
What Role Does Currency Play in the Architecture
Venice Biennale of 2012?

review by Fake Industries Architectural Agonism
(Urtzi Grau, Cristina Goberna)



fig. 1

1

Unlike art biennials, architectural biennials have little impact on the economic value of the materials exhibited. A work of art exhibited at the Venice Biennale of Art immediately increases in price; in the case of a work of architecture exhibited at the Venice Biennale of Architecture, its price mostly remains the same. If there is any change, it is only in the value of its representations—models, drawings, and photographs. Criticism works in similar way. A review of a work of art has an immediate effect on its value, most often a positive one, even in the case of negative criticism. An architectural review rarely changes a building's market value. The inability of a review of an architectural biennale such as this one to influence currency is therefore double. It does not affect the money that lies behind the exhibition, which itself has little effect on the value of the architecture on display.

Yet, architecture on display and money are closely related,

especially in Europe, where the local currency features architectural styles from different periods of the continent's history.¹ Starting with the Classical structures portrayed on the five-euro bill, historical examples approach the present as the value of the bills increases. The ten-euro note uses Romanesque, and the twenty Gothic. Renaissance decorates the fifty-euro bill, and Rococo the one-hundred. The European Central Bank (ECB) titles the illustration on the two-hundred-euro note "the age of iron and glass," referring the industrial architecture of the nineteenth century, and "modern twentieth-century architecture" is featured on the five-hundred-euro bill. In case you are wondering or have never handled the latter, for the ECB, modern architecture of the last century is best represented by corporate curtain-walls and high-tech bridges. The ECB has not only used, but has also recognized, the power of architectural representations. To prevent cross-national jealousies, it decided to avoid representing actual built structures and asked the author of the illustrations, the Austrian Robert Kalina, to "streamline" the historical examples he had chosen. Thus, non-existent works of architecture were specially designed for the bills. They blend multiple architectural examples, and some of them, as Diederik de Koning, Laura van Santen, and Thomas Cattrysse have noted, are even located outside of Europe.² In the end the ECB was simply acknowledging, as expected, that only abstract styles fit the inherent abstraction of the European currency.

This cautionary tale about ECB's belief in the abstract nature of architectural styles may seem like a Shandyian detour within a review of the thirteenth *Mostra Internazionale di Architettura di la Biennale de Venezia*.³ The effect of the ECB's policies on this last Biennale, however, is undeniable. After Silvio Berlusconi's resignation as Italian Prime Minister in November 2011, his substitute, Mario Monti, implemented a package of austerity measures intended to restore market confidence in the Italian economy, coordinated with the International Mone-

tary Fund (IMF) and the ECB. The package included large cuts to the budget of one of the key partners of the Biennale Foundation, the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities. These translated into a reduction of the overall budget of the event that different sources have identified as between 20% and 30% in relation to the previous edition.⁴ If we consider that the financial crisis that triggered the cuts had its roots in the burst of the real-estate bubble—the moment in which architecture stopped being a credible investment—this biennale has been the first one to endure the economic effects of the architecture culture promoted in previous editions.

In this context, the Biennale opened its doors in August 2012 and closed them last November, under the tittle, chosen by its director, the British architect David Chipperfield, “Common Ground.” The brief curatorial statement showed no signs of awareness of such topics. It avoided any reference to current conditions, economic or otherwise. Instead it discussed the possibility of a disciplinary space (a.k.a. architectural culture) as a provocation addressed to the field. The jury responded to Chipperfield’s so-called provocation, eluding any irony. Toyo Ito’s Japanese pavilion, featuring urgent dwelling solutions for the post-2010 tsunami destruction, was awarded the Golden Lion for Best National Participation. Urban-Think Tank and Justin McGuirk’s “Torre David/Gran Horizonte,” an exoticizing documentation of an occupied tower in Caracas, received the Golden Lion for the Best Project of the exhibition. If the members of the jury, which included the architects Wiel Arets, Robert A.M. Stern, and Benedetta Tagliabue, the author Kristin Feireiss, and the journalist Alan Yentob, wanted to contest the curatorial statement, they did so by appealing to two traditional arguments against the insular nature of architectural knowledge: the social responsibility of the field, and the qualities of architecture without architects. Post-bubble architecture and shrinking budgets passed unnoticed. Only the introduction by the Biennale’s President Paolo Baratta tangentially

mentioned the extraordinary efforts of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities. Nobody seemed aware, and yet symptoms of the economic climate were to be found all around the place.

