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The Story of the Raft: Architectural Narrations of Disaster, Despair and Delight — Willem de Bruijn

I made the raft into a wreck.
Madelon Vriesendorp, in an interview with Niall Hobhouse (4 November 2018), https://drawingmatter.org/madelon-vriesendorp/ [Accessed 28 February 2025].

I'm happy that no blood was spilled.
Eisuke Yamaki recounting his experience on the Acali in Markus Lindeen, dir., *The Raft* (Stockholm: Fasad, 2018).

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Introduction

What is the 'story' of the raft, and which 'raft' are we referring to? A clue is offered in the form of a drawing (Fig.1) – a trial proof for a screen print, to be precise – contained within the Drawing Matter collection. It depicts the 'Medusa Raft', named after the famous painting by Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) held in the Louvre in Paris (Fig.2). The drawing dates from 1978 and is an early work by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), founded three years earlier by Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis. It shows the raft from above, struck by the approaching floating pool from 'The Story of the Pool' (1976), written by Koolhaas and published as an appendix to his book *Delirious New York* (1978).[1] The drawing represents a key moment in OMA's narrativizing architecture, one that appears, and reappears, in projects such as *The Egg of Columbus Centre* (1973), *New Welfare Island* (1975–76) and the *Welfare Palace Hotel* (1976–77), first published in a special issue of *Architectural Design*.[2] Looking at these projects today, nearly five decades after they were first published, the presence of the Medusa Raft continues to intrigue. For, unlike the floating pool (which Koolhaas incidentally also describes as a 'raft'[3]) the Medusa Raft is not the subject of a fully worked out story with a beginning, middle and end. It is not immediately evident, for example, where the raft has come from or how it ended up in the East River off Roosevelt Island. Yet, its narrativizing power is evident in the drawings. If there is a story to be told, it is, first and foremost, one that works through pictures. This is especially true in the case of the print with which we began, with its large expanse of blue, reminiscent of Yves Klein's, which extends all the way to the edge of the drawing. As a form of visual storytelling, the drawing could not be more simple and seductive. It is, perhaps, the most sensuous of all the 'sensuous imagery'[4] created by OMA. Yet, in the absence of a textual story, the drawing also presents the viewer with an enigma. In particular, the literal transposition of Géricault's painting into the context of architectural projects deemed 'eminently buildable' (by Koolhaas)[5] remains puzzling. As one commentator in the 1977

Larger illustrations and captions on pp. 14–26

Architectural Design observed: 'Koolhaas and Zenghelis were establishing an alliance at once tangled and extremely vague with a number of non-architectural disciplines: literature, painting and psychology.'[6] In a similar vein, the architectural historian Kenneth Frampton found himself both seduced and somewhat perplexed by OMA's visionary projects, which, he wrote, defied interpretation.[7]

More recent discussions of the formative phase of OMA have shifted the debate from a concern with meaning to aspects of technique, authorship and dissemination.[8] Whilst important and often insightful, these have tended to obscure the problem of interpretation and to some extent contextualisation as well. If OMA's early drawings retain their challenging appeal even now, we must enquire about the contexts – cultural, iconographic, etc. – from which they arose. Addressing the question of what makes the Medusa Raft such a potent image (for OMA), I will focus on it as a locus of 'alliance', or shared interest, between architecture and 'non-architectural' disciplines, including painting and anthropology. This, I argue, makes it possible to see the Medusa Raft as more than a mere art historical quotation summoned in the name of allegory. Instead, it comes to relate to a more general appreciation of the raft *per se* as a complex cultural trope whose meanings do not always align. In this expanded context, OMA's Medusa is one of many rafts, and one of many different stories. In (re)telling some of these, this article seeks to gain a better understanding of how, in the work of OMA, the Medusa Raft becomes a thought-image for architecture. My argument is inherently speculative in that it does not attempt to seek out some definitive 'source' for OMA's ideas, but rather to present instances that seem to have some explanatory power in relation to OMA's use of the Medusa motif. The argument has been structured around these to develop a reading of OMA's work as ultimately concerned, not with the fate of the Medusa, but with the realisation, in built form, of the raft's architectural possibilities. The manifestation *par excellence* of this translation from painting to drawing to building is OMA's Kunsthal in Rotterdam (1987–1992).

Bruegel's raft

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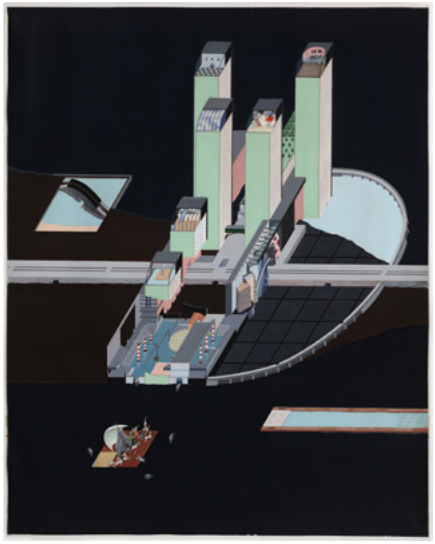
Perhaps the first worth mentioning in this story of the raft is not the most famous. It is a mere detail, easily overlooked, in an otherwise familiar painting of 1563 by Pieter Bruegel the Elder depicting the Tower of Babel (the Vienna version, Fig.3).[9] If the viewer can divert their attention from the colossal structure spiralling towards the sky in the centre of the painting and toward the lower right corner, a raft appears, afloat on the waters of an imaginary landscape (Fig.4). It is not immediately apparent what purpose it is to serve, but it may be for the transportation of large stone blocks and/or bricks to build the edifice (workers can be seen unloading bricks from a barge not far from the raft). The blocks, whose preparation is depicted in the foreground, are cut at some distance from the construction site. The raft looks surprisingly large, once it is understood in relation to the ships and barges operating nearby. Zooming in, we can see two men standing on it, operating large oars to steer the floating platform across the water. A third is seated in the opening of a tiny cabin placed upon the raft – he appears to be taking a break from his labours, as another oar is lying nearby, unused. Judging from the position of the oars, the raft appears to be moving towards the tower. The raft's position in the foreground as well as its relative size and shape (being completely flat apart from the little cabin) suggestively figures it as a kind of antithesis of the Tower – it may be that this seemingly fragile construction will even outlive the vast construction that rises above it, whose fate, as we know, was to be destroyed.

Bruegel seems to take delight in telling us this double story – that of a half-constructed, or indeed, half-ruined tower, and that of a raft, the discreet



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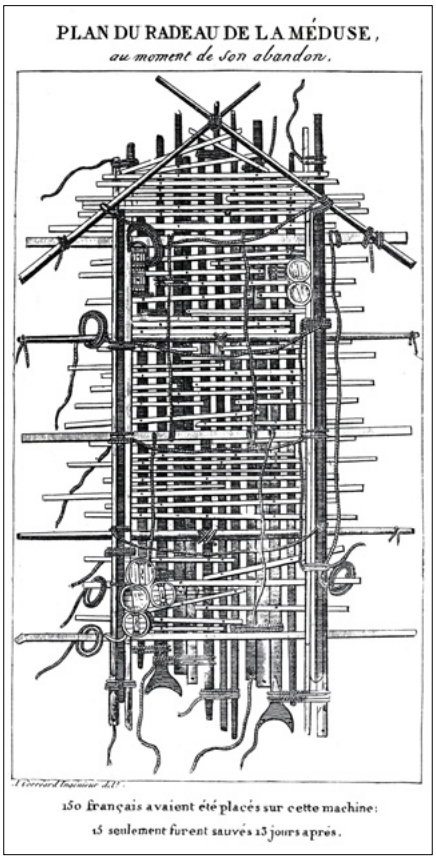
object of a minor architecture that attracts little attention. This marks its entry into a tale about human pride and unbridled ambition (symbolised by the building of the tower), subtly but assuredly as a story-telling device. By visually contrasting the all-significant tower with an 'insignificant' raft, Bruegel creates a visual motif that is reiterated in the early drawings of OMA. This is most evident in the drawings for projects like *New Welfare Island* (1975–76) and the *Welfare Palace Hotel* (1976–77), in which a miniature Medusa Raft is dwarfed by the towering complex of hotels and offices on the horizon (Fig.5). While OMA's Medusa Raft may present itself as a three-dimensional replica of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, the composition and style of the drawings suggest a very different sphere of influence. For, just as Bruegel is fond of reducing important events to a minor detail (most famously in the case of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* [c.1558], attributed to the artist), so Vriesendorp takes delight in making the shipwreck appear small and insignificant. This is true even for the trial proof to which we have already referred, in which the blue predominates. A visual paradox arises, insofar as OMA's fondness for the anecdotal is rooted in a tradition of Flemish painting very different to Géricault's aggrandising artwork.[10]



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Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*

The Raft of the Medusa (1818–19), the colossal painting by Géricault held in the Louvre, offers a dramatic account of events that took place in July 1816 when the French frigate *Méduse*, on course to the port of Saint-Louis in Senegal, ran aground off the coast of current-day Mauritania. In the days that followed the shipwreck, about two thirds of the four hundred mostly male passengers managed to get to safety using lifeboats, which eventually brought them to the shore some fifty kilometres away. Of those remaining, a small number chose to stay aboard the grounded wreck, while the others took to a raft that had been hastily constructed using remnants of the battered ship. This was to be towed by its launches, but complications led crew members to cut loose the raft, leaving it and its passengers to drift in the open ocean. In the thirteen days that followed, bad weather conditions and mutiny on board the raft caused many to die. Some of the dead had been half-eaten in acts of cannibalism, a practice legally categorised as a 'custom of the sea'. Of the one hundred and forty-seven people who had boarded the raft on the 5th of July 1816, only fifteen were found to be alive when the remaining survivors were rescued by the Argus, another ship faring nearby. Géricault's painting depicts the moment the Argus comes into sight, bringing hope to the few survivors left clinging to each other.

