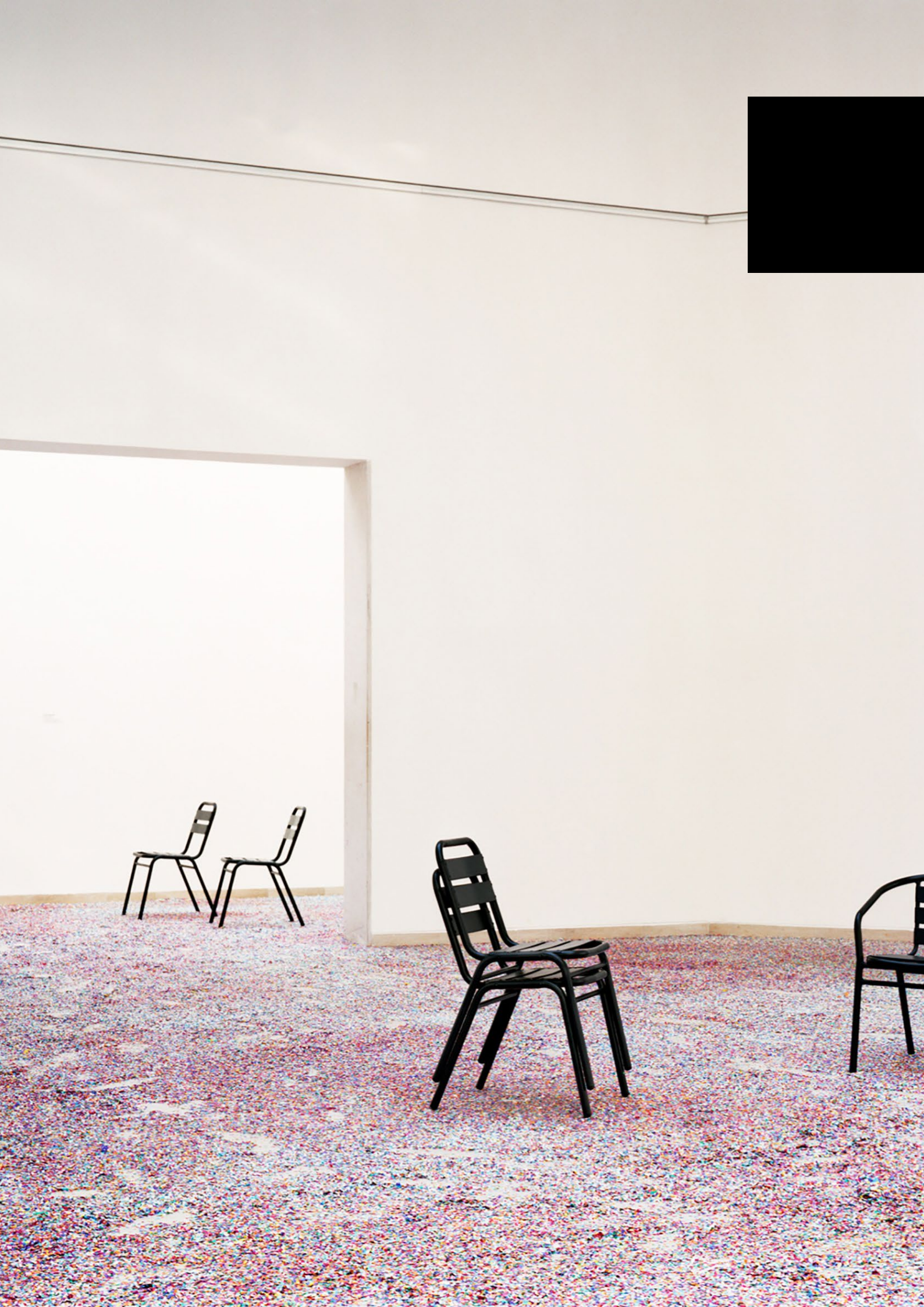

# Pull out a chair. OFFICE in Venice

Christophe Van Gerrewey

Keywords:
*Venice Architecture Biennale, OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, Architecture exhibitions.*

