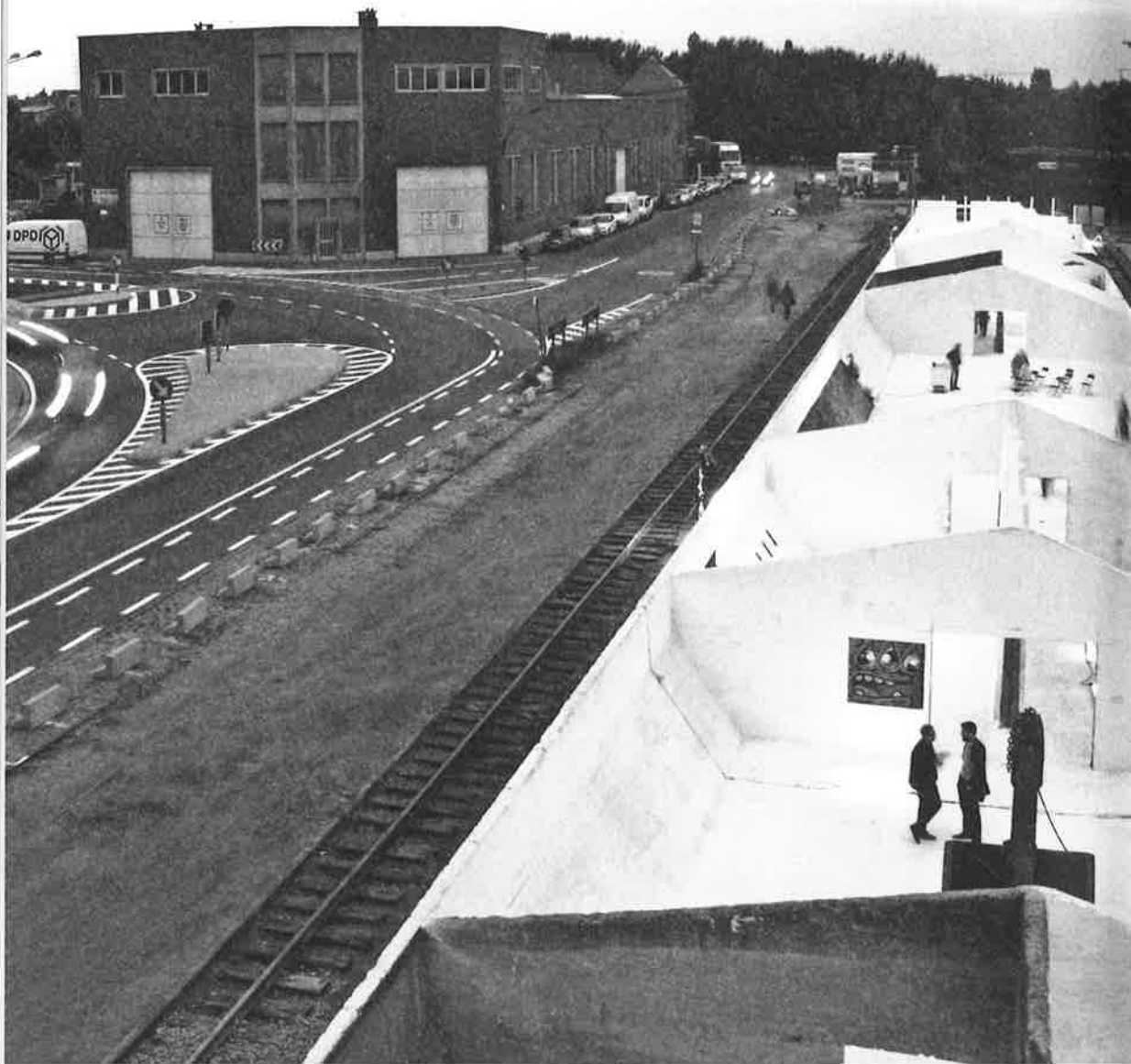


# On the Art/Architecture of Reframing an Industrial Site

Rotor's 'Grindbakken'  
Exhibition

Maarten Liefoghe

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In September 2012, an architectural exhibition inaugurated the opening of a curious public space on an old dock in the harbor of Ghent. There, a 160-meter-long bunker complex had been completely transformed with a coat of white paint. Moving through the dozen open-air 'rooms' of the building, visitors encountered thirty-six 'as found' exhibits: a set of holes in one floor, a red and ochre colored deposit on a wall surface, various kinds of graffiti, butterfly bushes, and many other seemingly banal items.<sup>1</sup> These fragments of the original structure, with their traces of industrial and informal post-industrial use, patches of vegetation, and testimonies of material change, had been carefully selected, preserved, and masked during the cleaning and painting works. Now they appeared one after the other amid freshly painted walls and floors, crisply framed and casually lit on the opening night.<sup>2</sup> They presented themselves as aesthetic events within the white but still gritty environment, like artworks—complete with didactic panels—in a suite of galleries with their roofs torn off. At the same time, the whole of the converted structure, along with its exhibits, came together as a single,

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Sarah Melsens and Roberta Gigante, *Use Me*, conversion of gravel containers into an open-air venue for cultural activities, with the opening exhibition-cum-intervention 'Grindbakken' by Rotor, Ghent 2012. Photo:



1 Sarah Melsens and Roberta Gigante, *Use Me*, conversion of gravel containers into an open-air venue for cultural activities, with the opening exhibition-cum-intervention, 'Grindbakken', by Rotor, Ghent 2012. Photo: Rotor.



2 Rotor, zone showing traces of fluctuating water levels in one container, at 'Grindbakken', Ghent, 2012. Photo: Rotor.

3 The new public space was planned to last for fifteen years before a mix of housing and offices would also be constructed in this part of the harbor area.

4 The title is appropriated from the 1988 engraving by Bruce Nauman, as Melsens and Gigante confirmed to me in an interview on 14 April 2016. The *Meesterproef 2010* competition was organized by the Flemish Government Architect in collaboration with the city development agency AGSOB (now sogent), and is discussed in *Bouwmeester Rapport 2010–2011* (Brussel: Team Vlaams Bouwmeester and Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 2012), pp. 28–37. Two other temporary public spaces in the reconversion process of Ghent's old harbor are 019 and DOK, respectively adjacent to and opposite the *grindbakken* site (on the other side of the canal).

