

Conversation: 020
With: Madelon Vriesendorp & Zoe Zenghelis
By: Richard Hall
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Working together

Richard Hall I'm very interested in how you four were working together.

Madelon Vriesendorp With Rem (Koolhaas) and Elia (Zenghelis), it was mostly apart. They're so different: the minimalist and the maximalist. But we all came together when there was a huge painting to be filled. We would get anybody to come and help: 'Hey you, fill in that piece of blue.' But Rem and Elia always had their own scenes. Even for the *Casabella* competition, it was a strip and they had their own squares.

You were doing the model.

Zoe Zenghelis Yes. On the glass.

MV I was filling in the watercolours and making collages for Rem. He gave me all the parts— 'This has to be in that'—and I cut and stuck it all together.

But I had a hard time when my children were born because I was so tired. The second child didn't sleep more than two hours in a row. I remember Stefano (de Martino) who was Rem's regular collaborator, coming in, in the morning to work. I had a baby cup for my son, and I had a coffee for Stefano. I gave my son the coffee and him the baby cup. He was so polite, he looked at it and said, 'Maddy, what am I going to do with this?'. I could never sleep. Then all these people coming into the room, 'Oh God, close the door.' The nappies...it drove me crazy.

RH At that moment, what were the most people working in your house?

MV When we entered competitions, we recruited three or four more students from the AA (Architectural

Association), like Dick Perlmutter and Ron Steiner—a genius model maker. When we finally rented an office, it expanded with Alex Wall and others.

ZZ And Matthias Sauerbruch as well.

MV At one point I said, 'I cannot have the office in my house anymore.' I couldn't take it. I was so tired. We had to work so hard. Once, I had to finish a painting—a woman was buying it—with Manhattan and the clouds behind Rem's Welfare Palace Hotel. Charlie was a baby. She was screaming. The taxi was waiting, and I was still drying the painting with a hairdryer. I hadn't cut it loose yet. Charlie was crying and Rem came and put the baby here, like a wolf child, to feed while I was painting.

ZZ They had this wonderful big room. With such light.

RH What about in America?

MV We were in America first, then they came and joined us.

ZZ We stayed with you for quite a long time.

MV The two guys were working day and night and then suddenly they zonked out. I remember Elia lying on the couch, I looked at him and he opened his eyes wide, 'I'm not sleeping!'.
ZZ I remember quite well, we went to Ithaca and stayed with them.

MV Rem was on a Harkness (Commonwealth Fund of new York City) fellowship. He was working with Oswald Mathias Ungers. He was very funny.

RH Why do you think it was like this: working together but apart?

MV Rem was a student of Elia at the AA. One day, Elia said to me, 'Don't tell him, but I'm so happy to have met him. He's brilliant!'. So, I immediately told Rem!

ZZ Rem was much older than the other students—and he wasn't very happy at the AA.

MV He had been a journalist.

ZZ Then he found Elia, and he understood what he was trying to do. For him, it was an amazing thing to happen because he was almost thinking to leave.

MV Rem brought him back to... not architecture, but whatever you call it... imaginative fantasy architecture.

ZZ My daughter is very much like Elia in just sticking with one thing. She can spend a year on it, just deciding. Even if it's just three colours, she has to decide on. It's just like Elia.

MV He couldn't choose either.

ZZ He could draw the same drawing for three months. Perfection was never enough!

MV I remember, we were trying to get him to finish his drawing. He was sitting in the corner here and we said, 'We have to go to the post office now! We have to pay.' And he said, 'No, wait, wait, wait!'

ZZ Impossible.

MV Incredible, intricate. He was such a good drawer.

ZZ Exactly the opposite from being an architect who does jobs. Stuck on one drawing for three years!

MV He was always singing.

RH How did it come about, the four of you working together, with painting as part of the projects?

ZZ Well, it started with Maddy and Rem. Maddy was painting, and Rem was telling her what to put in.

MV Yes, 'You must put in this, you must put in that...'

ZZ Rem came here one day—he was coming here all the time for Elia—and he saw my paintings. He said, 'Why don't you work for us?'. Then I started. They gave me one drawing and so on. From then on, it was the four of us doing all the presentations. It didn't take long.

Techniques

RH Could you talk about the different techniques you used? You both paint in different ways.

MV She was mostly doing acrylic and oil, and I did watercolour, acrylic and collages.

ZZ But when we were teaching at the AA, we could only do acrylic and watercolour, because oil takes too long to dry.

MV But also collages. I collected so many magazines for collages. I still have them. I have to throw them out! Collage is the easiest art form ever. It's a lazy way to start, isn't it?!

RH If you have the right pieces.

MV You have to get the right magazines, that's all.

RH What was the relationship between media and ideas?

