

BARRY BERGDOLL, KELLER EASTERLING,  
AND HAL FOSTER –

# Notes on the Venice Biennale

THE FOLLOWING DISCUSSION OF THE 14TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION AT THE VENICE BIENNALE—CURATED BY REM KOOLHAAS UNDER THE THEME OF “FUNDAMENTALS”—IS AN EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF AN EVENT THAT TOOK PLACE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY’S GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, PLANNING AND PRESERVATION ON OCTOBER 27TH, 2014. THE EVENING WAS HOSTED BY FELICITY SCOTT, MARK WASIUTA, AND THE MASTER’S PROGRAM ON CRITICAL, CURATORIAL, AND CONCEPTUAL PRACTICES IN ARCHITECTURE.

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## BARRY BERGDOLL

What kind of history is being presented at Venice? What is the status of historical research and thinking today, at the moment of the starchitect becoming the starcurator? In the first Venice Biennale in over thirty years to declare that its theme was not related to the present alone, what do we make of the fact that curator Rem Koolhaas framed the exhibition through the propositions of “Fundamentals” and “Absorbing Modernity?”

[1] At once micromanaging the national pavilions and banishing any representation of contemporary architectural practice from the vast fairgrounds, Koolhaas converted the Biennale grounds into a convention center of historical material, some organized in timelines, some in dioramas, some in provocative visions of recent art practices. What are we to make of the return of the archive as a fascination in the era of the digital, when physical materials are increasingly irrelevant and the organization of big data, even historical big data, into display seems an old paradigm—consume time and space when everything can be at hand instantaneously with a few taps, or if you’ve friended Siri, with voice control?

Where are we with the deployment of historical material in space (one plausible definition of the now ubiquitous gerund *curating*) if we compare Koolhaas’s Biennale with the first edition of the architecture biennale in 1980, famously titled “The Presence of the Past”? That biennale did signal an era in which the history of architecture was thought to be of enormous relevance to contemporary culture, no matter what one thought of postmodernism as it was being practiced. [2] One wonders if we are any more able to see our own place in a larger historical sequence than were those who gathered together to create the Strada Novissima with Paolo Portoghesi in 1980. [3]

[1] Consider the themes of biennales past: “Less Aesthetics, More Ethics,” “People Meet in Architecture,” “Common Ground,” etc.

[2] Koolhaas is hyper-aware of the obvious bookending between the situation in 1980 and that thirty-four years later, and explains that Portoghesi thought he was ushering in a sea change, which, in fact, Koolhaas, in this edition of the biennale explains “The 66 nations throw a fundamentally different light on the so-called ‘end of modernism’ that Portoghesi and Jencks had already proclaimed in the 1980s. At most, the postmodernism that the first Biennale introduced was a confused footnote...”



Strada Novissima, 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale directed by Paolo Portoghesi. image source: Domus.

In the fat catalog of the 2014 Biennale, Koolhaas explains his aims: “Previous Biennales have looked at architecture as a whole—trying to project the “full” picture, including context and politics. Here, we present micro-narratives revealed by focusing systematically on the scale of the detail or the fragment. We uncover not a single, unified history of architecture, but the multiple histories, origins, contaminations, similarities, and differences of those very ancient elements and how they evolved into their current iterations...” Despite the fact that this is precisely what architectural history, influenced by such historians as Carlo Ginzburg and Robert Darnton, has been doing for over a generation, the claim (under the guise of radical novelty) as well as much of the critical reception is of a new research paradigm. [4]

