Collages, History or *ready-mades*.
On the politics of representation in
the age of neoliberalism

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In the 2016 monographic number devoted by "El Croquis" to the work of Sergison Bates, Alejandro Zaera-Polo wrote an essay where he tried to systematise and explain contemporary trends by the means of a «global architecture political compass», in «an attempt to use a number of emergent practices as indexes of a new structuring of the field» (Zaera-Polo 2016, p. 255) and its forms of resistance to the implications of neoliberal political economy. In the Venn Diagram that illustrates the article, inspired by Charles Jencks infamous diagram in *Architecture 2000*, Zaera-Polo maps a series of practices (roughly) sharing the same generation (Fig. 1). Among these stands the name of Brussels-based office *Baukunst,* which is listed amidst "revisionists", "new historicists" and "constitutionalists". Taking this scheme as a pretext to revisit *Baukunst*'s early collages (from within the office's archive), this article aims not only to provide a larger intellectual frame to *Baukunst*'s work, but mostly to consider its specificity as a counterpoint to some of its apparently closer peers in the international architectural scene. Departing from its *Miesian* roots, up to reading the works of Caruso St-John, Office KGDVS, DOGMA and Fala, this article ultimately intends to present an alternative and critical reading of Zaera-Polo's compass.

I.

Technical and procedural in nature, a collage belongs simultaneously to the realms of the material and of the ideological. To put it in clearer terms, a collage is both an instrumental and a conceptual operation. As an instrument for architectural representation, collages are effectively and successfully used, at least, since Mies Van der Rohe's early work. The relationship of the latter with this technique, which acquired such im-

portance that it recently deserved the dedication of a whole monograph to it (Beitin, Eiermann and Franzen 2017), incarnates a paradigmatic difficulty in separating these two dimensions of the process. In fact, «for a long time, representation was the only possible conduit for Mies to present his ideas on connecting architecture, technology and industry» (Franzen 2017, p. 47).
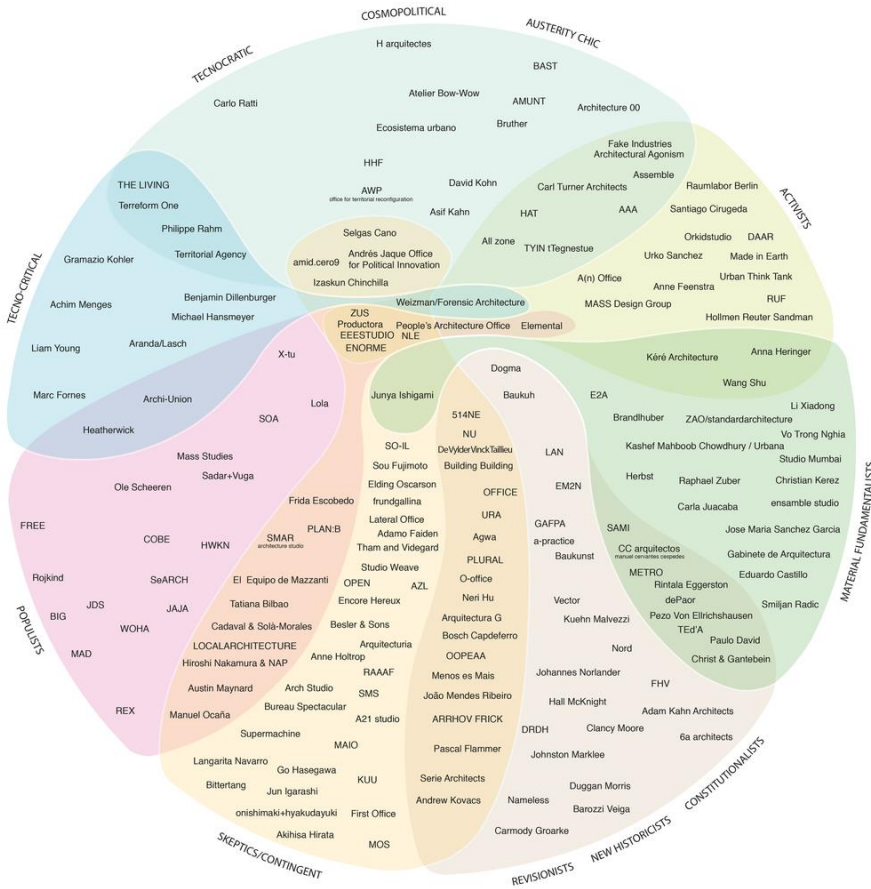

