Architectural Theory Review

ISSN: 1326-4826 (Print) 1755-0475 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ratr20

Outreach Extensions: OMA/Rem Koolhaas Exhibitions as Self-Critical Environments

Christophe Van Gerrewey

To cite this article: Christophe Van Gerrewey (2019) Outreach Extensions: OMA/Rem Koolhaas Exhibitions as Self-Critical Environments, Architectural Theory Review, 23:1, 90-113, DOI: 10.1080/13264826.2019.1616665

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2019.1616665

Published online: 04 Aug 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 248

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ratr20

ARCHITECTURAL THEORY REVIEW
2019, VOL. 23, NO. 1, 90–113
https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2019.1616665

Check for updates

Outreach Extensions: OMA/Rem Koolhaas Exhibitions as Self-Critical Environments

Christophe Van Gerrewey

École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne

ABSTRACT

Many times in the history of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), Rem Koolhaas has self- or co-curated exhibitions of recent work—in 1978 at the Guggenheim in New York; between 1980 and 1990 in London, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Rotterdam, France, Paris, and Basel; in 1994 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York; and in 2003–04 in Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin and in OMA's Kunsthal in Rotterdam. They are—typical for this medium—a forgotten part of OMA's production. In this article, OMA's exhibition policy is reconstructed by highlighting shows that reveal both the "medium-specificity" of an OMA exhibition as well as the obsessions in Koolhaas's method. Instead of offering the experience of "real" architectonic spaces or environments, these expositions consciously reflect the cultural and historical conditions in which OMA projects were developed, also by challenging disciplinary or institutional limits, and by "reaching out" to the world outside. A typical OMA show is not a space that has to be enjoyed phenomenologically, but rather a meaningful discursive environment, aiming to materialize the "structures" defining late twentieth-century life and work. The exhibition architecture offers guidelines for interpretation of the projects on display, as well as critical observations on the boundaries of architecture.

KEYWORDS

OMA/Rem Koolhaas; criticism; theory; exhibitions; media

Introduction: Exhibiting Rather than Building

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)/Rem Koolhaas organized more exhibitions than they built projects. The exhibition was, together with the book, the text, the interview, and the lecture, the medium they worked with, often simultaneously. *Delirious New York*, published on November 16, 1978 (the day before Koolhaas's 34th birthday), was accompanied by *The Sparkling Metropolis* on the top floor of the Guggenheim Museum, running from November 17 to December 17, while below, the exhibition *Mark Rothko, 1903–1970: A Retrospective* was taking place (fig. 1). *The Sparkling Metropolis* functioned as a month-long "book launch," while *Delirious New York* supported the exhibition—a simultaneity that indicates the ways in which such events were "used" to make things public. If *Delirious*

CONTACT Christophe Van Gerrewey christophe.vangerrewey@epfl.ch
© 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Figure 1. OMA, *The Sparkling Metropolis,* Guggenheim Museum New York, November 17–December 17, 1978 © Guggenheim Foundation.

New York was a set of ideas, in words and images, about how to conceive architecture that would—nolens volens—continue to "haunt" OMA's production and its reception, *The Sparkling Metropolis* was a first indication about how OMA would define the exhibition, and thus the public place of architecture as cultural production.

It wasn't a small achievement for a young office led by an architect of thirty-three to exhibit in the Guggenheim. Decisive was the intervention of Hubert Damisch and his wife Teri, two of the members of the informal OMA network in the 1970s. Via them, OMA got in contact with Guggenheim-curator Margit Rowell, who co-curated the exhibition.[1] Fifty-four works were shown in five categories: "Projects for London," "The Secret Life of Buildings" (Vriesendorp's psycho-analytical and humorous paintings, at the base of the main concepts in *Delirious New York*), "Projects for New York," "The Story of the Pool," and "Elevation of All New York Schemes."[2] The way in which the drawings were exhibited didn't differ much from the classic gallery show: all the works were mounted against the walls or the buttresses of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim, illuminated by spots or by the circular openings in the cupola. Nevertheless, Wright's building meaningfully resonated with everything OMA desired to stand for; if Koolhaas showed in *Delirious New York* how the masters of modern architecture misunderstood and in no way contributed to New York, this was, with the Guggenheim as an exception, certainly true for Wright. Moreover, this building's

"logic of inversion,"[3] as Neil Levine articulated it, of turning the traditional museum inside out and upside down would prove to be quite modest in comparison with all the inversions and perversion, both logical and illogical, Koolhaas & Co. would release on architecture. OMA's exhibitions as environments—not simply the objects on show, but also the way and the space in which they were shown—were (and are) made to attract meaning as "a lightning rod attracts thunderbolts," to use Roland Barthes's structuralist description of a "landmark" of nineteenth-century metropolitan architecture.[4]

This critical character—the exhibition as an explicit reflection on the architecture of OMA and on architecture in general—only increased after 1978. OMA started developing a portfolio that—in contrast with (most of) the drawings on show in 1978—aimed at being built. Koolhaas exclaimed "Goodbye paper!"[5] in the catalogue to an exhibition at the end of 1980 in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (where *The Sparkling Metropolis* was partly re-enacted), and Zenghelis repeated this decision to Deyan Sudjic in 1981: "We decided that if people were going to take us seriously we would have to take the plunge, stop teaching, and start building."[6] This caused a new challenge for OMA's self-curation, and it meant the real start of their exhibition policy: from now on they had to exhibit "architecture" instead of drawings. "An architect who in the 70s wasn't known outside of museum walls" and "only had to make magnificent drawings and subtle concepts," critic Paul Vermeulen summarized in 1987, "was obliged to revisit his position, because his office took its place in the world of construction."[7] And even this isn't completely true because most of OMA's early projects didn't get built. The classic problem of how to "represent space" while the "real" space is elsewhere was for OMA more complex or ironic: they had to put on display buildings that didn't exist (yet), while avoiding representing themselves as architects who couldn't build. The skepticism of Sudjic in 1981, writing about an exhibition at the Architectural Association from June 2 to 27, was probably widespread:

> Looking at the OMA's exhibits on the walls of the AA, you certainly can't help feeling that they could do with a bit of technology. They are brilliantly good at suggesting the kind of urbanity and vitality that is entirely lacking in the flaccid imagery of everybody from the English new-towners to the neo-vernacularists. What they are not so good at is suggesting that they would be able to achieve what their drawings promise, even if they had the chance. Even on the opening night of the AA show, one of their exhibition panels sheared loose from its supporting cables and came crashing down into the crowd.[8]

How to make "firm" exhibitions that could promise OMA's ability to function as professionals? The solution was to move and experiment freely between the two poles of "traditional representation" and "real space." This implied the decision to exhibit architecture critically as a *process*—as different stages from the first spark of the commission to the drawn or sketched representation of a project and (sometimes) its ultimate realization. Because of this, the exhibitions became autobiographical or at least self-reflexive and self-critical: it was considered possible to comment, by means of OMA projects, on the fate of the architect and on creating architecture in late twentieth-century society, but also on the exhibition as a genre. The difficulty of *representing* space was solved by creating spaces in which the difficulty of making and *constructing* space was shown, illustrated, and commented upon.

