

Platform, container, environment. 2019 Shenzhen Biennale as innovation in practice

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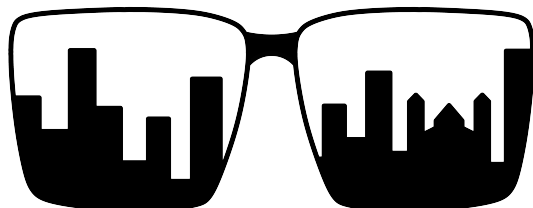
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THE ARCHITECT AND THE CITY

VOLUME 2

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THE ARCHITECT AND THE CITY

VOLUME 2



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PLATFORM, CONTAINER, ENVIRONMENT. 2019 SHENZHEN BIENNALE AS INNOVATION IN PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In a time of supra-national economic, political and social crises, the architectural profession is acknowledged as necessitating of a fundamental restructuring in order to gain both renewed relevance as a discipline (Awan, Schneider and Till 2009; Till 2014, 9-11) and sustainability as day-to-day practice (Deamer and Bernstein 2010; Deamer 2015; etc.). A tendency to diversify the products of architectural practice - i.e. beyond buildings - is facilitated by a constantly increasing number of curatorial outlets - i.e. Triennales, Biennales - allowing to increase the perceived pace of innovation (Papastergiadis and Martin 2011, 45-62).

The paper looks at the curatorial process of the 2019 Shenzhen Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism¹ as a way to access a select sample of internationally mobile contemporary practices whose work is produced at the intersection between profession, academia, and independent research. Drawing on literature pertaining to the concept of communities of practice (Amin and Roberts 2008, 353-369; Faulconbridge 2010, 2842-2858), ethnography of practice (Yaneva 2009) and feminist theory (Frichot and Runting 2015, 397-411), we question the agency of the Biennale and similar curated events as facilitating environments entailing the reconceptualization of design practice (O' Neill & Wilson 2015; Szacka 2019). In order to do so, we look at the practices that populate the exhibition, how they self-represent and how they employ the exhibition to maximize the possibility of producing innovation.

Finally, we select a small number of installations that appear the most resilient to contingencies, and analyze their trajectories outside of the Biennale in order to understand the way specific networks are built and effects are achieved, within platforms that are indeed part of day-to-day practice, rather than existing outside of it.

KEYWORDS

Innovation; practice; Biennale; container technology; contingency.

1. THE AGENCY OF PRACTICE AND THE ROLE OF EXHIBITIONS

In a time of supra-national economic, political and social crises, the architectural profession is acknowledged as necessitating of a fundamental restructuring in order to gain both renewed relevance as a discipline (Awan, Schneider and Till 2011; Till 2014) and sustainability as day-to-day practice (Deamer and Bernstein 2010; Deamer 2015). A tendency to diversify the products of architectural practice - i.e. beyond buildings - is facilitated by a constantly increasing number of curatorial outlets - i.e. Triennales, Biennales - allowing to increase the perceived pace of innovation (Papastergiadis and Martin 2011). Cultural events *par excellence*, biennials are generally studied and debated as a global phenomenon, as tools of marketing strategies adopted by cities that strive to emerge in the neoliberal system of the so-called "knowledge

¹ More specifically, we consider the practices that applied to the Open Call of the "Eyes of the City" section and were selected for the exhibition.

economy.” Even though they are inextricably associated with notions of homogenization, commodification and spectacularization of contemporary cultural experiences (Urry 1995; Evans 2003; Hornstein 2011), nevertheless these exhibitionary formats are commonly considered among the best-rehearsed media of dissemination and display of disciplinary knowledge in the fields of architecture and arts (Jones 2016; Smith 2012; Vogel 2010; Martini and Martini 2011; Gardner and Green 2016).