Fig. 1: Alejandro Zaera-Polo, *2016 Global Architecture Political Compass*, 2016

Retracing the career-long span that comprises Mies's work with collages, one realises that, even though the technique remains the same in principle, the expression of these images varies according to the architect's concerns and attitude towards the project. Prefiguring late century's digital renderings photorealism, Mies's earlier photomontages for the *Bi-*

smarck Monument (1910), made from model pictures, although a stepping-stone in the direction of abstraction, still reveal the figurative mark of his neoclassical filiation. On the other hand, in accordance to the *Zeitgeist*, the following collages for *Friedrichstrasse* and *Glass Skyscrapers* projects (1922) -made from charcoal drawings and model pictures respectively- begin to acquire an expressionist aura. At that time, Mies explained in an untitled article written for "Frülicht":

The novel constructive principle of these buildings comes clearly into view if one employs glass for the no longer load-bearing exterior wall. The use of glass, however, necessitates new approaches. In my design for the skyscraper at the Friedrichstrasse railroad station in Berlin, intended for a triangular site, a prismatic form corresponding to the triangle appeared to offer the right solution for this building, and I angled the respective façade fronts slightly towards each other to avoid the danger of an effect of lifelessness that often occurs if one employs large glass panels. (Van der Rohe 1991, p. 240)

Consequently, the collages illustrate these efforts to explore the latent material expressiveness in a *Glasarchitektur,* praised in the meanwhile by Paul Scheerbart (1914), by using geometry, depth, light, shadow and reflections to build design images. As Adrian Sudhalter puts it, «much as a painting freed of its representational function begins to signify differently -its own constituent parts coming to the fore- the new building becomes similarly abstract; it represents nothing beyond its own materials, structure, form, and mode of representation on the two-dimensional plane» (Sudhalter 2017, p. 76).

Finally, if one takes a second leap forward to the *Resor House* (1937-38), architecture becomes represented by its absence (Fig. 2). Charcoal drawings or models pictures are replaced by light, concise graphite lines, which seem to disappear into the *beige* paper, inverting the drawing inside-out in order to privilege the reading of the background and bring it to the fore. Previously used as an instrument to tune and illustrate the contradictory image of the new architectonic object facing its older neighbourhood, the *Resor House* images reflect an epistemological shift in Mies's understanding of architecture. Now filled with landscape pictures, material textures and artistic cut-outs, these collages speak of an architecture which, rather than being seen as an autonomous object, is now understood as a system connecting to a broader context, in face of which it plays a seemingly secondary role: an infrastructure in which life may take place.

Fig. 2: Mies Van der Rohe, *Resor House, project (Jackson Hole, Wyoming)*, 1939

Actually, this shift was already being theoretically built for over a decade. The year before the completion of the *German Pavilion* for the *Barcelona International Exposition* in 1929, Mies Van der Rohe had written:

The building art [*Baukunst*] is for me not a subject for clever speculation. I do not expect anything from theories and specific systems. But particularly nothing from an aesthetic attitude that merely touches the surface. The building art can only be unlocked from a spiritual centre and can only be understood as a living process.
The building art [*Baukunst*] is man's spatial dialogue with his environment and demonstrates how he asserts therein and how he masters it. For this reason, the building art is not merely a technical problem nor a problem of organisation or economy. The building art is in reality always the spatial execution of spiritual decisions» (Van der Rohe 1995, p. 299).

For Mies, architecture was not only a house for the body, but for the spirit. In this sense, the dissolution of the object against the sublime landscape, which occupied the central focus of *Resor House*'s collages, combined with Paul Klee's *Colourful Meal* (1928) and the warm substance of a wood veneer cut-out, incorporated and embodied this metaphysical approach to architecture with a striking economy of means. Describing the influence that Mies had on their own work, Alison & Peter Smithson precisely highlighted this "charged void": in other words, his capacity to en-

vision the building as something larger than itself, enabling it to silently charge the space within *and* around it with connective possibilities, in a way that until then was not recognised as architecture (Smithson 1994, p. 16, 139). This stance would eventually lay the theoretical foundations for Mies's concept of the universal space, which would reach its zenith in the ruling grid of the ITT Campus in Chicago. Once again, collage succeeded in crystallising the battleground of Mies's subjectivity.

II.