The “Fundamentals” (or are they “Elements”?) ask us to consider what happens when you anthologize. Has the Koolhaasian notion of “research” become a franchise? [5] Is the 2014 Venice architectural biennale the *dénouement* of this genre of research, or a retrospective? Just as Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill were sometimes referred to as three blind Mies, that there are today many tropes developed at OMA and AMO that have been long since stripped of the polemical clarity—or at the very least polemical irony—of Rem Koolhaas as he developed positions sparring with modernism from *Delirious New York* to *S,M,L,XL*. Already it seems to me that in “Fundamentals,” we have proof that one size does not fit all. Rem’s opening gesture is clear enough: Today we don’t make things over and over again as in the Semperian notion. Rather, we assemble them from the *objet type* of industry, even if the plaster ceiling might be every bit as false as the drop ceiling of Masonite panels hiding infrastructure. The *Four Elements* have been replaced by *Sweet’s Catalogue*. There are other evocations—for instance, where the vast variety of window types collected by an English antiquarian is jammed into a room with a window-testing machine. But in other places the subcontracting seems to muddy the message, as in the now notorious room devoted to the walls, or in the room devoted to stairs where the psychological registers rather than the standardization of the stair seems the point.

But what’s the overall point? What does Rem mean to say to us about the situation of architecture in the face of these ready-mades? Is architecture as a creative practice in its endgame, or is it beginning anew as

[3] The Strada Novissima was produced by film set designers from Rome’s Cine-Città—and thus was meant to vanish as rapidly as it appeared.

[4] Though, I will say, we are more in the realm of a neo-modern interest in avant-garde origins than in an engagement with, say, classicism of the *longue durée*.

[5] Which I suppose to a certain extent it already has in the countless children of Rem that today are everywhere in practice and in education.

with Duchamp—another figure celebrating a centennial of modernity? Is this why the toilet is one of the fundamentals?

The national pavilions offer a different set of questions. What is the role of the nation state in relationship to the globalizing vision of the generic that greeted us in “Elements”? Does the nation state still mean what it meant in 1914, when Europe went to war on a continental scale for the first time since the defeat of Napoleon a century earlier? Here, the historian of architecture will be reveling in countless new information, but the question we need to discuss is this: Has the shape of the narrative of modernism been altered by this extravaganza? Has the new paradigm of accumulation as research, OMA meets big data, the datascape yielding to the scan-scape, offered a new history? Or even fragments of a past begging for a new history? The most fascinating thing is that the countries with the most troubled national histories yield the most fascinating displays, notably the component states of the ex-Yugoslavia, South Korea, or even the tongue-in-cheek response of the Russians. It is hardly a surprise when the Netherlands reveals that there was a social project in the work of Bakema...

Here are, it seems to me, three tropes of recent art practices that have been assimilated into the practices of architectural curating. The first, and, I think, in Venice, the most compelling, is installation art. [6] There are some profound results, ones that recognize that an avalanche of information often melts before it is absorbed. Germany seems to have understood, to quote its self-exiled master Mies, that less is really more. The transposition of as much of the floor plan of the 1964 Sep Ruf Chancellor’s bungalow in Bonn inside the Nazi-era German pavilion is about as powerful as you can get on the iconographical stakes of modernism in the Cold War—and it’s an installation that marvelously can’t be sold as an art commodity since it is rendered meaningless in another container. The plotters tracing the morphology of Palestinian and Israeli settlement into sand from the Dead Sea also operates as much as an art piece as it does a didactic architectural display.

The second trope is the archive, a favorite of artists like Christian Boltanski. It was already adopted over ten years ago for the “Out of the Box” show at the CCA (2003). In Venice, the idea of minimal editing—that everyone can learn from an archive, that the historian is not needed—is taken up

[6] Random International’s *Rain Room* at MoMA is one memorable example of installation art in the near-architectural realm.



left: *Bungalow Germania*, German pavilion, 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale

right: *The Urburb*, Israel pavilion, 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale



*Lucius Burckhardt and Cedric Price – A Stroll Through a Fun Palace, Switzerland pavilion, 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale.*

in some powerful shows, but ones that admit that most people will not look at more than 10 percent of what is on display. For example, the brilliant Korean and Japanese pavilions, both curated by graduates of OMA.

