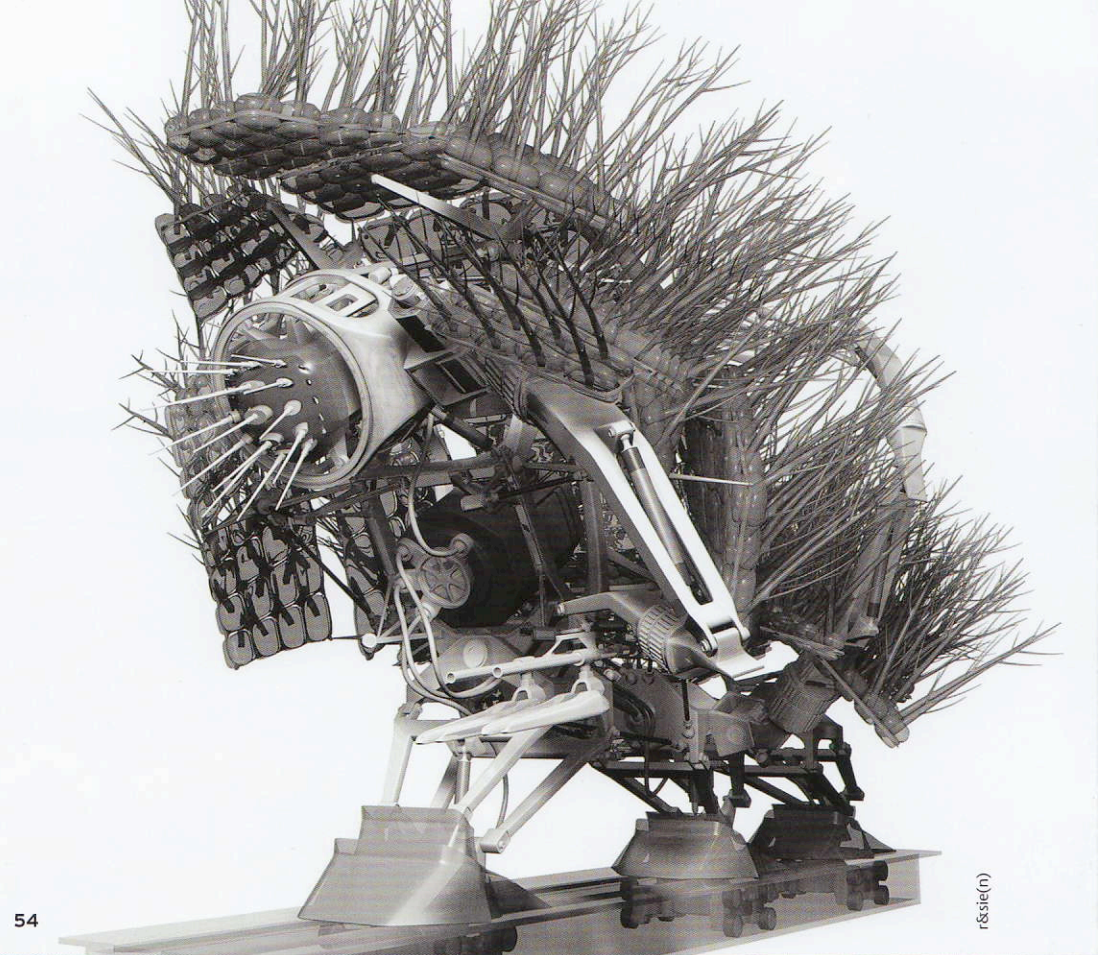


build

DAS ARCHITEKTEN-MAGAZIN

Bazon Brock
Dolce & Gabbana
Jürgen Mayer H.
Georg Gewers
Aaron Levy
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text | markus miessen
foto | eric holm

