

***The Architecture of the Museum:
A Conversation with Tak Pham and Rouzbeh Akhbari***

Marina Fathalla

The architecture of the Museum

On April 13, 2017, I met with artist Rouzbeh Akhbari and curator Tak Pham at Rouzbeh's studio in the South Borden Building at the University of Toronto, where Akhbari is currently a Master of Visual Studies [MVS] candidate. Although we discussed praxis, research, and producing art in an academic context within and beyond the institution, the abbreviated text that follows highlights the site as history, the movement and performance of land, the monument, and the pseudo-museological space in relation to the piece *Centre for Counter Monumental Activities* in the exhibition *Logs*.

A cubic DIY structure built to the scale of the body, *Centre for Counter Monumental Activities* [CCMA] is sited as a temporary intervention, attached to the tallest monument in Toronto, the Second Boer War Memorial. The parts of the structure are prefabricated, and installed on site as a gesture of resistance by artists Rouzbeh Akhbari and Ash Moniz. The monument is a typological representation, to commemorate and honour the Canadian military who fought in the Second Boer War (1899-1902) for imperial British expansion in South Africa. The slender granite monument has three figures at its base: two of soldiers, and one representing mother Britain cast in bronze. Names of the battles are engraved on the surface of the obelisk. Sited in the median on University Avenue at Queen Street, the monument brings together historical, political and international relations present on the site—government buildings, and embassies. University Avenue, also a locator for many University of Toronto buildings, represents the largest and most prestigious educational institution in Toronto, which provides a context for knowledge-making, historicizing and collections.

CCMA is built as a pseudo-museum or container for the violent and colonial historical narrative of the monument, and presents the underside of the history of the Second Boer War. Contrary to a typical "comprehensive" collection, which often attempts to create a linear view of history, the pseudo-museum is a curation of one object, the Paris Soap Box, and a single poem, by South African concentration camp survivor C. Louis Leibolt.

Considering its scale, Akhbari with Moniz reproduce an image of the monument using a drone as technological support and as a mode of surveillance. The performance is re-contextualized in *Logs*, curated by Tak Pham at Y+ contemporary in October 2016, exploring architecture as a lens for curation.

The discussion that follows considers the presentation of the piece in different contexts, which brings forward the extended research undertaken in *Logs*. An edited version of our conversation is interspersed with annotations added after the interview, that highlight a thoughtful conversation on architecture, and how it performs, as a means for inquiry, a vehicle, and a methodology in our artistic and curatorial practices.

A Conversation with Tak Pham and Rouzbeh Akhbari

Marina Fathalla [MF]: Tell me about your collaboration with ADL [Association for Decentering Landscapes].

Rouzbeh Akhbari [RA]: Just to give you an overview of what ADL is—it's a collective that started in 2015 in Morocco, when there was a residency curated by Ash Moniz bringing artists together in an informal setting. I met with Felix Kalmenson there, and I started working with him on a project that happened in a slaughterhouse in Casablanca. When we got back we starting developing ideas in a communal manner and doing projects here and there together. But the only project we did under the manner of ADL is something we finished last month [March 2016] in Beijing, dealing with the politics of desertification. It's a collective between myself, Felix Kalmenson, and Ash Moniz.

MF: Are you going to continue collaborating together?

RA: I imagine we would, but we don't know. It's usually a thing that comes together when we find an intersection between our research interests and the topics that we are looking at, at the moment, and see whether we can continue working together. I feel that it's going to be a thing that we jump on, depending on the projects that we have on the go. Felix's work is fascinating; his practice has continually inspired me. As an immigrant in Canada who also has a trajectory of the struggles of moving around, but also the complexities of landscape; and as a former architecture student, I think his work is kind of crucial to the questions that I have around landscape, economy and the conundrums that many different populations around the world have to face.

MF: Tell me about CCMA [Centre for Counter Monumental Activities]. Tak tells me the installation was taken down within the first 24 hours. Did you expect the piece to be that temporary?

RA: CCMA was a collaboration between myself and Ash Moniz. The title stands for *Centre for Counter Monumental Activities* and was an interventionist temporary and autonomous structure adding something to the monument that is highly problematic, and very prominent in the scene of public art in Toronto. When we installed it we knew it would get taken down, as it's a structure without a permit. But we went through all the efforts of making it as solid of a structure as possible. We used a construction grid with lumber and framing, and made everything prefabricated before we installed it—but I definitely didn't expect it to be taken down in 24 hours. It was extremely quick, especially considering it was on a Sunday that we installed, and by Monday at 10am, it was gone. It's interesting that it was taken down so quickly, but I guess it makes sense—it's a structure without a permit and Canadian politics are very serious about codes and what gets built, and how long it's supposed to stay there.

