

Object as Homebody: “A Fur on a Rock, Next to a Fire, in a Cave”¹

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This article articulates the ways in which a collection of objects produced by husband and wife team, Rick Owens and Michele Lamy, reveal a new intersection between architecture, sculpture, furniture, and the everyday.

INTRODUCTION

Architects have arguably engaged in the design and production of objects outside of buildings for nearly as long they have designed buildings. Early 20th century modernists, through the professed desire to remake the world through architecture, marshalled a collection of related design fields, including furniture, industrial design, fashion, and the like. By the mid-twentieth century, Ernesto Rogers reduced the complex and fragmented design efforts of a generation of architects to a catchy slogan encapsulating total design, “from the spoon to the city”.² While postmodernists countered and toppled the modernist social project, however rhetorical it may have been, they continued to work through all of the previously absorbed design fields. The practice continues today, with architects regularly adding new kinds of cultural production to their arsenal of output, including jewelry, shoes, pet playgrounds, purses, food, and festival installations. The spectrum of architects engaging in this sort of production ranges from the well-established to the freshly minted. For the former, spin-off memorabilia put their building designs within reach. Can’t afford a Gehry building? How about his ring for Tiffany’s? For the latter, in the absence of building commissions, these products serve as an accessible realm for architectural experimentation, and a potential stepping stone to building. Supplementing the pavilion, the one-time popular building alternative to “materialize concepts not yet readily available,” these lighter and smaller consumer products are even more immediate and accessible, displayed in galleries and stores alike.³

But while a generation of architects energetically embrace, or merely bide their time in the production of throwaway commodities, the traditional center of the discipline is attracting a small but growing contingent of celebrities and fashion designers. When Kanye West announced a new architecture wing in his expanding company, it was met with short-lived fanfare, and largely dismissed by the architectural community. However passing his interest may be, it is derived in part from his fascination and support of a sustained collaborative project by Michele Lamy, and her husband, Rick Owens. Last year, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles mounted a ten-year retrospective of their architectural

objects, the reception of which was notable as the first public appearance of West following his hospitalization in 2016, prompting this article from Vice’s i-D Magazine: “Kanye West Feels Better, Still Loves Rick Owens Furniture”. The pieces produced by Lamy and Owens appear to be everyday domestic furniture for the home. However, registered in concrete, metal, and various kinds of stone, these large-scale objects operate more like uncomfortable geological monuments. Their weight and overwhelming presence have the effect of converting the surrounding architecture into a different kind of domestic space, one in which the object is the homebody gazed upon by human visitors rather than used by inhabitants. The monumentalization of domestic functions in their objects makes us attentive to a dimension of everyday experience in which the human subject is displaced from the center.

Beyond that, their dichotomous architectural furniture is an objectification of their relationship, materializing a narrative of design and fabrication as couples counseling, a negotiation between husband and wife. Their first piece? A 4,000-pound marital bed conceived after their wedding in 2006. While the architectural field continues to, slowly, acknowledge its collaborative nature, and by extension, recognize the importance of long-ignored female voices and producers, Lamy and Owens effectively leverage their relationship as a discursive performance executed through their architectural furniture, to which they, like us, become outside viewers. So, why did the field of slow, labor-intensive, expensive architecture become the vessel for, as Owens says, “creating and exploring our personal life?”⁴ What can architectural practice learn about collaboration and its performance? And how is architecture affected when confronted with the overwhelming presence and permanence of objects that it has historically sheltered and outlived?

DOMESTICITY BECOMES ART

Now under production for more than a decade, the line of objects available from Lamy and Owens is formidable. It includes beds, sofas, chairs, coffee tables, benches, dining sets, lamps, and wall dividers. According to the pair, their objects are the result of their own domestic needs. Immediately prior to their marriage, they purchased the former headquarters of the French Socialist Party in Paris. Empty for twenty years prior, the pair set about designing the entirety of the interior. It was stripped down to its concrete bones, except for the master bathroom which they enclosed in marble. Rather than buy, they proceeded to design and



Figure 1: Rick Owens Day Bed.

fabricate, in-house, nearly all of the domestic furniture and objects, save for a few small sculptures and other works of art. For years, the house served as private residence, factory, and showroom for his fashion line and their architectural furniture.

