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Guest-curated by Albena Yaneva

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The Other Bottega. Interview to Giovanna Borasi

Giovanna Borasi
Edited by the Editorial Board of "Ardeth"

Abstract
Giovanna Borasi is Chief Curator of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal, since 2014. In 2015 the show *The Other Architect* opened at the CCA, in which the possibility for an expanded cultural and societal role for architects is analyzed through a substantial number of case studies and archival documents.
The question of the changing role of the architect, the relationship between subjective authorship and objective constraints along the action of design, are some of the crucial points that affect the proposal carried out by Ardeth magazine in general, and by this issue in particular. *The Other Bottega* features an interview to Giovanna Borasi on some of the issues that the show *The Other Architect* raised, related to the possibility for understanding the process of design and the different ways in which architectural practice can position itself with regard to the specific issues it confronts.

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Fig. 1 - *The Other Architect*
Installation view, Columbia University GSAPP, New York, 2016.
Photograph: ©James Ewing, New York

"Ardeth": *The Other Architect was shown at the CCA and then at Columbia GSAPP during the course of 2015 and 2016. Can you shortly describe the reasons for curating such a show in this specific – and particular – moment, and what its relationship to contemporary architectural discourse aimed to be?*

Giovanna Borasi: The show was at the Ross Gallery at Columbia GSAPP, then in Buenos Aires at Galeria Monambiente and in September 2017 it opened at the New Institute in Rotterdam. I will try to give a sense of the reason why we chose to stage this exhibition in this particular moment in time – in a moment, in fact, in which the discipline is trying to claim for a certain autonomy. In this context, it was important for me to challenge this idea and understand how the discipline of architecture could instead relate to other disciplines; and, conversely, what kind of architectural thinking could be applied elsewhere while still remaining inherent to the discipline of architecture. I think that the discipline can really take these relationships as an opportunity to rethink the role of the architect, and return to practices of architecture that undertake a more explorative approach. To me, this is also very much related to questioning the reality of today's model of practice: I'm interested in focusing about how architecture comes into being, how current processes work and how you arrive to a specific project and its construction. Due to the new economical framework we live in, I also observe that contemporary practices are investing more time in rethinking processes into a more systematical way of working.

The title of the show is *The Other Architect*: it includes many examples of 'other architects', and this 'otherness' is never embodied in a single person or in one unique way of carrying out this role. It is always a collective endeavour. The show is a way of reflecting how to return to this idea of the collective author, an attempt at non-authoriality, somehow, and very much opposed to the idea of star-architecture that we have seen in a very recent period of time in which it was very much the time of "my ego, my office, my one-man practice". I was looking for entities, institutions mostly, groups of people that have to give themselves a mandate, a reason for finding themselves together; and, consequently, it is never about the work of one single person.
This exhibition project was an opportunity to reflect on how architectural practice is changing in this particular historical moment. The different exhibitions I have worked on in the past have always been about architecture beyond the traditional definition of what architecture is, and this is also the wider mandate of the CCA as an institution. Also, in this case, it was an opportunity to use all the different archives and collections [of the CCA] that are very much about architects' ideas and about architecture intended not only as bricks and mortar. So *The Other Architect* was an exhibit that was very much about what the CCA intends architecture to be, the kind of variety and possibility of architecture beyond what is understood as simply building.

"Ardeth": *The Other Architect is declaredly an exhibit dedicated to those architects who have contributed – and are contributing – to constructing a place for the profession within a contemporary culture that exceeds the confines of the discipline, however they are defined. What is, in your opinion, the ultimate goal of such an endeavour? Are there tangible effects produced by 'the other architect's' search for a cultural role in society? Isn't there the chance that many of these attempts ultimately boil down to self-speculative operations feeding the more traditional, professional, side of architects' work?*

Giovanna Borasi: This is a very good question and I have had time to think about this while organising the exhibit: if you define 'another architect', shouldn't there be a definition of architecture to start from? As soon as you say 'the other architect', of course, you assume there is something definable as 'the architect', who works in a traditional way. Somehow I never thought that this should be oppositional; that 'the other architect' should be in opposition to the traditional architect. I think what the other architect suggests is just as another facet of the same thing, it should be somehow part of the practice in itself. In fact, many of the examples used in the exhibit prove this, such as AMO in relation to OMA, or the research entity on inflatable structures within Cedric Price's office, the Lightweight Enclosures Unit. So it's really not about creating an alternative practice, but more about seeking and isolating a moment where

Fig. 2 - *Lightweight Enclosures Unit: Photograph from Cedric Price and Frank Newby's collection of promotional and documentary photographs of pneumatic structures and components*
1972-1983
gelatin silver print
20.6 x 25.4 cm
DR2004:0136:016
Cedric Price fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture.

