New Pompidou

2014, HD Video, 19 minutes
Introduced by James Voorhies

James Voorhies: Your 2014 video New Pompidou draws on the context and history of an extraordinarily influential and controversial institution. What was the impetus for making this work?

Simon Fujiwara: It came out of a chance collaboration between the Fondation d'entreprise Galeries Lafayette and the Centre Pompidou, where I had been simultaneously invited to make an on-site residency and project for the Lafayette and to produce a new piece for the Pompidou's Nouveau Festival. I met with Bernard Blistène a month before he was appointed director of the Pompidou, and he asked me, "What is your relationship with the Pompidou?" And I began to tell him about my architectural studies, my first visit to Paris, and my awe for the building and its history, which I believe made me less inclined to become an architect—what is left to build after the Pompidou? It was the most perfectly engineered ruin, the endpoint in history as we know it—so, my logic was "quit now. It's over." Anyhow, the point is that I had a relationship with the building, and in my discussion with Bernard I said I wanted to take on the Pompidou, somehow, for having ruined my architectural ambitions, and to build a second Pompidou. That would be my project. I had no idea what I meant by that; obviously, I wasn't going to build another actual Pompidou. But then Bernard began to tell me about Pontus Hultén, the first Pompidou director's plans to build a twin Pompidou exactly the same, in another part of Paris, razing another whole historic quarter and making a twin Pompidou but double the size. The logic about this was clear: Pompidou was a Meccano-like building, made from interlocking prefabricated parts that could be endlessly replicated, so in theory a second could be made as large and in any quantity you like. The very idea of originality was gone. Then I came to think about the recent spate of twinning or cloning museums—Guggenheim Berlin, Abu Dhabi, Bilbao, or the Louvre's twins—and I thought, why has the Pompidou not cloned itself in Dubai or Hong Kong? And then I discovered that there had also been plans for that to happen, but each time it had fallen through—no country in the "new economy" seems to want a Pompidou enough to make it a reality. It seemed crazy, as the very architecture itself more than any other museum monument lends itself to replication, but it seemed easier to make a second Louvre that was housed in a building that used to be a king's palace. A Pompidou that embodies somewhat the '68 ideas of transparency and democracy didn't seem as enticing an export—still, today, the unique and the elite is sexier. Anyhow, this and the fact that the Lafayette had a good budget and an empty building just a stone's throw from the Pompidou meant that I could produce and experiment nearby with my own version of the Pompidou, and that the results of that, which ended up being a reproduction of a single fragment of the Pompidou recast with biological materials, by the way, could be carried to its mothership, which took place as a performance and procession.

JV: What is the fragment? Could you describe it?

SF: The fragment is a cast of a single structural element of the Pompidou building known as the Gerberette. Like everything in the building, it is a necessary engineering element that is also designed to appear more technological than it needs to—in short, it's a beautiful beam that could have been simpler in design if the architects wanted to be as honest to the materials and construction as they claimed to be. Although it appears to be a mechanical engineered design, it is heavily aestheticized and almost anthropomorphic, like a dinosaur skull, and its appearance on the building is almost like a cathedral gargoyle. It struck me as a

paradox that the architects were striving to make a machinelike building that was a mixture of democratic ideals, transparency, and formal pragmatism, and yet they made these little gargoyle faces all over the building and even gave them a name—Gerberette—named after the German engineer Heinrich Gerber, who designed the bridge to Neuschwanstein Castle, the fairytale castle Disney based theirs on. They were really romantics, or at least seemed to give a nod to the history they were purporting to be disavowing by their futuristic museum. All the paradoxes of the museum as a concept—a place to conserve, preserve, and to create and be radical—were, for me, locked into this one element. That is why I wanted to recreate a Gerberette that brought this paradox to the fore.

JV: What do you mean by biological materials?

SF: My Gerberette, or the New Pompidou Gerberette, contains swamp weeds, bones, roses, and earth among other non-biological materials like rusting metal, dyed paper, and plaster. The work needed to be watered every day by the conservation staff during the show, otherwise it would have rotted and decayed, but by keeping it green, the water activated the metal and eroded the plaster. So the conservation team had to confront the paradox that in conserving the work as I wanted it, they were also accelerating its destruction.

JV: And why did you use those materials?

SF: The Marais is the district of Paris where both the Lafayette Foundation and the Pompidou were built, and I discovered quite early into the project that the word marais means “swamp,” and I loved the idea that Paris’s most romantic, historic, cultural quarter was built on a dirty, destructive, and wet bog. The Marais is now a cleaned-up version of its former days; the buildings that once housed prostitutes galore, rabbits for the felting industry, and slaughter houses are now boutiques and scented candle shops. In short, life and death in its most basic sense is no longer as visible in the Marais as it once was, and so I wanted to bring back certain elements of this in the Lafayette studio to see if, by having a miniature swamp in the studio, a living rabbit in the air conditioning ducts, or by excavating the basement and bringing up desiccated swamp earth—in short, by surrounding myself and my collaborators with the materials of other ages—our New Pompidou project would be able to deny the linearity of time, to be a product of all ages, not just our own.