If, at the beginning of the XX century, collages became a current practice within the artistic *milieu* -from Picasso or Braque's cubist collages to the avant-garde Dada movement-, as well as in the architectural avant-garde -such as El Lissitzky, Gustav Klucis or Lázló Moholy-Nagy- of which Mies was no stranger (Neumann 2017, p. 60), the same may be said about the architectural scene at the beginning of the XXI. According to Sam Jacob, at the beginning of this century one has entered the age of "post-digital drawing", in which visual space became once again significant in and of itself, as it did for long during the history of the discipline: from Ledoux to the protagonists of *Architettura Radicale;* from Piranesi to "paper architects" such as Liebeskind, Hadid or Koolhaas at the beginning of their careers. As he puts it:

One reading of recent architectural history is that as those paper architects began to build, drawing became less and less important. With the rise of technology, drawing as a significant architectural act withered away. And as it did, so too did the connection to drawing as a core disciplinary act rather than an expedient way to communicate architecture. Yet at the moment that the architectural drawing seemed consigned to the dustbin of history, a different generation found in its very anachronism the possibility of an alternative. (Jacob 2017)

This is one of the common marks that Zaera-Polo identifies as a reaction to the implications of neoliberalism in architectural production since the 1990s, with its ostentatious and hyper-realistic renderings. Fitting his grand narrative of resistance, while he is «sure that drawings do not imply in any way a disdain for built work, there is a clear notion that they are an all-important instrument of thought, unlike those renderings that are produced by increasingly sophisticated for-hire specialists, whose primary aim is to produce an illusion, *épater la bourgeoisie*, affect or emo-

tion *versus* thought» (Zaera-Polo 2016, p. 271). In this return to drawing, which sought to reinforce the demonstration of disciplinary autonomy as an alternative act of resistance, collage reacquired special importance as a technique used by studios with not-so-similar intentions such as DOGMA, OFFICE (Kersten Geers David Van Severen) or even, more recently, FALA atelier.

Nonetheless, one shall be careful when drawing a conclusion about the true meaning of this alternative. As Byung-Chul Han brightly seeks to explain with the concept of "psychopolitics" (Han 2017), in a stage of cyclical crises where austerity becomes ideological, contemporary capitalism preserves its power by seducing the mind. It encourages citizens to feel a sense of opportunities waiting to be seized, as well as an all-encompassing ambition to succeed and satisfy their own desires. Workers become "entrepreneurs-of-the-self", in charge of every aspect of a life managed like a business, obliged to invest and make the most from the scarce means they (sometimes get indebted to) possess. In economics, this is known as "human capital", which the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development defines as «the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well being» or, in other words, «the quality of the workforce» (Keeley 2007, p. 30). In the words of the Invisible Committee:

With the theory of human capital, man is less the possessor of an indefinite cluster of capitals—cultural, relational, professional, financial, symbolic, sexual, health— than he is *himself* that cluster. He *is* capital. He constantly arbitrates between increasing what he is as capital, and the fact of selling it in some market or other. He is inseparably the producer, the product, and the seller of the product. Football players, actors, stars, and popular YouTubers are logically the heroes of the era of human capital, people whose value fully coincides with what they are. Microeconomics thus becomes the general science of behaviours, whether this is in commerce, at church, or in love. Everyone becomes an enterprise guided by a constant concern with self-valorisation, by a vital imperative of self-promotion. (Invisible Committee 2017, p. 95)

Evidently, this general law of economics has had repercussions in the labour of architects and their modes of production. As a matter of fact, before praising their intellectual implications, Zaera-Polo reveals another dimension of this renewed interest in drawings, which reveals, as far as one sees it, that this revamping may actually consist not so much in an