The documentation around permanence/impermanence; building permits are archival documentation, in contrast to the instant ways that images can exist and disappear especially with the state of technology. Permits are official documents, that while stark, they display the development and recorded history of the city, whereas activist, refugee tents or BLMTO community gatherings remain as informal architectural spaces, which do not make their way into an official presence as part of the history of the city.

MF: Did people get a chance to walk through? Did anyone from the public ask any questions?

RA: I remember when installing it there were a lot of people who sort of looked at us as if something was going on, but we had the entire area of the installation separated and walled off with tarps, making it look like a construction site. As we were building it, we didn't necessarily get a lot of people coming in but as we were documenting and packing up to leave, we could see people were curious, and coming to look at it. In some of the footage you can see some people coming in and looking around to see what this actually is. But it is a peculiar thing to have a construction added to the monument. It automatically brings people to the presence of an oddly shaped cube attached to something else in the city; I think that was mainly what brought them over. But we didn't actually identify as the artists in any shape or form for almost a year and a half and we didn't necessarily talk to people to see what they think because it was obviously something that could get us into trouble with the city and with authorities.

MF: What are the challenges of mediating a temporary performance-intervention in other contexts, such as with *Logs*?

Tak Pham [TP]: To me, CCMA is one of the rare projects where the documentation is the work. At least from my experience curating media work, a lot of artists tend to use the camera as the tool of recording but don't contemplate what they are recording on. What is the act of recording, what does that mean? In CCMA—the way that I see it—it unveils the monumental, or, the unseen monument. We acknowledge that monument is there, but if you were to ask anyone from the public if they recognize the monument, could they pinpoint exactly where it is on the map? No one pays attention, because it's so big, it's so grand, it's so monumental, that often it falls to the background. A lot of that is pertinent in our discussion about post-colonialism, where this history becomes normalized. The system is so insidious, it's just gripping. So I think it's pertinent to think about the difference between overt and subtle racism, and consider which one is more dangerous. I think the video of the drone does the work of refocusing our attention back onto the monument. Also it refocuses on the contention within that space and within that place where the monument is located—University Avenue and Queen Street, steps away from the US Embassy. The fact that it's located there—it really demands more surveillance from authorities. That's why it got taken down so quickly as opposed to if it were located somewhere like Scarborough, maybe it could have remained there for a month or two. I think the video unveils the unseen, not necessarily the invisible, but that which has the ability to remain on the sidelines.

MF: And the way you represented it in the gallery space, the size of the projection on the wall was deliberately small scale and intimate. Installed in conversation with other pieces as a kind of counter-monument, where viewers could slowly uncover the layers of the work. It provides a nice visual to the concept of a subconscious collective memory, built into the fabric of the city.

RA: Another thing about the install, is the work is revolving around—as you mentioned—challenging the normalization of colonial violence that becomes a part of everyday architecture that hides in the background. To present that conversation around the obelisk on top of this formal assemblage of the Brancusi style sculpture is really interesting; to think of the relationship between form—in terms of modern form and its presence within the gallery but its close associations with colonial violence. The idea of the international colonial modern forming out of a conversation that never took place around colonial violence and oppression.

TP: It was unintended; we were looking around for plinths. The act of putting a plinth together, could be a kind of performance. The blocks which are super heavy, and the act of stacking up each block, changes the reading of the work.

The feeling of a weight of history presents itself in the performance of moving the blocks, as part of the narrative in the exhibition Logs. Brancusi, a prominent modernist sculptor in the early 20th century, uses traditional material—bronze, stone, and marble—often purposed for monuments and perceived as “dignified” material. Its weight affects permanence. The insularity of a history as an arduous process to penetrate, is built into the structure of a city, and its politics with it. In contrast to the precarious nature of (logs) and the land as actors, constantly adjusting to the systems they are working within, the obelisk is quietly still, asserting its presence in the fabric of the city with conviction. The dust settles, and it stays protected, safe and withstanding.

MF: How the monument is placed also dictates how one can circulate around it, as a temporary location which is only conducive to vehicular traffic. It makes clear the power relationship between the state, public, and the consumption of the monolith. As a space and history that isn't easily accessible, it implies that there is an authoritative voice.

As public art, the piece is seen by more people than in a museum, which are designed as a spaces for reflexive learning. Its impact is both solidified and inconspicuously present in the background by its scale (towering above) and siting: which demands that one can only process it within seconds from a vehicle, from afar or above, or from an office window in the surrounding high rise buildings.

