Extra City Kunsthall, Antwerpen—Exhibition guide

ORBAN SPACE:
LUC DELEU—T.O.P. OFFICE
ALL THAT IS SOLID MELTS INTO AIR—MONA VĂTĂMANU & FLORIN TUDOR
THE FORGOTTEN SPACE—ALLAN SEKULA & NOËL BURCH
15-09-2013
ENGLISH

17-11-2013
Welcome

We are very pleased to welcome you to Extra City Kunsthall’s new venue. This is an exciting moment in the growth of our institution, as well as the first step in converting and rejuvenating a valuable landmark in Antwerp’s industrial architecture heritage. Over the course of the next year, we will add new functions and elements to our programming, taking full advantage of the potential of the location. In partnership with other organizations, we intend to offer to our neighbours in Berchem and to the city at large a cultural and social space permanently animated by exhibitions, film screenings, lectures, performances and guest presentations.


All That Is Solid Melts Into Air — Mona Vătămanu & Florin Tudor

The Forgotten Space — Allan Sekula & Noël Burch

15 September 2013 — 17 November 2013 Opening: 14 September, 18:30 — 22:00

Address Eikelstraat 31, 2600 Antwerpen

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INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITIONS

A new figure haunts the contemporary imagination. In environmental discourse, it bears the name of *Earth Overshoot Day*: an estimate of the moment in the year when humanity has consumed more natural resources and created more waste than the biosphere can safely absorb and replace over a 12-month period. In a broader, less technical sense, the phrase indicates a growing mismatch between profits, deficit and obligations in the contemporary management of resources, be they coalmines or theoretical paradigms. With different instruments, the three artistic positions grouped in our inaugural program respond to this discrepancy, to the ethical and political questions associated to how we represent and inhabit the world.

While increases in expenditure and consumption are hailed as economic successes, ecological debt accumulates. Living beyond our environmental means, in a tail-biting equation of prosperity and toxicity, dates back to the 1970s, and so do the first formulations of sustainability. Today, it takes 18 months for the biosphere to compensate for a year’s worth of residue, with major national producers keeping the least balanced ecological books and low-consuming countries as creditors. The 2013 *Earth Overshoot Day* occurs two days earlier than in 2012: such a chronological shift suggests that an alarming future accelerates into the present.

The artworks presented here do not engage the question of ecological deficit frontally, yet the case studies they build and their far-reaching interrogation of urbanism, pedagogy, resource depletion and the occulted spaces of globalization, invite an act of radical imagination: a fundamentally
political inquiry into alternatives to ecophagic systems that eat away the very sources of what they yield, into counter-factual possibilities, into what we have forgotten and what we have not yet thought. Grounding these exemplary artistic positions is a distinct sense of analysis and recalibration, the urgency to invent the instruments—practical and symbolic—that will allow a thinking of the future, and perhaps our emancipation from objects to subjects of that future.

It can be argued that Luc Deleu and T.O.P office, Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, Allan Sekula and Noël Burch all practice forms of realism, realisms that do not shy away from paradox, hyperbole or utopian intuition. From this perspective, land, sea and sky are both metaphorical territories and repositories of material detritus left by a gluttonous colonization. The artists’ propositions create a space for reflection on contemporary dilemmas: models where thinking and doing come closer to one another, figures of reality—as opposed to figures of speech.

Luc Deleu is one of Belgium’s most innovative and radical urbanist thinkers. Together with T.O.P office, the architectural firm Deleu founded in 1970, the architect by training has developed an intriguing and consistent oeuvre, spanning more than four decades and constantly challenging the discipline of architecture to rise to its global-scale responsibilities. This exhibition, curated by Wouter Davidts and Stefaan Vervoort in dialogue with T.O.P office, focuses on Orban Space, the ‘research by design’ project initiated by Luc Deleu in 2006, aiming to expand current notions of public space to the scale of the earth, and recalculate urbanism as urbanism. Continuously updated, the project builds upon streams of spatial, sociological and economic data, suggesting alternative models of resource distribution to the totality of earth’s population.

The exhibition intends to unveil and articulate new perspectives and ensembles within the oeuvre of Luc Deleu—T.O.P. office. To this end, it advances and
elaborates upon five thematic clusters: devices, media, dimensions, movements, and realities. Neither conclusive nor exhaustive, these clusters retrace, condense and interconnect many recurrent operations, actions and strategies that mark the practice of Deleu—T.O.P. office over the past decades.

