

Undersides, Insides, Rear Sides: The Bricolage of Eric Hattan Stefanie Bräuer

Eric Hattan's exhibition *Habiter l'inhabituel* in 2014 provided an opportunity for visitors to explore a newly opened building by architect Kengo Kuma, including its back of house and underground spaces. From the entrance at street-level of the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain of the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region in Marseille, through the foyer and down a wide staircase, the exhibition space was to be found in the basement. This large, six-metre-high space was striking for its emptiness. Apart from an introductory text, a loudspeaker suspended from the ceiling and some colourful plastic buckets, there was very little to grab the attention. On searching for the art, a door that was slightly ajar invited visitors to approach the back right-hand corner of the room. Turning the handle did not, however, provide access. The door was jammed. In the middle was a peephole but there was little to see apart from some plaster debris on the wooden floor of the next room and a door in the far corner on the left. Determining the function of this room proved quite difficult as, finally, it turned out to be an illusion. A tiny model of a room was stuck behind the peephole between door and wall. The work's title *Coincée* (atelier d'artiste) – which translates as *Wedged* (artist's studio) – created the impression of a productive art studio with white walls, wooden floor, skylight and rubble where the artist spent time living, working and creating the model itself, the door and all the other works in the exhibition. In this scenario, the sites of production and exhibition were put into immediate vicinity.

Having to wait in front of the closed door, the visitor's attention focused on this screen which acted as a mediator between inside and outside. As cultural theorist Dirk Baecker has explained: 'Architecture is finding form through the medium of screens, which always serve the purposes of both closure and opening.'¹ Here Baecker elevates the function of the wall above basic principles of form, function or construction to a critical role for understanding buildings. Eric Hattan worked within this context when he emptied out the exhibition spaces in Marseille and 'intervened' in the architectural structure. The destabilising and subsequent sharpening of perception caused by Hattan's approach was highlighted by critic Samuel Herzog, in his review of the exhibition. Having discovered four six-metre-high pillars that at first glance appeared structural but were actually inserted into the space as artworks entitled *Sculptures*, he wrote: 'Now everything inside the space appears dubious and we begin to distrust everything, to subject everything to some kind of reassessment.'² Indeed, inquisitive visitors would find other infrastructural *trompe l'œil* items, mainly on the walls, in the shape of ventilation flaps, grilles, lamps and pipes.

Another work in the exhibition, titled *Hidden Place*, penetrated walls with the aid of a surveillance camera. Like *Wedged* (artist's studio), this piece focused on what might lie behind the walls. Whereas the peephole offered a view into an imagined adjoining room, this CCTV system provided continual visual access to a real space. In this case, the hidden place was a gap between the gallery and the neighbouring property, which was several metres high and long but only a few centimetres wide. Usually unlit, Hattan illuminated the space for the camera over the duration of exhibition, rendering it visible as a weather-worn crevasse. The monitor showing this video was installed elsewhere in a small anteroom so that cables connected to the camera had to be fed through perforations, which had been drilled in the wall. With *Hidden Place*, Hattan literally sheds light on the contradictions in architecture between disciplined technical engineering and inescapable, irrational features which are accepted with a simple shrug of the shoulders. This approach can be likened to that of the bricoleur, a handyman, DIY enthusiast and hobbyist extensively described by ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss³ as 'someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman... Unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of (the diverse tasks) to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project...'⁴ This approach to materials implies a creative method, where the artist, as a hybrid of bricoleur and engineer 'constructs a material object which is also an object of knowledge.'⁵ Lévi-Strauss thus defines artistic practice as a combination of useful research activity and an incidental, non-specific process of creation.

Three particular works by Eric Hattan bear a close connection to this notion of bricolage through his site-specific approach and economy of means: in the installation, *+ - das halbe Leben* (+ - half a life, 1990), he transferred all the belongings collected during the course of his life into an exhibition where they were arranged as sculptural material for visitors to view or, even, purchase; in a 1994 work titled *Entbehrliches aus dem eigenen Haushalt* (*Stellen Sie sich vor*) (*Dispensable household stuff* [Just imagine]), an airplane trolley served as a container for discarded personal belongings wrapped in plastic and looking for a new user; and in 2008 Hattan rearranged the clutter in an abandoned house in Iceland, by propping furniture and household items up against the ceiling on rods, thereby putting them out of use. This process of turning things upside down found its counterpart in Hattan's frequent

inversion of packaging materials. In this same installation in Iceland, a bag that had been left on a table, along with an egg carton and some other boxes, were all carefully turned inside out by the artist. Such careful handling of usually discarded packaging not only erases their branding and prevents them from being ignored as the detritus of passive consumption, but also makes a feature of their insides, undersides, seams and joins. As Lévi-Strauss writes, 'the possibilities always remain limited by the particular history of each piece and by those of its features which are already determined by the use for which it was originally intended or the modifications it has undergone for other purposes.'⁶ This aspect of continual transformation is a creative principle that keeps Hattan's body of work in a state of flux. It reinforces a provisional quality and reflects a formative process that is neither predetermined nor conclusive. For example, the street light – a recurring feature in Hattan's body of work since the mid-1990s – appears in multiple guises and locations: tilted head first on the stairs in a narrow stairwell; bending at ground level to form a pillar as well as a lamp; or an arc lamp bent over at the top. In Eric Hattan's work, therefore, bricolage relates to variations on conceptual set pieces as well as the material traces of consumerism, both of which become interrelated in his in-situ approach.

