CAHIER # 3

STUDIO LDB

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Founded in 2014, studio LDB is a collaborative art practice exploring the œuvre of artist Lieven De Boeck. The studio develops and shares authorship through the concepts of reproduction, re-interpretation and conceptual research on forms of presentation. In order to show hidden aspects of the work, alternative ways of making the work public are explored.

Studio LDB has a changing setting. One of the tools of the studio is a series of free publications containing text written by invited authors, called cahiers.

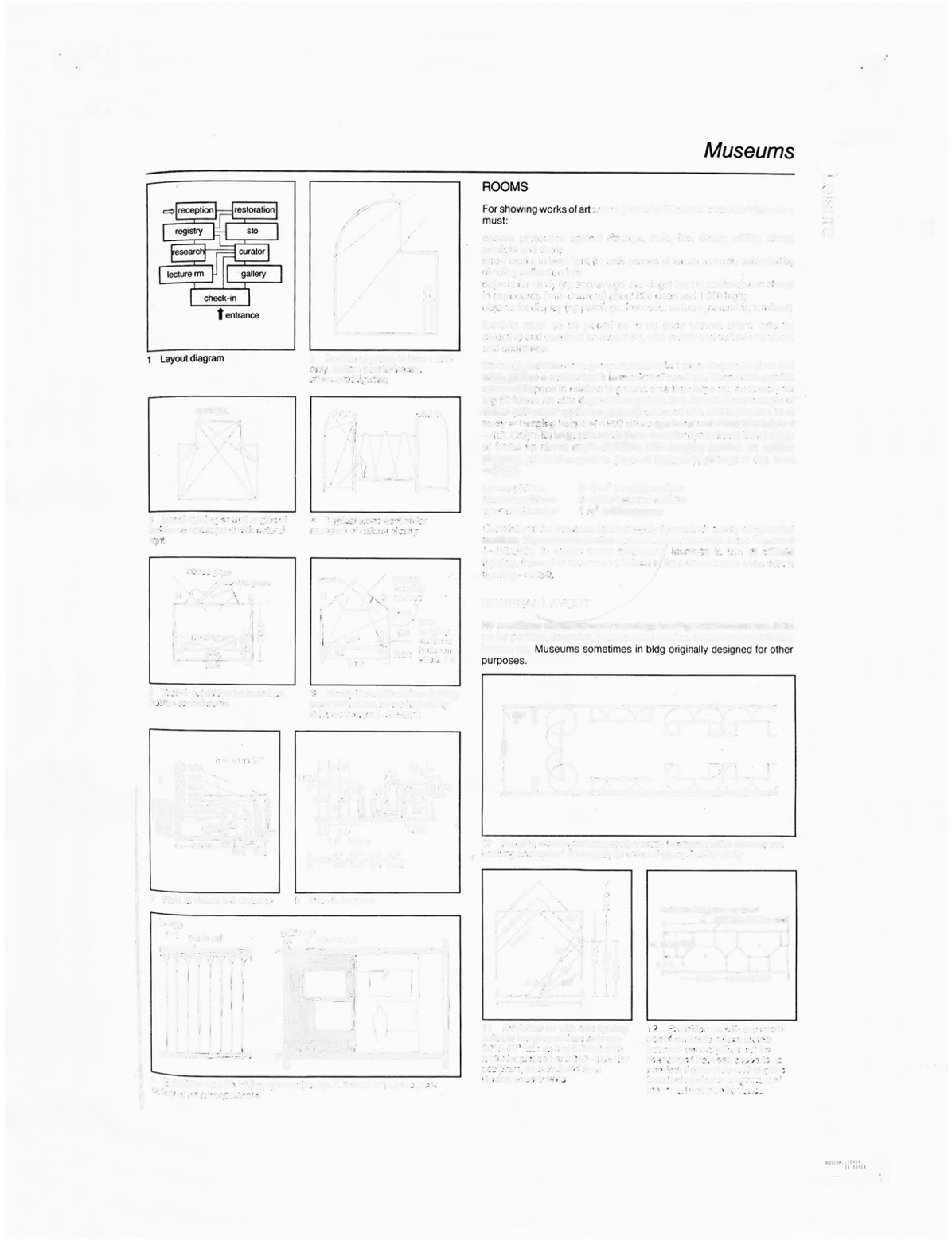
The cahier project proposes a composition formed out of critical texts addressing new aspects of the work and elaborates different concepts and research areas by pushing the boundaries of the traditional essay format.

