

Exposure levels

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ABSTRACT

In the essay Studio and Cube, Brian O'Doherty analyses the relationship between the place where art is produced and the place where art is shown, indicating a moment where the two coincide. O'Doherty describes how, in 1964, Lucas Samaras reconstructed part of his studio in the Green Gallery in New York, observing that in Samaras' work the art gallery space is inundated by the mythologies of the atelier that historically precede those of the white cube. By placing his studio in the gallery, he deliberately makes both spaces coincide, subverting their dialogue. The overlay of Samaras leads us to think that the origin of the exhibition space is the atelier and it is the artist who determines the place that becomes the model for galleries and museums. In fact, observing how the production of art has evolved until today can help to understand the logic and forms of contemporary art. The transfer of this hypothesis to architecture and the superposition of the logic of production and that of the exhibition in a representative group of practices would lead us to shed light on the scenarios in which architecture is truly represented

today. The typological question, the communicative one or the strategic approach, serve as lenses through which galleries are read as contemporary places of architectural production.

The contemporary architectural studio is a complex ecosystem, full of edges and loaded with myths about which little is said. The documentary, The Competition (Borrego Cubero, 2011), directed by Ángel Borrego, allows us barely a glimpse into some of the virtues and miseries that populate the most prestigious offices in the planet and how its participants are subject, in an almost comical way, to the whims of arbitrary personalities. Perhaps, in this sense, one of the most shocking examples might be the documentary The Architects, a 30-minute horizontal tracking shot through some of the most important architecture offices in New York City, done by the director Amie Sigel (2014) on occasion of the US pavilion at the 2014 Venice Biennale, entitled OfficeUS. Sigel's film, presented as part of the study undertaken by curators Eva Franch, Ana Miljacki and Ashley Schafer (see Franch, Miljacki, Mínguez Carrasco, Reidel, & Schafer, 2017) offers an interesting reflection on the exhibition space as workplace, and delivers us a disturbing image of homogeneity in the midst of American offices that seem essentially focused on production.

This article does not pretend to establish a taxonomy or extend towards the generality of current forms of working, but inquire into the idea proposed by a series of offices with European roots that, sponsored by the growing policies in support of the so-called 'creative industries' in the Old Continent,

have left aside the productive motivation of their work to link it strategically to the art world, by producing a series of important transformations, both in its ways of working, as in its morphology and the functioning of the offices themselves, which end up reflected in advances within the core of the discipline.

Dana Cuff (1991), in her book The Story of Practice, an endo-graphic research manual on offices, already draws attention by the late 70's on the ambition of some architects to be considered as artists. According to her analysis, this conception of design as art, originated in the French école, is born out of an attempt to be differentiated from the world of engineering, la querelle des anciens et des modernes (the contest between the old and the modern), in a clear allusion to architecture as artistic practice, that is, as part of an intent to provide added value to the architectural practice that would distance it from the marked pragmatic patterns in other professions. With the passing of the years, we've witnessed different types of affiliations to this model, from the famed Starchitects, to profiles more linked to behaviours associated with the bohème.

This relation art-architecture is manifested in the architects' work around three strategies: 1) the use of art as a narrative device; 2) the instrumentalization of art's production and dissemination in the work processes; and 3) the incorporation into the work of problems that the art world works with.

All of them share, however, a common denominator: the use of a specific mediatic apparatus of intermediate agencies clearly

related to the art world. Just as Beatriz Colomina (2010) describes in *Privacidad y publicidad: la arquitectura moderna como medio de comunicación de masas* (originally published as *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* by MIT Press in 1994), architecture becomes modern thanks to its engagement with mass media, tendency that has continued to grow within what we could call 'contemporary architecture'. Perhaps in the present we may be witnessing a change in orientation, through which architecture becomes more 'contemporary' as it moves closer to the art world.

In any case, the increase in the number and influence of architectural publications has found a continuity (cause or consequence?) in the growing interest for architecture exhibitions, and most notably in the growing number of exhibitions that celebrate the monographic work of the abovementioned architects or showcase subjects of the discipline in relation to issues linked to other areas of knowledge, opening architecture to a wide range of disciplines. In issue number 952 of *Domus* (2011) we can see the multitude of biennials, triennials and various festivals that feature architecture as subject. If we look at it today, seven years later, we could complete the picture including more stable institutions like architecture agencies, museums or galleries – a shift from the White Cube, the essential apparatus in the development of modern art – dedicated to the exhibition of material from architectural design.

The extraordinary growth, as well as the visibility and influence of these institutions, born by the late 20th Century, has been decisive in the construction of architectural thought and the legitimization of architectural practices – that is, in determining what is understood as good or bad architecture – in the last decade.