This was also proof of Koolhaas's aversion, often expressed during the 1980s, to space as such—of his inability to understand what was meant by "space." When he was asked by Jacques Lucan in 1984 to describe the "architectural space" OMA was trying to conceive, Koolhaas confessed the following:

> I've never understood what people mean by the word space. I think it was most revealing when I was in New York, at the IAUS. […] Every afternoon, about 4 o'clock, Peter Eisenman would come to see me to relax, smoking a fat cigar. He would come into my office saying "Koolhaas, you have no sense of space." I would reply: "Yes, that's right. But I'm delighted to be here as you're going to explain to me what this concept of space is all about!" But Peter was never really able to explain it to me properly. The only way he had of making me understand was to take my hands, twist them and make a kind of onomatopoeic noise: "crrrr … " Since an intellectual like Peter Eisenman couldn't explain to me what space was, I haven't tried to go any further in understanding something that seems to be based on animal noises. When it comes down to it, I don't believe in it.[9]

Although there is some irony in this—how can an architect not believe in space?—Koolhaas didn't become an architect to provide corporeal, physical, or sensory, and, thus in the end, unnamable experiences. The projects of OMA were meant to be cultural, intellectual, and discursive; they were to provoke, not silent contemplation or sublime pleasure, but commentary, critique, interpretation, ideas, words. Instead of phenomenology, structuralism was the aim: to show by means of architectural projects, in drawings, explanations, and—despite everything—spaces, how architects (and human beings in general) crawl around in an infinite web of influences, cultural traditions, power concentrations, coincidences, obstacles, and desires. This has, of course, consequences for OMA's exhibitions, where the mythology of the traditional architect as an untouchable and genial creator of perfect objects and beautiful spaces was deconstructed, or at least replaced, by the self-fashioning of the architect as a cultural producer who had to battle with fierce opposition, but who, elegantly and self-consciously, showed and *proved* his conviction to go on, against all odds.

1988: *Arbeiten 1972–88*, Basel

At the upper floor of the Architekturmuseum Basel, where an exhibition was held in the spring of 1988, the eventful genesis of the Netherlands Dance Theatre (completed in 1987) was exposed (figs 2 and 3).[10] But also elsewhere in this show, as Stanislaus von Moos wrote later that year in *A + U*, what was:

> "illustrated" by this architecture was primarily the design process itself. Impossible, in view of the three staggered combs which define the volume of the office tract [of the project for the City Hall in The Hague], to forget the three small pieces of plastic which Koolhaas used in the exhibition videoclip to demonstrate the central idea of the complex. (In one showcase the Architekturmuseum prominently displayed pieces of colored clay models as relics of the "creative process," almost as if it were a Beuys installation.)[11]

The casual comparison (fig. 4) with Joseph Beuys—who indeed made "spatial works," like *Wirtschaftswerte (Economic Values)* from 1980, that exhibit, on iron

Figure 2. *OMA Arbeiten 1972–1988*, Exhibition Poster, Architekturmuseum Basel, March 5–April 24, 1988 © OMAR, HNI, Rotterdam.

shelves, small and banal objects—can be elaborated upon. It does seem possible to criticize Koolhaas in the same way (and for the same reasons) as Benjamin Buchloh criticized Beuys in 1980. One quotation, in Buchloh's article, from Nietzsche's book on Wagner is remarkably applicable to both Beuys and Koolhaas:

Figure 3. *OMA Arbeiten 1972–1988*, Architekturmuseum Basel, March 5–April 24, 1988 © AM, Basel.

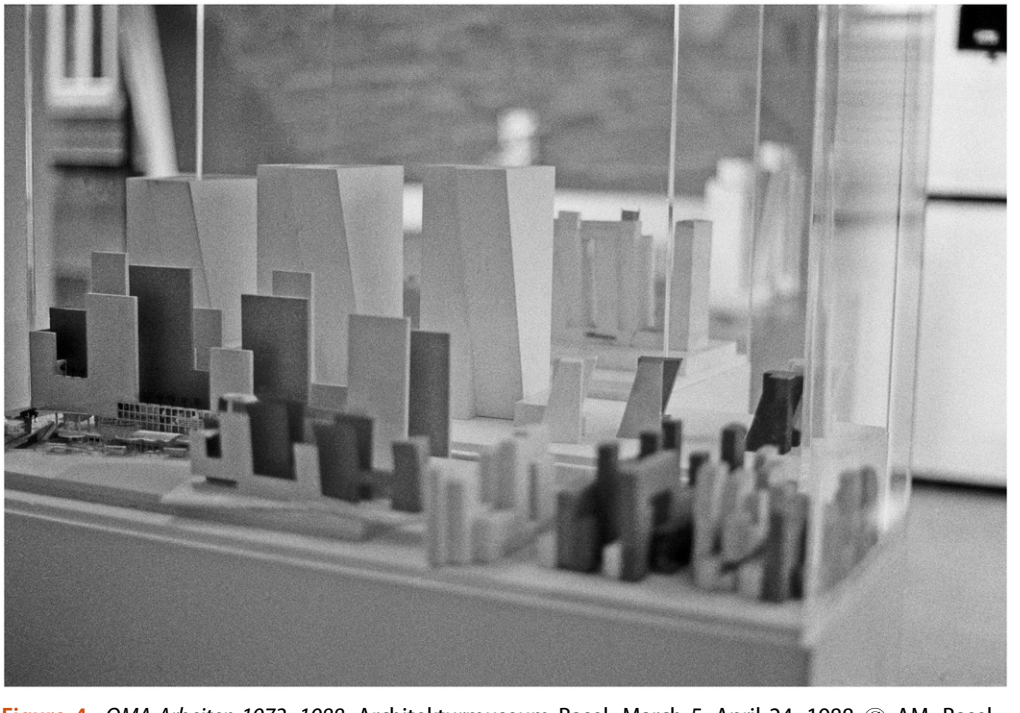

Figure 4. *OMA Arbeiten 1972–1988*, Architekturmuseum Basel, March 5–April 24, 1988 © AM, Basel.