In collaboration with different authors (writers, artists, architects ...) the Cahiers aim to open up a dialogue between the objects and the subject entering into relationship with it. By facilitating complete freedom of perception, each cahier and each author explores their own representation of thoughts, ideas and concepts, moving and approaching an open possibility of imagination and sensation of the work in question.

The Cahier is an ongoing project since 2015, promoting a collaborative practice as a new methodology to raise questions, discourse and research around art, its perception and imagination.

Cahier 03 contains texts of Teresa Stoppani and Emma Vanhille & Karel Bruyland

Lieven De Boeck



The Undoing of the Museum. The Manual, the Architect and the Millionaire

Stage Setting

This text is not only an essay on the undoing of the museum to be read individually or to be delivered to an audience of convened specialists: it is in fact the script for a performance. As such, the written word is only one of the elements of a composite message, delivered not only through the reading of the text, but also through other means or theatrical props. Some spatial considerations are required then, to set a stage that allows to speak of – or perform on – the space of the museum and its fading.

Stage: a large rectangular white room, the typical 'white cube' space.

Audience: a small audience of about fifty, educated enough to smile at the performers' innuendos and willing to participate.

Characters: the Lecturer, equipped with the usual tools of the speaker, a lectern with microphone, a laptop computer for digital slides presentation, a projector and projection screen, a pointer; the Architect, surrounded and identified by a spatial arrangement of his tools and work, architect's manual, a wall of pinned-up drawings, a box of architectural references and typologies, a table, an industrial light fitting. To make role definition even clearer, make the two characters male and female. Dress them in outrageously bright colours, to identify them as performers and distinguish them from the greyness-blackness of the audience of architects, artists, museum curators.

Setting: the two performers and their props are to be placed at the opposite ends of the room; the audience is to face neither of them, seated in orderly rows parallel to the long side of the room and staring into the void.

The end. Or the beginning.

Performance: the Lecturer delivers her speech; the Architect, silent, mimes and points at his work; Lecturer's pointer and Architect's floodlight move and intersect across the room to direct the audience's gaze, concentrating or confusing their attention. The space and the act are deconstructed.

Topic: the undoing of the museum, in architecture and outside architecture, beginning with its definition as type, building, institution, container, display.[1]

The Beginning

Before any consideration on the questions of the museum's role, its work and its contents, to architects the word/task 'museum' invokes the idea of 'type', as it was developed by the theorists of architecture of the Enlightenment. Type is not understood as a defined form, but as a series of prescriptions for a form – or, to use Quatremère de Quincy's definition of 1825, 'an object after which each [artist] can conceive works of art that may have no resemblance'.[2] What is absolutely relevant from a design point of view and still has critical repercussions today is that for Quatremère 'all is more or less vague in the *type*', as it acts 'like a sort of nucleus about which are collected, and to which are co-ordinated *in time*, the developments and *variations of forms* to which the object is susceptible'.[3] Extraordinarily modern in its conception and non-definition of space, Quatremère's definition of the type refuses to congeal it in one form and offers to architecture the tool of a dynamic four-dimensional proto-form that is at the same time original-generative and derivate-cumulative – we would call it, today, a diagram.

The Manual

When addressing the theme of the museum, as architects we think 'type' and we go to our manuals, before we even start considering the issue of its contents. We go, in particular, to one of the many (national) versions of 'the' manual, Ernst Neufert's 'Practical Encyclopaedia of Design and Building'. And while Lieven De Boeck begins a critical reading by erasures (tip-exing) of his English edition, I look at my Italian copy.

Succinctly covering the topic in only two pages, my Neufert conveniently sandwiches 'Musei' between 'Chiese' and 'Cimiteri', thus offering a lapidary but nonetheless powerful Focaultian reading of the institution 'museum'. Editorially and typographically placed between two other heterotopias – the church and the cemetery – the museum is here still identified as container, in a sequence of increasingly enclosed and sealed spaces, from the openness of the post-Second Vatican Council catholic church – where space is articulated by and around the presence and the positioning of certain key elements (parish centre, parvis, nave, presbiterium, altar, seating, ambo, tabernacle, schola and organ, chapels, baptistery, campanile, and church annexes) – to the enclosed cemetery space – clearly delimited and essentially organized around the modularity of the stacked bodies, coffins or tombs.[4] Stuck as it is between the two, the museum is thus implicitly but quite clearly defined as both a public space of ritual communication (like the church) and a space of collection of memory (like the museum).