## ABSTRACT:

Fifteen years ago, the architects of OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen participated in two editions of the Venice Architecture Biennale, in 2008 in the Belgian pavilion, and in 2010 in the *People Meet in Architecture* exhibition, curated by Kazuyo Sejima. The meanings of these interventions – the way they exhibited thoughts concerning architecture – are examined in this text. In 2008, 1907...*After the Party* put the Belgian pavilion itself on display, enclosing the historic building and separating it from the Biennale by means of a wall. Confetti, scattered both inside and outside, added layers of meaning to this 'installation', which can be interpreted as a reflection on both the architectural exhibition and on the state of architecture in the 21st century. Similarly, the smaller, more traditional *Garden Pavilion (7 rooms, 21 perspectives)* exhibition in 2010 was an opportunity to create a new space for architecture culture, within the machinery of the Venice Biennale.

Quindici anni fa, gli architetti di OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen parteciparono a due edizioni della Biennale di Architettura di Venezia, nel 2008 nel padiglione belga e nel 2010 nella mostra *People Meet in Architecture*, curata da Kazuyo Sejima. I significati di questi interventi – il modo in cui hanno esposto riflessioni riguardanti l'architettura – vengono esaminati in questo testo. Nel 2008, 1907...*After the Party* mise in mostra il padiglione belga stesso, racchiudendo l'edificio storico e separandolo dalla Biennale mediante un muro. Coriandoli, sparsi sia all'interno che all'esterno, aggiungevano strati di significato a questa 'installazione', che può essere interpretata come una riflessione sia sulle mostre di architettura sia sullo stato dell'architettura nel XXI secolo. Allo stesso modo, la mostra del 2010 *Garden Pavilion (7 rooms, 21 perspectives)*, più piccola e tradizionale, è stata un'opportunità per creare uno spazio nuovo per la cultura architettonica, all'interno dell'apparato della Biennale di Venezia.

Opening Picture:

Fig. 01: OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, *1907... After The Party*, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2008. (Photo by Bas Princen).


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Confetti became an officially recognized architectural element in 2008. The English word is adopted from the Italian confectionery of the same name: at weddings, baptisms or graduations, it is a tradition to distribute (or throw) almonds with a hard sugar coating. The Italian word for paper confetti, however, is *coriandoli*, in reference to the coriander seeds originally contained in this dessert.

In the early 1980s, confetti emerged as a metaphor in the architectural discourse to describe a compositional method, used by the early members of OMA/Rem Koolhaas, to deal with the distribution of programmatic components over an area, randomly scattered after being thrown in the air, yet with a final effect of total colonization. While a plan, or any other representational document in architecture, is traditionally drawn or made by hand, throwing confetti involves a different manual gesture – first grabbing and holding the snippets, then releasing and spreading them, with a result that is at the same time predictable and always different. In 1981, Elia and Zoe Zenghelis, two founding partners at OMA, designed a project for sixteen villas on the island of Antiparos in Greece – "an empty expanse by the beach, with just the sea and the horizon", as the site was described by one of the architects.[1] The houses seem to be scattered over the land, more or less evenly, but without a logic that could be put into words or numbers. The same reliance on chance set the basis, one year later, for OMA's participation in the competition for the Parc de La Villette in Paris, even though in that project, small point-like service structures are distributed on a multi-layered grid of horizontal strips and vertical axes. Thirdly and finally, there is a painting by Zaha Hadid, who had worked for OMA at the end of the 1970s, finished in 1983: *Confetti Suprematist Snowstorm*, part of the competition-winning (but unbuilt) project for The Peak, a leisure club in Hong Kong. On this canvas, which Zoe Zengelis collaborated on, the square shreds of paper are still suspended in the air, fixed in that one moment when they have reached their highest point before falling, proving the spatial potential of confetti also as compositional metaphor.[2]

Of course, arranging objects in space by throwing (or imagining) confetti seems something completely different from making a proper and exemplary composition. And this is exactly the point: an architect or a painter who relies on confetti – be it in the air or lying still on the ground – to decide what should go where, must be quite clueless, having seemingly exhausted all the other more classical and traditional compositional methods. Similarly, the inclusion of *real* confetti as a material presence within a project, heralds an end point for architecture, or rather: lots and lots of small circular pieces of colored paper are everything architecture is not – aleatory, flat, chaotic, flimsy, and so light that even the faintest gust of wind can disrupt once more the so-called order (although, once again, it would be impossible to describe those two different states – before and after – conclusively).

When OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen showered confetti all over the Belgian pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in



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2008, those different aspects were at stake, or they can at least become elements of interpretation [fig. 1].

The Belgian pavilion was built in 1907, and was the very first (non-Italian) national building in the Giardini.[3] The commission was given to Léon Sneyers, a little-known art nouveau architect from Brussels. Of his original project, only the blocks of the central hall with a skylight and the entry section remain today. After extensions and renovations during the 20th century, the pavilion is now a completely enclosed interior, consisting of a large space at the center, with six smaller surrounding rooms or white cubes, all lit from above, and without any window – there is only one small door on the right, leading to the Giardini and to the neighboring Dutch pavilion. In 2008, the curator of the Belgian pavilion was Moritz Küng. He had directed a series of exhibitions in Antwerp since 2005, exhibiting the work of 13 young architecture firms over the course of three years. At the end of these series, he invited all these architects to participate in a competition for the Belgian contribution to the Venice Biennale with the following assignment:

Give the existing building [of the Belgian pavilion], as part of its immediate surroundings, an architectural use and function that can be experienced on a scale of 1:1 with regard to its location (a public park), status (cultural embassy), history (of the Giardini) and/or context (an international platform for architecture.[4]

This brief belonged to a concept that criticized the very existence of architecture exhibitions, and thus, one could argue, of architecture culture as a whole: instead of showcasing, at a biennale, the many possible derivatives of architecture (such as drawings, photographs, models, texts, or movies), the aim was to show the real deal, and to offer an experience of space. The submission by OFFICE, in turn, criticized this premise by taking it to the letter to an almost absurd degree. Their decision to put the existing pavilion on display, revealed a contradiction in the reasoning behind the brief: exhibiting architecture inevitably takes place within a space, and why should another construction be necessary when the pavilion from 1907 already exists? Thus, from September 14 to November 23, 2008, the Belgian pavilion in Venice was surrounded by an almost seven-meter high double wall made of galvanized steel panels. The fence occupied the entire ground in front of it, in line with the main road of the public park, but at an angle with the pavilion. The oldest building in the Giardini disappeared, hidden behind a dimly mirroring façade [fig. 2].

The two-meter wide corridor behind this facade inside of the wall was accessible from the Giardini and led to the side entrance of the exhibition building. Visitors entered the doorway, walked about twenty meters in almost complete darkness, turned the corner, walked another twenty meters, to suddenly find themselves inside an empty building, which had been invisible the whole time. The pavilion was indeed on display, but only for those who had exited it and stepped into the newly created outdoor space – in between the inner wall of OFFICE's temporary intervention and the ou-


