the only intelligence worth defending is critical, dialectical, skeptical, desimplifying

to our readers...

We have witnessed a political agenda marked by consensus rather than conflict—a democracy more recognizable in stalemate than in action. Political subjectivity and difference has been stifled and "politics," a set of practices and power relations that organize social order, has been relegated to the realm of mere management and administration. However, after the seemingly unchallenged triumph of neoliberalism, we find ourselves in the midst of global unrest and disillusionment. From Baltimore to Athens, diffused systems of power and control that underpin the everyday have become glaringly obvious.

We prioritize "the political" over "politics." For us "the political" (*le politique*) is inherently conflictual. It is the space where power is challenged and reordered. In this third volume of :, we explore how architecture stands as a series of actions—how architecture itself acts politically. Architectural practice is a medium of dissent with the potential to occupy, resist, reject, topple, subvert, and criticize current hegemonic systems and ideologies. An alternative cannot exist without an existing, opposing term, position, and possibility. As architects, we propose new forms and images, but also think about the tactics to achieve those ends. This volume is concerned with strategies that promote friction and provide space for the political.

As a valued modality in architecture, the term radicality suggests producing something new and original. However, we question the linkage between these two terms. Instead we are concerned with the architect as a civic activist whose modus operandi is copying. The copy is not a mindless trace of the existing: it is a subversive tactic, a political gesture, and a tool for agonism. The goal is not the copy itself, but its ability to generate conflict. To copy is to work within an established vocabulary in order to mask an agenda—to avoid being absorbed, and thereby neutralized. In this episode we speak with Cristina Goberna about replication.

the political

cristina goberna

a successful party never depends on the presence of an architectural icon

Cristina Goberna in conversation with G and R. Recorded April 13th, 2015

R: To begin, it is apparent that the term "agonism" is an important one to your practice, and we are interested in investigating whether a work of architecture or an architectural proposal can perform agonistically. How does agonism work as a design method? Are there examples that you can think of where a work of architecture is behaving agonistically?

CG: In Fake Industries Architectural Agonism (FKAA) we focus on the idea of *Replica* with the dual sense it has in Roman Languages: that is, as literal reproduction, and as response or agonistic answer to a previous statement. We are interested in exploring the irrelevance of originality in design, and we look for questions that we believe need to be put forward for public discussion. This is constant in our practice, writings, and pedagogical approach as educators. The question is then, of course, how to open those public discussions up. We understand the figure of the architect as someone who not only designs, but who also creates the documents that mediate between different agents that build the city. We aim to recuperate the figure of the architect as a *Public Intellectual* in the European tradition—someone who is not locked in his or her office or university, but who writes in newspapers, is engaged in conversations, and has the ability to disagree. We like the way Susan Sontag[1] defined *Public Intellectual*: someone that is not afraid to risk, if necessary, his or her position in society in order to incite certain discussions. This makes me think of our position as finalists in the Guggenheim Helsinki competition, and the reactions we started to get from some critics who confuse public competitions with exploitative office practices, and from some publics who think that you cannot be political anymore. We are interested in participating in the architectural questions of our time. We don't mind being put in uncomfortable positions and conversations if we have something to add. Of course, this means you will be scrutinized, and sometimes misinterpreted. The other thing is that architects seem to have become the top immaterial workers of Post-Fordism. Value has shifted from the object to the production and management of information: a situation that requires workers to be as flexible as capital. Architects and curators do this very well. Architecture schools create the top immaterial workers. What would be really interesting would be to create civic activists instead.

G: To define the term replica in terms of a response is to participate in an ongoing dialogue about copies, doubles, facsimiles, etc. We conducted a conversation with the conservator Adam Lowe of Factum Arte, who creates near perfect facsimiles of King Tutankhamen's tomb in the Valley of the Kings, as well as works by Caravaggio and Veronese. He draws a very clear distinction between facsimile and copy. A copy is a cheap re-make, while a facsimile is a meticulous replica that enacts its own life—one is stillborn, the other is active. What is the distinction between a copy and a replica?