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The event was full of collections. Numerous invitees became curators of their own exhibition. In some cases this attitude was to be expected. The Anglo-American historian Kenneth Frampton presented the self-explanatory “Five North-American Architects as Common Ground,” and Spanish critic Luis Fernández-Galiano brought the installation “Spain Mon-Amour,” featuring fifteen works by ten Spanish offices. This made sense; they were simply presenting the curatorial side of their practice. In other cases, the exceptional status of the invitee was the reason behind the assembly of unlikely objects. The participation of the magazine *San Rocco* entailed an issue called “Collaborations,” which included fifty-one projects by its editors and collaborators. The installation “40,000 Hours” brought together student works from forty different schools of architecture around the globe, while three other schools—Yale, the ETH, and the University of Michigan—enjoyed their own independent exhibitions. The piece “La Ruta del Peregrino” included works by nine different offices along a pilgrimage route in Mexico. The most symptomatic cases, however, were those in which single architects did not show their own work but rather requested fellow architects to do so instead. Alberto Campo Baeza asked sixty colleagues to design a house. Caruso St John organized an exhibition on the work of seven other offices. Diener & Diener, in collaboration with the Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico, invited thirty-three architects, historians, and critics to discuss the spaces of the Biennale. Fashion Architectural Taste (FAT) organized a museum of copies that included three other practices, one of which refused to show their work and invited one-hundred practitioners to do so instead. Valerio Olgiati



fig. 2



fig. 3

selected tens of architects and demanded one or more reference images from each one. Sergison Bates Architects curated an exhibition on social housing that included the works of six other firms. And Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects collected and displayed objects selected by thirty-five fellow travelers. The Biennale turned out to be an endless collection of collections.

The critic Jacob Moore has recently identified the taste for accretion as a contemporary malaise of architectural exhibitions.⁵ “Overdoing it,” as he puts it, has become a common curatorial tactic that complicates the access to information, hoping the audience will be forced to extrapolate their own conclusions. No doubt. Walking through the Biennale one easily concludes that the excess of contents does not always obfuscate the lack of substance—it more often reveals it. Many of these collections neither clarified the value of the exhibited materials, nor were able to state the role played by the strategy of accumulation. Yet, as a strategy, they revealed a common reality: subcontracts. Trifling budgets are not new news in

architectural production. Practitioners have learned to deal with complex conditions of production, especially in the last five years in Europe. Not by chance then, a group of prominently European architects, confronted with a shortage of funds, chose to distribute expenses among friends and foes, outsourcing their participation. The results thus exhibited issues similar to heavily subcontracted construction sites. Sloppy details and a lack of synthetic solutions were counterbalanced with rigid formats: for example, a collection sixty sketches on squared pieces of paper, a collection of tens of small images, a collection of one-hundred sets of A4 formatted photocopies. But standardized frames do not necessarily hide confusion—they *frame* it.

There was another common trend that was perhaps even more revelatory. The collections were mostly displayed on gigantic tables, seventeen just in the rooms of the Arsenale and the Padiglione Centrale. This specific piece of furniture, conceived of to gather around, seems a too perfect metaphor for a Biennale entitled “Common Ground.” Not only does it have the right scale to be exhibited in an interior, as an object the table is both on display and provides display area. But more significant, the tables of the Biennale constructed new grounds—“common,” as the exhibitors’ statements repeatedly read. There, exhibited objects were organized in autonomous constellations. The arrangements followed their own compositional logics, disconnected from the existing ground as much as from the visitors. But these were not operating tables in the Lautréaumontian sense (with the laudable exception of the Serbian pavilion, which was occupied by a single, empty, humongous white table that sliced visitors in half, rendering only their upper body visible). Chance encounters with everyday objects were out of the question. The collections were there merely to be admired. They left no space for accidental conversations since the tables were entirely occupied by representations of conversations. Embracing Chipperfield’s sug-

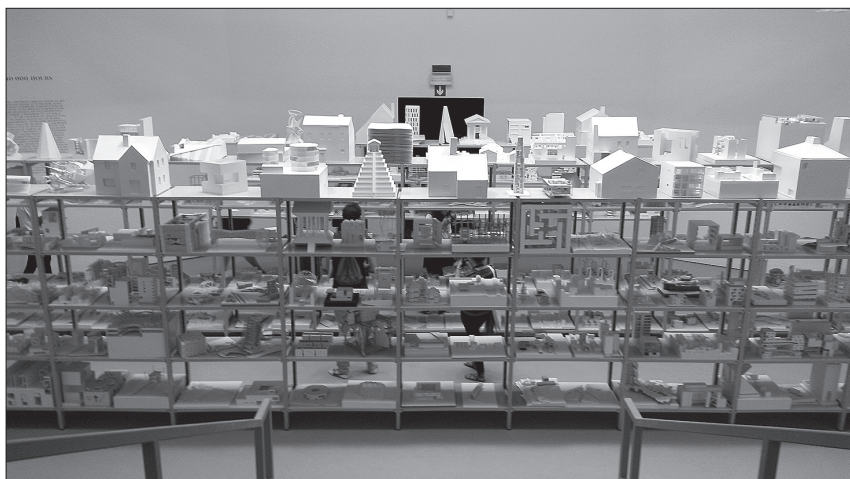


fig. 4

gestion, these tables constructed the *tabulae rasae* on which the curators' versions of architectural culture were safely deployed. The space they constructed was common, but only for the objects placed atop them.

