Uncube*. On the other hand Jimenez takes a slower introspective approach. You can read the general zeitgeist through some of the architectural questions he confronts, but it is much more implicit and usually involves architectural debates that have been drawn out over decades, such as designing via plan versus section. And in step with this slow critique, Jimenez publishes with slower platforms: books and journals. So two different strategies, with two different intents. Can you tell me what brought you both to these strategies?

**KL** It is true that much of the work I do is linked to a very specific timeframe, which adds to the indecipherability of the gags themselves for anyone not familiar with the referents. This does have to do with the medium they are designed for, which has a blog format, a very particular mixture between the syncopated, sequential – but also timeless – form of the diary, and the sequentially substitutive nature of the newspaper, where each new installment replaces the previous one. This ephemerality of periodical printed media is something that has been





KLAVS#



MISS COMMUNICATION 2012

KLAVS#

'In Cyberspace Everyone Can Hear your B.S.' (top) and 'Miss Communication 2012'. MAS Context: Communication, Summer 2012. Originally published in *The New City Reader*: Food Section (guest edited by William Prince, Krista Ninivaggi, and Nicola Twilley), November 2010. © Klaus

erased somehow by the internet, which has brought about an era where everything remains out there forever, establishing a rather interesting flattening of History where every moment – and every content attached – is equally accessible, cohabitating a sort of timeless ether where any former understanding of time as an ever-advancing line, gets diluted in the general matrix of hyper-linked data-events.

So, coming back from the heights: It is true that the blog format brought a change to my work. When I split my personality and created Klaus almost a decade ago, I used it to criticize the discipline in a less latest-news-sort of way, and it was when creating the blog that I started to feel the urge to reference current events as they happened. This is particularly true of my collaborations with *Uncube*, where the sort of 'Good Morning America' format brings the commentary aspect to the front. However, the timelessness of the net I've referred to has also prompted me to explore rather obscure corners of the discipline, and indulge in a lot of obscure image-producing which mixes referents at will, such as the 'Latour in Urbicande', 'The Great Gizmo in the Sky', 'Eisenmania', and others. Not surprisingly, those are the ones that make their way to architectural publications.

JL I have a reaction to the word 'commentary' – I don't think anyone should make a 'commentary' about anything. When someone makes a commentary, there is a suggestion that that person is above it. If a designer or a student or even a critic says: 'I'm just making a social commentary on the...' I am imploding on the inside wondering to myself: 'Are you above the society?' This attitude alludes to pointless projects that evade the pressure of practicing in a forward-thinking way. Maybe

in a more reductive way, I am interested in projects that clearly exemplify qualities of 'productive criticism'.

Now, onto the speed of critics – and sadly all of this is in real time, I am not only some GMT's behind both of you but actually need time to think things through... it feels like a bloody chess game with clocks to slam on. In another recent conversation I've had with my friend Pieterjan Ginckles, speed and irreverence came up as an agreement between us. We live in a society of the non-chalant, and I simply want to embrace that. I love reddit and 4chan. I follow suckerpunch. I'm a friend of the Archive of Affinities. I believe in the idea that work has to be visually striking for anyone and everyone, but with enough depth to be mullied over. I call it 'calibrated superficiality'. But I think another thing that I admire about Klaus is his immediacy: 'I think this is important. Therefore, I will make it important by doing something about it right this minute.'

I do actively maintain a presence on the interweb because of the whole 'calibrated superficiality' and I do pump out work at quite a high speed and volume. But I chose a slower medium because I subscribed to a discipline that acknowledges books as benchmarks for a young architect's journey. I made this deliberate decision after an analysis the journeys that others took: blips (Archigram, Super Studio et al), hermits (Woods), hermits turned sluts (Libeskind), hermits turned pope (Eisenman, Tschumi, Venturi, Holl), and sluts turned madams (Koolhaas and Johnson). I guess I was trying to find a way to be somewhere between a hermit and a slut and a first book seemed to have made sense.

KL Ha! Fastness will tear us apart. Well, regarding criticism and critique, I think I have a more hedonistic

positioning towards commentary. Commentary is fun, as long as you understand what you're doing. I love debate, dialectics, and even some playful auto-contrarianism. I think debate, even if it stems from nitpicking, activates your intellectual processes, not to mention your design muscles: Reactive thinking is a powerful force that triggers that first step in our chained mental drifting, letting you overcome that fear of the void you have to face when relying on pure introspection. I like details, precedents, mixing things, and watching how they interact and breed new stuff in the alchemy they generate. So, in this context, commentary, even at its most irreverent, irresponsible or unfair, becomes a rather useful tool, as long as it does not degenerate into a kind of John Cleese-Michael Palin 'argument clinic' sketch, as has become more the case with the 'opinion age' unleashed by the internet. It also helps having in mind that, when playing this game, everything is provisory and, again, contextual: truth is dialectical, and it should be treated accordingly. If faced by the need to choose between the important and the interesting, I'll always go for the second.

