



Exhibited ecology. On *Taking the country's side*

Jannik Cesare Emiliano Pra Levis

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ABSTRACT:

To cope with the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness induced by the environmental crisis nowadays, architecture exhibitions dealing with the themes of ecology and sustainability can play a fundamental role in building a collective consciousness that could help people manage or, at least, understand contemporary ecological issues.

Against this background, this article discusses the case of the exhibition *Taking the Country's Side: Agriculture and Architecture* by architecture theorist Sébastien Marot, which is analyzed through the study of its evolution as well as through the reconstruction of the curator's thought.

Per far fronte all'opprimente sensazione di impotenza indotta dall'attuale crisi ambientale, le mostre di architettura che affrontano i temi dell'ecologia e della sostenibilità possono svolgere un ruolo fondamentale nella costruzione di una coscienza collettiva in grado di aiutare le persone a gestire o, almeno, comprendere le attuali problematiche ecologiche. In questo contesto, l'articolo approfondisce il caso della mostra *Taking the Country's Side: Agriculture and Architecture* del teorico dell'architettura Sébastien Marot, che viene analizzata attraverso lo studio della sua evoluzione e attraverso la ricostruzione del pensiero del curatore.

Opening Picture:

Fig. 2: *Taking the Country's Side: Agriculture and Architecture*, 2023, Marseilles, Friche Belle de Mai, installation view, detail with dioramas.

Jannik Cesare Emiliano Pra Levis

Jannik Cesare Emiliano Pra Levis is a PhD Student at the Department of the Arts, University of Bologna, specializing in the History of Contemporary Architecture. His current research aims to investigate the role of green environments in the city – urban parks and gardens, public greenery, and urban forests – in the fight against climate change.

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In 1999, Jean Louis Cohen attempted to distinguish, on the pages of the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, various types of approaches to the display of architecture, and a simple summary observation emerged: “The functions that architectural exhibition take on are [...] eminently variable”.¹ Among the architecture exhibitions reported in the article, however, a prominent position is held by the exhibition presenting a newly acquired archive that must necessarily go “beyond the simple display of documents, incorporating historical interpretation through curating”.² In these exhibitions of archive material, curatorship becomes not only a taxonomic tool but, more importantly, one able to convey hypotheses.³

Cohen’s reflection essentially involves a thematization that treats exhibits not as individual, independent, and self-explaining objects but rather as elements of a larger narrative that does not end with the confines of the exhibition. Indeed, the question broadens to the field of research: “The exhibition is but one moment in the sequence of events that comprise research, in its trajectory from an initial definition of a problem or issue to the diffusion dissemination of findings. Yet the exhibition is only very rarely the end of the journey”.⁴ From this perspective, therefore, architecture exhibitions do not simply document history; instead, they “construct narratives, and [...] tell them with spatial, visual means”.⁵

Barry Bergdoll provides another fundamental contemporary observation regarding the urge to rethink architecture exhibitions in the

pages of *Log*.⁶ The article starts with an analysis of the exhibition *Rising Currents: Projects for New York’s Waterfront* to propose a working hypothesis for the activist exhibition. Bergdoll’s position can be summarized as a desire to overcome “the reactive mode of exhibition,” an approach derived from the tradition of displaying paintings and sculptures in which “the curator culls from contemporary or recent production what he or she admires and thinks deserves contextualization and wider publicity”.⁷ Bergdoll proposes to implement the classic exhibition scheme, turning the museum space into an incubator for new ideas and launching “[...] through public programs, and through work that others will do [...] a debate that can far outlive the ephemeral event of the exhibition”.⁸ Thus, according to what has been said so far, an architectural exhibition able to convey a message and encourage visitors to reflect must first and foremost be narrative, observatory, and laboratory.

Cohen and Bergdoll’s enlightening considerations provide a starting point for contextualizing and analyzing *Taking the Country’s Side. Agriculture and Architecture*: an exhibition that investigate the theme of ecology observed in the relationship between habitat and species. Sébastien Marot, the chief curator, weaves a narrative plot that is apparently educational or, as he calls it, “ideological in that it is didactic”.⁹ In fact, the exhibition is the result of his decades-long academic career,¹⁰ as well as his countless reflections that have appeared in books and scholarly articles.¹¹ Nevertheless, the exhibition is not limited to a selection of case studies and events

from the history of the agriculture and architecture relationship. *Taking the Country's Side* is a dialogue with cities, an observation on the effects of the climate crisis, and an empowering exhortation to take a personal stand; even so, it is first and foremost an invitation to spectators “to leave their metropolitan comfort zone, and literally ‘take a walk on the wild side’”.¹²

