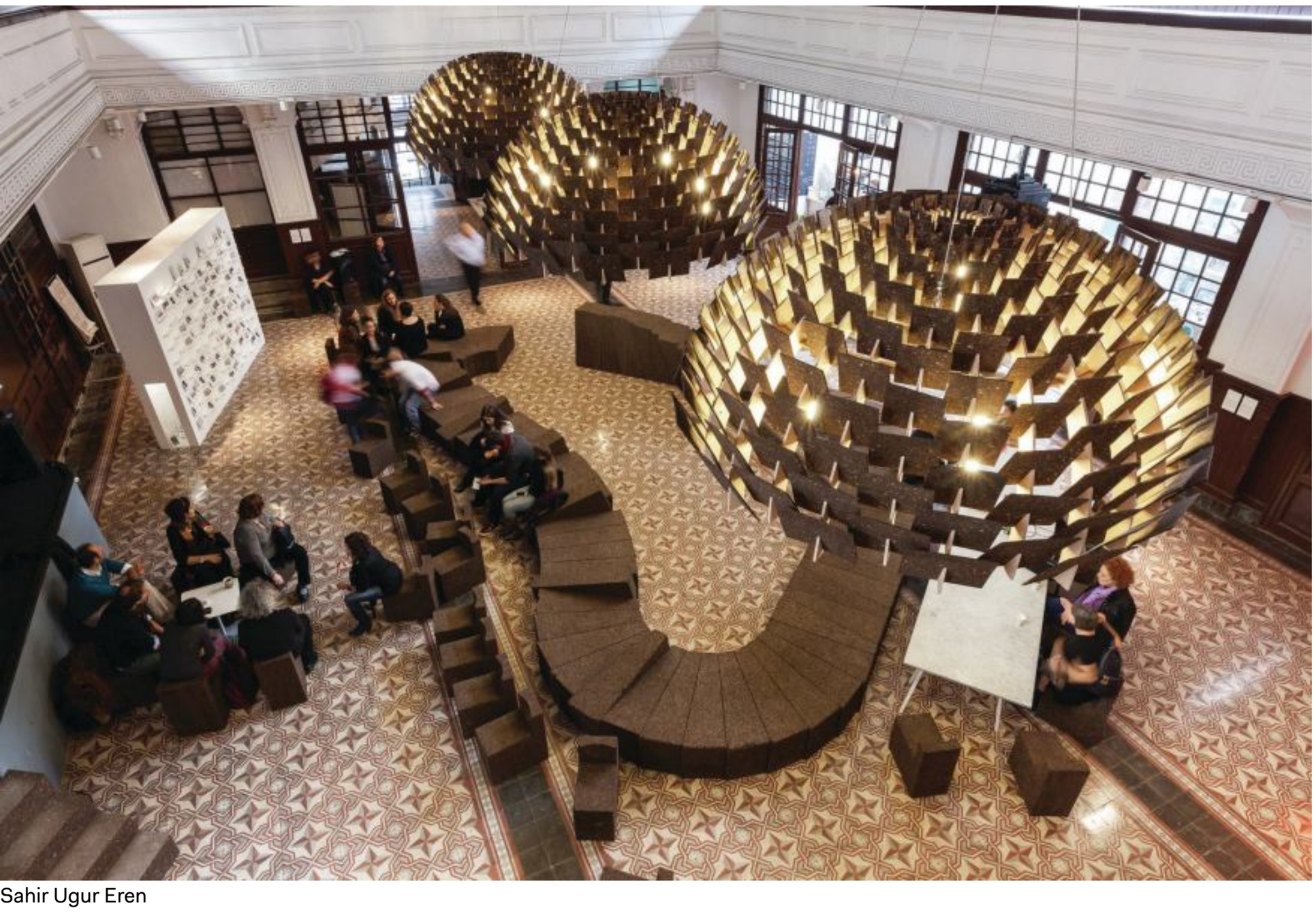
EVENTS

Reviving the Manifesto: Zoë Ryan's Istanbul Design Biennial

Zoë Ryan's biennial sought to revive the manifesto with 53 projects that raised questions about architects' codes of ethics and other controversial issues.

