

THE LAB IN 20th-CENTURY ART AND ARCHITECTURE

*Colloquium organised by the University of Leuven, Faculty of Architecture
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Keynote by JORGE OTERO-PAILOS (Columbia University)

In *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941), Sigfried Giedion claimed that abstract art's new representation of space "was accomplished step by step, much as laboratory research gradually arrives at its conclusion through long experimentation." Earlier in the book, he had mused about the scientific method ("a great tradition") as architecture's prime example. He was writing this at a time when an increasing amount of artistic and architectural endeavours were indeed taking place in self-proclaimed 'laboratories'. This tendency can be traced back to the historical artistic avant-garde: the pioneering workshop didactics of the Bauhaus represented a technical, experimental and collaborative counterpart to the humanist Beaux-Arts tradition, and for a short time the architects and artists at Vkhumetas, the Russian state art and technical school in Moscow, even created proper laboratory settings through the use of all kinds of apparatus and standardised testing. Other, more associative uses of the term were also deployed, notably by Le Corbusier, who once referred to his painting studio as a laboratory.

With the influx of European émigrés to the United States in the 1930s, this novel research paradigm got hold across the Atlantic as well: Josef Albers continued the Bauhaus tradition of experimentation at Black Mountain College from 1933 onwards, and in 1936 Friedrich Kiesler founded a 'Design-Correlation Laboratory' at Columbia, with a New York 'Laboratory School of Industrial Design' also being set up that year. Jean Labatut's architectural laboratory at Princeton, completed in 1950, would be operational for over fifteen years. From the late 1950s onwards, an increasing amount of research in the architectural and urban field was operating under the moniker of laboratory, notably at MIT's School of Architecture and Planning. At the same time, Gyorgy Kepes was the first visual artist to become a tenured professor there, signalling the increasing scientific affinity with artistic research paradigms. Conversely, the artist's studio – which used to be regarded as a place of solitary contemplation rather than collaborative action – acquired new meaning as a privileged space of experimentation due to the growing attention for the practices of visual artists such as Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol.

While the initial frame of reference was often informed by empirical natural sciences, later iterations of these laboratories also encompassed the social sciences. This allowed for psychological research and field work studies to become models for artistic or architectural research as well. Since then, the paradigm of the laboratory grew in popularity as quickly as its meaning diminished in specificity: contemporary examples include everything from design studios and fieldwork to the 'living labs' of experimental urban schemes.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Questions remain about the advent and steady rise of laboratories in the visual arts and architecture. Should we understand them, following Giedion, as an extension of the 'great tradition' of scientific empiricism? Or is it rather the result of institutional shifts in the postwar academic landscape? Were they thought of as a studio, a research tool, a workshop, a method, a representational space? How was the laboratory conceived on the metaphorical, symbolical, but

also on the material level? Were there actually any observational or inductive methodologies involved? Or was it often just a moniker for free experimentation under the guise of scientism? And how did these developments influence the epistemic culture of art and architecture at large?

We invite researchers to submit paper proposals that shed light on this topic from one or more of the following thematic focal points:

Objects: In classic laboratory studies, the various apparatus employed by the researchers are understood as crucial actors in the creation and mediation of knowledge. How does this translate to the architectural and/or artistic context? What kind of research tools were used in these laboratories, and how? In what way is the classic toolset of architecture (plans, models, rulers, drawing boards) or art (easels, brushes, chisels, one's hands) altered or suspended to make room for new tools more akin to what one would normally find in a scientific laboratory: machinery of various kinds, measuring devices, experimental set-ups, or elaborate models of various scales reflecting the properties of real-world conditions. What objects were involved in the sourcing of experimental knowledge?

Practices: Like objects, practices are a classic focus of any social or anthropological study of scientific research. Especially if we look at how experiments are conducted, many distinct social as well as methodological practices come to the fore: how do teams of researchers work together to conduct an experiment, and how do they decide when sufficient and/or reliable information is retrieved from it? What does 'observation' mean in an artistic or architectural context? And how do these practices acquire, as they would be understood from an anthropological vantage point, ritualistic properties?

Settings: What is the physical context of the objects, practices and rituals that are used in the research endeavours of architects and artists — where does the research take place? Does the architectural or artistic laboratory share with those from the natural sciences its status as privileged space for knowledge, and if so, how is this reflected in the physical form of these laboratories? And how does this translate to research more geared towards field work, where entire cities could be taken as laboratories? More generally, what are the institutional settings for these investigations? On a yet more theoretical level, the epistemological setting comes to the fore: under what conditions is the investigation considered to have produced valid knowledge?

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Organisers

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Filip Mattens (Faculty of Architecture, KU Leuven)
Stéphane Symons (Institute for Philosophy, KU Leuven)
Janno Martens (Faculty of Architecture, KU Leuven)

Location

KU Leuven, Faculty of Architecture, NYhub / Flanders House
New York Times Tower, 38th floor
242 West 41st Street, New York, NY 10036

Submissions

Submissions to the call may be sent to Janno Martens: janno.martens@kuleuven.be
Deadline: 1 March 2020