Logs, and the landscape as performers, actors, and agents.

The image I have of Logs is of floating cylindrical wood pieces, traversing rivers and bodies of water. They contain layers of narratives of movements inscribed—the shifts of the land and its dispossession, holding together the history of vulnerable marginal narratives. The image portrays ideals of settlerhood or “arrival,” a representation of the early forms of industrialization and mass production, evidenced in the labour of cutting the logs in modular pieces to build shelter.

MF: Tell me about the significance of the title *Logs* and how does it contextualize the exhibition?

TP: It's a double meaning word. The initial concept was to draw a parallel between commerce and the exchange of goods with the migration of bodies. Trying to trace back the history where the concept of commerce, industrialization and corporatization began. Initially it was a collaborative project between me and curator Barbora Racevičiūtė. We saw a parallel between mass production and mass migration and how people transgress borders, and the customs applied to visitors. We wanted to explore that. The freedom to move—this global season of mobility has to do with trade agreements between nations. The people with a certain citizenship are free to move around, but it's harder for people to travel from the countries that are not in that network, or agreement. We researched the first exchange, and how people were shipping with the river; and avengers, or explorers keeping track of where they visited with diaries and documentation of where they travelled.

MF: I'm thinking about the parallel between the idea of the movement of logs, and the dispossession of the land and material, and the parallel to some of your [Akhbari] pieces that are speaking to the performative and the experience of actors. How does performance play an important role in your work in *Land Also Moves* and *An Audition for Permanence*; each appears to connect to various sites and landscapes, ecologies and histories. What's the role of place specific performance to facilitate the work's social and critical agency?

RA: I really enjoy the way Tak is talking about *Logs*, and the freedom of commodity and freedom of movement for capital in strike contrast to the freedom of movement of people, in the contemporary political and social landscape that we are entangled in now. The way I think about movement is usually from this kind of genealogy of colonial standpoints of frontierism; when you get somewhere, you have all these resources to extract. The landscape is completely rendered as a place without people, and a people without history. This is continual not only for settler colonial societies like Canada but also in places where colonialism was rampant like south of Persia or in Morocco. The narration of a place without people and people without history is the first phase of massive capitalist and industrialist project of extraction. The way that I think about the relationship between subjects, and things that are more broadly understood as objects, such as trees, is to think about landscape as something that has its own subjectivity. Many different actors—social to economic, to different forms of agents that work within a landscape, are all subjects that have

their own agency and very complex interconnected networks that they function within.

In terms of thinking about performance, I think what works like *Land Also Moves* or *An Audition for Permanence* are trying to achieve is to bring all of these actors—from the vegetation, to the landscape, to the people who are active in these places—all as subjects that are about to stage a very complex performance. I feel like the role of performance in most of my practice, but specifically the work we are doing in China, is to situate landscape as something that is very messy, very complex and always with multiple layers of actors and agents who are activating them. And that's exactly how I think projects that tend to be de-colonial, in thinking about violence and the legacy of colonial aggression must consider. The idea of the performance of agents as something that is constantly present and active, with histories that have been erased but are still there to kind of touch, and bring to a form of conversation that could at least shed light on the problematics of colonial violence.

TP: I have a question to that: for *Land Also Moves*, how do you find it realizing that the Beijing project, as a de-colonial project in a context where colonialism doesn't really take place, in the nuclear of colonial power—

RA: Exactly. And the nuclear colonial power as we understand it historically, as the relationship between the metropole in Europe and the colonies and violence that is presented elsewhere—making prevalent the relationship between centre-periphery violence to conversations around extractive economies, and the imperial industrial complex that came out of larger historical examples of colonialism. In the case of our research in Beijing, you're right—you're not dealing with a colonial force but you're beginning to notice very intricate centre-periphery relationships between Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul, who are constantly experiencing very bad sandstorms. The anti-desertification initiatives are unleashed thousands of kilometres away from the metropolises on the edges of the desert. So the centre periphery model, not necessarily under the rhetoric of European violence, but is under very complex and similar power struggles between those who are living closer to the edge of the desert and those who are living in populated valleys, who are industrious and dependent on urban population with their ongoing operations.

TP: So it's the same power dynamic...

RA: It's the same power dynamic, and similar strategies are employed in terms of extraction economies and how they evolve over time. Especially in the case of the desertification initiatives because they tend to use the language of 'wasteland' that has to be claimed and turned into a vegetated area to stabilize the landscape. So this language of wasteland reclamation is something that is inherently present to colonial approaches and to resource extraction.

