

## Exhibiting Matters: ‘The Architecture Exhibition – An Environment for a Radical Redesign of the Discipline?’

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The rise and professionalization, around the 1960s, of the figure of the curator marked an important point in the configuration of an exhibition’s authorship and process, restaging or reframing of art and architecture exhibitions, and questioning processes of instruction versus creation. Such broader shifts in architecture exhibition practices coincided with the emergence of exhibitions conceived as, or concerned with, environments. For example, the work of the Belgian architects’ collective Rotor represents a new kind of emerging practice in architecture, in which various disciplines are combined: from research, curating and exhibition making to material studies and re-use strategies. Rotor made its frame with their installation ‘Usus/Usures’ at the Belgian Pavilion during the Venice Biennale of 2010. ‘Usus/Usures’, was entirely made up from salvaged building components, which are usually overlooked and treated as “waste”, such as carpet, stairs, railings etc. These elements were exhibited in an isolated manner as to draw closer attention to their own intrinsic qualities, despite, or perhaps exactly because of their anonymous and ordinary appearance, and because of the traces of wear and tear caused by everyday use. Through minimal in its appearance, the exhibition resulted from Rotor’s research into and analysis of the use and wear of buildings and building materials.

This presentation interrogates the radicalization of creative practices in relation to the architecture exhibition as an environment and discusses the strategy of appropriation by analyzing an artistic intervention by the architect’s collective as case studies. ‘Usus/Usures’, a curated and materialized architecture exhibition by Rotor presented at the Belgium Pavilion for the 2010 Venice Biennale will be analyzed and discussed with reference to statements by the authors in order to explore the nature of critical practice when associated with the architecture exhibition as realm for alternative/radical practices in the discipline.

### EXHIBITING ARCHITECTURE

Architecture exhibitions have played, and continue to play, a major role in architecture culture. It is difficult bringing architecture into the space of galleries, museums or multinational biennales because architecture once it is built is always already on display. That is one reason why Architecture exhibitions are almost always exhibitions of representations of architecture. The architectural exhibition then is, to quote Bergdoll with a few exceptions a radical deracination of architecture – simulacra and deracination, a substitute representation or a displaced original.

The architecture exhibition throughout the twentieth century and beyond have allowed architects to take extremely speculative positions and use exhibitions as laboratories for architectural ideas. Exhibitions particularly those from the 1960s and 70s, like group shows such as The Trigon Biennale 1967 (Ambience/Environment) and the 1969 Trigon Biennale 1969 (Architecture/Freedom) in Graz captured, for example, the political ethos of the late 1960s. This kind of experimental installation-based environments demonstrates that architectural exhibitions have not only played a role in canonizing architects and buildings but also can affect architecture’s social role.

In Italy architect’s collaboratives such as Superstudio, (one of the participants of the Architecture/Freedom exhibition), Archizoom, Global Tools, Gruppo 9999, and U.F.O. expanded their role in society 1968 to shape the contemporary political and cultural agenda through “Radical Architecture” without the intervention of a building. Because architecture, they claimed, had become complicit with late capitalist land development and status production and had disclaimed its responsibility to provide affordable housing to Italy’s middle and lower classes. In an attempt to divorce themselves from what they perceived as a corrupt discipline, radical architects replaced construction with a variety of alternative mediums. They reject the various mediums of architecture in favor of other, non-tectonic modes such as montages, models, films and foremost exhibitions, installations and magazines using all the techniques of mass communication to broadcast their message to a global audience. In 1972 those radical groups were selected through an open competition to participate in the ground-breaking exhibition Italy: The New Domestic Landscape at MoMA, curated by Emilio Ambasz. The contribution by 9999, Casa Orto—Vegetable Garden House, would become one of the defining projects in the early ecology movement. Lettuces and cabbages were presented against the backdrop of the museum and used as the raw material for a collage of the Home Garden. This ecological and communal oriented design approach like Casa Orto promoted a globalism founded-on beliefs in a common culture of human survival and evolution serving a “global commons” imagined as an ‘open work’ rather than owned resources.

The urgent issues we face today about ecology, globalization, technology, and social justice seem to closely echo the issues addressed by the Radical Movement.



Figure 1: Rotor: Usus/Usures, Belgium Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2010, Photo: Eric Mairiaux

Now the world of radical architects is reflected, quoted and exhibited by younger contemporaries such as Rotor's ('Usus/Usures', at the Venice Biennale, 2010 and "Behind the green door" at the Oslo Architecture Triennale, 2014), and numerous others.

