

ENCOUNTERS WITH PEOPLE PRODUCTS PROJECTS

INDESIGN

*Unilever Haus
Roslyn Street Studio
Skin Temple
Mud Australia
Midland Atelier
LAB[au]*

ISSUE 45. 2011

AUSTRALIA \$16.50 NEW ZEALAND \$17.50
SINGAPORE \$12.95 HONG KONG \$155 USA \$21.99



INDESIGNLIVE.COM

ISSUE 45

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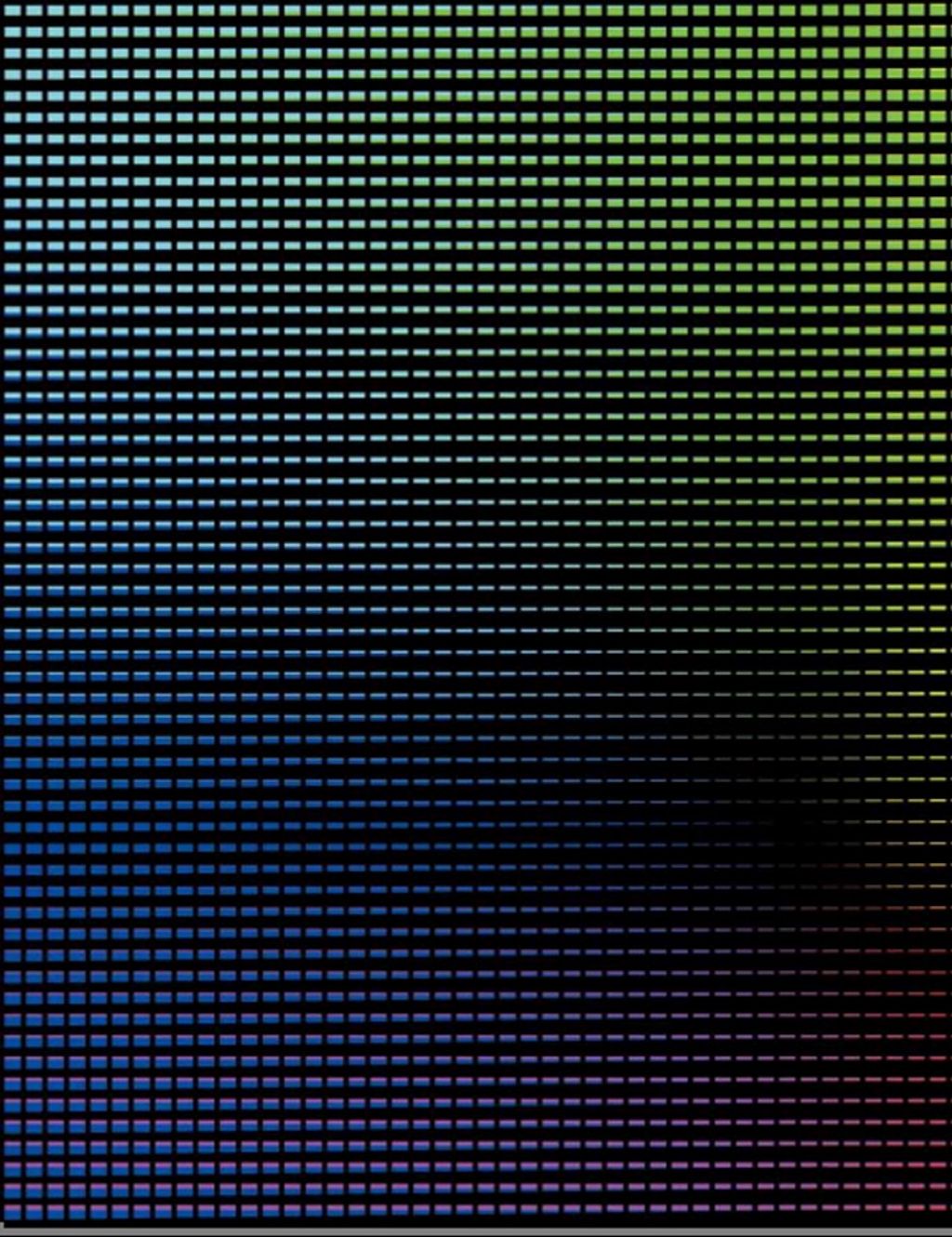
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WORDS MANDI KEIGHRAN

DESIGN LAB

BELGIAN ART COLLECTIVE
LAB[AU] EXPLORES THE
NEW SPACES OF THE
INFORMATION AGE

Belgian art collective LAB[AU] couldn't have chosen a more fitting name when they formed in Brussels in 1997. Most obviously, the name means 'laboratory for architecture and urbanism', describing the group's experimental approach that navigates between architecture, information design, digital art and sculpture. But, like much of LAB[AU]'s work, there's more to it than that. Pronounced in French, the emphasis falls on *au*, German for 'construction' and a link to the Bauhaus movement.

