

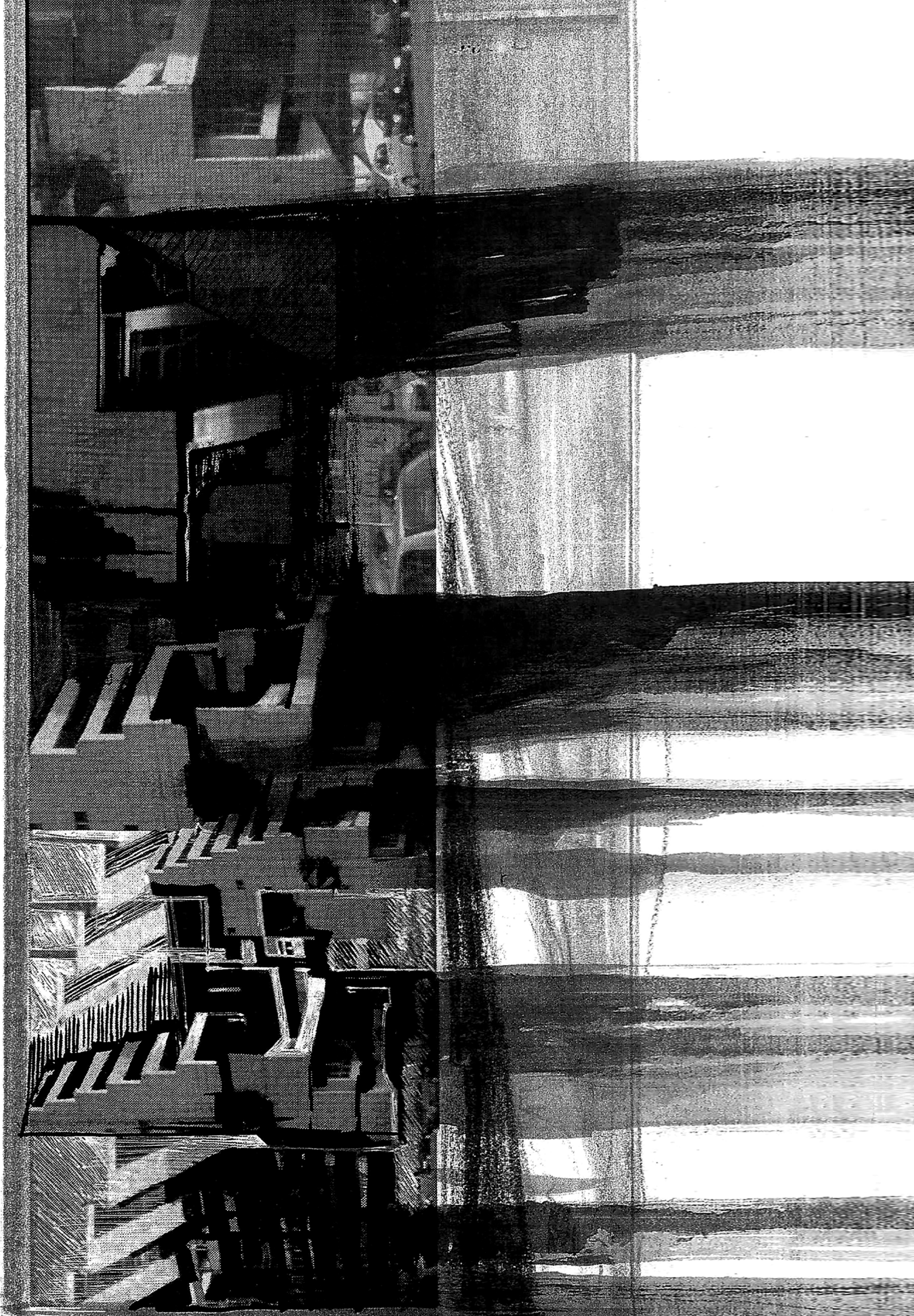
Visual Essay

Architecture as a Visual Resource: An Aesthetic Reflection on the Aftermath of War

