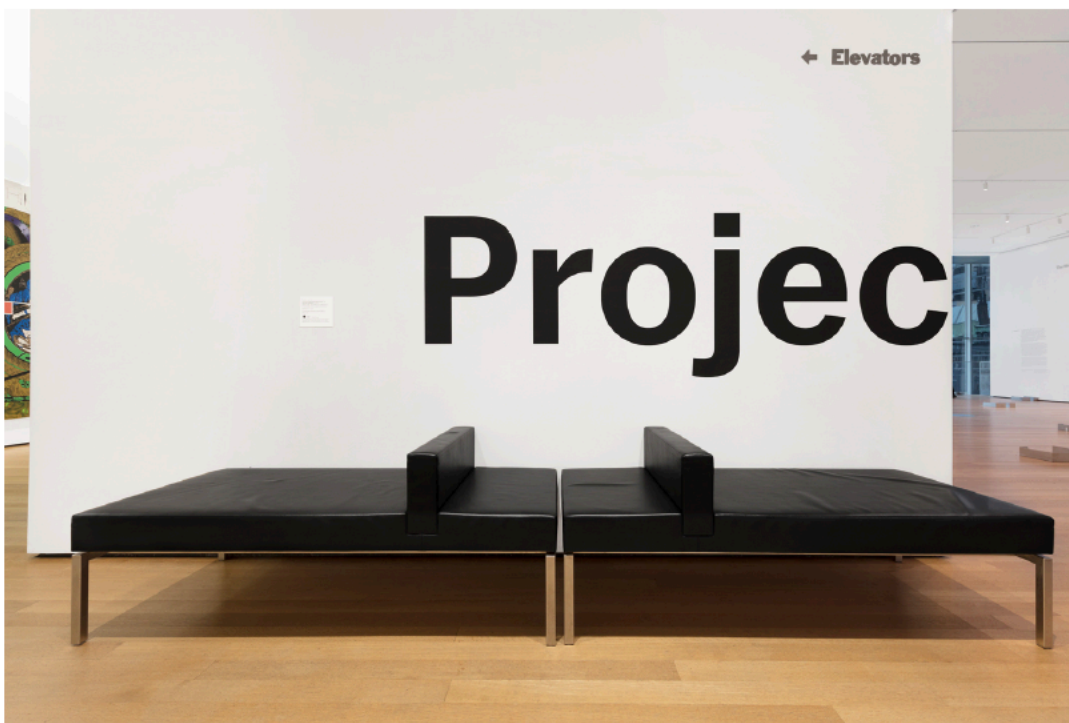


REVIEWS

“Park McArthur Projects 195” at MoMa, New York

by Alessandro Bava



Park McArthur, *Projects 195: Park McArthur* installation view Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018 Third Configuration
Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York. Photo: Denis Doorly

The title of Park McArthur’s exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art already declares the artist’s interest in looking at the institutional and spatial context surrounding and enveloping it, starting with the way the museum has been archiving and numbering projects. McArthur cites artists John Knight and Adrian

<http://moussemagazine.it/park-mcarthur-projects-195-moma-new-york/>

Piper as she attempts to manifest the underlying conceptual constructs of which institutions are made and which need to be constantly reexamined and often radically changed. She expands the practice of institutional critique from the museum to American civic institutions at large, with a specific focus on institutional constructs of normativity and ability/disability.

The project at MoMA pivots around the sound piece *PARA-SITES*: narrated by artist and educator Paula Stuttmann to the artist, it presents itself in the guise of an inoffensive audio guide of the exhibition, which features only a sparse number of objects in the space: a steel and leather bench, framed sheets of A4 paper, steel tray-like objects tucked in a corner, loosely resembling architectural models, and finally, a large wall stencil of the title of the exhibition.

The eleven-part audio piece accessible on [MoMA's website](#) quickly reveals itself to be much more than an audio guide: it is, in fact, the context in which the exhibition declares itself and acquires dimension. An audio guide is often a tool to allow for fruition of an artwork to those who are visually impaired, and, as such, it can also be a beautiful rendition of something visual into something verbal and poetic, and potentially an augmented way of helping people who can't see with their eyes to see with their minds. In this exhibition, the audio piece does exactly that while also subverting the hierarchy of visible and audible. Here the audio is the exhibition; it doesn't just describe a material reality.

In it, the artist intends to openly question the museum that hosts it and the ways in which institutions help to shape the contemporary American (and effectively the global) shared cultural landscape. Arguably, museums are the site where the human ability to make beauty in a given time is explored, researched, exhibited, and, for better or for worse, canonized. I would argue that beauty is never a visual attribute; it's a vibration, a neurological sense of harmony that can be approximated with many techniques as our consciousness evolves and changes. This beauty can then be absorbed into general consciousness and potentially can even be an agent of change to such a degree that, as time passes, it becomes less evident.

In the case of McArthur, the quest for "beauty" is an ethical, a political, and a civic one. The artist questions the funding of MoMA's latest expansion by a luxury real estate operation, a tall skyscraper towering over the museum, designed by the Parisian firm Jean Nouvel Architects and currently under construction. In the audio guide, the artist points to the fact that the developer of the tower, Hines, is a longtime donor to the museum and, quoting from the audio transcription, is "a company that, from 1985 through 1991, sponsored a series of five exhibitions at MoMA, titled The Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture Program. The series was conceived to examine current trends in architecture ... it was the first initiative of its kind to be supported by a corporate gift."

The new tower repeats a funding scheme already used with the Cesar Pelli-designed Museum Tower in 1984 and critically reconsidered by Rem Koolhaas in 1997 with his losing museum extension proposal titled MOMA Inc., which included a triangular tower shaped only by the abstract hands of air-rights regulations. Writing in the *New York Times* about the proposal in 1997, the late architecture critic Herbert Muschamp pointed to the unmasking quality of OMA's proposal, outlined in a thick book rather than in conventional plans and models: "Money and power, accumulated by

MOMA Inc., are converted into energy that is channeled into the curatorial departments. Here, artifacts are selected, then hauled out of storage and put on public display.” Similarly, the new tower also conforms to the regulations that force it into a convulsed triangular section, updated and scaled up to the hubris of the speculative real estate of the 2010s and the economy supporting it.

McArthur’s exhibition brings into the museum the plans for the luxury condo and, perhaps like Koolhaas, she makes visible (and audible) the mechanisms that support the production of collective culture within the US democratic capitalist system. The artist also makes a provocative counterproposal for a different kind of tower: this design is once again described in the audio as a mixed-use tower with artists’ studios and open-plan apartments for disabled and nondisabled individuals and groups, a sort of self-portrait of the artist and her community in the form of a project, and it appears in the gallery as a series of simple aluminum stackable “trays” rearranged multiple times by the artist during the course of the exhibition. The artist describes large open-plan spaces defined by their communities’ habits and necessities and an abundance of services like a shared swimming pool.

The audio guide also poignantly references an Instagram post by Martino Stierli, the curator of Architecture at MoMA, an image taken from the top of the construction site at the Nouvel tower and captioned “on top of the world!” The coincidence of an exhibition on socialist architecture in Yugoslavia curated by Stierli and currently on view at the same time as the project by McArthur made me think again of a quote from Svetlana Boym in [a review of it on the New Yorker](#): “New utopias are neither political nor artistic, but rather technological and economic. As for politics and philosophy, they play a minor role in the imagination of the future.”

McArthur’s exhibition seems to point in the opposite direction: contemporary artists’ increasing awareness that *space* and architecture are the sites where many of the immaterial and abstract forces shaping our lives become visible underscores that art can still play a major role in imagining and changing the present.