a practice defines a specific approach. In this sense it is about finding an appropriate mandate, defining a problem in a different way, looking for tools that are kind of specific to the problem that is faced, and so on.
I never really thought this as a kind of a counter-figure, oppositional to a more traditional figure of the architect; I think in many architectural offices we might find a component that might have this 'other' approach – I don't want to say 'experimental' because it may be very traditional as well. In the exhibition we start with the Delos symposium and arrive to more recent examples- for instance Forensic Architecture. For me the fact that there is this desire to set up a specific framework is fundamental. Weizman can well do his forensic research as Eyal Weizman, but somehow he decides to set up an institution; there is a kind of need to give a new persona to this endeavour, I think. These are very different approaches that have this in common and we put them all under this umbrella of 'the other architect'.
The intent of the show was somehow to have an activist's role: all the exhibits at the CCA and all the work I have curated have this intent to throw stuff on the table, say 'this is a possible position' and attempt to show a way in which this may feed back into contemporary practice.
Besides the exhibition we have invited several groups to give talks, for instance Rotor, who established a new company that deals with the idea of de-construction; it is about the ingenuity of these practices to understand which are the issues of this very moment in time and create a new agency that can tackle them. We also invited Assemble and the New York

group Who Builds Your Architecture, who are working to frame an ethical stance for architectural practice. For me, what was interesting was that these groups were putting on the table a discussion about architecture while at the same time being architects.

"Ardeth": *Albena Yaneva's call for Ardeth#2: Bottega focuses on the socio-material dimension of architectural practice, which is also the filter through which the 'Other Architect' constructs its proposal. In the exhibit, though, the ethnographic stance proposed by Yaneva is replaced by an archival one: the exhibit, in fact, is an archive of physical objects testifying to alternative ways of practicing of architecture. In such an archive, architects are only allowed to speak through the objects they have produced and the documents they have exchanged. Would you say that the documents and objects that make up the archive can be defined as social objects – that is, objects that exist as a result of a social act and that, by virtue of their being inscribed, are registered and recognized, and as such offer a way into the workings of architectural practices which is independent of their authors' intentions?*

Giovanna Borasi: The way I work as a curator is this: you give yourself constraints that allow you to develop the show precisely and consistently. From the beginning I thought that we should rely very much on archival material – from the CCA and elsewhere – and that in a very transparent way we should show these materials to the visitor, with little or no mediation. In the show this aspect was even overwhelming, because there were something like 800 objects, and people would stop at a table and start to read all these documents. Somehow we didn't put the visitor in an easy position to just look at objects and get information, but they had to do this kind of archival search themselves.
I wanted to focus on the foundation or the beginnings of each group, because I thought this is the strongest moment for them, in which they have to justify their existence, they have to explain why they want to start this new endeavour and their mandate. I think an exhibition is interesting if it works on different levels and I thought that to actually see these documents as you would look at a drawing in another exhibition – and so the way that architects present themselves – is as interesting as showing the way that architects draw. The way you write a request for funding or for a grant is as important to the practice as the way you draw. Sometimes this point in the life of a practice is even too early to begin archiving anything; I remember talking to Eyal Weizman and asking him about the document in which he really started to conceptualise his idea of Forensic Architecture, how it came about; and in fact the only document he was able to find was the early application to get funding to initiate the Forensic group.
The objects were not mediated to the visitor, so the visitor was able to see the way the groups presented themselves. It was a way to show their intentions, the way they speak about themselves and how they understand the real context they are reacting to.

"Ardeth": *In this sense, the choice of documents and objects exhibited is, obviously, of the uttermost importance in defining which 'architect' is 'other' to a certain mainstream that you define in the catalogue as "a practice that inevitably brings about the construction of an artifact" (Borasi, 2015: 362). In your curatorial choice, which came first: the selection of practices that are definable as 'other' through their known work, or the selection of objects and documents which define a practice as 'other'? While the answer is quite obvious in certain cases such as Monica Pidgeon's tapes, in which it is the object that defines the practice, the question becomes more interesting in the case, for instance, of AMO, in which the work for Prada can be interpreted as part for whole...*

Giovanna Borasi: Of course there is this idea of 'otherness' in the selection. Which comes first, the section of objects or the selection of practices? I have to say, the main thing is that I really wanted was to find groups that were carried out by architects. For instance, one of the things we discarded was the restaurant that Gordon Matta-Clark did in New York – which, by the way, we have in the archives at the CCA. Food was a restaurant that Matta-Clark opened in Manhattan; of course, Matta-Clark was an architect by training and the project was very interesting- the idea of a restaurant as a tool for discussion- but it was very difficult to document what was discussed there; there are movies of people chatting and eating the things that Matta-Clark would cook for them, but it was difficult to understand what was done there beyond creating a performative moment and an opportunity for discussion; also, we didn't know if the nature of discussion was pertinent to issues of architecture.
On the one hand, the curatorial choice privileged architectural, urban or landscape issues. In this way we eliminated many other groups that we felt were not pertinent – like Food – but we decided to include groups like AMO or Forensic architecture which apply architectural thinking to other issues; these may not seem pertinent to architecture at a first glance, but this kind of experiment can feed back into architectural matters because it is an experiment on architectural thinking and tools. So on one side it was about how architects can employ architectural tools and thinking towards architectural issues, and on the other about how architectural thinking can go beyond what is normally understood to be the field of architecture and apply its expertise to other subjects and other matters. Also, there was this idea of anticipating societal needs and cultural changes – for instance, Monica Pidgeon's work anticipating our own podcast era with a system that was very simple. In the show it was presented in a very nitty-gritty way, it was all about the way she worked – copyright issues, the photos that the architects would take themselves, etc. The question of the format was also very important: through the specific framing that the architect uses, the format becomes the tool. An idea, the format in which it materializes, and the resources you put together.