Ironically, the way the tables operated was less revelatory than their multiplication. The previous Biennale, curated by the Japanese architect Kazuyo Sejima, witnessed a proliferation of one-room installations that blurred the differences between art and architecture. The strategy of "one room, one architect, one work" filled the exhibition with full-scale mock-ups, colossal models through which visitors could walk, fragments of buildings and even buildings small enough to fit the rooms of the Arsenale. An improbable collection of *objets trouvés* one could claim, but there were no tables to be seen. This last year, the proliferation of tables ensured a return to more normative architectural formats: regular-sized models, technical drawings, and hand-drawn sketches, proper to the disciplinary focus of the event. This also meant a return to the basics—simple designs with precise uses—if one follows the essentialism that tables have enjoyed in the architectural imaginary. Not by chance do tables play a significant role in the differentiation between

use-value and exchange-value: they are a Marxist icon of a commodity in which use-value is self-explanatory.⁶ In this context, the tables of the Biennale became an involuntary economic statement. Complex financial products obscured architecture's use-value, leaving only exchange-value visible, to be repurposed and distributed in secondary markets through the infamous derivatives. The multiplication of architectural objects with literal use-value seems an unconscious response to the excesses of speculation, an attempt to recover the *real* value of architecture separated from the flows of the market. But this Marxist reading of the Biennale's tables is also self-defeating. The literality of their use-value does not imply a resistance to their fetishization as commodities; it only demonstrates that tables are a didactic example to explain the process that connects architecture and currency.

3

This multiplication of collections and tables points towards the implicit relationships between architecture and money. However, some projects also attempted to explore the contradictions within these relations, particularly in relation to originality. The aforementioned "Museum of Copying" and "Villa Rotunda Redux" by FAT, "The Book of Copies" by *San Rocco*, "Repeat Yourself: Loos" by Ines Weizman, and "Architectural Doppelgänger" by a research cluster at the Architectural Association not only used, but also consciously embraced, reproduction as an architectural topic. Similarly, Bernard Tschumi remade his "Advertisements for Architecture" from 1976–77 with an homonymous title; Robert Burghardt presented a monumental mash-up of modernist masterpieces, entitled "Denkmal für die Moderne (Monument for Modernism);" Case Studio Vogt and the ETH Zurich replicated an existing venetian kiosk located at the intersection of Via Garibaldi and the Riva dei Sette Martiri in "Un-Common Venice"; Cino Zucchi Architetti illustrated the repetition and variations in-

volved in design processes in “Copycat: Empathy and Envy as Form-Makers”; in “The Piranesi Variations,” Eisenman Architects, Dogma, and Jeffrey Kipnis versioned Piranesi’s *Campo Marzio dell’antica Roma*, and in so doing they also reused the techniques of Graziella Lonardi’s “Roma Interrotta” from 1978; and Fulvio Irace’s “Facecity” appropriated the façades of Milanese postwar buildings. In sum, the art of copying emerged in unlikely works.

It was nothing new. Imitation and reproduction have historically fuelled architectural production; what was surprising was the acknowledgement of its use. As with any other creative practice, architecture is subject to a regime of originality. Yet, operations that rely on already produced forms—well-known critical tools in a wide range of artistic production—still remain unabsorbed and even taboo. This denial is probably the reason why architecture is the creative field in which the circulation of knowledge is least regulated. Different from literature, music, or cinema, architecture lacks legal parameters to define plagiarism and misuse of intellectual property. The lucrative business of intellectual rights has not penetrated architecture, though this exceptional condition is being amended. Recent attempts include the late inclusion of architecture in the United States Copyright Law in 1990, and Santiago Calatrava’s legal victory in his suit against the City of Bilbao over an addition to one of his bridges.

