

Grounded Fabulations #2:

Works+Words+[Worlds]

Johan Liekens and Wim Goossens

⊗_FRAMING OUR WORKS+WORDS+[WORLDS]

Our contribution to this Biennale, which presents contemporary artistic research within the field of architecture, is situated on the intersection of a series of lines of how Architecture – and by extension also specifically Interior Architecture as an interiorizing practice – may be conceptualized. Assembled, these lines delineate how we approached Architecture while developing our works+words+[worlds] and which we titled *Grounded Fabulations #2*. Assembled, these lines more broadly resonate with the approach to architectural-artistic research we generally deploy within the research cells *Architecture & Wicked Matters* and *Radical Materiality* at the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture, Sint-Lucas campus. While these lines are irreducibly interrelated, in the introductory part of this academic essay we advance them in separate paragraphs, each time suggesting though a substantial link in-between. As these lines deal with how Architecture may – also – be conceptualized, each paragraph is to be thought as if preceded by the prefix (*Interior*) *Architecture is...*

... A PRACTICE OF MAKING WORLDS

In a most fundamental way, Architecture materializes as a peculiar “way of worldmaking,” a terming we borrow from Nelson Goodman’s eponymous book of philosophical arguments.¹ Considered a “worldmaking” practice, Architecture constructs novel worlds within existing ones, underpinning Goodman’s claim that there is not one single world, reality, or truth to be taken for granted. Conversely, at any point in space and time, there are many valid versions of world coexisting. As these concurrent versions of world coexist, they find themselves in ongoing and evolving tensions. The idea here is politico-poetical. It is political in the sense that such tensions invoke the one beholding more than one world – or better the one inhabiting them, as worlds are lived and experienced rather than observed – to negotiate in-between versions in between versions. It is poetical in the sense that through such – political – negotiation continuously new worlds are made, or become.

... A PRACTICE OF ASSEMBLING WORLDS

More than just neutrally making worlds, Architecture may be characterized as the assembling of

novel worlds. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have, beyond their own discipline, infected many other discipline and practice with the concept of the “assemblage.”² Architecture has not been an exception to this movement. Indeed, it is not hard to conceive of Architecture’s peculiar way of worldmaking in terms of the assemblage or assembling. Architecture, and Interior-Architecture in this arguably excels due to its high-resolution embodying capacity, has even a unique ability of connecting and drawing near what was previously – kept – at distance. In her work, Albena Yaneva has attributed to Architecture the very role of the “connector”: a connector within a cosmos of conflicts.³ The connecting role architecture assumes she classes in terms of the “adjectival architectural”: an act, a doing.⁴ Connecting the formerly distant, unexpected, unfamiliar, and even irreconcilable, a novel world version starts gaining substance. It may “territorialize,” then “deterritorialize” to make space and time again for another world becoming⁵. We take notice here that the notion terra in territorializing and deterritorializing in fact is synonymous to the notion world. More than just a philosophical concept, assemblage thus is a conceptual tool and act of engaging productively with difference, becoming, and multiplicity, themes that we connected in the previous paragraph to the notion of worldmaking. Assemblages, Deleuze and Guattari state, are characterized by agencies distributed across distinct but – temporally – aligned forces and agents, both human and non-human. They produce emergent properties, as such spawning worlds. They thrive on affects and intensities, intensities that arguably associate with how we conceive of the natural forces in world-forming.

... A PRACTICE OF CONSTRUCTING WORLDS

Resonating intimately with the concept of the assemblage, and relating to Architecture in a similar manner, John Rajchman advances the concept of “constructions.”⁶ Close to it, he talks about *the architectonic*, an adjectival notion comparable to Yaneva’s *the architectural*. With *the architectonic*, Rajchman alludes to a potential in juxtaposing constructions, which constantly engage with the “fresh problems” they are confronted with, gaining substance “in the midst of things.”⁷ Within constructions, things “hang together without yet being held together,” in “provisional alliances, broken and reconciled.”⁸ Constructions thus allude to a movement and a temporal state rather than a fixed position, meaning, or truth. They are “an exercise in building new spaces for thought in the midst of things.”⁹ To *think* within constructions, Rajchman adds, would “always be to construct, [...] , invent concepts, unfold a drama.”¹⁰ Architectonic constructions are “a kind of sensation-construct of something virtual, unthought, which doesn’t yet accord with anything.”¹¹ Such architectonic constructions, we argue close to our works+words+[worlds], correspond with the ideas on world-making

and world-assembling advanced above. They also relate to the titling of our contribution: *Grounded Fabulations*. Indeed, our work follows Rajchman's call that aesthetic work, as a construction, always needs to be "unformed, indeterminate, loose enough that other figurations, other confabulations may yet happen in it or pass through it."¹² For this, Rajchman proposes to deploy – designerly – strategies that are not "reducing sense but [...] multiplying it," strategies of "complexifying rather than reducing."¹³