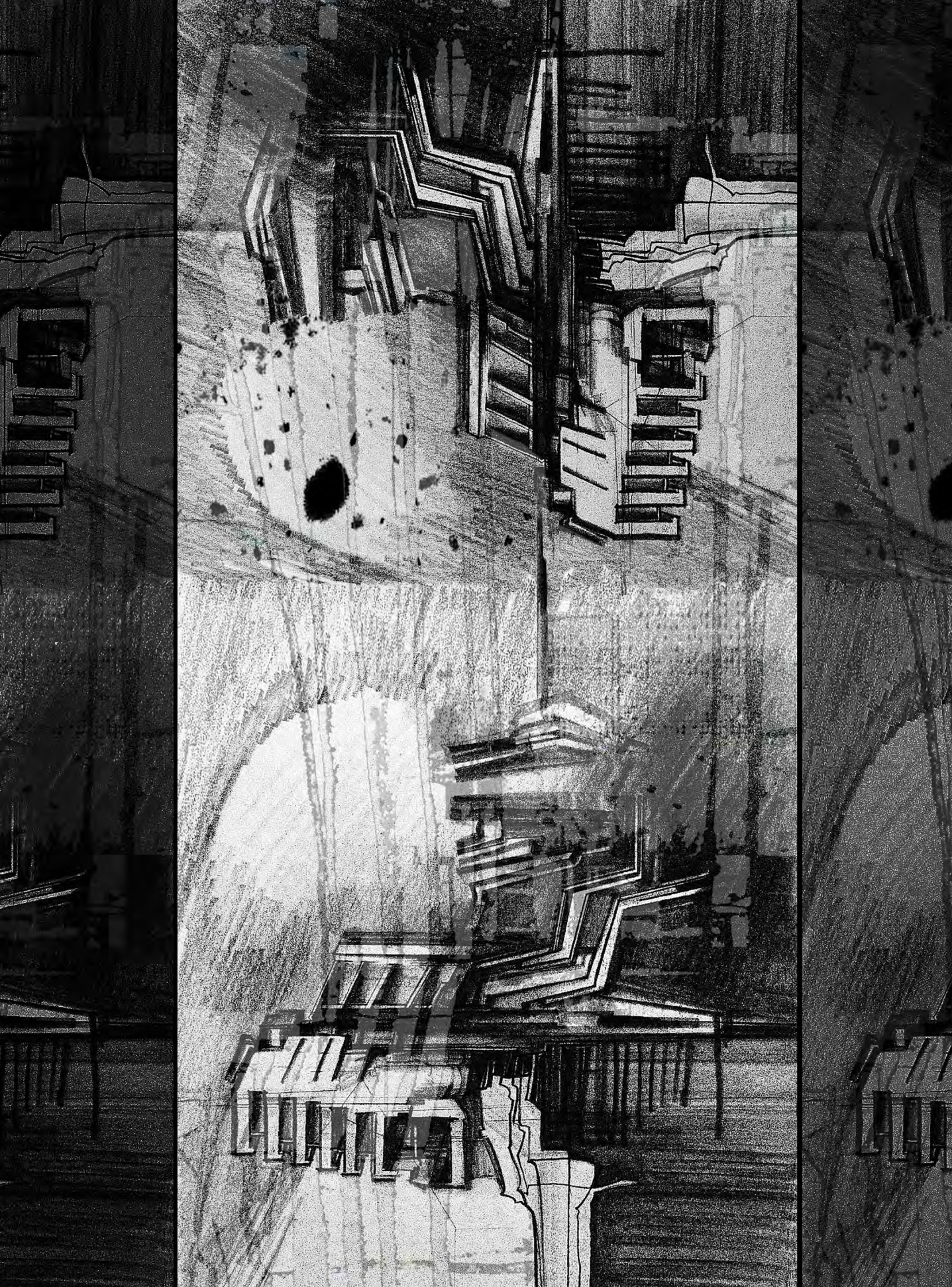
Katarina Andjelković

In early 1999 the conflict in Kosovo led to the apocalyptic scenario of NATO-sanctioned bombings of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. One of the targets was the complex of buildings comprising the military headquarters in Belgrade: the Generalštab. Over the past twenty years no intervention has been made to repair and protect this cultural monument damaged by war, but its mental image has inevitably changed, transgressing the identity of the historical event. The trauma of war bends time and alters spatial perception into non-linear contact, producing specific modes of understanding.¹ At the same time, changing perceptions of architecture as a visual resource is affected by the aftermath of war. Could it be that a wartime elegy overshadowed the enthusiasm for remembering and reviving the past, or does it nevertheless have the capacity to give place to visual narratives concerned with explaining the past or at least save it from oblivion? It is striking that the wartime elegy rather overtakes the history of the events in exposing architecture to changing perceptions beyond the prejudices and stereotypes of war. Accordingly, my intervention is inspired by Paul Virilio's note that 'the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception. In other words, war consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the "immateriality" of perceptual fields'.²

The drawing project *The Generalštab Building as Image: A History Decomposed* deals with an aesthetic reflection on political bodies and conditions, asking how they have re-territorialised the material reality of the Generalštab building as a cultural artefact into the performativity of its political function. [Fig. 1–6] To animate the viewing encounter, I chose to transcribe the energetic event of explosion into visual forms. Material decay of the building granted access to the immateriality of perceptual fields and delineated a multi-layered untold story in a fusion of energy (the fundamental concept in physics), power (the fundamental concept in social science) and transformation.



