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Yam Lau

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# ALEXANDRE DAVID, EMBEDDED FUTURES

TORONTO

Alexandre David, *Moving Around*, a residency/project,  
YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto. 8 January-2 April 2011

Montreal-based artist Alexandre David has established a practice of sculptural/architectural intervention of various sites such as gallery interiors and outdoor public spaces. David's works can be roughly divided into two approaches: large-scale constructions that negotiate with the real and imaginary geometry of the physical site, and mobile units designed to activate social geometries and relations within a space. All the works have consistently been clad with plywood, a choice material for the artist. Regardless of their individual differences in character and objective, the works are united by a clear sense of purpose, to serve as experimental forums in which humans perform their individual, social and practical potentials.

## The Artwork in Use

Earlier this year, David created and exhibited *Moving Around* at YYZ Artist's Outlet in Toronto during a three-month residency. The installation was an enormous undertaking: a sculptural/architectural construction that lined the entire interior space of the gallery (minus the ceiling) with plywood sheets, much like the inside layer of a jacket. While fitting itself to the orientation of the orthogonal space, the work's seemingly homogenous surface also deviated. In one continuous movement, *Moving Around* became complex as it articulated into a slope, a ditch, and a dead-end stairwell.

One "enters" the work by taking a step up at the threshold of the gallery space, immediately becoming implicated you in a complex network of perceptual, architectural and behavioral opportunities. The work's convex platform inclines towards the back of the space, before it abruptly changes direction and drops into a recess. This sudden change in surface and volume produces an elevated "horizon," marking a crease in space. It yields a semblance to a landscape: an architecturally modeled "hillside."

As the incline leads beyond the "horizon," the plywood surface abruptly stutters, folds into a depression that reminds me of a "trench" in war movies. Through this unexpected move, the work's seemingly uninterrupted vista of space is contracted into a pocket of reserve, awaiting inhabitation. One end of the "trench" branches or drains sideways into a tight stairwell that descends to the locked door of the gallery storage: a dead end. Since this stairwell provides no further passage, it concludes the work abruptly, but also ambiguously. One is left to puzzle about the function of this concealed "cellar" space. I think children would love to hide there and call it home, as we all did during our early encounters with the world.

During the exhibition, the "hillside" motivated a range of activities. Mountain bikers took up its challenge to practice on it. Others were inclined to exercise certain nostalgic and pastoral sentiments, using the "hillside" to stage a daylong communal picnic. This indoor picnic was a beautiful event that sparked many friendships. Visitors to the gallery lingered throughout the day, lounging on a patchwork of used fabric pieces assembled by two student organizers<sup>1</sup> with wine, snacks and conversation. At other times, the administration and the board of the gallery used the "trench," which is also conveniently proportioned like a bench, to conduct meetings. People frequented this spot as a place of solitude, somewhere to sit and quietly read.

Its complexity notwithstanding, *Moving Around* is remarkably lucid. It behaves like a kind of mutating tissue, whose nuanced movement generates a myriad of spatial experiences that are deeply evocative and inviting.

## A Statement on Use

In a newspaper review, David explicitly states that his work "has no meaning unless it is used." But aside from this and a few other occasional, almost offhand

remarks, David is generally reticent about his work. Perhaps there is not much to say. Perhaps the work lacks nothing, or given the nature of the work it is necessary, even critical to say as little about it as possible. In any case, I actually regard David's reticence as an expression of confidence; it confers to the work a quiet sense of authority that resonates with its presence. The perspicuity of this statement also discourages speculation. It reinforces the idea that the meaning is plainly in view, apparent when the work is "used." There is nothing deliberately obscure, hidden behind the work's implementation. Being "used" is the sole condition that transpires the work's purpose. No discursive rhetoric or promotional clamor is required here.

Though being "used" is of paramount importance to the work, David is also reticent about *how* the work should be used. There was no instruction, program of activities or schedule of events, during the entire time of his exhibition at YYZ Artist's Outlet. The work was just *there*, persisting in its facticity (plywood). And yet, the audience seemed to have intuitively grasped its invitation to engage with it. In effect, I believe David's restricted utterance allows the term "use" a maximal openness. It protects the integrity of the viewer's engagement with the work, allowing this moment to be both genuine and voluntary. Laying down a prescription of program and instruction would have undermined the authenticity of agency. Both the work and the potential agent are thus entrusted with an essential freedom.

I must add that the term "use" in David's case is nuanced. *Moving Around* is an artwork and not exactly a tool or architecture. Therefore, using the work cannot be strictly an instrumental activity. The fact that the viewer is compelled to stage a picnic, meetings, read, cycle, as well as just walk around on the artwork signals that their multifarious identifications with the work are as much practical as they are poetical. The meaning of "use" in David's work is lodged in an elemental stratum of experience, where modes of engagement with the world are not yet codified into distinct categories. Here, the poetical and the practical operate as entangled aspects that infect each other, weaving together the many forms of human practices that animate life.

## Pedestal and Autonomy

*Moving Around* occupies a very unique position within the sculpture/architecture paradigm. As a thoughtfully orchestrated act of self-effacement, the work withdraws to the condition of a pedestal. A sort of open stage perhaps, that anticipates as well as supports the yet-to-be manifested potential of human practices and agency. Hence, using the work is to enter into a spontaneous contract with it. One "acts" and agrees to let that action be staged, made visible on the work's complicated terrain.

Although *Moving Around* can be implemented in a number of ways, it is not a multi-use design object. Also, while engagement is necessary, the work does not posture to be a relational artwork, which often degenerates into a free-for-all banality. *Moving Around* demonstrates a complex, yet resolved internal logic: a network of spatial conditions that summons the body to act freely. Although the meaning of the work is disclosed in its use, the work is not exhausted by this condition. Composed in its own terms, the work holds in reserve, with ease and confidence, the potentials of many futures to be actualized through an imaginative agent.

Yam Lau

Born in Hong Kong, **Yam Lau** is an artist and writer based in Toronto. He teaches painting at York University.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The two students are Michelle Liu and Joy Wong of York University in Toronto.

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Alexandre David, *Moving Around*.



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