

The Lacunary Archives of Wesley Meuris

Denis Briand

“And so I found myself actually in the Holy of Holies of the library. I had the impression, I assure you, of being inside a skull. There was nothing around me but shelves with their cells of books, everywhere ladders to climb, and nothing on the desks and tables but catalogues and bibliographies, all the quintessence of knowledge, nowhere a proper book you could read, only books about books.”¹

In Depth

In Robert Musil’s novel, *The Man Without Quality*, General Stumm describes to Ulrich his visit to the Imperial Library of Cacanie, accompanied by an eccentric librarian who takes him into the catalogue room, which was normally out of bounds to the uninitiated. Overwhelmed by the sense of the place, Stumm thinks he is approaching the fount of all knowledge, but at the same time he measures the infinite character of his own fitness. This creates in him a vertigo even more intense than admiration, as if there were in all those “books about books” the secret of all those in the library and the esoteric plan of their organisation.

A similar vertigo could overtake us before Wesley Meuris’ installation *The World’s Most Important Artists*,² a title that seems to resonate with fundamental works in the history of art. The collection of information presented is subject to an ordered layout whose apparent rigour the visitor may initially find disconcerting. Explicitly organised according to the model of archive architecture, the installation divides the space in two with a long glass wall. On one side, a narrow passage runs in front of the glass, giving access to the outside of the filing space. On the other side, are six long grey blocks aligned in a large white room, with sixty drawers on each of their longest sides. In total, six hundred and sixty identical drawers lined up in this collection of grey columns looking exactly like ordinary filing cabinets. In the centre of the glass partition an opening gives access to the space occupied by these volumes. The area is simply lit by rows of neon lights hanging below the roof, lined up with the cabinets. However, in reality the drawers are just surfaces on the sides of the “cabinets” and do not offer any real storage capacity. Consequently, any attempt to use them is foiled by their failure to open and the drawers remain

¹ Robert Musil, “L’Homme sans qualité,” translated into French by Philippe Jacottet, new edition, Vol 1, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2004, p. 517. (English title “The Man Without Qualities.”)

² In his first solo exhibition in France, Wesley Meuris created an installation specifically for the space in the gallery Art & Essai at the University of Rennes 2: *THE WORLD’S MOST IMPORTANT ARTISTS A data collection which explores the artist’s life in depth*, 30 April to 12 June 2009 (media: paint, glass, neon lights, metal handles, paper.)

stubbornly closed. They have no other material existence but the relief of their façade and the presence of the handles; similar to images of drawers, they flaunt a repetitive identity on both sides of this sculptured furniture. The only tangible difference is the reference label on which a standardised code specific to each drawer is written in letters and figures.³

In this new installation, a methodical organisation of data is supposed to materialise in the architectural space, an exhaustive classification of the “artist’s life”. But it uses an unusual system with the following logic: a chart with three lists corresponding to medium, type of inspiration and psychological state of the artist, makes it possible to prepare and organise documentary research which could then follow in the archive room. A slip, available at the entrance, permits the visitor to tick one box for each list on the chart to obtain a three section code referring to a specific drawer situated in one of the cabinets. For example, if one is interested in ceramics, inspired by the theme “satanical and sadism”, created by artists suffering from a stutter, one should look in drawer no 028–SAS-Y3 in order to consult the files on the artists concerned. If one would prefer to carry out research in the category “painting” with inspiration linked to “personal myth” and directed towards “sense of worth”, the research will then take place in drawer 044-PMY-Q3. These two examples reveal the nature of Wesley Meuris’ relationship with the business of classification. A certain wit regularly undermines with the absurd the apparent megalomania of the project.⁴