In a unique scenography devised by T.O.P. office, the exhibition distributes a selection of previous works and projects around the recent results of Orban Space. Newly produced work is put into historical perspective by means of a selection of sketches, models, design tools and archival documents produced since the late '60s, many of which have not been exhibited to this date. The five themes that structure the exhibition are:

1. Devices
From the very founding of T.O.P. office in 1970, Luc Deleu and his collaborators have selected or even invented the necessary tools to embark on projects in the diverging regimes of architecture, urban planning and art.

Over the past few years Luc Deleu—T.O.P. office have worked on Orban Space: Terminology (2006-ongoing), an index of public space on a world-wide scale, counting over 10000 pages. Terminology aims to map and describe the various connections, hierarchies and priorities of global public space on all possible scale levels. It combines abstract terms with photographs sourced from the archives of T.O.P. office and from publicly available encyclopedias or websites like Wikipedia. The result is a design tool that operates as a dictionary, atlas, thesaurus, catalogue, and manual for architecture and urban planning all at once.

2. Media
T.O.P. office sought and appropriated a vast range of modalities to mediate the design process in the studio as well as to make the resulting work public.

The terminology of global public space provided the onset for the vast poster Orban Space: Analysis (2006-ongoing). Composed of the sections Forum, Network and Nodes, Urbanized Public Space, Setting & Location and Scales & Degrees of Urbanization, the scheme proposes a refined and complex world-image modeled from different layers of urbanity, infrastructure, and technology. Set against a starry sky, the panels function within T.O.P. office both as an organizational system and a design manual for contemporary global society.

3. Dimensions
T.O.P. office never failed to measure developments in society as well as their own activities against the scale of the globe.

Orban Space: The Voyage (2006-2013) documents a sailing trajectory around the world, enacted by Deleu in person. The journey served as a performative climax in Deleu’s lasting research into Planet Earth’s surface, by means of which contemporary globalization is not only mapped but also enacted, or embodied. Negotiating between cartographic calculation and an adventurous expedition, research here ambivalently appears as both abstract and concrete. ‘I want to make the journey to get a grip on and a real feeling of the scale of the world,’ Deleu stated in 1994, ‘and for the urbanist that’s what it’s all about.’
4. Movements

T.O.P. office explored imaginative proposals and thought up visionary plans to challenge the immobile nature of building.

Orban Space: Travel Pictures (2006-2013) consists of a grid-like sequence of photographs shot by Deleu during a journey around the world in 45 days in 2006. A visual record of the actual travel experience, it documents the orbanist’s land-, air- and sea-bound movement. The pictures not only represent the physical voyage but also reveal the different political, cultural, and historical spheres that were crossed through—a global realm marked by ongoing internationalization and cultural cross-influences between West, East, North and South, that is, by the present-day aftermath of the modernist age.

5. Realities

T.O.P office adheres to the design rule that all schemes—from the conceptual to the quixotic, from small to extra-large—are grounded in the real and contribute to a future understanding of our dwelling on planet Earth.

The model Sector X (2010) analyses an urban territory in the immediate vicinity of T.O.P. office’s Antwerp studio. The mapping and superimposition of the assorted traffic flows generates an architecture in and of itself, detached from the objects, bodies and buildings that populate the original site. The intricate pairing of detailed attention to a local environment with an abstract and scaleless materialization tentatively convey public space as a multilayered force field.
Appendix
Especially developed for Extra City Kunsthal, a discursive program will provide alternative perspectives on these five clusters of operations and strategies. Through lectures, performances, films, sculptural interventions and music, the diverse output of Luc Deleu—T.O.P. office will be considered in both its critical and versatile aspects. With contributions by: Luc Deleu (BE), Mark Jarzombek (US), Adrian Lahoud (UK), Hugh Campbell (IRE), Chantal Pattyn (BE), Adrien Tirtiaux (BE), Hans Demeulenaere (BE) and students of the Drama Department, Conservatorium of Antwerp, and films by Charles & Ray Eames, Al Reinert and Victor Kossakovsky.


Exhibition co-produced with Stroom Den Haag. The video work 'Tribune' was co-produced with LLS387—Antwerp, and Etablissement d’en face—Brussels. All works courtesy of Luc Deleu—T.O.P. office. All works, unless otherwise noted, stem from the collection and archives of Luc Deleu—T.O.P. office.