This encounter is seen as an opportunity to rethink political power through the analytics of physical sciences. It is revealed as a type of image which, instead of reproducing architectural reality, rather produces new perceptions of the event through the power of the energy and forces war unleashes. The resulting choreographic notations can be registered and apprehended through the universe of image representation that negotiates physical boundaries by energy and forces. This method is based on Boccioni's early twentieth-century references to the 'electric theory of matter', according to which matter is only energy.³



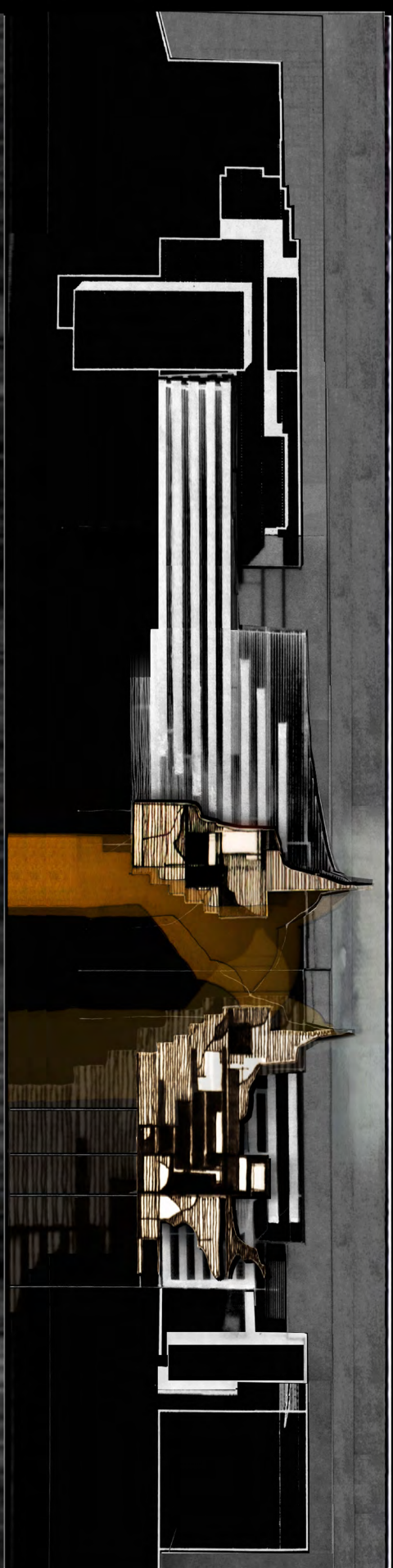
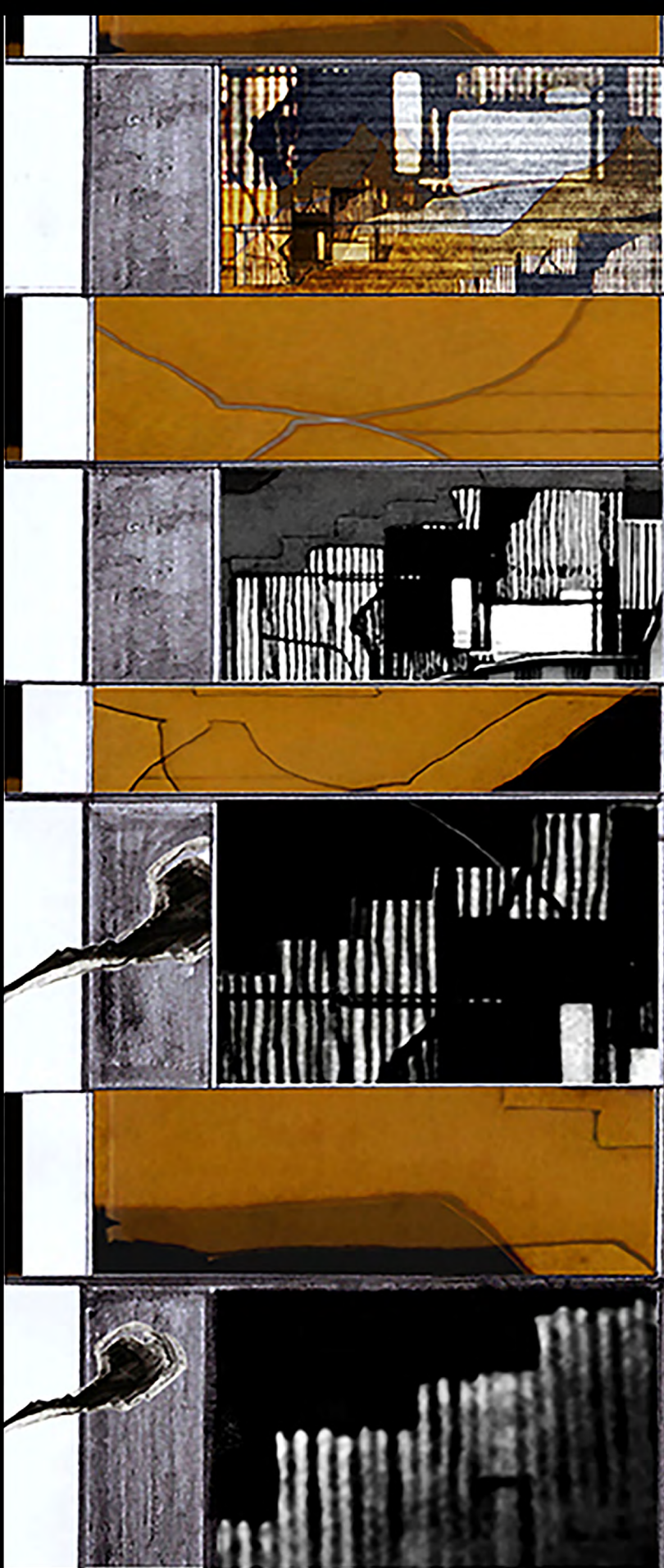
Shifting away from representational images to a more abstracted non-representational forms, the fragments of broken structure are represented in a flow, bearing a striking resemblance to electrons in their 'bareness' or lack of materiality. In this way, digital image manipulation allows a new perception of what exists and reveals hidden powers of material things, which are, as Hito Steyerl reminds us, 'never just an object, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces is petrified'.⁴ In other words, 'things are never just inert objects, passive items, or lifeless shucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, all being constantly exchanged'.⁵