The main exceptions are those pieces that are so large and/or heavy that they require site-specific production. There are several large-scale pieces that weigh hundreds and sometimes thousands of pounds: a ten-by-ten-foot platform bed, a ten-foot long day bed, a dining table seating twelve, a twenty-foot long bench, in addition to their alabaster bed once referred to as a Shaq-sized object that dwarfed the surrounding architecture.⁵ Other material include marble, ox bone, petrified wood, bronze, aluminum, concrete, and basalt. The retrospective installed at MoCA in West Hollywood prompted the creation of a Los Angeles facility to produce pieces specifically for the exhibition. Lamy now regularly flies between Paris, New York, and LA, in addition to quarries and foundries, to oversee fabrication of the limited-edition pieces that heavily resist transport.

The majority remain in Owens and Lamy's own residences in Paris and Venice, save for a few that collect dust in galleries and showrooms. Aside from their prohibitive price tags in the tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars, their architectural furniture is purposefully and noticeably uncomfortable both visually and physically. In stark contrast to the slouchy, free-flowing clothing for which Owens is famous, the objects are severe, rigid, and rugged. In fact, one struggles to find a non-staged image of the objects in everyday use, except for this snap of an obviously uncomfortable West.

TRADING PLACES

Herein lies just one of several dichotomies in which Owens and Lamy relish and collapse. In a world of light and cozy fast fashion, their architectural furniture is slow, heavy, and disciplined. The objects are large but with luxurious materials. While functional for the everyday, their scale and weight



Figure 2: Rick Owens Furniture installed in the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 2017. Copyright GQ Magazine.

imply the permanence of a monument, one that will undoubtedly outlive the architecture in which it resides.

The last is of particularly importance, as their work suggests a productive collapse of architecture and the everyday, a duality that largely continues to be reinforced by the architectural field, even as contemporary practitioners eschew the former for the latter. And while the risk remains of either reifying the everyday by delineating “an alternative aesthetic based on it” or getting “caught within the binary trap of remaining immersed in the ordinary;” neither approach ultimately blurs or overcomes the categorical distinction.⁶ For Dell Upton, “as a result, when architects try to incorporate the everyday into their work, the results tend to be embarrassingly literal and decorative.” Minimalist sculpture, he



Figure 4: Rick Owens Furniture installed in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2017. Copyright Wallpaper Magazine.

suggests, provides some clues. By “exploring architectural concerns of space, volume, movement, light” while “stripping away notions of empathy, iconography, narrative and, by extension, discourse,” minimalist artists manipulated architectural space, forcing viewers to confront their “ordinary, taken-for-granted, interactions that constitute the everyday experience.”⁷ Lamy and Owens’ large-scale, architectural objects, however, go beyond the mere manipulation of the architectural space. Through the incorporation of everyday domestic functions, they create a new alignment between the gallery and the home. The gallery is refashioned as a home; their objects operate as both architecture manipulating the everyday spatial experience and furniture serving domestic functions. Lamy’s explicit assertion, though, that the “gallery is a home to be transformed,” is only partly true.⁸ If the gallery has indeed become a home, it is not for human inhabitation. While containing functions, the objects are uncomfortable, imposing, not to mention distancing as Tony Smith claimed, and unbelievably heavy.⁹ The objects are homebodies themselves, at home where humans are less inhabitants than visitors, outside witnesses to the everyday experience of Lamy and Owens’ objects.

Ultimately, their architectural furniture is an objectification of their own relationship. Lamy, one-time protégé of Deleuze and former lawyer, cabaret dancer, fashion designer, restaurateur, filmmaker, and fashion figure, first met Rick Owens in Los Angeles when she hired him as a pattern cutter. Their romance began just prior to the launch of his eponymous line in 1994. As Owens, seventeen years her junior, garnered prominence in the fashion world, the two returned to Lamy’s native France in the early 2000s.