5 Rotor was founded in 2005 by Tristan Boniver, Lionel Devlieger, Michaël Ghysot, Maarten Gielen, Benjamin Lasserre and Melanie Tamm. The 'Grindbakken' project was realized by Tristan Boniver, Renaud Haerlingen, Lionel Billiet, and Maarten Gielen.

cohesive art installation. But such allusions to contemporary art and its spaces were challenged by the captions on wall labels. Their titles and short texts were scientific in nature, and interpreted each item not as art, but as physical evidence of the harbor's economic history, of building practices, and of ecological and material processes.

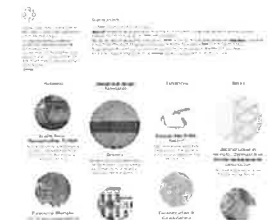
The 160-meter-long strip of what were originally concrete gravel containers (*grindbakken* in Dutch) were built in the 1950s for storing sand and gravel before being transferred to ships and trucks. As the harbor's operations moved north, the *grindbakken* fell into disuse in the late nineties. Taken over by vegetation, the abandoned site became an illegal dump and a *terrain vague* for informal and transgressive use. However, urban redevelopment of the area adjoining the concrete structures forced the intervention of local authorities and, in 2010, the city initiated a project to turn the gravel containers into a temporary public space.<sup>3</sup> Architect Sarah Melsens, together with visual artist Roberta Gigante, won the competition with a project titled, *Use Me*, through which the *grindbakken* would be converted into an open-air site for cultural events.<sup>4</sup> Their proposal was to make the structures more accessible and usable by cutting out door openings between adjacent containers, providing light and electricity, and, most strikingly, painting over the entire complex with white road paint. Melsens and Gigante were also convinced that this newly recovered piece of public infrastructure would benefit from a succession of artistic contributions to encourage an engagement with the project's changing urban context and neighborhood population. They commissioned the Brussels-based collective Rotor to make the first contribution.<sup>5</sup> Rotor seized the opportunity to critique the radical make-over of Melsens and Gigante's project, which they felt entailed a rather formalist and violent gesture. They proposed to mount

an exhibition based on local observations on the site's surface by preserving selected elements or zones of the abandoned infrastructure, and by introducing narratives that relate to the site's past, present, and future. Their exhibition, simply titled 'Grindbakken', retained the 'disorderly aesthetics' of industrial ruins in selected areas, while also seizing on the aesthetic possibilities of the newly sanitized environment.<sup>6</sup>

