

# ‘THE GREAT REPAIR’

# AT

Review  
by Sue Spaid

# AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE, BERLIN

In taking visitors on a journey through recent practices in making and unmaking, ‘The Great Repair’ marries the human need to create things (whether needed or not) to resource extraction, designers’ concerted efforts to counter obsolescence and users’ strategies to get creations to endure. This transdisciplinary exhibition assembles 40 ‘positions’ comprised of archives, documents and collections indicative of damage (trauma) and repair (healing) from the perspective of multiple research fields: materials science, architecture, sociology, history, economics and ecology.

‘The Great Repair’ treats the lifecycle of man-made things, whose lives span resource extraction to fabrication and beyond, as inherently traumatic. Since things are always at risk of falling apart, if not being destroyed, we devise strategies to extend their lives. This exhibition suggests that only the policy of degrowth can heal this trauma. It goes without saying that if we conserved land and water, consumed fewer resources and produced fewer consumer goods, far fewer repairs would be in order.

The exhibition actually begins in the stairwell, where one discovers the results of a scientific analysis of the building’s concrete walls and floors, which date from 1960. During the building’s 2009–2012 renovation, its concrete structure was determined to be in good condition, despite its age. We soon learn that in two decades the mass of concrete on Earth will outweigh its biomass. Moreover, the manufacturing of cement accounts for 8 percent of the world’s annual carbon dioxide emissions — reason enough to insist upon the development of alternative building materials, as well as the undamming of rivers at risk of climate change-induced flooding.

Sociologically speaking, many of the works here address what US artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles terms ‘maintenance’, a fact of life necessitating cleaning supplies, specialised tools, time management skills and care aesthetics. Adjacent to Ukeles’ *Maintenance Art Manifesto!* (1969) and *Touch Sanitation* (1977–1980) project for which she shook hands with and thanked 8,500 NYC sanitation workers, we encounter a tightly-packed, towering shelf of cleaning supplies. Nearby is Edit’s gorgeous, Prussian-blue vacuum cleaner (2019), to which three hoses are affixed, enabling workers to vacuum collectively, covering three times as much ground at a time. Michael Wolf presents doz-

ens of photographs from his *Informal Solutions* series of mops, gloves, hoses and washcloths propped up on buckets, windows and chairs occupying Hong Kong alleyways.

‘The Great Repair’ aims to surmount the ‘nothing lasts forever’ attitude. Given this anxious feature of our everyday lives, this exhibition surveys the ways we human beings, mere mortals ourselves, have coped across millennia. Wolf’s unique *Bastard Chairs*, which he assembled while travelling across China, exemplify improvisation as he cobbled together parts scrapped from worn-out things to create functional furniture. A free-standing, cylindrical rice-paper display captures the hard-won efforts of Japanese architects Fuminori Nousaku and Mio Tsuneyama to resist ‘architecture as a disposable commodity’. Largely relying on their own labour and recycled materials, they’ve been actively restoring a thirty-year-old, four-story building since 2017, all the while living and working inside.

Without local materials, there would be no vernacular architecture. Various cladding materials and concrete aggregates are on display here, alongside trowels and rollers used to ensure smooth surfaces. Hidden amidst this display, one discovers Swiss engineer Heinz Isler’s experiments with letting concrete roofs become ponds, replete with algae, lichens, mosses, grasses and eventually small trees. As a result of these experiments, he fabricated Méret Oppenheim’s beloved living sculpture, *Fountain* (1983–present) in Bern, Switzerland. Across the room, one notices a peculiar hanging object, a tapestry comprised of hundreds of colourful slides (perhaps originally pedagogical aids) featuring numerous colourful, cement-clad buildings. A delightful tabletop display of moulded paper packing materials mimics the mud and wood-frame structures familiar to African, South-west American and Arabian architecture.

Without available land, building would be impossible. But who has the rights to a territory and who is the land’s beneficiary? Suspended by colourful *chumbe* belts, each indicating the location of *Inga cabildos* (community councils), the artwork *Awasaka Alpa woven territory* remaps the Inga people’s complex web of intertribal relationships, now erased by colonisation. Plantain leaf fibres delineate river boundaries, while *Iraka* palm fibres indicate rivers and *chakira* beads mark the Inga territory’s