> As a matter of fact, his whole life long he [Wagner] did nothing but repeat one proposition: that his music did not mean music alone. But something more! Something immeasurably more! […] Music can never be anything else than a means. This was his theory; but above all it was the only practice that lay open to him. No musician however thinks this way! Wagner was in need of literature, in order to persuade the whole world to take his music seriously, profoundly, because it *meant* an infinity of things.[12]

Replace "Wagner" by "Beuys" or "Koolhaas" and "music" by "art" or "architecture," and the statement still rings true. For Buchloh, this was proof of the fact that Beuys didn't respect the characteristics of art in the period he was working in and for. Beuys expected a metaphysical, political, and magical signification of art in an era that was (or should be) defined by the disenchanted disciplinary boundaries of art—in an era in which, according to Buchloh, art was condemned to confess its own isolation and limitations. Similarly, Koolhaas and OMA did not seem to respect the specificity of architecture—they were constantly raising the bar with regard to its meaning, its visibility, its sites of publicity, its confinement, and its medium-specificity. The question is, however, whether OMA's work—and the exhibitions of the 1980s show this to the largest extent—wasn't precisely historical *because* of this. Koolhaas didn't respect the specificities of architecture, but this disrespect—this kind of "architecture in the expanded field"—was becoming omnipresent in the era he was working in, and for most of the architects of his generation. How could architecture be considered "specific" in an era when it was constantly being reproduced, mediatized, and represented? How could architecture still be architecture when it was on display instead of being part of the "real world"? How could an office that mounted more exhibitions than buildings persist in using and carrying out the limited, modernist disciplinary definition of architecture as "the masterly, correct and magnificent interplay of volumes brought together in light," when this light didn't come from the sun, but from artificial sources like museum lighting, the flash of a camera, or a film spot?

In one of the few instances when O. M. Ungers commented on the work of his former pupil, he criticized Koolhaas for trying to escape the discipline while remaining an architect, indeed like Wagner composing while trying to leave behind music: "Art cannot escape art. And Koolhaas cannot escape architecture. In the end it might be self-deception."[13] For OMA, escaping architecture was nearly inevitable, not only for biographical reasons (given Koolhaas's previous career as a journalist, for example), but also for cultural and historical reasons. Architecture as a discipline, for better or for worse, was moving—precisely in the era in which OMA started to work—in the direction of art, principally because it started to contain more ideas, meanings, intentions, intellectuality, and self-consciousness, but also because it became nearly impossible to still experience architecture "in a distracted way" (as Walter Benjamin famously described it).[14]

1989: *The First Decade*, Rotterdam

OMA never constructed in an exhibition a "real space" or "a piece of architecture" on scale 1:1; the "minimal" solution of showing nothing but plans, models, and photographs was also avoided. One contribution to a group exhibition that shows this was OMA's façade in the Strada Novissima in the Venice Biennale of 1980: a plain translucent piece of canvas, and a clearly temporary screen instead of (most of) the other

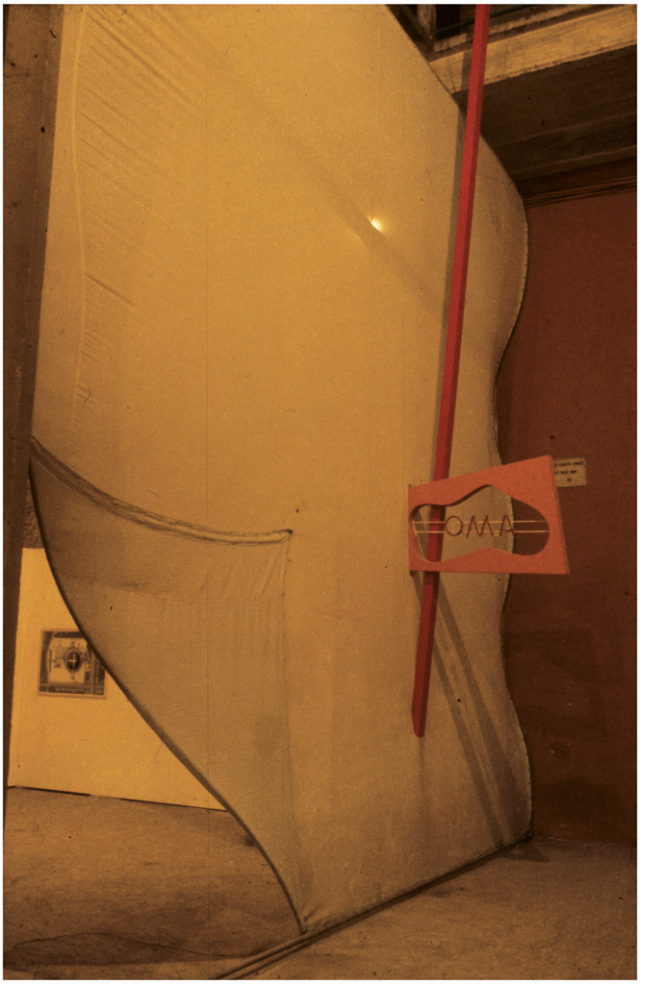

Figure 5. OMA, *La Strada Novissima*, Venice Architecture Biennale, June 1–September 28, 1980 © Geert Bekaert (Ghent University, Department of Architecture & Urban Planning).

nineteen "real" façades in the exhibition (fig. 5). It shows the desire to oppose a typical element of the discipline (the façade) and its construction at an exhibition, but it also, as Léa-Catherine Szacka wrote, "produced its own logic as it aspired to define a situation—namely that architecture was about content rather than formalist games—and foreshadowed just how unsubstantial architecture was to become."[15]

The curtain from 1980, with one lifted corner, seems to announce—mutatis mutandis—the work of Petra Blaisse, who started collaborating with OMA at the end of the 1980s, also on the occasion of many exhibitions. Her contribution cannot be underestimated, for example to the show at Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in the spring of 1989—a kind of paroxysm of paradoxicality in OMA's exhibition history, and in its history in general (fig. 6). *OMA—The First Decade* was conceived as a construction site, with a regular grid of columns consisting of reinforced steel without the concrete (fig. 7). On these poles, small platforms were attached showcasing models, while inside of or next to some of the reinforcing steel, small television screens showed films in which the