Take a Walk on the Wild Side: Adaptability and Nomadism

Taking the Country's Side is a travelling exhibition consisting of specific sections that evolve over the course of the different editions. The materials on display recurrently consist of six significant images of the themes addressed placed at the beginning of the exhibition itinerary, a continuous chronological line usually positioned on a wall to recall a frieze, a central part hosting forty-two panels (forty-nine from the Marseilles edition) divided into six thematic sections of seven panels each, several screens on which significant experiences related to the events narrated in the central section are projected and, finally, four large dioramas designed by architectural illustrator Martin Etienne. The element-based layout of the exhibition adjusts to its nomadic nature, also contributing to its adaptability to the ecological core of the display operation. When it comes to exhibitions dealing with ecological issues, it is necessary to consider sustainability not only as a theme but also as an approach to the construction of the exhibition itself. *Taking the Country's Side* is a virtuous example of flexibility or,

from the point of view of sustainability, museography resilience, as it manages to adapt to different types of space while guaranteeing the same museum experience.

The exhibition modifies its ranges from the 2200 square meters of the Garagem Sul at the Centro Cultural de Belém for *The Poetics of Reason: Quinta Trienal de Arquitectura* in Lisbon,¹³ to the 400-450 square meters of the Archizoom Gallery at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne,¹⁴ the 220 square meters of the Orangerie pavilion in the Parc de la tête d'Or in Lyon, the two-story space at the Halles St-Géry in Brussels and, again, at the *Friche Belle de Mai* in Marseilles. Marot turns the limits imposed by the built space into the possibility to articulate the exhibition's narrative and imagine exhibition schemes that can help the visitors in their reflection. The space is articulated through metaphors used as “a purely way of helping the visitors to just orient themselves”¹⁵ through the exhibition.

In Lisbon, for example, the exhibition structure “was suggested by the plan of Garagem Sul, which roughly mirrors, with its two long rows of pillars, that of a basilica or cathedral: a nave flanked by two aisles”.¹⁶ The space was divided into three symbolic parts: the nave hosting the panels, the aisles – one of which was divided in niches – displaying the chronological frieze and the videos, and a choir with the four drawings by Martin Etienne. Following the religious metaphor, the six representations at the beginning of the exhibition constituted the *narthex* of the basilica.

At the *Friche Belle de Mai*, the initial six images grouped in diptychs are



01

conceived as the revolving doors of the exhibition, leading to the panel section, which evokes the idea of a forest where the visitor is invited to stroll while observing and reflecting on the forty-two original panels and the seven new ones on bioregionalism. The four scenarios that constitute the visitor's compass are instead imagined as a clearing circumscribed on three sides by the 'forest trees' and open on the fourth to the chronological frieze that dominates an entire wall. The exhibition design is completed by a set of film excerpts, documentaries, and interviews displayed along the north wall, which expose significant figures in the field of environment and social ecology.

The exhibits vary considerably from city to city, with some significant modifications in the last edition of Marseilles. Nevertheless, the great capacity of *Taking the Country's Side*

lies above all in its ability to weave ever-new narratives with space understood in its dual form of building and city. It is not so much the materials on display that change, but rather the interactions that are bi-univocally exchanged between visitors (and, by extension, the community of citizens) and the exhibition itself. *Taking the Country's Side* transcends the museum limits and is enriched by public events and lectures¹⁷ with the aim of establishing a dialogue with the plurality of visitors and stimulating their critical sense.

A Game of Cards: how to play *Taking the Country's Side*

The exhibition layout is set up to create multiple paths and points of view. The most substantial section of the exhibition consists of double-

Fig.1
Taking the Country's Side: Agriculture and Architecture, 2023, Marseilles, Friche Belle de Mai, installation view, detail with panels.

Jannik Cesare Emiliano Pra Levis
Exhibited ecology. On Taking the country's side

sided panels arranged “like a giant deck of cards in which the visitor’s mind is invited to wander as in a game of patience and reflection”,¹⁸ reporting events fundamental for the curator to illustrate the evolution of the relationship between urban and rural space. This part of the exhibition is divided into seven groups of seven panels each, metaphorically referred to as the “Ideological Garden”. Thus, it is a series of gardens of ideas, gardens of events or moments in history that might be relevant for us today to reflect on, to meditate on”,¹⁹ which focus on the following macro-themes: *Agriculture&Architecture*, *Agriculture&Urbanism*, *From Agronomy to Agroecology*, *Exit Urbs: a history of agrarian movements and return to the land*, *Facing the current environmental situation*, *Reframing the Practice&Theory of Design* and *Towards an Archipelago of Bioregions*.

