PUBLIC TRANSACTION
RITA MCBRIDE
“[...] categories like sculpture and painting have been kneaded and stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity, a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything. And though this pulling and stretching of a term such as sculpture is overtly performed in the name of vanguard aesthetics—the ideology of the new—its covert message is that of historicism. The new is made comfortable by being made familiar, since it is seen as having gradually evolved from the forms of the past.”


“A new term has replaced the word furniture [...] the new word is the equipment of the house. To equip is, through the analysis of the problem, to classify the various elements necessary to domestic functioning [...]”

Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre complète*, 1971

“It would still be necessary to undertake a study that would accomplish for the 20th century what Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* had the intention of doing for the 19th century; after all that we know today about the period, a work of this type should be entitled *The Book of Air Conditioning*.”

Peter Sloterdijk, *Écumes. Sphères III*, 2005

Rosalind Krauss’ introduction to “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” offers us clues to an understanding of the complex operations taking place in Rita McBride’s work that oscillate between an expanded practice of sculpture and a conceptual approach to historical reference. Though not at all grounded in the historical moment in which this expansion of the sculptural field was produced, namely the 1960s and 1970s, McBride’s work revisits moments in the 20th century during which sculpture has been redefined and captures these shifts, intertwining them in a referential dialogue with episodes in the history of modern architecture.

The selection of works by Rita McBride for this exhibition hinges on two axes, which are then deployed towards what the artist has categorized as ‘positions’ to define the different bodies of work that she has produced over the last twenty-five years. The first axis addresses the logic of sculpture as one inextricably and historically bound to the monument’s commemorative function, charting its transition during modernity towards what Krauss calls its “negative condition—a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place.” The second one explores the ontological implications, for her particular sculptural practice, of the term *équipement* (equipment) in Le Corbusier’s functionalist redefinition of architecture, furniture and interior design.

If, according to Krauss’ analysis, sculpture in the early sixties “had entered a categorical no-man’s land” and become a “pure marker” it was always in relation to landscape or architecture; sculpture thus designated whatever “was in the landscape that was not landscape” or “on or in front of the building that was not the building.” McBride’s work, in this sense, operates within the category of the sculptural object that is not architecture but that somehow stands in as a marker for the architectural.
Much of the literature on McBride’s production has addressed the contradictions that her work poses vis à vis its sculptural condition, and the tensions it establishes with architecture where sculpture is placed in a sort of double bind in relation to it. In this sense, it would be worthwhile to examine the relation to the figure of Le Corbusier as one revisited constantly in her production, precisely at this juncture between the sculptural and the architectural where McBride’s work operates. Since the early stages of McBride’s trajectory, Le Corbusier makes frequent appearances, as a kind of trump card, in the most unexpected and tangential ways. McBride’s *Toyota* (1990) though seemingly not laden with Corbusian references, is a commentary on industrial mass production as the hallmark of modernity and the guiding principle behind Le Corbusier’s seminal book 1923 *Towards a New Architecture*, where he never ceases to emphasize that the house and the city of the future must be mass-produced: “We must create a mass-production state of mind, a state of mind for building mass-production housing, a state of mind for living in mass-production housing.” McBride’s approach to mass-production is certainly ironic; the computer generated image of the car is rendered into sculptural form using rattan bound together in the traditional way, a handcrafted object that clearly denies the imperatives of mass-production.

A graphic work from 1991, *Dominoes and Donkeys*, offers further clues as to the relation between the aforementioned work, and ideas related to mass-production, in Le Corbusier’s writings and practice, as well as providing a conceptual blueprint of McBride’s entire production. The print depicts two figures rendered in CAD/CAM, that of the *Toyota* “skeleton,” and the “skeleton” of Le Corbusier’s *Maison Dom-ino* (1914) the first house he designed specifically.
with mass-production in mind, a basic structure that could accommodate different mass-produced elements assembled in a variety of different ways. Moreover, its title is allusive to a chapter of Le Corbusier’s 1924 book Urbanisme titled “The Donkey’s Way, Man’s Way” in which the architect critiques Camillo Sitte’s organic conception of urban planning stating that: “Man walks in a straight line because he has a goal, he knows where he is going. He has decided to go somewhere and he walks straight there. The donkey zigzags, hesitates a little, its brain burnt and distracted, it zigzags to avoid large rocks and slopes, seeking shade: with the least possible engagement.”