By CATHY LANG HO



Sahir Ugur Eren

The word “manifesto” has a musty air, evoking a long-ago moment when artist-agitators felt compelled to publish missives, neatly bullet-pointing the motives behind their works and actions and, in doing so, asserting a superior course to the future. The first modern manifesto, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ 1848 Communist Manifesto, paved the way for what scholars described as the “manifesto fever” of the early 20th century, coinciding with Modernism’s ascent and the myriad social anxieties it caused. Media savvy avant-gardists, working alone or collectively, adopted the manifesto form—no doubt finding its inherent oppositionalism useful—delineating absolute positions that posed (or rather, posed as) recipes for revolutions.

PROJECTS

Videcoq Project > Hamonic+Mas & Associés

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In the world of architecture and design, manifestos have a pedigreed tradition, linking Futurists, Surrealists, the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, CIAM, and Team X, not to mention Victor Papnek, Robert Venturi, FAIA, Rem Koolhaas, Hon. FAIA, and Bruce Mau. Zoë Ryan, director of the second Istanbul Design Biennial, has cleverly resurrected the manifesto with "The Future Is Not What It Used To Be," a presentation of 53 projects culled from over 800 responses to an open call for ideas. The call asked for "manifestos (whether texts, actions, services, objects, or something else) that open up new attitudes and sensibilities, highlight underexplored or overlooked aspects of society, and prompt further investigation and exchange about our designed and constructed age."

Sahir Ugur Eren

The Galata Greek Primary School, where the biennial was staged

Aptly, the platform to revive the manifesto is a biennial—both born around the turn of the century with a parallel urge to assert leadership in a fast-modernizing and globalizing world. Venice was the first, launched in 1895 to promote contemporary art, though like its kindred world's fairs and expos, it was as much about geopolitics, world trade, tourism, urban regeneration, spectacle, and propaganda as about cultural exchange and artistic progress.

This complicated mix of concerns and motivations persists among the 300-plus biennials, triennials, and similar episodic art extravaganzas around the world today. Unsurprisingly, the newer biennials have tended to crop up in emerging economies, in part motivated by a desire for cities to enhance their image or achieve some form of parity with their global counterparts. The organization behind the Istanbul Design Biennial, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), was sharp to add design to its festivals (which started in the early 1970s, and include music, cinema, art, theater). Design encompasses a wide range of disciplines—industrial design, fashion, communication, landscape, architecture—and can offer important perspective on Turkey's

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charged political situation, which has helped stall its until-recently-growing economy. The nation's unrest, played out dramatically last year in the Taksim Square protests, has conferred a heightened sense of responsibility to the nation's artists and cultural leaders.

ATISuffix

The ABC Manifesto Writers & Consultants exhibit, where visitors could record their own manifestos

Ryan, the John H. Bryan Chair and Curator of Architecture and Design at the Art Institute of Chicago, writes in the show's catalog, "[It] is a challenging time for designers, faced as they are with problems including climate change, the depletion of natural resources, work/life balance, economic instability, ethical conundrums raised by new forms of warfare, and social and political unrest." Her curatorial framework zeros in on the primary challenge felt by any conscientious architect or design curator, for that matter: to advance innovative practices that strive for "better" possible futures, while acknowledging the forces that have gotten us where we are.

"The Future Is Not What It Used To Be" is a manifesto in itself, proposing an overhaul of the very definition of the word. The projects represent a broad range of possible outcomes, from adding human rights to architects' codes of ethics to expanding waterfronts via small interventions to farming one's own food to repurposing surplus military accessories into everyday wear. Ryan and her co-curator, Meredith Carruthers, a Montreal-based artist and curator, worked with a majority of the selected teams to develop their concepts specifically for the biennial, sifting the miscellany into five "departments": Personal, Norms and Standards, Resource, Civic Relations, and Broadcast.

