



BUILDINGS EXTENSION - Sylvie Macias Diaz
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Simulacra and archetypes

Hosted by ISELP for a solo show, the visual artist Sylvie Macias Diaz (b. 1968, Verviers) presents *Buildings extension*, an original proposal that involves and redefines the two exhibition levels into psychic and physical spaces, which are *a priori* distinct yet inseparable; A willingness to structure the chaos around the idea of the full and the empty, respectively put to the fore by utopian architectural projects as well as drawings that explore the collective unconscious through archetypal figures from folk tales; A relevant plastic vision, critical and existential. Five-hundred assembled crates constitute the heart of the installation: a model of multiple extensible dwellings, a fragment of an imaginary city. If the "module crate" remains the basic vocabulary of the visual artist, language becomes renewed thanks to the commitment of this expansive creation, visually dual due to the layout of the place (large area and panoramic view from the bridge) and its real situation in the city, namely *Boulevard de Waterloo*. According to the logic of the deployment of cities around the main thoroughfares, the typology of individual suburban homes of the *Villa Pedreña* or the *Villa Pilotis* gives way to the city public housing estate. The parallel with modernist architecture is tempting. But is it relevant? While the above works explicitly refer to villas of Le Corbusier (purism and pilotis) designed for the upper classes, the housing development of *Buildings extension* could be a variant of housing units by the same architect, composed of housing cells differentiated and equipped with a pool and other additions. Nevertheless, wood is not the preferred material of functional and non-organic modernist architecture, unlike this biomorphic *ensemble* set whose modules are deployed in order to appropriate the space. In this model as well as all previous, the pure form hardly responds to any function. It is not more functional architecture as it is architecture as such. The work of Sylvie Macias Diaz cannot be seen through the prism of architecture for the simple reason that she is not an architect but visual artist. The plans are there testify: they lack any realistic consideration, they paradoxically intervene after building the models based on physical manipulation of the modules. One can read in the program "The complex includes a swimming pool, individual garages, parking spaces" or "sliding panels can be used to divide space. Self-closing the windows protect from the sun. Surfaces can be divided into living / dining room, kitchen, master bedroom and go up to 5 bedrooms, terraces and garden." Apart from the pool, there is nothing visible on the model or the plans since they are not intended (at least not materially) to be projected into reality: they ARE projections of the real, recycled by the imagination of the artist. The plans are elaborated *a posteriori* and open the door of the imaginary while simultaneously offering a space of freedom to the potential user, the actor invited to mentally adapt the project and make it evolve according to his/her needs. This kind of architectural design controlled by the user evokes the concept of *autoplanification* developed by architect and artist Yona Friedman. They both converge on several points. They both aspire to establish a form of architecture socially and environmentally responsible which leads them to propose alternatives to the problems of habitat by studying the space based on structures as method to act upon the environment. Reduced to its minimum components (relation between floor and ceiling), the type of habitat they both offer facilitates mobility and individual freedom. Whether poetic projects or achievable utopias, their creations are the evidence of a shared mindset that one can describe as anti-architecture.

Like a LEGO

In light of the current worldwide financial crisis, the use of crate is more relevant than ever: as carrier of our consumer goods, it symbolizes both a system that shows its limits and possible alternatives, such as, from an ethical point of view, recycling and sustainable development. In each work of Sylvie Macias Diaz, a disturbing element arises which generates a shift of meaning. In the model *Buildings extension*, this element takes the form of a small plastic palm tree, sign of a sunny and exotic somewhere-else, but also symbol of a potential and fatal war threat, terrorist act or natural disaster caused by climate change. Disorder and anxiety interfere. By the intervention of this little toy, the meaning makes a 180 degrees turn from the conventions of contemporary architectural productions, from the elementarism and the radical "architecture first", from the essence of

¹ Friedman's approach is characterized by a radical questioning of the role of the architect. The concept of autoplanification brings unpredictability as it relieves the architect of his decision to entrust power to users. His concept of mobile architecture combines mass production and custom-made housing. Applied to the scale the city, mobile architecture creates the idea of spatial city. It enables citizens to freely organize the city, to build houses whose alteration, removal or destruction involve only modest costs thanks to the mobility aspect and the possibility to reuse materials. His reflection on the continent-city gives a spark of new development to the spatial city.