CG: We understand that in order to create resistance or a reaction with architecture we cannot re-apply the strategies used by the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, or the 60's and 70's—which antagonistically rejected certain conditions to propose a new order of things. The moment you offer a new order of things, the market absorbs it. A copy is more difficult to digest. If you want to create some form of architectural impact or resistance, it is better not to be antagonistic with current conditions, and not to produce an original. It should agonistically engage with its time. It should be a copy. This is the definition of a *Replica*. If you think about other creative disciplines, such as literature or art, copies are widely used and recognized as having value. This doesn't happen in architecture—copying is taboo. We have not only identified the facsimile or replica, but also a list of seventy-seven other types of copies with high potential for architectural production. Sometimes we use them in our writing, sometimes in our pedagogical approach, and most of the time in design.

R: You are not using copying in its traditional Beaux-Arts application. In that model architects emulated an established canon. Artistry resided in the subtle modifications made to a received idea—inching closer and closer to an ideal universal model. I believe your project is distinct from this.

CG: In the Beaux-Arts tradition, you learned by copying classical orders. Even when I studied architecture in the south of Europe during the 90s some of these principals were applied in architectural education. If you were good at copying, you would be praised by your professors and your peers. It was a good thing. Now it is quite the opposite. Nevertheless, and to answer your question, yes, our interest in copies differs from the Beaux-Arts tradition in that we are talking about Replicas that involve a necessary critic.

G: It also seems that the replica is a tool to position yourself, self-consciously, in a discursive lineage. You make something important by placing it within a certain pre-existing lineage.

CG: The use of replicas forces you to become an expert on the material you are copying, in terms of its argument, representation, and design. If you think about the MoMA YAP PS1 proposal, *Rooms: No Vacancy*, which we did with MAIO, it is easy to see the countless projects throughout the course of architectural history generated by a generic grid of rooms. If you are looking for originality, it lies in the argument more than anywhere else. It is a comment on the history of architecture. It is also a comment on the PS1 Young Architects Program competition brief.

G: *Rooms: No Vacancy* is actually the project that we see agonism, and the notion of historical lineage most clearly. Traditionally, the PS1 Young Architects Program has produced a large sculptural object—one that serves as an icon in the courtyard—around which a huge party happens every Saturday. Your project proposes a scenario that challenges this. There is no icon, only a series of rooms. You create a platform for a series of smaller parties, instead of one gigantic party. Do you see agonism as a tool to challenge the design brief or what history tells us is the appropriate solution?

CG: In that specific proposal we (FKAA and MAIO) began with a conversation about iconography in terms of the PS1YAP pavilion. Our argument was that we might not need another icon in the middle of a courtyard. Why? Because, Instagram exists. The more opportunities and varieties of photographs visitors can take, the more visible and iconic the pavilion becomes. We call it 'Distributed Iconography.' The other argument was focused around parties. If we are talking about a disciplinary conversation, MoMA YAP clearly raises the question of whether or not architecture can induce or boost a party. Historically, the settings for mythic New York parties were generic interiors (CBGB's, Warhol's Factory etc.). Bodily technologies, atmospheric technologies, and scopic technologies were applied. Parties typically have a very loose dependency on architecture. A successful party never depends on the presence of an architectural icon.

R: Do you feel that it is important for architecture to stray away from the era of the icon—especially since you have chosen to enter the largest carnival of icon-production the discipline has ever seen?

CG: There is a huge local polemic in political and artistic circles around the possibility of the Guggenheim Museum, which is extremely interesting in terms of constructing the urban imaginary of a European city. Then, there is of course the disciplinary question. What could be next after the museum-as-spectacle? And after Atelier Bow-wow's Guggenheim Lab? We normally do one competition every one or two years. We choose them very carefully. We only want to participate if we think that the question it raises is relevant. If so, it probably will put you in a position of risk.

G: The Guggenheim competition begins to touch on ideas put forward by Mike Davis in *City of Quartz*.[2] He argues that culture in Los Angeles, supposedly to be put on display for the general public, was imported from a predecessor of generating real estate capital. Is it possible to have such strong ties to structures of power and still view oneself as an agent of the common people? How can we change the perception that our profession is on call to the demands of those in positions of power?