Installation view ‘The Great Repair’, 2023–2024, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, foreground: MATERIAL CULTURES, Paludiculture Construction Fragments, 2023; background: ASSEMBLE, Methods of Assembly, 2020–present, © photo David von Becker

cities and towns within Columbia. Since Israeli soldiers regularly remove *faza3as* [sic — Arabizi for scarecrows], farmers have come to depend on *Sonic Faza3a* (2022), acoustic scarecrows that deter boars, yet attract animals that turn the soil in search of edibles. In this context, Agnes Denes’ *Wheatfield — A Confrontation* (1982) distinguishes wheat’s invaluable role as subsistence from its use as a global financial instrument. Nearby, Hans Hortic and Tang Wei’s video *In the Shadow of the Palms* (2023) documents the transformation (since 2020) of a monocultural palm plantation in Ulu Tiram, Malaysia using ‘syntropic agroforestry’, a technique that combines ecological remediation with the cultivation of various cash crops. In a project exemplary of social planning, 20 female Palestinians living in Ein Qiniya on the West Bank drew up detailed ‘master plans’, incorporating their dreams for social infrastructure, public space and environmental justice. Members of the agency *autonôma*, founded by activist architect Paolo Tavares, worked with members of the *Xervante* community to create and erect signs demarcating protected Indigenous land.

Without available clean water, land lies fallow. Marjetica Potrč created two elaborate ‘tree of life’ wall drawings, each featuring a series of ten smaller framed drawings focused on legalising river rights, in particular Slovenia’s Soča River (2021) and Australia’s Lachlan River (2022). For these, the artist collaborated with Wiradjuri elder and river custodian Ray Woods. Extending legal rights to natural entities shifts inhabitant attitudes from users to guardians, proactively protecting such entities from exploitation. To protest the disposal of waste in Guatemala’s Lake Atitlán, Manuel Chavajay co-led a protest with Tz’utujil women, who balanced reed baskets filled with trash and plastic waste on their heads, and men, who carried nets similarly filled with garbage, which they dumped in front of the Chamber of Industry and Congress in Guatemala City.

Without ecological thinking, resources are wasted. A free-standing solar garden built from repurposed materials by Tokyo’s Atelier Bow-Wow connects two galleries by granting visitors passage across the roof garden, ordinarily off limits in winter.



Installation view ‘The Great Repair’, 2023–2024, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, foreground: FOLKE KÖBERLING & MARTIN KALTWASSER, *Car4*, 2013; background: CHRISTINE JIAYI CHEN / KRISTINA SHATOKHINA / WILHELM GARDELEONE, *After Parking*, 2023, © photo David von Becker





Installation view 'The Great Repair', 2023-2024, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, © photo David von Becker

Material Cultures proposes 'paludiculture', whose bio-based materials grow in wetlands. Architect Charlotte Malterre-Barthes' pandemic-era thought experiment asked architects and planners to envision temporarily halting construction, especially digging, which causes soil erosion and flooding. In 2022, architectural historian Alexander Stumm called for a moratorium on demolition, which found broad support among several German architectural and biological societies. Construction, operation and demolition of buildings in Germany account for some 40 percent of all the nation's greenhouse emissions, while construction consumes 70 percent of all raw materials, and demolition generates 55 percent of all waste.

Without the scars, there is no proof of repair. 'The Great Repair' advocates avoiding erasure, lest the damage be forgotten. Bas Princen's prints assemble images of fragments salvaged from Giotto and Cimabue frescoes destroyed during a 1997 earthquake. London-based Forensic Architecture has compiled thousands of photographs, videos and social media posts, as well as conducted dozens of hours of interviews in order to assess whether a Russian missile that hit a theatre sheltering thousands of refugees in 2022 constitutes a war crime.

Without cooperation, we cannot repair collectively. Finally, we encounter architecture's new frontier: collective charrettes, regenerative architecture and ultimately degrowth. *With Balls for All* (2019), five participants actively dismantle the

hierarchical structures of design studios by jointly achieving game goals. Pritzker winners Lacaton & Vassal regularly demonstrate that what's needed most is not new buildings, but regular maintenance of existing buildings and public spaces. Similarly, ZAS (Zurich Working Group for Urban Planning), a collective of around 20 young architects, working in conjunction with local architects, politicians and citizens, developed alternative uses for Triemli Towers, three 15-story buildings containing 750 rooms. The towers were slated for demolition in 2003, yet they still stand. The digital archive Limbo Accra collects images of unfinished buildings scattered across the African continent in hopes of publicising their availability and potential utility.

Although 'The Great Repair' proffers no shortage of interesting strategies for making do (healing) with what we humans have left unmade (trauma), I imagine some visitors finding this survey of 'regenerative architecture' a bit tedious. In fact, it is the polar opposite of the spate of post-millennial surveys publicising starchitects' glossy, high-dollar edifices posing as public attractions. If the 'positions' explored here highlight architecture's future, then our future shines bright, though it will require far more imagination and collective thinking than ever before.

'The Great Repair,' Akademie der Künste, Berlin from 14 October 2023 to 14 January 2024