This, in short, is the story of *The Raft of the Medusa*. Yet, this story is never quite the same, depending on who narrates it – nor is the raft quite the same raft, depending on who makes a representation of it, in which medium it is presented, and to what purpose. Géricault, who had not witnessed the events himself, based his painting on accounts of survivors published in the immediate aftermath of the shipwreck. One of these had been written by Alexandre Corréard, an engineer and geographer who also produced a technical drawing of the raft. This shows an oblong rectangle, twenty meters long and seven metres wide, consisting of orthogonally assembled planks with a pointed front (Fig.6). Géricault's raft looks more like a square, an impression perhaps reinforced by the fact we are seeing it in perspective. Another important source is the account of a surgeon by the name of Savigny, also a survivor, who turned his experience into the subject of a doctoral dissertation.[11] The story of the *radeau de la Méduse*, as told by Savigny, explains how passengers, who would otherwise most likely drown, built a raft with salvaged planks from the ship. But what seemed like a hopeful action soon turned into a nightmare. Already, after the first night in open sea, a terrible sight greeted Savigny in the morning:

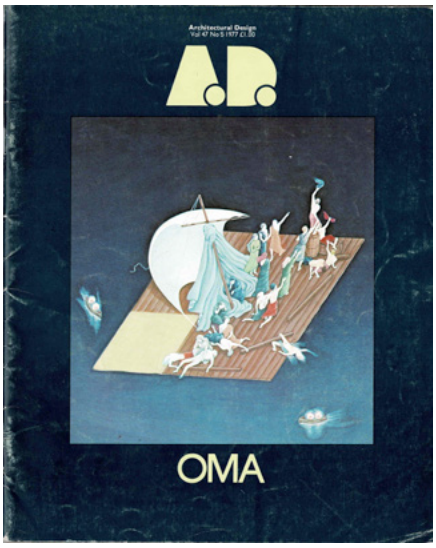
> What a spectacle presented itself to our view! Ten or twelve unfortunate creatures having their lower extremities entangled in the interstices left between the planks of the raft, had been unable to disengage themselves, and had lost their lives. Several others had been carried off the raft by the violence of the sea; so that by the morning we were already twenty fewer in number.[12]

This horrible spectacle was followed by further catastrophe when mutiny broke out on board and several men were killed in the fight. After only a couple of days at sea, as rations of food and wine dwindled, those in a reasonable condition began throwing the wounded and sick overboard. Three days into the raft's journey, acts of cannibalism served to keep the fit ones alive until finally, nearly two weeks after the *Méduse* had been battered to pieces by a storm, the Argus came to their rescue.

The publication of multiple stories told from different points of view, as well as the proliferation of easily reproduced lithographs in mass media, no doubt contributed to the popular success of Géricault's painting. Moreover, what would have otherwise counted as a relatively trivial subject – a mere news item – was here elevated by virtue of being treated in the manner of a history painting.[13] A true spectacular, *The Raft of the Medusa* entered the public and cultural imagination as the depiction of a story whose meanings proliferated through the multiplication of differently mediated points of view. Géricault alone produced over a hundred preparatory studies for the large painting in the Louvre, ranging from close-ups of contorted bodies and faces to more distant views of the raft lost in the waves. This suggests not a single but several stories of the raft, each one motivated by a different interest in the event – artistic, scientific, medical, autobiographical, etc. OMA's postmodern appropriation of Géricault's painting is an extension of this, a further peregrination of the Medusa Raft through word and image.

OMA's Medusa Raft

The Medusa Raft first appears in a drawing made by Zoe Zenghelis for *The Egg of Columbus Centre* project (1973), in which 'Géricault's *Raft of the Médusa* is gently dropping by parachute' above Manhattan.[14] Having crossed the Atlantic Ocean (by air, apparently), Géricault's raft is presented as the archetypal manifestation of Manhattan's architecture – 'the raft itself has taken the shape of a *block*', the elementary unit of the urban grid.[15] At this point in the story, the raft's journey across time and space promises to deliver a happy ending for the survivors – as the metropolis comes into view, their rescue seems imminent. However, in the next set of drawings, created for projects such as *New Welfare Island* (1975–76) and *Welfare Palace Hotel* (1976–77), we encounter the raft in a different guise. Captions accompanying the images reproduced in *Architectural Design* explain that this is not the original vessel but a 'plastic replica'. We also learn that, when the 'obdurate pessimistic raft of the Medusa' is struck by the approaching floating pool, the pool slices through it 'like a knife through butter'.[16] This moment, when the pool collides with the anchored raft, or approaches it, is shown repeatedly across different drawings, multiplying the perspectives from which we observe the event. As already noted, the simulated drama associated with this second disaster stands in stark contrast to the cold and dispassionate tools of architectural representation – plan, elevation, and isometric projection. Vriesendorp's depictions of the raft itself reinforce this contrast by introducing an element of abstraction. No longer an oblong structure assembled from planks of different lengths, the Medusa Raft is now a perfectly flat and smooth square, equipped with a dance floor in one corner (Fig.7). The change in shape suggests a simplified and idealised design, which brings it closer to a form of architectural 'perfection'.



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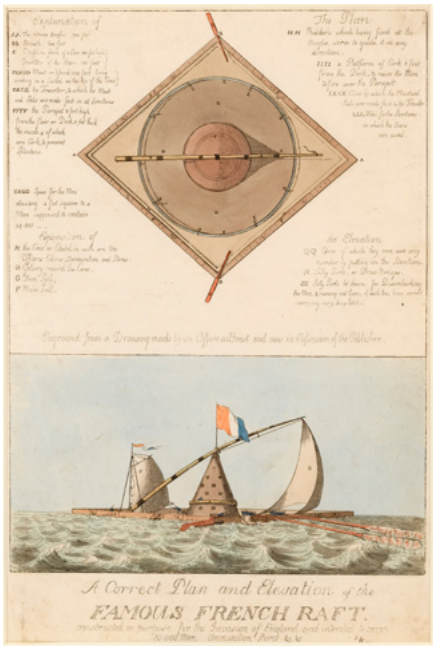

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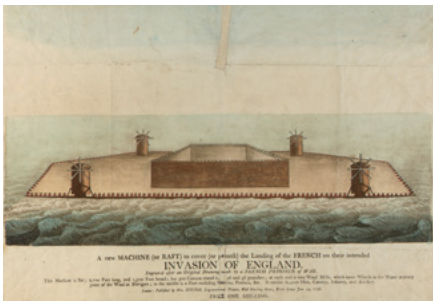

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The use of the square effectively reduces the raft's geometry to its purest state, more an idea than a material thing. Interestingly, this kind of idealisation of rafts is not unique to the work of OMA. A curious precedent is the 'Famous French Raft', the subject of much speculation and mythologising in Britain at the end of the 18th century. Fuelling fears of an invasion by French forces, engravings of the time show a raft able to carry 'thirty-thousand men' across the Channel (Fig.8). A plan of the device shows a floating platform, perfectly square in shape, with a tower-like 'Cone' or 'Citadel' mounted in the exact centre, which housed the officers' cabins, ammunition and storage spaces. Another, even larger version, measuring 2,100 feet long by 1,500 feet wide, could purportedly transport double the number of men, housed in a fortress, plus five hundred canons (Fig.9). This fantastical machine was equipped with windmills in every corner that propelled it forward by means of waterwheels.[17] Whilst OMA may not have been aware of this precedent, it aptly illustrates how – even before the Medusa foundered and endowed the raft it birthed with the name of a monster whose gaze petrifies all those it is turned upon – the raft could serve as a vehicle of myth and speculation.

In the work of OMA, the Medusa Raft thus comes to figure on several levels as a cultural trope – a linguistic, but also architectural, signifier of spatial and temporal displacement. 'Parachuted' into the present from a distant and forgotten past, the raft is the temporal nexus where past, present and future, but also history and myth, converge into a single image (of human distress, but also possible salvation) to signal a moment of crisis. When the Medusa Raft is dropped into Manhattan, it arrives – according to Koolhaas – as a metaphor for 'the impasse towards which architecture was heading'.[18] In what may be described as a hermeneutic *tour de force*, he interprets the events on board as reflecting the state of a generation incapable of facing urban reality:

> After the shipwreck in the Mediterranean of the Medusa – a military vessel – the soldiers/castaways were left on their raft only with barrels of wine, guns and ammunition. In a premature and drunken panic they began to cannibalise each other on the second day of their journey. [Yet] they could easily have survived without eating anything at all. This monumental expression of 'loss of nerve' corresponds to the premature panic and loss of nerve about the Metropolis in the present moment of the 20th century.[19]

In drawing a parallel between the 18th-century shipwreck and the 'present moment', Koolhaas here presents the story of the raft as an indictment of architects of his own generation who have retreated in the face of the radical challenge posed by the metropolis, which he will articulate in his 'retroactive manifesto for Manhattan', *Delirious New York*. The Russian avant-garde architects who have taken forty years to cross the Atlantic in the floating pool signal the only possible outcome. In destroying the Medusa Raft, they put a definitive end to its story. When it sinks, none of the initial optimism and promise of rescue associated with its arrival in New York remains. The final state of OMA's 'sunken' Medusa Raft thus contrasts sharply with its first aerial iteration and even contradicts it. In *The Egg of Columbus Centre*, the raft could still function as the archetypal 'plot' or 'base' of Manhattan, an ideological laboratory equipped to 'suspend unwelcome laws, undeniable truths, to create non-existent, physical conditions to facilitate and provoke speculative activity'.[20] OMA's raft thereby assumes multiple, sometimes incompatible, meanings depending on the (con)text in which it appears. At times a colossal sculpture made of plastic (the epitome of postmodern kitsch), a 'block' suspended underneath a balloon, an ideological laboratory – the raft is all these things and more:

> it is a container and communicator of Manhattan's Metropolitan agencies – proving both the need and the impossibility of 'escape'. It is an equivalent of the 19th century sculpture. When the weather permits it, the lifeboats leave the interior of the [Welfare Palace] Hotel to go out on the river. They circle around the raft, compare the monumental suffering of its occupants to their own petty anxieties, watch the moonlit sky and even board the sculpture. A section is equipped as dance floor, relaying the music that is produced inside the Hotel through microphones that are hidden in the sculpture.[21]

This, then, is what remains of the Medusa Raft – a camp simulacrum, a literally floating signifier ambiguously celebrating *and* cynically mocking life in the metropolis. Where Géricault romanticises, Koolhaas ironises, and he does so through a tale of two floating constructions: one propelled by the wind blowing across the Atlantic, the other by the concerted efforts of constructivist architects swimming in unison away from their goal.[22] This is the raft of postmodern allegory, a moment in which the crisis of twentieth-century architecture takes on the form of an emblematic human drama. True to its allegorical character, the Medusa Raft acts as an emblem whose meaning is never fully explicated or exhausted by its caption. As Kenneth Frampton observes, the image of the raft has a dual aspect that should not be forgotten: it is both a 'ship of fools' *and* an 'image of salvation'.[23] The Medusa Raft thus signals a 'return to meaning' without any prospect of hermeneutic closure. It forms part of a 'world to be read at the level of narrative and myth, or simultaneously at the level of both'.[24] Herein also lies the difficulty in interpreting OMA's work – rich in potential but 'highly ambivalent', oscillating between, on the one hand, the 'illusion' of painting and, on the other, the 'reality' of architecture.[25] For Frampton this tension between illusion and reality, or art and architecture, should not be understood as an opposition impossible to overcome: 'In as much as it projects the image of an alternative reality [OMA's] work embodies a radical potential which is as critical of communism in its ascendancy as it is of capitalism in its decline.'[26] We can interpret the raft in this light as occupying a central role within OMA's thinking; a dialectical image of sorts, produced 'at a standstill'. For, in this image, and in this image alone, the (timeless) 'truth' of their own historical condition becomes visible.[27] For OMA/Koolhaas, the raft thus takes the form of a Benjaminian 'thought-image' (*Denkbild*) – one whose 'obdurate pessimism' is ironised and whose 'predicated optimism [...] remains [...] ambiguous'.[28]

The Acali Raft

As I have tried to show previously with reference to Bruegel, the 'Famous French Raft' and Géricault, OMA's deployment of the raft-as-image does not stand in isolation. It sits within a constellation of rafts whose origins are multiple. To this constellation we must now add another, known as the Acali. The story associated with it in many ways not only parallels OMA's story of the Medusa Raft but also offers us a means to examine its anthropological dimensions.

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Acali – meaning 'the house on the water' in the Nahuatl (native Mexican) language – was the name of a purpose-built raft that crossed the Atlantic in 1973 as part of an experiment led by anthropologist Santiago Genovés (Fig.10).[29] Genovés had previously been a crew member on expeditions led by Norwegian explorer and writer Thor Heyerdahl, involving two attempts to cross the Atlantic ocean in boats made of papyrus (based on ancient Egyptian models).[30] These expeditions provided Genovés with the necessary experience to set up his own experiment involving a specially built raft, using modern materials. Whether in the design of the Acali experiment Genovés ever thought of Géricault's *Raft* remains unclear, but we can draw some parallels. For one, the purpose of the experiment was to

study human behaviour with a focus on violence. As Genovés explained, a floating raft provides a perfect setting for such a study, because the crew – consisting of five men and six women, selected from a pool of volunteers from all over the world – would be trapped in a situation from which there was no means of escape. Tensions between members of the crew would have to be resolved on board the raft. Genovés designed the raft with this purpose in mind, ensuring the crew knew little or no privacy. The Acali was not equipped with any rudders to steer the vessel, whose journey was intended to follow the ocean currents. Another salient detail of Genovés' experiment was the presence of an axe onboard, which could have been used as a weapon. An axe was also reported to have been onboard the Medusa, presumably used to dismember the dead (Géricault includes the axe in his painting). Leaving Las Palmas, in the Spanish Canary Islands, off the west coast of Africa, the Acali – like OMA's Medusa Raft – traversed the Atlantic, making its crossing the same year that the raft appeared in OMA's work in the context of the project titled *The Egg of Columbus Centre* (1973). It is difficult to think of this historical convergence as mere coincidence, considering the widespread media coverage the 'Acali experiment' received. Somewhat like its Medusean antecedent, the Acali raft entered the public imagination as a site in which 'social intercourse' had been pushed to a limit condition. Dubbed the 'Sex Raft' in contemporary media reports, the Acali was deemed a scandal, notwithstanding its status as a university-funded research project and a self-declared laboratory of sociological experimentation.[31]

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However, as revealed in a remarkable documentary by Marcus Lindeen, the Acali was very different to the raft of the Medusa. *The Raft* (2018) offers a striking account of Genovés' experiment as told by some of its 'survivors'. Using a life-size reconstruction of the Acali (made from plywood) as a prompt, the documentary invites members of the crew who were still alive at the time to reminisce, discuss and share their experiences of the journey (Fig.11). We learn about life on board the Acali and tensions arising among the crew, some of which were the result of deliberate provocations by Genovés, whose methods can be described as at least unorthodox if not indeed unethical. His efforts to incite crew members to commit acts of violence ultimately failed. Footage shows that reality on board the raft was unlike anything the anthropologist might have hoped to witness as part of his research into 'why people fight', the Acali remaining a scene of restraint and control of nerves. Images of the Acali crew relaxing in the sun also contrast sharply with the raft's portrayal in the world's press as an arena of social transgression (Fig.12). As is beautifully revealed in Lindeen's documentary, even in the face of mortal danger the crew members manage to preserve their calm and keep any violent thoughts to themselves. A near-fatal collision with a large tanker is only narrowly averted thanks to the actions of the Acali's female captain.

By this account, the Acali was the setting of a remarkable display of physical and psychological endurance. It allows a different picture of the raft as a site of 'social intercourse' to emerge – one devoid of the kind of 'loss of nerve' that the Medusa Raft, according to Koolhaas, inspires. It also figures the raft as locus of an experiment committed to social inclusion and the empowerment of women in a way the scripting of the Medusa raft and floating pool stories, is not.[32] Nonetheless, the Acali still figures as a site of extreme human suffering. This suffering is arguably less overtly 'monumental' – it is one that we first learn about from the stories that the women tell each other on board the reconstruction of the raft in Lindeen's documentary. These personal and sometimes collective stories of pain and silent suffering are stories from which they – the women – emerge triumphant.[33] For while we may never obtain any answers to some of the questions that Genovés posed, many of the women present the experiment

as a worthwhile experience, a great success even, with one of them (Fé Seymour) explaining that '[i]t was the opposite of violence'.[34]

What the story of the Acali points to, is not, in other words, a simple matter of coincidence. Both Genovés and Koolhaas are similarly invested in the raft as a scene of social and physical constraint – a limit condition like no other, although one whose 'prisoners' have entered voluntarily (c.f. OMA's early project *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* [1972], which, from our point of view, by walling off a zone makes a 'raft' within the ocean of the city).[35] For his part, Genovés did not neglect aspects of the raft's design, which was meticulously planned and drawn out. This is also evident in another unrealised project, involving the anthropologist himself as the sole occupant of a one-person raft or vessel (more a floating coffin) featuring a glass bottom through which he could stare into the depths of the ocean. The design stresses the imaginary and symbolic aspect of Genovés' ideas. He sees in the raft a powerful metaphor, whose broader meaning becomes clear in a televised interview in which he advised the programme's hosts and members of the public to 'make your own raft'.[36] It is not entirely clear here whether he means this literally or metaphorically, for he says that to do so, is 'risky' and that 'you can die'.[37] But he probably means both, in which case every human-centred project of isolation and containment can be conceptualised as a raft. This is where the projects of Genovés and Koolhaas again converge. Indeed it was at the very end of the Epilogue to *Exodus* that Koolhaas first invoked the raft of the Medusa as a metaphor in (and for) OMA's vision of architecture:

> Like the castaways on the raft of the Medusa, the last surviving realists, hanging on the parachute of hope are dropping on the rescue ship THE CITY, which, at the end of cannibalism, will appear in the horizon.[38]

Launched with this first invocation, the raft of the Medusa will appear and reappear in various guises throughout their work. It will never be built, or at least not in the form suggested by the story of its encounter with the floating pool, that is, as a plastic sculpture. Here the projects of Koolhaas and Genovés might seem to diverge, insofar as the latter was interested in the actual building of rafts. Yet, both are visionary, experimental, socially critical and to a considerable degree 'paranoid' in their methods.[39] They both tell stories about survival, cooperation and social intercourse under extreme circumstances. This is not to say that OMA was not invested in what Frampton calls the actualisation of visionary content in built form. For Frampton, built projects are where new possibilities for OMA's visionary projects arise – and while we may take issue with this, appreciating that the potency of the raft-as-image is in no way diminished by the absence of a 'made' object, this does not mean that we cannot ask about its 'translation' into building. Vriesendorp herself points to the importance of seeing OMA's built output as manifestations or 'culminations' of visionary content formed in the early years of the practice:

> The early drawings were visionary but within them was always the possibility of an architecture, the sense that OMA would eventually build. Looking around Rotterdam, Rem's building there [The Rotterdam mixed-use towers (1997–2013), presumably] is almost like Welfare Palace. It is really a culmination of all the things he has ever done.[40]

Is there, then, *another image*, or iteration in built form, that 'continues' the story of the raft? Of particular relevance here, I argue, is the Kunsthal (also in Rotterdam), which opened in 1992.[41] For it, more than any other building by OMA, embodies the raft as architectural form.