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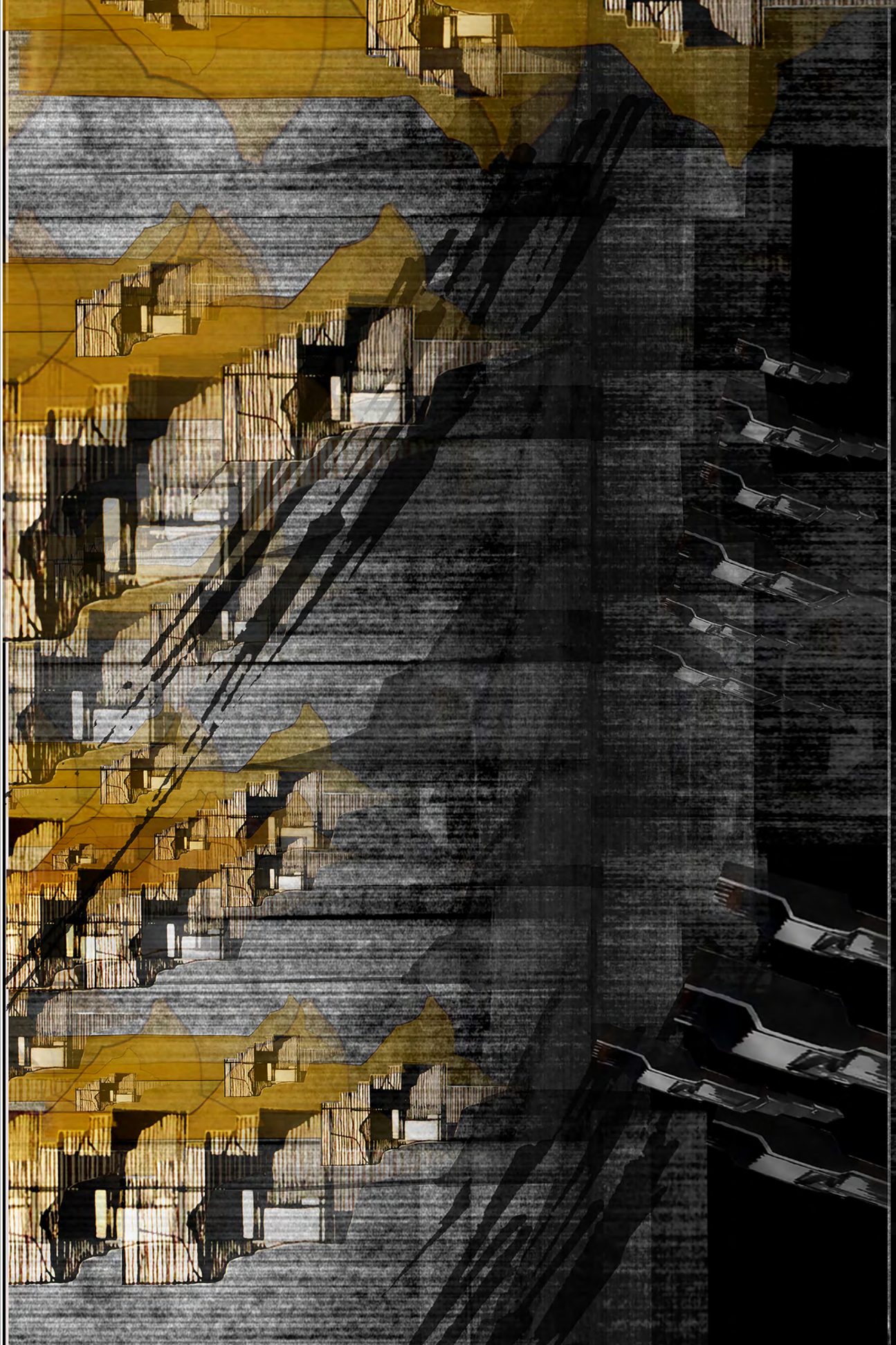
The drawings that make up *The Generalštab Building as Image: A History Decomposed* may be seen as an opportunity to problematise the visual reinvention of space, as manipulated digital work unearths important issues and raises challenges to better understand how society's historical, political and cultural processes in each era decisively influence the type and use of visual constructs. Alongside what is considered to be the politics of destruction, this introspection claims that material incidents of time have an aesthetic value of their own, and appear to venture into a dream-like state or into the energetic event that one can almost inhabit.