McBride is thus simultaneously signaling two major conceptual directions, indexed by the subtle references to Le Corbusier’s ideas that prevail in her work: that of the mass-produced serial object that follows the imperatives of what Le Corbusier defined as équipement, embodied in the two images depicted in the rendering, the streamlined design of the mass-produced car of the early 1990s and the mass-produced housing prototype conceived by Le Corbusier in 1914; and in the allusion to the “donkey’s way,” to Le Corbusier’s ambiguous relation to the grid plan, one he so keenly advocated in the 1920s and that he would reconsider as a result of his experience of the aerial view in the late 20s and early 1930s after which he designed his plans for Rio de Janeiro and the Plan Obus for Algiers, the latter also revisited by McBride in a wall neon sculpture entitled A Little Dust (1995). McBride offers her own particular critique of the grid plan in National Chain, (1997-2013), a work that would seem to send us off on the “donkey’s way” as we try to sort our way through the maze of the aluminum grid that the artist has placed at chest height, impeding circulation and forcing the spectator to constantly negotiate this grid with both mind and body.

Le Corbusier’s radical departure from Cartesian spatiality was not exclusively indebted to his experience of flight and aerial vision. However his embrace of the airplane and aviation as inaugurating new forms of the modern that departed from the sole imperative of mass-production is subtly referenced in McBride’s works. This is particularly the case of the aforementioned A Little Dust and more specifically her sculptural renderings of urban master plans of different cities, including Chandigarh which is represented in Settlemes (Chandigarh), 2009, included in this exhibition along with a set of tapestries inspired by Le Corbusier’s designs for the tapestries used to decorate government buildings in the city he conceived for a new and modern India, one that desired to escape through the window of modernity and development from the conflicts of the Partition. More specifically, the changes brought about by the experience of flight and the implications that aviation would have on his conception of équipement are reflected in the title of the work that articulates this exhibition, Backsliding, Sideslipping, one Great Leap and the ‘forbidden’, (1994-2013). The curious choice of words for the title of this work is indicative of the conceptual word games McBride employs in her work, which add layers of meaning to her sculptural/architectural endeavors.

First of all backsliding, a word that has eminently religious connotations and designates the one who strays from the path of religion could be read as Le Corbusier’s own backslide from the modernist dogma of the Cartesian urban plan. Moreover, the use of aviation terminology such as sideslipping, a term used to indicate an aerodynamically inefficient flight maneuver that is employed to counter cross winds when landing,
adds to the reading of Le Corbusier’s own ambivalence upon experimenting the bird’s eye view afforded by flight, further emphasized by the choice of words in the rest of the title: “one Great Leap and the ‘forbidden’.” The work itself takes the floor plan of the ground level of Le Corbusier’s 1930 Villa Savoye and reproduces fragments of it as a 1:1 scale model that intersects and interrupts the flow of the museum’s architecture, transforming space and suggesting alternative ways of circulation while at the same time producing a tension between both architectures. McBride divests the Villa Savoye of its function as a dwelling to convert it into a display device, a large-scale pedestal inhabited by the works of the artist, an utilitarian sculpture or a sculpture with a program, so to speak, which brings us to the Corbusian notion of équipement as a medullar one in McBride’s practice. Moreover, it is a complex relation of discreet narratives and subtle ironies that McBride weaves around this 1:1 scale model that becomes the articulating element and dispositif in the exhibition.