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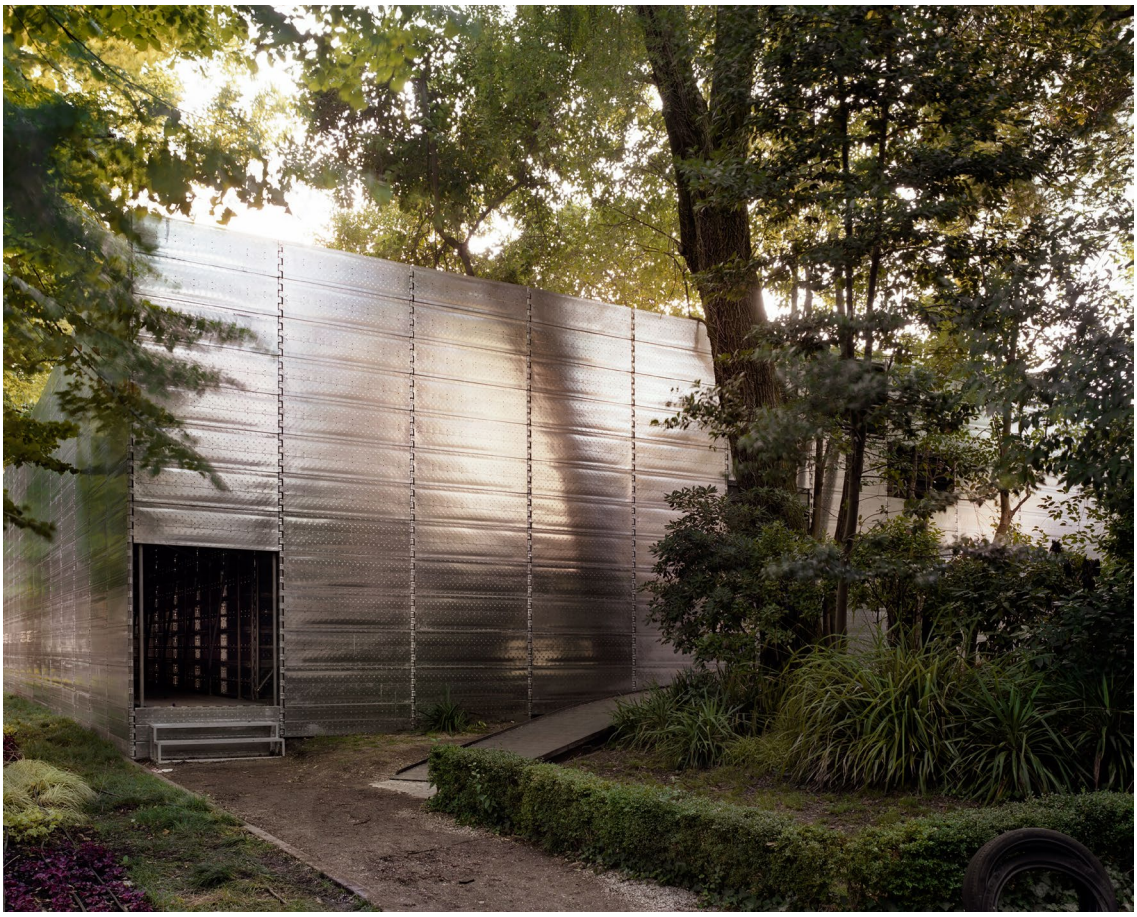

02

ter wall of the building from 1907 – and then turned around to face the historical architecture [fig. 3].

Meanwhile, confetti was everywhere, both on the floors inside the old pavilion, as well as in between the trees, on the ground of the outdoor space, merging both distinctive parts into a single differentiated whole. The primordial thing it represented, within the institutionally charged context of an architectural biennale, was what architecture needs but also combats, or lacks: life, in all its chaotic, varicolored, and very often vexatious but ineradicable mess. One way to make somebody's birthday truly unhappy is opening a nice big bag of confetti in their living room: a present that equals a sentence of weeks of idle cleaning, if not relocation. Particularly confronted with the almost archaic earnestness of a total, impenetrable and aggressive wall – and of the classicist aspects of OFFICE's architecture in general – confetti represented everything architecture cannot control, but at the same time requires as its raison d'être and as an undermining or relativization of its power. As the Biennale progressed, the shredded paper spread over the Giardini, the other venues, and the city of Venice – and who knows where else the confetti ended up, hidden in the clothes and luggage of visitors from all over the world – possibly making the project the most widely distributed contribution ever to a biennale.

The title of OFFICE's intervention was seemingly straightforward: *1907… After The Party*. It evokes the year the pavilion was built and suggests that a birthday bash had been held somewhere in 2007, on the occasion of its centenary. To be

**Fig. 02**
OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, *1907… After The Party*, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2008. (Photo by Bas Princen).



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clear, this had not happened. What visitors saw and experienced was a set of rooms and a walled garden where people, now absent, threw enormous amounts of confetti at each other. Perhaps the real occasion to party had been the final day of the Venice carnival, which would turn this architectural installation into an allegory of Lent, the forty-day period of fasting in the Christian liturgical calendar.