MF: Yeah, when I was working on research for my thesis project, I had to contextualize land practices using canonical artists, but I was very adamant to try and move beyond that because most of the artists like Robert Smithson, while are interesting, are thinking of the landscape more philosophically, and as landscapes that are disconnected from those interconnected networks that you're referring to. Lucy Lippard makes a distinction between "place-specific" and "site-specific" wherein the former is conscious of the ideological relationships and historical consciousness of place, and the latter is only occupying it.

Museology of place, curating poetry.

The museology of place—how is place represented in the museum, and how is land orchestrated to become a part of history? What are the intersections between museology and the monument? A town's early stages of development will typically consist of a museum about how the place was pioneered, where the museum is built with a central marketable factor to draw in tourism. The pseudo-museum – questions its own placement in that location. It is critical of its own siting, and in turn the ecologies and treatment of the landscape that surrounds it.

As the conversation develops below, we discuss how the language of "wasteland reclamation" particularly in desert landscapes, or "unoccupied" places is a colonial project in itself. We explore the presence of a museum in the middle of the desert as an architectural locus—as an ontological and phenomenological body.

MF: We all work adjacent, or in relation to concepts of museology in some form(s). How do you both critique, or conceive of museology in your practices? For instance, in *Land Also Moves*?

RA: The project in Beijing started as fieldwork that was engaging desert ecologies and frontier thought, and the relationship to anti desertification initiatives. For our research we got into a new district/town that was created in 2001 and now it's a booming town, there's almost 300 000 people who live there. There was a massive museum there, almost half the size of the AGO. The whole thing was constructed to reference the construction of the town itself, so it was a museum about the presence of the museum; it was a self-justifying museum.

MF: Like a lot of Ontario museums are.

TP: Town museums...

RA: But in that case it was a very direct way of thinking about the presence, and the architecture of the museum, addressing why a museum needs to be here in the middle of the desert. Since then, that entire project became a contemplation on what museums do in terms of massive state initiatives and schemes that deal with landscapes. And I feel the work of the CCMA does exactly that – in thinking about the role of the museum in terms of historicizing, but also as an institution that tends to preserve objects of history. That's why we call the project the CCMA, named as a pseudo museological space attached to this other massive object that is supposed to historicize an event; and what we're presenting in it is exactly historical replicas—historical objects that tend to capture the essence of something that happens, but in our case from an alternative standpoint that thinks of the violence and the atrocities of the Second Boer War.

MF: What was the role of curating poetry in the piece?

RA: That's something that I think I'm personally very interested in; the fact that different communities tend to remember violence differently. It constructs a very specific form of imaginary of how the aggression is destroying personal relationships, and physical manifestations and ramifications of terrible things that happen to people. And I feel like poetry really allows that imaginary to be present, without losing its vividness and losing the ambiguity of traumatic experiences. And that's why in terms of the poetry curated in that space, we're just referencing the poem of one of the survivors of the British held concentration camps. And in the poem specifically, he's talking about how Paris soap boxes were being used as coffins for children who are dying in these concentrations camps. And of course Paris soap has a very long history of colonial, very racist marketing campaigns within the African continent altogether,

but specifically in places where British troupes were more present. Bringing that poem and replica of an object that is what the poem is referencing—this tiny box that is working as a coffin for children—is how we're thinking about museological relationships. It tends to be very didactic and I think I'm fine with that because you're dealing with something that is extremely didactic like an obelisk that references a conflict. The addition is another space which considers the architectures of didactics, the historicization of objects, and the poem allowed us to reflect on what sort of object a museum should collect, as opposed to a painting of an officer.

TP: Reminds me of the *Fearless Girl* statue on Wall Street. That dynamic of confrontation. You don't have to do something big, or grand in order to confront it.

RA: Exactly, when you *can't* do something grand, doing something small as a gesture is very important, a resistant move has a lot of weight—that's exactly the kind of thinking that I'm having especially now that I'm doing my research in Abadan; sometimes the suppressed subjects of the colonized nation, simply don't have the possibility of doing a grand monumental gesture to defy the presence of the colonial master. What you can end up doing is working with gestures that tend to have a lot of weight and unleash many conversations in movements that come after that presentation.

TP: For sure. I think that the politics and implication of gestures is very powerful. The poem is very affective...more humane, more relatable, more personal. A lot of poetry is used as a way of creating hope. Activism is run with songs and poetry; it really gives a sense of commemoration.



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