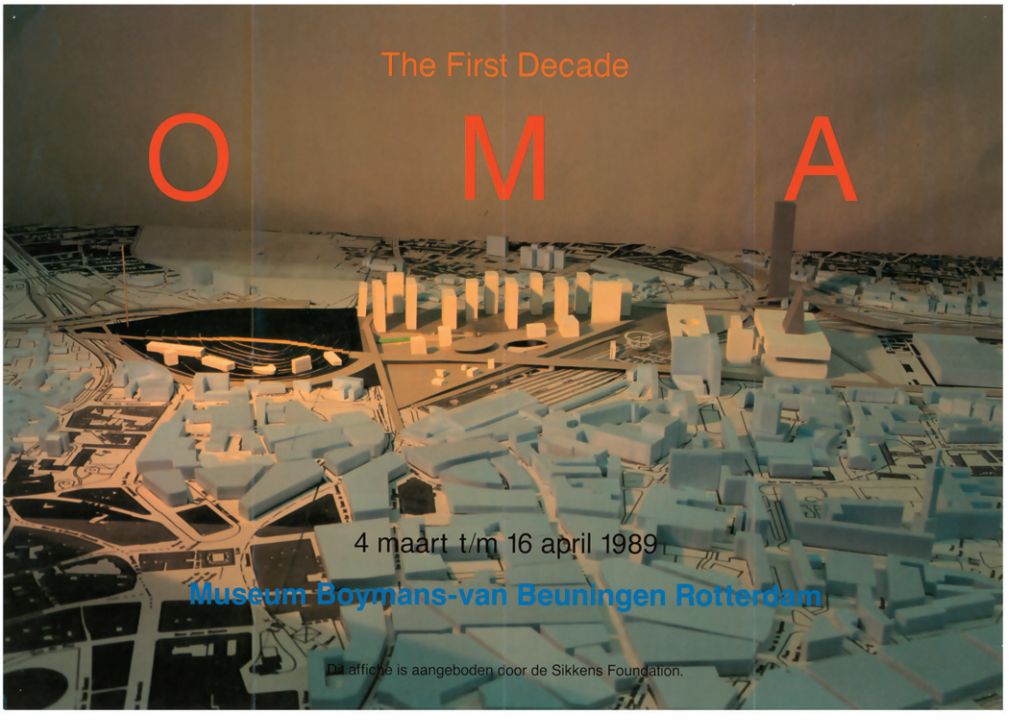

Figure 6. *OMA The First Decade*, Exhibition Poster, Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, March 4–April 16, 1989 © OMAR, HNI, Rotterdam.

Figure 7. *OMA The First Decade*, Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, March 4–April 16, 1989 © Geert Bekaert (Ghent University, Department of Architecture & Urban Planning).

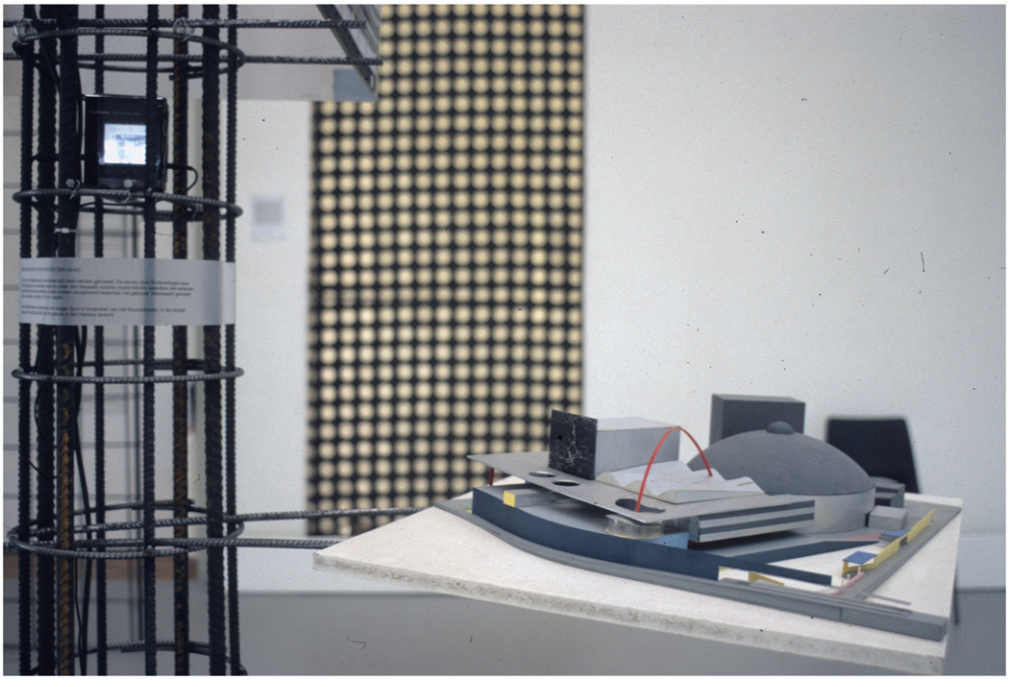

Figure 8. *OMA The First Decade*, Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, March 4–April 16, 1989 © Geert Bekaert (Ghent University, Department of Architecture & Urban Planning).

projects were presented (fig. 8). On the walls, large plans were shown, and in the middle of the exhibition space, a black volume was constructed—a real space after all, although it was made up of black textile, from which, again, one corner was lifted in order to create an entrance (fig. 9). The exterior of this ephemeral "construction," rather like a Bedouin tent in the desert, was used to project slides; the interior was discreetly lit to present seven of OMA's unbuilt projects for the Netherlands, such as the design for the City Hall in The Hague or for the residential Boompjes in Rotterdam (fig. 10). In fact, the entire exhibition architecture *was* based on one of those aborted projects, namely for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI), and for a site immediately nearby Boijmans Van Beuningen, at the top of the Museumpark and in front of the Kunsthal (two OMA projects that would become reality)—the same ground plan, the same construction method, the same black archive volume in the middle (used in the exhibition to "store" and "archive" the rejected projects), and the same preference to program over form (fig. 11). With this "reproduction" of a project that wouldn't get built—OMA lost the competition for the NAI to Jo Coenen in the fall of 1988—Koolhaas seemed to get his way after all, "building" the design by OMA before the construction of Coenen's project had started. When asked in an issue of *Archis*, which served as the catalogue to *The First Decade*, about the curatorial decision to ephemerally reconstruct their NAI project, Koolhaas replied:

> Purely coincidental. The abortion of the Architecture Institute project was, of course, a catastrophe for us. It served to amplify the implicit questions we always wondered about: What impact does our work have in the Netherlands? What reactions does it elicit—in other words, what purpose does our presence here serve?[16]

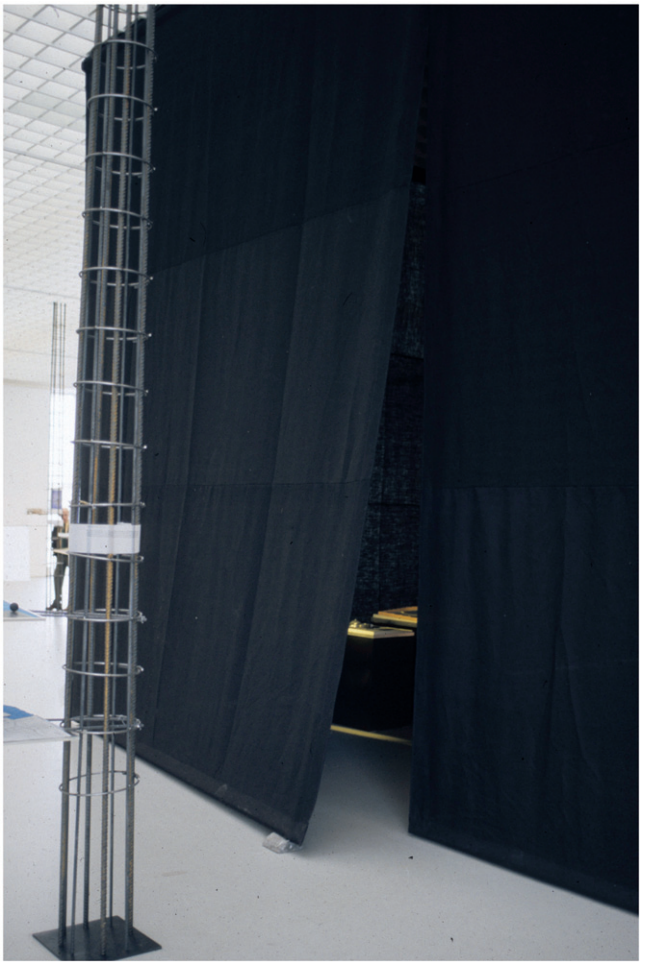

Figure 9. *OMA The First Decade*, Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, March 4–April 16, 1989 © Geert Bekaert (Ghent University, Department of Architecture & Urban Planning).

