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Disappearing Act: Interview with Petra Blaisse and Aura Luz Melis

ŽELJKO RADINKOVIĆ: It seems that the spheres of interior and exterior categorically define the concept of your work. Assuming you do not consider these spheres to exist "as such" or "in themselves," how would you formulate the aesthetic or architectural process of their constitution? Alternatively, is there a more specific notion of interiority and exteriority that serves as the starting point for your work?

AURA LUZ MELIS: Regarding the aesthetic and architectural process of the constitution of both interior and landscape spheres, I would like to start by saying that we design by neglecting any type of border and by freeing ourselves from a prescribed *métier*. We work on both interior and landscape design fields simultaneously by studying and looking at the entirety situated in a specific context. Strong concepts, big gestures, lively lines, rhythmical patterns, artistic de-contextualization of fabrics, light atmospheres, etc. all react to the context and the architecture while moving fluidly between both. The freedom we take to intuitively work in an interdisciplinary manner allows us to master the entire setting defined by floor, walls, and ceiling in the interior or by soil, sky, and local climatic conditions in the exterior. The effect of color, the catching and play of light and movement are key elements that we engage with in both fields to create sensitive and exciting moments/settings.

PETRA BLAISSE: I can't say I understand your question very well. I do know that we like to combine "interiority" with "exteriority" in all senses of the words (mental and physical). We find it important to create environments that invite people to appreciate and take care of their immediate surrounding, so that they grow attached to them. Both the interior—the home—and the landscape—the garden—are objects of attachment (so often a blind spot in territorial action).

ŽR: Let's dwell on this topic for a while. In your work there is also a kind of relationship between the spaces outside and the spaces inside. How should we understand the concept of space? Are these spaces closed and already defined? Are they fluid? How should we understand their boundaries? What is your conception of those entities?

PB: Open air can become an inside space if defined with planted screens, a (green) roof, or a tent—a form of protection built with simple materials that can be changed, taken away or moved around. But the terms inside and outside can have philosophical, poetic, or political meaning too, beyond the physical one that, apart from "space," could be about internal thought or feeling versus external expression; or about interaction between living species. We learn that invisible exchanges between nature and "us," and between "us" humans among ourselves, are an ongoing phenomenon. The idea of each of us as unique, encapsulated individuals becomes blurred.

The past few years we have been concentrating on life underground, with the emphasis on the exchanges and collaborations of organisms, air and water within the first 30 to 50 cm of soil, where exterior and interior life forms come together and most activities, processes, and exchanges take place. In this research process we invite scientists to join our team, to educate us, and introduce us to their individual specialisms so that an overall picture emerges. We also met biologists who focus on life within "our" interior, namely our intestines, which led us to discover that our bodies and underground life are quite comparable. This is not what you're asking, I know, but the idea that fascinates us is that we are not autonomous individuals, but in fact all linked and connected through these invisible yet fundamental exchanges of invisible particles and bacteria. This blurs the boundary between the "I" and the other. Of course, in psychological sense, the actual boundary between or connection of living creatures can also be discussed.

I do agree with your thoughts, and if you translate them into language, then you talk about inside and outside and about communication and exchange.

Inside for us means protection, intimacy, a defined place of which you know where it begins and ends, and how. With clear openings and

controlled views outward. If you have a view into the outer world, you feel the enclosure and protection of the enclosed space you are in. Outside for us means the large outside world, the unknown in which we form a minuscule part, in which we can disappear without anyone noticing; or it means nature, the countryside, with all its beauty, harmony, dangers and and surprises.

We could talk for 70 hours about what it can all be and mean, but our work, although also based on naïve idealism and romantic ideals, beauty, and philosophical thought, has to take shape, be materialized, and remain functional for many years. Working in and around architecture, public space, and urban planning, the boundary between inside and outside a built structure or area—or even of a given budget or program—is always present. We usually try to dissolve or overcome boundaries, to create fluidity and flexibility. To make psychological or visual connections, even if there is in fact no such thing, we create spatial illusions. You can, for instance, stretch the experience of inside and outside, of "here" and "there," with the manipulation of light, levels of transparency, reflection, perspective and scale; with moving objects too. Classic tools!

ŽR: Could you elaborate on your relationship with modernism in architecture? According to some interpretations, architectural elements such as curtains are originally part of a pre-modern architectural discourse, which also carries an ideological bourgeois dimension. In your work, however, these elements return to a central role in the constitution of space.

ALM: Curtains and textiles have always been intimately related to humans and to our private atmospheres. They have developed hand in hand with humankind for centuries. In architectural discourse, we tend to look back mostly at the passive role of textiles in the bourgeois era, and at their "liberation" during modernism, when they first appeared as soft walls inside an exhibition designed by Mies von der Rohe and Lilly Reich.