CG: This makes me think of a recent lecture at the Architectural Association in London by Pier Vittorio Aureli titled "Can Architecture be Political?"[3] He began by saying that architecture can never be political because it is a discipline and practice that always deals in consensus. As he talked about that he showed an image of the Guggenheim competition and all the submitted proposals. At the same time, he explained that architecture is always political because it deals with space. We also understand architecture as a cultural production. Therefore, we can begin to free ourselves from the pressures of capital and traditional office economies.

G: So the question would be: how do architects get outside of our own conversations? It seems we are so caught up in these discussions with other architects that we have little dialogue with those outside the field.

CG: This is a communication issue. One of the things we do the most is write and speak in architectural schools and other public environments. For example, we have been developing a project for the rehabilitation of a mining village from the end of the 19th century in Caceres, Spain. Every time we have a meeting with a different agent, we give them a publication about the project. We now have a big collection of booklets with different graphic and text languages that can be approached by my grandmother, or the mayor of the city, or the press, etc.

R: In the research that we did on architects who are more socially or politically engaged, many were from Europe--particularly Spain. Does this involvement have to do with education?

CG: Santiago Cirugeda is a good example. We studied together. At some point, with like ten other student representatives, visual artists, and flamenco musicians, we rented a house which we named La Casita (the name of a famous brothel in Sevilla). We opened it as a studio or office. For the next seven years this collective did many exhibitions and publications concerning similar topics (politics, architectural games) and created illegal public spaces in rough areas of different cities. Around that time, the architecture schools in the South of Spain were extremely conservative. The studies were very long (ten or eleven years to graduate) and extremely hard to pass. They added high amounts of engineering to the architectural education. In this case, we were or are products of the rebellion against a specific educational system. In hard environments there can be an action of resistance at some point. The positive thing with structures of repression is that you can identify what to fight against, which is more difficult in friendly systems of education. That might be the origin of our interest in agonism.

During and after the crisis in the south of Europe, the younger generations are reinventing what it means to be an architect—both in getting commissions and organizing an office. Also, many of them are very politically engaged. In Spain there is a social drama from foreclosures since the financial crash. With high unemployment, people can't pay their loans. Therefore, not only do the banks get their homes, but also—and this quite exceptional internationally—they still maintain their debt. This drama appears daily in national newspapers in the form of violent foreclosures and myriad suicides. There's a movement in the south of Spain where architects, professors, lawyers, artists, economists, etc., came together to organize plans on how to assault specific buildings. They were empty, but new and owned by the banks. They organized the assault for a couple of years, getting information about how to get water, electricity, and legal protection for the future inhabitants of the place. One night, they did it: a number of families moved into what was called a "freedom commune" for about a year. Since then, more communes have appeared around the country with architects visibly involved in their organization.

G: Although it was never as bad as Spain, Greece, Portugal, or Italy, now there is certainly a growing momentum for this type of resistance in the US.

CG: One important thing to understand is that the most successful strategy to keep the youth quiet is to make them take out big loans. This is something that doesn't happen in Europe, where the vast majority of (and the best) universities are practically 100% sponsored by the government. Therefore, they are extremely affordable or free - education is believed to be a human right. It is quite difficult to engage in any action of resistance when, every month, you have to pay a high amount of money on top of the cost of living in expensive cities like New York. The University system in the States should be more supportive of students, eliminate their debt, and completely sponsor their tuition.

Front image: Úrculo, Luis. Rooms: No Vacancy. film short for MoMA PS1 YAP, 2014.

1. Susan Sontag and Leland Poague. *Conversations with Susan Sontag.* Jackson: University Press of Missisipi. 1995

2. Mike Davis. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles.* Vintage. 10 Mar 1992.

3. Pier Vittorio Aureli. "Mouffe in Mouffe in conversation with Aureli, Martin, Weizman and Whiting." Presentation at "How is Architecture Political?", Architectural Association, London, June 12, 2014. Michael Jennings (Belknap Press), p456.