On their website Rotor present themselves as 'a collective of people with a common interest in the material flows in industry and construction'. They further specify that, 'On a practical level, Rotor handles the conception and realization of design and architectural projects. On a theoretical level, Rotor develops critical positions on design, material resources, and waste through research, exhibitions, writings, and conferences.'<sup>7</sup> Before the 'Grindbakken' show, the collective was probably best known for their 2010 exhibition 'Usus/Usures' in the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale—a project on the use and wear of contemporary materials—or for their radically archival 'OMA/Progress' show at the Barbican in London in 2011–2012.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of the latter exhibition, OMA characterized Rotor as 'experts at dismantling constructions both material and rhetorical' and as 'the anti-OMA: borderline material fetishists, contemplative types, slow, resistant, consensus-driven'.<sup>9</sup> 'Grindbakken' continued thematic lines of investigation and means of curatorial presentation and narration that Rotor would take further in 'Behind the Green Door', their exhibition on 'Architecture and the desire for sustainability' for the Oslo Architecture Triennale in 2013.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to their exhibition, research, and design activities, Rotor have extended their practice with Rotor Deconstruction (Rotor DC). As an autonomous branch of Rotor, Rotor DC offer consultancy services to the public on

6 Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), pp. 72–79.



7 Rotor homepage (<http://rotordb.org>, last accessed on 20 March 2018). Screen view of Rotor's homepage (March 2018) showing the various categories in which Rotor are active (next to the Rotor DC division doing deconstruction and re-use of construction materials).



8 Rotor, 'Usus/Usures' in the Belgian Pavilion at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale, gallery view. Photo: Eric Mairiaux.

9 OMA, *OMA/Progress* project page ([oma.eu/projects/oma-progress](http://oma.eu/projects/oma-progress), last accessed on 10 January 2018).

10 This research and exhibition project is best documented in Lionel Devlieger, Maarten Gielen, Livia Cahn, and Rotor, *Behind the Green Door: A Critical Look at Sustainable Architecture through 600 Objects* (Oslo: Oslo Architecture Triennale, 2014). I have discussed curatorial decisions in this exhibition in my book chapter 'Exhibits That Matter: Material Gestures with Theoretical Stakes', in *This Thing Called Theory*, ed. Teresa Stoppioni, Giorgio Ponzio and George Themistokleous (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 57–167.

11 I developed this point earlier in more detail in my contribution to a special issue *Beyond Art/Archaeology* dedicated to the intersections of the expanded fields of contemporary art and of archaeology, in which I also made a first short analysis of the framing in 'Grindbakken'. Maarten Liefoghe, 'On Rotating Positions in Archaeology, Art, and Architecture: Grindbakken', *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 4, no. 2 (2017), pp. 138–147.

12 Lionel Deulieger and Maarten Gielen, 'About Our Exhibition Ambitions', *Oase: Journal for Architecture* no. 88 (2012), p. 72. For a critical discussion of the rise of 'research/curation' in architecture publications and school curricula, in relation to the backlash that 'history/theory/criticism' faces, see Joan Ockman, 'Slashed', *e-flux architecture* 27 October 2017 ([www.e-flux.com/architecture/history-theory/159236/slashed/](http://www.e-flux.com/architecture/history-theory/159236/slashed/)).

the reuse of building materials and, through the Rotor DC Store, sell salvaged building elements, fixtures, and materials. Clearly, Rotor are not afraid of getting their hands dirty. They argue that their participation and intervention into the physical and economic realities of building and material reuse is not only the best way to understand the processes they are interested in, but also to bring about an alternative building materials ecology. This attitude can also be seen in their 'Grindbakken' exhibition, which grafted itself thoroughly and critically onto the spatial and processual context of Melsens and Gigante's *Use Me*. In fact, Rotor did this so successfully that their exhibition came to somewhat overshadow the original project, which would sometimes be wrongly attributed to Rotor themselves.

