



Curating as form of criticism?

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Much ink has been spilled over the first Chicago Architecture Biennial (CAB)¹. We know that the exhibition, taking place at the very hearth of United States' modernity, was curated by art directors Joseph Grima and Sarah Herda. We were also told that the CAB, the first event of the genre to be grounded in North American soil, was strongly supported by Chicago's mayor, Rahm Emanuel, and sponsored by "supermajor" oil and gas company BP (former British Petroleum). While some praised the show for being the emergence of a new generation that understands the great agency of architecture, others, condemned it for its lack of clarity and the weight of its venue. Yet one question remains: What is (or what should be) the role of such an event within today's architectural discourse?

In response to the question raised by this issue of *Viceversa* dedicated to the "critiques of architectures", I would like, not to offer yet another general critique of the CAB, but rather to ask the following question: Can Architecture Biennials and Triennials act as a form of discourse and criticism, beyond and above the presentation or representation of specific works by selected architects? In other words, can large-scale architecture exhibitions be more than just engine of legitimization, offering a tribune to architects, the majority of which are already part of a system that too often repeats itself? Moved by a common attempt to be more than mere vitrines, it looks like the Architecture Biennials and Triennials of the last few years (Venice but also Lisbon, Oslo, Shenzhen and now Chicago) are facing an identity crisis. Should they be, as suggested by Rem Koolhaas in 2014, research based events

oriented towards a form of knowledge production? Or should they, like at the 2013 Lisbon Triennial, go out in the street and question architecture's agency in contemporary cities? Should they lead to concrete urban transformation and act as launching platforms for cities that seek to renew themselves? Or should they address hot topics and thus contribute to offer insightful reflections on society, transforming the architect in an intellectual that raises awareness on the problems of the world, and even, maybe proposes solutions? At a moment in which architecture exhibitions, and more particularly large-scale periodic events, are booming it is important to reflect on the role of these events within the larger architecture culture.

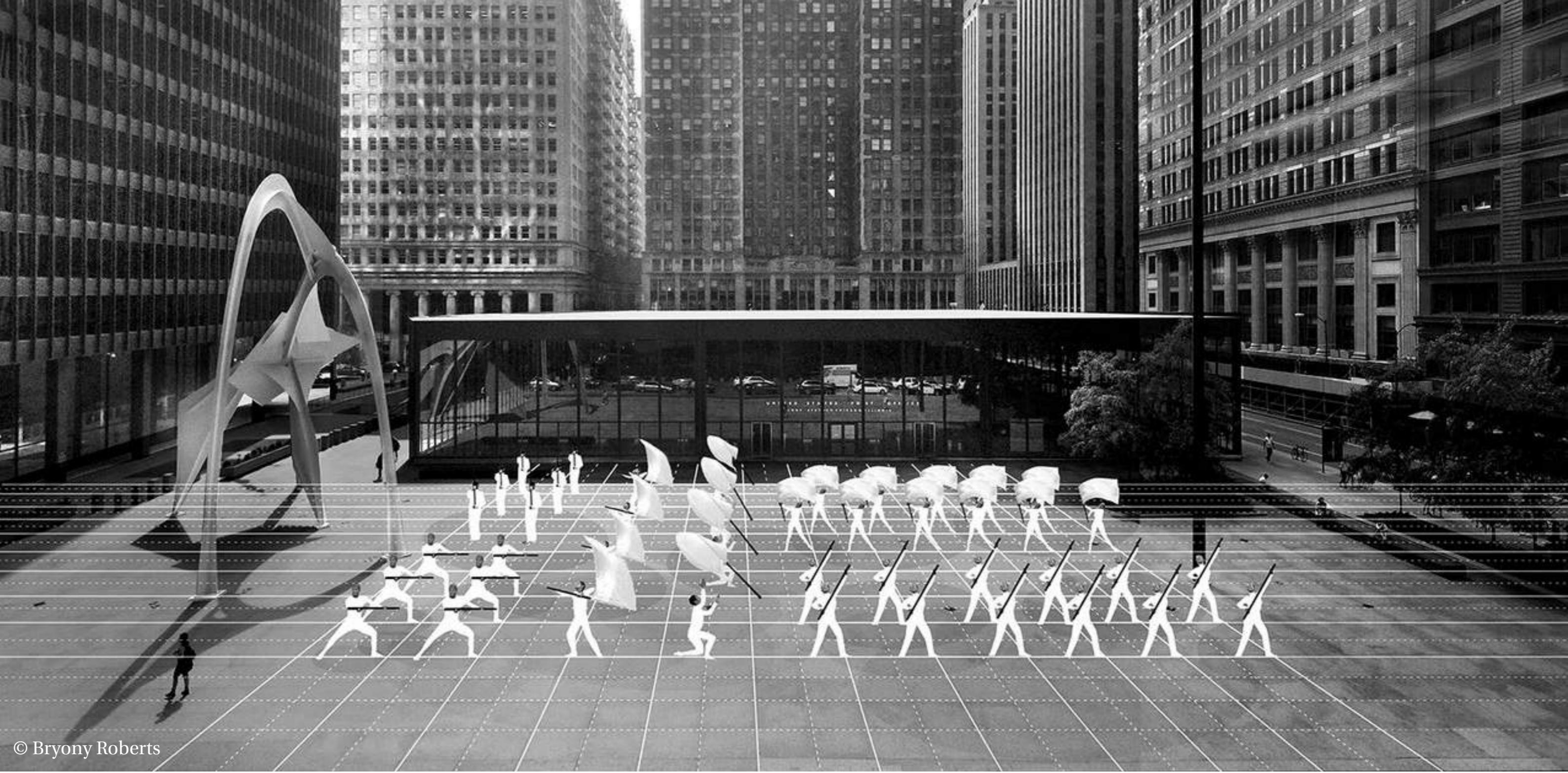
Mapping the current state of architectural criticism, the issue 81 of OASE — *Constructing Criticism* — published in 2010, suggested that criticism is an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, an activity that entails both the judgment of what is genuine and valuable and mediating between avant-garde and a wider audience that is often reluctant to accept the new. Likewise, in *Does Architecture Criticism Matter?*², a text published in the April 2014 edition of Domus, architectural historian Joseph Rykwert was questioning the role of architectural criticism in the era of starchitecture. «I have always believed that the critic must be a fighter», wrote Rykwert. «To do so, they must of course have a base from which to operate — not only the obvious one of a newspaper, periodical, radio or television program or even a blog — that will make their views public, but they must, more intimately, have a clearly articulated notion of what they think society must expect of its builders». These references offer valuable insight when assessing the role of the CAB and other similar events.