emancipation, as rather in an adaptation to neoliberal contingencies. Architectural drawings, he claims, «are again relevant as objects of cult worship and it is common amongst emerging practitioners to in indulge in the production of highly elaborate drawings, but not necessarily to produce building as such but to produce polished images to be distributed in magazines or uploaded to the Internet» (Zaera-Polo 2016, p. 271). As a matter of fact, although it only briefly occupies his review, this observation should be enough for us to reconsider the correlation between this return to drawing and neoliberalism, as well as the subtleties differentiating (at least in their intentions) the previously mentioned practices. For DOGMA, as the name of the studio implies, drawings are a form of commitment with a profound ideological stance. For them, drawings embody both a refuge in the autonomy of architecture and an effort to imagine alternative ways of communal life in a world where, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the capitalist logic of social management has strengthened its hegemony and spread it to virtually every corner of the world, as well as to every nook of intimacy. In other words, the primordial intention of these illustrations is not to act as an alternative to practice. They do not represent missed opportunities to build, as much as they act as drawn fragments of Theory. In the words of Pier Vittorio Aureli, one of its co-founders, «the most challenging efforts within and against capitalism are those born out of "Theory" with a capital T- Theory, that is, not a device aimed at simply reporting on the "reality as found" of the city and its changes every Monday morning, but as a way to establish long-term responsibilities and solid categories by which to counter the positivistic and mystifying ways that social and political developments come to be seen as evolutionary progress» (Aureli 2008, p. 83). On the contrary, as the title of one of their proposals for the transformation of office parks into living and working spaces suggests, for DOGMA *Everyday is Like Sunday* (Fig. 3). This, in turn, is a metaphor claiming that every spoil of capitalist development is a fissure in the system, which is to say, a missed opportunity for something else to emerge. As far as the author is concerned, «[t]he themes and concepts that frame these interventions can be seen as the stepping-stones of a strategy, and thus of a project, that attempts to reinvent the city» (Aureli 2011, p. xiii). In this sense, architecture's autonomy is not envisioned as a tactical retreat from the world, but as a strategic *mis à part* and an instrument for political reorganisation.

Fig. 3: DOGMA, *Every Day Is Like Sunday*, 2015

On the other hand, although they co-authored the masterplan proposal for a new administrative capital in South Korea with DOGMA, OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen place themselves in a more pragmatic and disenchanted position. In the text accompanying the monographic magazine "2G" dedicated to their work, Kersten Geers provided a categorical statement on their own position. For him, it is clear that «Architecture is about making an artefact: a drawing, a model, a plan, a building, a perspective», but «the artefact does not change the world and cannot in itself claim immediate political value» (Geers 2012, p. 163). Nonetheless, he adds:

The artefact -the work- is always connected to its creator, the author of the work. Architecture, as a form of cultural production, revolves around authorship. Its cultural canon is created by the sum of all authors. Each author (not necessarily an individual) takes a position, defends that position through their work and takes, in one way or another, responsibility for the work. [..]. The author can describe his or her desires, point out particular fascinations and distinguish items and issues. At most, one can talk around the artefact. (Geers 2012, p. 163)

In contrast to DOGMA, Kersten Geers is not particularly interested in inscribing his architectural production in any specific political horizon. On the contrary, he focuses on the cultural narrative that each author is able to formulate as a "project", that is, in the «embodiment of the architect's -or the author's- intention» (Geers 2012, p. 164), in a position finally materialised in the architectural object. In OFFICE's case, this takes the form of an "architecture without content", which intends «to investigate the possible architectural strategies left to us if we accept the limits of our field of operations» (Geers 2012, p. 166). As far as the work of OFFICE is concerned, form is understood as the means to establish some internal consistency in a world where the consolidated city has been replaced by extensive urbanisation, and architecture's role and room for political manoeuvre are envisioned as rather limited.

From this perspective, collage seems capable of performing a double function. First, it fulfils the fantasy of the architectural project even before it is built, acting as a "machinery of representation" for its intentions and principles (Fig. 4). Secondly, it creates a strong visual identity, enabling one to establish a clear association between the author with his cultural background, his values, interests and fascinations, and the outcome of his production. At this point, it is no longer difficult to observe another potential correlation between post-digital drawings and neoliberal economy: they are less resistant, but more resilient. To do so, however, one has to frame and reinterpret the role of architecture -as an artistic form of creation- and architects under the light of the contemporary political economy.

In the 1980s, claims Maurizio Lazzarato, «the artist became the model of "human capital", because he embodied the "freedom to create"» (Lazzarato 2014, p. 13). Art was integrated into capitalism and became as much a part of the social division of labour as any other activity: the artist became a specialised professional. As a consequence, he argues, the art market transformed the act of creation and its singularity into the specificity of artistic work: the value being determined by its scarcity, as

well as by the uniqueness of each author. In fact, «in capitalist society, the signature is the affirmation both of (the producer's) identity and property […]. Originality, property, and the signature, the latter of which guarantees the former, are the prerequisites of modern day production and consumption» (Lazzarato 2014, p. 34). Speculation, he concludes, infiltrates the dynamics of artistic production-consumption, with the value of the artwork being mostly determined by the public which, in turn, is the product of cultural authorities such as art critics, museum directors and curators.