MV They had the ideas and we had the media.

ZZ You can recognise the paintings which are Maddy's and which are mine. So that means that there was some initiative in the whole thing. But otherwise, we didn't take any part in the design process. We left it for them.

RH The reason I ask is because OMA has always used such a wide variety of representations. But the special thing is the ability to pinpoint the right media or technique to convey an idea. I'd say OMA are fairly exceptional in that.

ZZ I suppose we knew each other so well—especially being husbands and wives—we knew what they wanted and more or less did it.

[Exodus (Or The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture), allotments collage – OMA]

MV They did what they wanted. Except sometimes I was fighting like crazy! Not to put a naked woman in the collage. 'No, let's not do that.' It was for the collage about the allotments [in Exodus]. Rem wanted this naked woman in the water, and I said, 'Why does she have to be naked? Leave her out.' It was to be added to the image with the man and woman praying...you know, the farm?

RH The Angelus.

MV Yeah. That's very funny. He won anyway; the naked woman is there. Couldn't stop it.

RH There are themes in your independent work that correspond with, or run parallel to, themes in OMA work. Looking at this painting on the wall: scenography, colour, estrangement, unlike relationships, a peculiar balance between abstraction and figuration...maybe on that last point you both come from different ends?

MV I was never good at abstraction. That's Zoe.

ZZ Thank you. That I can do well.

RH What I'm thinking is—and if you say you didn't influence the ideas, I'm not going to force you to have—it's really wonderful that there are these resonances. Which are beautiful independently, but the results are astoundingly powerful when you worked together.

Part of it seems to be common interests, but also about a range of complementary skills and techniques. This is connected to what I was getting at before: the ability to connect ideas and media—to precisely represent an idea—is reliant on shared understanding and a range of technical competencies. And of course, the ability to choose: should it be a collage or a painting, acrylic or watercolour?

ZZ To take advantage of each ability.

RH Exactly. If I may, I think that's something quite unique about Rem: being able to spot people's particular skills or interests...

MV Yeah, exactly! And make them do it.

ZZ Also, the collaboration with Stefano de Martino and Alex Wall was unbelievably successful because they were so gifted.

MV But then, when Stefano was in his office, Rem suddenly wanted more Alex's style of drawing. He tried to convince Stefano to make more wild kind of drawings. Stefano didn't want to.

ZZ He was so precise. Such a good drawer.

MV He's so brilliant.

RH It's easy to spot a drawing Stefano made when you see one. Technically exquisite.

ZZ Fantastic.

MV Yeah, he's an unbelievably good artist.

Popular culture

RH What was the role of popular culture in what you all are doing at the beginning?

MV Rem was very interested in popular culture, because he had been a journalist and a scriptwriter. He was reading all the magazines that he could get his hand on. He was just an unbelievable reader: novels, biographies etc.

RH Comparing OMAs competition entries in the 70s with the work of your peers, your paintings render very particular architectural images. I understand painting was not totally unusual then of course, because everyone had to use analogue techniques, but the OMA paintings...

ZZ Yes, but as soon as we finished teaching at the AA, the computers came in. They didn't need people who could draw or paint anymore.

MV It's coming back because people are getting quite bored with computers now. I'm always shouting at people, 'You have to start drawing and use your hands!'. Because using a mouse, it just doesn't inform your brain. It's very, very important to use your hands. I made an exhibition in Istanbul about hands. I had this whole sort of sermon about how you have to use your hands to inform the brain.

RH What I'm trying to get at with the popular thing is, when I look at your paintings compared to other architects' representations from the time, they're very accessible. The way you both represent materials is also very beautiful...

ZZ And no pencil.

RH I especially like the way you both render stone. It's very particular. Actually, maybe it's a little bit exaggerated. Maybe that's why it's graspable... and a bit exotic?

MV We had to make a thousand different marbles. I was so fed up with it. I made a sort of fake marble on the Netherlands Dance Theatre, using the forms of dancers. It was like a sort of camouflage. Originally it was a joke because I was fed up with marble walls. But then they said, 'No, we like this more'. It's ridiculous, it was a joke.

ZZ Is that building still there?

RH No, it's taken down.

MV It's gone. They rang me and said, 'What do you want to do with the wall painting? Shall we take it off? It will cost us £130,000!' A ridiculous amount to preserve it. I said, 'No, it belongs to that building.' If the building is not there, why have it?

RH Just to go back a step: the representations are accessible to anybody. Unlike many architectural images—

especially by ambitious architects—of the time, these paintings are accessible and appealing to all sorts of people. Simply put, non-architects would be able to get excited about them and understand them. Yet, they contain fairly radical proposals.