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The Kunsthal as Raft

The Kunsthal in Rotterdam, completed in 1992, offers a potent example of a project in which the visionary content of OMA's early paintings and drawings finds architectural form. This includes the Medusa Raft. If we look carefully at the design of the Kunsthal, and take into consideration the architectural experience it offers, it is possible to see in it the Medusa Raft materialised as building, a building in which all traces of Géricault's Romantic pathos disappear in favour of concrete, architectural incarnations and applications. To be sure, the Medusa Raft is not the only 'reference' upon which the Kunsthal draws and the project cannot be reduced to it. The Kunsthal is rich in other allusions, too, but these are more obvious or overtly architectural, and internal to the discipline, such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's S. R. Crown Hall at Chicago's IIT Campus (1950–56), Le Corbusier's Carpenter Centre for the Visual Arts (1963) and Alexander Melnikov's Soviet Pavilion for the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1925.[42] The Medusa Raft is a more discreet, cultural reference that has come from outside the discipline and is recognisable only if you have encountered the image of the *Raft of the Medusa* before and seen it through architectural eyes. The Kunsthal is effectively an assemblage of fragments, for which the raft acts as prototype – a unifying trope coming to the rescue of a discipline in crisis.[43]

Seen from above or in plan, the unifying principle manifests itself as a square – a square divided in four parts (the result of two roads cutting through the volume at different levels). The entire programme for the Kunsthal is organised around this principle of a division into four quarters, with the largest reserved for the main exhibition hall. The square outline has of course a precedent in the work of Mies – the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin of 1968. But the square is also the shape given to the Medusa Raft in all renditions apart from *The Egg of Columbus Centre* – a shape which, as we have seen, the original did not have. The presence of a dance floor in one corner of OMA's Medusa Raft also suggests a link insofar as it prefigures the idea of partitioned areas within the square marked only by a change in material. More importantly, the sense of being on a raft, of boarding a raft, is palpable for anyone visiting the Kunsthal in person. Approaching the Kunsthal from the north (the Museumpark side) you are met with an inclined concrete floor that acts as a ramp linking the lower part of the site to the top of the Westzeedijk (Fig.13). At the lower end, the ramp extends beyond the perimeter of the building and plunges into a 'sea' of blue bricks, conjuring up a graphic image of water (Fig.14). On the south side, the building appears to hover or float above the Westzeedijk which protects the Museumpark area behind from flooding (the sea is a constant threat). This gives the impression of the building being moored along the dyke, ready to depart when needed (Fig.15). The floor in this part of the building is covered in sheets of metal grating which visually disorient the visitor, as they bring into view the sloping ground beneath their feet. The presence of metal grate floors and inclined floor slabs inside the building further add to the sense of disorientation. Details such as the protruding I-beam (Fig.16), the log serving as balustrade, the use of corrugated plastic as cladding material, the plywood panels in the interior, and the different types of plate girders used for columns further conjure up the image of a building put together from fragments. Every detail seems intent on evoking the improvised nature of a structure assembled from repurposed or 'found' elements, the prototypical example of which is the raft.

Read as a raft, although formally multifarious, the Kunsthal appears as a building still committed to a sense of (ideological) unity. Pre-eminently horizontal and planar, it is an exercise in flatness. Even the service tower is flat and discreet, like the sail on a raft. In the Kunsthal's translation from painting to drawing to building the *Raft of the Medusa* is effectively

absorbed by and transformed into a work of architecture. In this process of becoming architecture, the Medusa Raft sheds its painterly values as an image of human distress, ceasing to figure as a scene of disaster and despair.[44] This the Kunsthal achieves without losing its capacity to narrate. A story is still being told, but the purely 'pictorial' narration of history painting gives way to a spatial narration in the form of experiences associated with the architectural reality of the raft-as-building – walking up the ramp, looking for somewhere to hold, feeling one's sense of balance disturbed. This is the 'reality' of architecture, which moves visitors not in the way a painting moves its viewers, but through physical movement in space. The psychological drama associated with the artful depiction of people in distress has been substituted by another form of architectural 'drama': one where the sense of peril comes from walking over galvanised steel grating, down skew staircases, or up steeply inclined and cantilevered floors. The violent clash of human emotions ('agony', 'panic' and 'loss of nerve', but also hope, joy and despair upon seeing the Argus appear and disappear on the horizon) associated with Géricault's painting is replaced by the 'violent' clash of materials and the equally violent conjunction and juxtaposition of programmatic content throughout the building. The Medusa Raft has thus come to embody the paradoxical prototype of an architecture of excess practised with minimal means – one where meaning can proliferate in conditions of constraint. It is an image that has come to the rescue of architecture in a moment of crisis: an 'impasse' from which there seemed no escape.

Storytelling with the raft

This article has taken OMA's Medusa Raft as a starting point for an exploration of some of the narratives associated with the raft as a cultural trope linking art, anthropology and architecture. It is a story where narratives of suffering and despair, but also hope and humanity, converge without necessarily coalescing into a coherent whole. Unlike Koolhaas' 'The Story of the Pool', the story of the raft is not a self-contained tale of architectural desire, suspended in time. Nor is it a mere account of 'what happened' in 1816 or 1973. The story of the raft brings together references that broaden the cultural and iconographic context within which OMA's Medusa Raft can be interpreted anew. In this expanded context, the rafts of Bruegel, Géricault and Genovés all have a role to play, namely, to demonstrate how an image and its object (the raft) can operate on different levels. The appeal of OMA's raft is as a storytelling device rooted in a broad repertoire of cultural references – broader than their explicit reference to Géricault suggests. The Kunsthal merely adds another iteration, or interpretation – one of the raft-as-building. One could call this the 'happy end' of a tale of (at least) two stories: one that pictures the raft as a descent into agony, barbarism and despair ('a dream from which there is no waking up', as Koolhaas puts it) and another that pictures the raft as a locus of 'true peace', as in the case of the Acali experiment.[45] Yet, to see in the raft a mere image of duality is clearly too simplistic. The raft is a constantly shifting object, neither simply a sinking vessel *or* life-saving craft, but equally a tool in the study of human behaviour, a stage for human interaction, a prop in a studio, a work of art in an exhibition, and so on. By the same token, the Kunsthal is not a place where tensions between the 'visionary' and the 'implementable' are destined to be resolved but, on the contrary, maintained and intensified.[46] It is a place where the tension between art and architecture and, by extension, anthropology, continue to be a source of new meanings and delight. This, I argue, explains the enduring appeal of OMA's work and identifies the nature of the interpretative challenge, which their Medusa Raft poses. To test this thesis further, one would have to extend the discussion to other non-architectural disciplines such as music, literature, theatre and film. Bart Lootsma, in an essay on Koolhaas and Dutch culture of the 1960s, has

pointed to W. F. Hermans' 1958 story *De donkere kamer van Damocles (The Darkroom of Damocles)* as another antecedent for the story of the raft.[47] Hans Werner Henze's 1967 secular oratorio *Das Floß der Medusa* may also be considered a point of reference in this context.[48] Whichever way the story develops, the raft will no doubt remain a foremost example of 'an architecture capable of triggering an unlimited flow of associations'.[49]

Coda: the raft of Mies

Arguably the first building to *figure* as a raft, or turn the raft into a trope for architecture, is Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's 'Barcelona Pavilion', designed in collaboration with Lilly Reich. Built in 1929 as the (temporary) German national pavilion for the Barcelona International Exhibition, the structure was dismantled in 1930 and rebuilt in the mid-1980s. Pictures of the official reception in 1929 show the King of Spain, Alphonso XIII, and Queen Victoria Eugenie visiting the Pavilion in the company of German officials representing the Weimar Republic. In one photograph, Mies van der Rohe, looking smart in morning dress, can be seen chatting to the King. The pavilion elevates this predominantly male gathering of dignitaries above the surrounding crowd. Inside it everything seems orderly, the visitors relaxed. There are no signs of distress. Drinks are served. And yet, one cannot escape the thought that, like a raft – made of travertine, glass and steel – the pavilion has come to the rescue of someone or something, if only 'retroactively'. The King of Spain would leave his country no less than two years later, in April 1931. The Weimar Republic would crumble, and Hitler rise to power in 1933. Perhaps the pavilion anticipated something of what was to come, the disaster that was to strike these people. Whatever the case, it remained silent and, once dismantled, unable to bear witness to historical events that were to come. What the photographs show is perhaps no more than the ghost of a raft, haunting architectural history. The reconstruction, on the other hand, makes it possible to experience the pavilion and its architecture once more, without the burden of the past weighing over us. It is still a raft, but one in which the psychological charge of historical events has been dissipated.