Fig. 4: OFFICE KGDVS, *Solo House*, Cretas, 2012

In this sense, if one reconsiders Geers's fixation with the authorial dimension of architectural designs, one begins to realise how OFFICE's collages may play a fundamental role not so much *against,* but mostly *according* to neoliberal strategy. After years during which the sphere of visibility was occupied by *starchitects* and their iconic designs and rather expensive 3d renderings, young emerging practices were forced to find an alternative way into this market. Moreover, this generation of emerging architects was forced to build the foundation of their practice during a period when economic decline was on the horizon and a new ideologi-

cal apparatus was on the rise as the primal instrument of mass subjecti-
vation: the Internet, with its constant urge for novelty images[1].

To retrieve a form of expression such as collage -historically charged and
reverberating the weight of disciplinary predecessors-, combined with
the use of powerful artistic references -such as Ed Ruscha, David Hock-
ney or Henry Rousseau- offered a viable and effective means of keeping
up with the terms of this new age: building a coherent and unique visual
identity, while giving an impression of resistance and of a vast cultural
background. For younger studios, this represented the possibility to re-
veal -in spite of an otherwise modest evidence of work -their true poten-
tial, which is to say, their latent value as human capital. In OFFICE's work,
the implications of these socioeconomic contingencies reached an ideo-
logical level, merging form and content into one of their signature
moves: an austerity of architectural gestures, an "economy of means"
(Geers, Van Severen and Walker 2012).

In other words, the collage technique provided them both with the
means to compete for notoriety in the media space, as much as to in-
crease their symbolic capital among academic and professional peers.
Besides, in comparison to hyper-realistic images, the production of digi-
tal collages is rather easy and inexpensive, particularly if one considers
the basic *Photoshopping* skills required (allowing one to engage cheaper
unskilled labour), the ease of cracking the kind of software needed and
the contemporary hyperconnectivity to a free and virtually infinite data-
base of online images. These characteristics allowed for small offices to
produce more at a higher pace, despite the meagre means they eventu-
ally possessed.

The case of FALA Atelier -a young studio based in Porto, who started its
production in parallel to their work in other offices- assumes paradig-
matic contours considering how quickly they became nationally and in-
ternationally known: «their output almost seems excessive, with work
being produced at such a fast rate that it immediately catches the atten-
tion of specialist publications and websites. It is an example of the swift

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[1] Both OFFICE and DOGMA were founded in 2002, five years before the beginning of a
global financial crisis that led to a period known as Great Recession. Younger practices,
who have built upon their work, sharing (in different degrees) intellectual and visual affini-
ties with these -such as *Baukuh* (2004) Point Supreme (2008), Piovene Fabi (2013) or FALA
Atelier (2013), just to name a few-, have experienced this systemic recession and ideologi-
cal austerity during their early years. Parallel to this, it is relevant to remark that social net-
works like Facebook (2004), Tumblr (2007) and Instagram (2010) were also launched during
this period.

and business-like performance of the generation of "Millennials"» (Moreno and Seixas Lopes 2019, p. 670), which was born and raised under neoliberalism. Building upon a common taste previously instituted by studios like OFFICE and their generational peers, this easiness was a direct consequence of its "naive" reproducibility, emptied of any political appeal. «We are always stealing from the Internet, so it is only fair for us to be copied, and actually quite nice – it's an ecosystem after all», claims Filipe Magalhães, one of its founders (Mollard 2016). After all, «the *credibility* of a discourse is what first makes believers act in accord with it. It produces practitioners. To make people believe is to make them act. But by a curious circularity, the ability to make people act -to write and to machine bodies- is precisely what makes people believe» (De Certeau 1988, p. 218).

III.

As aforesaid in the first lines of this article, however, Alejandro Zaera-Polo does not situate the work of *Baukunst* -a Belgian office from the same generation as OFFICE- among the "pragmatist" and the "sceptical"[2], but rather within a "revisionist", "neohistoricist" and "constitutionalist" tendency (Fig. 5). An ensemble of architects which, according to the author's reasoning, «intensif[ies] their use of historical references to create an even stronger argument of resistance against the superficiality of the super-modern world of militant, late-capitalist globalisation» (Zaera-Polo 2016, p. 269). An attitude which, much like OFFICE's sceptical pragmatism, would embody an iconoclastic reaction against the exaggerations of '90s and early 2000s architecture and its submission to market desires and deliriums, but seeking refuge in a more conservative mood.