These various intertwined aspects of bricolage are also present in Hattan's interventions involving walls, not least in the works in Marseille. His use of peepholes and penetrations set up a visual *mise-en-scène* that guides and choreographs the visitor's gaze. In the video *Fenêtre sur cour* (1997), the artist can be seen sawing a window-sized hole in a plaster wall. After 120 minutes of real-time footage, three removed slabs can be seen leaning next to the newly formed opening. It now offers a new view of the back courtyard through a window and alludes through its title to Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* (1954). Another video, *Les trous* (1999), documents the artist making holes of different sizes in the plaster wall of the exhibition space using a hammer and chisel for almost an hour.⁷ Located in rooms that were originally intended to house a cinema, Hattan's intervention reversed the original direction of the audience towards the screen by placing monitors behind the holes he had cut in the wall between the former projection room and the storeroom. Hattan also integrates found holes in his work with the aid of a camera or video to re-direct the spectator's gaze. The video *Vous êtes chez moi* was created in 1999 in an empty Parisian housing block from the 1960s that was slated for demolition. In preparation, builders had knocked holes of approximately 40 cm in diameter through the walls between flats, as bolted doors had impeded the usual movement through the building.⁸ This uncut, hour-long video documents Hattan's exploration of the building as he climbs through the holes to cross an entire storey.⁹ The gaze here is materialised in the act of walking around, a significant physical effort with camera constantly in hand. Hattan has explicitly pointed to Gordon Matta-Clark's 1975 intervention *Conical Intersect* in relation to this work.¹⁰ Matta-Clark – whose works cross the boundaries between art and architecture¹¹ – cut a conical hole in a building in Paris that was due for demolition. However, in contrast to Hattan, Matta-Clark employed a camera-man, Bruno DeWitt to document the work.¹² In Hattan's video, the strenuous activity is all the more tangible as the moving image is closely connected to the artist's moving body, providing greater immersion in the action. Physical labour is central not only when Hattan tears down walls himself but also when he films found cavities. In these examples, the wall in Hattan's work takes on a double permeability: not only does it become a template used to frame and orientate the gaze; it also offers a point of access, inviting the body to enter.

All of the aspects outlined above could be found in Hattan's work *Kalter Kaffee*, realised at Kunsthalle Basel in 2002. This installation displayed the traces of the artist's break-in from the exhibition space into the adjoining director's office, through a door that is usually bricked-up but was now made visible again as a result of the artist's intervention. The video *B-Movie*, which was screened on a monitor placed behind a room divider made of corrugated cardboard, showed the artist carrying out his nocturnal raid. A pile of rubble that had been roughly swept up, along with the broom leaning against the wall next to the entrance hole, were further silent witnesses to the action. Cables snaking out through a hole in a broken-up door supplied ten loudspeakers with varying soundtracks of the artist describing his experiences with the Kunsthalle since 1978. This work was created in response to the curators' invitation to all participating artists to reflect their respective back story with the Kunsthalle. In the accompanying catalogue, Hattan emphasised the fact that, in general, exhibition conditions are neither good nor bad, but instead interesting or boring,¹³ which reflects on his aforementioned in-situ practice and his recognition of institutionally conditioned parameters. These were especially interesting here, since Hattan addressed both the architecture and the institution. Though the artist recounted his own experiences, he also undermined their importance by playing them back as a hardly decipherable cacophony of voices and lending them a humorously self-deprecating title: *Kalter Kaffee* translates literally as 'cold coffee', but is used to describe something that happened too long ago to be still relevant. With his nightly raid of the director's office, Hattan not only broke some very basic

boundaries, he also demonstrated intimate familiarity with both the ideal and real architectural and material fabric of the Kunsthalle: only his knowledge of the bricked-in door and its exact position allowed him to break through it. For the duration of the exhibition, he was able to restore the former openings of the institution, both physically and metaphorically.