Following the opening of their retrospective, most of the discourse that emerged centered on the design and fabrication of the objects more than the objects themselves, which appeared to be adequately explained by a quick laundry list of architecture and art references. Rather, in interviews and articles, Lamy and Owens casually blur their personal romantic relationship with their professional collaboration. Lamy regularly discusses quarries, foundries, and factories, while Owens talks about “two pairs of loving hands” that produce objects of an “expression to each other more than to the outside world.”¹⁰ In fact, discursively, their romance is so fused to their collaboration and vice versa that Owens equates designing an object on his own to being unfaithful.¹¹ A prototype rock crystal toilet he designed on his own, against the wishes of Lamy, was ultimately scrapped because she disapproved of its installation in their Venice residence.

The productive confusion of work relationships that are also intimate is hardly new. In her discussion of architectural couples including the Smithsons, the Eames, and Venturi Scott Brown, Beatriz Colomina articulates an increasing interest by practitioners and historians alike in the how rather than

the what.¹² For Colomina, focusing on the process enables a discussion of the collaborative nature of architecture rarely acknowledged, and the opportunity to recognize and credit long suppressed or ignored female producers. But where Colomina operates as an historian, mining the archives to revise and reveal the collaborative, and at times romantic, nature of architectural practice, Lamy and Owens actively leverage their personal relationship through the discourse surrounding their objects.

CONCLUSION

The dichotomous objects, then, materialize a narrative about therapy that merges cultural production with domestic bliss. Through their objects, the productive confusion of ideas and their generation as a result of their intimate relationship is made public as a discursive performance. In so doing, a new confusion is created between the gallery and the home, wherein the monumental and the everyday merge. Their objectified relationship installed in the gallery, transforming it into the home, reveals the simultaneous gallerization of their residences. Lamy and Owens become outside visitors to their own home, outside viewers to their own relationship. The imagery, then, is telling. West was not only uncomfortable, he is pictured sitting in the furniture during transport. Similarly, Lamy is pictured seemingly only able to use the object while in transit, prior to the moment it comes to rest as a homebody. Owens meanwhile, in an expose on his home, is pictured standing in his bathroom, careful not to impose on the private space of his objects. And so yes, Rick Owens’ description of his ideal domestic environment is “a fur on a rock, next to a fire, in a cave,” it just doesn’t include him.¹³

ENDNOTES

1. Rick Owens quotes in Alexander Fury, “Rick Owens’ Monumental – if not Entirely Cozy – Furniture,” *New York Times Style Magazine*, last modified November 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/t-magazine/design/rick-owens-furniture.html>.
2. Characterizing the spirit of the 1943 Athens Charter, Ernesto Rogers remarked in 1952, “Dal cucchiaino alla città.”
3. See Sylvia Lavin, “Vanishing Point,” *Artforum International* 51, no. 2 (2012): 212–219.
4. Rick Owens interviewed in *Newsweek*, April 21, 2017.
5. Alexandra Cheney, “Rick Owens: An Artist Makes his Bed, and Sells It,” *Wall Street Journal*, last modified May 10, 2010, <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/05/10/rick-owens-an-artist-makes-his-bed-and-sells-it/>.
6. Dell Upton, “Architecture in Everyday Life,” *New Literary History* 33, no. 4 (2002): 707–723.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Rick Owens, *Rick Owens Furniture* (New York: Rizzoli, 2017).
9. Sam Wagstaff, Jr., “Talking with Tony Smith” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968).
10. “The Birth of Brutalism – Rick Owens’ Weird Furniture,” *Public Delivery*, last accessed November 13, 2018, <https://publicdelivery.org/rick-owens-furniture/>.
11. Lee Carter, “Rick Owens’ Furniture is Like Couture: Precious, Handmade and Wildly Expensive,” *W Magazine*, last modified December 16, 2016, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/rick-owens-furniture-is-like-couture-precious-handmade-and-wildly-expensive>.
12. Beatriz Colomina, “Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58 no. 3 (1999–2000): 462–471.