Each *Ideological Garden* is composed of seven double-faced panels. On one side of the panels, a contextualization of the subject is accompanied by an essential bibliography, made available to the visitor for an in-depth exploration [Fig. 01], while, on the other side, excerpts from texts and a series of “famous projects, images and references that speak by themselves and need less explanation” are displayed not according to precise rules [Fig. 02], but following “their counterpoint or resonance with the front panels situated either behind or across them”.²⁰ The stated choice to display the images in a non-predetermined order is a strong museography approach in itself. In fact, the museum route winds simultaneously along the chronological line that governs the structure of the macro-themes

with the help of the large frieze, and along the random line dictated by the presence of the images on the back of the panels. The visitors thus move with a certain experiential freedom in the history of the architecture and agriculture relationship to reach a degree of awareness that allows them to critically analyze the phenomena exposed around them.

At the same time, the ludic dimension expressed through the metaphor of the pack of cards is crucial, especially for the cognitive experience gained through the autonomous reading resulting from the interplay of references between images and texts. Marot refers, in particular, to the game of solitaire and states:

I like that because, in a way, this was part of the pleasure of organizing those different references in the space, like having a game of cards raised in to the space, and it suggests to the visitors that they have to play with them. We could play the arrangement differently. That is up to the visitor to keep them in mind and play with them mentally, like a game of linking concepts.²¹

The importance of this often-emphasized playful aspect should not be forgotten when analyzing the exhibition’s journey. For example, Sebastien Marot suggests considering the Garagem Sul – the larger space in which the exhibition was hosted – and the small Orangerie in Lyon. In the first case, the panels are suspended, hanging from the ceiling. The effect created is that of a series of floating cards among which the visitor can move freely, immediately grasping the entirety of the space and playing a game of

cross-references. The Lyon exhibition appears to work differently; the 200 square meters pose a challenge to such set-up. Thus, the long and narrow space forced to arrange the panels on wooden supports placed on the floor, leaving the main scene to the frieze along the wall. Despite the limited space, the final result is nevertheless achieved thanks to the height of the supports, which, at 110 cm high, still allowed the visitor to grasp the overall view and play this “solitaire of references”.²²

To help understand the many stories exposed on the panels, the exhibition also presents “a timeline synthesizing the parallel evolutions of agriculture and architecture (and, subsequently, urbanism) since their common inception in the Neolithic age”,²³ which is typically presented as a frieze on the wall. This chronological summary serves as “a historical and pedagogical backdrop to the references and projects surveyed in the Ideological Garden”²⁴ and even for the four scenarios. The selection of the events displayed in the frieze was partly based on Marot’s lectures²⁵ and studies undertaken during his years as lecturer, and partly to make the curators’ radical stance of the cultural frame of reference explicit, as can be read in the exhibition. An even greater synthesis is achieved thanks to the reworking of the frieze by architect and illustrator Gaetan Amossé, who participated in the Lyon exhibition. In this context, the timeline is enriched with drawings and quotations from anthropologists, historians, philosophers, and scientists, making the graphic layout more articulate than the previous frieze. According to Marot, the technique of illustration – compared to other

media – helps to present ideas in a more efficient and user-friendly way. The use of illustration also allows the subjects presented to be abstracted from specific contexts. It is no coincidence that Marot opts for drawings even in the most purposeful part of the exhibition.

Exhibition – Exposition

Illustrator Martin Etienne designed the four large dioramas that constitute the last section of the exhibition in collaboration with Sebastien Marot. The use of illustration, in this case, allows images to be abstracted and caricaturized, to make them easier for visitors to understand. At the same time, the message conveyed is privileged over the specific context. Indeed, a Europeanized landscape²⁶ is recognizable in the drawings but, as Marot confesses: “You have to opt for a certain geography, a certain thing, but at least you clarify the ideological component of what you are dealing with”.²⁷ These typological caricatures of possible scenarios are the radical exaggeration of processes that still coexist, compartmentalized by Marot only to allow a clearer reading.

In the Triennale catalog, this section was entitled *Urbi et Orbi*. It showed four competing narratives about the future relationship between city and country and was the section of the exhibition where “the reader, now informed and equipped with a reasonably good rear-view mirror on the parallel histories of agriculture, architecture, and urbanism, is finally introduced to a compass rose representing opposite scenarios in

the type of relationship that city and countryside might develop in the near future, and gently invited to ask themselves which one (or two) they might, in good conscience, actively endorse”.²⁸ The “four broad landscape drawings” exhibited in this section summarize “the different and competing directions the dialectic of city and country, as well as agriculture and architecture, might take today and in the near future”.²⁹

Incorporation constitutes the first scenario presented. Marot describes it as the approach supported by those who consider the metropolis “not just as the *manifest destiny* of humankind, but also as the ultimate condition of our whole biosphere”.³⁰ In this vision of out-of-control growth, technological innovation and the uptake of agriculture into the capitalist process are seen as the only possible solutions to the ecological crisis.

