

7. Plamen Dejanoff: The Bronze House

FRAC CHAMPAGNE-ARDENNE
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In 2006 Bulgarian artist Plamen Dejanoff (b. 1970 in Sofia) started the project *Planets of Comparison*. Today the project is moving along fast and when done, will be composed of three bronze sculpture-buildings erected in different parts of the Veliko Tarnovo city center in Bulgaria: one bronze house, one bronze theater and one bronze library. Actually there are four interventions, since a bronze floor/square will be installed as well in the middle of town. The following text was written after a day spent together walking through the beautiful show at MAMbo, in Bologna, and more discussions via internet that cleared up not only the details of the project but the artist's way of thinking and working.

From what I can see, and from what I'm interested in grasping, the central concept in this long, big, and ambitious work is the idea of "authority". That's a word we tried to erase (or rebuild?) throughout the last century, but in the end it's still there, and if we are honest, we cannot deny that every artwork (to "be" an artwork) has to produce a certain amount of authority. *Planets of Comparison* is like a huge experiment that shows how much authority an artist can have over museum directors, curators, art critics, businessmen, politicians, common people, etc. Making buildings/sculptures in bronze is really expensive, and the artist needed to convince people, collectors and companies to invest money in it. At the same time, to be allowed to put these giant things in the middle of a UNESCO-protected city, he will need the ability to convince politicians as well. But in an email, Plamen told me, "I see my project as more related to the words 'beliefs' and 'conviction'". Actually, those things wouldn't be possible without the capacity to make the art system truly believe in the project. And museums are necessary to give an official imprimatur saying this is not a utopian dream or a provocative artistic proposal without a concrete, physical realization. There are no dreams or provocations here. Everything is planned out and will probably start being built next year.

To bring about *Planets of Comparison*, the artist had to set up two foundations that now are following every single detail of the project and that became part of the artwork in itself. A slight shift from the position of the artist to that of a businessman. Some might see this as a way of also becoming a gentrification operator. Like a punk, do-it-yourself way for artists to avoid the exploitation of places and things they love and create.

The exhibitions he has made to present the project, like the one at MAMbo that I visited with him, allow one to understand all the phases he passed through to develop it. It's clear how everything grew and changed

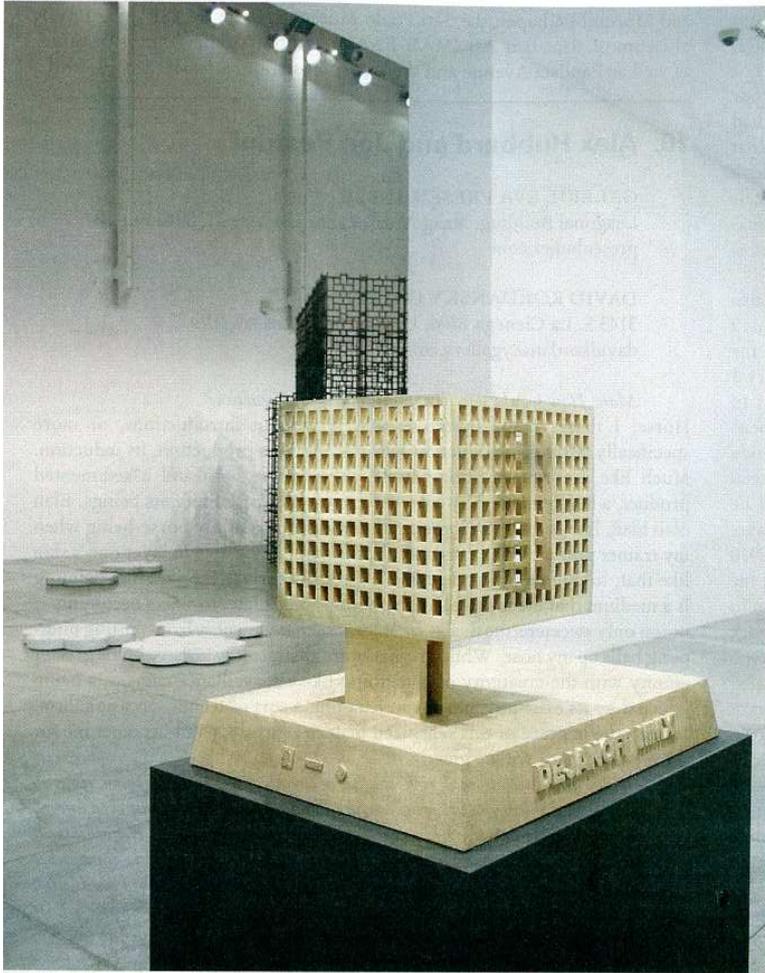
(a lot) from the point of departure. In part because the project is so complicated that wouldn't be possible to know from the beginning what shape it might take on in the end. There are preliminary studies and the first, toy-like models he made when just thinking of constructing one group of buildings in materials like wood, glass, etc. Then he realized those materials, even if used in new ways, are the same ones used (for floors, windows, etc) in normal architecture, and decided to use bronze: a material probably never adopted in architecture and that would be able to keep everything in the realm of sculpture.

To figure out how to "handle" this material and how it works, he started casting objects taken from everyday life. Broken toys from his children, a Hoover, tire rims. But there is also one more compelling reason. Using bronze was the best way to make the sculptures last for centuries without too much maintenance. That would mean a lot of saved money, time and effort. That's also why there will be no technological or functional devices in the buildings and they will be primitively bare and sober, reduced to a minimum framework. Then, for example, no windows or electricity, no spotlights or heating, even though the sculptures can be walked through and used as venues for a program of events (shows, performances, cinema screenings...) open to the public. Every time a solution will be found, as when something is done in a square or in nature. If art still means getting beyond the limits of space and time, then *Planets of Comparison* will never be obsolete, even in its small details.

The starring work in the exhibition at FRAC Champagne-Ardenne (as in the past ones) is the bronze house. The gigantic structure is made in a modular way by assembling the grid-like base element. The suggestion for the shape of this grid comes from the wood panels used in the construction of Veliko Tarnovo houses. They also impressed Le Corbusier in one of his trips to that area in his youth. And the architect's diaries, together with the memories of his visit to the Brancusi endless column and to Marfa, Texas, convinced the artist to choose this town as a site for the project. In the Reims show more attention will also be paid to the chosen location and the Bronze Theater. A pure and simple bronze amphitheater that probably will be done before the Bronze House, even though the assembly of the latter will start first.

When it seems that everyone and everything is moving with centripetal, conformist force towards the biggest centers of art, Plamen Dejanoff is doing the opposite, spending years of effort to build something in a place that is peripheral, and from the standpoint of the art world, in the middle of nowhere. As he told me, it would have been possible and easier for him to make everything in Berlin, for instance, but in the end that wouldn't be the same. Again, it is a question of beliefs and conviction. As in the early months, when engineers said it would be impossible to build that kind of huge "cage" out of so many different pieces of bronze. And now it's here before us, and even stood up to the earthquakes that took place in Bologna in the days around the opening.

(Antonio Grulli)



7 Plamen Dejanoff, "The Bronze House," installation view at Mambo, Bologna