

## 31 buildings (an encounter)

Wrapped

*The narrow space between two walls.*

“How do I begin to talk about this space?” That’s the question that goes through my mind while Piya gives me a tour of the unfinished exhibition. We walk between construction materials and past freshly painted walls. As I take in the unlikely shapes and angles of the slanted structure that seems to cut through the exhibition space I begin to experience what the artist’s themselves call “a gap” in the viewer’s perception of the work: an absence of narrative and a degree of abstraction and emptiness that leaves the viewer with the task to fill in the missing pieces for herself. “It’s not about interpretation,” Cristian tells me later, when I sit down with the artists to discuss their work, “we wanted it to be about the affective reaction of the viewer to the work.” *31 buildings* investigates the different kinds of experiences a space can generate with the people who move through it and how those experiences can reverberate in their daily lives and environments. My own first encounter with the work leaves me with an uneasy feeling about how to describe the experience.

I am confronted with the fact that, for better or worse, my medium is language. Of course, language is (nearly) everyone’s medium. It’s how we interact with each other and how we think and communicate about the world. But the more time I spend thinking about this work and talking to the artists, I’m reminded of the other media we share. We share images: digital, printed or otherwise. We share spaces. We share the concrete, plaster, wood and paint that make up the buildings we live in and move through. How do we relate to these shared media? Decades of Poststructuralism and deconstruction have taught us to be critical of the power relations that are sustained and even created by language, but when it comes to visual media we might still be largely oblivious to the ways in which they shape and influence our reality.

“We are not conscious enough of the way we read visual spaces and the way in which they control our behavior,” Piya says. We also lack the language to describe our encounters with the visual. I’m reminded of German philosopher Robert Vischer’s theory of perception, which he centered around the concept of empathy or *Einfühlung*. Perception, according to Vischer, is intricately connected to the body. When we look at a building, a painting or a sculpture, we simultaneously establish a sensory and affective relationship to it. As Vischer puts it: “The manner in which the appearance/phenomenon is built/structured becomes an analogy with my own build/structure; I wrap myself in its limits like in a dress.” I like the idea of wrapping yourself in something that is in reality not even close to your skin, of feeling in your body what you see with your eyes. It might seem difficult to image, but we’ve all experienced moments where our visual perception induces a sensory response. We’ve all had goose bumps, we’ve all felt pain when watching an image of someone hurting or uplifted by the scale of a building. To allow yourself to be wrapped and enveloped by something. Maybe this

is a key to visual literacy. To me, it also comes close to what Susan Sontag called “an erotics of art” in her famous essay ‘Against Interpretation’. Seeing, feeling and touching as an entangled experience.

## Burdened

### *The pipes that run through the cellar.*

While we’re talking, Cristian tells me about the history of the space we are in. HKS was a school building before it was an art center. Like most buildings it had a lifespan beyond the control of any one architect, its function and shape changing over time. The structure that Piya and Cristian built inside HKS is a section from a building they visited in Romania. These buildings too had a life that gives them their particular quality today. Built in the communist era, they were designed to fit specific purposes, their architecture reflecting their functionality. After the fall of communism, the buildings’ purpose and function was suspended, leaving them as strange remnants in the countryside, free to be re-used and appropriated in different ways. The buildings’ remarkable shape is the result of several factors working together over time to create something that wasn’t originally planned. “This idea of collective authorship is important to us,” says Piya. “We are interested in the way that different conditions like weather and human interferences change a building in unforeseen ways.”

The particular design of the Romanian buildings also brings with it a particular affective quality that Piya and Cristian wanted to transport to the spaces of HKS. The confrontation between the exhibition space and the structure that is built inside of it creates a sense of alienation, but one of intimacy too. The structure is superimposed on the existing space to create the experience of many different buildings. Walls move close to and then away from each other, spaces are opened and closed off. Between the architecture of these two buildings unlikely openings emerge, new spaces that invite the viewers to move through them in unusual ways. “Peripheral spaces like attics, cellars and machine spaces have this quality too, but most of the time we aren’t aware of it,” says Cristian. Experiencing these affective encounters in the exhibition might make viewers more sensitive to similar experiences in their own environments.

The collective authorship of a building could be described as layers of natural and human traces that are stored in its structure and material. I wonder how these traces live on in the exhibition itself. For Cristian, it was initially important to approach the buildings they visited in Romania as clean spaces, freed from the burden of history. At the same time the exhibition does not entirely dismiss the historical context. History is present, but it does not determine the reading of the work. The abstraction of the structure, which is intensified by the color of the walls, is meant to make the encounter with the viewers open and unlimited. This is where the potentiality of the space ties in with its historical sensibility. The exhibition can be

described as a constellation, a collection of fragments that carry within them a trace of their original historical context. Transported to the spaces of HKS, the fragments can potentially resonate with other architectural fragments outside the exhibition space. The exhibition makes present affective encounters with buildings that were built in another time and in another place. By sharpening the viewer's sensibilities to these affective encounters in their own time and space, a different kind of architectural history is proposed: one that is based on affect, movement and reverberations.

## Bound

*An opening between the wall and the floor.*

As I take another walk through the exhibition I begin to notice the intangible spaces that exist between the visible structures. The empty spaces that I am invited to fill. I imagine lying on the floor underneath a wall, its weight pressing on my chest. I try to feel the embrace of two walls as I stand in the narrow space between them. I hide in the intimacy of shadows. I imagine the building tilting and tipping over while I remain upright. I think about walls growing through ceilings and floors like ivy through the holes and cracks of a house. Where does this space end and where does it begin? Is it defined by the shapes I see; by the shapes I imagine or by the movements I make? One sentence by Dominique Gonzalez Foerster that Cristian and Piya sent me before I came here keeps coming back to my mind: "I prefer to be in a relationship with something that's around me, but which I am, at the same time, myself around." I think it beautifully describes my position as a viewer, which is at the same time ambiguous and pleasurable.

As a viewer I am both inside and outside the space. I feel like, in a way, I'm a part of it, that my movements can potentially complete it and that my imagination can expand it. In this sense it is a space without boundaries. At the same time, I also feel bound by the space. I feel like it wants me to move in a certain way, like it tries to make solid what is essentially fluid. To be bound means to be limited or confined by something. In an archaic sense it also means to be ready or to be set on going somewhere. While I'm looking up the different meanings of "bound", I find that the etymology of the word goes back to the old Norse *būinn*, which means to dwell or to prepare. I'm intrigued by the dual meaning of the word: to dwell and to prepare to leave at the same time. To be in one place and in the next. Perhaps this is a good way to describe the tensions I'm experiencing. The feeling of being between two places: a permanent structure and a temporal one, a physical space and an imaginary space, something solid and something fluid. I'm curious about the future directions the work will take in my mind. For now, I decide to linger in this space a while and then to take it with me to next one, and the next, and the next.