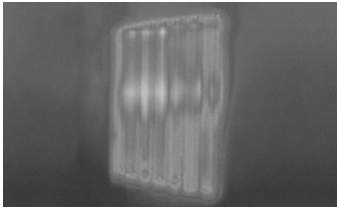


**Power, CIVA, Centre International de la Ville et de l'Architecture, Brussels (October 13, 2023 - March 17, 2024)**



All of this won't give us back Congo. Perched atop a hill, overlooking a reservoir supplying potable water to Brussels, the CIVA (Centre International de la Ville et de l'Architecture) has positioned itself at the forefront of architectural discourse for three years now. This shift coincided with the appointment of Nikolaus Hirsch, a renowned architect and curator, as new artistic director. Previously regarded primarily as an archive center for the contentious modern architectural archives curated by conservative architects during the fervor of the 1960s, CIVA embarked on a series of exhibitions aimed at redefining its critical stance in the lead-up to relocating from its hilltop perch to the former Citroen garage in central Brussels.

The inaugural exhibition, held over the course of 3 months in late 2021, was titled *Institution Building*. It was conceived as an evolving showcase, inviting architects worldwide to engage with the institution from various perspectives. Situated somewhere between Harald Szeeman's seminal *When Attitudes Become Form* and the iconic *This is Tomorrow* exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956, the genesis of this initiative traces back to the temporary occupation of the abandoned Citroen garage by the CIVA team, offering a glimpse into the potential future of museums in the 21st century.

Reflecting on this evolution, it becomes evident that everything following *Institution Building* could be interpreted as a transient occu-

pation of the institution's traditional confines. The exhibition concluded with an intervention by architect Jan de Vylder and the technical team, dismantling a circular opening between the exhibition space and the protected archives. A physical and metaphysical connection between the archives and the exhibition areas. Thus, the tone was set: CIVA will be punk or it will not be.

My own studio Traumnovelle was invited to contribute to an exhibition showcasing images from the archives. Our aim was to explore the architectural projects that emphasize the profound nexus between architecture and politics in Brussels. Sorting through thousands of images, we affixed them to the walls, only to peel them away, revealing a palimpsest of concealed horrors. Initially, we contemplated removing the originals, but soon realized such a gesture was premature. At the exhibition's opening, we underscored that if we had encountered these archives before embarking on our architectural journey, we might have recoiled from the discipline. Yet, CIVA proved otherwise; its archives serve not merely as dormant repositories of horror but also as potent tools for confronting the past to shape the future.

In 2023, *Style Congo* opened to the public, prompted by a simple yet profound question: while Belgian presence in Congo is well-documented, what about the Congolese presence in Belgium? The exhibition curated by the CIVA team including Nikolaus Hirsch and Silvia Francesceni, alongside studio Twenty Nine, represented by contemporary artist Sammy Baloji and researcher-curator Estelle Lecaille drew inspiration from Deborah Silverman's decade-old research highlighting the profound connections between Belgian Art Nouveau and Congo. Another cornerstone was our contribution, *Congolisation*, which unearthed from the CIVA archives Belgian pavilions from Universal, International, and Colonial Exhibitions featuring a Congolese presence. Through contributions from con-

temporary artists addressing similar themes, the exhibition transcended disciplinary boundaries, coalescing around the transformative potential of a transdisciplinary approach. Archives, by their nature, are not relics of the present but beacons for the future.

One of the Belgian pavilions at the 1958 exhibition, titled *Towards a More Human World*, showcased the Pavilion of Uranium, spotlighting the potential of this newfound energy source extracted from Congolese mines.

The phrase "All of this won't give us back Congo" resonates deeply in Belgium, serving as both a common expression and the title of a renowned Belgian TV show documenting reality. Embedded with Belgian irony, it underscores the futility of reclaiming lost treasures, regardless of efforts expended. Its application from a Congolese perspective adds another layer of poignancy: all endeavors, no matter how earnest, cannot restore what has been lost. In 2023, against the backdrop of geopolitical upheavals like the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the omnipresent specter of climate change, a striking visual installation marks the commencement of the exhibition *Power*. An infrared heating system by a TU Delft architecture studio, coupled with a live display of the building's energy consumption, made tangible the exhibition's central theme: the imperative of retrospection to comprehend the present.

