

Text on exhibition 'Manhours in Headquarters' in P/////AKT, with the work of Evita Vasiljeva

René Boer

There are two grids of reinforcement steel, one of which contains some remains of concrete; a steel machine, from which strokes of steel stick out on all sides. There are two concrete frames, once again aligned with long pieces of reinforcement steel, and overhanging fluorescent lamps. Stainless steel frames have been stacked into a large pile. Two concrete elements are caught between steel plates. These objects, surrounded by rubble, dirt; and left-over materials, are the first things you notice in the landscape of the exhibition 'Manhours in Headquarters', by the Latvian artist Evita Vasiljeva (1985).

For a brief second, one appears to be among the remains of an unfinished apartment complex. Think of the forgotten cut-outs of Gordon Matta-Clark or the found footage of a building site, barely dusted off before its exhibition.

At a second glance, this association begins to lose credibility; the unusual material compositions reveal themselves. Mirrored plates have been stuck into the concrete in seemingly arbitrary places. The reinforcement steel has taken anchor in peculiar ways. Plastic cable ties have been used in order to keep steel pipes from falling apart. The presentation of these objects in this way appears to have resulted from an interest in materials associated with building and a perceived interest in the manifold ways in which these may relate to one another. The rubble and the left-over materials suggest that the entire building process would have taken place here, within the space.

This observation will afford the spectator some insight; as a result, the less immediately noticeable elements of the exhibited landscape will reveal themselves: for example, a small object resembling a building model on the ground; or two concrete bullets that stretch a thin piece of canvas stuck to the ceiling all the way

down to the floor, a printed composition of texts and building instructions scattered about the background of a photo of a piece of plastic.

Slowly but surely, it becomes apparent that the constructive process in the space has come about through interaction with research, in which the ongoing thought process of the artist, the characteristics; and meaning of the used materials have come to be of seminal importance. The unpolished state of the objects suggests that this interaction has been abruptly brought to a halt by an outside agent. More than likely, the curators have driven the process towards a provisional culmination in the interest of the public presentation.

The caesura between the combined research- and production process appears to have been sudden. As a result of the swift materialization, one desires that the stalled process be picked up again, in part, because the works invite the viewer to do so. Often, grids of reinforcement steel, for example, suggest that an extra level may be added, in the event that additional funds may be obtained sometime in the future.

The suggestion of a future sequel raises the question of what the next step of the artist could be, were she offered the chance. Would the current objects be augmented, or would new ones emerge? Would the relation between objects be strengthened? Would they fit in or on top of one another, as a composite construction? What kind of architectonic spaces could follow from the continuation of the working process?

While in the imagination of the viewer new building materials are syncretized into new constructions, slowly doubt begins to settle. The concrete appears of inferior quality. Small tears are beginning to emerge. At close inspection, the frameworks appear unstable. Brightly coloured straps are responsible for binding the unit together. The steel apparatus appears to have been vandalized. The grids, having initially encouraged the imagination of a future phase of construction, have been treated with a type of brittle concrete, from which a part could even already have been extracted.

Is the work no longer in construction, or was it even initiated with a concrete intention? Has the work begun its natural process of entropy, and are we merely witnessing the ruins of what was here before? There is no immediate answer, but the experience of the looming destitution, or the deliberately executed destruction, puts the somewhat butch title, testament to those with a sound work-ethic, into perspective.

The doubt regarding the direction the work is taking, falters when the viewer drops the notion that he or she is witnessing a preliminary phase of construction, and that in fact, the artist won't follow up on the work whatsoever. The exhibition shows the work in a congealed state, without any recourse to further development. The temporality of the presentation brings one to wonder what the conceivable future of the work could bring. How would it react to a new environment; one in which it hadn't been manufactured? Which aspects of the work remain when released from the sanctuary of the white cube? What kind of relation would it take on with the city context of P/////AKT – up until now a fairly undefined plot of land with an industrial background? What could this work mean in the midst of the tidy streets of the adjacent districts, the *Plantagebuurt*, and the *Indischebuurt*.

While the spectator considers the contrast between Vasiljeva's raw, congealed forms and the polished city, he or she will quickly realise that some of the objects could probably not even be transported. In all likelihood, there remains nothing for it but to demolish the works in situ. In what kind of way would the artist be involved; or, is it left to the brutal art of the unsuspecting demolition firm? Will some of the remains be kept for posterity?

According to Vasiljeva, the work provokes different reactions in Latvia, where she has lived and worked, to when it was presented in Amsterdam. Compatible projects, seen by the unsuspecting Latvian art-viewer, inspire questions such as why 'pieces of the city' are being exhibited inside. We can surmise from this remark the extent to which rough concrete is still associated with the urban environment of daily life. Considering the crucial role concrete played in the modernist style of architecture that prevailed in

the last decades of the Soviet-Union, this comes as no surprise. In spite of the rapidly changing city landscapes in the former Soviet countries like Latvia, the rigid concrete lines are still a prominently present, visual factor.

The dominance of this hermetic architecture can be starkly contrasted with Vasiljeva's free and associative way of working and her playful research into the possibilities, values; and limitations of the material. Most notably, the concrete frameworks in the exhibition appear – bearing in mind the way in which, during the Soviet era, through the aid of prefabricated elements, housing complexes were stamped out of the ground – in all their fragile vulnerability, to be a critical reflection upon the rigid building culture of that period.

Nevertheless, her work doesn't feel like a total rejection of this history of architecture, but represents a gentle nuance in a polarized debate. In recent years, beside the tendency to dogmatically reject such architecture, there has emerged a re-appreciation of (Soviet-)modernism and brutalism, that has found its way to a mainstream audience through various blogs. Neither of these extremes seem to offer consideration for the qualities, or the problematic aspects of this architecture; however, in the case of Vasiljeva's work, in a subtle way, this most certainly is the case.

Besides a relation to her own background, the work reflects, albeit unconsciously, upon Amsterdam, her current place of residence. In a city where the spatial environment has been thoroughly rectified and polished, and where the positivistic discussion regarding the need for progression has become almost indisputable; taking time for the freedom of construction, while laying emphasis on the possibility of destruction and decay; represents a breath of fresh air. The same goes for sustaining productive processes in an area of the city where such productivity has been fostered since time immemorial, at a time in which consumerism has increasingly come to dominate urban space.

Vasiljeva's work contains in all of its abundance, diverging tensions: the materials bear unusual, conflicting relations to each other; a curiously fixated work process. It is the raw, transitory products of the *white cube*; and, seen from a bird's eye view, the *white cube city*. The work balances the potency of further development against the omnipresence, and looming threat of destruction. Although the work has an element of ongoing, live decay, it is no 'ruin porn'; a term used for the facile fetishization of the collapse of 'the uncanny'.

The nuanced contrasts within the work, on the other hand, give rise to it being constituted as a 'productive dystopia'. This latter term signifies an imagination with a (lightly) baleful character, unyielding to hermetic consumption, while stimulating the spectator's power of imagination. The work of Evita Vasiljeva takes us along in her process of thinking and making, allows for reflection upon the characteristics; relations, and societal meanings of the used materials; and asks larger questions about man's appetite for construction, its intrinsic fragility; and the spatial configuration that has accommodated this joint effort.

René Boer works on the intersection of art, architecture, cities and heritage, is part of the Non-fiction collective and managing-editor at the research studio Failed Architecture.

Translation by Daniel Voorthuis