Introspection as a high level of uncertainty is reflected in the constant addition of a new layer over the finished drawing. This method is based on reading and using transparency, similar to what Boccioni learned while experimenting with X-ray transparency as a means of overlaying multiple viewpoints to create 'the simultaneousness of states of mind'.⁶ My reference to Boccioni's practice concerns each of us, offering us a spyglass to turn to the world. Its lens casts doubt on truth that is hidden in the fabrication of fictional scenarios of the existing fragments of building as energetic particles, that may indeed be a matter of necessity.



This system of representation changes perceptions where the veracity of the represented event falls systematically under suspicion. It balances between the visible remnant (rejected reality) and invisible harmony (fictional scenario). Consequently, the leftovers from playing with the arbitrary disintegration of materiality produce images that are fundamentally unstable, creating at the same time the stability of the destruction itself.



Notes

1. Caren Kaplan, 'Bringing the War Home: Visual Aftermaths and Domestic Disturbances in the Era of Modern Warfare', 21 February 2019, podcast by MIT Comparative Media Studies/Writing, 1:35:17, <https://cmsw.mit.edu>.
2. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), 8.
3. Boccioni's reference to the electric theory appears in his *Pittura scultura futuriste: dinamismo plastico* (Milan: Edizioni futuriste di Poesia, 1914). Read more in: Linda Dalrymple Henderson, 'Illuminating Energy and Art in the Early Twentieth Century and Beyond: from Marcel Duchamp to Keith Sonnier', in *Energies in the Arts*, ed. Douglas Kahn (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 134.
4. Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 55.
5. Ibid, 55.
6. Umberto Boccioni et al., 'The Exhibitors to the Public 1912', in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (Boston: MFA Publications, 2001), 47.

Biography

Katarina Andjelković (PhD, MArch Eng), is a theorist, practicing architect, researcher and a painter. She served as a visiting professor, Chair of Creative Architecture at the University of Oklahoma, a lecturer and a researcher at the Institute of Form Theory and History in Oslo, the Institute of Urbanism and Landscape in Oslo, and the University of Belgrade, and guest-lectured at TU Delft, AHO Oslo and ITU (Istanbul Technical University). She has lectured at conferences in more than twenty-three countries in Europe, the UK, the US and Canada. Andjelković has published her research widely in international journals (Web of Science) and won numerous awards for her architecture design and urban design competitions, and she has exhibited her work in London, Dublin, Lisbon, Delft and Belgrade. She is the author of *Preliminary Architectural Design*, a national project supported by the government of Serbia. She won the Belgrade Chamber of Commerce Award for Best Master Thesis defended at Universities in Serbia in all disciplines.