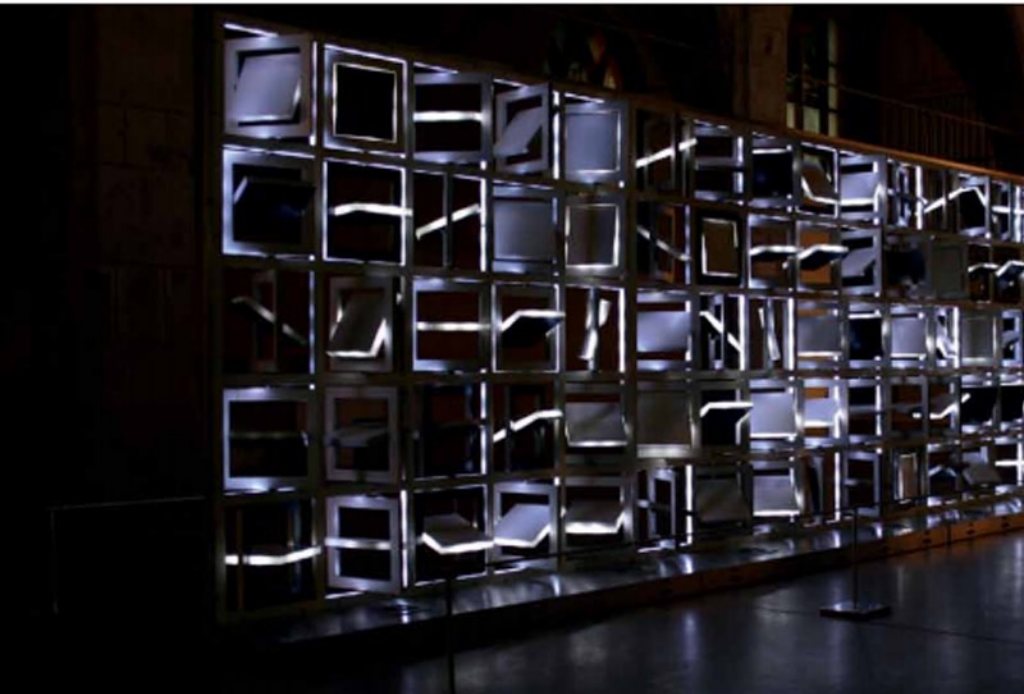
"The Bauhaus is very important to us," says Mansel Abendroch, one of the founding members of LAB[AU]. "It was a place where technological shifts led to artists, designers, architects, musicians and dancers questioning what it means to create in a new industrialized world."

The parallels are easy to draw. Just as Walter Gropius and his peers were navigating the shift to an industrialized world, LAB[AU] are discovering new forms of architecture and space in an emerging information society in which rapidly evolving networks and advancing technologies abound.

With the dawn of the information age, new questions to do with the purpose of architecture, art and design have arisen. Architecture, for example, is a representation of a specific purpose – so, a public library has meaning in the urban landscape and represents certain values and ideals – but in the information age, what is representation? What is connectivity? How do we access information? It's issues like this that members of LAB[AU] – Abendroch, Marlene Decond, Els Vermeir and Alexandre Pierrevaux – are broaching.

"You can speak about it in terms of architectural thinking," says Abendroch. "It's how to structure social, economic and other structures into artifacts." These 'artifacts' are frameworks – structures that run software or other applications – which react to a





wide variety of parameters depending on the software applied. It's an approach, documented in extensive notes by LAB[au], that reduces complex information to deceptively simple visual representations.

The work that LAB[au] is best known for is at the Dexis Tower in Brussels. The group designed RGB LED lights into the tower, making each window a 'pixel'. It was proposed to Dexis that the tower become a "kind of urban sign" using three different systems - interactive, performative and analytic - with each system type reacting to a different set of parameters.

These system types come from a range of six used by LAB[au] in their projects: generative, analytic, performative, reactive, interactive and connective. Generative, for example, is something completely self-organized, a process that runs by itself. On the contrary, interactive systems need user input; performative systems need a composition; and connective systems need a network.

The project for the opening of Dexis Tower was Touch, an interactive work that allowed people, via a touch screen, to interact with and control the LED lighting of the tower in real time. The resulting pattern of colour and light on the 145-metre tower was seen by the wider city. The person controlling the appearance of the tower was, by extension, anticipated the image of the city, which was memorialised in the form of an e-postcard. "You create a new relationship between a citizen and the building," says Abendroth.

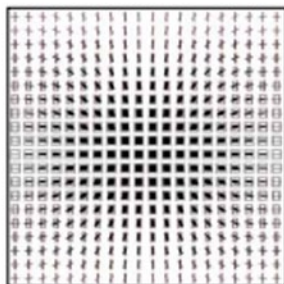
The permanent exhibition is *chronotower*, an analytic work based on a simple principle that matches the three primary colours of light - red, green, blue - to the three basic measures of time - hours, minutes, seconds - creating a slowly evolving colour field that represents time. "You re-install a relation between light, space and time," says Abendroth. Parking in the city for 10 minutes every hour between sunset and midnight, *chronotower* restores a circadian rhythm to the city's inhabitants. A snapshot of each hour has been plotted as a print and exhibited as a visual mapping of the passing of time in a work titled *chronoprints*. On occasion, the tower is performative, the light reacting to a composition by artist or musician.

"What we do is parameter design," says Abendroth. "We try to identify parameters and how we can translate them - not in a metaphorical way, but in a concrete way. It's just taking things as they are."

Mazel Nightvzn is Deputy Editor of *Indesign*.

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“It’s how to translate social, economic and other factors into artefact”

MANUEL ABENDROTH, LAB(AU)



PREVIOUS PAGE LEFT
LAB(AU), CHRONO PRIME,
2009, HILDEBRAND, GERMANY
RIGHT: ILLUSTRATION BY 3D-ART
PREVIOUS PAGE RIGHT
LAB(AU), CHRONO TOWER,
2007

ABOVE LEFT: LAB(AU),
300g, 2009, ALUMINIUM,
REISIGLE, CHRONO
ABOVE: THE FLOW-VISUALIZATION
IS A SERIES OF COMPUTER-GENERATED
ILLUSTRATIONS SHOWING THE
DENSITY OF URBAN ACTIVITY
NEAR A METRO STATION.
THE VERTICAL BARS REPRESENT
URBAN ACTIVITY NEAR A METRO
STATION IN PARIS. THE
VARIABLES REPRESENT THE
DENSITY OF URBAN ACTIVITY
NEAR A METRO STATION.