Local newspaper *Rotterdams Nieuwsblad* was more straightforward, as the title of a review of *The First Decade* from March 4, 1989, indicated: "Rem Koolhaas shows ten years of disappointment." Taking into account the relative absence of Dutch projects in OMA's portfolio of the 1990s, this letdown led to a kind of kiss-off between Koolhaas and his home country. But what OMA also showed by means of *The First Decade* was a determination to exploit the medium of the exhibition and to use it not simply for retrospective means, but also to sarcastically reflect on the recent history of the office. The exhibition reached out to a nearby building plot in Rotterdam, where an OMA project could have become reality, and the Netherlands "could have become a better country,"[17] as Koolhaas expressed it on the opening night of the show, if only the architecture culture had shown some enlightened daring.

Figure 10. *OMA The First Decade*, Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, March 4–April 16, 1989 © Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam.

Figure 11. *OMA The First Decade*, Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, March 4–April 16, 1989 © Geert Bekaert (Ghent University, Department of Architecture & Urban Planning).

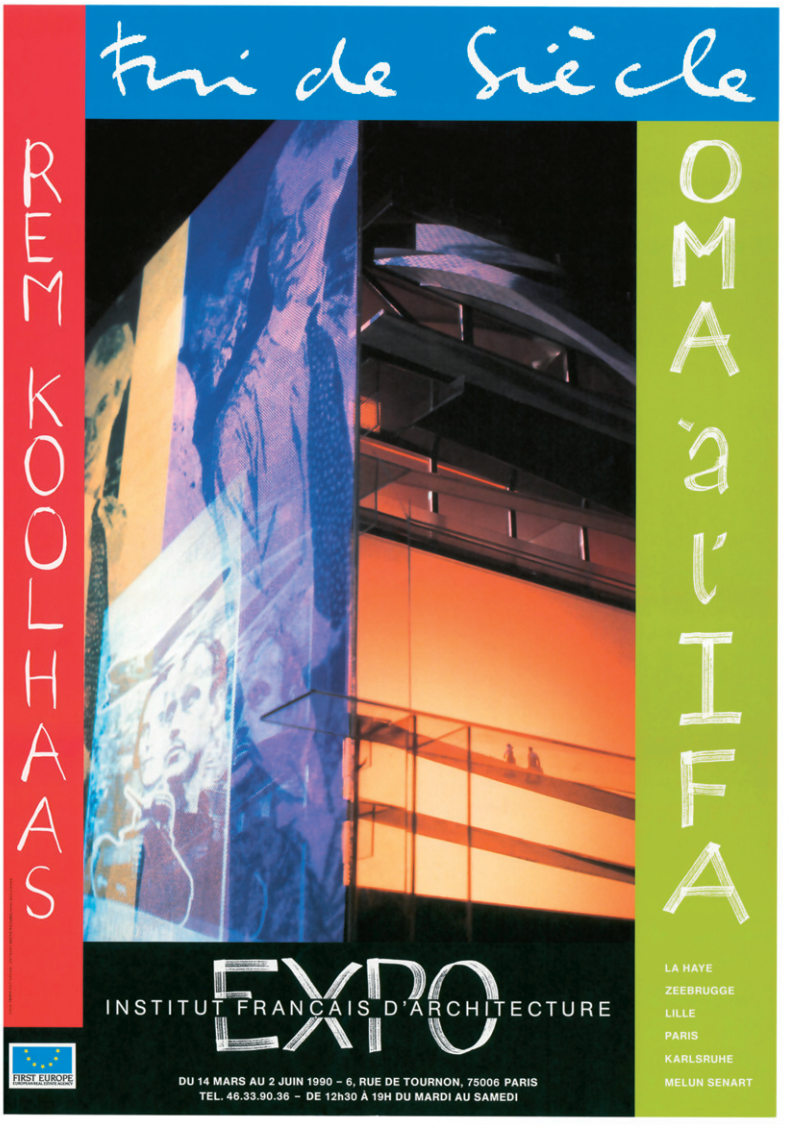

Figure 12. *OMA Fin de siècle*, Exhibition Poster, Institut français d'architecture, March 14–June 2, 1990 © OMAR, HNI, Rotterdam.

1990: *Fin de siècle*, Paris

A similar struggle, although with a positive outcome, was exhibited, in a similar way, in the spring of 1990, at the Institut Français de l'Architecture (IFA) in Paris, in a show entitled *Fin de siècle* (figs 12 and 13). This exhibition was reviewed by Toyo Ito: "This was shoulders above any other architect's show I've seen to date. Fun, but with impact."[18] Ito described the four rooms of the exhibition. The last two contained (large) models, plans, and videos, while the first two were more particular and "spatial" because of the elaboration of one architectural element—the column and the wall. The second room, in Ito's words, was "an interior buried in sketches,"[19] with drawings (of the Euralille project)

Figure 13. *OMA Fin de siècle*, Institut français d'architecture, March 14–June 2, 1990 © IFA, Paris.

pasted on the windows, blocking the views, and creating an almost suffocating atmosphere of feverish work; at the time, OMA had to develop the project for Lille at break-neck speed. The first room was filled with slanted columns on a checkered floor, in between the existing (and load-bearing) wooden columns (fig. 14). This environment referred to the Villa dall'Ava in the same city, and to the field of columns underneath the daughter's apartment, also aligning, or guiding, the garden path to the main entrance. This house had been commissioned in 1984, but because of opposition from neighbors and trouble with contractors, it was only completed in the fall of 1991. At the time of the Paris exhibition, the construction was under way. The walls of the first room at the IFA were chaotically filled with A4-sized pages, against a red background, and printed with full-page black-and-white photographs, single words in capitals (such as *EUPHORIE, DESIR, CROQUIS*) and longer texts theoretically reflecting on these notions.