A NEW SPIRIT

Markus Miessen in conversation with Aaron Levy

Aaron, you have organized hundreds of exhibitions and symposia in the United States and internationally, including being co-curator of this year's United States Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale. Could you refer to the challenges of your work? Each project I undertake topically intervenes in contemporary debates around art, architecture, geopolitics, and critical theory in a way that is purposely critical and provocative, inviting audiences to consider criticality itself as a source of dynamism and enjoyment. These projects have ranged from public cross-burnings examining the charged history of white suprematism in America, to retrospectives on Viennese Actionism and the prevalence of violence and spectacle in contemporary life. Each has the potential to bring diverse constituencies together in productive dialogue, or alternatively tear them apart in disagreement, threatening the presenting cultural organization in the process. This is one of the more challenging and difficult characteristics of my approach. Increasingly, I deal with financial and logistical challenges that invariably affect the curatorial process. A simple façade project in the public sphere with artist Braco Dimitrijevic required extensive contracting and permits; an exhibition with architect John Palmesino of Territorial Agency required that we could flood our organization with water for a project about water rights, nation-state sovereignty, and climate change. Other challenges are more intellectual in nature. Artists and architects such as Arakawa + Gins and Acconci Studio challenge traditional forms of exhibition display, if not the very idea of educational display itself.

What has been your most challenging task to date?

Clearly the U.S. Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale – organizing an exhibition of this scale in Venice in 90 days is no small challenge! I am curating the exhibition with William Menking, Editor-in-chief of The Architect's Newspaper, and Andrew Sturm, Director of Architecture for the PARC Foundation. Many of our featured practices undertake choreographies of collaboration and activism that leave little time or resources for formal documentation. This lack of easily available documentation immediately called into question a more typical curatorial approach that would have privileged cultural artefact, and instead encouraged us to highlight their unique and processual conceptions of practice. We chose to view these procedural limitations productively, allowing them to organically determine our curatorial process.

Could you please explain the work you do as Director and Senior Curator of the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia?

Slought Foundation is an independent cultural organization affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania. The mission of the organization is to organize public programs including exhibitions, public symposia, and publications with leading artists and architects that encourage new forms of sociability and activism in an intimate and

participatory environment. I consider a cultural organization as much more than a form of incorporation or even cultural authority; rather, it is an evolving social system, an organic infrastructure for interaction. Exhibitions and public programs are the new art forms for the twenty-first century. My responsibilities include the administration of the foundation and our publications division, as well as all public programming in collaboration with senior curators Osvaldo Romberg and Jean-Michel Rabaté, with whom I founded the organization seven years ago. The small scale of our young organization means that administrative and curatorial responsibilities frequently overlap. Research is also a fundamental component of my practice – on the level of the individual curatorial program, but also on the level of planning for the organization during periods of rapid growth. My current projects range from exhibitions and publications to a mixed-used, mixed-income urban development we are currently planning in Philadelphia with PARC Foundation, designer Teddy Cruz, and a social welfare organization, People's Emergency Center. Each of these projects requires new responsibilities and skill sets, and entails complex choreographies of institutional collaboration.

Although your background is in English Literature, your projects tend to intervene in contemporary debates around art, architecture, geopolitics, and critical theory. How did this interest occur?

One of my primary interests as a curator – which developed out of my training in literary theory and art history – is the idea of art and architecture as a sort of “open work” or “social system”, a concept that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Paul Virilio once remarked to Catherine David, many art works from this period were temporal and lasted long enough only to exist, not in the gallery, but rather as inscriptions on land, finally to disappear. How do you begin to read or even display to the public practices that amount to an aesthetic not of appearance but of disappearance? Proposing answers to questions such as these requires that I frequently go beyond conventional interpretative approaches and disciplinary positions by espousing intellectually hybrid approaches. This is in keeping with the work of philosophers such as Helene Cixous or the late Jacques Derrida, whose work proceeds upon an expanded definition of literary interpretation and responsibility. I have recently been teaching Samuel Weber's “On The Militarization of Thinking”, where he suggests that strategies that aim to narrow the field of ambiguities and pinpoint a target with interpretative precision inevitably miss the mark and in fact multiply confusion. Any attempt at foreclosing on a single interpretation invariably induces additional readings. This fact of indeterminacy can become a generative point of departure for curators, who must acknowledge and reflect this fact of indeterminacy by tempering the interpretative desire for transparency with the competing reality of opacity – looking to contemporary developments in art, architecture, and critical theory for possible answers that cannot be found within any one





discipline alone. Many of the individuals and practices featured at Slought Foundation – artists and theorists such as Helene Cixous, William Anastasi, Arakawa+Gins, Braco Dimitrijevic, Werner Herzog, and Dennis Oppenheim, and architects and engineers such as Teddy Cruz, Cecil Balmond, or John Palmesino – all emphasize research as a fundamental component of their work. They challenge us to reconsider the politics of exhibition display and prevailing curatorial approaches by evading clear distinctions between architect, critic, and curator.

