When asked to imagine the future of art schools, Parasite 2.0, a collective of architects and designers at the crossroads of architectural conception, scenography and the visual arts, began with this thought. With a leap through time, tasting more like the distant past.

Perhaps this scenario went through their minds as they walked through the studios, galleries, pathways, terraces and gardens of the Villa Arson, a school which encourages its students to appropriate the spaces and to make them come alive.

Dedicated since the mid 1980s to a type of experimentation where everything becomes hybrid and intermingled, the Villa Arson is several things simultaneously. Both school and art center, building and garden, 18th century villa and ‘outstanding contemporary building’, made of raw concrete and stones from the Var.

In such a context, Parasite 2.0 conceived Gently Brut as a series of specific interventions distributed around the original villa and the architecture created by Michel Marot in 1960, considered to be one of the most singular examples of brutalism in France. As the title of the exhibition suggests, the interventions are carried out in opposition to the architecture and embody its contradictions: the roughness of the concrete is softened by the use of textile, the brutalist gray by colored pigments, the monumental scale by human scale, and the rigorous conception by the spontaneity of the creative gesture.

This dialectics between the preexisting building and the works of art added on to it symbolically leads us to another kind of dialectics: that between various generations of students and the institution. Thus Parasite 2.0 has imagined students taking over Marot’s project, gradually modifying it by adding works, protesting both against the institution and the architecture.

In a sketch from 1955, Michel Marot represented the Italian village of San Gregorio as one of his references for his conception of the Villa Arson. The architect somewhat attempted to reproduce the complexity of an old town, with its social network.

But there is an essential time element which differs between an old town and a new project built from scratch: the absence of history of the latter. The layers of complexity of a self-developed village are the result of a stratification of actions, events and actors, which can only occur over years, or even ages. The layers of history are what transforms an architecture into a locus.

By fantasizing and questioning future activities, the barriers or potential contamination between architecture and the visual arts, Parasite 2.0 implements what philosopher Henri Lefebvre might have defined as “obsolescence of the space to the advantage of time”: returning its very transience to the site.

Parasite 2.0 is a collective of architects and designers based in Milan. Founded in 2010 by Stefano Colombo, Eugenio Cosentino and Luca Marullo, the collective explores the status of human habitat in a hybrid environment intermingling architecture, visual arts and scenography. It has worked and collaborated with the Milan Triennial, the International Fashion Fair in Copenhagen, Ikea, Missoni, the Terraforma festival, Sunnei and the Venice Architecture Biennial, amongst others. Parasite 2.0 has also taught at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, at the NABA Nuova Accademia Belle Arti in Milan, for the program MADE and, since 2022, has been teaching regularly at the Design Academy in Eindhoven. In 2016, Parasite 2.0 was awarded the YAP Young Architects Program prize by the MAXXI museum.
Vittorio Parisi

How would you define Parasite 2.0? As an architect's office, an artist collective, a trio of friends, or all three? And most of all, what does Parasite 2.0 do?

Parasite 2.0

A trio of friends, that's a nice definition! We often get descriptions we like that. Over time we've defined ourselves in various ways, from an architects collective to a design studio. Today we think we are a sculpture studio (progettazione in Italian, editor's note). Obviously, we intend as wide a definition of possibility as possible. We don't want to be bound by the limits of a professional practice. We want to be free to continue to experiment and to meet new challenges.

What does Parasite 2.0 do? It conceived on various scales and in various contexts, while concentrating on a diverse array of objects. We find that labels are anachronistic necessity in an increasingly mobile and fluid world.

VP

Since this is not the first time it happens to you - in an interview for the online magazine Exibart, you mention that your first application as young architects was for an artists residency - how do trained architects and designers end up doing a contemporary art exhibition?

P

Precisely because of what we mentioned in the previous answer: As we progressed in our studies, we realized that the tools available for architectural conception didn't necessarily have to be limited to imagining a project or urban planning. From the start, we felt the need to explore the relations between the spaces they inhabit from a wider point of view. We naturally turned towards the world of contemporary art.