This confusion of roles and responsibilities is not entirely anecdotal. The 'Grindbakken' exhibition, the Rotor collective, and the occasional collaboration with Melsens and Gigante, all illustrate forms of professional mobility that characterize contemporary expanded practices in art, architecture, curation, and even preservation.<sup>11</sup> The specific sort of art and architecture exchange that takes place here occurs through exhibition making and research: practices that have no disciplinary home base. After all, Melsens and Gigante did not invite Rotor to make an art project, nor to make or exhibit architecture, but to make an exhibition. For Rotor, research and exhibitions go hand in hand: 'We see exhibition-making as a way to conduct our research.'<sup>12</sup> (Academic) research and (architecture or art) exhibitions are also the main platforms for projects in what has recently been coined 'experimental preservation'. 'Working mostly outside of the traditional governmental and nonprofit organizations', a new generation of preservationists are not only challenging the authority of official heritage institutions to define the

standards of practice, but are exploring 'preservation as a new form of cultural production in itself'.<sup>13</sup> Both *Use Me* and 'Grindbakken' could well be interpreted as such contemporary experiments in preservation.

In sharp contrast, however, to 'Grindbakken's' discipline-crossing practices of 'curating' and 'research', is the striking appearance of a shining white cube aesthetic in Melsens and Gigante's conversion project. It is a mark of the museum's exhibitionary regime and spatial conventions spreading beyond its walls, and of its entanglement in processes of post-industrial urban regeneration.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the white wall and floor surfaces inside the previously abandoned gravel containers can also be read as a *tabula rasa* gesture: of establishing a clean slate to make place for the new, washing away the uncomfortable image of a contemporary industrial ruin, a decade before the structure would be demolished altogether to make space for redevelopment. It is against this double backdrop of contemporary art on the one hand, and the processes of urban destruction, renewal, and preservation on the other, that 'Grindbakken' is interpreted here. Rotor's framing work combined a series of curatorial and exhibitionary operations which can be unraveled in order to map out different stakes in this *mise en cadre*, and to situate some threads of this project within an expanded field of art, architecture, and preservation.

### On Framing as Shutting Out (Sacrifice)

The first operation is performed on the site as a whole. Rotor selected particular areas on the surface of the existing structure because of their aesthetic qualities, or because curatorially they would add up to a fitting set of prompts to raise the

13 Jorge Otero-Pailos, Erik Fenstad Langdalen and Thordis Arrhenius, eds., *Experimental Preservation* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), pp. 8, 9.

14 Elena Filipovic has characterized the white cube as still being a worldwide 'architectural inevitability' for art museums, galleries, art fairs and even biennials despite the latter's frequent focus on locality and context. Elena Filipovic, 'The Global White Cube', in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), p. 65.

15 It is by now a familiar observation that the preservation of artefacts or sites as heritage is in itself often not only a process of warding off destruction but also a process of destruction of the preserved object, and of a usually unacknowledged creation of a contemporary preservation object. For instance, in Cornelius Holtorf and Troels Myrup Kristensen, 'Heritage Erasure: Rethinking "Protection" and "Preservation"', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 4 (2015), pp. 313–317.



16 Le Corbusier, Plan Voisin for Paris, 1925, exhibited at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs (as published in the third volume of the *Oeuvre complète*, 1943).

17 Thordis Arrhenius, 'Restoration in the Machine Age', in *The Fragile Monument: On Conservation and Modernity* (London: Black Dog, 2012), pp. 112–137.