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building volume: the vital need to shelter and to occupy a territory. One can think of vernacular architecture², alter-architecture³, or buildings and primitive nomads. The crate is a means of protection and structure of chaos. But any interpretation disintegrates itself once stated. Can an emergency architecture including pool and garage? Can a shelter be as ephemeral and fragile? What about recycling, since crates are now used and are custom-made crates instead of being recycled? Before evoking the concept of Yona Friedman of mobile architecture, founded upon the production of industrial elements of orderable elements depending on the desires of the resident himself, this last point leads us once again to modernist avant-garde (its experiments with prefabricated buildings on the basis of serial modules). The dense work of Sylvie Macias Diaz cannot be easily defined. "In the crates, the full equals the empty, the empty equals the full" says the artist. A contradictory and tautological art form. Or "It's like a Lego set" ... What seems anecdotic is far from trivial: the game has a pivotal role in her work. Less of a source of amusement (though...) than a universal invariance, a fundamental element of the human condition, the game, as a space of freedom, as generator of unpredictability, is a fictional representation of the world into an extreme stylization of reality through the power of imagination. The ambivalent plans and models, located in a zone of oscillation between fiction and reality, have the appearance of what they claim to be: they are archetypes of architecture, structural empty pre-forms, in the same way that the carbon figures of *Femmes d'intérieur* are feminine archetypes. An art of the feint, artifice and simulacra, the "truth that hides the fact that there is none," as described by Jean Baudrillard. As for the game, we can apply the definition which Kant gave to art: "A goal without an end".

The dark side

In the second part of the exhibition, we move from macro to micro, from the full to the empty. One get inside a shed, transposition crate module to explore what is happening in the interstices. We glide from the physical to the mental via drawings readily identifiable as relating to tales, this form of archetypal and initiatory narrative that reflects the mental processes of the collective unconscious, as defined by Jung. If modules are designed to organize the outer chaos, the archetypal figures of tales are necessary structures for the construction of the psyche, just like the game. Moreover, despite passages such as "As if ..." or "Once upon a time..." one remains in a simulacrum since the tale presents itself as untrue. Instead of the ideal happiness promised by the housing layout, we discover a psychic universe of dark depths. The prettiness of the stroke and the childish appearance of her drawings do not reduce the disturbing darkness of this tumultuous fantasy revealed through symbolic images. Absence and fear, violence and death lurk in the interstices: from suicidal attempts that seem playful, from the Red Riding Hood in the jaws of a wolf (symbol of individual enlightenment and release from the anxiety generated by the transition to puberty), to a dominating and theroid female lycanthrope, ready to her prince into a vampire ... All these figures, all women (often featuring a very long and wavy hair, a symbol of modesty and privacy, seduction and sexuality) travel through these metamorphoses a path of transformation and experiment their dark side as a necessary condition to achieve their full psychic totality, according to the Jungian thought. A maze pattern opens up the diaporama, a complex mental structure, a source of insight. Are we to find Ariadne's thread or is it a hopeless and inextricable labyrinth?

Sandra Caltagirone.
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2 Vernacular architecture is a type of indigenous building which belongs to a specific time or specific location (not imported or copied from elsewhere). Built by oneself (no contractor or architect), it uses the resources available locally to meet local needs with a local method.

3 By analogy with the anti-globalization thought, which it shares common values with, alter architecture brings together a diversity of alternative constructive approaches towards construction as opposed to the standardized "ready-to-live" : respect for the environment, saving resources and recycling, natural non-polluting materials, back to simplicity and authenticity of traditional materials and techniques ...

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