The pages on 'museums' begin with a disconcertingly biased and outdated (even for post-modern 1980) definition: 'Particularly suitable for historical objects, for which these building provide the right frame, better than those cold museum called "modern"'.[5] In the exhibition rooms, the works 'must be 1. protected from damage, theft, fire, dampness, dehydration, sunlight and dust, and 2. displayed in the best light (in the widest sense of the term)'.[6] The manual emphasizes shelter, storage, accumulation and cataloguing before display, and consequently in the functional diagram and schematic layout that it proposes (prescribes) the gallery space – i.e. the exhibition – occupies only a small part of the museum, and is directly connected to just a few other functions. As for the display component of the museum, this seems to be resolved in a series of prescriptions for light modulation, enhancement or exclusion. Thus far on page 1.

The issue of presentation, representation and appearance is carefully avoided also in the definition of the museum's overall space: page 2 is entirely devoted to examples of museums presented only in plan and section, and not the ones corresponding to the others, but offered in an assortment of mismatched parts constructing an 'ideal' and impossible – and faceless – museum of 'perfect' functionality.

And yet, the text in the manual ends with the disconcerting acknowledgement of the failure of architectural specificity: 'Fortifications, castles, abbeys and the like are often empty because they are no longer usable, and therefore very suitable to be turned into museums'.[7]

In the late 1970s Neufert decrees the death of the space of the museum as public space of display and representation, reducing it to a functional diagram for the optimization of archival storage, distribution layout, lighting conditions: more than ever, the museum as heterotopia of accumulation.

Where does architecture go from here? What is there left to do for architecture, apart from defining storage and/or modifying, refurbishing, changing use in 'castles, abbeys and the like'? Does the generative type – the dynamic four-dimensional proto-form – of the museum still exist, if even the manual invites us to restrict architecture to the transformation of what is already there and originally generated for other purposes?

The Neufert – technical, conservative and prescriptive as it is – if critically read, seems to contain or at least suggest a critique of the discipline and of the role of architecture in answering the question 'what is a museum?'. It places the museum between the church and the cemetery, that is, between the celebration of the collective ritual (the church), and the collection and preservation of memories and the past (the cemetery), in a sacred and difficult and always already ambiguous position. Without reaching Bataille's provocative paroxysm of associating the museum to the slaughterhouse as spaces of collective rituals, this dry technical manual triggers questions on the nature of the museum, which remain unanswered.[8]

Functions and systems of relations of the museum are thus defined, but the museum finds no form, as it remains only suggested by a series of partial and unrelated examples (plans and sections but not corresponding ones). While the museum has many functions and can take many forms, even the Neufert (in 1980) must acknowledge that the museum type does not exist as a form. Not only that. The museum can easily occupy, parasitize, existing and disused structures. It is therefore defined by its functions and contents, by how it occupies rather than makes space.

The Architect

It is here that Lieven De Boeck's work on museum typology begins. De Boeck's architectural investigations always use exact quantities, numbers, precise definitions of words dimensions and times. It is with the sharpness of these tools that his drawings cut through architectural typologies and conventions. Here the tool is a tip-ex pen, subtle instrument of precise and partial erasure that leaves on the manual's pages ghostly traces of the lines and words, which have not been removed but added onto. Tip-exing rather than knifing away, he adds onto the certainties and the doubts of the given, obliterates functions and keeps spaces, but only to re-occupy and modify them. The operation is precise, part of a more extended work for the preparation of a visual 'dictionary of space' for the definition of new typologies and methodologies for the production of space. But De Boeck's research is indeed the site for the construction of a critique of architecture through the proliferation of a very personal -and only apparently rational- design imagery. Reaffirmed and multiplied, dissected and deconstructed by the individual, the emptied forms and rules are made available to be defined and liberated by new occupations of space.

De Boeck's work on the contemporary art museum operates on the different languages of architecture - norms, definitions, typologies. His tip-ex drawings question the handbook's formal regulations and quantitative prescriptions for the 'museum' through their erasure, substitution, replacement and misplacement: functional bubble diagrams are obliterated; prescriptions of optimal lighting become space themselves, as agents of an architecture of displays whose materials are not necessarily solid and permanent walls; examples of museums are no longer recognizable as such and, effaced, become themselves available to other different occupations. In turn, the concealment of scale-identification in random architectural examples of architectures of the 19th and 20th century makes them available to occupation by the museum contents.