The last is the transposition of relational aesthetics into architectural curatorship, often in a form that is hybrid with the archival trope. Here, the best is the archival hospital imagined by that ur-star curator Hans Ulrich Obrist in the Swiss pavilion. Obrist's installation of Lucien Burckhardt and Cedric Price in the Swiss Pavilion (did you know that Price was Swiss?) used facsimiles, perhaps a welcome relief from miles and miles of digital scans and Xeroxes in Venice at the moment. Here, documents have no context except what is offered by the docents, an ultimate condemnation of all display techniques, I suppose. Other pavilions, like that of the U.S., offered another hybrid version, in which an almost Borgesian reproduction of the archive in hundreds of magazine articles that no one will ever read in situ is juxtaposed with office workers whose activity can only be understood by interrupting the participants.

### HAL FOSTER

To return to “Elements” or “Fundamentals” is an old modernist impulse. But I took this impulse on the part of Koolhaas to be not only ironic but also auto-deconstructive, so to speak, in the sense that the examples provided in the main pavilion of his show indicated how ridiculous it is at this point in time to search for anything like fundamentals when it comes to floors, walls, ceilings, and the rest. It was a mock or schizo Semperian performance, one that engaged Semper and other fundamentalists in the history of architecture only in order to suggest that—today and perhaps always—there is no ground beneath our architectural feet. Who knows if that's what Koolhaas intended; it is, however, what I took away.

For me “Absorbing Modernity” also pointed to a master narrative, not just micro stories about the different modernizations experienced by the different countries. The exhibition looked back over 100 years, and I found (or again projected) three stages in that history. Very schematically: Modern Architecture 1.0 appeared in the wake of World War I, galvanized by the devastation and the reconstruction alike. The same is more or less true of Modern Architecture 2.0: again, awesome destruction and momentous



reconstruction galvanized architecture. Then, I'd argue, there's a Modern Architecture 3.0, which Koolhaas rode to great acclaim. This version is not postwar so much as post-Wall, and yet the fall of the Wall closed out a war, too, perhaps the most costly of all, the Cold War, and it also involved massive reconstruction, both the making-over of the old Eastern Bloc and the making-new of Europe in toto—that project was a huge boon for neo-modern architects, Koolhaas included. However, this third stage of modernity soured almost as soon as it began. The Fall of the Wall in 1989 was the triumph less of democracy than of neoliberalism (or rather it was the cannibalization of the former by the latter), and after 9/11 and again after the 2008 crash this stage became openly catastrophic: Modernization as a persistent state of emergency. It was, it is, so bad that it has colored the prior stages of modernity, which also appear catastrophic to many of us. This turn in the status of modernity could be gleaned in some of the national pavilions at the Biennale.

And it has affected Koolhaas too. Again, he rode the third moment of modern architecture to great success. He was quite explicit about it, developing a whole set of theorems to support that architectural boom: It's out of this moment, we should remember, that signal texts such as "The Generic City" and "Bigness" emerged. He surfed this wave of modernization, as any architect with his kind of gusto would. However, not long after 9/11 his vision of modernity changed too. Koolhaas and Company began to work on the Project on the City—*The Harvard Guide to Shopping* as well as the work on the Pearl River Delta, which explored a new intersection of communism, capitalism, accelerated industry, and consumer culture that Koolhaas called Market Leninism. [7] That's when his faith in this third version of modernity collapsed, as Koolhaas came to discover that not even he could surf the junkspace that it produced. This is how I read his Biennale, then—as a retelling of the grand narrative of modernity with a twist at the third moment. Once ambivalent about modernity—like Baudelaire or Benjamin before him, he was equal parts *pro* and *con*—Koolhaas now turns on what he once embraced, and becomes its acerbic critic, challenging his followers to take stock as well. Here, though, he's not in a vanguard position: For many of us this modernity was a horror all along.

[7] See Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong eds., *Project on the City 1: The Great Leap Forward*, (Cologne: Taschen, 2001); Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong eds., *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Cologne, Taschen: 2001).

### KELLER EASTERLING

It's almost too obvious to say that what so palpably imprints the space of the Biennale, what edits and shapes everything housed and uttered there, is the residual structure of exposition with pavilion nations as the elementary particles in an international network. So decoupled is that structure from any current global political reality that it's sometimes hard to take the whole assemblage seriously.

