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23 APRIL, 5-8PM

**In two new research-based works Kasper Akhøj unravels how architecture and design cannot escape layers of history and personal stories.**

## INTERVIEW

By Marie Bruun Yde, Overgaden

**Marie Bruun Yde** *In your current exhibition at Overgaden, you are presenting the works Welcome (TO THE TEKNIVAL) and Abstracta, both of which are ongoing projects which follow the journey of a specific design through time and space. The first deals with the restoration of a famous modernist villa, and the other with the export and use of a less famous, but similarly modernist and prototypical shelving system. Could you tell me how you discovered these two stories?*

**Kasper Akhøj** Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici's Villa E. 1027 is a famous house, and the story of how Le Corbusier - without asking permission - painted nine large murals in the house is by now also familiar. But it is a story with many layers, both semantic and physical. I have had an opportunity to follow part of the development of the house, first of all through another work, *Untitled (Schindler/Gray)* from 2006 when the house was still largely in ruins. Then, when I heard about the restoration plans, I waited for the project to begin, because I had an idea that it might be interesting to observe and document the process.

In 1929, Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici's special edition of the architecture magazine *L'architecture Vivante* was published, in which the house was presented for the first time through a series of photographs, which they made just after it had been completed. My starting point for the project was to recreate these photographs, as a form of documentation of the villa's creation - for the second time. When you restore a house like this, you do it on the basis of the historical material - which is to say, the same pictures that I was working from. I was interested in trying to capture the layers that the restoration process might erase along the way. The house contains the traces of a myriad stories, some of them tragedies. It is also a politically charged place, in which the local municipality, the regional district council, the *Conservatoire du Littoral* (National Heritage Board) and the Le Corbusier Foundation all have conflicting interests, and of course there is also the gender political aspect. It has not been easy to gain access to it.

*Abstracta* is a completely different story, which arose by chance. In 2006 I took part in a research project which consisted of a journey to follow Tito's motorway project, the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity, which was built in the 1940s and 1950s to link the new capitals of the former Yugoslavia. During the trip I began to notice a particular display system that was used almost everywhere in the shops and in the still state-owned department stores, which, at that



*Welcome (TO THE TEKNIVAL)*, 2009. E.1027 Maison en Bord de Mer during restoration

point, had not changed much in the 20 years since the war. It was a very simple and elegant system of steel tubing and glass, assembled in modules. It looked rather like a 1960s minimalist sculpture, and the colour combinations I saw it in were not far removed from, for example, the later murals of Sol LeWitt. Nobody knew what it was called, who had designed it or where it came from. It was just old, something from the 'communist period'.

**MBY** *So how did you trace its source?*

**KA** The following year, in the summer of 2007, I was invited back for a brief residency in Skopje in Macedonia, and decided to go back and look at this display system. I followed the route from the year before, from Skopje in the south to Ljubljana in the north, and I managed to find some used modules here and there: in the back room of a shoe shop in Pristina in Kosovo, in an old clothes shop in a provincial town in Macedonia, in a still state-owned fur fashion store in Belgrade, etc. It was only then that I came into contact with a retired architect who, as an exhibition designer, had worked with the system in a museum in Belgrade in the 1990s, during the war, and I found out that it was called Salamander or Abstracta. The mu-

seum put me in touch with a small factory that had once produced the system, where the managing director told me that the shelving system had originally come from another communist country, China, in the 1970s, after which it became so popular that they began to copy it in Yugoslavia. Now, at last, I had a few names which allowed me to search more precisely. I discovered that there was a display system called Abstracta, dating from about 1960, which had been designed in Denmark by an architect named Poul Cadovius. The system largely resembled the one I had found, except it was a bit smaller. There were two sizes, 13 and 19 mm in diameter. The ones I had found were 14 and 20 mm, but otherwise they were identical. So the system had grown a little on its journey around the globe.

**MBY** *You follow up on and disentangle various connected and unconnected stories, and it seems like you come into contact with an infinite number of tales. How do you manage to sort all these out and choose a path for your research?*

**KA** It is often difficult to sense how much or how little material you are dealing with. I work intuitively, so I do not have an overall structure or methodology around which I try

to construct my research. My work is thus not very systematic, which may seem somewhat paradoxical when you consider that the Abstracta project is about a system, and about the systems in which this system has existed at various times. *Welcome (TO THE TEKNIVAL)* is about attempting to capture some physical traces on film, in the form of a documentation of the process by which they are being erased. When I began this project, those traces were still in place and stood out clearly, I didn't have to search for them. *Abstracta*, on the other hand, arose out of nothing - a lack of traces, perhaps. But if you look closely, you will always find a trace which leads you on to the next one. The stories that these traces lead to - and which are usually peripheral in relation to the object or core of a given project - can help to place the interesting aspects of the material in context. I wouldn't call it talking off the subject, but it's something like that.