All these operations seem to suggest that the museum as public space of communication is not defined by the nature of its architectural shells but by its contents, by their 'democratic' accessibility, and by the devices employed for their display. In other words, a sort of Malrauxian museum without walls, in which the role of architecture is redefined: not shelter, container, and chronologically ordered celebratory frame, but exhibition device designed with the lightness of tip-ex on the vestiges of the old museum. A re-definition by adjustments.

Then, what redefines the museum, after functional diagrams, technical requirements, and building types have been tip-exed?
According to De Boeck, the tools of museum making are:

1. A catalogue of available *building solutions* (neither models nor types any more) that are not museums but could become it. A box of tools with an invitation to re-invent architecture not from scratch but from a given with partial amnesia.
2. A printed *invitation* to the celebrating – opening, closing, in-process – event. The exhibition becomes a mediatic event that takes place and has repercussions outside the physical boundaries of its location, and therefore engages different spaces.
3. and 4. The museum *exhibitions programme* and the *catalogue*, which both reproduce, in other media, the nature of the museum as heterotopian time condenser: of the future – the programme of events is a catalogue of (past) futures, of possibilities and planned strategies – and of the past – the catalogue preserves the (already past) contents of the exhibition and its display by transferring them to another medium (the book).

It is not the event and/or the place in themselves that matter, but the recording of them in the book. (Would a museum of exhibition catalogues then be still a museum, or a library? The difference here would be determined – to confirm De Boeck's assumption – by the nature and definition of the display.)

And finally, 5. A *table* where these objects lie, a white 'frame' that silently screams 'look at me', inviting to behold and reconsider all these ingredients together. 'I am the museum, the frame, the trigger of attention'.

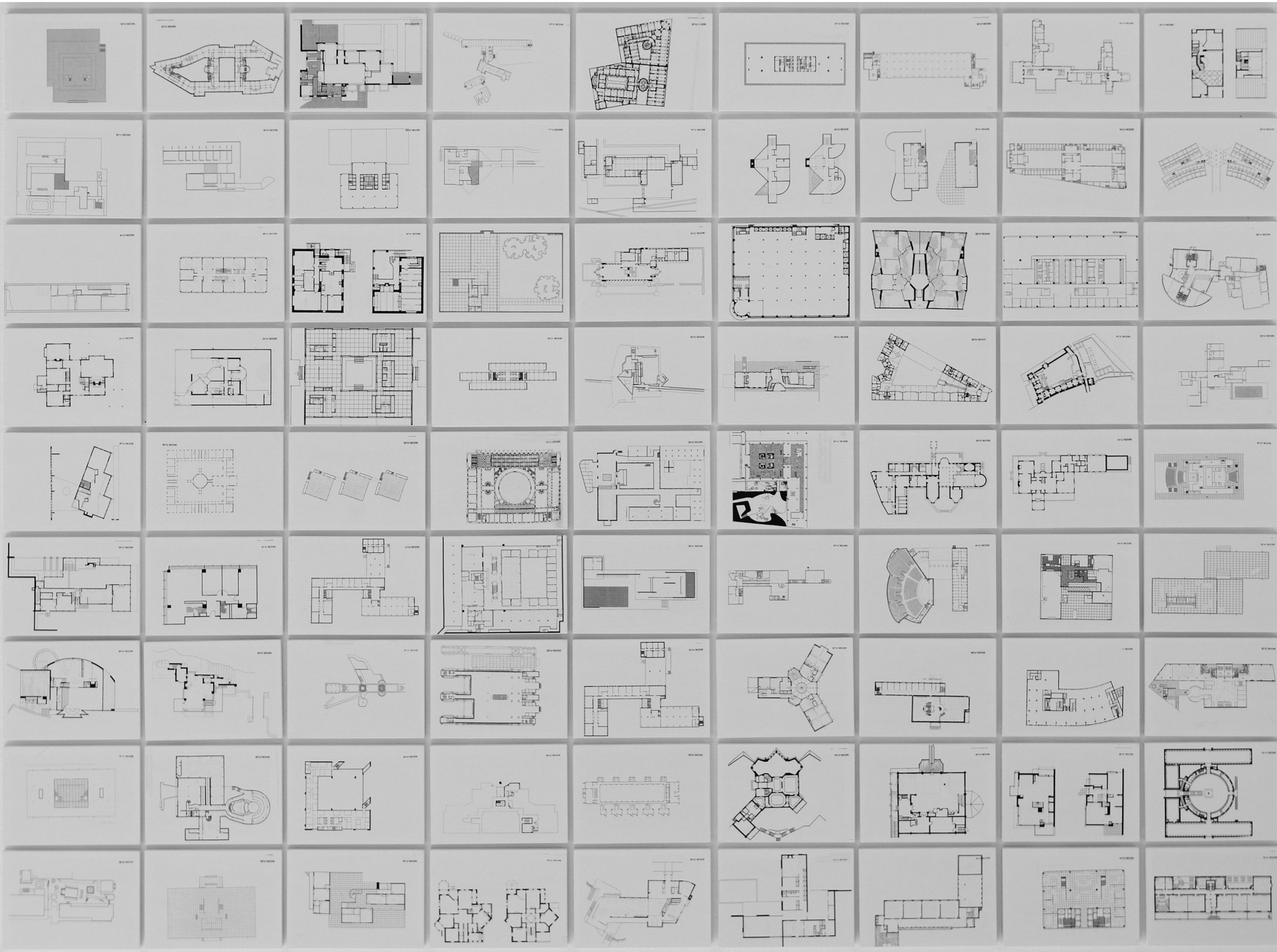
A table, a house, a tip-exed plan of a building designed for another purpose: for De Boeck the museum is a private space (the house) that is made public (the erasures performed with the tip-ex) for the presentation and exhibition of a specially assembled selection of objects, and whose scope is made recognizable by a sign (the table, the programme, the invitation). For De Boeck the principal role of the museum is 'to exhibit' – 'to make things public': the artwork, the collection, but also the curatorial work, the art production and research. If the museum is a strategy of accommodating, organizing, opening and distributing information, then the work of architecture here is to make its space public, and not only by walls or their demolition. Thus de-composed, taken apart, transformed into a *con*-tainer that does not 'hold in' but 'holds together', the type of the museum is exploded. Its pieces, now liberated, are made available for the (re)making of the undone museum, a museum penetrated and inscribed by its context, which brings in what norms, definitions and typologies seem to lack: the individual and the city.

