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Ian Kiaer

BY RAHMA KHAZAM



Ian Kiaer, *a.r. salle des études* (A.R. Model Room), 2013, installation view

In the catalogue accompanying Ian Kiaer's exhibition at Vassivière, philosopher Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield suggests that the conditioning power of the architecture of a gallery can be minimized by the art works exhibited within it. This was the objective Kiaer set himself when he installed his show in the iconic art centre, which was designed in the late 1980s by neo-rationalist architect Aldo Rossi in collaboration with François-Xavier Fabre. Kiaer deployed his works in the centre's five spaces, corresponding to Rossi's concept of the different stages in the making of an art work, from genesis to display. Responding to the Italian architect's views not only on architecture but also on art, Kiaer questioned the function of each space.

Take the first of the art centre's two buildings – a tower that Rossi built to promote observation and reflection – in contrast to the long, flat building next to it containing the remaining spaces, a workshop and three rooms for presentation

and display. The tower's conical shape testifies to Rossi's interest in the visionary 18th-century architects Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Étienne-Louis Boullée, both of whom made use of pure geometric forms. Accordingly, Kiaer's response to Rossi's tower, *a.r. tour* (A.R. Tower, all works 2013), featured a tiny makeshift spherical model that drifted aimlessly on Vassivière Lake, underscoring the fragility and absurdity of the works to which it referred – namely Ledoux's unrealized project for a windowless sphere and Rossi's Teatro del Mondo – a brightly coloured floating theatre built for the 1979 Venice Biennale. Meanwhile, a surveillance camera projected the model's image onto the tower's inner wall, materializing the encounter between the two architects through the juxtaposition of the pure geometric forms of the sphere and the cone. By monitoring the movements of a model, Kiaer undermined the panoptical principle manifested in such buildings as Ledoux's Royal Saltworks and, for that matter, the art centre itself, the high interior windows of which afford the viewer discreet glimpses of the artist labouring below.

In the main exhibition space, Kiaer created an installation that subjected Rossi's architecture to further critique. Countering Rossi's desire to provide maximum visibility, he covered the windows and reduced the electric lighting. He furthermore exhibited only a few mundane objects, as opposed to the monumental works Rossi most likely had in mind when he designed the space. Grouped together under the title *a.r. nef* (A.R. Nave), these items included a sheet of plastic bearing an imprint of the parquet of the artist's London studio – a personalized object that counteracted the impersonal grandeur of the space – and a large, transparent inflatable that had both an artistic and an architectural function: while recalling the short-lived Utopian promise of the 1960s and '70s inflatable architecture trend, it also served as a reminder that art need not be monumental but can be insignificant, light and even immaterial.

Kiaer's approach was not always antithetical to Rossi's. In the basement, originally designated as a workshop, Kiaer showed examples of found works in progress, from incomplete models of the art centre to archival images of its construction, echoing the function of the space. Furthermore, Kiaer's view of architectural models as opening up a crucial space for reflection and experimentation concurred with Rossi's idea for the function of the tower.

More than just a response to Rossi's concepts, the exhibition also highlighted

Kiaer's own ideas about art. The installation in the model room upstairs included several accidentally creased sheets of white paper hanging on the wall – an allusion not only to the monochrome and the Readymade, but also to the jettisoning of virtuosity and know-how in art. For Kiaer, this element of his installation referenced Thierry de Duve's remarks that both aforementioned genres signal the denial of the artist's hand, implying the death of representation.

Kiaer dealt representation a no less deadly blow in *a.r. petit théâtre* (A.R. Small Theatre), an assemblage of mute objects that contravened the function of the small theatre intended for discussions and meetings with artists. Below a tiny window offering a tantalizing glimpse over the lake, Kiaer hung his own painting of the same scene, assigning it an inferior position due to its inability to represent nature. The two blank sheets hung on the back wall also seemed to underline the impossibility of this task: the traces of dust and humidity that had collected in their upper portions evoked hazy outlines and soft shadows, but not a landscape as such. Haunted by debunked architectural visions and the end of representation, Kiaer's compelling showdown between art and architecture left neither discipline unscathed.

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