In past biennales, one's often been left wondering if all those architects and indentured interns just really wanted to get together for some kind of party. Or possibly, since the structure of architectural practice has changed even less than the supposedly durable nation-state, maybe everyone's really at home in the anachronistic structure of the space. I just learned that there's even a self-appointed masonic or Bohemian Grove-like cabal called the "Dark Side," which gathers to critique each biennale. So

maybe for some of the participants looking down that axis at the British pavilion with half-closed eyes, the historical aspirations of empire perfectly map onto the pavilion boutiques featuring the feverish ambitions of architecture careers. But for most of us, that structure loudly disallows information and evidence about a world in which nations and architecture careers are not elementary particles—so much so that sometimes one can barely focus on any particular show for all the information fallout between shows—a kind of information cancelling.

So if a curator designs not only content but also the disposition within which information and evidence can flourish, in Koolhaas's curatorial structure the pavilions arguably do share an intention that allows information to flow between them. Koolhaas's claim about modernism and absorption—which was obviously not entirely true—also got the pavilions talking, if only to qualify or to insist on other declensions of modern, modernism, modernity. Many expressed relief at a break from career competitions. And in a way that was perhaps unforeseen, the overwhelming thing one saw was that many nations wanted to tell stories about episodes of violence and concentrations of authoritarian power for which modern architecture was only a prop in the twentieth century. One even saw violence in the overweening, overbearing managementese of Pax Americana that was so well portrayed in the U.S. pavilion.

So Koolhaas's structure, it seems to me, opens many doors without occupying all of the most interesting territory on the other side of that door. This biennale's historical conversation, while not reconciling, is maybe most importantly something substantial against which to push into yet more more challenging territory. That territory is not a postnational world, but a world in which nations are only somewhat more obdurate lumps in the lumpy striated medium of extrastate players, a medium in which the state and extrastate now partner to pursue even more insidious and less traceable deals. So one can imagine yet another curatorial adventure for the next biennales that might release yet more information by further altering structure or disposition to recognize a world of imbricated, overlapping, or contradictory sovereignties—sort of a biennale of Ceutas and Melillas and special economic zones with nations occupying, hijacking, or poaching the space and time of other nations. Russia already outsourced its exhibition to a non-na-



*OfficeUS, United States Pavilion, 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale.*



*Fair Enough*, Russian Pavilion, 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale.

tional, and one can imagine many other kinds of continental islands.

In Venice a couple of weeks ago when I was there again to take part in one of the ongoing conversations, someone said that the Swiss pavilion had to go all the way to the embassy level to get permission to store some chairs next door in the Venezuela pavilion. I take that little banal fact to be the germ of a potentially interesting curatorial idea. In the current structure, architects can really only clearly see our modes of practice straining to operate effectively in global networks. But maybe within a more atomized and lumpy set of players, architects might manifest their own powers as an entrepreneurial player outside their fee-for-service habits, especially since the single most important thing that our discipline might rehearse, in addition to designing things, is designing an interplay between things.

#### MARK WASIUTA

If it's the task of this biennale to expose and speak back to those mechanisms that Rem claims are already communicating so insidiously through the elements of architecture—that record and track us, just to pick on one of his examples—where would we locate this? Where do you as readers locate the Biennale as a mechanism that speaks back? What is it speaking back to? And how would we do that not in the general sense, but in specific analysis of the pavilions, the exhibition elements, the organization into its three component parts?

Rem also declares that the project intends to engage a history of biennales and their failed or limited propositions. In particular he claims that it intends to speak back to the authority through which those Biennales, especially the 1980 Biennale, attempted to claim or to demonstrate or to embody or to sponsor a set of traditional values for architecture. So, where do we locate something like evidence of an architecture that would refuse those traditional values? Where might we find particular moments within the biennale that we can attach these claims to or that we can test those claims against?

#### KELLER EASTERLING

I can tell you what I thought I was working on with the Elements portion of the exhibition. I was allowed to write an essay on the floor that was

inspired by something like William Gass's *On Being Blue*. It was not encyclopedic. It was a long reflection about a selection of artifacts that presented puzzles about cultural habituation—something like architectural *why stories* that exposed fatal errors or moments when the discipline ossified an element. It returned to those moments to see territories sidelined in history that can become fresh projects for the discipline.