A growing amount of literature attempts to understand the role that such outlets have had in the development of architectural discourse ever since the onset of architecture as a liberal profession through the Beaux Arts, the Modern and the Postmodern (MacLeod, Hourston Hanks and Hale 2012; Szacka 2019), to name just a few key moments in which the close relationship between curatorship and practice has allowed for a stronger perception of the architect as public figure. More recently, architecture as a practice has known a decrease in public relevance; disciplinary discourse tends to mirror a growing concern with the real agency of design with respect to pressing matters of the contemporary world such as urban poverty and informality, climate change, and even the very conditions within which design and construction are carried out as practice (WBYA 2018, Deamer 2015, Brenner 2015), while architectural education is showing an “undisciplined” move towards the scale of the city (Cuff 2014) in search of renewed relevance. If we accept that exhibitions are facilitating environments entailing the reconfiguration of design practice (O’Neill and Wilson 2015; Szacka 2019), thus impacting the way that design is understood and the degree to which it can claim relevance, we must understand how exhibitions are made as a real practice. In his conceptualization, architecture historian Florian Kossak (2012, 214) uses the term “productive exhibition” to acknowledge the

exhibitionary format acting as the testing ground for “new forms of the production of architecture itself” and as “a continuation and integral part of the architectural praxis [...] that has a transformative and progressive role in the development of architecture”: this allows for a re-consideration of the exhibitionary format in terms of potential agency outside the “white cube” conceptual space and its well-rehearsed politics of display, as investigated today by a growing bulk of curators and scholars.²

The discourse around the way exhibitions impact on architectural debate most usually revolves around an epistemological approach, centering on the distance between curators’ intention and effect at a critical level (O’Neill and Wilson 2015), on the way mediated messages convey a real shift in the way architectural design is practiced (MacLeod, Hourston Hanks and Hale 2012), or on the way exhibitions allow for a stronger vector of change (Pestellini Laparelli 2018, 22) and internationalization of discourse (Filipovic, van Hal and Øvstebø 2010). These perspectives rarely allow for an unpacking of the relationship between the exhibition and the real conditions within which it is produced. Drawing on Bruno Latour’s understanding of the “entanglement” (1988, 1996, 2007) and subsequent ANT explorations of the relationship between sites of reality and the production of any (necessarily sociotechnical) advancement, we set out to explode the real conditions of production of a specific exhibition, in the hypothesis that such real conditions – the contingent here and now – have a stronger impact on the content of the exhibit and therefore on the way it, in turn, impacts on discourse, than has been recognized. In this perspective, the observation of UABB 2019 – Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture (hereafter UABB) is employed as a way to measure the effectiveness of the notion of “entanglement” as applied to the life-scale laboratory environment of the curated

² Recently, an entire issue of the magazine Volume has been dedicated to the investigation of the potentials and of the roles of biennials today (See Volume #54. On Biennials).

exhibition, looking in particular to one of the two main sections of the exhibition, "Eyes of the City."

2. OUTER TRAJECTORIES

In this section, we look at the way selected practices describe themselves as participants to contemporary discourse around the redefinition of the boundaries of architectural practice, in order to assess the role that UABB has played in their innovation/deviation/reinvention/development. To do so, we employ as main sources: 1) the data on all participants that we have gathered throughout the curatorial process, 2) parallel interviews we have conducted with nine participating groups, and 3) personal exchanges and conversations held throughout the development of the work. Collected data (1) refers to the type of firms that have participated and the way they describe their practice; on various occasions, the curatorial team were asked by UABB and local authorities to give exhaustive accounts

of all participants to the exhibition, in terms of individual affiliations, geographical locations as well as narratives. The nine parallel interviews (2) were structured in three main parts: the first looked in closer detail to the structure of the group, the second to its reasons for participating to the biennale and the third to the way that each proposal has evolved within it. Both (1) and (3) were collected throughout the six months of continuous interaction with participating groups, while (2) were carried out after the opening of the exhibition. Using these data on an epistemological level allows us to define some of the strategies that are consciously deployed by these practices in order to actively push perceived boundaries of the discipline and gain agency within the contemporary world.