Titled *The State of the Art of Architecture* — in reference to a 1977 homonym event organized by Stanley Tigerman for the Graham Foundation — the first CAB did not propose a single theme or problematic, but rather wanted to feel a generation while becoming 'a platform for groundbreaking architectural projects and spatial experiments that demonstrate how creativity and innovation can radically trans-

form our lived experience.'³ As explained by Tigerman himself (today aged 85), whilst the 1977 event presented nothing but Anglo-Americans white males, the 2015 exhibition was global — including architects from various backgrounds and origins spanning five continents — with one third of the participants being women⁴. This global and highly inclusive twist, together with the fact that, during the days of its inauguration, the CAB was at the center of architecture's media world attention — not only discussed at dinner parties and in architectural blogs and magazines, but also in daily newspapers such as The Guardian, LA Times or, of course, The Chicago Tribune — suggests that the event is definitely an architectural project of its own, paradigmatic of our time.

The exhibition took place in the lavish Chicago Cultural Center, a space which presence is at the antipodes of the white cube. There, a collection of objects and projects offered an overview of pressing global issues. As rightfully written by Rob Wilson for Uncube, it was «a fascinating collection of snapshots but remains a collection non the less, too diffuse to be saying anything despite attempting to tick all boxes from the pragmatic to the fantastical»⁵. And if the collection remains scattered, its overall meaning hard to grasp, as many critics have implied, the most impressive part of this first CAB were the few live performances that took place during the opening days. One in particular: *We Know How to Order* conceived by architect Bryony Roberts, choreographed by Asher Waldron and performed by the South Shore Drill Team, offered a glimpse into the power of Architecture Biennials as form of criticism.

We Know How to Order was ephemeral — only performed a few times during the opening days of the CAB in front of Mies Van der Rohe's Federal Center — yet it will survive thanks to the countless snapshot that circulated the net and, more importantly so thanks to the official video shot by Andy Resek⁶. Robert's site-specific project was a way of ordering bodies in the contemporary cities by performing high-energy drill routines infused with street choreography. Playing on the



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idea of the grid — the 4'-8" module that governs the architecture of the Federal Center and that of the South Shore Drill Team Routine that «transform conventional military drills into expressive fusions of street moves, flag tossing and rifle spinning»⁷ — *We Know How To Order* «superimposes multiple systems of order onto each other — street choreography onto precision drills onto the Federal Center»⁸. It also refers to the history of Chicago, more particularly addressing racial issues.

With *We Know How To Order* it seems that the CAB achieve something more: it truly and significantly (albeit very briefly) entered in dialogue with the city of Chicago and its inhabitants, bridging ideas (theory) with some of Chicago's greater architectural masterpiece (practice), while mediating a form of judgment. The performance caught the attention of a large number of passer by whom, for a moment, directed their distracted gaze towards one of Chicago's greatest piece of architecture and urban public space. In this sense, it called «attention to

the accessibility of public space in the U.S. — how architectural systems alongside social expectations influence the occupation of common space»⁹.

If, as notoriously declared by Bernard Tschumi in the 1970s, there is no architecture without event, without action or activity, today, we could say that there is no criticism without exhibitions. In fact, exhibitions, with their complex apparatus comprised of catalogues, press release, and online media presence and collateral events may allow a “shock” and a cross-programming and non-conventional occupation of space that no doubts attracts more attention than any other traditional channel of judgment and knowledge production within architecture culture. Yet, it is when taking a strong and uncompromising position that exhibitions better achieve a critical act of some sort. Otherwise, they remain mere communicative platform promoting individual talents in a system that may soon enough exhaust itself.

1. The State of the Art of Architecture, first Chicago Architecture Biennial, October 3, 2015 to January 3, 2016. <http://chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org>
2. http://www.domusweb.it/en/op-ed/2014/05/21/does_architecturecriticism-matter.html
3. Press release – Announcing the title of the inaugural Chicago Architecture Biennial, *October 31, 2014*. <http://chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org/about/press/press-releases/announcing-the-title-of-the-inaugural-chicago-architecture-biennial/>. Accessed on October 24, 2015.
4. Tigerman / *The State of the Art of Architecture: 2015 vs. 1977* published in Newcity design blog - Chicago Architect, the magazine of the American Institute of Architects Chicago Chapter. The September/October 2015 issue of Chicago Architect is dedicated to the Chicago Architecture Biennial
5. Rob Wilson, *From Agency to Urgency : Experiments in the Possible at the First Chicago Architecture Biennial*, Uncube Blog, 8 October 2015, <http://www.uncube-magazine.com/blog/16131615>, [accessed November 8, 2015].
6. <http://vimeo.com/141231941>
7. Bryony Roberts on the official Chicago Architecture Biennial guidebook <http://chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org/public-program/calendar/we-know-how-to-order/>[accessed November 8, 2015].
8. *Idem.*
9. *Idem.*