



RE-TOOLING THE SPACE OF EXHIBITION:
LOT-EK'S INDUSTRIAL BRICOLAGE AT THE BOHEN FOUNDATION
By Todd Alden

Unlike most exhibiting arts organizations in this country, the Bohemian Foundation operates under the sign of transition: it does not keep a permanent collection. Dispossession by design, the Foundation commissions and exhibits works by artists in a variety of media that do not readily lend themselves to standard gallery formats. Subsequently, it typically gives the works away. It is this generative--and yet temporary--emphasis that distinguishes the Bohemian Foundation from other institutions, including its European cousin, the Kunsthalle; the latter houses temporary exhibitions without keeping a permanent collection, but doesn't typically commission or make gifts of works. For its new site in the Meat Packing District, the Foundation searched for an architect responsive to its unique aims: someone, to quote President, Fred Henry, "...who would reconceive the very idea of the exhibition space, who would reconceive the vocabulary of the exhibition space." Enter LOT-EK.

LOT-EK swerves from the straight path of art and architecture. They don't *build*: they cut, they cobble, and they re-tool. In contrast with the "professional" working methods of most artists and architects today--and especially the proliferating numbers dedicating themselves to so-called "digital architecture"--LOT-EK is committed to already given materials, to re-shuffling leftover oddments of industrial functions for renewed purposes. With the inspired craftiness of the lefthander, LOT-EK's purposive architecture cuts and welds mass-produced urban materials into new, idiosyncratic hybrids and individuated *changements*. This transformative--and theoretically endless--process of renewal is the very dynamic of *bricolage*, described by Lévi-Strauss as "a practice which sometimes attains its goals, but which is founded on neither permanent rules nor a permanent method."

What is *bricolage*? Somehow fittingly, the French word, *bricolage* has no equivalent in the English language. A distinctly modern concept, *bricolage* invokes the work of, or the tasks performed by, the amateur tinkerer, the jack-of-all-trades, the inspired oddjobsman. A consummate do-it-yourselfer, the *bricoleur* hobbles together functional contraptions out of already given or collected materials which he re-tools and re-signifies into new objects with novel uses, but more importantly, which he regenerates into a new, oscillating syntax: one of loss, gain, and more than anything, one of play. More like the inspired amateur than the professional artist, the *bricoleur* does not concern himself with the technical mastery of a particular medium. Unlike the painter who hides the facture and function of the work, the *bricoleur* externalizes the materials, the means, and the purpose. Violating the aesthetic conditions of professional art--"purposiveness without purpose" (Kant) and moreover, "the formula of disinterestedness plus admiration" (Marcel Broodthaers)--the *bricoleur's* primary concern, rather, is modest functionality: *making it work* with materials readily at hand.

As architects, the principals of LOT-EK are industrial *bricoleurs*, and their architecture, industrial *bricolage*. Responding to the site's history as a former printing factory, but also to the Bohemian Foundation's flux and range of institutional aims, LOT-EK has come up with a design to allow maximum flexibility. This aspect is immediately legible to the casual passerby, who can readily apprehend the changing spatial configuration through roll-up glass, garage-style doors, behind which four red, used, sliced-up and truncated industrial shipping containers can slide along four paired rows of railroad-like tracks affixed to the floor. The sense of the space's legibly shifting features will also be enhanced by the function of the viewer's memory as differences emerge and prior arrangements are recalled.

Through the garage-like windows, the modest and industrial style of the Bohen Foundation logo, designed by LOT-EK, conjures up the identity of a regular shipping company, rather than that of an Art Foundation. Two pair of containers stenciled with “BO(H)EN” face the street--the middle “H” is split in half--and the name reads disjunctively, depending on the placement of the containers. The logo will always read with absent and piecemeal elements and never as a whole and continuous “BOHEN;” this discontinuity is exacerbated by the fact that parts of the letters have also been removed where container sections have been cut out. This fragmented, oscillating syntax neatly announces LOT-EK’s reconceived vocabulary of the exhibition space and its fugitive aims and character.

Each of the eight, movable containers slides along the tracks and is designed to house a specific function--office, lounge, conference room, video screening room, etc. Each container also packs four or five, 16’ x 12’ sliding wall panels on its side. Once the containers are temporarily “set” into their flexible positions, the wall panels can be unfolded, sliding along an exposed hanging armature, and forming exhibition spaces in a variety of sizes and shapes. Depending on the exhibition needs, there is also the possibility for dramatic, two-story spaces through a removable, metal-grating floor/roof between the ground floor and the basement. (This recessed space LOT-EK cagily refers to as “the den of lions.”) In addition to operating as an exhibition space, the basement, like the upstairs floor, is designed so that it could function as an actual workspace for artists, as necessary. In most institutions, a so-called “project room” is, in practice, typically little more than a viewing room for changing, contemporary exhibitions. At the Bohen Foundation, however, the aim is that invited artists will actually *work* in this space.

The interiors of the containers are created with the characteristically modest, deft economy of means employed by the *bricoleur*. By simply cutting into the container skin and folding it inwards, LOT-EK creates both a new void and a new function: the folded container skin becomes a window on the vertical axis and a table on the horizontal onto which clear industrial resin is poured, creating safe, smooth, functional surfaces. The transparency of the resin not only allows the desks to be functional, but also unconceals the means, the process, and the materials with which they are factured. With similar economy, the doors of each container are delineated by simply cutting and removing a door-shaped opening. “Waste not” being part of the *bricoleur’s modus operandi*, the left-over metal scraps are removed, bent, and welded to create benches for inside the container onto which transparent rubber, rather than resin, is poured for the user’s comfort.