The exhibition in the end is a collection of ideas and groups, as well as resources and approaches to architectural issues.

"Ardeth": *The Other Architect stems from the idea that architecture amounts to a set of competences, tools and skills that are applicable to a number of activities, rather than to a discipline whose tools are aimed at envisioning transformations of the built environment. In this sense, differently from other curatorial endeavors attempting to define other ways of doing architecture – such as, for instance, Jeremy Till, Tatjana Schneider and Nishat Awan's Spatial Agency, the Other Architect takes as a starting point (as a given?) the profession of the architect rather than the action of producing architecture. Whereas Spatial Agency (for instance) attempts to question the role of the professional architect by envisioning the possibility for other professional figures to take part in the production of the built environment, the Other Architect takes the profession as a given in order to question the societal role of professional architects. What implications does this inversion have, in your opinion? And is it a forced inversion, once the focus shifts from the work of architects as agents to the documents they produce as actants?*

Giovanna Borasi: I worked some years ago with Mirko Zardini on an exhibition called *Actions: What You Can Do With the City*, and somehow there I was very much on this position, on this idea that the-subject-is-

Fig. 3 - *Actions: What You Can Do With the City*
Installation view, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2008
Photograph: ©CCA.

the-city and I-don't-care-who-the-actor-is: architecture can be produced by anyone and the same applies to the decision-making processes that make architecture and urbanism possible. Take the example of the Minhocão highway in São Paulo, Brazil: the mayor decided that this highway, which is an elevated highway with a very heavy traffic load, should become a promenade during the weekends, so it is closed to the cars and becomes a place where people go jogging and do all kinds of things. There is not even a project there, just a decision process in which a mayor decides that a specific highway will be closed to the traffic on a specific day. We also had the example of this shepherd taking sheep into the city of Turin In Italy to take care of the maintenance of a park, and so you have this idea of animals, of nature back into the city. In that show I was very much looking at these things like guerrilla gardening and artists' practices. The show was about empowering everybody to commit to a better city and a kind of built environment where everybody could actually do something. With *The Other Architect* I thought it was more interesting, in a moment in which there is an interest in a return to an autonomous discipline and to disciplinary tools, to reflect about a practice of architecture that can do architecture, be architectural, but also borrow things and tools from the outside or lend them to the outside.

"Ardeth": *As you expressed it, architectural thinking can be defined somehow by at least three things – being an architect by training, using architectural tools or format, and addressing architectural (or urban) issues; do you think this might sum up what you may define as architectural thinking and what you used as criteria for the selection of the cases to be shown in 'The Other Architect'?*

Giovanna Borasi: Sure, I think that studying architecture is quite fundamental in defining a mind set. Even now, if you have a plan of a building and you ask an architect, or a historian of architecture, or a historian of art, or – you know, Albena [an ethnographer of architecture] – to look at it, that simple drawing is read in a variety of ways. Of course, I'm not saying that only architects can think in an appropriate way when it comes to a building, but there is a different understanding about the limits of what can and cannot be done, of the speculative and the real. I think in this respect the specific education of an architect can be crucial. As for the tools: they are also very important and somehow the point of this show was to say that you should not take for granted that the tool is a drawing, and that drawing is about plans, sections and elevations. Maybe you need to get on a bus to be an architect, maybe you need to do an interview, maybe geography is the tool. So this was actually an invitation to go beyond the idea of traditional tools, but still I think that architectural thinking is about the tools; so if you take the work that AMO did for the European Union, all the research was about visualising critical moments in history, designing flags, etc. If you can say that this is a kind of branding exercise, this can still be done through the tools that architects would use for traditional projects. And the third thing you mention – about the

issues architects focus on: absolutely. If you take some of the work of Forensic Architecture, you may ask yourself 'why would an architect work on that'? The same could be asked about another case in the show, the work that the Multiplicity group did at Documenta, which I think is also representative in this sense: there was an attempt at understanding the vicissitude of migrants, but also the idea of the Mediterranean as a new continent – involving new boundaries, different cultures and so on. Seen in this way, it is something that goes beyond social issues and becomes transformative; it becomes an issue of geography, traversing that terrain and understanding the implications of borders, of one side as opposed to the other. In this way, it becomes an architectural issue.
Architecture has the capacity to take problems that look unrelated to architecture understood as the design of a building, and read them in a very different way. At the same time, architecture is something you can describe. Applying architectural thinking to problems which do not seem architectural problems means that you can start to analyse them and describe them through the means and the words that an architect would use.