18 The comparison, suggested by Stanislaus von Moos, is discussed in more detail by Arrhenius, 'Restoration in the Machine Age', p. 121.

issues Rotor wanted to discuss. The thirty-six preserved zones therefore appear as exceptions: relics that are revealed only after everything else has been sacrificed. Such a dialectic between preservation and destruction is of course a stinging reality in any process of conservation or musealization, including Rotor's own material recuperation activities.<sup>15</sup> Rarely though is it so strikingly visible as it is here. In its boldness, but also in its precision toward the existing, the *Use Me-Grindbakken*' combined project recalls the Plan Voisin, notwithstanding key differences in scale and ideology.<sup>16</sup>

Le Corbusier's canonical project is usually described as a tabula rasa gesture, but it is much more complex and ambiguous, as Thordis Arrhenius has shown.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Le Corbusier justified his radical scheme with the assertion that it would preserve Paris' past: his plan was to 'save' a group of historical monuments that would forever become dislodged from their former structuring role in Paris' urban fabric. In that regard, Le Corbusier's proposed isolation of historic monuments by cleansing them of all 'accretions' is a much more radical one than Haussmann's *dégagements*, as the Plan Voisin also radically detaches many of the preserved monuments from the urban *tracés* together with which they could still take up a co-structuring role in the modernized Parisian fabric.<sup>18</sup> While the integrity of some ensembles like that of the Place Vendôme are respected, other monuments such as the Église Saint-Eustache or Garnier's Opéra are merely preserved as incidents in the park landscape, in between the cross-shaped *immeubles-villas*. They are preserved in situ but, as Arrhenius argues, they nevertheless become spatially dislocated through an operation similar to that of museological displacement. The salvaged surface fragments in the Ghent gravel containers appear in a similar configuration.

The way Le Corbusier presented the Plan Voisin inside the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau in the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes also opens up an interesting perspective on Rotor's project.<sup>19</sup> Besides being a prototype of one dwelling from the *immeubles-villas*, the pavilion also simulated views onto this utopia of a Paris 'saved' by the latest modernization project. The pavilion's annex was designed as a powerful diorama apparatus to stage illusionistic views onto the shiny if chilling urban visions. Two panoramic scenes painted by the architect were supported each by a rotunda, and were framed by interior window openings.<sup>20</sup> In 'Grindbakken' we can find similar ocular devices flattened out and compressed, as it were, into little more than a perforated layer of white paint. What it frames, however, are not projected cityscapes of the future that stretch out for miles behind the frame, but traces of a past and signs of a present ecology that lie in the depth of a structure's skin.

### On Framing as Finding and Pointing (Evidence and Index)

Framing operations become a tool for Rotor to highlight their finds in 'Grindbakken': they selectively defamiliarize and make visible what was already there but overlooked, helping us to see and read the existing walls. Of course, there is a history of such revelatory gestures. For example, Rotor's confrontation of the idea of the pristine white surface with the material and historical reality beneath, is similar to that seen in Lawrence Weiner's, *A 36" x 36" Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* (1968).<sup>21</sup> But, while Weiner's 'removal' can be read as a gesture of institutional critique exposing 'the raw room' of the art space



19 Le Corbusier, Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs, 1925, interior view inside the rotunda with the panoramas.

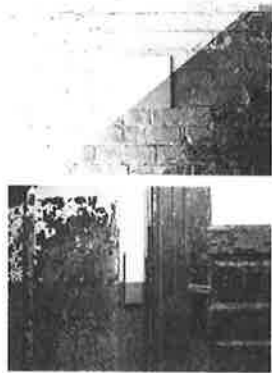
20 For a detailed discussion and analysis, see Richard Difford, 'Infinite Horizons: Le Corbusier, the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau Dioramas and the Science of Visual Distance', *The Journal of Architecture* 14, no. 3 (2009), pp. 295–323.



21 Lawrence Weiner, *A 36" x 36" Square Removal to the Wallboard or Lathing from a Wall*, 1968, installation view (as published in *Statements*, 1968).

Benjamin Buchloh has suggested that the square paintings and the cube-shaped sculptural artworks proliferating in the early 1960s are both self-referential and pointing to their environment. They are self-referential artworks *par excellence* for Buchloh, since 'the square abolishes the traditional spatial parameters of verticality and horizontality, thereby cancelling the metaphysics of space and its conventions of reading', making it 'the central form of visual self-reflexiveness'. Yet, this self-referential shape also induces an apprehension of the square painting not so much as an image, but as an object situated in the actual space we find it in, and 'inviting a viewing/reading of spatial contingency and architectural embeddedness'. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* 55 (Winter 1990), pp. 130, 131.