If one takes into consideration the set of architectural practices included in this category, it does not feel inappropriate to claim that a figurehead of this generation is the London-based office Caruso St. John, for which the disciplinary, ideological compass is always pointing to the referential

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[2] It is important to note that the author himself warns that most of these practices' are fluid in their approach, sharing characteristics with practices in different regions of the spectrum, as well as considerable differences with practices within the same category. DOGMA, for instance, due to its historical materialist approach to disciplinary autonomy, is placed among "neohistoricists". On the other hand, even though being primarily placed among "sceptics" and "pragmatists", OFFICE's work is referred along the lines of the essay as having strong affinities with this historiographical approach.

value of history. Writing about the early days of his joint practice with Peter St. John, Adam Caruso wrote that:

The point of these and a great many other references was to try to capture a sense of character that we thought the project could have, and there didn't have to be simply one. [...]. In those early days, we used them in lectures and in exhibitions to explain an intellectual and cultural basis to our work and also to lend a weight that was otherwise lacking in our tentative and still not numerous projects. [...]. Our interest is instrumental in that we want to better understand the emotional effects of different languages of architectures, and the different material assemblies that have been employed to speak those languages. This is not so different from what architects have always done, studying classicism to choose precisely the appropriate Corinthian order, doing the same with the Gothic to replicate the intensity of its bounded forms and worked surfaces» (Caruso 2015, p. 74).

Fig. 5: Baukunst, *House on a Hill*, 2009

From this passage, one may conclude that history is considered from an ambivalent point of view. On one hand, regarding its operative value, it is considered as a way of ensuring the transmission of Architecture's specific knowledge: a vast repertoire of forms and techniques accumulating

an inexhaustible amount of experience to which the architects may refer to and resort to in order to solve their problems. On the other hand, history is seen as an opportunity to situate their projects within a disciplinary genealogy, profiting from the authority conceded by history and collective memory to gain credibility and validate their own designs.

Once again, this means that Zaera-Polo's hypothesis lacks an alternative counter-reading, a proper critique of neoliberal ideology. After all, if the positions of OFFICE and Caruso St. John are distant in their aesthetical achievement, they do not look so apart in their implications: history may work as a stoic form of resistance, as well as an opportunistic form of resilience and self-valorisation. As Agamben puts it «History, as we know it up to now, has been no more than it own incessant putting off, and only at the point in which its pulsation is brought to a halt is there any hope of grasping the opportunity enclosed within it before it gets betrayed into becoming one more historical-epochal adjournment». What gets lost in this petty calculation, he proceeds, «is precisely the one incomparable claim to nobility our own era might legitimately make in regard to the past: *that of no longer wanting to be a historical epoch*. [...]. It is precisely this that gets lost in the blind will of our time to be at all costs an epoch, even if it be the epoch of the impossibility of being an epoch, indeed, the age of nihilism» (Agamben 1995, p. 87-8).

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The competition entry for the Museum of Fine Arts, which *Baukunst* co-authored with Caruso St. John in 2015, could have acted a shortcut for this categorisation. Nonetheless, this specific project seems to have passed unrecognised by both offices -precisely, one would argue, due to disagreements experienced during the design process concerning the pertinence and use of historical references-, thus having virtually no public visibility. If for both studios the history of architecture is seen as a potential repertoire of forms and situations to be summoned, Caruso St. John's approach relies on *mimesis* and formal interpretation as means to learn and reproduce ways of conceiving and making architecture; while for *Baukunst*, its value resides in the possibility to salvage fragments whose renewed relevance is given by the way in which they are used as ready-mades, and literally re-assembled.

Indeed, taking into account the deliberately silent, -virtually nonexistent-, presence of *Baukunst*'s work in the media sphere during its first years of

existence, one shall only speculate about the specific reading that led Zaera-Polo to include *Baukunst* in the neohistoricist lineage of his chart. Up until 2014, when an article about what was, by then, the only finished building of *Baukunst*'s portfolio -a structure and a garden in Quatre-Vents, Molenbeek- was published in the renowned Japanese magazine "A+U #529", the exposure of the studio's work was mostly limited to the scope of small collective exhibitions and local specialist publications, namely the regular disclosure of public competitions results and its respective applicants' designs made by "A+", an architecture magazine from Belgium. On his side, Adrien Verschuere -the architect who founded *Baukunst* in 2008- does not have a habit of writing about his or others' work. In fact, it was not until March 2015 that he gave the first lecture on his own studio's work (DeSingel, Antwerp); or until July 2015, when he gave an international workshop (Porto Academy), revealing the kind of work he had been developing with his students. Finally, the first article critically framing the work of *Baukunst* was not written until September 2015, when a monographic folder about the studio, published in "Accattone #2", included the essay *Models. Structure, Infrastructure, Archetypes* (Montenegro 2015).