MV Yeah, but there was also a whole thing about colour. Look at Lina Bo Bardi. She made all those amazing drawings—all sorts of people in it and dogs and cats and flowers. Architects didn't think that she was an architect.

ZZ Plus, she was a woman.

MV And she was a woman. When I went to São Paulo and I said, 'Do you know who made this building?', people would say, 'Maybe Niemeyer'. She never won the competitions because of this colour. Colour was always considered to be unprofessional.

ZZ They also didn't see the sensitivities of her work. But then you get someone like Zaha who would do something completely extravagant and immediately attracts attention. Personality takes over. But if you are working reasonably and it's in good taste: difficult.

RH Bo Bardi is a good example of what I'm getting at. Her work is, again, totally accessible and—while full of all kinds of hidden symbolism and myths—it is a kind of popular architecture. As in, available for people. I think at various moments OMA has tried to pursue a radical architecture that could also be part of the popular world—of everyday life—rather than the 'museum of architecture.'

Versions

There are many different versions of your paintings.

ZZ Oh, yes. We did so many. We were constantly trying things out, so we made many versions. Someone would say, 'Oh perhaps this should be a night image', so we made a night version.

MV But also, somebody said, 'Can you make another one?'. That's how the French painters did it: someone

would say, 'Can you make that painting again?' They did hundreds of copies of the same painting.

ZZ Yes. It was also the demand from outside. Not only us—mostly we did versions when we wanted to try something else for the same image—but many times, the very popular ones went straight away. So, we had to make more of them for us.

RH You mean, paintings being bought?

ZZ Yeah.

MV Yeah. We tried desperately to sell things. We were lucky: suddenly architecture drawings were popular. Gilman Company—the paper company—they bought some...

ZZ Yes, and Time-Life. Many in America. Others just disappeared.

MV I have paintings in the CCA and they put the most ridiculous things underneath. They always get it wrong. They put things like, 'Painting commissioned by OMA.' OMA didn't exist. As if OMA was going around commissioning things!

ZZ All the titles in the magazines are mostly wrong.

RH Are there examples of paintings where each of you did a version of the same painting?

[The City of the Captive Globe, painting – OMA]

ZZ Yes, we did. For example, The City of the Captive Globe. Lots of them. We don't have a single one. They're all gone, unfortunately. We should keep things. I don't have anything.

MV Make one again. You can make a few. I did the first and second watercolour versions and drew the hand-drawn parts for it.

ZZ That was fun. That was the very beginning. That was completely Rem's idea, wasn't it?

MV Yeah, it was a chapter in his book *Delirious New York*. The idea of the Manhattan grid, where all architecture could stand together on separate blocks, all different ideologies coexisting peacefully. Later on I made another watercolour of it for a show in the Pompidou Centre, which I called 'City of the Captive Globe Revisited' and added a skeleton version of Rem's Très Grande Bibliothèque competition entry in the corner.

Value

RH What would you say was the value of OMA's work at that time?

ZZ Working for OMA was a pleasant and inspiring time. There was the feeling that something new was introduced to architectural thought. There was undeniable optimism, magical storytelling and inspirational drawings and paintings. I think that OMA inspired and influenced many students and young architects—sometimes for the best.

Zoe Zenghelis (*Athens, 1937*) founded OMA in 1975 together with Elia Zenghelis, Rem Koolhaas and Madelon Vriesendorp. becoming known as an artist in her own right in the 1980s. Her work is in the collections of MoMA and the Gilman Paper Co. in New York, private collections in Greece, Cyprus and the UK, and the Drawing Matter collection. Her work has been exhibited internationally, most recently in solo exhibitions at Betts Projects (2020) and the Architectural Association (2021) in London and the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburg (2022). Her work was the subject of an associated publication, *Do You Remember How Perfect Everything Was?* (2022), by Hamed Khosravi. She is currently preparing for an exhibition in Athens. With Madelon Vriesendorp, she taught at the Architectural Association from 1982-1994.

Madelon Vriesendorp (*Bilthoven, 1945*) founded OMA in 1975 together with Elia and Zoe Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas, in parallel to her own career as an artist. Her work includes painting, making and collecting. She has been

exhibited internationally and her work is included in a number of collections around the world. In 2008 her work was the subject of an exhibition at the Architectural Association, The World of Madelon Vriesendorp, curated by Shuman Basar and Stephan Trüby, and designed by Kasia Korczak, with a companion book of the same title. The exhibition later traveled to Aedes Berlin and the Venice Architectural Biennale in the same year, and the Swiss Architecture Museum in Basel and the Art Biennale in Venice and the Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam in 2009. She received an Honorable Fellowship from the RIBA in February 2009 and in June 2017 the Architectural Association awarded her an Honorary Diploma. With Zoe Zenghelis, she taught at the Architectural Association from 1982-1994.