If the collection of supposed archives preserved in the filing cabinets gives hope of possible exploratory work, research in this or that drawer cannot, however, take place. No matter what code is obtained by combining the three lists on the chart, research will lead to nothing concrete and the promises of this collection of precious information on “the world’s most important artists” will quickly disappoint. So, there is no actual content to be discovered in these fictitious archives, but a purely imaginary exploration can be undertaken from the cases in the chart, and a real spatial experience can be had in the constructed space. The grey colour of the filing cabinets, the rigour of their construction, the geometry of their form and the clinical neon lighting, all these characteristics, precisely defined by the artist, plunge the area into an austere atmosphere, a reflection of the classification system which seems to submit the architecture as a whole to his authority. As if what were preserved here, and the assumed correlated activities, were demanding a cold and impersonal environment to suit the rigour of the filing system. Before the void which the installation creates we would, after a fashion, be obliged to *see* the architecture⁵ and for that the plastic dimension is no stranger to its qualitative perception.

The installation virtually takes possession of the architecture and completely reconfigures it. From this point of view, the long, transparent separating wall represents a new use of glass walls in the work of

³ The principle of this installation is closely related to another work by Wesley Meuris entitled *Botanical World Archive* (2007), consisting of four tall, double shelf units associated with a drawing in perspective schematizing the spatial organisation of the botanical classification of this device, whose shelves remain, however, completely empty of all content. It would be possible to see there a reference to the field of knowledge in which the first taxonomy businesses were developed and the first catalogues produced.

⁴ The heading on the research request slip available at the entrance says “Our archives allow you to explore the life of the artist in depth with rapid and well-designed research facilities,” and a note at the bottom of the page gives all the necessary “guarantees” on this vast, utopian system for the classification of art, pointing out that “Fundamental methods of conservation are employed.” This is just one of the many details that contribute to the fiction of the collection.

⁵ Lieven Van Den Abeele, “Une architecture à ‘voir’ – Les sculptures architecturales de Wesley Meuris”, Septentrion. *Arts, Lettres et Culture de Flandre et des Pays-Bas*, Rekenen, Stichting Ons Erfdeel, n° 4, 2008, p. 5.

Wesley Meuris, whose *Zoological Classification* constituted a significant step. This series of sculptures and installations presented life-sized animal cages, where the conception takes account of all the characteristics of the animal's natural life, adapted to artificial spaces.⁶ Taking inspiration from conservation and display practices in natural surroundings, *Zoological Classification* showcased the contradictory device of the zoo, obliged to look after the vital needs of the captive animals and, at the same time, constrained to make a spectacular display of them. If the history of the zoo has really led to a specific form of show,⁷ the constraining power of the glass cage finds its legitimacy in the desire for knowledge and its humanistic intentions. Without being peremptory, this series reflected the ambiguity of the project, and the glass case fulfilled the double function of show case and exhibition material, creating a frontier between the spectator's external space and the enclosed world of the cages, which, however, were always resolutely devoid of occupants.

The glass wall separating the space of *The World's Most Important Artists* is clearly less constraining than that of the zoological cages, but its reflective qualities further extend the artist's sculptural vocabulary. Because of its configuration – a right angled recess frames the entrance to the installation itself – the glass partition creates endless play of mirrors and reflections. We know how much the use of glazed surfaces characterises a distinctive direction in the architecture of the twentieth century, with architectural modern buildings regularly showing a fascination with glass cladding and its effects. Reflective exterior surfaces on buildings thus reverse the visual process which returns on-lookers “to the origin of its source: the spectator.”⁸ The glass fulfils a similar function in Meuris's sculpture. It both underlines and reveals the “place” of the spectator and probably makes it one of the principal subjects of his work. The numerous diffractions produced by the mirror effects of the glass partition here compromise the boundless ambition of the project to create an archive of *The World's Most Important Artists*, by focussing attention on another dimension of the installation. The reflections of multiple, interlocking spaces transform themselves as one moves, so one could almost come to doubt what one sees, as the sculptural cabinets seem to multiply to infinity beyond the wall, or another room seems to exist symmetrically on the other side of the glass. Does the spatial illusion relate to the void which is substituted for the promised contents of the collection of information? A symbol of illusion, as immaterial as a film projection, here the window, by reason of its mirror images and deceptive effects, promises much and “delivers so little”.⁹ This is not the least disconcerting aspect of the project and the in-depth exploration which it guarantees does not seem to operate in the expected place.