So how does one do an exhibition inspired or based on a long essay? A text develops a very particular relationship with a reader for a period of time. What are the durations and selections one makes to prompt a parallel contemplation in an exhibition?

#### FELICITY SCOTT

There was provocation, I thought, in the way in which the “Absorbing Modernity” part of the exhibition pushed to the limit the very feasibility of something like a national pavilion, or an exhibition whose concerns could be demarcated by or contained within a national framework. On the one hand, this undermining was a product of the centralized coordination of a part of biennale that would not normally be centralized; on the other hand, it opened up the implied failure of the very structure of a biennale born of an earlier geopolitical framework. I think there were many moments like this that were really super-provocative.

So I'm interested in the question of what this provocation, or transformation of the curator's role, demands of the next curator, whether they are being invited to proceed along similar lines or react against them. Maybe this is another way of coming back to Mark's question about how to speak of an architectural exhibition after a project that has tested so many of these implied limits.

#### HAL FOSTER

For all the talk of how this exhibition was outsourced, it struck me as still very authored. No curator of an art Biennale would have the authority to guide the national pavilions so effectively, to make them stick to a question, as Koolhaas did. So, on the one hand, it was largely outsourced, on the other it was quite focused, comparatively speaking.

I think the real question is the subject effect, the viewer effect, of the exhibition. Barry suggested that it presented a history that circumvented the historian. But was there any coherent subject-position for the viewer of this exhibition?

I'm interested, Barry, that that you used the term *archival*. As you suggest, in art practice over the last generation there was indeed “an archival impulse.” But there it was driven by a desire for a kind of counter-history or counter-memory, where marginal or lost figures and events were recovered and represented. That idea of the archival is very different from the downloading of a whole lot of data.

#### JEAN-LOUIS COHEN

Barry has insisted on the overwhelming presence or time lines, chronologies, etc. I would'nt be too cruel and remind everybody of what Bal-



zac wrote. He wrote that reducing the life of an individual to a mere collection of facts is practicing chronology, that is “l’histoire des sots,” history for dumb people. So I think that what is missing is not research, there is a lot of it, it is historical interpretation: What are the factors determining the genesis and the metamorphosis of the elements? How were they produced? What do they mean? My major problem with the Central Pavilion is its descriptive character.

I was also struck by a sort of rampant paranoia in the pavilion: devices that are supposedly providing comfort, but that in a way track your movements, doors that become security gates at the airports. The presence of surveillance, repression, observation, which is really striking and which also was part of the initial agenda of “Absorbing Modernity.”

But I think the attempt usually—my analogy is a very superficial one—usually the biennale is like a zoo in which every country shows a particular animal in its cage. This time Rem had a more choral perspective, trying to have everybody more or less sing to the same key different melodies, without the illusion of achieving harmony. And I think it worked in many ways.

As for “Absorbing Modernity,” the initial spec was about absorbing American modernity into a wide range of scenes. The modernity produced by the Eastern bloc in the ’50s and ’60s was initially overlooked. The happy surprise has been in this respect the Chilean pavilion discussion the Soviet-inspired and Soviet-exported panels, which were, in fact based on French patterns bought by the USSR in the mid ’50s. So in the end, the image of the modernity “absorbed” has become much wider than the small number of building types and technologies initially envisioned.

#### KELLER EASTERLING

I think we were trying to craft *voice*, in the thoughtful sense that Jean-Louis has described—a voice informed by the carefully sequencing of evidence or a contemplation on information gathered in research.

#### BARRY BERGDOLL

Same here... I don’t need to get rid of research. I just want to be in a state of research that transcends the hunter-gatherer stage. So I don’t dismiss agriculture, either, but I think it’s gotten beyond the hunter-gatherer stage.

#### HAL FOSTER

I think it was actually terrific that, for the most part, the pavilions weren’t filled with the latest bauble by the grooviest architect from that particular country. It was a huge relief to have an exhibition free of that kind of the parochial promotionalism. That’s a step in the right direction.