This installation seems to prefigure the poststructuralist concept of *S,M,L,XL*, in which images and words, signifiers and signifieds, are "released" from their strict positions and traditional relationships in order to create a kind of cultural haze in which meaning is constantly suggested rather than confirmed. Jacques Lucan—editor of *OMA/Rem Koolhaas: Pour une culture de la congestion*, one of the three French books published in 1990, the other two being the seemingly Xeroxed *Six Projets* and *Lille*, published simultaneously with the exhibition—transcribed one of the texts, more specifically the one on the elevator, *l'ascenseur*, in his book *Composition, Non-composition* from 2009.[20] The fragment suggests how in this space, OMA staged the obstacles that can occur between good theoretical intentions and the cultural sources of inspiration of an architectural office on the one hand,

Figure 14. *OMA Fin de siècle*, Institut français d'architecture, March 14–June 2, 1990 © IFA, Paris.

and, on the other hand, the "reality" of constructing in an environment that doesn't tolerate this kind of architecture. Ironically enough, at the exhibition at the IFA, this difficulty of reconciling theory and practice was "materialized" by columns that stood in the way of the writings on the wall—exactly the kind of columns that were used to both facilitate and disarrange the entrance to the Villa dall'Ava. Again: a battle against architecture (as theory, culture, images, and words) in the form of architecture (as replicas of "drunken" columns that have seemingly forgotten both their ordering and technical function).

1994–95: *The Public Place of Architecture*, MoMA, New York

In a review of *Rem Koolhaas and the Public Place of Architecture*, OMA's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), co-curated with Terence Riley and on show from November 3, 1994, to January 31, 1995, Jayne Merkel used the term "outreach extension":

> It's OMA at the MoMA this winter. Actually the exhibition of Rem Koolhaas's Office of [*sic*] Metropolitan Architecture reaches beyond the Museum of Modern Art's doors into a nearby store window, on to a telephone kiosk and a construction fence, and into the subway across the street at 666 Fifth Avenue. The brash modern imagery fits in just fine, and the outreach extension makes sense for a show called *Rem Koolhaas and the Place of Public Architecture*.[21]

It is an unexpected but concise description of a constant in OMA's exhibition policy (and its work in general): the desire to reach out, by means of material but also

Figure 15. *OMA at MoMA*, New York, November 3, 1994–January 31, 1995 © MoMA, New York.

immaterial extensions, to places, problems, people, and practices that are not part of a limited conception of the discipline of architecture and its way of exhibiting, presenting, and publishing itself. In the case of the MoMA exhibition, this desire became explicitly visible when OMA decided, as it is described in the exhibition catalogue, to add "a number of installations in the immediate vicinity, including in the 53 Street E and F subway station and at various locations on 53 Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues."[22] These installations consisted of, among others, billboards with photographs of OMA's architecture and slogans such as "beautiful architecture" or "generic city" along the escalators in the subway (fig. 15). Also on street level, posters announced the exhibition in the form of quotes and messages from *S,M,L,XL*—the book that was in preparation for half a decade, and that would be published on October 31, 1995. "Philip Johnson is said," Grahame D. Shane reported in his review, "to have chuckled as he paused before the monotype posters tastefully announcing the ephemeral nature of the city on nearby street hoardings. These hoardings stand in front of the derelict townhouses to be demolished for a museum extension (they are posted above the cardboard boxes in which homeless people sleep on the street)."[23] These last remarks indicate a by now classic example of *Koolhaasian* congestion, but they also—as Shane suggested in his review—betray an influence of the Situationists:

> Koolhaas employed his thread of publicity as a narrative promenade woven through the section of the city up into the museum, in a gesture which attempted to recoup an avant-garde impulse of the Situationalist's random *dérive* or *drift*, long lost to manipulative commercial art and the advertising industry.[24]

Koolhaas could no longer fall back on the hopeful pugnacity of the Situationist International and its attempts at turning the boring bourgeois city into a lively and diverse environment by means of the exploration of hidden trajectories and the

connection of isolated parts. By the end of the twentieth century, the city was no longer boring and bourgeois, but all too exciting and demanding—every possible intervention immediately (and deservedly) got received as a form of advertising, and thus as an unconcealed invitation to consume. But this doesn't necessarily mean—another sample of OMA's elusiveness and ambiguity—that the "outreach extensions" in the Manhattan streets and subway stations around MoMA couldn't question or reveal other problems. It is possible to interpret them as both a critique and an "exaltation" of the "apartness"[25] of the architectural community, to use Manfredo Tafuri's terms. Tafuri was one of the first to not only witness but also to analyze the emergence of the late twentieth-century architecture exhibition, for example in an article published in 1976 in an issue of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* devoted to the United States, and not coincidentally with a cover featuring *The Ecstasy of Mrs Caligari* from 1973 by Madelon Vriesendorp, part of her New York Series. In his text from 1976, Tafuri criticizes the New York scene of the Grays and the Whites, and their—in his view—superfluous debates and disputes over their alleged differences. What all these architects had in common, Tafuri argued (and Koolhaas's "jokes" were no exception), was the way in which they "exalted" in their "apartness" from the rest of society. In contrast to the modernist generations of the 1920s and 1930s (a contrast that is somewhat pumped up by Tafuri in an instance of operative criticism), architects in the 1970s had become part of "an intellectual elite," aiming:

> to remove its own work from all structural conditioning to give birth to controversies completely internal to the limbo in which it confines itself. That this has occurred signifies that, once high levels of comprehensive integration in the determining sectors have been reached, it becomes possible to maintain well-defined cultural spaces, entrusted with the task of pleasurably entertaining a highly select public.[26]

It is often forgotten how this analysis sealed the fate of contemporary architecture to this day—or to put it differently, architecture as a cultural sphere has since the 1970s easily accepted this situation and *moved on*, continuing to produce buildings that don't seem to change the course of things, and continuing to make exhibitions in order to safeguard the existence of architecture as a cultural and intellectual discipline. This evolution has been observed also by Tafuri:

> New circuits of production and use do come to be created: architecture comes to be exhibited in its own *cinémas d'essai*. But there is no hope for architecture to influence structures or relations of production: no reformative hypothesis appears to have the right of sanctuary in the new monasteries in which patient monks transcribe and comment upon the codices of the modern tradition.[27]

In an overlooked irony of architectural history, it has been mostly Rem Koolhaas who continued to highlight this relative social impotence of the discipline, specifically so by turning exhibitions into self-critical environments. The irony lies in the fact that Koolhaas once criticized Tafuri for his dramatic criticism of architecture. In an interview from 1978, he said:

> It is my strong impression that Tafuri and his followers hate architecture. They have declared architecture dead. Architecture to him is a row of corpses in the morgue. Yet even though those corpses are dead, they won't leave them alone; they are vain enough to presume to be the experts of the morgue.[28]

Figure 16. *OMA at MoMA*, New York, November 3, 1994–January 31, 1995 © MoMA, New York.