JL No, I am a fan of debates too. I like 'auto-contrarianism'... that's funny. Straight contrarianism can be quite annoying, though. And I totally agree with a debate's ability to cause stimulation.

KL Going back to speed, I gotta admit that I'm rather amused by the fact that I'm the one here who's associated with fast responses, given the decidedly slow style I've chosen for myself. I'm fast at sketching, but, then, there's almost a zen pleasure in obsessively adding detail, overlapping layers, changing small things, and exploring different options and endless iterations. So, in the end, my cartoons take ages to be completed. I have drawers full of stuff that will never get finished because their time passed before completion.

BC **Let's talk about the productive element of criticism. What does it produce? What's the desired effect on your audience? In the abstract sense, criticism has been traditionally positioned in a feedback loop between theory and practice, all working together 'towards an architecture', whatever that was supposed to be. Now in the so-called post-critical world, that machinery is broken, calling into question what criticism actually does. Again I think you both have slightly different approaches and intents with what you want to produce through your criticism. Jimenez seems to be building theory, conscientiously documenting his own theoretical development, while Klaus seems to be more focused on provocation and dialogue. Please correct me if I'm wrong.**

JL I just read on the interwebs last night that some kid told me to fuck myself in a book review on Amazon because I worship architectural gods and write in undecipherable archi-speak. I mean guilty as charged, I guess? I can see how opacity can aggravate people, particularly when the promise of my work has to do with an approachable graphic storytelling of architectural theory. Yes, I am shamelessly constructing a biography and a narrative within a body of work, and that isn't necessarily theory.

KL Well, there is a very obvious difference in the way Jimenez and I work. In Jimenez's case there's an obvious connection between what he draws and the stories he tells, and his work as an architect, while in my case, there's an absolute detachment between what I draw and what I do. There are, of course, common interests, and the overlaps become more vivid in the case of Klaus's work

and my academic life. However, those two (three, actually) sides of myself are treated as different personae – which sometimes causes some conflicts. Recently, at an event in Naples, I was invited as Klaus, but then they decided it would be really helpful if I could introduce some of my theoretical work in one of the sessions, which is a separate area (related, but not equal to) that requires a different tone. In the end, I ended up speaking two different days under two different names.

BC **Split personality as occupational hazard. It might afflict all of us writers to a certain degree. Let's leave it at that then. Do you have any parting words? Perhaps a sign-off that one of your avatars might give?**

KL "Less is more than nothing."

This is actually a real sentence I heard in a conversation many years ago, sprouted by a fellow with a perfectly straight face. This guy tended to gift us with stuff like this with no ironic intent at all. We always wondered whether he was a genius or an idiot (I suspect the second), but his nonsense is nonetheless deliciously usable.

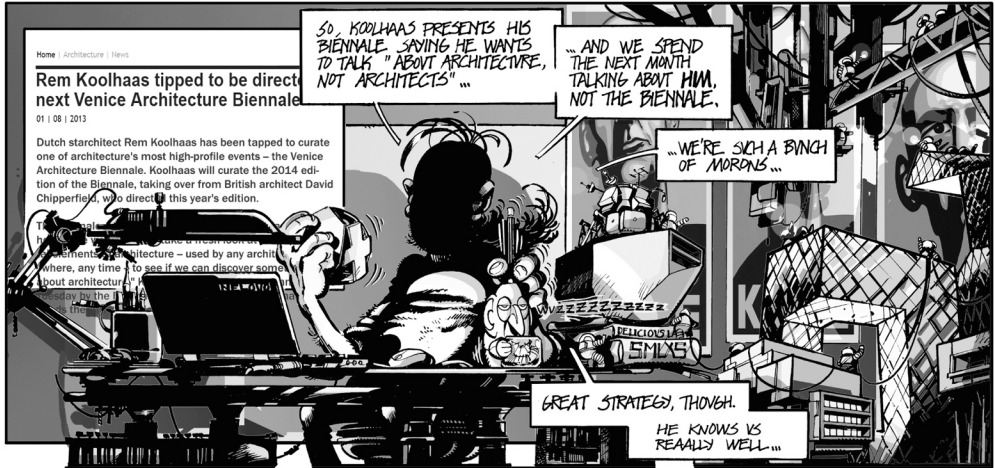
JL "The future is spectacular."



'Banham Style': A cartoon in the series 'The Bubble Adventures of P. Reyner Banham' showing Jimenez and two of Klaus' obsessions: the utopian 1960s, and himself. © Klaus

## II. YOU'RE SO KOOL

NUMERUS *klausus* by KLAUS 2013



'You're so Kool' (*Uncube #07: Off-Places*, February 2013). Second cartoon of the series 'Numerus Klausus', an ongoing collaboration with digital magazine *Uncube*. © Klaus