The millionaire: art in the city

While architecture, slow as usual, struggles with the dilemma and redefines its tools, life seems to provide answers. Peggy Guggenheim's life in art and work for art can suggest a way to look at the idea of museum as architecture from beyond and outside architecture, through the individual and the city. In different ways, with different languages and actions, with the tools and ways of a lifestyle rather than architecture, Peggy Guggenheim enacted and lived the transgressions that De Boeck draws 'by erasure' on his Neufert.

More than anybody else (or at least more loudly and more effectively than anybody else) – artists, curators, art critics, architects – Peggy Guggenheim lived and worked towards an opening up of the museum as a space of display that operated between and was compromised with both the individual and the city, the private and the public. From 'Guggenheim Jeune' in London before the Second World War, to 'Art of This Century' in New York during the war, to her final and long-lasting 'experiment' in Ca' Venier dei Leoni in Venice, Peggy Guggenheim exploded all predefined programmes and formal solutions for the display of contemporary art, opening up the exhibition space and suspending it between the private/personal and the public/collective.

In Venice especially, spatial categories and divisions are defied, private life and art production intermingle, domesticity and business coexist. On one hand there was Peggy Guggenheim, the woman who loved, sponsored and promoted artists, constructing an autobiography through artworks that although very personal was never exclusively private. On the other hand there was Venice, a city so historically and culturally loud that it could never be excluded from the space of the collection, and offered for it the best context, apparently perfect and complete and yet vulnerable and perpetually unfinished.



Venice is, by her own nature, the place of multiplicity and non-dialectic coexistence of differences, of ongoing changes and adjustments, both in her physical making and in the construction of her myth. The city becomes the ideal setting for Peggy's operation – her life, her collection, and the idea of turning the private space of her house into a place for the production and exhibition of art – a world, writes Gore Vidal, 'where the party still goes on and everyone is making something new and art smells not of the museum but of the maker's studio'.[9]

The encounter with Venice is facilitated by Peggy Guggenheim's purchase of the perfect setting for her operation, Ca' Venier dei Leoni, an 18th century family palace on the Canal Grande, remained unfinished during construction for legal disputes with the neighbouring families, and occupied in time by different forms of precarious inhabitation. The *'palazzo non compiuto'*, writes Peggy Guggenheim,

'had the widest space of any palace on the Grand canal, and also had the advantage of not being regarded as a national monument. […] It was therefore perfect for the pictures'. But also, she continues, 'The top of the palace formed a flat roof, perfect for sunbathing'.[10] And sunbathing she did, lying on the roof above her art collection, in view of the main traffic artery of the city, and in front of the palace of the Prefect.