It is striking to confront this quote (together with Tafuri's criticism of the isolation of architecture and its exhibition circuits) with *OMA at MoMA*. The inside exhibition showed OMA's recent public projects and buildings (Euralille, ZKM, Melun-Sénart) by means of models, but also by means of light boxes normally used for large advertisements at bus shelters (figs 16 and 17). This unorthodox presentation—debunking the projects as advertisements—bathed in a "blue-gray light" and surrounded by gray walls and "apocalyptic blackboard announcements" (in Koolhaas's own handwriting) (fig. 18), caused a particular environment, as Shane wrote in his review:

> Slowly I began to read the penumbral lighting and funereal tone of the inner sanctum as a typically ironic performance by Koolhaas, framing the public display of these vast corpses in a temporary graveyard, a suitable resting place for such megalomaniac urban and architectural aberrations.[29]

The dialectical position of OMA was thus, also at MoMA, extreme: they "unabashedly celebrate the constructed environment, even at its most extreme,"[30] as co-curator Terence Riley wrote in the catalogue, but at the same time they offered the possibility of a critical and in a way devastating interpretation, as Shane's review comes to show. The same could be said of the "outreach extensions" towards Manhattan: on the one hand, they represented an attempt to step out of architecture's boudoir, but on the other hand, they showed a bitter self-criticism regarding the impermeability of this boudoir, and the architect's (and the museum's) unrelenting desire to get noticed.

Figure 17. *OMA at MoMA*, New York, November 3, 1994–January 31, 1995 © MoMA, New York.

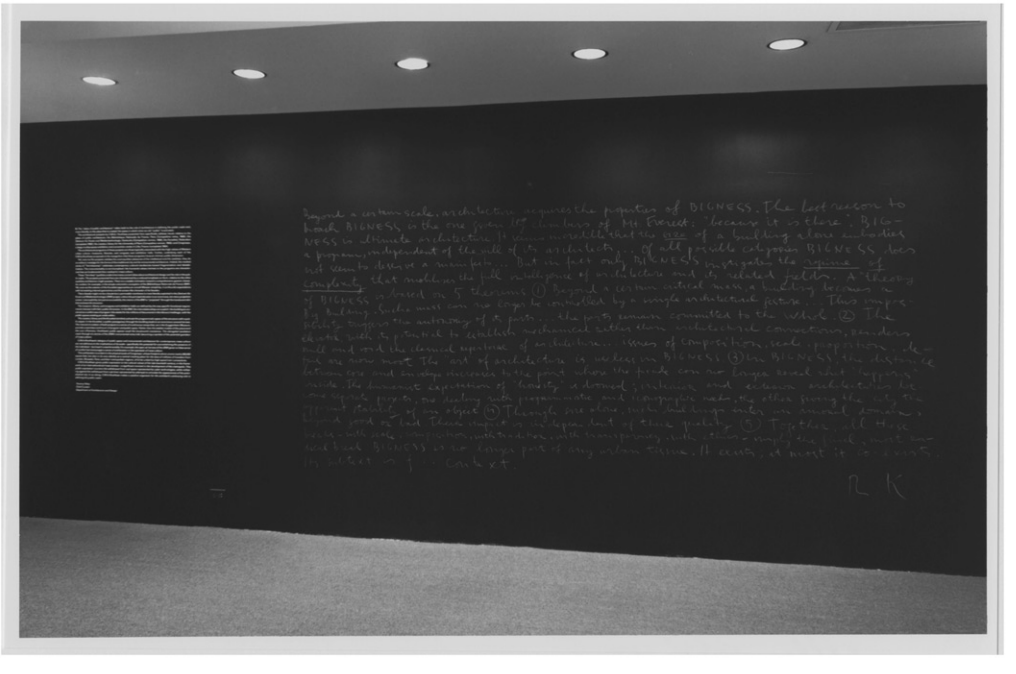

Figure 18. *OMA at MoMA*, New York, November 3, 1994–January 31, 1995 © MoMA, New York.

The exhibition was an intensely loaded environment in which the nearly impossible contradictions of architectural production and of contemporary urban life became visible and tangible.

Conclusion, 2003–2004: *Content*, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin/ Kunsthal, Rotterdam

What came afterwards can be summarized as a period of crisis for Koolhaas, but success for OMA. The office got famous and started producing countless buildings that could no longer be "managed" by Koolhaas on his own. What he said in an interview in 1993—"I'm at it right now to decrease my office. I find the prospect of working, in the coming four years, with 10 to 15 rather than with 50 people, extremely attractive"[31]—didn't turn out as planned. In terms of exhibitions, Koolhaas first turned to research (at Documenta X in Kassel in 1997), and then to a presentation of the industrial production of the office (at *Content* in Berlin and Rotterdam from 2003 to 2004).

Documenta X was curated by Catherine David. As one reviewer summarized this edition, "painting and sculpture played a minor role," "whereas art reflecting its mediality stood in the focus of the curator."[32] Koolhaas was invited to show research on the growth of the Pearl River Delta. In a converted station-house in Kassel, he opted for an accumulation of varied data and catchphrases on the present and future of the Asian city, reproduced as huge wallpaper (fig. 19)—a kind of "data environment," forecasting exhibitions such as Richard Burdett's 2006 biennale *Cities, Architecture and Society*.

Figure 19. OMA at Documenta X, Kassel, June 21–September 28, 1997 © Documenta, Kassel.

The few critics who noticed Koolhaas's presence in Kassel mostly reacted with a preference for his architecture ("his real contributions may lie elsewhere")[33] or with a rejection of this kind of pseudo-intellectual work ("[His copyrighted concepts] are beginning to resemble the ravings of a madman").[34]

Six years later, *Content*, although considered by Marco de Michelis as "an important episode in Koolhaas's biography, especially because here a truly multilayered narration of the architectural facts took a mature form,"[35] was a retrospective showing OMA's work since 1996—not coincidentally the year following *OMA at MoMA* and *S,M,L,XL*—in a not very favorable light. What goes for the catalogue—"I both liked it and was disgusted by it, in a productive way,"[36] Beatriz Colomina admitted—was applicable to the exhibition. Koolhaas said: "We needed to break down our own achievements, to try to do something as good was totally impossible so we needed to do something as bad."[37] Not only does it show an architect struggling with his own history, but also with his (indeed by now rather Tafurian) analysis of architecture as an uncontrollable discipline subject to market forces. *Content* was organized both in Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie and in OMA's Kunsthal—a coupling that reaffirmed the view on Koolhaas's method as a slightly perverted and self-conscious reenactment of high modernism. The exhibition was in both cases almost an act of vandalism on the architecture of the Nationalgalerie (fig. 20) and the Kunsthal (fig. 21), but also of OMA. The work was presented chaotically, with so many different working models of each project that a feeling of random multiplicity was the result, while the canonic architecture of the two buildings seemed to make no difference—what prevailed was an anonymous, unstructured working interior, almost like a sweatshop.