... A PRACTICE OF MAKING-UP; OF MAKING SENSE

Let us linger some more on the idea here of multiplying sense. To invoke instances of worldmaking in-between different world versions – between the one we thought to know, the one challenging that knowing, and the one becoming known – is to invoke acts of sense-making. To consider Architecture as a worldmaking practice here twins with its consideration as a sense-making practice. To make in-between worlds is to make sense of the coexistence of world versions, their shifting similarities and differences which destabilize our senses. We deliberately use the plural notion *senses* here to refer both to what can be sensed – differently – and what makes sense. We draw here on Nel Janssens' elaboration that, relating to the ancient Greek notion of poiesis, interprets the notion of the "poetical" to a making as well as a making-up and a making-sense¹⁴. Architecture makes worlds, but in the same movement it makes-up worlds and calls upon their inhabitants to make sense – anew.

... A PRACTICE OF WORLDING

In her New-Materialism manifesto *Vibrant Matter: A political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennet further develops the concept of the assemblage in specific ways. Giving far more ontological weight to matter itself, she radicalizes the aforementioned idea of agency distributed across human and non-human matter towards the concept of an intrinsic agency residing within "vibrant matter."¹⁵ Such agency she pairs to the "congregational agency" unfolding in our (re-)relating with such matter¹⁶. Drawing further on new-materialist thinking, worldmaking becomes a practice of "worlding,"¹⁷ Worlds advance as complex, ecological entanglements. Similarly to worldmaking, within the concept of worlding worlds are not fixed backdrops but conversely continuously generated throughout dynamic relations among humans and non-humans; between agents, matters, and forces. Worlding has an implicit ethical dimension: how we attune to the agencies and entanglements that make

worlds possible. In *Grounded Fabulations #2*, the notion of *ground* refers to concrete entanglements with the vibrant matter of *soil*, or with soil communities considered fully as worlds.

... A PRACTICE OF SPECULATING ON AND PROJECTING OF WORLDS

However, the notion *ground* not only refers to the concrete matter of *soil*. Creating constructions or assemblages “unformed enough so that other figurations, other confabulations may yet happen in it or pass through it”: it has literally been the aim of our contribution. Rephrasing, our aim has been to open up a space and time for con-fabulations on world to emerge in ourselves but more importantly within the one beholding the cabinet we presence in the venue of this Biennale. These confabulations we draw close – an act of assembling itself, referred to by the preposition *con-* with the characteristic of these fabulations being grounded. This advances a second interpretation of *ground* in our works+words+[worlds]. The world we bring in substance in the cabinet hovers between fact and fiction; between what we know or think to know and what reaches us through architectural rumours or hearsay. While we are fond of some confusion with the concepts of fake news and alternative truths, the idea here connects more to the speculative and projective nature of Architecture. Through project, Architecture is able to project ideas on – future, latent, or alternative – world(s). To speak with Kim Dovey, in order to be even classed as Architecture some idea of future should always be at stake¹⁸. Architecture fundamentally is a practice of speculating on worlds. Architecture fundamentally is a practice of projecting projects of world.

On the intersection of these lines conceptualizing what Architecture is or can be, our cabinet *Grounded Fabulations #2* constitutes the contours of an invitation. It is an invitation to make sense of its assembled artefacts, and to assemble a world throughout this encounter. It is an invitation for grounded fabulations, in which the vibrant matter of soil in which Architecture is grafted is never distant.

⊗_SUBSTANTIATING OUR WORKS+WORDS+[WORLDS]

As suggested, to artistic or design driven research we attribute a sense-making capacity, enabling it to uncover as well as substantiate and curate yet to become-worlds, on the edge of reality and fiction / imagination. For this we deploy a speculative and projective design approach, akin to mythopoetic constructing, wherein speculative projects serve as vehicles for material and spatial inquiry. The speculative projects we bring to a concrete and situated level, by making them material and

embodied, further extracting and abstracting insights to feed back into the processes of inquiry. As such we articulate an artistic methodology aimed to bring about an immersive engagement with speculative worldmaking.

Our specific contribution embraces this more general perspective by proposing an open-ended investigation into how architecture can function as a medium and environment for research and discovery, rather than advancing it as a practice offering fixed sets of solutions. Its ground zero are the soil worlds beneath our and architecture's feet. We question what it means for architecture to more radically interact with un-known and under-explored subterranean, underground realms, including its uncovered concrete materialities and agencies, its ingrained narratives and associated fears, its grounded poetry.

