Intimate Stories
trans in conversation with Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine

Through their films, Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine put into question the fascination with the picture, which covers up the buildings with preconceived ideas of perfection, virtuosity and infallibility, in order to demonstrate the vitality, fragility and vulnerable beauty of architecture as recounted and witnessed by people who actually live in, use or maintain the spaces they have selected. Thus, their intention is to talk about architecture, or rather to let architecture talk to us, from an «inner» point of view, both personal and subjective.

TM In your films you collect personal stories to examine the relationship between a building and the people who interact with it. Your approach is very different from most architecture documentaries. Why did you choose to portray architecture in this way?

BL Usually architecture on film focuses on the idealized image of the buildings and the preconceived ideas of perfection and virtuosity behind the architectural project. We choose to speak about architecture from an inner point of view, far from the eulogy and the architectural criticism that reflects on the architects and how they meet their expectations. Our films aren't educational, historical and not even technical: every pragmatic functionality is deliberately exempted. You don't need to be a critic to have an opinion on the space that you live in every day. Our intention is to let the architecture talk in a very subjective way, putting the human body back at the center of the space and giving voice also to people who actually, consciously or unconsciously, experience it.

TM Do you think the architecture of a building influences its inhabitants or are the people's stories the ones that give life to architecture? Is there a mutual dependency?

BL There's a mutual dependency. But architecture without people is death, it's merely a structure. It's incredible how many aspects you could understand about architecture while speaking with people about love, desire and fear. A place is made by people's stories and the relationship between the space and their bodies, their energies, their feelings. We need to reconsider the discipline starting from the huge capacity to contain various universal issues: social, politic, economic, historic…

TM Do you believe residents consciously love or hate a building because of its architecture?

BL We don't think it's always a conscious feeling. Unfortunately, people are too often forced to adapt to terrible spaces without rebelling against them. The huge impact of architecture on people's daily existence has been underestimated all too often. Good architectural projects have a plus, they're powerful: they're able not only to make us feel better but to change our lives. Observing the relationship between people and the space ultimately represents an analysis of their sense of self.

TM The everyday life stories you tell are very intimate. How do you build your relationship with the inhabitants to persuade them to reveal their emotions and thoughts?

BL During our shootings we approach a lot of people and often we earn their trust in a very short time. We talk to them openly, opening up ourselves first. We're not journalists, we take the time to speak and to share experiences in a mutual exchange. It's incredible how many intimate stories emerged over the years. During «24 heures sur place», for example, in an instant from a conversation about a dog, we end up recounting the dramatic history of a political refugee, passing by tattoos and a troubled love. It's in these details that we could feel the real essence of a place.

TM The buildings or places in the centre of your films are often iconic pieces of architecture. What kind of position do you have to a building before you start filming it?

BL We're not searching for both positive and negative aspects and not even for a critical approach. We build the narration gradually, through fragments taken from the exploration of the space and the experiences gained. Choosing iconic pieces of architecture, generally considered extraordinary for design and a valuable innovative potential, is—especially at the beginning—a methodological

Film still from Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, ‹Barbicania›, 2014

Film still from Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, ‹Moriyama-San›, 2017

and instrumental choice. Buildings that have earned the status of landmarks belong to our collective imagination. For this reason it's easier to work on them to show how much responsibility there's behind the architecture's representation which ignores the inhabitants for an aesthetic appreciation. In our methodology time is crucial: we are interested in buildings that have already passed the period of media attention and have now entered into maturity, in order to understand how they function in the ordinary.

TM How does this position develop?

BL We find ourselves at the boundaries of the discipline: we speak about architecture with an anthropological approach, through a cinematographic language that is close to video-art. Architecture interests us mainly in its dimension of long term social experimentation. The narration evolves from an inner point of view, in order to unwrap the reality behind the buildings. In these years we've talked to inhabitants, cleaning ladies, concierges, neighbours, dog walkers, children, «animals», postmen, musicians, tourists. And we've collected their stories. The films—structured as a layering of micro cells where the time slows and space distends—don't enable to understand the whole building but just offer a lived experience. You'll never find talking heads or voice-over or off-camera commentaries: we always show the raw stuff. Our purpose is to investigate the different possibilities that the building could create, deny or impose and indeed to explore which ones are created regardless of the original project.

TM Would you say that making a film about a building is an emotional examination of its architecture?

BL It depends. We are interested in speaking about architecture in this personal way, both subjective and ironic. Every path that we follow into the space is the representation of an interior landscape. While drawing the lines of an emotional map of a building, an area, a city, we mainly recount an intimate story. Bonds of affection, memories: motion and emotion are irrevocably connected. The cinematographic language is the medium that allows us to record an experience of space and time. A kind of performance. Often at the end of our films, many people tell us: I don't know much more about that piece of architecture but I feel like I've actually been there...

TM Do you think your approach to thinking about architecture could be adapted as a design tool for architects?

BL It could be. Our research is focused more on a method, or, better, on the capacity to create relationships with human beings. Architecture is more than a garment and has to be profoundly related to humans. Showing the way in which buildings operate after the design process is part of a reflection that aims to put the human body back at the centre not only of the narration but of the design process. Projects can have new possibilities if we try to understand a space and the movements within. We could quote various representatives of this kind of humanism, from Georges Perec to Jane Jacobs, but unfortunately nobody carried a significant weight within the design process. But we live in hope.

This interview was held via email in January 2018.