⁶ *Zoological Classification*, created between 2005 and 2007; cf. “Wesley Meuris, Artificially Deconstructed,” Antwerp, Annie Gentils Gallery, 2007.

⁷ Cf. Olivier Razac, *L'écran et le zoo, Spectacle et domestication, des expositions coloniales à Loft Story*, Paris, Éditions Denoël, Collections Essais, 2002, p. 82.

⁸ Marc Perelman, “Le stade du verre de l'architecture moderne comme transformateur du moi”, in: Dan Graham, Paris, Éditions Dis Voir, 1995, p. 84.

⁹ Cf. Robert Smithson, “Ultramoderne”, (Arts Magazine, September-October 1967), in: “The Writings of Robert Smithson,” Edited by Nancy Holt, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 50.

From the Collection to Standardisation

*“Instinct, tentative progress, empiricism are replaced by scientific principles of analysis, organisation and classification.”*¹⁰

With regard to the work of Wesley Meuris, one thinks regularly of the tradition of the early collections of Ferrante Imperato, Francesco Calceolari, or Ole Worm in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, probably because he appears to share with them a practice of scene setting and articulation of heterogeneous realities in the same space.¹¹ We also find a catalogue tradition and its analogical relationship with the organising vocation of the architecture of cabinets of curiosities, even a fascination with the totalising project of these collections. However, the fundamental difference between this tradition and Meuris’ work applies precisely in the “modernist” project summarised thus by Marcel Breuer: “The new space must not be a self-portrait of the architect, nor directly reflect the personality of whoever lives there.”¹² In fact, the world represented in the works of Wesley Meuris reflects more the normalisation, rationalisation and impersonality of a certain kind of functionalism, than a nostalgic exploration of the world of Wunderkammer. The structure of the installation *The World’s Most Important Artists*, the organisation of its space, the nature of the “furniture” housed within it and the codified classification system it depicts, undeniably reflect an order of reality which was launched at the beginning of the twentieth century in industrialised, western societies. This new *idea* also affected work places in offices, filing places in administration, even domestic environments in a new concept of the house. All these places, by a general standardising process, were being subjected little by little to a rational model, according to a “scientific” concept of organisation, which was also implicitly a project of an ideal society. What was put in order began with the architecture of the surroundings of everyday life, and went on to aim for extension to a city scale, as Walter Gropius wrote in 1935: “The repetition of standardised elements and the use of identical materials in different buildings will have the same effect of co-ordination and sobriety on the appearance of our towns as the uniformity of modern dress has had on social life.”¹³ This ideal of the standard, supported by many architects and “modern” artists, has no doubt undergone a critical re-reading by Wesley Meuris. In fact, several of his works, and particularly the installation described here, hinge on a system of classification of information whose structure and form are unlikely before the era of the normalisation of things and the rationalisation of work.¹⁴ But the

¹⁰ Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, “Après le Cubisme”, (first edition: Éditions des Commentaires, Paris, 1918), Paris, Éditions Altamira, 1999, p. 44.

¹¹ Cf. Key Portilla-Kawamura, *Cabinet / cage / stage*, in: “Wesley Meuris, Artificially Deconstructed,” Antwerp, Annie Gentils Gallery, 2007, pp. 22-23. The filing cabinets in the installation referred to here, are reminiscent of the cabinets in the Levin Vincent collection, *Wondertooneel der Nature* (The theatre of the wonders of nature), published in Amsterdam in 1706.

¹² Marcel Breuer, “Metallmöbel und moderne Räumlichkeit” (1928), Bauhaus, 1919-1969, Paris, musée national d’Art moderne (National museum of modern art,) musée d’art Moderne de la ville de Paris (Paris museum of modern art,) 1969, p. 117.

¹³ Walter Gropius, “La nouvelle architecture et le Bauhaus” (1935, *Apollo in the Democracy*), in: “La nouvelle architecture et le Bauhaus,” Brussels, Éditions La Connaissance, 1969, p. 110.