Petra Blaisse took this liberation a step further in the late 1980s and early 1990s, escaping the limits of architecture even more and giving curtains a *raison d'être* that goes beyond being servile backgrounds. Their artistic expression, scale, and positioning within a space gave them an identity of their own.

PB: The "emancipation of the curtain" has led to one version that is completely independent from architecture: a transparent membrane that floats in space, held up by helium balloons. The emancipation is, however, also about its freedom of presence or character, its movements and its independent shape: suggesting an evening dress when stored around a structural column in a museum space, acting like an attractive diva that closes and opens a stage at considerable speed, transmitting sound from its reflective, pleated surface, traversing a room in unexpected directions, or choosing to disconnect from the architectural form, letting go of defined boundaries to form a composition of its own. It can be thick and heavy or thin and as light as a feather. Like an actress, the curtain can appear or disappear; be modest, witty, dramatic, or boldly striking. The curtain is suddenly a lively presence, able to totally transform a space or atmosphere in the blink of an eye! All this forms the curtain's charisma and creates its cinematic quality.

SAŠA KARALIĆ: Does the curtain serve as a kind of mediator between the inside and outside?

PB: Traditionally it does. If the curtain follows the architecture, like a transparent façade, a wall, or a stage, it defines a division or an ending, opening up or closing off a space. What is inside and outside? Where are you, and where are they? A curtain is, of course, in itself a space with interior and exterior elements (pleats, layers, structure). It can indeed be the mediator between inside and outside, or it can form a boundary where there was none, then move sideways or upwards to open up a place or connect spaces, such as in the theatre.

The curtain is also space in itself: if you look at the curtain up close, you'll find all kinds of spaces within. Within the weave or knit, within the hairs, in-between pleats—so-called air chambers. We talk about inward and outward, and inside and outside, forward and backward when we weave, cut, knot, knit, fold, or sew, or when we describe where the yarn goes with which we sew. Also, in a microscopic sense, you have the inside and outside within each yarn, each particle. It's endless when one starts to think about the definition of space, its place, scale and boundaries.

SK: I think that's a beautiful analogy between the use of the curtain in architecture and in theatre. Željko mentioned earlier that the

curtain originates from the bourgeois tradition. The way the curtain you just mentioned is positioned on stage also strongly reflects bourgeois theatre conventions. Later, in modern and experiential theatre—where the boundary between stage and audience was often blurred—the curtain took on a completely different function and became less relevant. In your work, I see the curtain almost as a question mark: a mediator, but also a boundary—a soft barrier between two worlds.

PB: As we like contradictions, we often flirt with the "bourgeois" aspect of curtains when it can challenge the context, or when it can refer to the hidden, forbidden, or denied cultural background of a place or its inhabitants.

SK: My question is: how do you perceive the space you are invited to participate in, and the role of the curtain within that space? Once your work is situated within the context of an art exhibition, how do you reflect on its cinematic qualities?

PB: I don't know if we meant cinematic *because* it inhabits an art exhibition. The cinematographic quality lies in the fact that it can behave as an actor, as a personality, influencing the spectators and the atmosphere of a place or moment. And it moves along a carefully organized choreography through a place at various speeds, coming up, stopping, disappearing. It flutters in the wind, catches light, reflects it, transmits light, and spreads shadow patches all around. It has a certain feel and smell, bounces off color, triggers memories, communicates with its users. So, it's a living element, and a real presence if it wants to be.

SK: I was interested to hear—how do you position your work within the context of art? When it comes to architecture, that's quite clear to me, but within the art context, I'm curious how you see it.

PB: For the Haus der Kunst in Munich (2004-2007) we made a monumental curtain that, on its interior side, acted as a projection screen. Once the curtain was pulled out completely and fastened at its outer end, the pleats were flattened and the translucent surface, thanks to its opaque lining, reflected moving images with perfect quality. So: a curtain as acoustic tool, space-definer, and flexible cinema. I particularly liked the softness and almost ethereal quality of the "screen" material in combination

with the immateriality of the medium of film, actually each time a kind of miracle how with rays of light images fly straight through the air to strike a plane, and in this case onto a soft, slightly swaying, almost indefinable material that simultaneously absorbs the images and passes them through to the other side. For the Diana und Aktaion exhibit at the Kunstpalast in Dusseldorf (2008) we created two sinuous curtains that meandered through the exhibition spaces as integral part of the exhibit, reenforcing the theme of the installation through its materialization and strategic transparency.

ŽR: Is it possible to define private and public space in architecture beyond ideological preconditioning? Are the "interspaces" or "spaces within spaces" you create, in some sense, de-ideologized spheres focused on exploring new possibilities?