JV: I always appreciate the way you quickly assess conditions at hand and then proceed to spin a web of ideas into something, intertwining not only the early history of the Pompidou, in this case, but the geographic proximities between the museum and the Fondation Lafayette. What were the benefits and limitations of working with both institutions in terms of the impact on your final work?

SF: One thing I will give the French is that their romanticism and belief in ideas versus Anglo-Saxon pragmatism made it possible to make a large-scale project like New Pompidou without a road map, in just six weeks, and with a modest sum of money and space. Do what you want. And when practical obstacles arose, it was the power of the artwork that always shone through. For example, a week or so before the planned procession in which five large fragments would be carried by hand to the Pompidou from the studio, the authorities said “NO”—for health and safety reasons, the works had to be rolled, not carried. This was a problem: it’s not a procession, with all its faltering, exhausting, human sweat, but a carnival if it is rolled. Blistène stepped in here and began to use his influence, but rather unlike a museum director, who often opts for the safe first approach, Blistène was behind the idea to carry the work. He was almost more adamant and certainly more influential than I was, so it went ahead—against regulation and on his shoulders too. It was the idea of the ruins being rolled that bothered him so much that I was allowed this potentially dangerous liberty. In the end, the police supported it, sending driven escorts that blocked the road as we walked to the Pompidou.

JV: And the Fondation Lafayette? What was their reaction to all of it?

SF: They stood behind it, all the way through. The Foundation is led by François Quintin, who has appointed a great team. The people make the place.

JV: The resulting video is beautifully produced. Was that always the intention to make a video? How did ideas for it develop during the process?

SF: After I made the video, I felt that Bernard, who that week became the new director of the Pompidou, had contributed so much to the project that he would have to be the narrator of the film, which he accepted. In some ways, he considered it his first statement as new director. The voiceover was recorded during one afternoon in the IRCAM studios, also part of the Pompidou complex, which was conceived as an institution for all media and even production. And so the whole project circled around the building in a very satisfying way, using the entire history and the actual facilities, including the conservation department, and catalyzing it all into the work.

JV: What is the text that Bernard Blistène reads?

SF: He speaks as if the whole project is a kind of mad dream of a museum director, but the narrator seems to have multiple personalities, telling other people's stories and slipping into other people's first-person narratives. He speaks about the Pompidou as if it were a mythical and almost living being. It is all very unclear and dreamlike in some ways, but it also describes—together with footage from my production of the Gerberette and studio documentation—the making of the sculpture, so it's a sort of documentary.

JV: How does New Pompidou circulate?

SF: It is shown in exhibitions as a video or in film screenings. I am working on a publication.

JV: I admire the role museums and schools have played in your practice, where resistance, hurdles, and pushes against your ideas could have seemed impossible or, at the very least, negative. Instead, the limitations are transformed into ingredients and sometimes the impetus for art that is direct and with intention, but flexible. A final thought. Could you discuss how you negotiate between the imperatives of the institution or the context and conditions at hand and maintaining an autonomous studio practice?

SF: I make art partly to learn. I never know what the work will be before it is made, and it is always a combination of multiple factors, of which I am one important factor but not the only one. I like the contradiction of this idea, because the great thing about being an artist is that you can say "no" to anything and everything at any point you choose. The work must come first, and if I find myself in a position that compromises that, there is no point in continuing. This has happened, and these are the projects you don't know about. I also like to muse on the idea of the individual as a mini industry or institution of one's own. In light of the recent Volkswagen scandal, and all the other corporate mess-ups that make us trust no state or company, we have come to scrutinize every element of these companies' production. Do they source ethically? Do they produce wastefully? Is their product ecological? These seem to be the de facto moral benchmarks that make us feel better about being consumers. There is almost a Shinto-like animist ideology in how we relate to industrial products these days; the material itself holds a power that is better or worse for the universe. I enjoy wondering if artists should be held to the same benchmark? Does it matter how we source our materials? How and with whom we collaborate? Are we, as artists, now aping the new liberal corporate morality by having these considerations? It's not a question we need to answer. It's a perverse idea that I enjoy, and perversity drives my work because it's unresolvable.

This text is an excerpt of a conversation between Simon Fujiwara and James Voorhies in the forthcoming book What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?, co-published by the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge, Massachusetts and Sternberg Press, Berlin.

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