The theme of our research is ideally suited to this context, where ephemeral architecture and installations are privileged means of expression.

VP

The previous question was deliberately ambiguous, and actually implied another question: according to you, at what point does it no longer make sense to differentiate contemporary art from architecture?

P

As soon as one is no longer limited to functional, economical, technical or aesthetic possibilities. For example, the Marot’s project for the Villa Arson was more than a reflection on architecture and its aesthetic/functionality of potential it was also the idea of a giant inhabitable sculpture.

VP

Any exhibition has to deal with a space. This may seem trite, but it’s an ontologically crucial aspect. Architects are often considered to be space-makers, to shape the space where it is held. However, if you had been told that this was one of his works, you could have still been convinced it was a hilly landscape.

P

We have always felt the need to contaminate it through other means. Insomuch as we are able to judge our own work, our approach to conception is visceralily linked to a form of pragmatism which comes from our training as architects. We have always felt the need to contaminate it through other more theoretical types of research, perhaps closer to the world of artistic research. Here we are certainly confronted with two interpretations of the word “design”, through different tools, and such contamination can only enrich these interpretations on both sides.

VP

If we were to ask Parasite 2.0 to create the art school of the future, where would you start?

P

If we were to create the school of the future, perhaps we would start by having a dialogue with today’s students, or even by creating an inter-generational and diverse team. But it is hard to predict the future, considering how fast the world we live in is changing. To describe this exhibition project, we decided to start with the following sentence: We are in 2068 and throughout the world architects have regained control of what is left of universities! No more architects or designers, just people who create the school of the future, where would you start?

VP

As young architects was for an artists residency Exibart, you mention that your first application what would have almost renounced their control, including? For obvious reasons the letter interchanges and thereby the slightest changes.

P

One might ask, where does Marot’s project stop and Parasite 2.0’s intervention begin?

VP

The starting point from which you give free reign to your imagination for this exhibition reveals a dystopic aspect: “We are in 2068 and throughout the world architects have regained control of what is left of universities!” But you do based on Marot’s reflection on the Villa Arson’s main vocation, which he conceived as a place to where artists and students could build their own space for creation. Was this the feeling you had when you visited the Villa Arson and its spaces, the students’ studios and the exhibition galleries?

P

We had the feeling that it was a very free and open space of experimentation. Students also seem to benefit from a degree of independence in the use of the space, even though the slightest changes. Buildings suffer from the wear of time and of the people who inhabit them, if they are not maintained. For example, the Villa Arson, first as a school and then as an art center, is permanently at the center of this contamination process. During our consideration of the space, we met with a specific intervention by Dan Graham. If we hadn’t been told that this was one of his works, it could very well have been part of Marot’s initial project.

In contrast, the relation between our intervention and Marot’s architecture will be “terminated” at a specific moment: the moment when the installation is taken down. It aims to create a contrast with the pre-existing situation, this being presented as a post-humous addition, an obvious superficiality. The intervention is written into the context, while also declaring itself as decidedly foreign.

VP

Designing an exhibition at the Villa Arson not as an exhibition space but as an architectural site, to imagine an aesthetic and symbolic dialogue with all the components of Michel Marot’s project: the reinforce concrete, the stones and vegetation that intertwine to enliven a rather singular organic brutalism, laid out horizontally on a hill like the fortified villages in central Italy that inspired Marot. This hybrid landscape includes passages, forms, ridges and volumes which invite us to interpret the project as a landscape which comes from our training as architects. We have always felt the need to contaminate it through other means. Insomuch as we are able to judge our own work, our approach to conception is visceralily linked to a form of pragmatism which comes from our training as architects. We have always felt the need to contaminate it through other more theoretical types of research, perhaps closer to the world of artistic research. Here we are certainly confronted with two interpretations of the word “design”, through different tools, and such contamination can only enrich these interpretations on both sides.

VP

According to you, what is the main difference between an architect's office and an artist's way of conducting a project and an artist's way of doing research? According to your experience, what is the contamination potential between these two worlds?