The art collection was everywhere in the palace-non-palace, and originally the entire house was open to the public on museum days: 'In place of a Venetian glass chandelier, I hung a Calder mobile, made out of broken glass and china that might have come out of a garbage pail.
[…] Most Venetian, and at the same time un-Venetian, is a *forcola*, or gondolier's oar-rest, which Alfred Barr presented me with for my garden. Those who don't know what it is admire it ass a wonderful piece of modern sculpture, which is just what Alfred intended'.[11] She doesn't even have the privacy of her own bedroom, as in it artworks and personal items, or pieces that are both, commingle: the silver bed head made for her by Alexander Calder, which, in her words, 'against [the] turquoise walls looked as though it had been made for its ultimate destination – Venice'; a painting by Francis Bacon, whose 'background is all done in fuchsia-coloured pastel, which goes admirably well with my turquoise walls […]. The rest of the walls are decorated by my collection of earrings, a hundred pairs or more […]. In addition to this, the room has Venetian mirrors and Laurence Vail's decorated bottles and Cornell's surrealist "objects"'. She concludes: 'it was difficult to exclude the public from all this, but in the end I had to'.[12]

Peggy Guggenheim buys the palace in 1949, and begins to hold shows in the house and garden. Public and private spaces are still undivided and originally the entire house is open to the public on museum days. 'So many people came wandering into all our bedrooms that we had to cordon off the exhibition. I had a house guest […] staying with me at the time, who perpetually forgot that there was an exhibition and often found himself in the midst of strangers in his pyjamas in the garden'.[13]

The visitors to Peggy Guggenheim's exhibitions enter the private living quarters, and slowly the 'house' has to give in to the gallery space. 'In order to create space, I began turning all the downstairs rooms, where the servants lived and the laundry was done, into galleries. […] Matta helped me transform the enormous laundry into a beautiful gallery, and then one by one the other rooms followed suit, till finally the servants got pushed into smaller quarters and the laundry had to be done in a basin at the entrance to the waterfront'.[14] Plans for an extension of the palace fail. She does not like Belgioioso, Peressutti and Rogers's project for a two-storey penthouse elevated on pillars twenty feet high on the roof of the unfinished palace: 'The front was to resemble the Doge's Palace, and in their minds they conceived something that they thought would be a link between the past and the present. I found it very ugly and I was certain the Belle Arti of Venice … would never have allowed it to be built'.[15]

But it is not only the public that enters Peggy Guggenheim's private domestic space. Her collection enters the Biennale of Art first, and then penetrates the culture and the space of the city, it absorbs it and infiltrates it. For just a short while, and almost by accident, the best selection from her collection occupies the most representative space of the city, the jewel-like salon of St. Mark's Square, momentarily turning Venice's best 'salotto' into Peggy Guggenheim's 'own' living room: in 1950 she exhibits her Pollocks in the Sala Napoleonica in the Museum Correr. Self-satisfied and with a sense of accomplishment and belonging, she contemplates the paintings lit at night from the square. 'I remember the extreme joy I had sitting in the Piazza San Marco beholding the Pollocks glowing through the open windows of the museum, and then going out on the balcony of the gallery to see San Marco in front of me, knowing that the Pollocks were behind me. Is seemed to place Pollock historically where he belonged as one of the greatest painters of our time, who had every right to be exhibited in this wonderful setting'.[16]

The expansion continues with constant growth. Between 1958 and 1959 Peggy Guggenheim constructs a *barchessa* on one side of her garden,

to enlarge her exhibition space and rearrange there her Surrealist paintings and sculptures. After her death in 1979 the Guggenheim Foundation (now owner of the museum), further expands the gallery spaces, acquiring the buildings at the back of the garden, to host temporary exhibitions, services, a bookshop, a cafeteria. Notwithstanding the diminutive dimensions of the interiors, carved inside the existing Venetian 'minor' architecture, the spaces of the extension look, feel and smell 'American'. But inside them the museum is still forced to work with the city and with the former inhabitant, and like them: slowly, prudently, in a piecemeal way made of adjustments, innovations, negotiations, infiltration, occupations.