Negotiation and *Infiltration* are two more scenarios that, at first glance, present various points of tangency. The first is “what we might call agricultural urbanism”,³¹ an approach that combines agricultural practices with urban planning. The second, conversely, represents a hypothetical landscape, in which agriculture and horticulture are used according to “a logic of self-organization that does not pertain to planning or urbanism but blossoms here and there, like weeds, in the fault and voids of urban territories”.³² In an interview by Christophe Catsaros for *Archizoom Papers*, Marot explains that, although the two models seemingly resemble each other, there is a clear difference between the two. *Negotiation* starts from the

consideration that the growth of the metropolis is inevitable and seeks the solution in hybrid models that integrate agriculture, livestock, horticulture, and even the very concept of ‘nature’. *Infiltration*, on the other hand, represents a process that starts from agriculture and moves towards the fabric in a relationship of proximity between resources and human beings.³³ Although similar, they derive from tendentially opposite approaches that today might respectively be called *top-down* and *bottom-up*.

The secessionist proposal stands as a separate scenario.³⁴ *Secession* is based on the assumption that the metropolis system is doomed to collapse and the solution to today’s environmental problems is to privilege decentralization to achieve a greater degree of local autonomy. Such a viewpoint, which invites the rediscovery of the participatory dimension of rural communities, derives from activist theories and movements, such as bioregionalism and especially permaculture, a concept elaborated by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren³⁵ and developed into a veritable philosophy of life by the latter: a social approach “that would turn territories into confederations of self-managed communes or worlds”.³⁶ In describing this latter approach, Marot is well aware of the need to compromise with the existing system but extols the multiple secessionist narratives as “what unites them in their very diversity, is their collective intuition that salvaging the idea of *civitas*, and giving it a new meaning, now badly requires a sub-version of and an exodus from the metropolis”.³⁷

These caricatured representations

are certainly not intended to judge the value of one scenario over the other but rather to show four directions that embody as many environmental strategies, each of which holds some truth in its hypothesis. This undefined horizon of evaluation does not mean, however, that the exhibition is neutral and the curator, as well as the visitors, cannot express their position concerning the propositional compass. Marot himself openly expresses his position as “right next to Secession, leaning towards Infiltration, with a modest and conditional tolerance for Negotiation, and an instinctive distrust of Incorporation”³⁸ and adds:

I thought it was my duty, in a way, to say where I tend to place myself within that compass, if only to invite other people to wonder where they would place themselves. And of course, I know that the exhibition is not neutral, that only through the selection of what we put together, we strongly invite people to at least place themselves not in the corporation, in a way. So I know that. But at the same time, I do not think we are forcing or compelling anyone.³⁹

As an example, Marot recalls that, at the 2019 Triennale in Lisbon, many visitors were enthusiastic about the Incorporation scenario.

The evident difficulty of giving physical form to the climate crisis⁴⁰ translates into the challenge of constructing an architectural exhibition around this theme. *Taking the Country's Side* is an exhibition that transcends the boundaries of observation and enters a collective

dimension that dialogues not only with places but, above all, with people. It does not merely inform visitors about ecological theories and approaches but builds a participatory process that aims to stimulate them to think critically about environmental problems. The exhibition fully satisfies the three criteria of narrative, observatory, and laboratory that have been identified: it represents the outcome of decades of research in the field of habitat history, articulated through a narrative framework and open to the workshop dimension in the encounter and debate with citizenships. Through the exhibition, Marot questions the very concept of exhibiting and seems to rather construct an exposition in its meaning of “exposing oneself”, thus showing that someone has taken a stand. Exposing oneself is a radical act that stems from the need to manifest one's choice. The relationship between agriculture and architecture speaks of space, places, and relationships between living and non-living, human and non-human beings but the exhibition is not limited to this. *Taking the Country's Side* brings spectators to the center of the problem and invites them to ask questions and seek answers. Dealing with sustainability and ecology, with his exhibition Sébastien Marot has proposed a new way of displaying architecture in the Anthropocene. By exhibiting his thought, he invites us to expose our own.