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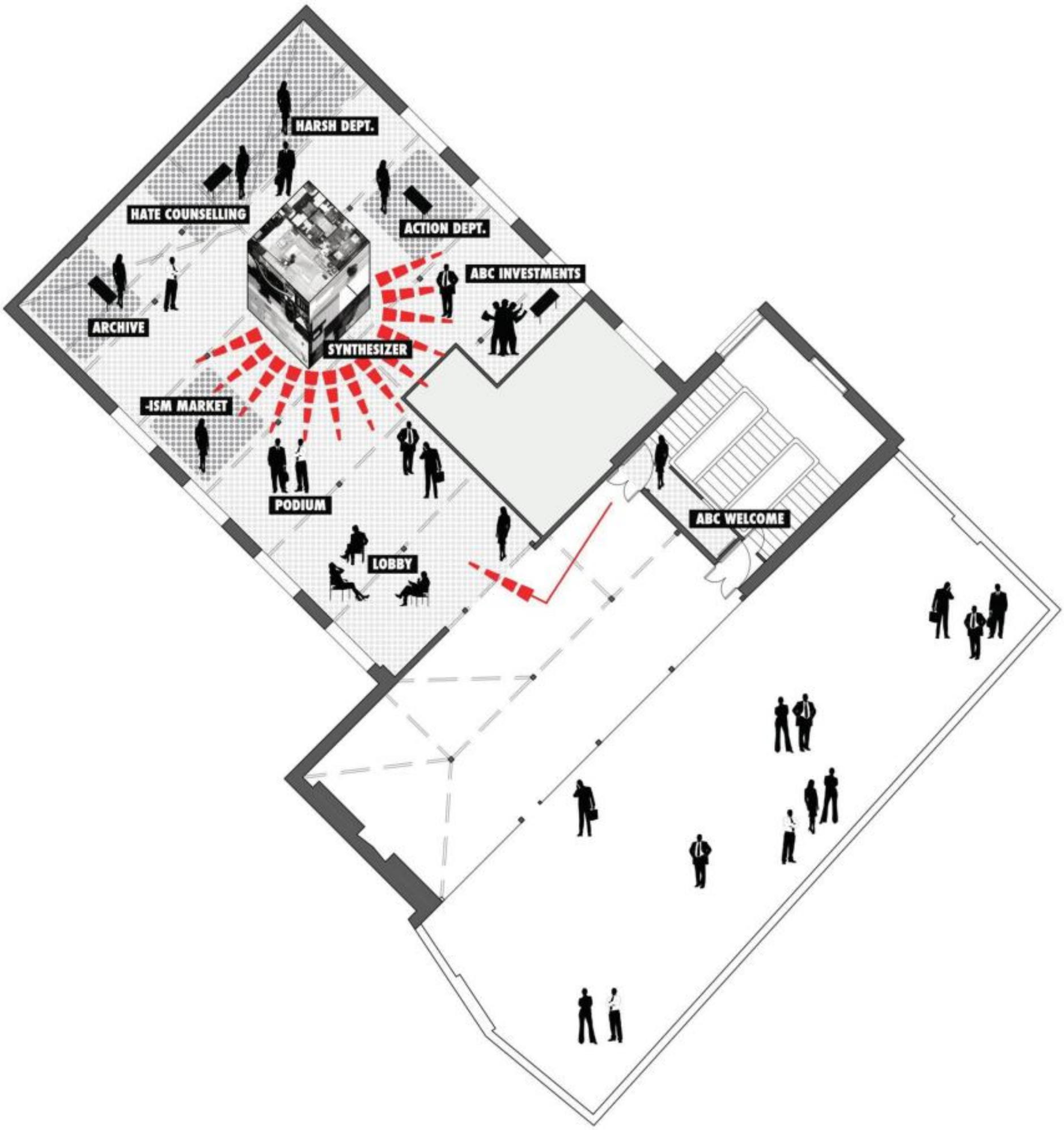

Floor plan for the biennial

Istanbul architecture firm Superpool designed the exhibition, which took over the Galata Greek Primary School, a grand neoclassical building in the city's historic core. The designers cleaved the building vertically into two sections, using a simple fabric scrim to divide each floor and the double stairwell, directing traffic up on one half and down the other. This simple move helped eliminate some of the monotony that can come with circulating whole floors at once. But Superpool's most memorable gesture is the ground-floor Hub, an inviting space designed to host workshops, talks, and informal socializing. The centerpiece is a horseshoe-shaped block sculpted from dense cork, with careful cuts that define backs and seats. Three large dome-shaped chandeliers—cork tiles attached to plywood ribs—create a grand canopy over the seating, encouraging crowds to huddle.

The exhibition starts with the question of self, of personal identity and beliefs—inextricable from the idea of the manifesto, which demands personal commitment. In the Personal Department, British artist Kristina Cranfeld's Ownership of the Face stands out as a provocative collection of "speculative accessories," masks, and other peculiar devices that allow wearers to distort or conceal their facial features. In an age of ubiquitous surveillance and facial recognition technology—being developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Facebook alike—Cranfeld's project argues for our ability to maintain "authority over our basic tools of communication": our expressions. Might governments someday use protestors' face scans to build dossiers on political activists or suspected terrorists? Though Cranfeld's images may appear absurdist, her project

suggests the need to guard against potential encroachments on privacy and civil liberties.