Yet, in retrospect, and not necessarily in line with the intentions of the architects, other parties could have taken place here, whose end was being exhibited. On September 15, 2008, one day after the opening of the 11th Venice Architecture Biennale, the American global financial services firm Lehman Brothers went bankrupt – the climax of the subprime mortgage crisis, which prompted a general financial malaise worldwide, and inaugurated a period of economic insecurity, political austerity, institutional and democratic mistrust, overall budget cuts, growing inequality, and burnout pandemic that is still ongoing. If the Western world had been partying before, then there where certainly enough blatantly present reasons to pull the plug, stop drinking, silence the DJ, turn on the lights, and go home. Something similar can be said of the profession of architecture itself, defined (or determined) as it always is by its economic base. Now that the relative economic prosperity of the Western world was suddenly on a slippery slope, money disappeared in thin air in large numbers, taking the carefree self-evidence of architecture with it. What was being celebrated by OFFICE in 2008 was therefore also a form of architecture the world was slowly parting from: obvious, detached, intellectual, conceptual, formal, dialectical, autonomous, and, most of all, not openly politically engaged. "Cultural production is part of the world, but it doesn't change it", Kersten Geers said in the catalogue of *1907… After The Party*, in an interview with Andrea Philips, who objected: "Lots of people would say that it does". "It doesn't mean", Geers continued, "that we are resigning from a social and political task. It is simply not ours. Cultural production is bound to fail, in a certain sense. But that's the important part of it. Cultural production is production without any clear goal or economic value".[5] That kind of freedom for architecture (and art), which symbolizes the existence of a purposiveness without a purpose, to put it in Kantian terms, is only possible thanks to its exemption from political and social battles. If there is one moment in the 20th century in which this exceptional status was proclaimed, it was in Manfredo Tafuri's essay "The Ashes of Jefferson" from 1976, in which the Italian historian wrote about the current architecture being produced in the United States, a country that was once led by an enlightened president like Thomas Jefferson. (Ashes are, after all, a more apocalyptic form of confetti – polluting, gloomy, grey and dirty, as remnants of what was incinerated because it had to go). In the wake of the major economic crisis of the 1970s and writing about the "manipulations of linguistic materials" of the Modern Movement ("whether we are dealing with Eisenman or Venturi"), Tafuri acknowledged, quite bitterly, "a real event: 'the war is over'". Architects at the end of the 1970s, he


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argued, had resigned themselves to their limited cultural task in society: they realized they could no longer change much, being subjected to the economic ways of the world, and that's why they decided to *show* that predicament –bringing about change was something for others to do, or that might become possible again at a later stage. This end of the direct engagement of architecture with politics and society, of the possibility of architects to go to war, to fight, to change the world, was the beginning of a party that can be labeled as "contemporary" (instead of modern) architecture. After all, what better reason to start celebrating than the end of a war? And what, subsequently, could end the party better than another war, or at least a major crisis? Of course, that pendulum swing between engagement and detachment, or activism and autonomy, is never absolute. If indeed, more than thirty years after the 1970s, the party of contemporary architecture came to an end in 2008, in the Belgian pavilion in Venice (of all places), this would not mean, unfortunately, that architects suddenly regained the power to change the world. Rather, it would mean that most of them would no longer grant themselves the privilege and duty to stay out of that battle. The circumstances had become too serious to fall back on one's own disciplinary pursuits, and it was time to at least harbor the illusion or cherish the desire that something could be done, also by architects. To ignore that something was lost that way too would be naive, since architecture (and art and culture in general) as a symbolic bastion for society against politicization and instrumentalization, was beginning to be dismantled from within.

Following this interpretation, *1907… After The Party* stages the end of architecture as we knew it, and as it had been exhibited and celebrated during successive editions of the Venice Biennale since the late 1970s – what is this event, after all, if not a celebration of architecture? A more literally materialist but no less historicist reading could zoom in on the material confetti is usually made of. To make confetti, it is necessary to shred or perforate paper: a hole puncher is therefore the most common tool for making confetti, at home or in the office. Although in 2008 hole punchers could still be found on almost every desktop, the ongoing digitalization has since turned the storage of perforated documents in ring binders into an obsolete, if not otherworldly, sad and time-consuming activity. If paper is indeed considered a material we can do without, what does this say about confetti? A deluge of small pieces of colored paper, in the empty building of a pavilion at an architecture biennale, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century: how could this *not* be seen as the enactment of that ancient battle between words printed on paper and meaningful buildings made of stone – a conflict Victor Hugo most famously staged in his 1831 novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*?.[6] Instead of a disagreement, however, it is also possible to speak of an entente: for centuries, architecture culture was based on the continuous collaboration between buildings and books, between constructing and printing, and between stone (or concrete, wood, steel, glass…) and paper. This was a party too, or rather a kind of dance: architects made projects and