### **CURATING THE ARCHITECT'S ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT**

The work of the Belgian architects' collective Rotor displays a valuable understanding of the designer's role in society, the material world, and the environment. And by directly addressing or challenging the architectural dimension on the notion of environment, their exhibitions suggested new terms on which architecture and design could be practiced, prepared and presented. Architecture is no longer just the object of the exhibition. Instead, the exhibition itself has emerged as an important site for reframing and representing the discipline of architecture. Through their work as curators and makers of several exhibitions, Rotor raises the question: How can the design profession reinvent its discourse around responsibility?

Hence, the work of Rotor explores the notion of wear, that is, materials, objects and building structures in relation to use. Use is not to be conflated with program or function, but rather the social aspect of occupation and inhabitation of architecture during the life-span of a building, which allows Rotor to approach critical questions of reusability and sustainability.

Rotor focuses on modernist and contemporary buildings slated for demolition in order to reuse their material

components for radical redesign. This obsession with the worn-out and wearing out of architecture is intended to question the standard approach of demolition to create a tabula rasa situation for new projects, not only to save materials (and energy) from the landfill, but also to introduce a social point of view, to keep the qualities that are already there, to improve on the existing, and to remember the people and events that took place. Material re-use encourages one to consider buildings as repositories, not just of the materials, but also of knowledge and past practices of crafting buildings. These past practices are also given as raw material—in this case, of knowledge—that might find new applications and contribute to new value systems.

### **REUSABILITY, SUSTAINABILITY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AS A PART OF A POLITICAL PROJECT**

Rotor's design approach addresses reusability and sustainability as part of a political project. It formulates a critique of throwaway consumer culture and highlights how outsourcing products to global supply chains conceals labor conditions, resulting in depoliticization of both working conditions and environmental costs. To counter this, Rotor developed guidelines, protocols and regulatory work for the reclamation of reusable materials and the integration of "waste" into the current building process. Transgressing the disciplinary limits of architecture, they research, design and exhibit work in response to industrial production, consumption and waste fabrication.

Rotor's national survey of existing second-hand building material dealers in 2013 showed the lack of firms working with large scale industrial materials of the twentieth century, out of which Rotor DC (Deconstruction/Consulting) in Brussel developed as an independent wing of Rotor's design activity. In 2015, Rotor developed a vade mecum for off-site reuse: a model of legal and practical guidelines for the reclamation of reusable materials from public buildings in Belgium. In cooperation with a lawyer, they are also working on policies to re-introduce salvaged building material into the construction process of buildings within the European market. Here, the client is the European Union in Brussels because waste legislation, rules on public tendering, and product norms are subject to EU policy. Rotor hopes to dissect and redesign the material economy and its underlying (legal and processual) conditions which could be understood as a political project.

### **CASE STUDY: USUS/USURES – THE ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION AN ENVIRONMENT FOR RE-USE STRATEGIES**

As a relatively young office, the work of Rotor represents a new kind of emerging practice in architecture, in which various disciplines are combined: from research and exhibition making to material studies and re-use strategies. Rotor is interested in material flows in industry and construction, particularly in relation to resources, waste, use and re-use which challenge historical conceptualizations of building culture, heritage and social value. They deconstruct buildings into



Figure 2: Rotor: Usus/Usures, Acrylic fibre carpet in a living room adjacent to an entryway, a hallway, a bedroom and a kitchen, Belgium Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2010, Photo: Eric Mairiaux

elements (construction, materials) and re-assemble them in new ways. This is an approach about material and knowledge of past practices of crafting buildings and interiors. They aim for both new applications and new value systems around materials and assemblies. Rotor undermines the typical professional divisions of responsibilities between clients, contractors, workers, designers, users and other stakeholders.

This distinct interdisciplinary approach of Rotor—which can be described as deconstruction, relocation and assemblage—has been at the center of their exhibition ‘Usus/Usures’ for the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2010.

At the international architecture exhibition, they displayed mundane materials and products salvaged from Belgian social housing projects as abstract art. The selection and framing of used materials and architectural elements of a social housing complex is neither a purely aesthetic nor neutral act, but points to the social problematic of disappearing low income housing in Belgium and other Western countries.

‘Usus/Usures’ (Fig.1, Fig.2, Fig.3) was entirely made from salvaged building components that are usually overlooked and treated as “waste” (deconstruction), such as carpet, stairs, railings, etc., exhibiting them in a denaturalized way

(assemblage) in the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (relocation).