Within the total amount of 130 teams that applied to the Eyes of the City UABB Open Call, 25 defined their structure as "research group" or "academic association". Of the remaining 105, a large part defined its activity as "freelance" or "private studio", while 17 preferred more hybrid definitions such as

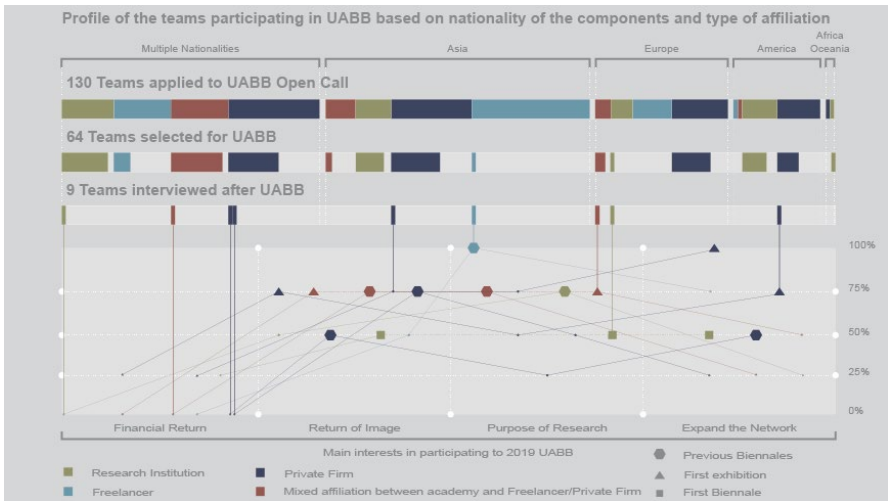


Figure 1. Tracing of the nationalities of the teams and their interests in participating within 2019 UABB – Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture. Diagram by the authors.

"freelancer/academic", "studio/academic". Looking at the individual biographies provided by the 64 teams selected to participate, it is evident how the profile of architectural or design firm is perceived as constraining; most exhibitors show a tendency to describe their design work as other from a projection of built artifacts, towards more experimental and less tangible contents, which identify the social, interpretative and innovative role of the profession in an heterogeneous mix of multiple activities. This is evident in the self definitions that have been provided, such as "research and media practice," "multidisciplinary design practice," "Space Lab," "platform".

While only 19% of participating groups stated an official affiliation, as group, to an academic institution, for a further 15% different affiliations explicitly coexisted as some members stated a professional affiliation to an office or private organization, while others stated an academic affiliation. Furthermore, of the 25 academic institutions involved within the UABB exhibition, 6 of them³ participated with two or three different proposals. Some of the professional skills that were featured within participating groups were conventional ones such as architects, designer, artists and urban planners, but also extra-disciplinary ones such as "CG Artist," "Coder," "Computer Scientist," "Virtual Reality Specialist," "Software Engineer," "Aerospace Engineer," "Economic Geographer," "Actress," "Filmmaker," "Information Designer" and "Computational Designer," among others.⁴ From a geographical point of view, of all participating teams, 45 have members with different nationalities, and 13 have members that currently reside and work in different cities or nations⁵. Finally, of the 64 participating groups, at least 9 were formed specifically to participate to the exhibition, across individuals and pre-existing groups.

While this sample is not wide enough to give an exhaustive restitution of the type of practices that populate architecture biennales, it is nonetheless clear that these practices, specifically, tend to structure themselves through recombinative strategies and "intercohesion" (Stark and Balàzs 2010). Contact across different cohesive groups through spatial proximity (Amin and Roberts 2008) and global mobility (Faulconbridge 2010) has been identified as the locus of innovation production; some authors argue that in order to maximize innovative potential, groups should foster "cohesion" and "connectivity" (Watts 1999; Moody and White 2003; Uzzi and Spiro 2005) as well as "closure" and "brokerage" (Burt 2005; Baum, McEvily and Rowley 2007). Building on these positions, more recently authors have proposed that communities of practice allowing for individuals to work "across" different groups show an increase in innovative activities, where "creative tensions of familiarity and diversity" are meant to "promote group performance" (Stark and Balàzs 2010, 1152). This perspective is interesting to the degree to which the participation to a specific exhibition is not likely to be the main activity of any organised body at any time - if not in the very short term of impelling deadlines. In fact, just two of the nine interviewed groups had only low expectations of financial return, none of them had any expectation of building ties with possible clients, while they all had expectations of building ties with media, institutions and peers. Four out of nine had already participated in an international exhibition, seven out of nine had already participated in an exhibition, and all nine intend to participate in an international biennale in the future. Furthermore, nine out of nine had already been in contact with 1 to 15 other participants through a collaborative project (1), a previous exhibition (3) or a common

³ Strelka, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Tsinghua University, Politecnico di Torino, University of Applied Arts in Vienna, University of Innsbruck, South China University of Technology.