22 Lavin argues that in the 1970s a notion of the real became 'the primary art/architectural separator', which, on the one hand, had 'the raw room favored by art' and, on the other, architecture (theory) turning away from the mundane realities of building towards semiotics, Sylvia Lavin, 'Vanishing Point (2012)', in *Flash in the Pan*, ed. Sylvia Lavin (London: Architectural Association, 2014), p. 73.



23 Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 1', *October* 3 (Spring 1977), p. 81. Lucio Pozzi, *P.S.1 Paint*, 1976, acrylic on wood panels, site-specifically affixed. Installation views from 'Rooms', PS1, New York. Photos: photographer unknown, as published in Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2', *October* 4 (Autumn 1977), p. 65.

24 Krauss, 'Notes on the Index', p. 65.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

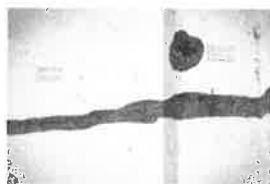
26 '[I]n the work I have been discussing – the abstract wing of this art of the index – we do not find a written text appended to the object-trace.' Krauss, 'Notes on the Index', p. 66. Krauss remarks that, in contrast, 'contemporary art which employs photography directly' does make use of such additional textual discourse. Yet, in a not entirely convincing argument that builds on a point of Walter Benjamin about the way sequence prescribes meaning to photographic images in film, Krauss ultimately discerns a supplementary narrative in the exhibition's quasi-cinematic succession: 'The "text" that accompanies the work is, then, the unfolding of the building's space which the successive parts of the works in question articulate into a kind of cinematic narrative; and that narrative in turn becomes an explanatory supplement to the works.' Krauss, 'Notes on the Index', p. 67.

around his excision, Rotor urges us to join them in a quasi-archaeological surface reading of what is found and shown inside the areas they framed.<sup>22</sup> Another useful point of reference is *Rooms*: the 1976 opening exhibition of PS1 in New York, located in a derelict school building turned into an art center. In her two-part essay, *Notes on the Index*, Rosalind Krauss famously interpreted the works in the show as demonstrations of art that signify in an indexical way, rather than through the use of encoded pictorial representation: 'this group of artists, working independently, chose the terminology of the index. Their procedures were to exacerbate an aspect of the building's physical presence, and thereby to embed within it a perishable trace of their own.'<sup>23</sup>

Roland Barthes is a continuous interlocutor in the essay, as Krauss' notion of the index combines his theories on (photographic) indexicality with Peircian semiotics. It is from Barthes that Krauss derives a spatio-temporal characterization of traces as indexing a reality that is 'physically present yet temporally remote',<sup>24</sup> but also the idea of the necessary 'addition of an articulated discourse, or text, to the otherwise mute index'.<sup>25</sup> Barthes argues that photographs as indexes have the power to create presence, but that this presence remains mute. For this reason, photographs and other indexical signs are typically complemented by supplementary captions, that can expand or specify the meaning of what is made present. Yet, Krauss admits, such typical supplementary captions did not accompany the works at PS1's inaugural exhibition.<sup>26</sup>

In 'Grindbakken', by contrast, Rotor supplements nearly all exhibited areas with a concise caption in a straightforward tone (in Dutch and with English translations).<sup>27</sup> These texts interpret and give critical meaning to the sensory immediacy of each of the finds, taking them beyond the oscillation

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27 Rotor, labels with captions at the 'Grindbakken' exhibition, Ghent, 2012. Photo: Eric

between absence and presence. A 'museographic' paradigm of exhibiting is thus privileged over the 'phenomenological' one that Rotor associate with 'installations in the contemporary arts tradition'.<sup>28</sup> The caption texts describe material, chemical, and economic processes and situate them within larger ecologies, pointing to the agency of builders and users, of materials and constructions in a new materialist perspective. As such, the former ruin is visually prepared and re-presented in such fashion that desires for so-called 'ruin porn' are frustrated; the finds are discursively activated so as to recalibrate the interaction between nature and culture beyond Simmel's allegorical appreciation of the ruin as an aesthetic moment of balanced metaphysical tension between nature and spirit.<sup>29</sup> Take for instance the caption that is added to a small patch of vegetation in one of the final rooms in the sequence.<sup>30</sup> The caption is given the tongue-in-cheek title 'Green roofs' and identifies the plant at the center of this found composition as Biting Stonecrop, noting that 'the use of this plant on green roofs is a more recent phenomenon, and represents a victory for this plant which has been fought relentlessly on footpaths, where it is seen as weed'.