**MBY** *What are the contexts which interest you in these two projects?*

**KA** I have travelled quite a bit back and forth to the Balkans in connection with the Abstracta project, and in my search for this design from the not-so-distant past I have witnessed some major upheavals in

the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Just like the old political, social and cultural systems in the region, Yugoslavia's version of Poul Cadovius' Abstracta system is in the process of being taken down and dismantled. But it has been through a lot before being taken to the dump. From the late 1970s and up through the 1980s, it spread into all corners of Yugoslavia and was probably the most widely-used shelving system of all. You can imagine how perfectly it fitted into the socialist market model: cheap, flexible, and easy to produce, transport and install; values which might not be that far removed from the neo-liberal model today. Throughout the 1990s, during the war and immediately after, a whole new kind of informal economy emerged, especially in Serbia, as the country has been subject to sanctions almost up to now - a kind of free market in a straitjacket. At the time, the economic landscape altered dramatically in the countries involved in the conflict. Where the big, state-owned industries had more or less ceased to operate, small private enterprises began to spring up. Some of these invented new variations of the Abstracta system which they could produce themselves on a smaller scale. Now, when so-called predatory capitalism dominates, especially in Serbia and the south-

ern part of the Balkans, there is no longer really a place for the Abstracta system.

**MBY** In your exhibition, *Welcome (TO THE TEKNIVAL)* is presented through a series of photographs and texts, while *Abstracta* is presented through an installation of *Abstracta* elements, as well as through text. What happens in the process of translating your complex detective work and materials into these works?

**KA** In this case, where a lot of information was involved, I have channelled the project into its natural divisions. I suppose it is an attempt to establish as organic a relationship as possible with the material. I see the installation and the whole process associated with the creation of a project as a series of chapters which slowly help to change the character of the work. Next time *Abstracta* is exhibited, it might be in a new form and perhaps include other elements of the material. Besides the works in the exhibition, both projects will also exist in book form. At Overgaden, I have taken *Abstracta* elements that I found in the former Yugoslavia and assembled them into a series of abstract sculptures. I think they can serve as a reference to socialist practice in art and design, and at the same time, on a metaphorical level, refer to the network structures and other symbolic images of unity which used to have such a clear presence; structures which still, or until quite recently, were displayed in public institutions, such as museums which had more or less ceased to function for financial or political reasons, or former state-owned national chain stores which are now bankrupt and in liquidation. The elements also reflect the Danish part of the story, perhaps a neglected chapter in the history of Danish design, and tell the story of a system that ran wild, or went its own way.

**MBY** You work in an almost anthropological manner, but as an artist you take a different approach to the story to that of the historian or scientist. What does it mean to deal with history in an aesthetic rather than a scientific manner? How much of the works *Welcome (TO THE TEKNIVAL)* and *Abstracta* are factual history, and how much is your own interpretation of the stories?

**KA** There are sources for all the materials, whether as oral testimony or physical evidence. But of course, that does not necessarily mean that it is true. I started the project on the basis of my own specific fields of interest. And perhaps, seen in this light, the material is more open. I probably have a little more time at my disposal than I would have if I had a scientific or technical agenda, but on the other hand I work with these projects in a different economy, and do not have access to established networks and resources. Instead, I search for the poetic potential of the material and the story, and can permit myself to insist on what might appear to be insignificant details, and to contextualise material that might not otherwise be given much thought - just to see where it leads me.

The interview was conducted via e-mail in March 2010.

## An Archive of Happenstance On Kasper Akhøj's History of Formable Design

By Marie Bruun Yde, Overgaden

History published about design and architecture almost always deals with the original and intentional design - what the designer wanted, rather than whether the design functioned as intended, and, if not, what happened to it. At a distance, the architectural historian regards buildings and furniture like societal concepts in their 'pure', recently-produced form - sparkling, complete and full of purpose. The real meaning of design, which first enters the picture in real life, when the design is used and occupied, more rarely finds its way into history.

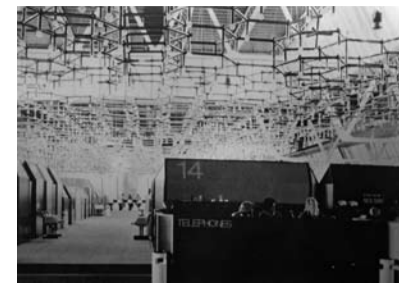
Kasper Akhøj takes a different, anti-nostalgic approach to history. In his research-based works, history is perceived as a wild and labyrinthine range of themes, images and ideas in constant flux. Akhøj draws a historical perspective from different angles, using various techniques: travel diaries and project descriptions in text, documentary photographs and abstract sculptures. His complex analysis reveals stories about design which lie in the margin of traditional historiography, and show how design and its significance can mutate when incorporated into the everyday world.