⁴ These definitions were provided by exhibitors in the bios they submitted for the initial application and later for cultural censorship and for the catalogue publication.

⁵ These data were collected by the curatorial team during the curatorial process through direct interactions with the participants, and were shown in the exhibition in the form of infographics.

network (5). In this sense, while it is clear that the construction and strengthening of weak ties (Granovetter 1973) through contact and visibility is one of the main objectives for all participants, it can also be argued that participants consciously used the exhibition as a strategy to maximize “overlappings” (Stark and Balázs 2010) at different levels within and across communities of practice. This works at the level of organisational structures and has a direct impact on the modes of production of the project. The theme proposed by the exhibition was “partially” (6) or completely (3) in line with the team’s research and work topics; significantly, in the former case, the project was a new proposal developed specifically for the exhibition, while in the latter it was an iteration of a previous project, and six of the nine groups intend to repurpose the same project for participation to another exhibition.

If we look at built installations within the exhibition as units of observation, it is clear that each installation cannot be analysed as the material effect of an abstract design idea, but needs to be read as product of an iterative process that is the result of the encounter between intercohesive practices, strategically employing the space of the exhibition as breeding ground for multiple levels of innovation, and an institutional container - UABB - in which projects go through successive rounds of modifications as the effect of a wide range of stimuli and irruptions. In this sense, UABB works as a “container” (Frichot and Runtig 2015), fostering the gradual progression of projects from world of ideas to specific, on-the-ground conditions. In the following paragraphs we look at UABB as a container for the 64 installations through a linear account of the process, and then more qualitatively at the nine installations authored by the nine groups we have interviewed.

3. CONTAINER/CONTAINED

Throughout its eight editions, since its inception in 2005, UABB has been acknowledged as one among the eleven most relevant architecture biennials worldwide.⁶ Its strong impact on international discourse⁷ is mainly due to its approach, the exhibition aspiring to act as a “catalyst”⁸ and as a laboratory for urban transformation. UABB declares ambitions that are not limited to the display of the “state of the art” of global architectural debates: rather, the event aims at establishing a proactive transformative tension towards the issues related to hyper-urbanization processes within and around the local context of Pearl River Delta mega-region. There is a growing narrative around UABB’s unconventional approach as well as the innovative charge of practices that participate in it. Despite this, UABB (as a direct emanation of the Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau) operates within a municipal-level political scenario bound to a strong regulatory framework. As a consequence, it is necessary to take immediate distance from a narrative of epistemological correspondence between intentions and effects. Rather than linear and one-directional, the trajectory between project and built object is iterative and recursive, made of twists and turns, of constant exchanges and negotiations, as much as any work of architecture (Armando and Durbiano 2017). In this paragraph, we look at the mechanisms of the exhibitionary institution, and at the actions that have been carried out within it by a collective of actors. In our working hypothesis, the exhibition acts as a “container” of practices: this section aims therefore at briefly unfolding the commonly intended image of the exhibition as a monolithic institution where the process involving curation as a real practice is often concealed, focusing instead

⁶https://www.archdaily.com/908891/11-architecture-biennials-to-pay-attention-to-in-2019?ad_source=search&ad_medium=search_result_all. Accessed 2020.02.10

⁷ The 2017 edition of Shenzhen-Hong Kong UABB has been visited by more than 550.000 people (Source: UABB Organizing Committee. See also Volume #54 “On Biennials”). Recently, UABB has been defined by online platform Archdaily as the “The World’s Most Visited Architecture Biennale” https://www.archdaily.com/930683/the-worlds-most-visited-architecture-biennale-opens-in-shenzhen?ad_source=search&ad_medium=search_result_all. Accessed 2020.02.10

⁸ The term “catalyst” is commonly used by the official narrative of the event to describe the curatorial approach of UABB.

on measuring the exchanges that took place between the container and embedded practices, with the purpose of demonstrating their negotiating and incremental nature.

Our hypothesis is that there are measurable points in the collision between the ontological level of exchanges and the epistemological level of each narrated agency, and that those can be found in the progressive validation of the latter within the former.