Thus, most of the works included in the exhibition seem to offer us an inventory of McBride’s different approaches to Le Corbusier’s concept of équipement and the impact it had on modern architecture and design. In the 1920s Le Corbusier had already stated the change of terminology; for modern architecture it was no longer a question of decoration and furnishing but of maximizing the efficiency of interiors and highlighting the function of design objects within the living space. In this sense, équipement responded to his interest in massproduction, Taylorism, and his general conception of the “house as a machine for living in,” concerns that are already present in the Dom-ino house of 1914 which he envisioned as a completely industrial, pre-fabricated and mass-produced endeavor. Several of McBride’s different series of sculptures produced since the early nineties seem to operate in this direction, in the form of indoor plants, skylights, ventilation ducts, parking structures, and electrical and telecommunication boxes, and the specific use of industrial materials such as aluminum, copper, steel, bronze and glass. McBride takes the programmatic aspect of design, and more specifically the one close to a conception of furniture and interior design as équipement, to assert these positions in her production. Beginning with her early series of Murano glass sculptures that evoke indoor plants we find in domestic and office settings, such as Potted Plant (1992) and Ficus (1995), McBride highlights the function of these ornamental plants and the way they inhabit the indoor spaces in a generic way; the ficus plant has become associated with office and corporate interiors worldwide. With these early works, McBride is not only making the connection to the Corbusian shift from “furniture” and “decoration” to équipement, but also laying out the bases for her future programmatic endeavor, in which she highlights the function of these architectural elements by the inverse operation of transforming them into aesthetic objects, rendering them useless and devoid of any function whatsoever. This is particularly the case in her appropriation of architectural elements such as skylights and ventilation ducts which she introduces into the exhibition space creating a situation of defamiliarization by exposing the spectator to these structures usually encountered in the recesses of architecture where they cannot be seen. The function of the skylights, usually seen only from below as they enable the entry of light from the rooftop of buildings, is negated by their placement on the floor, in a way reminiscent of Minimalist sculpture’s use of floor space but also allusive to Le Corbusier’s epiphany afforded by the experience of flight.
Parking Structure Interior, 1999
Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York
Photo: Bill Orcutt

Previous page:
Günther and Manfred (Middle Managers IV and V), 2003
Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York
Photo: Lorenz Oeventrop, Köln
McBride’s interest in the purely functional elements of architecture and city planning has led her to translate into sculptural forms elements of the urban landscape such as parking structures and, in the case of her series of *Middle Managers* and *Mini Managers*, the electrical enclosures and telecommunication boxes which dot our cities, providing protection from weather and vandalism to electrical and telecommunications infrastructure that serve neighborhoods and sectors of the city. Her *Parking Structures* series initiated in the late 1980s introduce a variation in her work regarding the problem of scale. Obviously impossible to reproduce in their real dimension, she transforms them into models and thus transubstantiates a building typology into sculpture. Aside from being part of her inventory of the infrastructural side effects of modern architecture and city-planning, the notions of model and typology embedded in these sculptures invoke spatial configurations bearing the inscription of utopia, that is, encapsulating a desire for it but evidencing the prescriptive impositions of the utopian model. Parking buildings are architectures in which the form/function dilemma is resolved in a purely programmatic structure designed only with function in mind, but their very material and physical presence in the modern urban landscape has rendered them into a building typology in and of itself. In their skeletal condition they recall the structure of Le Corbusier’s Dom-ino house, a model conceived for mass-production and to be replicated in perpetuity. From a functionalist perspective, parking structures reveal themselves as the most sublime form of urban *équipement*. These sculptures, placed in the exhibition space also bring to mind ideas regarding the placelessness that Krauss attributes to modern sculpture and its relation to architecture, which extends to works such as the *Middle Managers* (2004–2008) which operate within the category of sculpture but stand in as markers for the architectural.

Works that seem to depart from these narratives such as the *Machines*—inspired by those of gaming arcades but which could also in their abstraction of forms and placelessness be read as ATMs or automated teller machines—and the *Templates* introduce the notion of the body in relation to scale and the world of built things, becoming forms of apprehending space. The *Templates* produced in the 2000s evoke architectural historian Françoise Choay’s categories of the *rule* and the *model* as the two major approaches to architecture and the built environment since the Renaissance. Templates, like rulers, as opposed to the utopian projection of representational devices such as the floor plan or the scale model, are instruments that gauge, measure, and anchor space in its physical dimension and experience. A comparison can be drawn between the metaphor of the *template* in McBride’s work and the generative device of the *rule* described by Choay in relation to Leon Battista Alberti’s 15th-century treatise on the art of building *De re aedificatoria*; the *rule* is a grammar of the edifice and built things rather than a set model loaded with utopian signifiers that replicates over the course of history.