¹⁴ From the administrative building of the Larkin Company to “*The Decorative Art of Today*” by Le Corbusier, one could make a “genealogy” of spaces in which this ideal organisation of work extends to the field of architecture and is not far from defining the same project for the whole of society. Wesley Meuris has moreover gathered important documentation on this type of place in preparation for his exhibition at the gallery Art & Essai. (Administrative building of the Larkin Company, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, Buffalo, New York, 1903-1905; Le Corbusier, “L’art décoratif d’aujourd’hui,” Paris, Éditions G. Grès et Cie, 1925). (English title: “The Decorative Arts of Today”.)

critical point of view is not, however, effusive, and in the image of the works, the artistic discourse is often more complex than a simple denunciation of the constraints with which the progressive and efficient putting in order of the world weighs upon us. There is no better way to summarise the intention behind the installation *The World's Most Important Artists* than by Le Corbusier's formula: "It became apparent that, in the rigorous order required by business, it was necessary to classify classification itself."¹⁵

Nothing but Books about Books

*"I have here for you, General, a bibliography of bibliographies [...], in other words, an alphabetical list of the alphabetical lists of the titles of all the books and other works. . . "*¹⁶

The collection of "information" archived in the cabinets with drawers, which one could easily imagine filled with files, could recall the objects and emblematic formulae of conceptual art. But the abandoning of all content and the likely frustration that it causes, reflect the nature of the work, which strives to formulate a "project" of rationalisation, where completion of the project is always put back as it is in a constant state of development, rather than a definitive and authoritarian point of view on art. Information about information! Here without doubt is the real work of Meuris, and the information remains unlikely, as if all interest in its positivity risked compromising the ambition of exhaustiveness of the project. Did the librarian not put General Stumm on his guard? "Anyone who puts his nose in the contents is lost to the library," since then he will never "be able to see it as a whole!"¹⁷

If the "architectural sculptures" of Wesley Meuris invite us to look in the void,¹⁸ as Lieven Van Den Abeele suggests, this book also confronts us with a kind of vacuity.¹⁹

On this point, both book and installation operate on a common perspective. Thus the book complements the sculptural plan by promising it another form of existence. A hybrid formula between exhibition catalogue and art book, it becomes the site of a re-working of the artistic and conceptual elements of the installation according to the specific parameters of the printed document (graphic conception, production, publishing, distribution.) It uses a rigorous presentation that conforms to that of the sculptural work and the dominant shades of grey characterising the illustrations revisit on the printed page the chromatic ambiance of the space created by the installation²⁰. The status of the drawings and pictures presented oscillates between documentation and representation of a fictitious place which could never have existed anywhere but in a book.

¹⁵ Le Corbusier, "L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui", Paris, Les Éditions Arthaud, 1980, p. 77-78 footnote. (English title: "The Decorative Art of Today".)

¹⁶ Robert Musil, op. cit., p. 517.

¹⁷ Robert Musil, *L'Homme sans qualité*, translation Philippe Jacotet, tome 1, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1956, p. 549. (English title "The Man Without Qualities".)

¹⁸ Lieven Van Den Abeele, op. cit.

¹⁹ In the works of Wesley Meuris, we always wonder what we are really being shown. A large installation in the series *Zoological Classification: The Incredible Nightlife in the Tropical Forest* (2007), recreated the environment of nocturnal animals in the tropical forest. This installation took a whole month to construct for three days on exhibition, and was plunged in near darkness, with a level of light that was barely visible to the human eye.

²⁰ The photographs of Hervé Beurel convey this perfectly.

The fictitious dimension of *The World's Most Important Artists* is here reinvested in a publication, with all the appearance of a scientific document. It presents to the exhibition-going public all the contemporary practical and scientific tools for the objectivisation of the collection of archives. If the book is an installation within an installation, with the addition of a new range of information which it is presumed to be protecting, it is itself no more than a system of unadulterated authority, a kind of availability equally devoid of all content.