Unlike common architectural practice, where thinking about material and making means the design of new objects, description through specifications, and ordering through product catalogs, with ‘Usus/Usures’ there is an entirely different process in place: thinking of materials as something physical and tangible to be identified, transported from one place to another, and then reframed. A red carpet, for example, was taken from one apartment of a social housing block (relocation) and mounted to the wall of the exhibition as floor plan of this apartment (assemblage). The caption for this piece merely stated: “Acrylic fiber carpet in a living room adjacent to an entryway, a hallway, a bedroom and a kitchen.” The red industrial carpet, already depreciated as “waste”, becomes a kind of manual of use, a diagram of wear created by the occupant representing the processes of habit and inhabitation. Instead of being a deficiency, the traces of wear lead to reflections on use, users, and construction practices through the new context of the art exhibition.

In a similar fashion, an extracted banal industrial staircase shown in the Belgian Pavilion could be read as a map of human movements walking up and down this stair. These



Figure 3: Rotor: Usus/Usures, Staircase, Belgium Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2010, Photo: Eric Mairiaux

works create an understanding of the human body as a performative tool that leaves distinct material traces of everyday human activity.

The building components were exhibited in an isolated manner as to draw closer attention to their own intrinsic qualities, despite – or perhaps exactly because of – their anonymous and ordinary appearance. Through minimalist in its appearance, the exhibition 'Usus/Usures' resulted from Rotor's extended research into and analysis of the use and wear of buildings and building materials.

Rotor underscores the fact that sustainability cannot fully be defined in a scientific way; it is also a political matter, because it emerges from a multifaceted process with many contributors.

The stakes for architecture are aesthetic, economic, environmental, and social.

Rotor's intention for 'Usus/Usures' was to bring the subject of materiality into the arena of the Venice Biennale opposing the glorification of 'the New' that is implicit in this kind of exhibition format. They intended the subject of wear to draw attention to the reaction of buildings to longtime use,

and more, to challenge architects to anticipate this process.

Looking at buildings through the lens of wear leads to reflections on use, users, and construction practices. Rotor encourages the public to change their attitude towards building materials, but also in a more general sense, towards all objects around us.

Wear is largely a taboo topic in architectural circles because it contrasts fundamentally with the value of purgation, but also with the construction cycles which become shorter and shorter: "in the 20th century, under the combined influence of increased real-estate pressure, an obsession for speed in demolition, the availability of power-machines and explosives and fiscal constructions had encouraged accelerated building obsolescence."

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Exhibitions by Rotor use technique, material, process and the spaces of the art world (museum, galleries, Biennale) as realms for political commentary that are critical of the current global economic regime. Not only do their distinct yet comparable approaches entail urgent questions of sustainability, re-use, and appropriation, they also imply a need for a different view on history and the historical production:

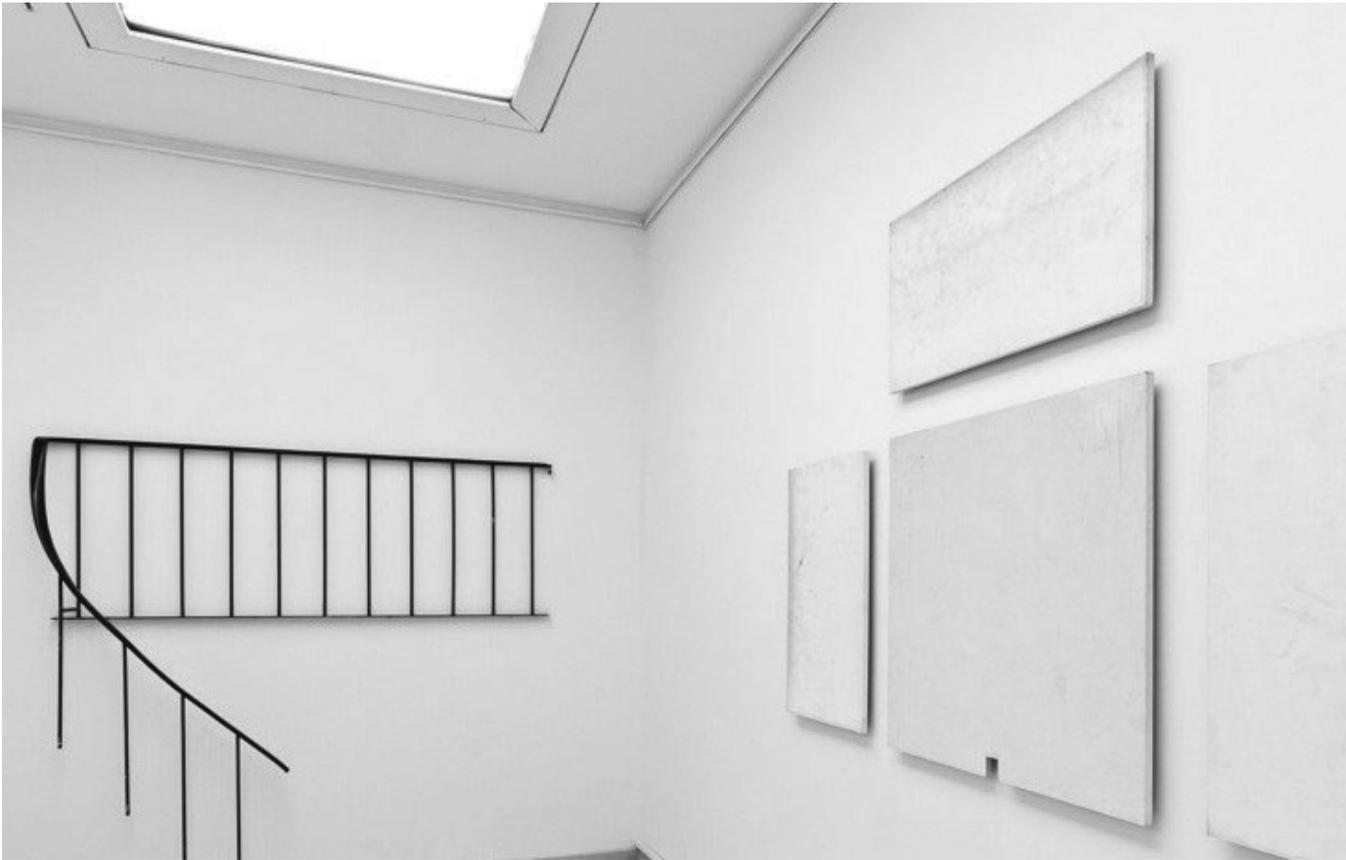


Figure 4: Rotor: Usus/Usures, Railing, Belgium Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2010, Photo: Eric Mairiaux

they recharge the critical aspect of curating architecture (as already present in the 60's and 70's and expand it to the problem of re-use: the re-use of materials and of building elements, but also the re-use of ideas, the re-use of knowledge, of archives and memory. They deconstruct existing value systems in art and architecture and open room for exhibitions as environments to initiate a radical redesign of the built environment.

Rotor continues its critical investigations in sustainability issues in architecture by curating and designing various exhibitions, including the Oslo Triennale 2013 'Behind the green door' (A critical look at sustainable architecture through 600 objects by Rotor) and the 2016 exhibition 'Constellations' ('new ways of inhabiting the world [...] in the context of today's political, ecological and cultural crisis' in Bordeaux.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Barry Bergdoll, "Out of site/In plain View: on the Origins and Actuality of the Architecture Exhibition" in: Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen (ed.): *Exhibiting Architecture a Paradox?* New Haven 2015, (13-21).
2. Germano Celant, "Radical Design" in Ambasz, Emilio, (ed.): "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape. Achievements and Problems of Italian Design" Museum of Modern Art, New York 1972. The term "Architettura Radicale," or "Radical Architecture," can be traced to Germano Celant's essay titled "Radical Design," which appeared in the catalog to the landmark Museum of Modern Art exhibition Italy: The New Domestic Landscape.
3. Emilio Ambasz, (ed.): Italy: *The New Domestic Landscape. Achievements and Problems of Italian Design.* Museum of Modern Art, New York City 1972.
4. Charlott Greub, "Craft as a process and performance of resistance? Rotor, Wim Delvoeye and 'deconstructing' architecture", *Dialectic: Craft VI* (2018): 47-50.
5. Rotor (Tristan Boniver, Lionel Devlieger, Michael Ghyoot, Maarten Gielen, Benjamin Lasserre, Melanie Tamm & Ariane d'Hoop & Benedikte Zitouni), "Wear makes us act", in: Usus/Usures: État des lieux/ "How things stand" Brussels: Éditions Communauté françaiseWallonie-Bruxelles, 2010, (81-104). [http://rotordb.org/hosted/usus\\_usures\\_Rotor.pdf](http://rotordb.org/hosted/usus_usures_Rotor.pdf), accessed November 8th, 2018.
6. Maarten Gielen, "Rotor Deconstruction" CCA (2016) url: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLHlxEh\\_oRk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLHlxEh_oRk), accessed November 8th, 2018.
7. Rotor, "Urban Mining, Salvaging Materials. Conference statement," in: Dirk van den Heuvel, Maarten Gielen, Lionel Devlieger, Deconstruction: *An International Symposium on Off-Site Reuse in Architecture*, April 24-25, 2017, 7-12, here: 11, url: <http://deconstructionconference.nl/booklet.pdf>, accessed November 8th, 2018.