In *Grounded Fabulations #2* a series of artefacts is curated, which lure those encountering and engaging into acts of making up worlds and making sense. *Grounded* aspects of architecture – the factual – herein inextricably mingle with architectural hearsay, rumours, and alternative truths – *Fabulations*. Our work also spins from a general fascination with radical and wicked matters, approached from the perspective of architecting. For *Grounded Fabulations #2*, we curate project articulations that re-route architecture's scope to the under-explored, subterranean worlds in which architecture is founded, on which it weighs, and in which it inevitably grafts and probes. We hence seek speculative entanglement with the shear materiality of soil worlds, but moreover with its imaginary counterparts, as sub-terra for architecture largely remains terra incognita.

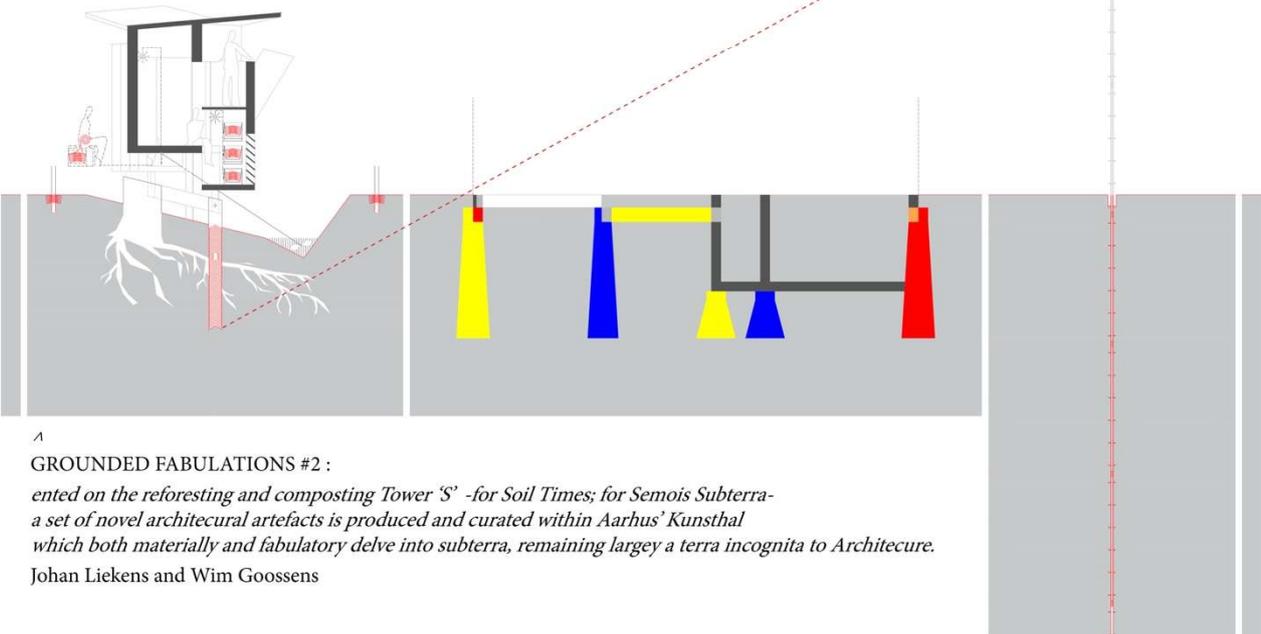
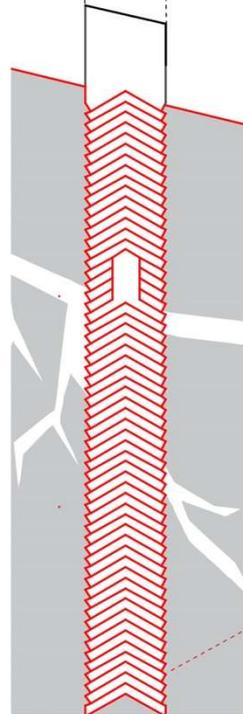
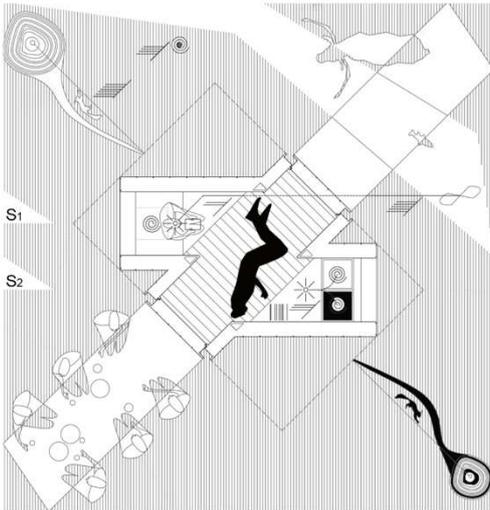
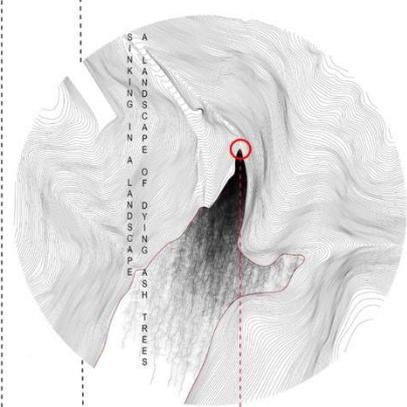
Grounded Fabulations #2 specifically delves in the subterranean soil world of a streamlet valley of the Semois hydrographical network, characterized by a rapid decline of the local Ash tree population. It grafts on hearsay suggesting the possibility of supporting architecture on a living foundation. Herein, an entrenched, wooden foundation is expected to be replaced in-time by an alive foundation-world regulated by soil mycelia, which feed on and digest the first. Around this hypothesis, a speculative set of artefacts is developed that ultimately will become part of the reforesting and composting tower called *S for Soil Times; S for Semois Sub-terra*. These artefacts are: (i) one image of a measuring rod drilled in the valley's soil crust, determining also the contour of the *Grounded Fabulations #2* cabinet in Aarhus' Kunsthall; (ii) one heap of Semois earth resulting from that; (iii) one foundational Ash pillar for underpinning *S*, architecturally composed and sculptured according to a

