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CENTRALE: THE CENTRE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS BRUSSELS ECOLOGIES, CONSTRUCTION, AND RESURRECTION

Words by Isabella Greenwood – October 24, 2024

A group show marking the renovations at [Centrale, The Centre of Contemporary Arts in Brussels](#), explores the multifaceted intersections of architecture, ecology, and socio-political structures through a dynamic mix of painting, sculpture, photography, and video. Curated by Artistic Director, Tania Nasielski, the exhibition brings together over 240 local and near-local artists, whose works interrogate the tensions between construction and destruction, creation and decay. Through immersive installations and critical engagements with themes of fear, preservation, and ecological loss, *Hosting: artists from Brussels & periphery* presents a complex dialogue on contemporary society's fragile relationship with its environment, offering a profound reflection on the cycles of renewal and ruin shaping both our physical and cultural landscapes.

After six months of renovations, Centrale, The Centre of Contemporary Arts in Brussels, reopens its doors with this group show co-curated by Manon De Boer, Pélagie Gbaguidi, Juan Pablo Plazas, Richart Venlet and Tania Nasielski. The institution positions itself as both a physical space and a conceptual framework for addressing critical contemporary themes, while platforming emerging artists.

In discussing the show with me, Nasielski drew on the French etymology of the term 'host': "*Hosting* reflects our desire to be hospitable to both artists and audiences, celebrating the artistic diversity of the current Brussels scene," she explained. This thematic emphasis on exchange, reciprocity and sharing mirrors the negotiations within the exhibition, situating *Hosting* as an allegory for the contemporary desire for interconnectedness.

Each segment of the gallery features unique ways to present the works, from structures created by featured artists, such as Plazas and De Boer, the role of the artist extends out from their works, alone and into the space itself. The curation thus operates phenomenologically, mirroring both the expansiveness and multifaceted nature of the artworks, negotiating their textural, visual, and thematic qualities, while deliberately subverting the rigid boundaries of traditional categorisation.

Towards the beginning of the show, Özge Akarsu, *I am Scared* (2020), plays a looping video of the artist listing her fears (from diplomats and politicians, to the fear of living, dying and even forgiveness): "I am scared to forgive, I long for more time," the voice remarks. Articulating the pervasive, collective anxieties embedded within political structures and societal authorities, Akarsu exposes the entanglement of fear with deeper existential concerns. Her looping monologue situates fear not merely as an emotional response but as a repetitive condition undergirding our social fabric, its cyclical nature mirroring broader cycles of crisis and recovery.

Following Akarsu, in an adjoining room, Prune Perris's photograph of derelict apartment buildings in Paris, Céline Prignon's modified chair structure *Sans Titre* (2023), Laurent Suchy's *Petite Théorie Cellulaire* (2013) and Adèle Pasquier's *Fake It Until You Make It* (2022)

depict themes of infrastructure and urban decay. The works, playful and plastic despite their otherwise industrial utilitarian function, speak to both the inherent corruptibility, and unseriousness, of building structures. The evocation of childhood play (building Lego towers or inhabiting plastic toy houses) resonates deeply within the pieces, reflecting a profound interrogation of architecture's role in shaping social realities. Pasquier's use of styrofoam, a material both ubiquitous and impermanent, for her hammer and nails, intensifies the tension between construction and destruction, serving as a critique of the superficiality of modern construction practices, where the illusion of permanence is continually undermined by the fragility of both materials and systems that are driven by neoliberal imperatives.

The dialogue is extended in Sara Del Bene's *Playtime* (2017), in which Lego-like wooden sticks spell out the words 'Play Time', a whimsical yet incisive commentary on the instability of both play and labour within these systems. Here, the notion of play is not merely lighthearted or trivial but laced with deeper, subversive undertones — highlighting the precarious intersection between leisure and exploitation. Perhaps the works might also invite the viewer to consider the resurrection of Centrale's physical space, which in and of itself becomes a statement of intentional reclamation, with intention to dynamically, and critically, function as a creative hub in Brussels, as opposed to simply mirroring the hollow resurrection of spaces.

Colin Fincoeur's *Intercom* (2024), a photograph of a crumbling intercom system lying on a cement floor, is placed above Marine Kaiser's *The Assistant* (2022), featuring neatly preserved jars of pickles and cucumbers additionally touches on urban degradation. The destroyed intercom, a once-functional object of communication, lies inert, symbolising a breakdown in communication. Yet Kaiser's pickles, objects that are preserved through fermentation, continue to exist, suggesting that something always remains, even amidst decay. This interplay between destruction and preservation highlights the curatorial concern with what survives and what is lost in processes of ecological and cultural ruin, for even as the world crumbled, pickles transmute their green fleshy bodies in brine.

Lucile Bertrand's *Chanter Comme Des Oiseaux* (2020) serves as perhaps the most poignant ecological statement. Featuring four music stands, each holding printed scores, the piece is intended as a performance, where vocalists would read from the music, composed to mimic the songs of extinct birds. Yet in the exhibition, the stands remain hauntingly silent. The stillness recalls John Cage's philosophies, particularly his seminal work *4'33"* (1952), in which the absence of intentional sound challenges the listener to engage with the unintended, and the otherwise unnoticed noises. This silent performance gestures towards ecological loss, unsettling and yet deeply moving, Bertrand's work offers a confrontation with our own complicity in ecological degradation, transforming what could have been a performance into a solemn eulogy for extinct life.

In returning to Akarsu's *I Am Scared*, it becomes clear that within the climate of ecological and urban collapse, fear and forgiveness are inextricably linked. Though, existing within fear, the act of forgiveness or the act of allowing oneself to reimagine old relics is essential. The rich tapestry of works at *Hosting*, from ecological critiques, reflections on the body, building and belonging, offers not only a diagnosis of our present condition but also tentative suggestions for how we might move forward. Centrale's renovation is not just a metaphor for renewal; it is an invitation to imagine new modes of preservation, reciprocity, and resilience in a world marked by constant cycles of destruction.

The exhibition opened on the 10th of October and will run until the 9th of February 2025, at Centrale for Contemporary Arts Brussels, Pl. Sainte-Catherine 45, 1000 Bruxelles, Belgium.