'Se la forma scompare …'[17]

Museum in ¿Motion? Conference Proceedings [12-13 November 2004], Wouter Davidts (ed.), Jan Van Eyck Academie / Museum Het Domein Sittard / Vakgroep Architectuur & Stedenbouw UGent, Maastricht / Sittard / Gent, 2005; ISBN 907207632x


Museums
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Museums
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Five rings found, transported, restored and hanged, One ring found, transported, restored and placed

Commissioned for HERZAMELEN, a group show curated by Emma VANHILLE.
First shown from April 29th to May 1st 2016 at CROXHAPOX gallery, Ghent.

The house belonged to a collector of electrical equipment. It was filled with hundreds of old radios, television screens, amplifiers, recorders, antennas, spare parts etc. The collector had recently passed away, the collection's raison d'être thus turned obsolete, its dispersion was inevitable. We curated an expo aiming at accelerating this dispersion by inviting a group of artists whose work related to the specific material in the collection. Their artist's strategies and practices would transform the collection, from stored goods to work in context. We invited Lieven De Boeck to the house.

It was the glass that spoke to him. Lieven left with a box filled with all the lamps he could find in the basement and took these to his studio in Brussels. The lamps were standardized circular elements, produced to fit in household lighting fixtures. Their perfect circular shape guarantees optimal lighting quality but is usually hidden within the device. For this show, De Boeck relied on finding this perfect form, making it operational, showing it without intermediation and consciously installing it within an abstract gallery space. Making visible what was already there.

Five lamps of equal size were suspended from the gallery ceiling using one single continuous fish wire, hoovering vertically at eye level. They are linked in a serial electrical circuit from transformer to first lamp, from first lamp to second, from second to third, from third to fourth, from fourth to fifth and back to the transformer. The number 5 reminds us of many of De Boeck's other works like la série bleue (consisting of 5x5 Lego blocks) or Cinq/Vijf/Five. Although auto-referencing to his own work, the number was pre-existing (there were simply five lamps of this size in the basement of the building). Un chiffre trouvé. All lamps function but some flicker a bit. The electrical cable is slightly too long and sags in between the lamps, mirroring the fish wire. The lamp itself has the form of a makeup mirror: a round shape encircled with a crown of light suspended at eye level. But upon looking through this mirror, one only sees the mirror reflected, but not oneself.

The lamps are positioned at equal inter-distance (equal also to the diameter of the lamp) in a serial and rational manner. The continuous wire loop creates a delicate equilibrium. The wire is very thin and seems destined to snap. All glass would scatter on the floor which would come as no surprise. As each lamp is fixed only on one point by the wire, its absolute position remains undetermined and it is allowed to rotate along the vertical axis. The final scheme of the piece remains unpredictable and did change during the show. As the lamps are not parallel to one another, ovals and bars seem to appear and disappear depending on the viewpoint. The piece then "reads" as 1-1-1-0-1 or 0-0-0-1-0. This binary code leads us back to the house filled with analogous equipment, dinosaurs extinct by gradually increasing digitalization. The work communicates to the original collection in the softest of manners, with a whisper of the wind, a lamp slightly moves, turning 0 into 1.

The sixth lamp is put apart as a separate piece (it has its own transformer and cabling in/out). It has a lesser diameter than the set of five and by consequence does not seem to conform to De Boecks self-imposed categorization criteria explaining why it was left out of the hanging piece but granted its own pedestal on the gallery floor. The placed ring seems to call our attention focusing on a corner of the space like a magnifying glass. Due to its circular shape on a flat surface, the lamp is unstable and might fall anytime resulting in its self-destruction. The lamp flickers a bit and during the show the part around the electrical plug turned black. But it eventually survived. The singular set-up seems to suggest something is still bound to happen or has just happened (although we missed it) suggesting a working situation in the gallery (although Lieven only passed by on the finissage).

Upon entering the darkened space, the fluorescent light attracts. We see the rings but their exact shapes are more mentally constructed than seen, since the light emitting quality hides the shadows and obstructs a clear view. The wire suspending the lamps is slightly visible, situating the lamps between the ground and ceiling. It is clear that there is no connection with the ground. This reminds us of the mistletoe, not growing from the soil, a parasite which draws water and nutrients from its host. Due to its elevation from the ground, the mistletoe plays a significant role in different mythologies. In this train of thought the lamp on the floor can be seen as the fallen one, banished from paradise, living a mortal life. It is an emotional encounter as we see the fragility of the lamp which anticipates its decay.