### On Framing as Cropping (Shape)

This patch of Biting Stonecrop was delineated by a circular contour, but the shapes of the thirty-six framed items vary considerably. In determining the frame's position in relation to these found surface archaeologies vis-à-vis the viewer—not only its size and shape, but also the way it 'crops' around or across some fracture, plant, stain or pattern—there also emerges a possible moment of design that is rarely acknowledged in heritage preservation. Rotor embrace this creative

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28 Deblieger and Gielen, 'About Our Exhibition Ambitions', p. 72. Note however that in contrast to this statement preceding 'Grindbakken', and to their later online communication about this project, Rotor referred to 'Grindbakken' as an installation in their opening invitation e-mail.

29 Georg Simmel, 'Die Ruine', *Jenseits der Schönheit* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 2008), p. 34.



30 Rotor, a patch of Biting Stonecrop and its caption 'Groen Dak/Green Roof', at 'Grindbakken', Ghent, 2012. Photo: Rotor.



31 Rotor, samples of types of graffiti at 'Grindbakken' exhibition, Ghent, 2012. Photo: Rotor.



32 Rotor, isolated graffiti of a paint spray can at 'Grindbakken' exhibition, Ghent, 2012. Photo: Rotor.



33 Rotor, a composite figure-ground-drawing, 'Grindbakken' exhibition, Ghent, 2012. Photo: Rotor.

moment and leverage the aesthetic and interpretative effects of the frame. Compare, for instance, the different ways in which areas of graffiti are framed, and how their captions interpret them accordingly. One group was framed into rectangular fields, cut out from spray paintings that seem to continue beyond their borders, underneath the white paint.<sup>31</sup>

Their captions invite viewers to compare them as samples of graphic styles. By contrast, other frames are determined by their figurative content, such as a depiction of a spray can of paint, stressing that image's subject matter.<sup>32</sup> In this case, the corresponding caption highlights an unexpected relationship between paint waste and the production of cement further down in the harbor:

Since the second oil crisis (1979), the major cement producers have been looking for cheaper fuels than gas and oil to feed their energy-devouring ovens. It appeared quite profitable to burn dangerous waste products, including waste generated by the paint industry. Paint waste is not only highly calorific; it also contains mineral fillers that contribute to the composition of cement.

Elsewhere in the exhibition is a more complex juxtaposition of four related and partly intersecting frames.<sup>33</sup> Of these, the most striking is a diagonal vein-like shape: it highlights a construction joint that reveals how the concrete wall was poured in two phases. Separate captions discuss the remaining three framed surface phenomena, which also speak of the life of this concrete structure: a gravel pocket that results from the concrete being insufficiently vibrated when it was poured; a rusty outgrowth that reveals reinforcement rods have started corroding beneath the surface; and dark brown leaching that indicates a chemical process of depassivation within the concrete.

While this complex contour clearly results from the cumulative outlines of four distinct zones, we can also see the resulting shape as a studied abstract composition around a diagonal line, or as a figure-ground drawing that recalls images of geological or archaeological sedimentation. Throughout the exhibition, it is such appeal to 'the archaeological imaginary' that, in combination with a general minimalist aesthetic, seduces visitors to engage with an often technical exposé about what might at first seem to be banal phenomena.<sup>34</sup> The most powerful example of this aesthetic economy is perhaps the *Grand Carré*.<sup>35</sup> Crisply squared by the surrounding white, this surface now strikes us as at once an abstract Rothko painting, and then as a stratigraphic soil section, while we learn that what we see is in fact a distribution of deposits and lichens that index the past fluctuation of water levels.