The proliferation of voluntary copies at the 2012 Biennale announces an alternative direction. The statements of the above-mentioned works recognized that using—stealing—others’ work is an architectural tool *par excellence*. These techniques are unique. Yes, many artists, especially musicians, are indulging in radical projects of copying, often denouncing how intellectual property law restricts creativity. Profits and legal control of the sources have reduced artists’ ability incorporate previous works into their practices. Yet in the field of architecture, the status of copying, cloning, duplicating, faking,

falsifying, imitating, impersonating, appropriating, reenacting, remaking, remixing, replicating, and reproducing differs from other creative disciplines. Against all odds, the way authorship works within the field has constructed one small space of resistance against market forces. Architects despise copies, refuse to recognize them, and by doing so regulate them. That is why copies at the Biennale can only be described as conservative. They are not an attempt to crack open the contradictions of copyright logic. Instead they preserve the way copying works in architecture by perversely revealing its secret. In this context, the recurrent references to the Biennale’s title imply a completely different reading; one in which the “common” does not denote an autonomous disciplinary realm, but rather the commonness of copies as an active strategy of resistance against the commodification of architectural knowledge. ○

FIGURES

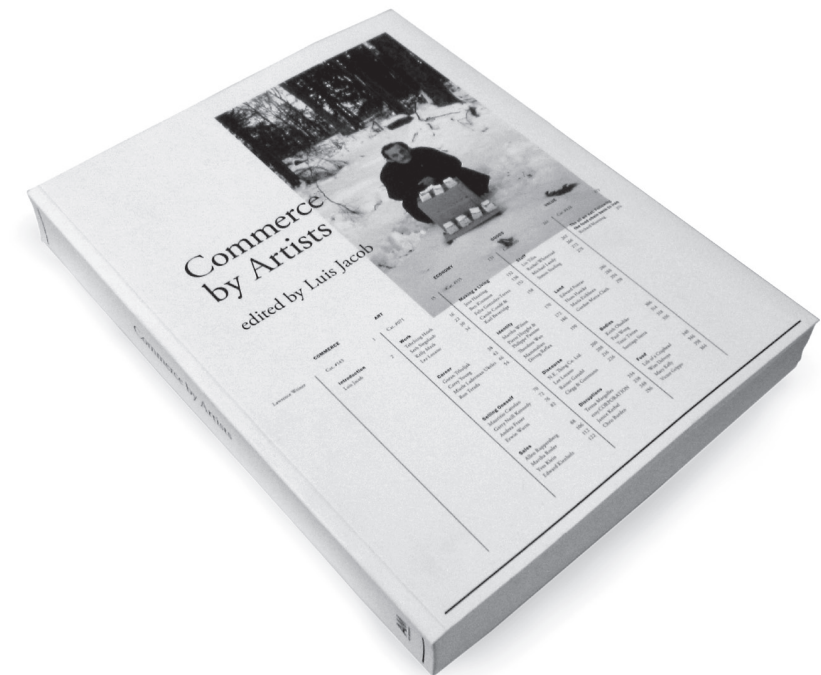
- 1 Caruso St. John, *Pasticcio*
- 2 San Rocco, *Collaborations*
- 3 Diener & Diener and Gabriel Basilico, *Common Pavilions*
- 4 Schools of architecture, *40,000 Hours*

ENDNOTES

- 1 “ECB: Banknotes,” *European Central Bank*, <http://www.ecb.int/euro/banknotes/html/index.en.html>.
- 2 Diederik de Koning, Laura van Santen, and Thomas Cattrysse, “Four Concepts and a Funeral,” *San Rocco* 4 (Summer 2012): 29–35.
- 3 Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, *Gentleman* is a great example of how difficult is to explain anything simply.
- 4 The 13th *Mostra Internazionale di Architettura di la Biennale de Venezia* did not release actual numbers. The percentages cited came up in conversations with agents involved in the curatorial process, who asked not to be identified.
- 5 Jacob Moore, “Past Futures, Present, Futures,” *Domus Web*, <http://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/past-futures-present-futures->.
- 6 See Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” *Capital* vol.1 (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 163–64.

BIO Fake Industries Architectural Agonism (Cristina Goberna and Urtzi Grau) is an architectural office of diffuse boundaries and questionable taste that explores the power of replicas, in the double sense denoted in romance languages—both as literal copies of existing works, and as agonistic responses to previous statements—for the advancement of the field. Goberna and Grau currently teach at Columbia University (GSAPP), Cooper Union, and the Princeton University School of Architecture.

Commerce by Artists
 ED. LUIS JACOB, TORONTO: ART METROPOLE, 2011, 386 PP.
 review by Allan Antliff



Art has long been a framework for radical agency, as attested by the rich history of artists' movements seeking to mobilize creativity for revolutionary ends. Art's conditions of production and its function under existing socio-economic systems (or future imaginaries yet to be realized) have been critiqued, experimented with, subverted, or otherwise transformed, and the process shows no signs of letting up. *Commerce by Artists* explores art's expansion into the realm of economics, specifically focusing on relationships of exchange that are rife with