Whereas most professional art and architecture internalizes or hides its means of execution and purpose, LOT-EK externalizes each, so that there is a dialogue between materials and function. Hence the decision to leave exposed and “unfinished” the ceiling beams, brick walls, and downstairs floor (along with the exterior folding, plywood-lined, sheetrock wall panels and the bare interior skin of the shipping containers). In a characteristic LOT-EK maneuver, an industrial use “container”--here the shell of a former printing factory--is transformed into a new function: the site of invention and presentation.

The genius of the design, of course, lies in its innovative reconsideration of the exhibition space, which radically departs from the Modernist myth of the gallery or museum as a static, ideologically neutral container for works of art. Rather than approaching the exhibition site as a pristine, empty vessel to be filled by artists and passively contemplated by viewers, LOT-EK proposes to conflate the site of artistic invention with the act of presentation and reception. What does this imply? Whether the space is configured to be either open/“raw” or the walls are unfolded/pristine (in other words, mimicking the conventions of the white cube), the contours of the “gallery” are determined--albeit to a limited extent--according to function and according to the artist’s desire. The following questions arise: is it the artist who determines the mold, shape and character of art or is it, rather, the mold--or container--of the exhibition context itself? Moreover, who or what molds the shape, character, and interests of art’s exhibition contexts? And ultimately, who or what determines *the sense* of culture?

Although LOT-EK’s design challenges conventions of the white cube, its *bricolage* system is modest rather than imposing and allows artists to make with it what they will. This choice,

however, becomes articulated as such: as a legibly constructed, shifting arrangement subject to active manipulation and transformation. Even, for example, when artists elect to present their works in an approximately conventional white cube, the viewer will enter the newly arranged, interior gallery through a lattice of folding walls whose constructed artifice and materiality are fully evident from the outside: namely, the exposed metal wall framing and unpainted plywood that backs the finished sheetrock side, which are typically hidden in galleries and museums. LOT-EK's "white cube" can not be understood as a universal, "naturalized" kind of space, but rather as a specific, and constructed *fiction*.

ENDS + ODDS

New inventions, which will enable us to move about in space in new ways and at new speeds, will bring about a new reality. The static architecture of the Egyptian pyramids has been superseded--our architecture revolves, swims, flies. We are approaching the state of floating in the air and swinging like a pendulum. I want to help discover and mold the form of reality. -- El Lissitzky

There are precedents of modular exhibition design in the 20th century, but this does not mean that these spaces--which are often constituted with movable walls--are fundamentally different from non-modular ones in terms of the viewer's relationship to art and architecture. These designs--and I suggest two examples, Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum (New York) and Mies van der Rohe's Nationalgalerie (Berlin)--offer essentially thematic variations on the white cube: the walls may be movable, but as containers, they remain static, timeless vessels to be filled for contemplation. Unlike LOT-EK's industrial *bricolage*, functionality and means of execution are typically concealed in this "professional" architecture. It is LOT-EK's inspired, but constantly changing purposiveness that throws a wrench into what might be politely referred to as the contemplative relationship to art.

One notable precedent is El Lissitzky who, like LOT-EK, aimed to collapse distinctions between art and architecture. Using corrugated relief walls--significantly an industrial material--El Lissitzky's temporary *Demonstration Rooms* in Hannover and Dresden (1926) were designed to hang nonrepresentational pictures in a cabinet-like room. The space was arranged so that the viewer's apprehension of it would alter with his or her own movement: the perception of the walls shifted from white to black and black to white. Also ingenious, however, was the incorporation of corner cabinets with movable wall panels that the viewer could slide himself, a presentation, as others have noted, that shifted the function of exhibition towards that of an archive.

Like Lissitzky, LOT-EK re-tools the syntax of the exhibition space, turning on its head the dominant, institutional conception of art as timeless, universal, and moreover, as "purposive without purpose." LOT-EK does not *conceive* space as a static vessel to be filled, completed, and contemplated. Rather, they *unfix* it, they *reconceive* its elements by cobbling together hybrids of already given, industrial materials *contaminated* by function and commerce: if the white cube endures even here, it is only as a constructed "fiction." As industrial *bricoleurs*, LOT-EK, together with the Bohen Foundation, are not making architecture for timeless art: they are re-tooling the very idea of the *exhibition space as container*, re-shaping it out of fragmented, oscillating hybrids of already given, industrial things. "I want to help discover and mold the form of reality," Lissitzky said. In this increasingly digitized, homogenized, and globalized world in which fictions are seamlessly, unblinkingly, and unapologetically interchanged with facts, this materialist aim--to which LOT-EK's industrial *bricolage* may also lay claim--is as urgent as ever.

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By basing its mission and foundational purpose on a shifting economy of *expenditure* (gifts) rather than on the museum's economy of acquisition (and permanent collections), the Bohen Foundation swerves from the straight path of institutions. Because its gifts will presumably be going to institutions that do not necessarily share the Foundation's unique aims, approach, and purpose, however, the question remains as to the degree to which the static, contemplative attitude towards art is, in the general economy of art, effectively challenged.