Endnotes

- 1 Cohen 1999, p. 317.
- 2 Cohen 1999, p. 320.
- 3 Cohen 1999, p. 320.
- 4 Cohen 1999, p. 324.
- 5 Cohen 2010, p. 49.
- 6 Bergdoll 2010, pp. 159-167.
- 7 Bergdoll 2010, p. 159.
- 8 Bergdoll 2010, p. 166.
- 9 In an interview by Christophe Catsaros for *Archizoom Papers*, Marot states that, in contrast to the exhibition curated by AMO/OMA in 2020 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, “notre exposition, centrée sur les rapports entre agriculture et architecture, est beaucoup plus classiquement didactique, voire idéologique, au sens où elle réunit un corpus d’idées et de références qui vient soutenir un argument” (*Interview with S. Marot*, 2020).
- 10 S. Marot in conversation with the author 2023.
- 11 Marot 1993; Marot 1996; Marot 1999; Marot 2003; Marot 2011; Marot 2011; Marot 2013; Marot 2019.
- 12 Marot 2023, Dossier de Presse
- 13 Éric Lapierre, the chief curator of the edition, invited the curatorial team to think about the different declinations of rationality in architecture. This choice resulted in five major Exhibitions: *Taking the Country’s Side. Agriculture and Architecture* curated by Sébastien Marot, *Inner Space* by Fosco Lucarelli, and Mariabruna Fabrizi, *What is Ornament?* by Ambra Fabi e Giovanni Piovene, *Natural Beauty* by Laurent Esmiliaire e Tristan Chadney e *The Economy of Means* by Éric Lapierre himself (Catalog 5th Trienal de Arquitectura, 2019). Despite the diversity of viewpoints of the five exhibitions, in a 2019 interview with *ArtTribune* Lapierre states “il loro contenuto e la loro presentazione sono stati pensati come un unico gesto”, adding “siamo quasi tutti sia progettisti che teorici: per noi, dunque, forma e contenuto sono un’unica cosa” (Interview with E. Lapierre, 2019). Unfortunately, there is no room here to delve into the different exhibitions, let us just say that the great merit of this edition of the Lisbon Triennial is also due to its variety of declinations, which in itself represents the spectrum of possibilities of architecture exhibitions.
- 14 One cannot fail to mention that in conjunction with the Lausanne edition, a parallel and somewhat complementary exhibition opened in the United States: *Countryside: The Future*, curated by OMA/AMO at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Both exhibitions reflect from different perspectives on the complex relationship between city and country. Although they deserve attention, we do not have the space here to talk about the nexus between the two exhibitions. However, it is crucial to say that they both constitute a fundamental junction in the ecological debate in architectural exhibitions. For further discussion, please see the catalogs of the exhibitions (Marot 2019; RK/OMA 2020).
- 15 S. Marot in conversation with the author 2023.
- 16 Marot 2019, p. 8.
- 17 The purpose of organizing meetings, workshops, guided tours, and debates is made explicit directly in the texts displayed in the exhibition. One example among many is the series of meetings *Terres Communes* of the Marseille edition or, again, the various guided tours and talks organized for other editions.
- 18 Marot 2019, p. 8.
- 19 S. Marot in conversation with the author 2023.
- 20 Marot 2019, p. 9.
- 21 S. Marot in conversation with the author 2023.
- 22 S. Marot in conversation with the author 2023.

- 23 (Marot 2019, 10),
- 24 (Marot 2023, Dossier, 22)
- 25 In his interview with the author (2023), Sébastien Marot describes the timeline as “a kind of visual resume or synthesis of my teachings in schools of architecture. Right. I have been teaching courses on the history of the environment for architects and landscape architects for 20 years now, and that is basically my canvas for that. So it is very helpful. Also for students, I can give them the timeline as a kind of resume of what I do.”
- 26 In the conversation with the author, Marot argues that, since the drawings present an ideology rooted in Europe, the drawn landscapes are necessarily Europeanized.
- 27 S. Marot in conversation with the author 2023.
- 28 Marot 2019, p. 195.
- 29 Marot 2019, p. 9.
- 30 Marot 2019, p. 197.
- 31 Marot 2019, p. 201.
- 32 Marot 2019, p. 205.
- 33 Interview with S. Marot 2020.
- 34 Interview with S. Marot 2020.
- 35 It should be kept in mind that the term *Secession* is coined by Sebastien Marot. Permaculture inspired the development of this scenario; yet, it is not the scenario itself. To elaborate further, see Holmgren David 2023. *Comment s'orienter ? Permaculture et descente énergétique* (translated and curated by Sébastien Marot). Marseille: Wildproject.
- 36 Marot 2019, p. 209.
- 37 Marot 2019, p. 210.
- 38 Marot 2019, p. 10.
- 39 S. Marot in conversation with the author 2023.
- 40 Morton 2013.

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