Notwithstanding, outwardly supporting the decision of Zaera-Polo, what all of these public interventions manifested in common, illustrated as they were by uncanny pictures and collages of the studio's work, was an undeniable relationship with the history of architecture: not only in their essence but, even more blatantly, in their appearance. In *Quatre-Vents* (2009), through a transformation in scale and material[3], Mies's *50x50 House* was finally built as a monumental porch for an introvert public garden. In *Spa* (2009), the second project built by the studio, the roof conceived by Mies for a "universal space", -which had already been used in the competition for a travelling theatre (2008)-, was used to unify the scattered and heterogeneous fragments of this polyvalent infrastructure. In the unbuilt proposal for the Fine Arts Museum in Verviers (2011), a collage shows Vasari's Galleria degli Uffizi without its façade, in order to reveal a lush garden whose presence would become as important as the exhibited works of art (Fig. 6). Digging deeper into *Baukunst*'s archives, reaching private commissions which have rarely seen the media spotlights, one finds design proposals for a house made from the plinth of da

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[3] In fact, in the original scheme, the structure was conceived in steel like the *50x50 House*. However, due to a last-minute effort to meet budgetary constraints, its design had to be reformulated in concrete.

Sangallo's Villa Medicea di Poggio in Caiano (which lost its classical *villa* to give place to a modernist *toit-terrasse*), or another one where the winter garden of Scharoun's Schminke House's ground floor was added to the Farnsworth House in order to solve its chronicle inhospitality. Seemingly combining a radical literalness with a *blasé,* almost disrespectful, attitude towards the formal integrity of those buildings, the affinity of *Baukunst* with history becomes not so evident to understand. Yet, the least one may claim with a high degree of assertiveness is that this affinity does not embody a reverential or even historiographical approach, let alone a historicist one.

Fig. 6: Baukunst, *Fine Arts Museum in Verviers*, 2011

First, in order to fully grasp the scope of the studio's use and abuse of historical references, it is necessary to recognise the virtues of a text which has played a key role in Adrien Verschuere's way of thinking, and which constantly reappears in his teaching curriculums: Oswald Mathias Ungers's *Morphologie: City Metaphors*. According to him,

There are three basic levels of comprehending physical phenomena: first, the exploration of pure physical facts; second, the psychological impact on our inner-self; and third, the imaginative discovery and reconstruction of phenomena in order to conceptualise them. If, for instance, designing is understood purely technically, then it results in pragmatic functionalism or in mathematical formulas. If designing is exclusively an expression of psychological experiences, then

only emotional values matter, and it turns into a religious substitute. If, however, the physical reality is understood and conceptualised as an analogy to our imagination of that reality, then we pursue a morphological design concept, turning it into phenomena which, like all real concept, can be expanded or condensed; they can be seen as polarities contradicting and complementing each other, existing as pure concepts in themselves like a piece of art. (Ungers 2012, p. 8-9)

Under this assumption, Ungers argued that design should find its relevance mostly on the third level. Like many other forms of thought, its specificity consists in a fundamental process of conceptualisation which, in itself, is able to transform diverse and unrelated elements of reality through the use of images, metaphors, analogies, models, signs, symbols and allegories, which compose ductile matter giving form to imagination. Metaphors, for instance, enable one to transform actual events into figurative expressions, evoking images to replace abstract notions for something more descriptive and illustrative. This comparison, he argues, is mostly done through a creative leap that enables one to tie different objects together, thus producing something, which is larger than the sum of the parts and already constitutes a new entity. In practice, what this process represents is actually a transition from thinking in qualitative values rather than quantitative data, or in a way based on synthesis rather than on analysis. For this, historical models are used as already built prototypes of the situations one aims to achieve: «a theoretical complexity in itself, which either brings a visual form or a conceptual order into the components of complex situations» (Ungers 2012, p. 11).
Thereby, one shall understand that *Baukunst* works with images, rather than with history properly said. Their work is closer to Walter Benjamin's beliefs "on the concept of history" when he wrote, in 1940, that «the past can be seized only as an image that ashes up at the moment of it recognisability, and is never seen again. […] Articulating the past historically does not mean recognising it in "the way it really was". It means appropriating a memory as it ashes up in a moment of danger». And every age, he concluded, «must thrive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it» (Benjamin 2006, p. 390-91).
For *Baukunst*, this moment of danger corresponds not only to the specific questions raised by each of its projects but, above all, to more prominent and general issues concerning our contemporaneity. If one takes into consideration more recent collages, such as the one for a community centre in Tongre Notre-Dame (2014), with its precast industrial beams and all the (high and low) technological paraphernalia sitting on top of its