Why Architecture?

For some time now, architecture has been uncertain of its way. Where should the field be going? Can the problem of where architecture is going ever be thought separately from the larger problem of community and public forms of solidarity? In preparing for the biennale, I recently reread “The Ethical Function of Architecture” by Karsten Harries, who argues, following Giedion, that the main task for architecture today is the interpretation of a way of life valid for our time. Harries also argues that, fundamentally, architecture is more than just an aesthetic approach, namely, a decorated shed. Today our attitude to the many factors challenging traditional methods of architecture, such as shifting socio-cultural demographics, changing geo-political boundaries, uneven economic development, and the explosion of migration and urbanization, cannot but be ambivalent. Through an expanded concept of architectural practice and its responsibilities, these sorts of intractable problems can be addressed and mitigated with an altered perspective.

You have worked with cultural figures such as Vito Acconci, Alain Badiou, and Werner Herzog. Would you agree if one assumes that your practice – to a large extent – is based on curiosity?

Curiosity has a negative connotation today, and is often associated with dilettantism. It has historically been maligned by philosophers, theologians, and scientists and defined as a lack of specialization – a sort of intellectual futility or vacuousness. Following Foucault, I would argue that the word is in fact quite pleasing, and suggests something altogether different, namely, a healthy scepticism and degree of casualness in regards to what traditionally passes for received wisdom. In the “Masked Philosopher”, Michel Foucault argues that curiosity “evokes ‘concern’; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervour to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential.” As with Foucault, I dream of a new age of curatorial curiosity, a landscape of new possibilities and potentialities.

Your work at the US Pavilion concentrates on curatorial strategies engaging the contemporary avant-garde. For the show “Into the Open: Positioning Practice” 16 groups were selected. Most of the work presented – including The Center for Land Use Interpretation, Center for Urban Pedagogy, and Estudio Teddy Cruz – is dealing with issues of communities and the built environment. How has American architectural practice and its relationship to civic participation been transformed over the last decade?

In the absence of large-scale public infrastructure projects in the United States, local initiatives are becoming newly empowered and dynamic arenas for the exploration and generation of new forms of sociability and activism. Through this expanded concept of architectural practice and its responsibilities, seemingly intractable problems can be mitigated with an altered perspective. In the exhibition, we are therefore proposing that social, cultural and spatial boundaries be understood as a new framework defining architectu-

ral problems. We have identified a heterogeneous and dispersed series of practices that are empowered by the inventive ways they work and with whom they engage. The curatorial logic behind this project thus highlights the ways that architects, urban researchers, and activists reclaim the ability to shape community and the built environment. It is our hope that this taxonomy produces a new understanding of American architectural practice and potential forms of social participation. We have selected 16 diverse participants all of whom actively engage communities on various levels. To remain relevant, we are arguing that architecture must find ways to respond to the cultural fluidity, socio-economic challenges, and environmental rifts that define our times. Architecture, far from being in an uncertain position, unsure of its direction, is revealed here as a generator of new forms of sociability and activism that can move us beyond ideological polarization.

One could argue that, especially in regards to the default mode of American architectural practice, you and your fellow curators have taken a very commendable risk. Surely in Europe and abroad this ambition will be fully recognized. What about its perception within the US?

The exhibition noticeably diverges from the prevailing sentiment in the architectural community in the States. We have been attentive to this discordance, indeed it has defined our curatorial approach throughout. The 1932 Museum of Modern Art show “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” highlighted – or, according to some critics, created – a split within the practice of architecture in America. The exhibition was conceived by Henry Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson, and Alfred Barr, and presented modern architecture simply as a representational style that had evolved from new materials and contemporary notions of habitation. It is of safe to say that the position espoused by Johnson, Hitchcock, and Barr represented the architectural profession in North America at that time, and has remained dominant through the 21st century as well. Lewis Mumford, who had visited the European housing states and projects throughout the 1920s, was asked to participate in the exhibition’s section on housing. His argument that modern architecture had evolved out of social welfare concerns such as the movement for decent housing for all segments of society was in direct conflict with the exhibition’s more formalist position. Mumford, however, continued to make his “social” argument about architecture through the 20th century; it would be too simplistic to conclude that he lacked adherents and followers on account of espousing a minority view. It could be argued that the split between these duelling positions remains one of the most important and pressing problems today in the profession. Our exhibition clearly takes Mumford’s side by highlighting contemporary formulations of public engagement, analysis and design. It is an open question as to how it will be received, though it is our hope that it will be productively received as prompting a renewed conversation about architectural practice and responsibility within the profession.