Let us consider galleries like *Storefront for Art and Architecture*, founded in 1982 in New York, today one of the leading centres of convergence for a community of architects that constantly question what surrounds them and the possibilities of architecture as critical practice; but also, institutions like the CCA, founded by Phyllis Lambert in 1979, constantly re-examining, from its rich archives, some of the central issues in late 20th Century architecture and confronting them with the most current ones today. Also, at LIGA, Espacio para arquitectura, which is presenting a context for the discussion and reflection on the discipline through the participation of a carefully curated selection of young Latin American offices.

In Europe, *Aedes* (Berlin), *deSingel* (Antwerp) and *Bozar* (Brussels), together with the *Pavilion de L'Arsenal* and *la Cité de l'Art et l'Architecture* (Paris), coexist with museums that include architecture in their exhibition programs, just as teaching or professional centres like AA (London), *NAi* (Rotterdam) or *COAM* (Madrid) have found in exhibitions a way of bringing their findings closer not only to the specialized public, but also to the public in general. Also, some consolidated architecture media, like *El Croquis* or *Arch+*, try to include the exhibition experience as a supplementary part of their strategies of dissemination, opening similar spaces in their installations.

In a scenario collapsed with content, a new batch of galleries, younger and removed from the traditional circuits, are working their way with common agendas and media, but considerably different intentions motivated by the aim of becoming spaces to accommodate minoritarian practices. Without letting themselves be fascinated by the built works, these galleries have managed to influence and slightly alter the narrative parameters of the discipline, accommodating young offices that, although they respond to the undeniable

conditions of contemporary globalisation, they do so without treading the paths created by the current power structures. *Arc-en-Rêve* (Bordeaux), the *Solo gallery* (Paris), the *Arkititektur Gallerie* (Berlin), *Jai&Jai Gallery* (Los Angeles), *Campo* (Rome), *Monte* (Buenos Aires), to mention only a few, are agencies that begin to understand the exhibitions from three inseparable fronts:

- The typological issue: the exhibition as an architecture project that occupies a space and establishes a program of relations for/with it.
- The communication or material issue: that is, the media, tools and circumstances through which a studio transmits the ideas and values contained in its work.
- The strategic issue: or the constellation of agents that participate or intervene in the event and, by doing so, contribute directly to its legitimization within the framework of the discipline.

This strange activity, which mixes communication with curatorship, places the galleries as mobilizers of architectural activity in our present times and lends them a decisive influence in the evolution of contemporary architecture offices.

CURATING AS ARCHITECTURE

Everybody knows today that the curator has also the profile of an architect, and that the exhibition is an architectural project per se. In his text *Showing Work*, published in issue number 20 of *Log*, Sylvia Lavin goes even further: "If Shakespeare argued that the world is a stage and Rem Koolhaas argued that the world is a mall, today we must add that the world is an exhibition, and specifically, an architectural exhibition" (2010, p. 8).

Of course, exhibitions have played a central role in the institutional and discursive frameworks that have shaped the cities, but focusing on the discipline, this history, in a large part, has not been written yet. The exhibitions, along with their events and publications, have been a visible and productive space of critique and experimentation in architecture; they certainly have been important in opening new lines of research by testing new formats, technologies and programmatic investigations, and awoken new polemics. Recently interviewed by Oase, Joseph Grima himself (Grima & Vandeputte, 2012), former director of Storefront, defines architecture galleries as spaces for experimentation, qualifying that for its rather non-conventional nature, these environments end up having a decisive influence on the very construction of curatorial practices. It is interesting that this appreciation leads us to define galleries, rather than as traditional white cubes, as actual operative platforms where the roles of authorship and production that support the recognition of the architectural practice as something extensive and multifaceted, become blurred. Could not this be perhaps the definition of an architecture studio?

If we make an effort to trace a genealogy of this recent interest for exhibitions in the field of architecture, we should surely argue that the display is, and has been, an extraordinary exercise to structure the relation that has been established between the author and the work that stems from the 'traditional' practice. That is, a tool to curate – making a critical reading – its own work. Continuing with Lavin's statement, if the world is an architecture exhibition, we may add that all architects are nothing else than a curators of their own production.

This intuition reinforces the avant-garde notion of the architect as artist and shuts the architectural work in itself, outside from

an active and contingent experience, or the well-known commitment with the user. In other words, separates architecture from its agency and its material intervention in the physical world, reclaiming the space of the 'conceptual' as its own.