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buildings, and books and magazines were printed to document those achievements, to comment, discuss, interpret, praise, or reject them. On the other hand, all that paper ignited and nourished architectural production, theorizing the future, and mapping out paths for practice. Wasn't the OFFICE's pavilion, empty and full at the same time, also a calm and cool goodbye to paper? To put it in absolute terms (and making abstraction of toilet paper): the only thing such material is still good for is being recycled into confetti. Whether this is a sad statement, and bad for architecture, remains to be seen: the screen, of a computer or a telephone, has since then become the combination of ally and enemy, as a device for representing buildings through shared images, but also as a medium that is asking for attention, and wants to influence what we do and what we think.

Whatever was celebrated or mourned in those exhibition spaces, it is clear that the visitors arrived too late – they had not been invited to the party that was over, and were experiencing its very end. This leads to further questions. Who is it that witnesses a banquet hall or a living room after the fact? Cleaners? Party crashers who got held up in traffic? Night owls with a hangover looking for their keys? Or voyeurs, incapable of experiencing real life and pathetically condemned to spy on other people's lives, which always seem better, more authentic, and more intense? The decision to exhibit the remains of an activity rather than that the activity itself – pe-

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**Fig. 03**
OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, *1907… After The Party*, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2008. (Photo by Bas Princen).



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rhaps not the dust yet, but certainly the confetti had settled – seems a critique of the architectural exhibition, in line with the assignment of curator Moritz Küng. Architecture should be used; it is there to be lived in, to be experienced "in a state of distraction", as Walter Benjamin expressed it – architecture, just like life, is what happens when you're making other plans, and doing other things.[7]

What a strange and, indeed, always rather marginal pastime, profession, or passion, so often misunderstood by everyone else: being *interested* in architecture, and above all in its copies and representations! I remember that during my visit to the Belgian pavilion in the late summer of 2008, me and my friends could not resist the temptation to grab bunches of confetti and throw them at each other. The Italian attendant reprimanded us immediately, possibly out of personal conviction. He started lecturing us, in broken English, on Guy Debord's theorization of the society of the spectacle. What was being turned into a spectacle here – by us and our apparently inappropriate use of the exhibit, but also by the architects? And isn't the whole idea of an architecture biennale the most direct proof of the fact that we live in a society hooked on simulacra and spectacles? In 1986, Manfredo Tafuri looked back on the very first architecture biennale in Venice in 1980, the Strada Novissima curated by Paolo Portoghesi – also architectural space at once real and fake –scornfully describing it as "a very different sense of spectacle, confining wood and papier-mâché to the realm of 'fiction': a development of a new realm opened to the architectural imagination by more