Akhøj's work *Welcome (TO THE TEKNIVAL)* (2008-) focuses on the authority of historiography. A house designed by the modernist architect and designer Eileen Gray, Villa E. 1027 in southern France, is undergoing a restoration which will not restore the villa to its original state, but will include the murals which the architect Le Corbusier - without Gray's permission - painted in the villa. Akhøj documents the restoration process in order to grasp the layers of the villa's history as they are respectively preserved and erased. A similarly thematic approach is taken in the work *Abstracta* (2007-), which examines how a modernist display system originally designed for a world exhibition in the early 1960s by the Danish architect Poul Cadovius subsequently spread around the world and ended up many years later in the Balkans, where it was duplicated and used in many different contexts from shoe shops to museums. Thus now the shelving system is used to display everything from art to footwear, while the design itself disappears behind layers of culture and life which nobody could have foreseen.

Kasper Akhøj thereby pursues the design object when the designer has finished his work and others begin to use the design, and the work acquires its own life. His texts deal with how objects travel through time and place, are reproduced and altered in unpredictable ways, and enter into social organisations and invisible distribution networks. What kind of ownership can you feel for a design produced in another time, another place? To what extent are its properties fixed in the materials, and to what extent can they be negotiated?

Poul Cadovius' *Abstracta* system was designed to absorb diversity - just like the street grid of Manhattan, the architect Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes made up of a network of standardised units, the prefabricated modular building constructions of the post-war period, and the democratic designs of the furniture giant Ikea. Sober, industrial and repetitive, it is made for efficient distribution and circulation. The basis of the design is not the design as such, but a universally applicable system that can be opportunistically used anywhere. The *Abstracta* system is mobile, and may also recall the project *New Babylon* (1959-74) by the situationist artist Constant; the nomadic, fluid network city which, like a playground, can be continuously remodelled, and thereby offers infinite possibilities for structural variation. The aesthetics of Akhøj's abstract sculpture can also call to mind associations with the post-war modernist architecture of Eastern Europe - such as the Palast der Republik and HO-Centrum-Warenhaus (now Galeria Kaufhof) in Berlin Mitte, with their bulky and raw functionalist exteriors, though also adorned with almost oriental-looking abstract and symmetrical ornamentation and filigree patterns integrated into the facade design and interior fixtures. What these examples have in common, the Palace of the Republic and the department store from GDR days, is that they are no longer perceived by the dominant order as being beautiful or desirable; one has been demolished and the facade of the other has been renovated to the point of unrecognisability. The life and ideology represented by the design have been erased.

In his study of the holes and gaps in stories, Kasper Akhøj presents the accidental nature of history - its existence more than its essence - its randomness and arbitrariness, but also its brutal treatment. He thereby uncovers narrative possibilities in the treatment of our history, with respect to both personally improvised assimilation and the State's deliberate intervention in it. Akhøj asks about the significance that design can have in our lives and community, and replies that the view of a given design will always be partly imaginary, and can therefore call forth both familiarity and alienation. Design and architecture may seek to offer as high a degree of practicality as possible, but the subject may assign political, social and cultural values which are far removed from the original intentions. History, in Kasper Akhøj's words, is open to negotiation.



*Abstracta*, 2010. Selection of images from research material

### CV

**Kasper Akhøj** (b. 1976) studied at Goldsmiths College, University of London 1999-2000, Städelschule - Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Frankfurt am Main 2004-2006 and graduated from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen in 2006. He completed the Whitney Independent Study Program, New York in 2009. His works have been shown at ISCP - the International Studio & Curatorial Program, New York, 2009; Art in General, New York, 2009; 28th São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo, 2008; Den Frie - Centre of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, 2006 and 50th Venice Biennial, Venice, 2003. Kasper Akhøj is currently Artist in Residence at 29th São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo, and will have a solo exhibition at Wiels - Center for Contemporary Art, Brussels later this year. Kasper Akhøj lives in Copenhagen and New York.

### ARTIST TALK

**Monday 26 April at 5pm** Kasper Akhøj will present some of the research material behind the project *Abstracta* in the form of a travelogue. The lecture will be in Danish.

### UPCOMING EXHIBITION

**Friday 25 June** Overgaden presents the exhibition *Denmark 2010 - Instructions to the Nation of the 'Happiest People in the World'* curated by Kathrine Bolt Rasmussen and Katarina Stenbeck. Participating artists: Kristina Ask, A.W., Jes Brinch, Nermin Durakovic, Gåafstand (Pia Rönicke & Nis Rømer), Joachim Hamou, Julie Edel Hardenberg, Maryam Jafri, Carsten Juhl, Elsebeth Jørgensen, Pablo Llambias, Jørgen Michaelsen, Ellen Nyman, Olof Olsson, Share Your Country (Kevin Lytsen & Jonas Smedegaard Buus), Oliver Ressler, Åsa Sonjasdotter, Johan Tirén and others. The last day of the exhibition is Sunday 15 August 2010.

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Translation: Billy O'Shea.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from [www.overgaden.org](http://www.overgaden.org)



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