STUDIO AND CUBE

*An interesting example of the 'fusion' between the studio and the gallery fostered by the attraction between the worlds of art and architecture is the one that Brian O'Doherty highlights in his essay *Studio and Cube* (2008), where he analyses the relation between the space where art is produced, the 'imagination's chamber', and the place where it is exhibited. One of the most exciting findings in his dissertation is the presentation of the confluence between both during Lucas Samaras' 1964 installation, where he rebuilt part of his studio at Green Gallery in New York.*

Relocating his studio to the gallery, Samaras deliberately makes both spaces coincide, subverting their traditional dialogue; the art gallery is inundated by the mythologies of the atelier that preceded it historically. It is, however, not this transfer what turns out to be as decisive as the museumification of the processes of production without the physical presence of the artist. In other words, the objectification of the studio that remains separated from the artist and is activated as an autonomous value in a complex rhetoric by which the studio represents the creative process of the artist.

Although plenty has been written (Barker, 1999; Bennett, 1995; Bishop, 2013; Deutsche, 1996; Foster, 2013) about the consequences of this transfer in several studies about the role of art galleries and about the conception of museums to come, there hasn't been a lot of in-depth analysis into the consequences that this relocation has had in the scope of the study; a matter

that we would like to extend to the specific typology of the architecture studio.

*Samaras' superposition situates the origins of the exhibition space of the studio and is, therefore, the artist who determines the place that becomes the model for galleries and museums. In fact, by observing the evolution of the artists' production techniques, we could better understand the logics and the forms of exhibitions in contemporary art. However, this relocation of the studio in the centre of the work – perhaps instead of relocation, we should talk about a refunctionalization, concept elaborated by Benjamin (1934/1998) in his text *The Author as Producer*, that called intellectuals not to supply the production apparatus but transform it at the same time –, it may be interpreted as a warning call for the definition of an own practice, of a studio, just as was recently warned by Juan Herreros (Columbia GSAPP, 2017) at the presentation of the symposium *Constructing Practice* (GSAPP, 2017), who referred to it as the most ambitious project at the start of any career; this hypothesis inverts the polarities returning the gallery to its origin: the studio.*

Art, in this sense, works as a technique, an essential argument in the critical re-description of the contemporary architecture studio. From its methods of production to its rhetoric, diverse elements of art are grasped and used by architects, from which it is nurtured, as we mentioned, the desire to reach the status of artist, making architects reach the point where they even use the tools of art critique to assemble a discourse on their work. But beyond the evident consequences, these associations produce a series of deformations:

Firstly, in the role of the architect, who disappears in this displacement of the attention towards the work of the artist

– without the artist –, that is, the creative act represented in favour of the studio. It leaves its well-known main role to become a medium through which the work is carried out. The architecture curator thus appears with an actual architectural task that includes temporarily liberating the discipline from a deficient programmatic and constructive corset, manifesting it as an ideal contraption of synthesis and extraction.

The second deformation has to do with the relation between context and content and, thus, with the material that architects use in their exhibitions. The architectural drawings, as well as the photographs or models of experimental structures, have become mediums of exchange to be presented and treated even as artistic objects. This attitude that favours showing over narrating produces an effect of dissociation between architecture and its means of representation, which become autonomous, making the reading of the documents prevail over any other consideration, even reality itself.

There would be a third deformation related to the discipline. The representation and the limitations of the display of architectural objects has contributed to a greater and less limited conception of architecture, not as a discipline essentially linked to objects in the built environments, but as a way of thinking about life and what surrounds us, that is, a discipline based on a production that goes beyond the conception of the traditional modes of the professional practice.

And lastly, the studio itself, the real work. The main project of every architect, which becomes a social centre, incubator of new ideas, revolutionary base, centre for exchange and commerce, production factory and exhibition space at the same time. The studios become exhibitions and the galleries become supplementary spaces

that deactivate their expository condition and become experimentation centres, laboratories or businesses. Places that make possible the formalization of ideas and to activate the architectural object. Places where the works function as they should function, or as if they really functioned.

STUDIO AS CUBE

Continuing with the initial hypothesis, the architecture studio, as an ideologic project, has ended up becoming an exhibition in the terms described by Brian O'Doherty in his essay *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space (1986)* in the same measure as the artist's atelier helped consolidate modern art as a conceptual practice. In other words, the studio itself is a project that makes the practice work as it continuously re-questions every decision on the basis of the concepts from which it operates, constituting, at the same time, a critical stance on the discipline itself.

Therefore, the architectural production for these offices acquires an important performative tone. It is about a work that is exposed in terms of risk and is exhibited⁽¹⁾ and functions as a work of art in itself, be it because it is constructed according to the procedures of the art world, or because it deals with issues that concern artists, inviting them in many cases to participate, but it is also about a work that, from its position, works as a critique of the discipline itself.

The office as gallery, the studio as exhibition, and production as show. And it is precisely this combination what confers the work an epistemological potential, because the way in which these works, from outside, deal with the architecture world, produces knowledge about the architecture world itself, bringing it closer to life; and that is, in the end, what art usually does. **m**

NOTES

(1) N. of T.: Play of words: in Spanish, 'exponer' means both to exhibit and to risk.

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