This is also perhaps the case for *Arena* (1997), a sculpture conceived to generate a program according to the local specificities of the location where it is displayed. Modular, and designed to be disassembled and assembled in parts, suggesting not only mass-production, but also flat-packing as the cornerstones of the modern design industry, *Arena* is a generative device, a template for a program of events within the institution, which, not unlike the way in which *Backsliding, Sideslipping, one Great Leap* and the ‘forbidden’ intersects and complicates the physical infrastructure of the museum, establishes a parallel program to that of the museum’s regular activities.
Arena, 1997
Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York
Photo: Anne Pöhlmann
In a sense, McBride’s work appears as a critique of modern architecture’s imperatives of mass production, Taylorization, and Cartesian spatiality; one that freely elaborates, with a keen sense of humor, on the contradictions inscribed in Le Corbusier’s writings and architectural practice. However, works belonging to three series roughly initiated at the end of the 1990s, namely *White Elephant* (1999), *Glass Conduits* (1999-2003), and *Servants and Slaves* (2003-2013), are indicative not only of this critique but of a different validation of the modern that responds to a consideration of modernity not as an era of revolution but rather as one of explicitation, such as that articulated at the dawn of the 21st century by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk in his trilogy on *Spheres*. For Sloterdijk, the knowledge of the atmosphere, in its general definition as the layer of air that envelops the Earth, is a constitutive aspect and an object of knowledge of modernity; “an object of explicit acquisition of culture.” It is certainly possible to establish affinities between Sloterdijk’s recalibration of the modern from the concept of atmosphere and Le Corbusier’s “epic of the air,” subtly referenced by McBride in her works. In the same way that Sloterdijk rebukes the notion that links revolution to modernity as one brought about mainly by discovery and invention and not exclusively by social upheavals, in *Towards a New Architecture* Le Corbusier writes a chapter titled “Architecture or Revolution” where he identifies architecture as a field of knowledge and acquisition of culture but also the key factor towards regaining the equilibrium lost in the midst of the social upheavals caused by the rapid onset of technological advance.\(^\text{12}\)

McBride’s ducts and conduits seem to materialize this atmospheric condition of the modern, translating it to sculptural form. We literally perceive air, the stuff that circulates through these phantom ducts that lead to nowhere and connect to nothing, as an overarching presence.

*White Elephant (curve)*, 2003
Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York
Photo: Bill Orcutt

It is here that McBride teaches us an object lesson on the modern; her sculptural endeavour would thus seem to become, in terms of Sloterdijk’s analysis, a field for the deployment of modernity’s fundamental undertaking of rendering explicit.
1 Translation by Julieta González.
3 Ibid., 36.
4 Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 254.
5 Not included in the exhibition.
7 Not included in the exhibition.
8 It is interesting to note in this context that McBride’s critique of Le Corbusier materialized in this particular piece, is closer to Kevin Lynch’s approach to urban planning, in turn influenced by Sitte’s conception of urban design, critical of the urban grid-plan which he considered as one conceived for machines rather than for humans, outlined in his 1889 book City Building According to Artistic Principles. Kevin Lynch’s Image of the City of 1960 introduced the idea of cognitive mapping through the definition of the imageable city. Contrary to Le Corbusier’s critique of the meandering, aimless wandering of the donkey, Lynch identified in this type of fragmented and aleatory experience of the city a logic of place rather than one of space; a sensuous apprehension of the city as a place and not as a plan or map, even though the observer articulates his or her apprehension of the city through mental maps. For Lynch the imageable city “would invite the eye and the ear to greater attention and participation” highlighting the inter-connection between urban planning and the perceptive and participant observer; a role that implied a process of de-alienation in regard to the built environment, an observer who is able to shape the built environment as much as the built environment is able to shape the observer.
9 The words were actually borrowed from one of Ada Louise Huxtable’s articles on architecture in The New York Times.
10 Aviation inaugurated for Le Corbusier a new era for équipement, literally elevating it to new heights; everything about the airplane and the aviation industry was about function, from the design of seating to kitchens, responding to an efficient way of organizing space and bodies in the machine for flying in.
12 Like Sloterdijk, Le Corbusier also agrees that war is the mother of invention and the Dom-ino house is a clear example of a house conceived for the aftermath of destruction of WWI, a foreseeable future in which entire towns and quarters would have to be rebuilt efficiently and swiftly, deploying the imperatives of mass-production and équipement.
BIOGRAPHY

Rita McBride (Iowa, U.S.A.) lives and works between Dusseldorf and Los Angeles. She studied at Bard College, New York, and later obtained her MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. Since 2003 she has been a professor at the Kunstakademie, Dusseldorf, where she was recently appointed as Director.

