

Conversation: 019  
With: Hans Werlemann, Claudi Cornaz  
By: Richard Hall  
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*Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)*

**Richard Hall** How did your engagement with OMA begin?

**Hans Werlemann** Kees (Christiaan) invited me to come and work with Rem (Koolhaas). I was already involved in architecture, as a photographer with the magazine *Utopia*—a small magazine at TU Delft, focused on skills that architects have beside architecture—as well as doing some work for a Dutch architect who was designing villas.

[Fork photograph – Hans Werlemann]

Kees asked me to show a picture to Rem. At that time, I was taking pictures for advertising. I gave Kees the picture I was currently busy with. He showed it to Rem and immediately they said, ‘Yes.’ It was for an advertising campaign about washing up liquid. For me, it was a very important picture, in all the lady’s magazines at the time.

La Villette was the first thing we did with OMA. There was the idea to make a model. We realised it would be really big, so it could only be done here, at our place. At the time, the OMA office was based at Boompjes.

That’s how it started for me. Very soon after, I invited Claudi to help me with all kinds of things. Everything was totally unexpected. It was a very exciting time.

**Claudi Cornaz** When we met, I was filming 8mm film. I had a helmet with hair on it, and a big metal rod with my camera hanging just in front of my eyes.

**HW** I saw this weird guy. He was on roller skates, zooming around filming. In fact, it was the first GoPro!

**CC** I’m the godfather of the camera helmet. Later, I made one for video that had the camera on the side of the helmet and a black-and-white monitor as a viewfinder in

front. I had a video transmitter so that everyone in the neighbourhood with a television set could watch what I’d been doing.

**RH** Why?

**CC** Because it’s so strange looking, people don’t realise that you’re being filmed anymore. It’s too weird, they lose their inhibitions and they’re spontaneous again. I started using a helmet because you could film the way you’re looking. With a tripod, you don’t get the same movement. I’ve been filming with the helmet ever since.

[Nederlands Dans Theater, model photograph via video monitor – OMA]

**HW** This is a picture that we took with Claudi.

**CC** Taken from a video monitor.

**HW** It was a white paper model of the Netherlands Dance Theatre. We made a machine that showed the colours on the monitor, then we photographed the screen.

*Improvisation*

**RH** Improvisation has been mentioned a few times recently. I wonder if it’s simply a matter of the technology available at the time when these projects were made, or whether it is prompted by OMA’s openness to these processes. Filming a model through a filter and then photographing the TV screen is clearly not standard practice.

**HW** Nothing was standard. We were there for days and nights. We worked all the time because it was so nice to do.

Rem has this strange habit of inspiring people. But he could really create tension too. He organised the office in teams and then—like a wasp—he went from team to team. He would come in the morning, divide his time across all these teams and then went running or swimming. Then,

he came back at night while everybody was developing things.

[ZKM, model photograph with image projection – OMA]

This is the machine that Claudi made for video projection.

**CC** For ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie). We made a screen on the facade, to show images with as few pixels as possible.

**HW** Nowadays we have 5K. But this is so simple, with the same effect.

[City Hall The Hague, gypsum model test photograph – OMA]

**RH** And this one, the effect was made with foil on the windows, right?

**HW** Yeah. This was made with blocks of gypsum. All the windows were made with a hammer. The model is huge! Very heavy. We put aluminium foil in the windows for the photographs.

### *Relationship*

**RH** Can you talk about this arrangement with a photographer and video artist entering into an intense relationship with one architecture practice? I can only think of a handful of similar collaborations.

**HW** Rem invited me and Claudi to be part of the team in the beginning. For example, with the Kunsthal the team were exploring the context first, in a very clear way. We went with them to take pictures on location. Then came drawings, sketches, small models, and we took pictures of everything immediately. Then we took pictures under construction and then later—when the building is there—we go back and take picture in use, at day and at night. We walked in this kind of rhythm with the project.

We would be there throughout. That was the secret.

**CC** Another important thing: all the media had to be involved. If a media had other possibilities—if it allowed you to look at things differently—it had to be used to flesh out the idea.

**HW** At OMA's office, there was everything. For instance, Stefano de Martino sitting at a very big drawing board—with a cigarette holder, like an Italian gentleman—surrounded by thousands of coloured pencils, making images of the prison in Arnhem. Meanwhile, Claudi is skating through filming.

The time we are discussing was the analogue period. I think these skills are dying out. The kitchen here was a big darkroom. I could handle any paper or colour, with very quick results. Slides were the quickest, but I had so much to do it was easier to take them to a laboratory. We would stick the films on the wall and Rem would mark with a small sticker what he liked—and then I'd mark what I liked. That was part of his theory: he'd ask, 'Which would you include?'—and he'd add them into his story. When he gave lectures, he'd have 2-3 carousels with slides in a plastic bag. In the other bag, credit card and sneakers. Off he went on the plane to do it.

The trick was to have no borders. Even on holidays, when I was in France camping somewhere, Rem could call me up, 'Is it ok if you come to Rotterdam, we have to do a few projects?'. The next day, I went to Bordeaux and jumped on a plane. It felt normal.