The uranium that fueled the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was sourced from the Shinkolobwe mine in the DRC, reopened in 1937 to satisfy American demands for the Manhattan Project. Reciprocating this generous gift, Belgium was among the first in Europe to receive civil nuclear power technology. Architectural plans and drawings from the CIVA archive unveil the Pavilion of Uranium's layout, a centerpiece of the 1958 Universal Exhibition showcasing a piece of raw Uranium in its center. The exhibition's research team also

unearthed an alternate proposal for showcasing this Promethean energy source: a nuclear power plant along the Brussels Canal, scuttled due to objections from one particular citizen over its proximity to his abode. Laid out on a table made from an insulating panel is a letter issued by the king Albert II stating "Not in my backyard."

The exhibition delves into the broader geopolitical implications of such endeavors, shedding light on the European Economic Community's formation in 1957, juxtaposed against the colonial control exerted over member states' territories—a narrative conveniently overlooked in contemporary Europe's official discourse. On some tables, pages of magazines showcasing the architectural potential of the other important European industry: the Steel industry, father of the Euratom project.

Navigating through the exhibition's immersive landscape, visitors encounter Claude Parent's provocative architectural renderings for a French Power Plant, challenging conventional notions of space and catastrophe. One drawing shows in the background a new concrete aesthetic of the power plant and in the foreground, people picnicking on a green lawn. Claude Parent and Paul Virilio, pioneers of the movement known as *The Function of Oblique*, championed a society capable of confronting its own turbulent history without flinching, and dancing on the slope left by modernity.

Another exploration unveils archives from the CIVA collection by Paul Duvigneaud, a figure with an enigmatic presence. Duvigneaud's work initially focused on studying Congolese lichens in the Congo, eventually establishing himself as a pioneering Belgian advocate for a systemic and ecologically informed approach to understanding the landscape of Brussels. Through his sketches, Duvigneaud prompts us to contemplate how we portray the climate. This sentiment resonates

with the director and curator of CIVA, who emphasizes that climate transcends mere weather patterns. From what we once viewed as old promises, we have now ventured into the realm of new pledges with an installation crafted by the Collective On-Trade-Off. This installation delves into the extraction necessary for constructing what we perceive as the future of mobility, epitomized by a copper Tesla Car. However, this vision is intertwined with another contemporary saga: the cobalt, coltan, and lithium mines, crucial resources for a promised green future, but also the sources of fresh wounds and aspirations in the Congo Territory. Yet, despite these endeavors, none of this can give us back Congo. It appears that whenever our modern societies require a new miracle material in abundance, they conveniently *discover* it in the heart of darkness.

A supplementary segment of the exhibition focuses on lithium, featuring a discussion between researcher Marina Otero, who actively investigates lithium mines in Chile, Sammy Baloji, and two members of the Off Trade Collective. Baloji, in his intervention, chooses not to dwell on distant events, instead, he poses questions to the audience about the here and now, spurred by Belgium's refusal to publish the commissioned report on the decolonization of Belgium.

Adorning one wall is a small poster by architect Luc Schuiten for Belgium's youthful green party, portraying a wind turbine emerging from the ruins of a nuclear wind tower. Ironically, the painted turbine is intersected by a flock of jubilant birds, now known to be on the frontline of ecological disasters stemming from this new green technology.

In the main exhibition space, juxtaposed are two contrasting installations: a Dutch proposal for constructing leisure offshore wind farm islands and an installation by architect Liam Young named *The*

*Great Endeavor*. The latter features a contemplative 3D video showcasing an offshore world dominated by machines fueling our envisioned green future, while adjacent to the entrance wall, uniforms from Shell and Halliburton serve as a stark reminder of the relentless exploitation of the planet's dwindling resources. These exhibits prompt us to ponder what lies beneath the favored images of the Anthropocene. At the heart of the main exhibition room lies *Photography* by Armin Linke, capturing ecological tragedies intertwined with global empowerment. This portrayal, ranging from aerial shots to close-ups of bureaucratic offices, challenges the aestheticization of ongoing catastrophes. Reflecting on TJ Demos's essay *Against the Anthropocene*, we are urged to reject these sanitized images and acknowledge the direct human impact on a global scale, underscoring the need to confront and contest future projects as archives of impending crises. I couldn't shake the belief that the *Power* exhibition was highlighting this sense of hopelessness, while daring us to derive some enjoyment from this final show. The conclusion of *Power* unfolds with a video titled *Untitled Crude Eye* by artist Monira Al Qadrilia, offering a journey through a desolate model of a machine world, devoid of life and purpose. Only the faint whispers of factory machines persist, relentlessly producing without respite. Maybe the issue has never been power, but rather extractive productivism. In its entirety, *Power* invites us to interrogate the consequences of spatial design critically and cautiously, recognizing that while our endeavors may shape the future, they cannot reclaim what has been lost. All of this, indeed, will not give us back Congo.

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