

# Andrea Blum, the Go-Between

by Évence Verdier

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When Donald Judd built furniture, he said something like: "A chair is not sculpture because you don't see it when you sit on it." Its functionality prevented it from being art – I think that's absurd!

– Angela Bulloch<sup>1</sup>

"I would like my work to function as an agent to position and de-position."<sup>2</sup> This statement by the New York artist Andrea Blum has a programmatic quality. For the past twenty years, she has been working with the same exigence: to create a tension, through the peculiar play of forces maintained by the private and social spheres, in each of her arrangements of architecture or furniture (buildings, houses, gardens and streets, but also libraries, offices, etc.)

Andrea Blum instils everyday domestic activities (reading as if in your living room, stretching out as if on your couch) in public space. An example is her project **Sleep/Drink** (2004), created in a space which already had an in-between quality, the cross-border Jardin des deux rives in Strasbourg. **Sleep** consists of a labyrinth of "meridians" in green concrete, following on one after the other. The direction each divan faces places its occupant in unexpected proximity with his or her neighbours, creating "a way of using public sculpture in order to stage an intimate and anonymous encounter,"<sup>3</sup> a chance proximity to the unknown. **Drink** functions according to the same "amusing and slightly perverse organizing principle": eight basins and their fountain, each with one or two drains accessible from one or two sides, stage a scene in which people strolling by who wish to quench their thirst become actors by creating, without their knowledge and with this same gesture, a space the artist describes as "organized sexually." In bending over to drink, each person is confronted with some else who has come to take a drink.

The point of interest shifts from the object to the action, to lived time. Blum thus creates the conditions for a happening, an environment which includes a temporal dimension and which is found in a place not reserved for art. This intertwining of the private and the social creates a distinction between space and place. If a place is defined as a sequencing of co-existing elements, space is the animation of the place by a moving body. This body supports what Michel de Certeau nominates as "the privileging of the route over the inventory."<sup>4</sup> In this sense, a practice of space is "to be other, to go over to the other, in a place." To make this passage possible, Blum creates neutral spaces, as little "designated" as possible. Do not seduce the public and attract its attention, but rather accept that it will detach itself and move towards the other. Blum sculpts because she creates within a place "'this erosion or non-place, gouged' out of a place 'by the law of the other'," because she wishes to alter places and mine them with non-places in order to change them into passages. **Sleep/Drink's** configuration is the persuasive metaphor of this ceaseless "movement that 'shifts lines' and traverses places [that] is, by definition, creative of itineraries: that is, words and non-places."

## Bewildering Landscapes

Blum's work is doubly disturbing. Unclassifiable (design without design?), it creates an experience of bewilderment. It is an example of, according to Nicole Lapiere, "the uncontrolled circulation of those who have gone beyond bounds and crossed borders," it "draws attention to...the intersection of the already and the not yet, an indeterminate zone of mutation."<sup>5</sup> **Bike House** (2004, The Hague), an interlocking of two cubes, one glass and the other steel, is the point of arrival and of departure of all journeys. The work involves a twenty-degree rotation of the glass module, creating an outer space which functions on the one hand as a counter for

customers and on the other as a garden and aquarium for the keeper. Through a ticket office duplicated inside, between shower room and kitchen, the design connects the paying customer's hands to the hands of the employee, who washes them. This house is the embodiment of the connection of private and social spaces which, superimposed on each other without altering themselves, enter into a symbolic relationship. This gap, through which our bewilderment arises, ironically becomes de-landscaped: nature is sampled (the microgarden) and canned (the aquarium). "We aspire to nature as an ideal," Blum remarks, "but we have transformed it into a commodity."<sup>6</sup> Brought back to private space, these landscape extracts sketch the paths of a domestic stroll. Grafts or fermentations of utopia imported into the home, they bewilderingly de-landscape private space – if, as Robert Morris states, landscape is "not only a far-off line but a type of space that the body can occupy and traverse."<sup>7</sup> What is at work here is very much a case of "inhabiting the landscape as much as verifying that landscapes also inhabit us."<sup>8</sup> In Blum's work, they leave traces by taking place metaphorically in an individual's private space. Terrariums, aquariums and vivariums are found in many of her domestic furnishing projects.

Another version of the bewildering landscape: her spaces of transit, **Nomadic House** (2002-03), which is a reworking of **Mobile Home** (1996). This work is a sofa bed, a closet and a table in one, three modules on wheels which can easily be moved about to invent various configurations. The table and bed, both on slots, are combined with a metallic structure – perforated sheets of steel held up by a tubular orthogonal frame. It is a temporary living space, made up of separable parts that are easy to transport and whose use is flexible. At first sight, this practical house continues to meet the challenge of designing functional products at low cost which can be taken apart and easily transported. In the market for furniture requiring assembly, compact and moveable structures such as these, made up of many pieces and with great adaptability, do not seem to be the exception.