But he was hard to keep up with. One day he says something and then he has another idea. But he forgets to tell you why he changed his mind. So, you had to be clever to find out what had changed. There was no time to explain. You had to be really sharp and be there when he was there. Don't let him sneak out if you have a question, ask it!

**RH** Another unusual aspect is consciously wanting to document what's going on in the office. Not just as part of the project process, but the office process. Recording everything, just in case.

**HW** Photography was also used as a resource. I remember for one project we were working on; we went to take pictures in a field somewhere outside of Rotterdam. In the picture, you see people walking at an angle in a particular light. Rem wanted that exact picture taken out of reality. He also took pictures out of reality himself to show people what he meant: that kind of light, that kind of scale. Everybody in the team was good at taking pictures to describe things. I hated it in the beginning because I thought, 'I'm the photographer'—but the quality of all these images together in one story was fantastic.

#### *Film*

**RH** Claudi, what was the last thing you were involved with?

**CC** The last film was in 2014 for the biennial. I did the *Corridor* project, and I edited the *Stair* project.

**RH** Film is less common as a medium for recording architecture.

**CC** Photography is faster.

**RH** But in many ways, filming in buildings makes much more sense. We don't live life through a series of stills.

**CC** Yeah. I filmed the (Netherlands) Dance Theatre a lot during the construction. It was the first major thing that was built, so it was important to record it.

**HW** When it was almost complete, we went there with friends to hijack the building—to have our own fantasy in it before the ballet came in. We used the band Tuxedo Moon to test the acoustics. I would prefer if it were Johnny Rotten, of course, but he had no time.

**CC** Once, Rem had two appointments to explain projects at the same time. He couldn't go to both locations, so we made a film of him explaining and that was sent instead of him. He went to the other one. That happened more than once actually.

**HW** We could invent a machine that reproduces Rem Koolhaas. But I'm afraid of the effect. No, one is enough!

#### *Value*

**RH** What do you consider the value of OMA's way of working during that period?

**HW** It was like a laboratory.

**CC** It was really like a pressure cooker. There was so much going on at the same time. Everybody had enormous energy and wanted to do it. It wasn't a formal process—it was an experiment—that was really important.

**RH** It's impressive to be able to stimulate that kind of enthusiasm. I guess the proximity—of ideas, media and processes—is also stimulus to everyone involved.

**HW** Very inspirational.

**RH** There's always something unexpected happening around you.

**HW** All the time. But for me, it went on for a long time. When I went to take pictures of the Qatar National Library, I had no idea what to expect. But still, when I entered the building with Rem my eyes are instantly darting about, becoming involved. With Rem explaining, it's always an incredible experience.

Something that is very important to understand is that there is OMA and there is Rem. We were with OMA. We're friends of Rem, but OMA was the laboratory, and Rem was part of it.

**RH** This is one of the great complications of the whole thing, no? But then, of course, you realise that, while Rem is in the laboratory, it is his laboratory.

**CC** It's his brainchild.

**HW** Another value is the humour in the work. It's also tumultuous. That's what I'm looking for all the time.

**RH:** It's one of the rare qualities of OMA's work, these sort of mutations. It's especially strong when the base substance is kind of banal or generic. That's when the manipulation is most powerful, most shocking—and suddenly you see the generic source in a new light. When people talk about OMA's work, they always talk about spectacle and newness. That's a quality of it, of course. But I think there's this other empathetic layer, that sees value in mediocre things. Looking at all the stuff that exists in the world, understanding that it exists for a reason and being confident enough to bring it into architecture.

**HW** I went to New York, to take pictures of the silkscreens he was selling at Max Protetch. Rem told me that when he was at the academy making *Delirious New York*, he could see the Empire State Building from the balcony where we worked. He discovered that there are no drawings for the Empire State Building anymore. Nobody knows how to repair it. He realised what percent of the world's buildings are made as architecture. It's like half a percent or something. But he could see that these things were special.

He also had a powerful way of communicating these things. I went a few times to his lectures. It was so exciting. When he's starting, first complaining that the projection is not sharp enough. 2000 students sitting there, waiting for him to start. He's just there, *click-click, click-click*, 'What the fuck is wrong with the slide machine?'. But whether it is TU Delft or here at the Universiteit (Rotterdam)—which doesn't even have an architecture department—when he gave a lecture at that time, it was exploding. Everybody was there. There were thousands of bicycles around the building because he was talking.

He was communicating all these theories like stories. Very inventive, always laced with humour and anger. It was nice to be with the guy who did that.

**Hans Werlemann** (Rotterdam, 1948) is a photographer based at *Utopia* in Rotterdam and founder of *Hectic Pictures*. Aside from his extensive collaboration with OMA, his work

*has included advertising, exhibitions and publication. He has worked in long-term collaboration with Claudi Cornaz.*

**Claudi Cornaz** (Zürich, 1954) is a video artist and inventor. Aside from high school education at *Atheneum B* and three years at the free academy 'Psychopolis' in Den Haag, learning film and sound, he is an autodidact. He has worked in long-term collaboration with Hans Werlemann.

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