Her solo shows include Public Tender, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona [MACBA], Spain (2012); Previously, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzerland (2010); Public Works, Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany (2008); Arena & National Chain, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, Netherlands (1997). Her work has also featured in group shows such as Sculpture at the Düsseldorf Art Academy from 1945 to the Present, K20 Grabbeplatz, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf (2013); Common Objects: Pop Art from the Collection, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California (2011); Dystopia, CAPC Musée d’Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, France (2011); Making Is Thinking, Witte de With, Rotterdam, Netherlands (2011); The World as a Stage, Tate Modern, London and Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2007); and What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design, Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2000).

Her commissions for public spaces have included Mae West, Munich, Germany (2011); Delicate Arch, Duisburg Kaiserberg, Germany (2010); Obelisk, Emscherkunst, Ruhr, Germany (2010-2015); and the Salford Arena, United Kingdom (2002).

GLOSSARY

**Brief.** In architecture, a brief or program is an outline of the different activities that the eventual user will carry out in each area of a house or building, as determined by his or her needs. The brief defines the space’s requirements and hence, its design.

**Cartesian plan.** This is a system of orthogonal coordinates (vertical and horizontal) that have a single point of origin. Its purpose is to determine the location of a point on a plane. In urbanism, a Cartesian plan refers to any city with a grid plan divided into different sectors.

**Équipement.** When Le Corbusier presented the L’Esprit Nouveau [New Spirit] Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925, he suggested that the word “furniture” be replaced by équipement, a term that encompassed all the different elements required for a habitat’s proper functioning: seating room, storage space, a place for eating, etc., moving away from any notion of decoration. Équipement would consist of standardized elements assembled using new technologies and industrial materials such as glass and steel. Bookcases, closets and cupboards would be built into the walls, and would also serve to divide up the different living spaces.

**Corbusian.** Adjective relating to the architect Le Corbusier. (La-Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, 1887– Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, 1965). He was a self-taught architect, painter and urbanist, and an emblematic figure of the 20th. His contributions to architecture and urbanism made him an obligatory point of reference within the Modernist movement.
He published a number of texts explaining his architectural theories; one of the most important was *Towards a New Architecture* (1923). Here, he outlined his five points for a modern architecture: the use of pilotis or supporting columns rather than walls to bear a building’s load, free floor plans, free design of façades, horizontal windows that took greater advantage of natural light, and the incorporation of roof gardens.

Villa Savoye, in Poissy on the outskirts of Paris, is the building that best synthesizes Le Corbusier’s architectural vocabulary. Its plan includes all the elements of a typical early-twentieth-century bourgeois country home, with maids’ rooms, caretaker’s lodge, salon, kitchen, master bedroom and the son’s bedroom, as well as a guest room. However, the design of the spaces and the incorporation of Le Corbusier’s five points set this residence apart from most constructions of the time.

It was in *Towards a New Architecture* that Le Corbusier first described a house as “a machine for living in,” referring both to the integration of new construction techniques and to the functional design of each living space.

**Taylorism.** Also known as scientific management, Taylorism is a system of labor organization and analysis that was proposed by the economist and engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor (March 20, 1856–March 21, 1915), with the objective of increasing productivity through a division of labor, worker specialization, and strict time controls over every task carried out within a given company.

**ACTIVITIES**

*Arena* (1997) is a temporary modular tribunal structure that has hosted artists and many other individuals or groups. It is often activated either by invitation from Rita McBride or by the institution that is hosting *Arena.*

On this occasion, Rita McBride has invited LIGA | Espacio para Arquitectura | DF, who in turn have programmed a presentation of Ricardo Carvalho + Joana Vilhena Arquitectos of Lisbon.

*Blind Date* is the name given to the programs presented in *Arena* that have not been directly proposed by the artist. The Museo Tamayo and the curators of *Public Transaction* have invited the following as *Blind Dates* for the *Arena*:

- Abraham Cruzvillegas
- Galia Eibenschutz
- Pablo Helguera
- Sofía Olascoaga

For dates and hours please check our website: www.museotamayo.org
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