Tomas Valenzuela Blejer

Image from Kristina Cranfeld's Ownership of the Face exhibit

Sahir Ugur Eren

Cranfeld's Ownership of the Face exhibit

With a similar eye to the future, The New Survivalism exhibit, by Chicago industrial designers Jessica Charlesworth and Tim Parsons, presents five variations on the "bug-out bag," emergency kits that take into account "emotional and physical needs" while "imagining building blocks for a new society." Citing Ray Bradbury as an influence, Charlesworth and Parsons adopt his friendly sci-fi tone in their kit descriptions, digging into the notion of survivalism and disaster preparedness. The Re-Wilder kit is designed for those prepared to return to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle; the SETI Reserves Member is equipped with satellite instruments to contribute to the search for "cosmic companions"; while the Biophotovoltaics Hactivist has all the ingredients necessary to convert grass into energy. By couching the subject in droll storytelling, the designers remove practicality as a concern, urging questions such as: What does "crisis" or "worst-case scenario" mean to each of us? What should we protect, besides ourselves? Our culture? Our ability to make it into the next future?

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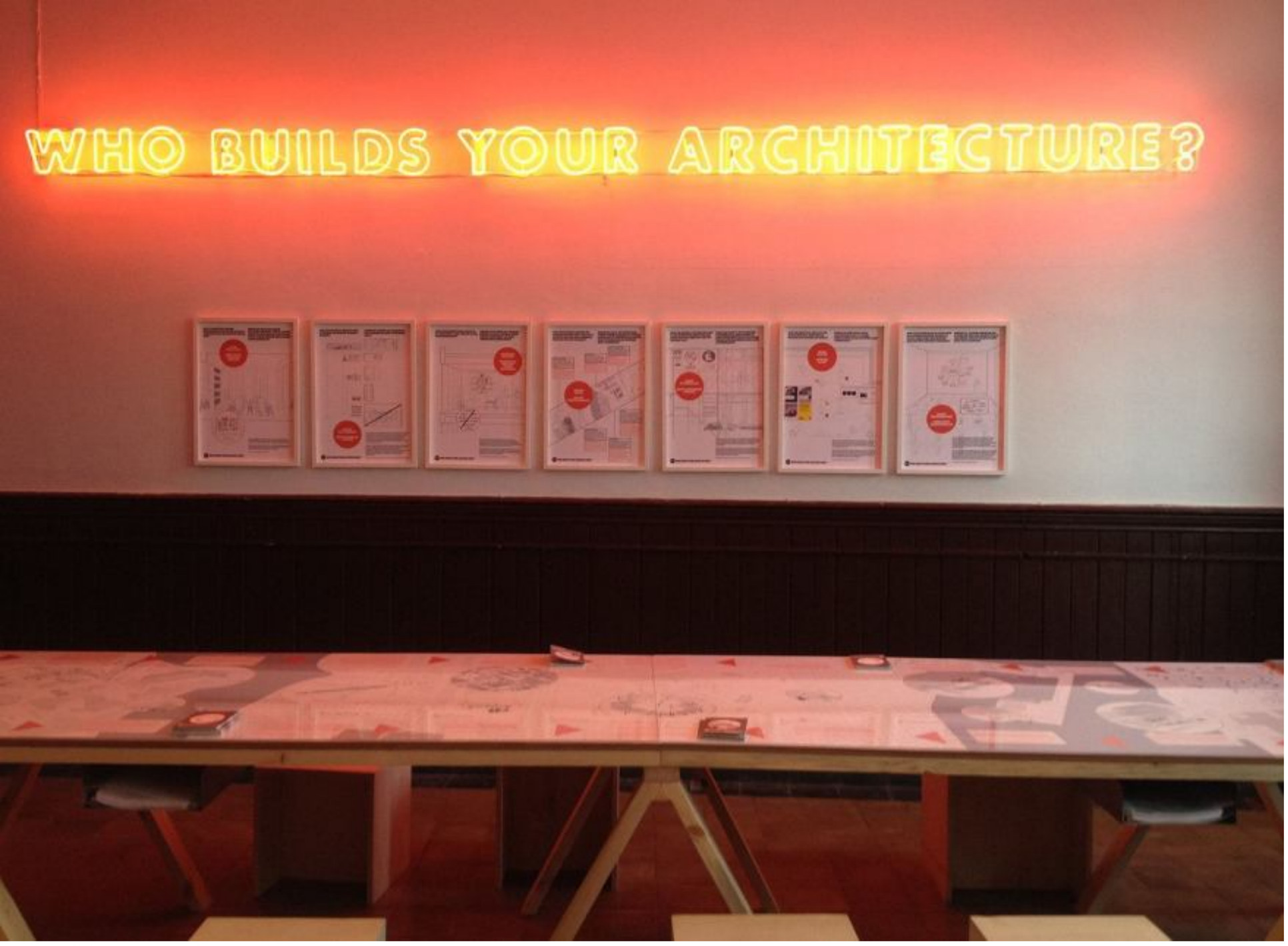
An emergency kit from Jessica Charlesworth and Tim Parsons' The New Survivalism exhibit