Figure 20. *OMA Content*, Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin, November 11, 2003–January 18, 2004 © OMA/Rem Koolhaas.

Figure 21. *OMA Content*, Kunsthal Rotterdam, March 27–May 31, 2004 © Geert Bekaert (Ghent University, Department of Architecture & Urban Planning).

While Koolhaas's Venice Biennale of 2014 was—for example, by Peter Eisenman[38]—interpreted as his goodbye to architecture, a decade earlier, *Content* might have been a better contender for this epithet. The struggle with architecture that Koolhaas has continuously enacted by means of building, but also, and more explicitly and concisely, by means of exhibitions, increasingly became something of a desperate attempt to overcome a condemnation of the discipline. An exhibition like *Content* became such a "self-critical environment" that the next step could only be to abandon the architecture of OMA as an exhibition subject. The work of OMA has rarely been shown since 2004 in exhibitions, while curation was left to outsiders: *OMA Progress* at the Barbican in London in 2011 was, for example, curated by Rotor, as an accumulation of all the material, often difficult to relate to specific projects, produced at the office. Meanwhile, OMA, Architecture Media Organization (AMO), and Koolhaas have been designing mostly art exhibitions and art spaces—for Prada, for example, but also for Knoll, for the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, for the Hermitage and for Lafayette in Paris—next to exhibitions that show the constraints of the building industry to the detriment of meaningful architectonic in(ter)vention (the 2014 Biennale), or that raise the countryside as *the* topic for the future, in a show scheduled for the spring of February 2020 at the Guggenheim in New York, the museum where the career of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture had more or less started in 1978 with *The Sparkling Metropolis*. After several decades of exhibiting architecture in self-critical environments, the architecture of OMA seems for Koolhaas no longer eligible to be curated or criticized.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

Christophe Van Gerrewey is assistant professor of architecture theory at EPFL Lausanne. He has published in journals such as *Log*, *A + U*, *AA Files, OASE, Journal of Architecture, ARCH+, Architectural Review*, and *Journal of Landscape Architecture*. He is the editor of *OMA/Rem Koolhaas: A Critical Reader from* Delirious New York to S,M,L,XL (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2019).

Notes

1. Shumon Basar and Stephan Trüby, "Worrying Kindness and Ultimate Wisdom," in *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp*, eds. Shumon Basar and Stephan Trüby (London: AA Publications, 2008), 256.
2. *OMA: The Sparkling Metropolis*, *November 17–December 17, 1978*, exhibition brochure, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Archives, A0003, Box 1258, Folder 9.
3. Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 299–364.
4. Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower, and Other Mythologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 5.
5. Rem Koolhaas, "Projecten uit de jaren zeventig, 7 nov. 1980 t/m 4 jan, 1981 zaal 24–25," in *Stedelijk Museum*, ed. Edy de Wilde (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1980), 99–100.
6. Deyan Sudjic, "Enter the Prophets of New Sobriety," *Building Design*, June 12, 1981, 2.
7. Paul Vermeulen, "Appareils instables pour la mégapole," *Septentrion* 16, no. 3 (1987), 44.
8. Sudjic, "Enter the Prophets," 2.
9. Bruno Vayssière, Patrice Noviant, and Jacques Lucan, "Amsterdam-Nord," *Architecture Mouvement Continuité* 17, no. 6 (1984), 18–19.
10. For a reconstruction of this genesis, see Christophe Van Gerrewey, "Goodbye Paper!" *AA Files* 35, no. 74 (2017): 98–111.
11. Stanislaus von Moos, "Dutch Group Portrait," *A+U* 17, no. 217 (1988), 88.
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Case of Wagner," in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1909), 30; quoted in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Beuys," in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 54.
13. Ole Bouman and Roemer van Toorn, "*Le Style, c'est l'Homme*," in *The Invisible in Architecture*, eds. Ole Bouman and Roemer van Toorn (London: Academy Editions, 1994), 58.
14. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 241.
15. Léa-Catherine Szacka, *Exhibiting the Postmodern*: *The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2016), 153.
16. Koos Bosma and Hans van Dijk, "Ik ben nu al zeker drie jaar bezig om dat stigma van het moderne van me af te schudden, juist omdat het in Nederland zo gemakzuchtig wordt beleden," *Archis* 8, no. 3 (1989), 42.
17. Herman Selier, "Voor een beter Nederland," *NRC Handelsblad*, March 3, 1989.
18. Toyo Ito, "Toyo Ito Reviews Rem Koolhaas Exhibition," *Telescope* 3, no. 5 (1990), 86.
19. Ito, "Toyo Ito Reviews," 79.
20. Jacques Lucan, *Composition, Non-composition* (Lausanne: PPUR Press, 2009), 550.
21. Jayne Merkel, "In the Galleries," *Oculus* 15, no. 1 (1995), 11.
22. Terence Riley, ed., *OMA at MoMA* (New York: MoMA, 1994), n.p.

23. Grahame D. Shane, "Rem Koolhaas and the Postmodern City," *The Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design Newsletter*, May 1995, 3.
24. Shane, "Rem Koolhaas," 6.
25. Manfredo Tafuri, "The Ashes of Jefferson," in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acierno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, UK: MIT Press, 1987), 292.
26. Tafuri, "The Ashes of Jefferson," 293.
27. Tafuri, "The Ashes of Jefferson," 293.
28. Hans van Dijk, "Rem Koolhaas Interview," *wonen-TA/BK* 6, no. 11 (1978), 18.
29. Shane, "Rem Koolhaas," 4.
30. Riley, *OMA at MoMA*, n.p.
31. Nikolaus Kuhnert, Philipp Oswalt, and Alejandro Zaera Polo, "Die Entfaltung der Architektur," *ARCH+* 25, no. 117 (1993), 22.
32. Sabine Fabo, "Documenta X," *Leonardo* 30, no. 4 (1998), 330.
33. Masao Miyoshi, "Radical Art at Documenta X," *New Left Review* 38, no. 228 (1998), 157. An earlier version of this article was published in *ANY* 5, no. 21 (1997): 6–9.
34. Geert Bekaert, "Dealing with Koolhaas," in *Rooted in the Real* (Ghent: WZW Editions, 2011), 497.
35. Marco de Michelis, "Fundamentals," *Log* 11, no. 32 (2014), 95.
36. Beatriz Colomina, "The Architecture of Publication," *El Croquis* 24, nos. 134/135 (2012), 367.
37. Colomina, "The Architecture of Publication," 367.
38. Valentina Ciuffi, "Rem Koolhaas Is Stating 'the End' of His Career, says Peter Eisenman," *Dezeen*, https://www.dezeen.com/2014/06/09/rem-koolhaas-at-the-end-of-career-says-peter-eisenman.