Lenders to the exhibition: Annie Gentils, M HKA, Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, Koen Deprez, Bernard Blondeel, Museum Dhondt Dhaenens.

T.O.P. office is: Luc Deleu, Laurette Gillemot, Isabelle De Smet and Steven Van den Bergh.
For their first institutional presentation in Belgium, the Romanian duo Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor exhibit two new films and an installation. These works reflect on rights — human or non-human (those of animals, trees or stones) — and their suspension or abolition. Indirectly, the artists argue that current representations of the world tie directly into — if they do not stem from — apocalyptic imagination, and visions of how the world might end. That the contemporary age is primarily defined by the explosive emergencies or gridlocks that it is headed towards.

Both films presented here can be read as either local case studies, surveying the symptoms and effects of democratic transition in Romania, or within a universal perspective, as allegories of environmental destruction and economic war, as dramatic antonyms to the slogans of responsibility towards the planet and towards the underprivileged.

It is this broader perspective that materializes in the artists' installation: a ‘poor’ cosmology, a representation of the known universe as if constructed by those deprived of everything but the zero degree of subsistence — bread. Modeled in dough, planets and their stars constellate on zigzagging pieces of string. Between an image of the cosmos and a makeshift, vacant Panopticon, the installation is conceptually organized around the Declaration of Human Rights, printed on bags of flour. Abstraction and embodiment, erosion and sustainability relate therefore to both ‘our world’ and ‘our rights’: the twinned notions of modern humanism and modern ecology, both relying on an endangered view of global accord.
The video *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* revisits the mining site at Rosia Montana, in Northwestern Romania, rich in gold and rare metals. A Canadian corporation advertises its plans for cyanide-aided extraction via a pompously optimistic public relations campaign, contrasting direly with the footage this film builds upon. Rosia Montana, where mining began in pre-Roman times and that was the site of relentless exploitation after the ’70s, looks frighteningly close to the stock image of a post-cataclysmic planet, where all signs of dwelling have been submerged in reddish waste water.

While the decision-making process around this mining project indicates the subordination of legality to corporate interests, the few remaining locals are forced into an upward migration, relocating each year further up the mountain to survive the rising residual waters. They are faced with the prospect of definitive dislocation when the plan, with its “community assistance” rhetorical ornaments, is carried out. The artists’ research at Rosia Montana revealed a situation where nothing is solid and nothing is imaginable, where projects for redeeming environmental and existential damage liquefy at the same speed as the shapes of the mountain’s former landscape.

The slow-motion ‘apocalypse’ triggered by injecting chemical cocktails into the ground echoes in the two elements that form the soundtrack to the film. Fragments of political speeches by Salvador Allende and Thomas Sankara punctuate a complete reading of the *Revelations of St John*, the Bible’s final chapter. The text of the Apocalypse enters a peculiar relation to the obliterated landscape: word and picture oscillate in relation to each other, and exchange the functions of figure and ground.
The two ‘scripts’ for renewal in the soundtrack, either through destruction or revolutionary transformation, write a history of the idea of future: from a future which ends with the apparition of a wrathful god, to a future that — after the 20th century — humanity can unleash against itself.

The Unblinded departs from a report on the attempt of the Romanian Orthodox Church to secure a national monopoly of the manufacturing of candles, divesting, among others, a blind persons’ association of their only source of income. In the film, we see a young blind woman being taught to make candles in a workshop that trains people with disabilities. Operating ironically around the concept of illumination, The Unblinded reproduces at an individual scale the disparity between those who need and those who grant salvation, between fragile life and insidiously deadly rhetorical or economic constructs. Unseen light stands for the obstructions separating those who make and those who consume, the regimes of value that disunite work and worth.

The cinema of Extra City Kunsthall will be inaugurated with The Forgotten Space (2009), by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch. The film follows container cargo aboard ships, barges, trains and trucks, listening to workers, engineers, planners, politicians, and those marginalized by the global transport system. The filmmakers encountered displaced farmers in Holland and Belgium, underpaid truck drivers in Los Angeles, seafarers aboard mega-ships shuttling between Asia and Europe, and factory workers in China. The image of the sea that emerges from this cinematic study is neither a metonym for infinity, nor a metaphor of tempests occurring elsewhere in the world. The sea is a symbolically vacant inflation of functionality, propelled by the economic and political convulsions of globalization.
In this fantasy world the very concept of distance is abolished. More than 90% of the world’s cargo moves by sea and yet educated people in the developed world believe material goods travel as they do by air, and that money, traveling in the blink of an eye, is the abstract source of all wealth. [...]