What is the value of risk today?

Failure has to be granted the important place it deserves today in our respective practices; it has to be recognized as a necessary and positive condition, a generator of intellectual adventurousness. We must also undertake a structural critique of how success is defined, especially in the architectural field. We must subvert the reigning hegemony of “success” that legislates and rewards homogeneity, repetition and assured outcomes.

Can you tell us about Teddy Cruz’ installation that deals with the entrance of the US pavilion?

Estudio Teddy Cruz’s contribution to the U.S. Pavilion is a photographic reproduction of the fence that spans the U.S. border with

Mexico at San Diego. This visual representation of the border, together with its photographic montage illustrating the 30 miles north and south of the fence, takes visitors through a landscape of conflict that courses through the affluence north of San Diego and the homelessness and neglect in Tijuana. Visitors to the pavilion literally and metaphorically pass through perforations in this “porous” border to enter the exhibition in the courtyard and inner galleries. These perforations, rather than taking the form of clear interruptions or breaks along the entire façade, instead take the form of small, vertical micro-incisions, thus making possible a sort of Situationist landscape of swerves and detours – in short, new choreographies of movement. With this small shift in perspective, the seemingly formal relationship between San Diego and its informal counterpart Tijuana, gives way to San Diego and Tijuana being understood as part of the same, larger urban system. This border montage is therefore a form of architectural research and a political practice of intervention. Representations of the border as a physical blockade clearly demarcating north from south, wealth from poverty, and formal from informal development misrepresent the constant flow and myriad networks of exchange that are central to their operation.

How did the curatorial collaboration turn out? It must be difficult to share authorship with two others who are coming from a very different direction.

One of the defining – and ethically troubling – legacies of Modernism is the discrete fiction of individual authorship, wherein collaborative practices are defined as the work of a single author. This is nowhere more evident than in architecture, where participatory processes involving multiple agents and agencies are presented as the work of a single agent, attributed with a sort of celebrity status. With this exhibition, we made a curatorial decision to omit star-architects and larger firms from consideration, instead highlighting small, less visible practices. We are interested in an expanded definition of architectural responsibility, whereby architects and designers also become activists, developers, facilitators of a more inclusive urban policy, and producers of unique urban research. Each of these practices are notable for their inventive, interdisciplinary choreographies of collaboration, and the way they reach creatively across institutions, agencies, and jurisdictions to negotiate hidden resources in the private, public, and non-profit sectors. We have also proceeded upon an equally expanded definition of curatorial practice that accurately accounts for the ways in which large exhibitions are realized. The different perspectives and sensibilities that my co-curators William Menking, Andy Sturm and I brought to the table are clearly evident in the exhibition, with all their tensions, discontinuities, and disagreements. Visitors to the exhibition will assuredly interact and engage in turn each in their own way, treating, we hope, the exhibition less as a site of formal instruction and instead as one of productive encounter – a space of social critique, a space of debate.

www.slought.org

Aaron Levy is founding Executive Director and Senior Curator at Slought Foundation, a not-for-profit cultural organization based in Philadelphia that highlights inventive and interdisciplinary practice by collaborating with leading artists and architects. Levy is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Pennsylvania and has organized hundreds of exhibitions and symposia internationally. Together with William Menking and Andrew Sturm, Levy curates the exhibition at the U.S. Pavilion for this year’s Architecture Biennale in Venice.



John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog/Territorial Agency: North, Installation at Slought Foundation, April 2008 (top)

Into the Open – International Center for Urban Ecology: The New Silk Road, Courtesy of Kyong Park, 2008 (middle)

Into the Open – Rebar: Panhandle Bandshell Flyout, San Francisco, California, 2008 (below)