ALM: Interesting question. Let me try to rephrase: what would the precondition of a space be before it is labelled as private or public? Do we create spaces that are somehow in-between, removed from ideology, or given a possible new status? Unintentionally, we might have created spaces within gardens or interiors where you can feel protected or secluded while inside a very public building or park. Being surrounded by hedges, screened by tall grass, or standing within a dense circular forest can be a space that is hard to define or pin down. In our exhibition designs, one can stand between a sea of floating vitrines or be trespassing an enfilade of transparent screens. Both scenarios can disorient or create the feeling of being in another dimension that is neither here nor there.

PB: To come back on your words "de-ideologized spheres," I think it is important to state that it all depends on the situation: we sometimes feel like taking our interventions out of the system of prescribed intentions, and sometimes we purposely pick up on the intended ideology when we feel there is a lack that can be enriched.

ŽR: How would you define architectural elements like curtains in terms of their mediatory role? Can we even speak of mediation, or should this relationship be understood in a different way?

ALM: In one way, curtains can have a mediatory role, in the sense that they facilitate many things and act as a welcome connector. Technically

speaking, they filter light, enhance acoustics, influence climatological conditions, define spaces. Emotionally, a curtain introduces tactility, memory, and cultural and generational connection. Socially speaking, they create privacy, invite for gatherings, or divide a space or a group of people into segments. Curtains are intermediary objects between space and architecture, between mass and void, defining the contra-form, the empty space.

PB: The word "mediation" sounds a bit fashionably sensitive. It is true that we often play an intermediary role, functioning as diplomats in complex situations, navigating between opposing mentalities and expectations. But often we are much more "activist" than the word "mediation" implies. We assert independent identities, challenging the architecture, the architect, the client, and the users with our interventions—bringing the viewer off balance or introducing moments of surprise.

ŽR: Your work in designing open spaces involves dynamic elements, such as the incorporation of biological components (vegetation) that are subject to seasonal changes. How would you articulate the processual nature of your approach?

ALM: A landscape is a process which is never finished. A landscape design is a forward-looking document predicting what will happen in at least the coming 50 years. We embrace natural processes and lately also try to visualize them, not only in drawings but also in moving images. Through our collaborations with ecologists, we have been advised to introduce very young plants to a site, or even to just "invite" local plants and weeds to settle in a specifically created condition—allowing them to grow more durably and healthily, and letting wind and rain shape them into their naturalistic look. Learning to let go of control and to predict gradual transitions between landscape conditions, rather than prescribing a fixed image of a landscape, means that working in the landscape today is all about processes, and that is what we facilitate with our current designs.

PB: Contrary to the static of architecture, nature is indeed dynamic. The incorporation of biological components, such as vegetation, has a counter timeline to, for instance, in comparison to curtains, in the sense that textile works are installed in a perfect final state, after which they

slowly degrade. Man-made nature's development, on the other hand, only starts after implementation, slowly growing towards its "final state" (imagined by the designers). Its success and survival depends on many different and often uncontrollable factors, such as urban density, air and water quality, wind turbulence, light levels, waste management, damage caused by animals and humans, and maintenance quality. This makes the introduction of "nature" into a project complex, time-consuming, often frustrating, but also fascinating (almost addictive!) all at the same time.

ŽR: In this context, could we also speak about the dynamic nature of the very concept of sustainability, which plays an important role in your work?

ALM: Yes, it's all about dynamism, adapting to changing conditions, a changing climate, and thus introducing the element of flexibility in forms of use and circumstances over time. A large percentage of our landscape projects is projected on roofs, as full soil conditions in the urban context are scarce. We try to mimic the natural soil condition by using water retention systems allowing the roots and their capillary properties to develop well, making the entire green package future-proof. There are smart controls that are in contact with the weather forecast and can automatically release water before heavy rainfall or supply extra water during dry periods. Besides this high-tech solution, we also have better control of the soil build-up itself and its nutritional quality. Apart from creating conditions that allow plants and trees to develop their root systems horizontally sufficiently to be connected below ground, our "Living Soil" research is giving us more grip on the importance and the role of living organisms in the soil. The number and diversity of living organisms indicate the soil's condition and help capture more CO2, nitrogen, and nutrients for the roots, expressed above ground in healthy plant growth. Diving into this subject gives us tools to create regenerative landscapes which are not only attractive to look at but also influence the underground layers, their conservation, and their healthy development. "Plants are the only organisms that connect the ground to the atmosphere, the soil to the climate."[1] This immediate relation between soil and atmosphere is a topic we are elaborating on. It is an opportunity to find deeper meaning.

[1] R. S. Elkin, *Plant Life: The Entangled Politics of Afforestation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis / London, 2022, p. 3.