Indeed, self-sufficiency and ecology are central concerns of many of the show's manifestos. Chicago-based, Togo-born Mansour Ourasanah's Lepsis is a self-contained grasshopper-growing unit that would look lovely on any kitchen counter. Easy to grow and a good source of protein, grasshoppers could be a viable alternative to animal meat. The project, located in the Norms and Standards Department, underscores the feasibility of consumers producing their own food—consider the growing urban agriculture movement—and fits right in with the Slow Food and Farm-to-Table manifestos, which have made great inroads into mainstream food consciousness.

Repair Society's 11-point manifesto, in the Resource Department, is notable as one of the few projects that's actually in practice. Led by Oslo-based historian Gabriele Oropallo, Dutch curator Joanna van der Zanden, and Canadian designer Cynthia Hathaway, this initiative—which originated in 2009 at Platform21, an incubator for design ideas in Amsterdam—has been downloaded over 1 million times. The manifesto argues for mending things over ditching them, encouraging things to be designed so that they can be repaired, and urging everyone to see that mending as a creative challenge, a craft. Repair Society is one of the more design-conscious strains of the worldwide DIY/maker movement (the influence of Dutch readymade revivalists Droog is evident) and has hosted workshops and online competitions, gaining followers who agree that "the act of repair has cultural, social, economical effects and benefits. … Repairing is a way to go forward; it bridges old and new, past and future, and could therefore be seen as a sensitive way of thinking about future forms of society."