From an initial rational presentation the book claims to objectify the facts which only a science of indices would, however, seem to have any interest in. It analyses and puts in diagrammatic form the interactions between the "collection" of information and the external factors determining its use. The double page of the chart "*Search Activity*" is quite giddy in this respect, reintroducing into the book the implicit conceptual version inscribed in the installation. The diagram retraces research activities in the collection over the course of several specific days. Twenty five *Specific days* are thus defined and put in Y-axis, with every one of the twenty four hours of the day represented by an abscissa. The six hundred intersections of these two axes indicate by a different intensity of colour the percentage of activity in figures, as is the number of drawers opened in an hour! We therefore discover that in the course of "wartimes day", for example, activity is nil apart from 1% - 2% from 10.00 am to noon and from 9.00 pm to midnight. A day of "the death of artist" will similarly be characterised by its distinctive feature. Activity is at its height at 82% between noon and 1.00 pm, with a frequency exceeding a thousand drawer openings an hour, and at 92% between 8.00 pm and 9.00 pm. The table also gives details for days when the temperature reached in excess of 35 degrees Celsius, for the shortest day of the year, and even for long weekends. Many of the events seem far removed from art but doubtless much less so than a certain efficiency of museum management of the contemporary world. Is it necessary from now on to make use of the new "system" developed in the book as a mirror of artistic life in which every aspect has become quantifiable? Once again, this autonomous, fictitious system of "expertise", which in the end is more important than the hypothetical collection of archives itself, could be the image of scientific approaches to art determinedly searching in incidental aspects for the reasons behind art works. An opportunity for the artist to produce images whose pictorial and graphic references could be sought in the areas of minimalist and serial art. An opportunity also for the reader (and the visitor to the installation) to find in the work a certain fascination for artistic practices connected with the idea of rationality. But here again all praise gives way to more fundamental doubts on their viewpoint. In Wesley's lists references to psychological states occur frequently, as is shown in his *Graph of Data on Mental States*. Retrospectively, the work seems to give rise to a question more worrying than his apparent plastic achievement would initially lead one to suspect. The graph mentioned above indicates, in some sixteen occurrences out of twenty six, delirious disorders, altered mental states or some other pathological disorder. All the possible characteristics of the condition of the artist and the psychological tendencies controlling him or her are shown. *Anhedonia* would be an emblematic term here, indicating a form of lack of pleasure, or more precisely an inability to feel pleasure. From now on one can wonder about the artistic person who might be lacking in pleasure and one finds out how much Wesley Meuris is interested in everything which gives rise to "unbalance" or raving. In other words, in everything which rational management has difficulty controlling. The chart *Risk Analysis*, also in this book, provides another example by drawing up a list of

the natural, technical, human and institutional risks threatening the preservation of archives! After all, many “rational” artistic practices may sometimes seem obsessional and without real potential, as if the rigour of their approach and the rules of their behaviour refer them to an artistic way of working “*which exceeds reason, which escapes all control.*”²¹ As if there were a lack of finality in finality itself. That is perhaps what “works” in depth in the work of Wesley Meuris, the exploration and scene setting of a certain way of following to the end the logic of the irrationality of the idea. This book provides a case in point. Attesting to the bankruptcy of a unified concept of the world, this complex and evolutionary work seems to describe reason itself. A reason which sometimes struggles to restrain and contain the irrational which is always present in our minds. And with regard to archiving the world, we can well understand how this project could never have been set up without gaps.

How would the Man without Quality’s librarian have coped, faced with the abyssal project of encompassing the whole collection of knowledge? Stumm reports: “Breathlessly, I asked him: ‘So, you never read any of the books?’ ‘Never. Only the catalogues.’ ”²²

²¹ From the work by Sol Lewitt: Rosalind Krauss, “Lewitt *in progress*”, (October, No. 6, autumn 1978), in: *L’originalité de l’avant-garde et autres mythes modernistes*, Paris, Éditions Macula, 1993, p. 342.

²² Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, p. 553.