PB: The aspect of sustainability has always been important for us, but in this time and age, when our globe is in urgent need of strategic thinking and fruitful global collaboration to heal and improve our planet and the health of all living things (with COVID and global warming as dramatic warnings), the necessity for sustainability is clear to everybody. Too bad that the current wars are slowing down initiatives and reducing available budgets.

What is new in our work is that we aim to make life inside the soil visible in the form of drawings. With the help of scientists—each with their own specialism—whom we invite to our studio, we are taught how every living ingredient functions and what it looks like, so that we can visualize it. This visualization has already become a valuable tool for many parties internationally, inspiring and educating people outside our *métier*.

ŽR: You recently published a book titled *Art Applied*. How do you understand the concept of "applied" art, especially in the context of architecture?

PB: "Applied Art" is more conventional and refers to handicraft or mass-produced work. Art *Applied*, on the contrary, is the connection between a free spirit and a controlled context. It refers to the creation of unique pieces that fulfil a certain necessary function, applied to a given framework.

ŽR: What role does collective work on projects play in your approach?

PB: We cherish and stimulate collaborations with specialists and colleagues from various backgrounds (this is the case within Inside Outside as well), as this enriches and challenges our intelligence, perspective, knowledge, and creativity, raising the results that emanate from this collective process to a higher and deeper level. It also opens up special friendships.

ALM: Collaboration provides a sense of connection and belonging to a team with a shared goal. We realized this together! We went through it together! Sometimes architectural and landscape projects can last more than a decade; during this time the team itself develops, politics and economic circumstances change, and each individual goes through different

phases of their life. Overcoming and adjusting to all this strengthens the sense of community (in this case, the design team).

ŽR: In your book *Art Applied*, you note that certain materials in architecture have specific traditions of application. For instance, curtains are traditionally understood as opposing the "masculine" principle, carrying the signature of the "feminine." Can specific materiality already point to a particular symbolic order, such as the mentioned binary?

PB: Architecture used to be seen as masculine (read: strong, confident, and decisive), and our work with textiles and gardens as feminine (read: sensitive, thoughtful, and accommodating). In our time we see much more sliding scales between the *cliché* of masculine and feminine. In this sense, our work can just be considered an intelligent tool that performs both technically and aesthetically, connecting all cultures and generations through their recognizable presence in the human environment, both inside and outside.

ALM: Our work is fluid, always in movement and free. There is not much labeling in an interdisciplinary result.

ŽR: Your architectural interventions in space seem to challenge conventional notions of the functionality of certain spaces. However, it also appears that this is not simply about repurposing or introducing a new function but about opening space for new interpretations.

PB: Indeed, that is correct.

ALM: We see some of our designs as "inventions." They happen because of the liberty we take to experiment without being bound to "what has already been proven" or the framework of a certain profession and because of our disinterest in following the latest trends and work of other designers. We keep inventing the wheel with each new given context and program, and this is important, as challenging ourselves keeps us curious and energetic, in addition to introducing innovation and originality.

ŽR: Your work is often exhibited in art spaces, such as Luma Westbau in Zurich, sometimes in group exhibitions, where its reading can shift from an architectural gesture to an autonomous artwork. Are you aware of this shift, and if so, do you consider it significant to your practice?

PB: Yes, of course this is significant to our practice. It symbolizes the many faces of our work, the different forms of intervention and thinking directions. Normally, our work is about reacting to and commenting on the context in which we are invited to participate, so it is sometimes a great relief if we can be free to create just for the sake of creating.

ŽR: Hybridity and transiency seem to play an important role in your work, particularly in projects that involve natural processes and the element of time. Do you see a connection between these aspects of your practice and similar tendencies in contemporary art, such as in the work of Pierre Huyghe?

PB: I love his work, but I don't feel there is an actual connection, because, first of all, there is a huge difference between the means available to artists and those reserved for architects and designers. Secondly, our work on gardens and landscape has shifted considerably from "design" to biology, with the health of soil and the biodiversity of all its inhabitants as focal points, increasing the distance and decreasing financial support even more. This might change, but until now this has been the case. So, we can talk about creative affinity and acknowledge the fact that we appreciate green inside an art building and that we certainly use similar ingredients in our work—but we were never invited to create a temporary landscape inside a gallery.

ALM: Something I admire in Huyghe's work is its experimentation with reality, blurring fact and fiction. He makes highly controlled, sculptural collages that have an impact because of their clarity and directness. For me, this relates slightly to our curtain designs, where we decontextualize existing materials, assemble them—almost as a "collage"—and experiment with a range of techniques to thus create new typologies. But for the rest, we are worlds apart, as our work is about functionality and about answering a multitude of given requirements and regulations, including the technical complexities that go with it.

Interview conducted by Željko Radinković and Saša Karalić.