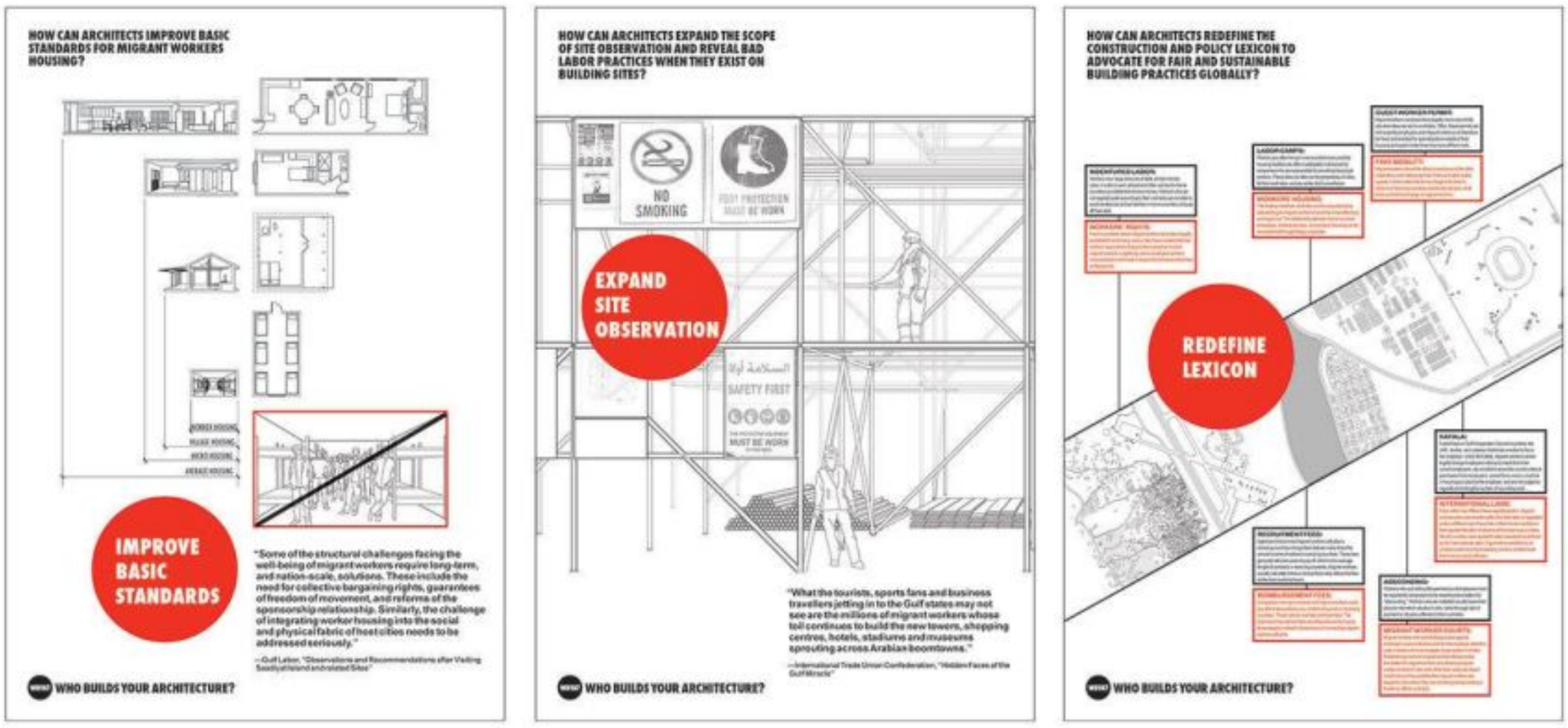


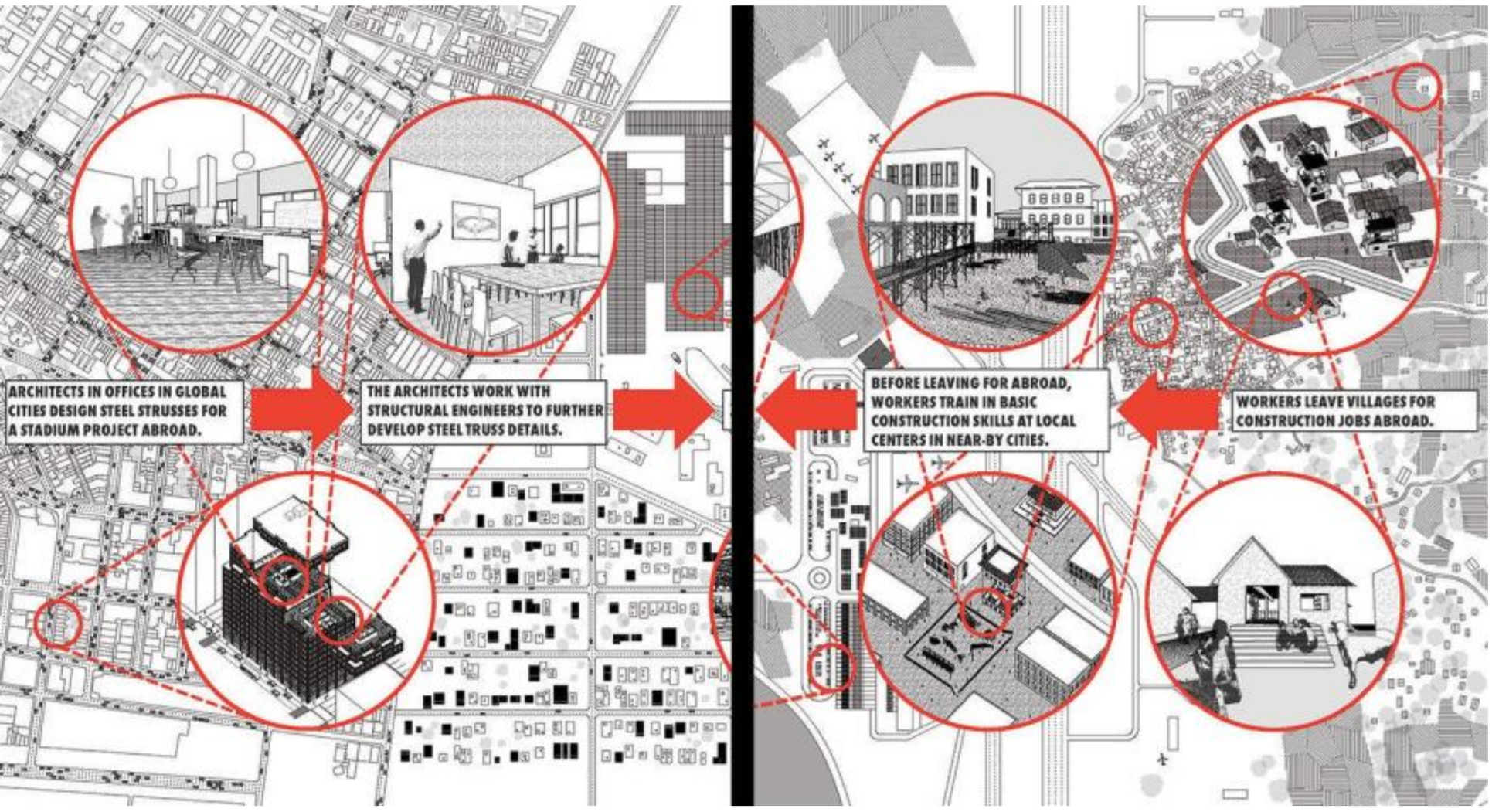
Who Builds Your Architecture?