Acknowledgement

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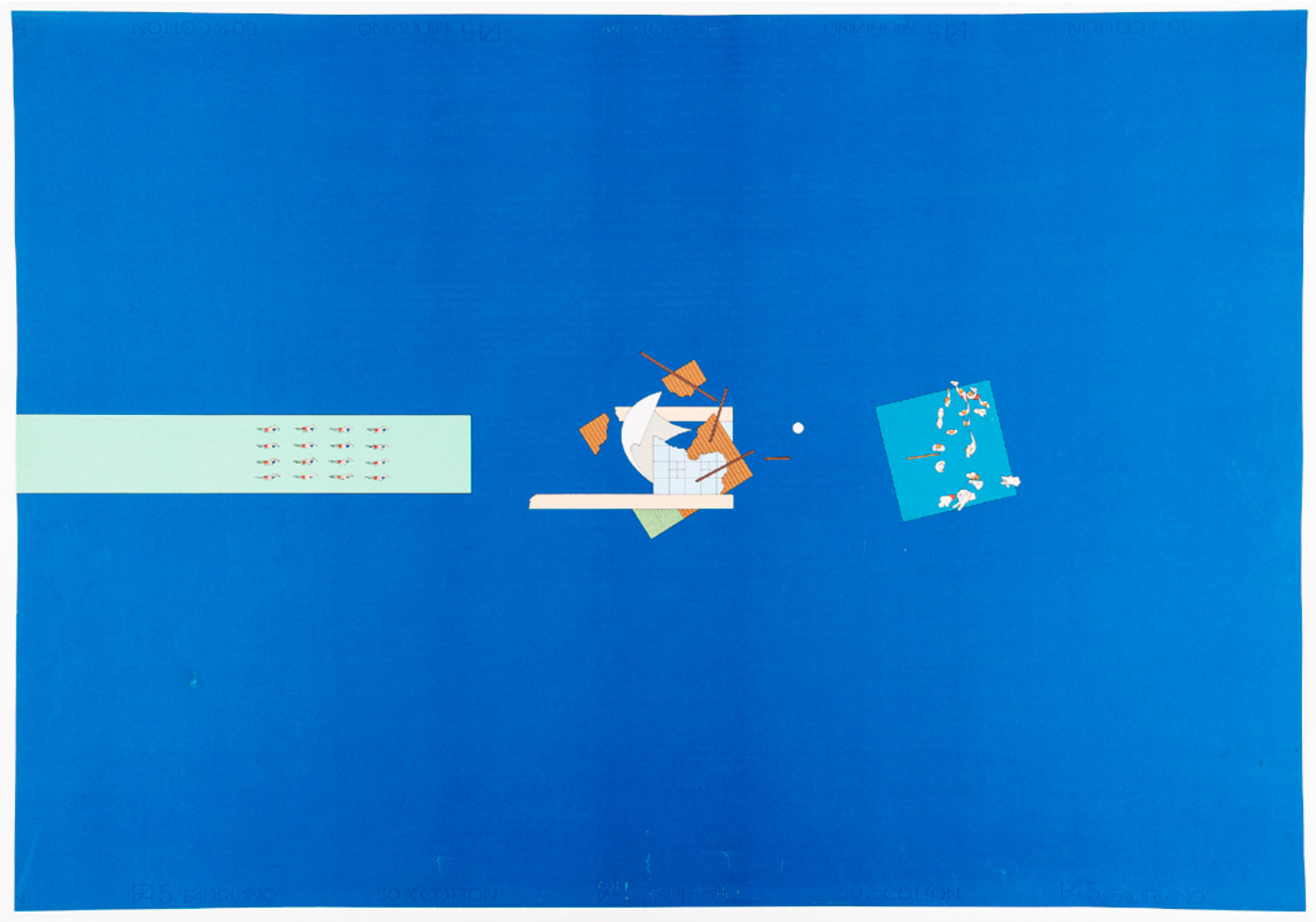
1 Rem Koolhaas, 'The Story of the Pool' (1976), in *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994), 307–10.
2 *Architectural Design*, 47(5) *OMA*, ed. Haig Beck (1977).
3 'In front of the Welfare Palace Hotel, the raft of the Constructivists collides with the raft of the Medusa: optimism vs. pessimism'. Koolhaas, *op. cit.*, 310.
4 Demetrios Porphyrios, 'Pandora's box: an essay on metropolitan portraits', *Architectural Design, op. cit.*, 357–62, 358.
5 Rem Koolhaas quoted from an interview with Mimi Poser for *Round and About the Guggenheim with Mimi Poser*. [Online] https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/oma-the-sparkling-metropolis-at-the-guggenheim-1978 [accessed 1 March 2025].
6 Porphyrios, *op. cit.*, 360.
7 Kenneth Frampton, 'Two or three things I know about them: a note on Manhattanism', *Architectural Design, op. cit.*, 315–18, 317.
8 Niall Hobhouse refers to the 'archaeology of how [the images] were made'. Interview with Madelon Vriesendorp and Niall Hobhouse, Drawing Matter (4 November 2018). https://drawingmatter.org/madelon-vriesendorp/ [accessed 28 February 2025).
9 The painting can be viewed in detail here: https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/323/ [accessed 28 February 2025]. The website of the Kunsthistorisches Museum allows viewers to zoom in on details of the painting, including the raft.
10 Frampton, too, notes how OMA's work 'reminds us of the lost art of the miniature'. Frampton, *op. cit.*, 317.
11 See Lorenz Eitner, *Géricault's 'Raft of the Medusa'* (London: Phaidon, 1972).
12 Savigny, quoted in Eitner, *op. cit.*, 8.
13 Géricault's painting was created during the Restoration in the wake of Napoleon being sent into exile on Saint Helena, following his army's defeat at Waterloo in June 1815. After Napoleon's fall, imperial patronage had disappeared, and the subject matter of history painting ceased to be relevant. This left artists in a creative vacuum, which Géricault resolved by choosing to depict a sensational news story in a format associated with history painting. The clash could not have been more deliberately provocative, and the painting had a profound effect on the younger generation of artists of the time, precisely because it displayed a new-found freedom of artistic expression (see Eitner, *op. cit.*).
14 OMA, 'The Egg of Columbus Center/1973', *Architectural Design, op. cit.*, 334–37 (334).
15 *Ibid.*
16 Koolhaas, *op. cit.*, 310.
17 This last feature anticipates by two centuries the design of the famous Hannover Pavilion of 2000 by MVRDV, whose rooftop was topped by four windmills.
18 OMA, 'The Egg of Columbus Center/1973', *op. cit.*
19 OMA, *Architectural Design, op. cit.*, 306 (inside cover). It will be noted that the quoted passage locates the shipwreck erroneously in the Mediterranean, which must be a slip – one that has the effect of placing the story more firmly in the realm of myth.
20 OMA, 'The City of the Captive Globe/1972', *Architectural Design, op. cit.*, 331–33 (331).
21 OMA, 'Welfare Palace Hotel/1976-77', *Architectural Design, op. cit.*, 345–47 (345).
22 It may be pointed out here that, irrespective of these differences, Géricault and Koolhaas are united in their essentially allegorical impulse, for both 'vulgarise' the myth or legend linked to the name of Medusa by casting the ancient Greek story of petrified horror, personified in the mask of Medusa, as a scene of desolate and all-too human suffering that is utterly opposed to myth.
23 Frampton, *op. cit.*, 317.
24 *Ibid.*
25 *Ibid.*
26 *Ibid.*
27 The 'raft of the Constructivists' is not fundamentally different from the raft of the Medusa in this regard; they are joined in opposition ('optimism vs. pessimism').
28 Teresa Stoppani, 'Postcard from Nowhere (Counterswimming)', Drawing Matter (08 April 2020) https://drawingmatter.org/postcard-from-nowhere-counterswimming/ [accessed 1 March 2025].
29 Genovés published his account of the experiment in 1975 under the title *Acali* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta).
30 The so-called *Ra* and *Ra II* expeditions took place in 1969 and 1970 and were intended to prove that ocean crossings were technically possible in ancient times. The crew had deliberately been selected to represent a diversity of race, religion and nationality – something Genovés extended with regard to gender.
31 See Stuart Jeffries, 'Mutiny on the Sex Raft: how a 70s science project descended into violent chaos', *The Guardian* (14 January 2019) https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jan/14/mutiny-on-the-sex-raft-70s-experiment-santiago-genoves [accessed 19 August 2025].
32 In Koolhaas' script for *The Story of the Pool*, the pool is equipped with locker-rooms for both men and women. Yet, the illustrations show the pool propelled only by a team of broad-shouldered, speedo-clad, male swimmers. The absence (or invisibility) of female architect-swimmers makes the presence of female locker rooms on board the floating pool therefore appear somewhat spurious. If the story is intended to celebrate, even if ironically, the metropolis as the privileged domain of the white male bachelor, it thereby excludes women (not just from certain spaces, but from the realm of representation as well). The emphasis on social uniformity is also evident in OMA's depictions of the *Raft of the Medusa*, which – with the notable exception of Zoe Zenghelis' painting created for *The Egg of Columbus Centre* (1973) – depicts the men on board the raft as all white – ignoring the fact that some were black (as can be seen in Géricault's painting). In the last analysis, the metropolitan condition advocated or indeed critiqued by OMA effectively eradicates difference in favour of the Same/sameness, which at the level of the city is symbolised by the grid: every 'block' is just another block. One may interpret 'The Story of the Pool' in this light as Koolhaas' equivalent of Plato's 'allegory of the cave', which Luce Irigaray, in *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1974), criticises for its lack of gendered differentiation and emphasis on sameness and equivalence between men. Just like the prisoners in Plato's cave, who are 'like us' (male, presumably), all facing the same direction with their backs turned towards the one source of 'true' knowledge, so do the architect-swimmers, who all look the same, swim in the same direction with their backs turned towards a common goal (the 'Metropolis'). They are, moreover, all driven by one and the same desire: 'to go to America, especially New York'. See Koolhaas, *op. cit.*, 307. The Acali experiment, by contrast, foregrounds social difference in a way that is irreducible to (and therefore critical of) any form of social uniformity/conformity; every crew member had their own personal, and widely differing, motives to participate. Here, the 'stories' associated with the Acali and Medusa rafts diverge to reveal a complex cultural trope invested with contrasting and sometimes incompatible meanings.
33 Participating in Lindeen's documentary proves to be a cathartic experience in this respect, or at least revelatory for many.
34 Fé Evangelina Seymour talking in Markus Lindeen, dir., *The Raft* (Stockholm: Fasad, 2018)., 1:34:00.
35 Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis, with Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis, *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* (AA Thesis, 1972), in *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations 1956–76*, ed. Martin van Schaik and Otakar Máčel (Munich: Prestel, 2005), 236–53 (253). For an extended discussion and analysis of the project, see Lieven de Cauter and Hilde Heynen, 'The Exodus Machine', in *Exit Utopia, op. cit.*, 263–76.
36 Quoted in Lindeen, *op. cit.*, 1:33:00.
37 Quoted in *ibid.*, 1:33:10.
38 Koolhaas, Zenghelis, Vriesendorp and Zenghelis, *op. cit.*, n.p.
39 In the case of the Acali this is evident in the manipulative behaviour adopted by Genovés towards members of the crew, including the captain. Koolhaas adopted and repurposed Salvador Dalí's 'paranoiac critical method' to develop a speculative practice centred on the manipulation of reality through architecture.
40 Vriesendorp and Hobhouse, *op. cit.*
41 This was a year before I started my architectural studies at TU Delft. If I return to the Kunsthal here, it is in part because there could be no more paradigmatic building for my generation – a provocation of unparalleled potency that has never ceased to intrigue, challenge opinion and haunt certainly my thinking about architecture.
42 Belgian architect and critic Paul Vermeulen first pointed to the affinities between the Kunsthal and Melnikov's Pavilion, which he describes as a 'prototype of a building which is cut into pieces by a half-covered road', as quoted in Tibor Pataky, *OMA's Kunsthal in Rotterdam: Rem Koolhaas and the New Europe* (Zurich: Park Books, 2023), 216–18.
43 Tibor Pataky interprets the unifying principle in OMA's design for the Kunsthal as reflecting a utopian project linked to the unification of Europe. See Chapter 5 'Modernism Obsolete: A New Approach for a New Europe', in *ibid.*, 245–92.
44 The despair experienced by visitors in a wheelchair facing an impossibly steep ramp remained long a problem but has since been resolved when the entrance was moved.
45 Fé Evangelina Seymour, quoted in Lindeen, *op. cit.*, 1:34:10.
46 See George Baird, 'Les extrêmes qui se touchent?', in *Architectural Design, op. cit.*, 326–27. Like Frampton, Baird identifies in the early work of OMA a productive polemic where drawings and texts present the reader with 'opposing positions' – between, for example, the 'visionary' and the 'implementable'. According to Baird these polarities raise questions for the long term, in particular how OMA might resolve the oppositions in practice. Projects like the Kunsthal arguably demonstrate not how such a resolution can be achieved, but how they can be maintained as a source of (continued) architectural production.
47 Lootsma points out that Hermans' novel opens with a story told by a school teacher to a class about a shipwrecked man, who has saved himself on a raft. See Bart Lootsma, 'Koolhaas, Constant and Dutch Culture in the 1960s' (4 September 2007), 7. http://txt.architecturaltheory.eu/?p=1320&lang=en [accessed 26 July 2025]. I thank Mark Dorrian for pointing me to this reference.
48 With thanks to Niall Hobhouse for making me aware of this play and sending me a review of the recent performance by the Komische Oper Berlin.