roof, one realises that *Baukunst*'s models are not necessarily rooted in history. At least, not within the history of the architectural discipline, for they may equally arise from the history of science and technology. Collage is the "technique-made-concept" which allows every piece of conflictive information to find its place into the architects' workspace, and architecture to move into the ultimate symbol of collage: the cyborg; «a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality [as] lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction» (Haraway 2016, p. 5) for a Humanity which may no longer separate nature from culture, or art from technology.

Baukunst's collages, much like Mies's, show an interest in dissolving architecture's authorial dimension and highlighting the *architecture* existing beyond itself. Contrary to what one may unadvisedly conclude, this actually reveals a will to reinforce architecture's disciplinary autonomy in contrast to its contemporary drift towards the bureaucratic realm of project management. In other words, it assumes a disciplinary commitment by renewing its specificity as an agent whose role is to synthesise other's knowledge; while aiming to prove, once again, that "everything is architecture" (Hollein 1968).

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But if the concept-image of the cyborg may be used to open new social relations, as well as being employed as an instrument to enforce and reinforce the current ones, what, then, could be the element of resistance learnt from *Baukunst*'s collages *within* and *against* neoliberalism?

In 1968, when he wrote his famous essay *La mort de l'auteur*, Roland Barthes concluded with the following words: «nous savons que, pour rendre à l'écriture son avenir, il faut en renverser le mythe: la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'Auteur» (Barthes 1968). In this line of thought, what distances *Baukunst* from its generational peers is precisely its literal use of historical and non-historical models. A methodological approach which ultimately stages its suicidal performance as an author.

For this reason, even if Marcel Duchamp is not one of Verschuere's professed *compagnons de route*, its ready-made use of history is *Baukunst*'s most powerful attribute. Not its work, *per se*, but rather the mechanism through which *Baukunst* produces architecture; which is to say, its work

understood as a process of subjectivation. As far as one understands it, the question is not so much about reproducing and displacing an already existing object, but what it means in terms of thought and labour. On the one hand, according to Duchamp himself, the ready-made is «"a work with no artist required to make it." It is above all an "act of defiance [...] an undeification" of the artist which lowers its "status in society instead of elevating him, of making him something sacred» (Duchamp, cited in Lazzarato 2014, p. 20). Ready-made is not merely an object, nor an image; it embodies a modality of simultaneous de-subjectivation and re-subjectivation. On the other, it is a lazy technique and «[l]azy action is incomparably "richer" than capitalist activity, for it contains possibilities that are not based on economic production (or surplus value), but open to an indefinite becoming which must be constructed, invented, and cultivated» (Lazzarato 2014, p. 41).

Thereby, the artist (or the architect) becomes no longer a creator, in the strict sense of the word, but otherwise a "medium", an interpreter of already existing content. If used properly, one may envision ready-made as a relevant tool to undermine the aspirations of neoliberal capitalism, largely sustained on the exploitation of immaterial labour, as well as its dependency on creativity to monetise intellectual labour (Mould 2018). Contrary to DOGMA, one may finally argue that *Baukunst*'s political relevance is not on the horizon established by their projects and respective representations, but in the way it resets today the role of "the Author as Producer" (Benjamin 1934). Through its work, *Baukunst* shows no intentions in establishing an indulgent, reactionary or revolutionary attitude towards the relations of production of its time. There is, however, even if only latently, «a genuinely structural consideration of the productive role of intellectual activities and, consequently, a series of questions regarding their possible contribution to the development of the relations of production» (Tafuri 1987, p. 288). Anyhow,

The essential point, on every occasion, is not to miss the new epoch already here or about to arrive or which at least might arrive and whose signs are already around us to be deciphered. [...]. This is why we do not want new works of art or thought; we don't want another epoch of culture and society; what we want is to save the epoch and society from wandering in tradition, to grasp the *good* - undefferable and non-epochal- which was contained in them. The undertaking of this task would be the only ethics, the only politics which measures up to the moment." (Agamben 1995, p. 88)

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