Unlike much of De Boecks other works the notion of authorship or artist's identity seems at first sight less apparent. The origin of the works is different. De Boeck, often commissioned for residencies, was in this case commissioned to make a work given a set of base material originating from a certain context. As the base material was not the object of artistic production but simply found, the artistic intervention springs from the actions applied to it. The two pieces derive authorship by applying concepts of displacement, categorization, permutation and re-interpretation of found material. Although the context of the house (and also the expo) was strongly narrative, the work transcends this. The context evaporates, but suddenly returns (together with the author) in the title of the work, which chronologically describes the actions taken.

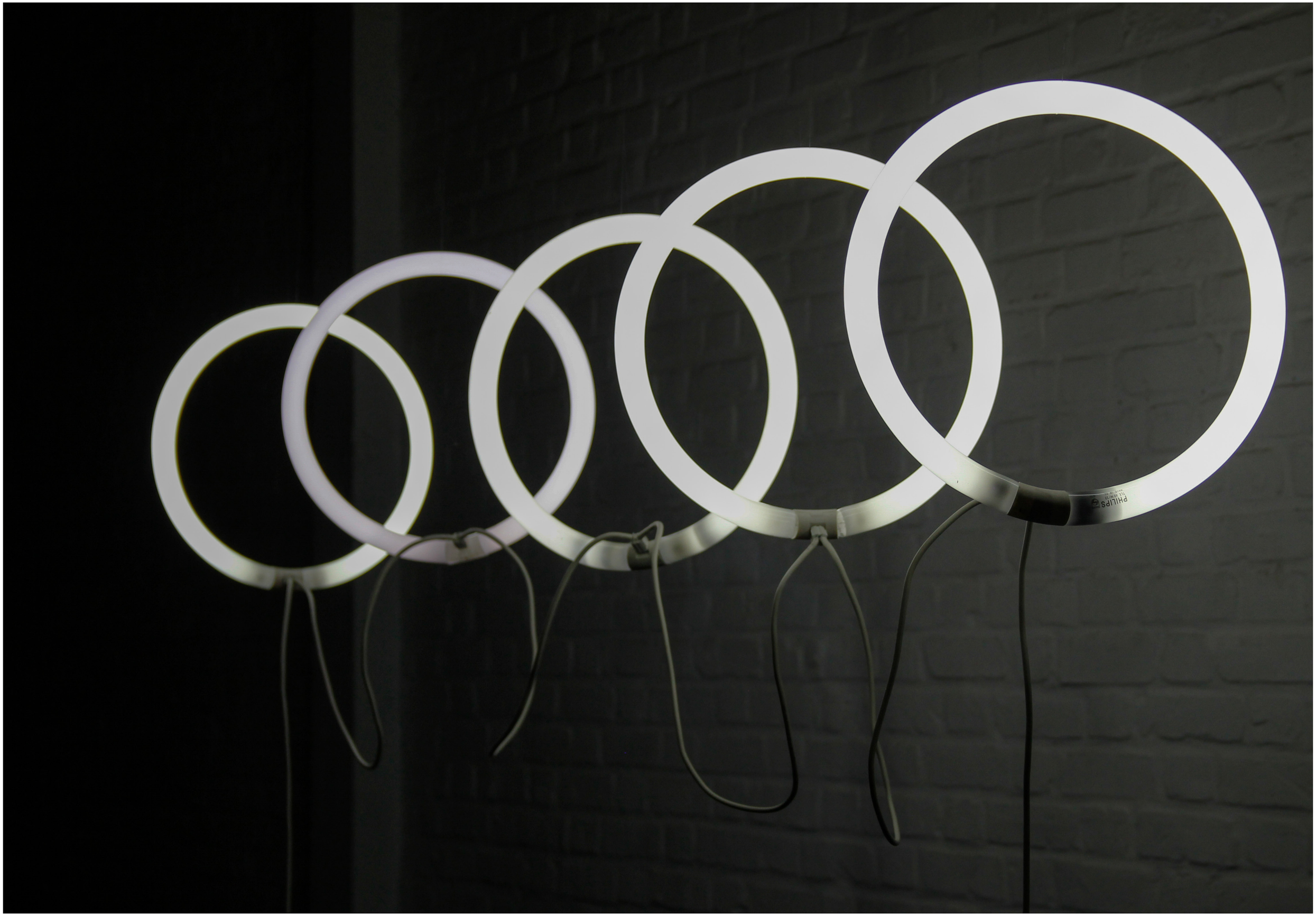
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Photo by Karel Bruyland

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Photo by Karel Bruyland

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