49 Porphyrios, *op. cit.*, 359. The flow of associations would no doubt have to include film. Notable cinematic moments involving rafts include the scene in *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922) where the vampire (Count Orlok) is transported in a coffin placed on a raft. Of architectural interest here are the six trapezoid coffins 'filled with dirt' stacked in pyramidal fashion on top of the raft (also trapezoid in shape). Another notable one would be the large raft in Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972), which towards the end of the film is overrun by monkeys.

1—



Rem Koolhaas and Madelon Vriesendorp, Trial proof of the *Medusa Raft*, 1978. Screenprint. DMC 3000.11, Drawing Matter Collections.

Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818/1819. Oil on canvas, 491 x 716 cm. Musée du Louvre, Department of Paintings, Inv. 4884, C 51. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

3—

Pieter Bruegel d. Ä, *The Tower of Babel*, 1563. Oil on oakwood, 114.4 x 155.5 x 3.8 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie. © KHM-Museumsverband.

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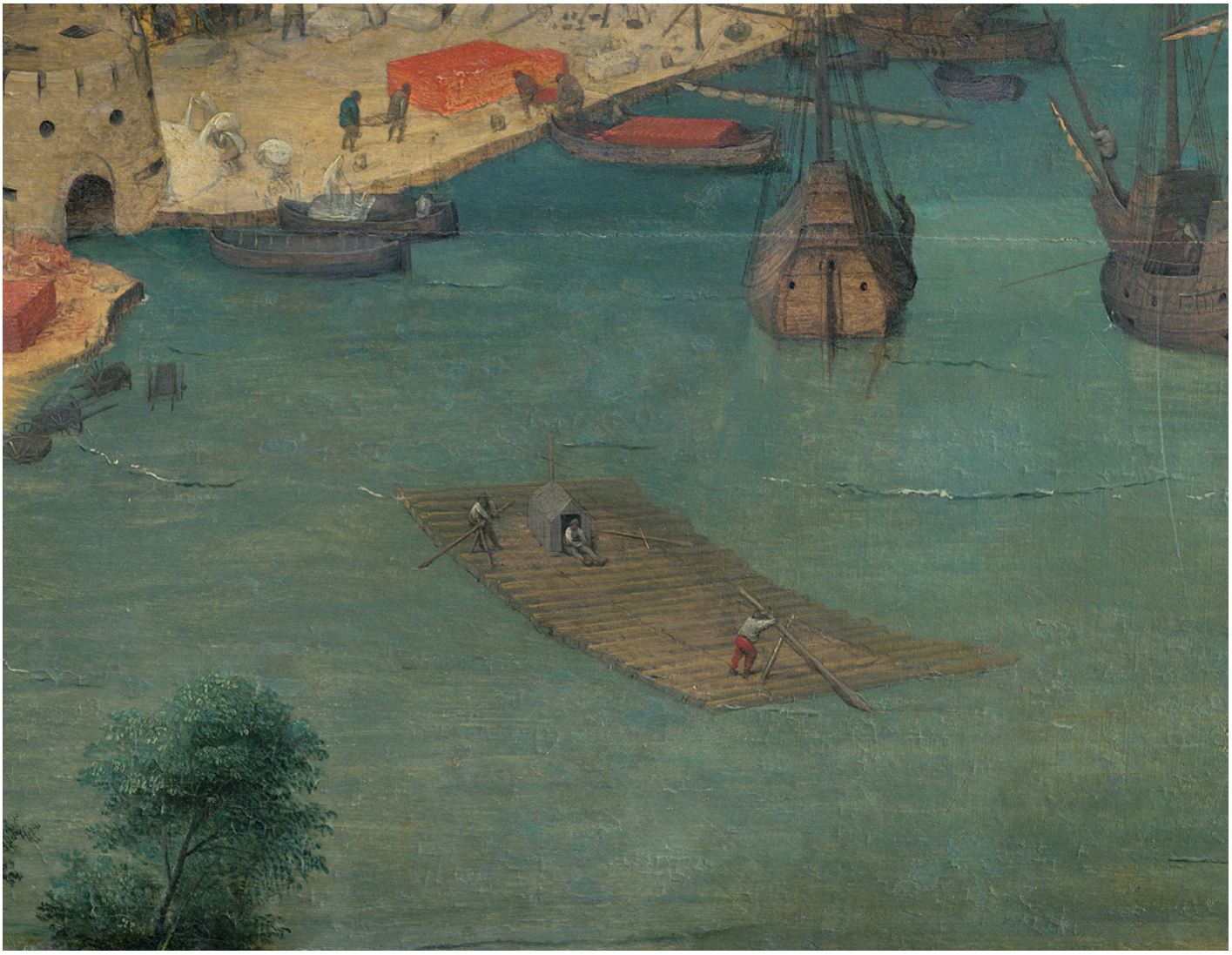

Detail from Pieter Bruegel d. Ä, *The Tower of Babel*, 1563. Oil on oakwood, 114.4 x 155.5 x 3.8 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie. © KHM-Museumsverband.