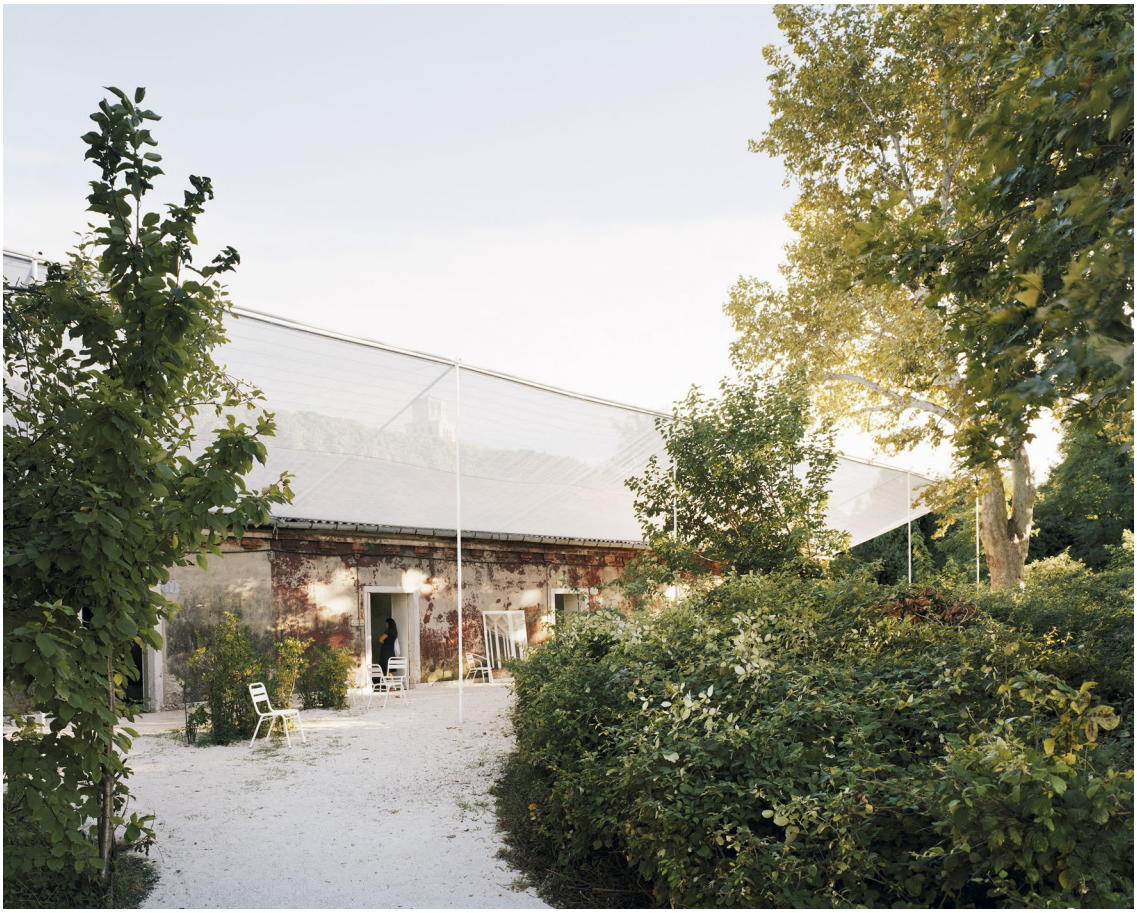

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**Fig. 04**
OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, *Garden Pavilion*, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2010.



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modern circuits of information and consumption".[8] *1907… After The Party* showed the belatedness – with paper reduced to its tiniest form – but also the enduring attraction of those circuits, confronting the architectural community (to which OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen of course equally wants to belong and excel in) with its own object of desire, fulfilling and withholding it at the same time.

It may well go on like this for a while, and risk yet more *Hineininterpretierung*: perhaps particularly today, such temporary marriage of an existing building with confetti, sealed by a few walls, can continue to lend itself to exegesis, also thanks to its encouraging title. The question is, however, if all those words are not completely off the mark. The most obvious quality of *1907… After The Party* has nothing to do with interpretation or explanation of a text: it was a real space, a set of rooms to be lived in, which did not exist before as such, and altered a century-old place in a drastic but also temporary and, all in all, subtle or rather concise way. It was a pleasant space to be in, not least because it was quiet, enclosed, calm, like a kind of limbo between inside and outside, real and unreal (an impression enhanced by the ghostlike reflections of the steel walls), but also between private and public, which no party ever is entirely. Anne Lacaton, a member of the jury that selected OFFICE at the end of the preliminary competition, admitted this was an important topic during the discussion:

[They] left room for the 'housing' aspect. They made room to receive people, they offer something, something positive, a garden. They offer a moment of pleasure. They make it possible for the visitor to enjoy the tranquility and calm of the garden and the pavilion. Their creation works on the senses and is generous.[9]

The phenomenological experience presented also connects, or disconnects, *1907… After The Party* with the rest of the 2008 Biennale. The thematic exhibition at the Arsenale, that year was curated by Aaron Betsky, and was entitled *Out There. Architecture Beyond Building*, resulting, as Brian Hatton has suggested, in an "entropic bag, which seemed but a *bricolage* of diffuse mythologies". [10] That OFFICE's intervention did indeed go "beyond building" can be both confirmed and contradicted: on the one hand, *1907… After The Party*, showed the results of building, and was conceptually much more than a plain construction; on the other hand, it was beyond nothing at all, affirming (and reducing) architecture as an act of separation from, precisely, the world "out there". This also gives the project something polemical, not without arrogant and elitist undertones: it was a refuge, presented as the only exception in and from the Biennale, and from everything that passes for architecture culture – by resolutely detaching itself, the whole caboodle, all the other pavilions as well as everything that Betsky had assembled, was put in its place – ironically, with conviction as well as with *sprezzatura*.

