

Architecture and everything else
Garden pavilion (21 perspectives)

The photographs taken by Bas Princen show existing forms of anonymous space and architecture; the images made by Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen are fictitious views of their architecture designs. In this sense, they seem to move in opposite directions: the perspectives of Princen long for authorship and particularity; the perspectives of Office want to shed their artifice as a layer of skin. This division, however, is false, as both sorts of perspectives just want to show places where people can exist by being confronted with their own existence. The means with which these perspectives and these forms of architecture are made, show a striking resemblance. What is important here is that nature and culture, or chaos and architecture, are not considered enemies. Rather the opposite is true. Massive walls, high columns, plane roofs, large squares and perpendicular openings, draw lines and impose borders. Trees, debris, surfaces of water, rubble, clouds and the sky – but also human beings, cars, books, artefacts and furniture, impose themselves as messengers and signs of the endless warehouse of our globalized world. They need each other in order to exist, and they can only be real and meaningful if they are granted to be what they are. The perspectives by Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen and Bas Princen reintroduce architecture as what it has been since the advent of mankind: a brave and necessary attempt to impose order, structure and spatial legibility to the world in general and to one place in particular. At the same time these constructions include their own failure, in the form of their exact opposite. That is exactly the essence of architecture: it can never succeed in the high standards it has set for itself, but it must keep on trying. Only by trying, architecture becomes an invitation to people, things, meanings, stories and activities.

This main characteristic is essential to all forms of architecture that still aim for relevance in our contemporary society. A one time famous but now somewhat forgotten theorist of art, Wilhelm Worringer, wrote in 1908 a dissertation entitled *Abstraktion und Einfühlung – Abstraction and Empathy*. His thoughts have rarely been applied to architecture (or only in a very narrow sense to the expressionist architecture that followed Worringer's thought historically and geographically), but the case of Princen and Office might be an excellent starting point for a timeless re-examination of his theory. Worringer considers the human urge for recognition, empathy and imitation as the only condition for the aesthetic experience. This urge is satisfied in the beauty of the organic, the mimetic and the natural. On the other hand, the human urge for abstraction finds its beauty in the denial of life, in the inorganic, in the 'crystalline', and in all abstract law and necessity. Regarding this project and this *Garden Pavilion* – and regarding the project of modern architecture – one could say that both the pictures shown as the spaces in which they are shown, present a complete but temporary balance between *Abstraktion* and *Einfühlung*, between geometric form and organic nature. Both extremes are joined without losing anything of their strength.

Consider the first room: a picture by Princen entitled *Ringroad*, two perspectives by Office entitled *Cité Refuge*. Both are located, apparently, in Ceuta, but that is not important. It is the method and the approach that counts, as a kind of survival ethics. A landscape of wild, uncontrollable vastness, a combination of desert and sea, in which even culture has become a part of natural history (or vice versa), is left completely to itself. Nobody is trying to change it, not a single complaint or verdict is being spoken. Neither does the architecture surf the waves of what is present (as was

so self-evident at the end of the 20th century, and for many still is). It does not go out to meet its surroundings; it does not change its character or its way of speaking, just because it seems to know whom it is dealing with. But in the three perspectives in this first room, something has been changed by means of architecture: an interior has been made, a division has been installed, an obstacle has been created. The opposites are not resolved, abstraction exists next to empathy.

In the second room, two pictures are shown in which a glass façade, somewhat reflecting its surroundings, is confronted with a bunch of trees. In the third room, a grid of walls or beams is trying to get a grip on rocks, grass, city life. In the fourth room, we see large surfaces – horizontal, vertical, diagonal; white, silver, interwoven – that partially cover or delimit earth, bushes, confetti. In the fifth room, a massive block of architecture creates, together with the border of the canvas of the picture, a set of squares, four directions outside together with an undefined – and in a way unimportant – programmatic content inside. In the sixth room the stream of history has come to a halt, as the lava of the context that has solidified against the presence of new architecture. In the seventh room a comparison is suggested between debris and the programmatic tools that human beings use in order to dwell – but it is not so much a comparison as an equalization. Nowhere anything is added to the architecture that could distract from its fundamental task and ambition, or it should be elements – a line, a border, a frame – that exactly stress this initial undertaking.

In a lecture given at the 100th birthday of photography, Paul Valéry said that only two things exist in this world: photography and literature; what is objectified and real (and thus photographed), and what is imagined, spoken, thought or written. The combined forces of Princen and Office show another division: there is architecture – and then there is everything else. Living is nothing more – thanks to architecture – than trying to define what this ‘everything else’ is, and how it is ‘done’.

Architecture, therefore, does not concern itself directly or discursively with life. It does not believe in listening closely and anticipating to fleeting and all too human needs. It already knows everything it needs to know. It does not want to be part of the ‘everything else’, but is there to install a contrast that precisely generates this ‘everything else’. That is why, in following Worringer, one might as well call it ‘abstract’ (if only it were to make the terrible epithet ‘minimalist’ forever redundant). It is the abstraction of a great and long lasting tradition, the abstraction of form, the doing away of everything that is concrete – in order to let the concrete exist and take its place. This is the abstraction of, to name just one example, Mies van der Rohe, who introduced his contribution – an apartment building – to the Weissenhofsiedlung of 1927 with just four words: ‘This is my block.’ Architecture is not a medium of conceptual signification. The absolute absence of clear, ‘textual’ or ‘referential’ meaning is installed, in such a way that whoever who wants to create meanings, is encouraged to do so.

A perspective representation of architecture and of all that it is not – and thus a three-dimensional picture of every part of the earth – will always include these two opposites. It presents a marriage between architecture and not-architecture, between abstraction and empathy, a marriage that will never settle in its ways. A perspective is only real if it shows both the independent ambition of architecture and the autonomous reaction of all that is not architecture.

The exhibition entitled *Garden Pavilion* is, therefore, a perspective as well. Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen and Bas Princen have used seven recesses in an old Venetian building, in the garden of the Arsenale, to present their pictures. This existing architecture has become context, landscape and natural history. It is part of

the empathic dream of Venice and as such, it is not renovated, wrecked or redesigned by Office and Princen because a biennial is taking place. It is simply used to house seven groups of perspectives, and to act as a counterpoint, a breeding ground and a vital condition to a new form of abstract architecture. The seven rooms are joined by one large lean-to, a shelter, a temporary roof – a form of architecture under which chairs are scattered, under which the garden and the outside world already begins, and under which people can gather. They can take a look at 21 perspectives, but they are also part of the perspective of the Garden pavilion.

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