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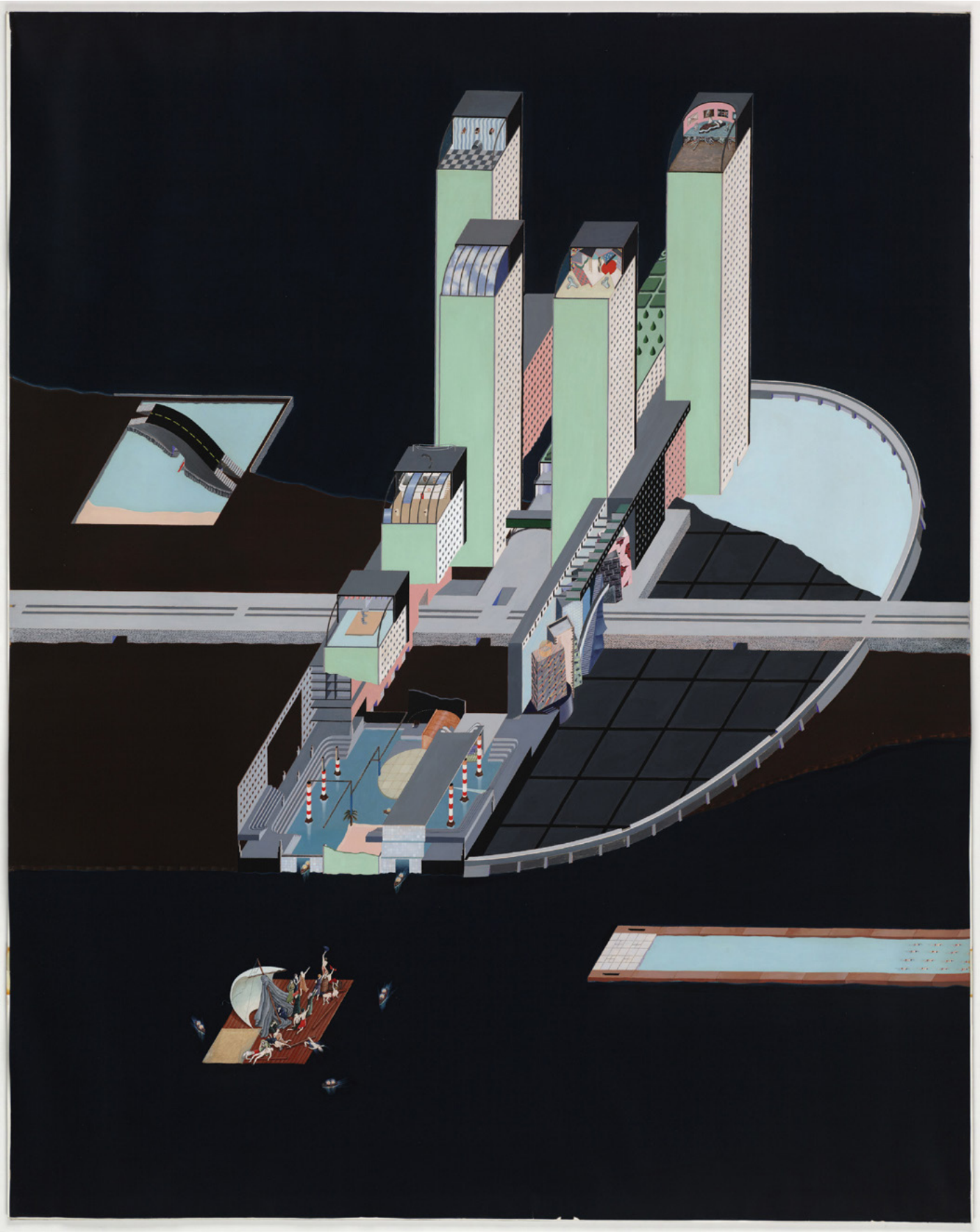
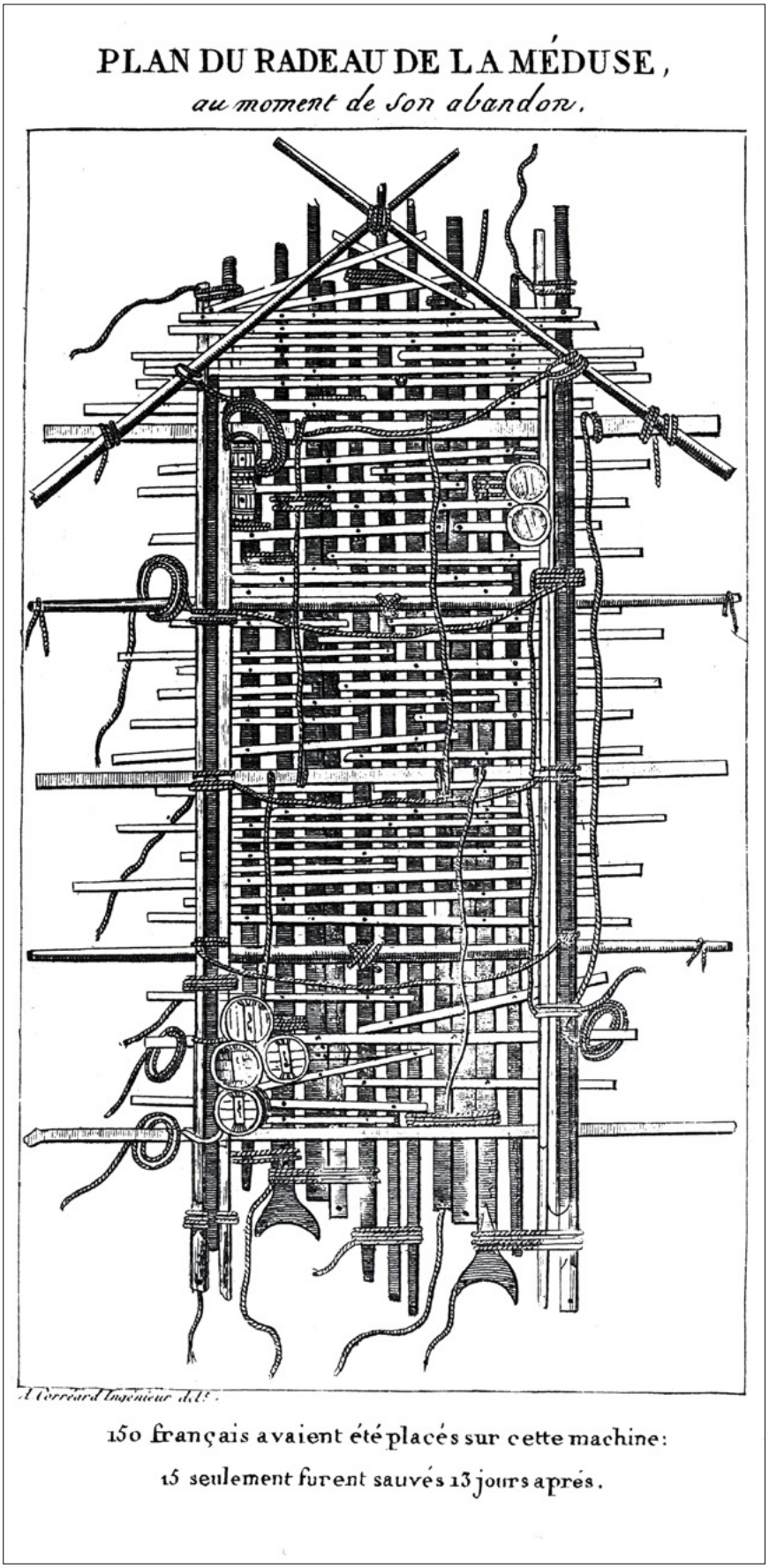


Rem Koolhaas and Madelon Vriesendorp, *Welfare Palace Hotel Project, Roosevelt Island, New York City (Cutaway axonometric)*, 1976. Gouache on paper, 129.5 x 102.9 cm. Gift of the Howard Gilman Foundation.