These validations take the form of signed contracts and documents, defining how the implementation of the project has been developed. This aspect is not secondary if we want to overcome the perception of the exhibition container as simple platform,

and go beyond the threshold dictated by the exhibition's communicative media to understand the mechanisms through which the exhibition works.

If each agreement remains unchanged between the parties until a new agreement is reached, as successive synchronic objects, proposals are, on the contrary, diachronic objects. In different moments of development, proposals undergo modifications prompted by exchanges with the institution that legitimizes their eventual translation into built objects. In this sense, we represent proposals as trajectories: in the exhibitors' initial intentions these would proceed linearly from acceptance to construction, but, due to

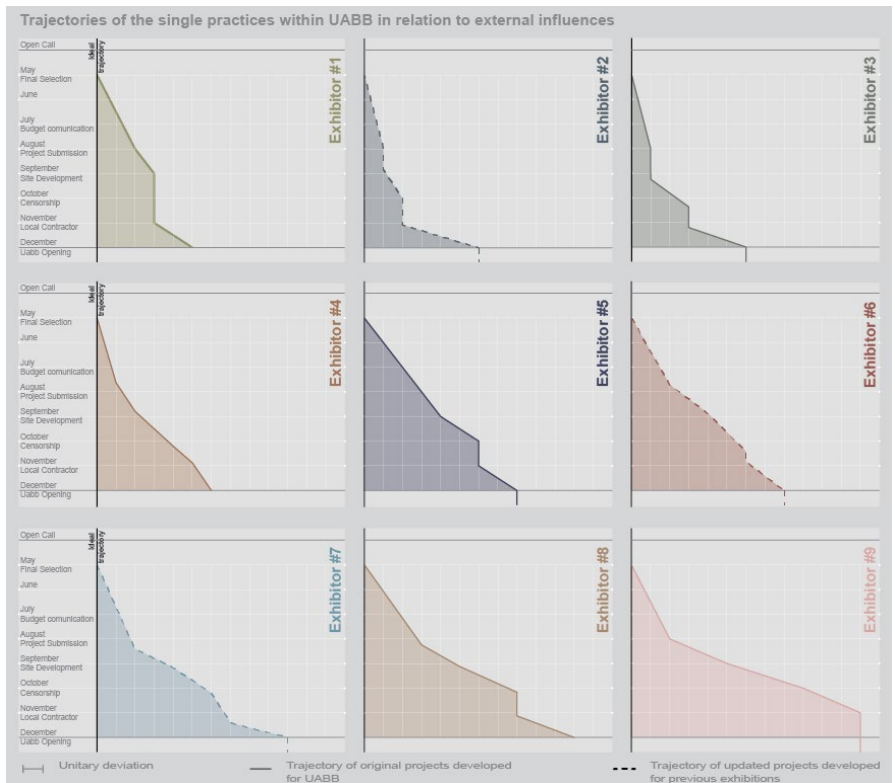


Figure 2. Tracing of the trajectories of the practices of each interviewed teams within 2019 UABB – Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture. Diagram by the authors.

the many irruptions of the container-biennale in its many forms, they need to deviate to get to the final stage of construction.

Under this perspective, the process works as continuous exchange; each modification is neither a result of authorial intentions, nor an automatism of cause and effect, or action and reaction. Since it is capable of internalizing an enlarged vision, and carry the agency of a validating collective, we can look at it as a socio-technical and incremental process.

Also because there are no clearly stated rules that can be accepted by all parties from the start, acceptance proposals are not either accepted as-is or excluded, but are rather co-constructed through a more synergistic process, where the agency of one party overlap with the agency of the other.