Reflecting on this strategy of bricolage, the projects by Eric Hattan that have been discussed here focus on the undersides, insides and rear sides – and thus the physical and sometimes, by extension, institutional conditions – of specific situations. The core of his approach lies in his site-specific practice, in a sustainable use of leftovers, a recycling of set pieces. Walls are amongst the locations he favours for such interventions: they draw the viewer's curiosity through openings, doors and cavities. Hattan channels our gaze with the aid of peepholes, CCTVs, holes cut through walls and, more intimately, through the camera work of his videos. Just as the visitors of the exhibition in Marseille shook the door handle, Hattan rattles the distinguishing fundament of architecture: the wall, and with it, the difference between inside and outside.

1 Dirk Baecker, 'Die Dekonstruktion der Schachtel. Innen und Außen in der Architektur', in Frederick D. Bunsen and Dirk Baecker, *Unbeobachtbare Welt. Über Kunst und Architektur*, Frederick D. Bunsen and Dirk Baecker, Bielefeld: Verlag Cordula Haux, 1990, pp. 67–104, here p. 95. 2 Samuel Herzog, 'Im Fleckenkleid der Möglichkeiten', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 18 March 2014, p. 46. 3 Published in English as *The Savage Mind*, London: Weidenfeld + Nicolson, 1966. In a critical appraisal of the art of Marjetica Potrc, Patricio del Real traces the reception of the structuralist Lévi-Strauss's concept of bricolage, which fell on fertile ground in the 1960s and 70s: 'With Jacques Derrida and poststructuralism, bricolage gains in meaning, transformed from a practice bound by concrete objects to a critical form itself. The activity of the bricoleur becomes a model for creativity and a critique of dominant culture in general.' Patricio del Real, 'Slums Do Stink: Artists, Bricolage, and Our Need for Doses of "Real" Life', *Art Journal*, vol. 67 no. 1 (Spring 2008), p. 86. Irénée Scalbert, meanwhile, has surveyed the reception of bricolage in architecture, focussing particularly on architectural postmodernism and contextualism in urban design: Irénée Scalbert, 'The Architect as Bricoleur', *Candide. Journal for Architectural Knowledge*, no. 4 (7/2011), pp. 69–88, here pp. 73, 77. 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–18. 5 *Ibid.*, p. 22. Patricio del Real also stresses this hybrid aspect when he writes: 'Bricolage is taken as a model of a hybrid practice that disarms disciplinary behaviours.' Del Real, 'Slums Do Stink' (see note 3), p. 92. 6 Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (see note 3), p. 19. 7 The exhibition formed part of the Bourse d'art monumental d'Ivry, which was accompanied by the publication: Thierry Sigg (ed.), *12e Bourse d'art monumental d'Ivry*, ed. Thierry Sigg, Ivry-sur-Seine: Le Crédac; Galerie Fernand Léger, 1999. 8 Eric Hattan in an unpublished interview with Maja Wismer, conducted in the context of the exhibition *Into the White* at MAC/VAL in Val-de-Marne on 26 September 2009, n.p. 9 The holes in the walls offered views into neighbouring flats, and the remains from the former inhabitants' everyday lives were suddenly lying next to one another. In this context, Maja Naef and Ralph Ubl refer to the topological principle of contiguity that can also reveal themselves unexpectedly. Maja Naef and Ralph Ubl, 'Eric Hattan's Transitions and Passages', in *Niemand ist mehr da / Vous êtes chez moi*, Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2006, pp. 119–124; reprinted in the present publication, pp. 259–261. 10 Hattan, interview with Maja Wismer (see note 8). 11 Philip Ursprung writes about how Gordon Matta-Clark 'showed architects the limitations of their possibilities, and hence their potential, by himself pacing off performatively these limits, thus making them visible and presenting them for discussion. The marking of limits, edges, boundaries, and thresholds runs like a thread through his oeuvre.' Philip Ursprung, 'Gordon Matta-Clark and the Limits to Architecture', in *Gordon Matta-Clark – Moment to Moment: Space*, eds. Hubertus von Amelnunxen, Angela Lammert and Philip Ursprung, Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2010, pp. 28–45, here p. 30. Stephen Walker also describes Matta-Clark's attempts to push boundaries, by which he is referring to both material and immaterial borders such as institutional boundaries. Stephen Walker, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Art, Architecture and the Attack on Modernism*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 157f. 12 Marc Glöde, 'Slicing Space – Thinking Space', in *Gordon Matta-Clark – Moment to Moment: Space* (see note 11), pp. 132–143, here pp. 137f. Bruce Jenkins notes that the intervention was captured on 16mm film by Matta-Clark and Bruno DeWitt, and was also documented in a video recording by Marc Petitjean. Bruce Jenkins, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Conical Intersect*, London: Afterall, 2011. The 16mm film has since been digitised and is available online at: http://ubu.com/film/gmc_conical.html (accessed 1 December 2015). 13 Eric Hattan, in *capital letters*, ed. Peter Pakesch, Basel: Kunsthalle Basel; Schwabe Verlag, 2002, n.p.