Alexandre Corréard, Plan of the Medusa's raft at the moment of its crew's rescue, from A. Correard, H. Savigny, D'Anglas de Praviel and Paul C.L. Alexandre Rand des Adrets (dit Sander Rang), *Relation complète du naufrage de la frégate La Méduse faisant partie de l'expédition du Sénégal en 1816*. Reprint 1968 by Jean de Bonnot éditeur. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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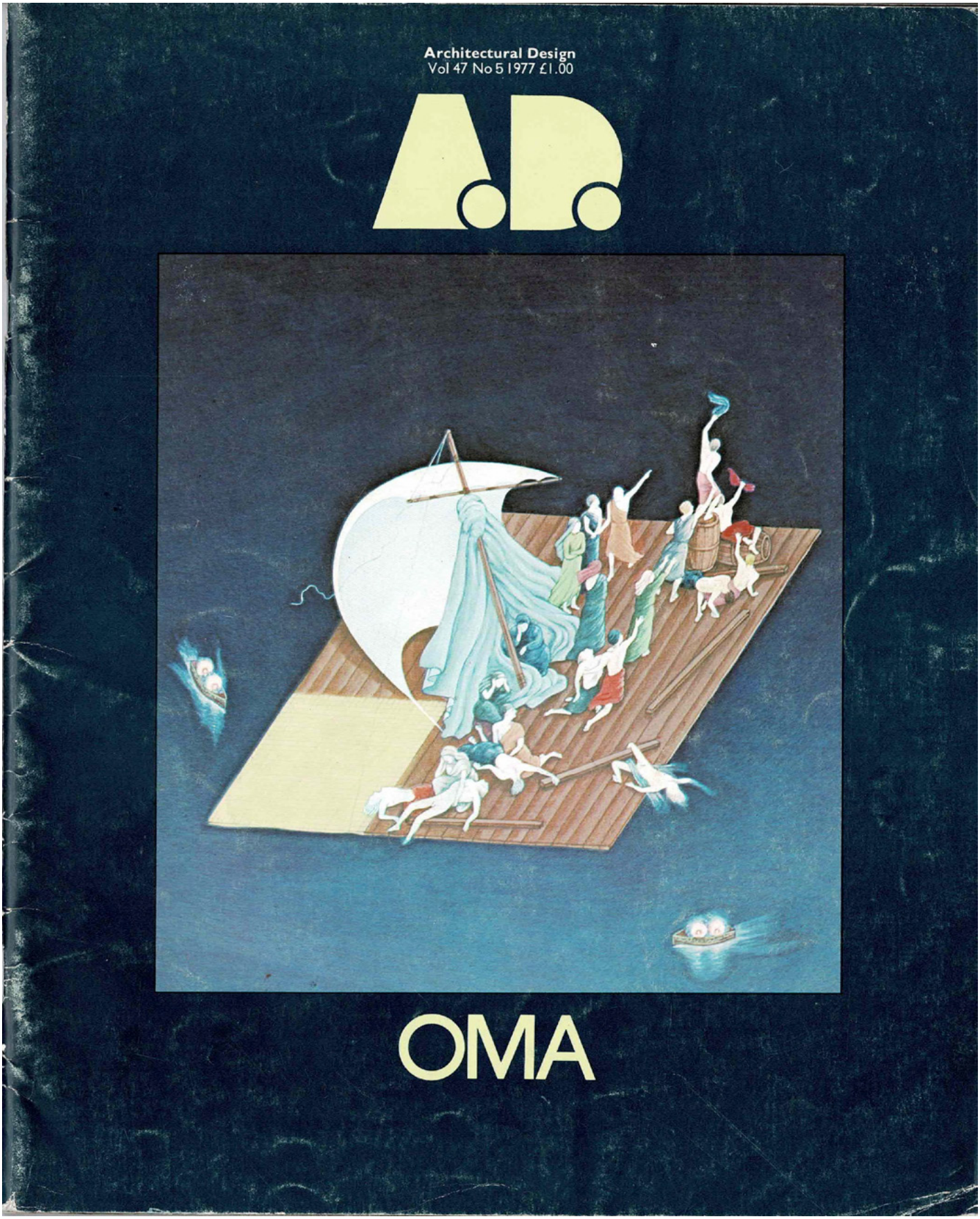
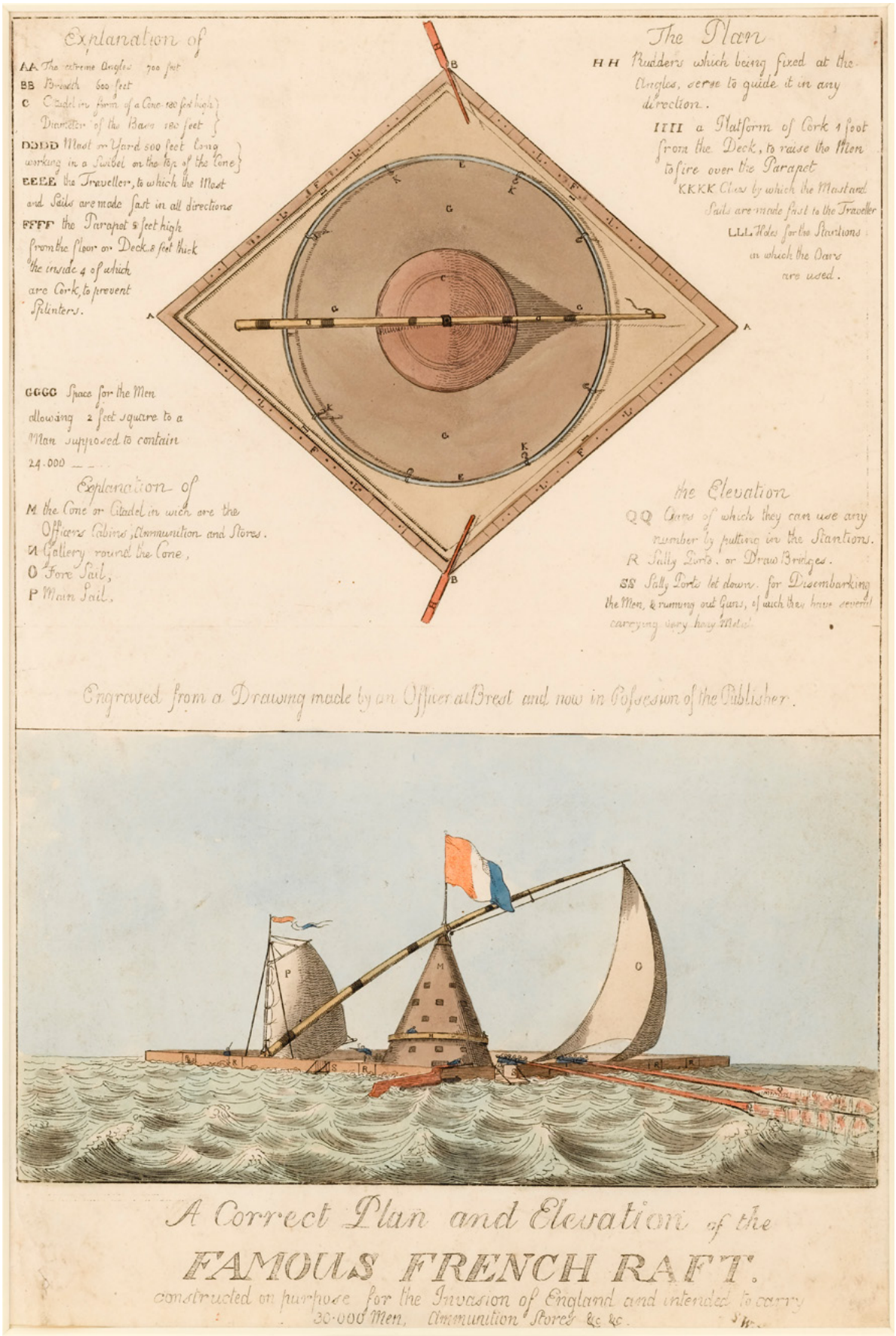
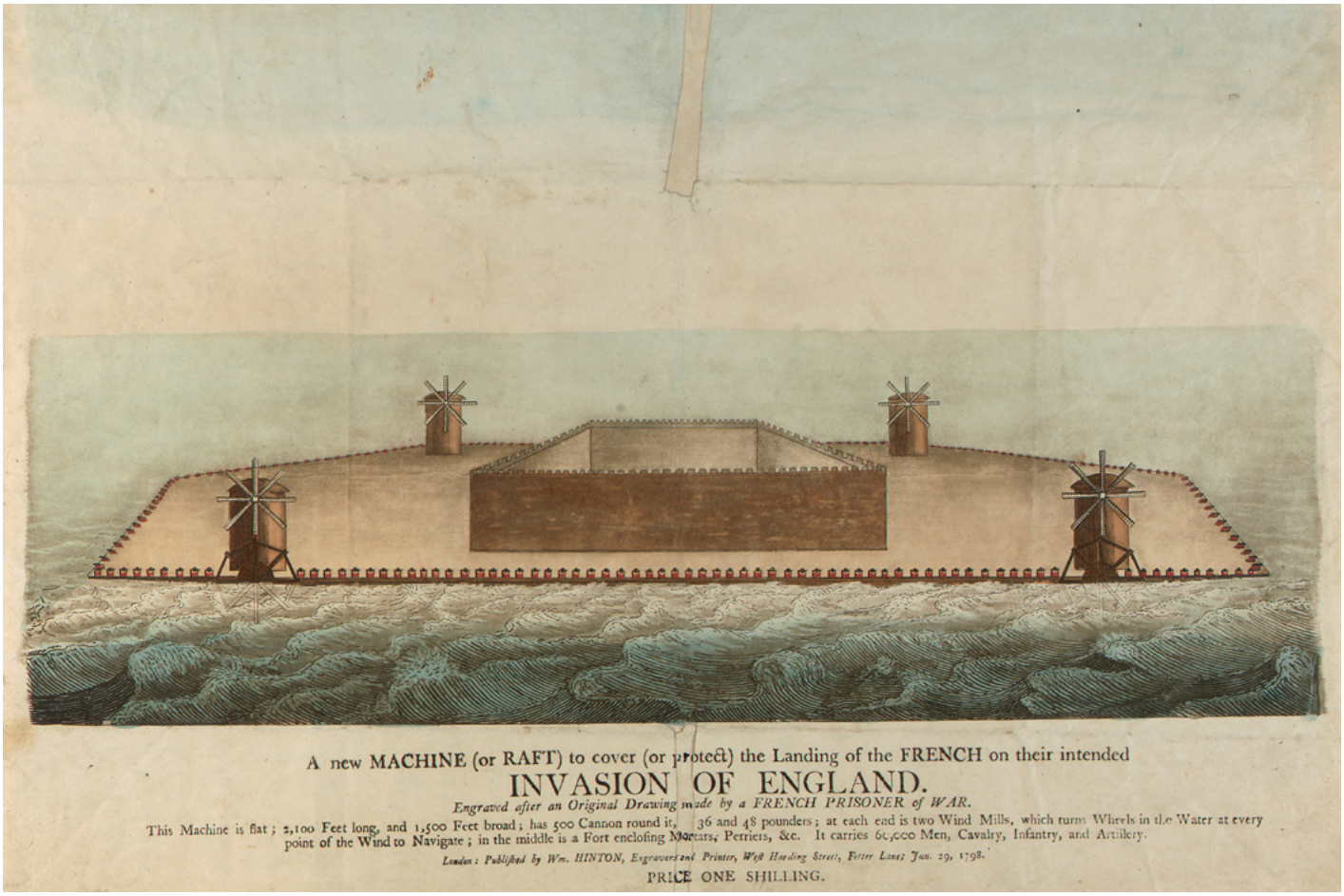


The cover of *AD (Architectural Design)*, 47, n.5 (1977) with a detail from the *Welfare Palace Hotel Project* painting (cited above) depicting the *Medusa Raft*. Reproduced courtesy OMA.



British School, 18th century, *A Correct Plan and Elevation of the Famous French Raft constructed on purpose for the invasion of England and intended to carry 30000 men, Ammunition stores &c &c. Engraved from a Drawing made by an Officer at Brest and now in Possession of the Publisher*, 18th century. 37.1 x 25.2 cm.



William Hinton, British School, 18th century, *A new Machine (or Raft) to cover (or protect) the Landing of the French on their intended Invasion of England etc (Rafts 4)*, 29 January 1798. Print, 26.9 x 39.2 cm.

The Acali at sea, 1973. © Fasad.

11—

12—

11— Plywood reconstruction of the Acali made for Marcus Lindeen's documentary *The Raft* (2018). Courtesy Marcus Lindeen.
12— Santiago Genovés (centre) with crew on board the Acali, 1973. © Fasad.

13—

14—

13— The Kunsthal, Rotterdam, viewed from Museumpark, 2023. Photograph by the author.
14— The skew ramp (also known as ‘Hellingstraat’) at the Kunsthal, Rotterdam, 2023. Photograph by the author.

15—

16—

15— The Kunsthal, Rotterdam, viewed from the Westzeedijk (South side). Photo: Jeroen Musch. Courtesy Kunsthal, Rotterdam.

16— The extended I-beam at the Kunsthal, Rotterdam, 2023. Photograph by the author.