This exchange was analyzed using the data derived from the parallel interviews carried out with 9 of the participant groups: these were asked to evaluate the impact of some irruptions on their proposal. Exhibitors were asked to evaluate, on a scale from 1 to 5, how much the proposal had been modified as a response to each of the following irruptions: specific budget allocation changes, contents revisions, site development, local producers requests, submissions deadlines; which, at different times along the process, influenced the proposals to varying degrees. The diagrams allow to visualize the results of the interviews and compare them (fig. 2). From these, two aspects emerge as immediate demonstrations of our hypothesis: first, that practices are not developed independently from the container, and second, that the irruptions have different impacts at different moments, depending on the specific proposal. The first aspect points to the fact that practices consciously adapted to embed within the container. No line of the diagram is perfectly vertical; that is, no practice went through the container without having to negotiate at least some aspects of their proposal. This appeared as the only means to survive, in a continuous tension between

container and contained and their opposite agencies - on the one side, the procedural and bureaucratic eagerness to get things done, on the other the need to maintain the integrity of a design intention while striving to obtain the former's legitimation.

The second aspect makes explicit that there is no generalizable relationship of causality between each irruption and its effects on proposals, as effects change from one proposal to the other and from time to time. The spatialization of this gap is a non-constant deviation between irruptions and practices' intentions. By looking at the diagrams, it can be observed that exhibitors #1, #2 and #3 (fig. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3) described their initial proposal as remaining more or less unchanged until it had to face site development and local contractors' feedback on feasibility. Of these three teams, two are research institutions whose proposal was the result of previously developed research work, while the third one is a renowned architecture firm. Two of them had already participated in a biennale before, and many of their components are from China. These groups likely had a clear idea from the start of the project they wanted to show in terms of conceptual narrative, and concentrated their efforts in reworking it strictly when needed, in answer to the formal requests of construction and set-up.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, exhibitors #4, #5 and #6 (fig. 2.4, 2.5, 2.6) described their proposal as having consistently changed in the first phase of concept development, while being easily translated into part of the exhibition in the production phase. In this sense, their initial redefinition was deemed useful to make these proposals more resilient to formal adjustments. All these teams are small to mid-size private offices with a strong research agenda, and had previously participated in other minor exhibitions. This shows how some proposals may be innovative in their capability in discovering how containers work step by step, strengthening their perspective at each negotiated stage.

Finally, exhibitors # 7, # 8 and # 9 (fig. 2.7, 2.8, 2.9) show a definite diagonal trajectory, telling a story of constant negotiation throughout the process. These three teams had previously participated in a biennale, and defined themselves as experimental practices. Their proposals were described as having undergone the most changes, both in the initial phase of conceptual development and in the phase of development and construction. In this sense, these are the practices that have demonstrated the most willingness to adapt to contingent factors and, more generally, to the container.

These three categories are intended to define a spectrum of the possible strategies that practices employ in order to legitimize their work within an institutionalized container. To trace the complex tangle of relationships that are in place allows to redefine the narrative of an exhibition, past the interpretation of each object as a result of a curatorial intention.

4. CLOSING REMARKS

By tracing the variable trajectories of proposals, we attempt to describe how selected practices constructed their progressive legitimation and, therefore, the feasibility of their proposals, through strong conceptualizations, constructive detailing or minute negotiations.

The graphs demonstrate that there is a continuous interchange between the space of ideas and construction: within the container, the two poles converge and diverge continuously.

The irruptions of final selection, blueprints submission, cultural censorship, all had effects on the level of the symbolic values of the proposals, supporting the vision and authorial perspective of each exhibitor. Budget communication, site development, and meeting with the local contractors had effects mainly on the translation of projected symbols into physical matter. Their turnover

along the route depends on the rules of the container as well as on the contingencies that can co-exist with those rules.

A description of exchanges allows the observer to define categories based on the different degrees of interaction, with the purpose of deconstructing the narrative of the "white box" toward an operative definition of "productive exhibition".

There have been proposals capable of holding firmly to their contents and having to change only to the test of reality. Others have experienced the opposite while still others have had to incrementally stake the entire proposal to be able to legitimize themselves inside the container. Under this perspective institutionalized containers should be read as negotiated spaces rather than platforms. Narratives on exhibitions focus on communicative and epistemological stances, while this paper aimed at observing how the development of projects engenders symbiotic exchanges between practices and containers. Mapping how practices deploy strategies to spatialize their ideas opens the possibility to shift scholarly attention from synchronic media objects to the diachronic procedures through which they are produced. The preliminary categorization shown in this paper is intended to point towards a possibility of measuring the relationship between the symbolic and the material, to explore practices and define the circumstances within which they work.

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