foreseen initial resistance and subsequent disintegration and takeover; (iv) *S'* future urinal-over-flow-orientation sink, which organizes the infiltration into the landscape's soil while being well aware of the specific point of that infiltration; (v) a small terrarium holding a reversed, composting model of *S*; (vi) a pair of globular glasses, to see architecture in a reverse modus. What was up is down; what was down is up.

Grounded Fabulations #2 also contains an outgoing trace of *Grounded Fabulations #1: Well to Hell*, through the presence of sections of the large measuring rod and part of that work. A different scale indication has been added to the original scale though, as the rod travelled with us to the Semois streamlet valley and served to take particular measurements preparing the curated world of *Grounded Fabulations #2*.

In between these artefacts, we invite the one beholding to make sense and by doing so to make world.

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 GROUNDED FABULATIONS #2 :
 ented on the reforestation and composting Tower 'S' -for Soil Times; for Semois Subterra-
 a set of novel architectural artefacts is produced and curated within Aarhus' Kunsthall
 which both materially and fabulatory delve into subterra, remaining largely a terra incognita to Architecture.
 Johan Liekens and Wim Goossens

Bios

Johan Liekens is partner in the office STUDIOLO architectuur. He is an architect interested and skilled in aspects of artefactual and material agencies. On this theme, he is an Associate Professor at KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture, Campus Sint-Lucas. Here, he leads exploratory design studios in the Architecture and Interior Architecture programs. With Wim Goossens he develops a new research Interior Architecture master program. As an active researcher, he engages within the research cell *Architecture & Wicked Matters* and its Academic Design Office *The Wicked Home*, which he leads with Nel Janssens, and within the research cell *Radical Materiality*.

Wim Goossens is an architect skilled in creative exchanges between architecture and art; education and spatial practices. He teaches in *lab-O* and leads exploratory design studios in the Architecture and Interior Architecture programs of KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture, Campus Sint-Lucas. He is Head of Expertise in Teaching and Design Practice. With Johan Liekens he develops a new Interior Architecture research master program. Crossing arts and architecture, he also intensively collaborates with Arnaud Hendrickx, among others through the Academic Design Office *AVDAK*. He currently conducts a PhD titled *Reis door Eskimonië*, and is part of the *Radical Materiality* research cell.

Notes

¹ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1978).

² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

³ Albena Yaneva, *Mapping Controversies in Architecture* (Routledge, 2012).

⁴ Yaneva, *Mapping Controversies in Architecture*.

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

⁶ John Rajchman, *Constructions* (The MIT Press, 1998).

⁷ Rajchman, *Constructions*.

⁸ Rajchman, *Constructions*.

⁹ Rajchman, *Constructions*.

¹⁰ Rajchman, *Constructions*.

¹¹ Rajchman, *Constructions*.

¹² Rajchman, *Constructions*.

¹³ Rajchman, *Constructions*.

¹⁴ Nel Janssens, *Utopia-Driven Projective research: A Design Approach to Explore Theory and Practice of Meta-Urbanism* (Department of Architecture of Chalmers University of Technology, 2012).

¹⁵ Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter* (Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*.

¹⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Kim Dovey, "I Mean to be Critical, But," in *Critical Architecture*, ed. Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 2017), 252-260.