To rule the sea is to rule the world. [...]
Our film is about globalization and the sea, the ‘forgotten space’ of our modernity.

First and foremost, globalization is the penetration of the multinational corporate economy into every nook and cranny of human life. The contemporary vision of an integrated, globalized, self-regulating capitalist world economy can be traced back to some of these axioms of the capitalist spirit of adventure. And yet what is largely missing from the current picture is any sense of material resistance to the expansion of the market imperative. Investment flows intangibly, through the ether, as if by magic. Money begets money. Wealth is weightless. Sea trade, when it is remembered at all, is a relic of an older and obsolete economy, a world of decrepitude, rust, and creaking cables, of the slow movement of heavy things. [...]

Those of us who travel by air, or who ‘go surfing’ on the web, scarcely think of the sea as a space of transport, or of the raw factory system no longer concentrated in the developed world but has become mobile and dispersed. As ships have become more like buildings, the giant floating warehouses of the ‘just-in-time’ system of distribution, factories begin to resemble ships, stealing away stealthily, in the night, restlessly searching for ever cheaper labor. In the automobile industry, for example, the function of the ship assembly line is akin to that of conveyor systems within the old integrated car factory; parts span the world on their journey to the final assembly line. [...]

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Our premise is that the sea remains the crucial space of globalization. Nowhere else is the disorientation, violence and alienation of contemporary capitalism more manifest; but this truth is not self-evident, and must be approached as a puzzle, or mystery, a problem to be solved. [...]

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© Allan Sekula and Noël Burch

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The function of sea trade is no longer a separate, mercantilist enterprise, but has become an integral component of the world-industrial system. We are distracted from the full implications of this insight by two powerful myths, which stifle curiosity. The first myth is that the sea nothing more than a reservoir of cultural and economic anachronisms. The second myth is that we live in a post-industrial society, that cybernetic systems and the service economy have radically marginalized the “old economy” of heavy material fabrication and processing. Thus the fiction of obsolescence mobilizes vast reserves of sentimental longing for things which are not really dead. [...] 

Our response to these myths is that the sea is the key to understanding globalized industrialism. Without a thoroughly modern and sophisticated “revolution” in ocean-going cargo-handling technology, the global factory would not exist, and globalization would not be a burning issue. [...] 

Ships are loaded and unloaded in as little as twelve hours, compared to the laborious cargo storage practices of fifty years ago. The old waterfront culture of sailor bars, flophouses, brothels, and ship chandlers gives way either to a depopulated terrain vague or—blessed with the energies of real-estate speculators—to a new artificial maritime space of theme restaurants, aestheticized nautical relics and expensive ocean-view condominiums. As the class character of the port cities changes, the memory of mutiny and rebellion, of intense class struggle by dockers, seafarers, fishermen, and shipyard workers—struggles that were fundamental to the formation of the institutions of social democracy and free trade-unionism fades from public awareness. [...] 

The boxes are everywhere, mobile and anonymous, their contents hidden from view. One could say that these containers are “coffins of remote labor-power” carrying goods manufactured somewhere else, by invisible workers on the other side of the globe. We are told by the apologists of globalization that this accelerated flow is indispensable for our continued prosperity and for the
deferred future prosperity of those who labor so far away. But perhaps, this is a case for Pandora, or for her more clairvoyant sister, Cassandra. [...]

Our film moves between four port cities: Bilbao, Rotterdam, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong. It visits the industrial hinterland in south China, and the transport hinterland in the heart of Holland. Of the four port cities, three can be classed as “super-ports,” the largest in the world. Here we encounter functional hypertrophy. Bilbao, a fading port with a brave maritime history, has become the site of radical symbolic transformation of derelict maritime space. In Bilbao, functional atrophy coexists with symbolic hypertrophy, a delirium of neo-baroque maritime nostalgia wedded to the equally delirious promise of the “new economy.”

Source: http://www.theforgottenspace.net
Film courtesy of Galerie Michel Rein, Paris.