That's why *1907… After The Party* would find its rightful place at the Biennale two years later, curated by


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Kazuyo Sejima. It is even possible to speculate about the extent to which the Belgian pavilion in 2008 influenced the concept and the title – *People Meet in Architecture* – of the 2010 edition, given the conspicuous presence of "real" spaces, architectural installations, and proper interventions that year. In any case, OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen was invited by Sejima to also contribute to *People Meet in Architecture*. They were assigned a place that had never been part of the machinery of the Biennale: a semi-derelict storage building at the far end of the Arsenale, on the border of the Giardino delle Vergini, and the very last thing that visitors of 2010 encountered. The location itself gave this project, titled *Garden Pavilion (7 rooms, 21 perspectives)* and awarded the Silver Lion for Promising Young Participant, the air of adventure and discovery, but also of ongoing colonization: in search of ever larger exhibition space, the circuits of the Biennale were once again expanding, and also this wild, overgrown, forgotten garden would now be cleaned up and enlisted.

On the one hand, OFFICE seemed to do the exact opposite of what they did in 2008: inside the existing seven rooms, with worn-out brick vaults and old wooden or stone floors, aluminum plates were placed with images of real or imaginary buildings and spaces – photographs taken by Bas Princen (of structures of unknown authorship, but also of projects by OFFICE, such as *1907… After The Party*) or computer-assembled perspective collages of their designs. It was a way to show the affinities between the method of a photographer and that of a duo of architects who had been collaborating for years, to explain how looking at a building, a structure, or a space, always also means framing and designing it, by tracing the borders it imposes with the rest of the world thanks to formal abstraction. Quoting a 2016 text by Kersten Geers, Princen's photography is "about the relationship we have with elements, objects, architectures and (micro)landscapes", and the juxtapositions in those rooms in Venice showed how this is also true for architecture, and certainly for the architecture of OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen.[11]

On the other hand, this seemingly traditional exhibition, filled with representations of architecture, was equally seized upon to build yet another new project: on the outside, pencil-thin white steel posts supported a stretched-gauze roof, silvery and reflective, which followed the façade of the existing building, mirroring its pitch roof, and creating – well, yes – an architecture in which people meet [fig. 4].

Exactly this social opportunity and generosity connects 2010's *Garden Pavilion (7 rooms, 21 perspectives)* with 2008's *1907… After The Party*: spaces were created in which architecture (the architecture of the exhibition, the projects on show, but also everything the Biennale itself had to offer) could easily be forgotten, but even, of course, contemplated and discussed. The most significant presence in the pavilions from 2008 and 2010 in this respect has not been mentioned yet: chairs, freely available in a confetti-like and ever-changing composition. Although this seating furniture was produced by a Belgian company, its design and colors clearly mimic the classic



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steel chairs that were first commissioned by the city of Paris and can be found since 1923 in parks such as the Tuileries, the Jardin de Luxembourg, and the Palais-Royal. Within the confines of the most important architectural exhibition worldwide, this symbol of modern, enlightened, and metropolitan public life – if not of a Habermasian *Stukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* – becomes both the perfect metaphor and the indispensable tool, not so much for architecture as for architecture culture: everything that makes architecture, and what it relates to, discernible, negotiable, debatable, understandable, and therefore subject to change. Architecture culture is what happens when the subject of architecture is put forward, and when chairs are available to sit on, and then watch, listen, think, and talk.


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**Endnotes**

1 Davidson 2014, p. 98.

2 Khosravi 2021, p. 32.

3 Verschaffel 2013, pp. 23-26.

4 Küng 2008, p. 12.

5 Philips, Davidts 2008, p. 32.

6 Delbeke 2014, pp. 118-122.

7 Benjamin 2003, p. 268.

8 Tafuri 1989, p. 187.

9 Vandermarliere 2008, p. 75.

10 Hatton 2008, p. 49.

11 Geers 2016, s.p.

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