#### Research/Curation

An overarching paradox that gives 'Grindbakken' much of its power is the simultaneity of an *ex situ* and an *in situ* condition: the seductively presented material finds are at once visually displaced by their whitewashed setting, at the same time as they are recontextualized and rewritten into the narrative of the site discursively. Similarly, the forceful aestheticization of Melsens and Gigante's white gallery-like environment and Rotor's concomitant framing strategies, sits in stark contrast to the critical discourse of the didactic labels that eschew issues of aesthetics or art. And, in the same way as their exhibits appear within but point to realities outside an aesthetic realm, Rotor take on an ambiguous disciplinary position with regard to the art world. While operating mainly

34 With regard to this strategic instrumentality of a minimalist aesthetic, an interesting reference is the exhibition *Political/Minimal* that Klaus Biesenbach curated at Kunst-Werke Berlin in late 2008. In the catalogue, Jenny Schlenzka states that 'Artists such as Francis Alÿs, Monica Bonvicini, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Mona Hatoum make use of classical Minimalist forms in their sculptural works, only they share these with stories and questions about the human condition, life, the body, and society. . . they exploit the visual authority of Minimalism in order to procure attention.' Jenny Schlenzka, 'Mehr als men steht/More than one sees', in *Political/Minimal*, ed. Klaus Biesenbach (Berlin: Kunst-Werke Berlin, 2008), p. 21. Dieter Roelstraete and Sarah Kramer, *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art* (Chicago/London: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago/University of Chicago Press, 2013). See also Michael Shanks, *The Archaeological Imagination* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012).



35 Rotor, the so-called *Grand Carré*, at 'Grindbakken' exhibition, Ghent, 2012. Photo: Rotor. I should specify that Rotor never publicly used the title *Grand Carré* for this find/work. I draw it from a preparatory note from Rotor's archives.

36 Two recent exceptions of Rotor participating in unambiguous art events are *What's Eating the Chinese Mitten Crab/Who's Eating the Chinese Mitten Crab*, a diptych with which Rotor contributed to the 2018 Bruges Triennale and to the contemporary art triennale Beaufort along the Belgian coast respectively, and *Da quassù è tutta un'altra cosa* at the 2018 edition of the European nomadic biennale Manifesta in Palermo, Sicily.

37 OMA, *OMA/Progress* project page (<http://oma.eu/projects/oma-progress>, last accessed on 10 January 2018).

38 Here I am referring to Bart Verschaffel's interpretation of OMA's adherence to architecture's heteronomy in 'On Art and/or Architecture Being an Obstacle', in *Architecture, Disciplinarity and the Arts*, ed. Andrew Leach and John Macarthur (Ghent: A&S/books, 2009), p. 21.

outside it, with 'Grindbakken' Rotor nevertheless use visual strategies shared with contemporary artworks, creating an exhibition with an even stronger installation character than their 'Usus/Usures' Venice show.<sup>36</sup> Curiously, however, and in contrast to their often explicit analyses of the economies and ecologies of building materials, Rotor has remained notably silent on the questions their work raises in relation to art and aesthetics.

While Rotor might agree to their description by OMA as 'a group of young architects who decided for some reason not to be architects', they would almost certainly reject their categorization as artists.<sup>37</sup> Just like OMA, Rotor seem wary of art's disengagement from the powers that condition contemporary society, and want to deal 'fully with that which autonomous art lacks and longs for: *reality*'.<sup>38</sup> For Rotor, who developed a practice that tries to work with the building industry—with its economic and political realities to change matters from within—art can at most be one such reality to confront, or to make use of, but it is never presented as a pursuit in and of itself. For all of the intertextual references an audience versed in contemporary art might read into 'Grindbakken', and for all the cultural capital this might mobilize with that audience, Rotor's *mise en cadre* is therefore best understood as neither a work of art nor architecture. Rather, their reframing of this industrial ruin is an indissociable aspect in what is ultimately ecological and building archaeological 'research/curation'.

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Stephen Walker  
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*vis-à-vis*

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Valiz

# Trading between Architecture and Art

Strategies and Practices of Exchange

Studies in Art and Architecture



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