The Who Builds Your Architecture? exhibit argues that professional architecture associations should expand their codes of ethics to include human rights on job sites.

A century after Adolf Loos declared ornament a crime and Le Corbusier pronounced the house a machine for living, many smart designers and architects today have found comfortable ways of combining rationalism with decoration and craft. Customization, upcycling, 3D printing, small-batch production of everything from beer to clothing to building components—all signal a craft revolution. At the same time, in many parts of the world, traditional craft-based populations remain at risk of disappearing. Crafted in Istanbul, an initiative of Turkish industrial designers Baris Gumustas, Bilal Yilmaz, and Seda Erdural, documents and maps the city's craftspeople in order to boost their potential for collaboration with designers and industries. Ironically, the nation's growth and rising tourism are hurting these ateliers, pushing them out of the city's core in favor of shops stocked with kitsch souvenirs and cheap goods from China.

How do the exhibition's many good ideas—about sustainability and the impacts of globalism, social engagement, and design activism—scale up to the level of mega-architectural projects? Who Builds Your Architecture? intelligently analyzes the global supply chain of construction projects and campaigns for professional architecture associations to expand their codes of ethics and conduct to include human rights on job sites. Led by Kadambari Baxi, Mabel Wilson, Jordan Carver, and other faculty at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, this effort grew out of a 2012 conference in New York and now includes a broad coalition of architects, activists, and educators. The group installed a long worktable in the biennial's Civic Relations Department, with illustrations tracing the global movement of materials (like steel) and the parallel journey of humans (mostly from Southeast Asia) to construction sites. Amidst recent controversies over worker deaths and labor camp conditions in Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and other Persian Gulf cities, this is a manifesto that deserves to gain political traction.





Who Builds Your Architecture?

Images from Who Builds Your Architecture?

The biennial's title borrows from a 1937 essay by French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry, in which he alludes to our diminishing capacity to perceive the future. He wrote, "We can no longer think of [the future] with any confidence in our inductions." Inductions is an awkward word in both French and English, but the word "induce"—to cause an event or process to happen—suggests an assumption about impact, results, or outcomes. His statement might be interpreted as deflating the manifesto, but it clearly doesn't stop people from speculating, and more importantly, hoping for results.

At the end of the exhibition, a large room is set up like an office for ABC Manifesto Writers & Consultants, a cheeky bit of performance that pokes fun at the features of the traditional manifesto—arrogance, loudness, perversity—and offers to help anyone write their own, with a step-by-step process that culminates in participants reading, recording, and then ripping up their new (mostly meaningless) manifestos. Ultimately, the value of this bit of agitprop is that it helps to drag manifestos out of people who might never consider making one.

In Ryan's introduction, she suggests that the new manifesto might be propositional rather than oppositional, discursive rather than commanding, grounded in everyday life rather than utopian visions, collective rather than exclusive. Her 53-point show certainly makes a sound case.

ATISuffix

The ABC Manifesto Writers & Consultants exhibit

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