When looking a little closer, however, Blum is clearly dreaming of another world. She is proposing, not an indefinite sum of consumable products, but a finished ensemble of modules which can be linked together, as if what was at stake was setting the rules of a game.

### A Living Space

The work is intended to be contextual. It is also intentional. The structures' colours never contrast with their environment: the grey of the mattress and cushions in **Nomadic House** extend the colour of the metallic structure, which is covered in an aluminum matte lacquer. Only the laminated veneer of the table has a soft yellow colour. The colours tend to be neutral, the materials are deliberately basic. Aloof from the designer star system, with our recognition of their style, the mark of their label in our surroundings, Blum has chosen discretion. As if she wanted the object's style to be effaced as much as possible in favour of the subject. She does not beautify, she does not cover up forms. She does not ask consumers to dissolve in the world of another, even when it would be a very agreeable "trend." With her peculiar way of being concerned about the needs of her contemporaries, without falling into standardized production, she engages them in using in a creative manner the potential of what she puts at their disposal. The possibilities of the structures she creates is increased by the personality of their occupants.

Far from being enveloped in a comfort that fits its contours, the body must rub up against the reality of deliberately austere material, of stiff and angular shapes. Ballasted in this way with all its weight, it is enjoined to become aware of the issues at stake in the space of its life, against the grain of cocooning, which leads to closing our eyes and forgetting...

**Nomadic House**, a work symbolically lacking outer walls when it is used in the "operating" mode, is the means for thinking about the way in which it is possible to inhabit a structure and redeploy it as a life place, or in other words a living place. The holes perforating the interior walls both reveal and camouflage the presence of another person, with whom one can enter into a relationship without however violating their privacy. It's a game of hide-and-seek which undoubtedly conveys the artist's avowed shyness,<sup>9</sup> and may be a solution to it.

This same system of showing and hiding, which mobilizes seduction and voyeurism, is at work in

**Bibliothèque mobile** ("Mobile Library," 1997, L'Observatoire/Marseille). This work is a reading room, designed for two people, covered with black rubber. In size, it is between a small room and that of a large piece of furniture: big enough to provide privacy and small enough not to be imposing. It is equipped with wheels and can be moved and set up in different places. Its two outside walls, designed to exhibit artists' books, are linked by a third wall, whose lower section is open, so that the two readers facing each other can see only see the other's hands. This library is in the shape of the letter H. What is the meaning of this H? "Find Hortense."<sup>10</sup> Its two vertical bars intersected at their midpoint by a horizontal bar present two beings with the possible schema for an encounter. The eroticization of space. The work of a go-between.

In different places, Blum has written *travailler/work*, *manger/eat*, *dormir/sleep* and *habiter/live*, emphasizing that the forms already designate something: our most common activities, our most routine and no doubt least conscious acts. Is there not malice in Blum's decision to use concrete or steel walls to invite viewers to experience an art of living freely?

### Neither Refuge nor Artificial Paradise

The designer Rüdi Baur asks himself: [Should I] abandon this dangerous ambition to want to develop the ideal spoon, the ideal city, or the ideal hamburger. The history of design has been marked by this universal approach and by the industrial logic of large production lines.... can it find the modesty to work on the particular, the local, on modest things that are indispensable to our quality of life? In other words, "to leave the consensual behind in order to develop difference" and to renounce uniformity and the transformation of public space "into a mere territory we pass through which has been completely standardized."<sup>11</sup>

Every one of Blum's works reformulates this concern. She starts from the point of view of the user and meets the needs of people inhabiting smaller and smaller spaces and urban nomads, who are "constantly in movement as a result of the real estate boom or professional re-locations."<sup>12</sup>

Other artists also work in this vein. Their projects, while functional, make it possible to extract oneself from false needs. **L'autocrat** (1997), by Atelier van Lieshout, an autarkic dwelling unit, nevertheless does not create isolation from the world but rather resistance to the laws of the market and the means of survival and autonomy. Absalon has commented on his houses that "they will be the means of resistance against the society which prevents me from becoming what I must become."<sup>13</sup> For Joep van Lieshout, **L'autocrat** makes possible the circulation of vital and sexual energy. Blum's work too has, in its own way, an erotic charge. While, unlike Atelier van Lieshout, she does not create trailers for lovers such as **Baise-ô-drome** ("Screwmobile," 1995), some of the titles to her work are suggestive: **Passage d'amour** ("Love Passage") for a street project, **Loveseat with Aquarium** for a garden project. This is a more "subtle" eroticization in the sense that, as she herself says, she is more "voyeuristic." It's a question of accompanying the subject's desire and keeping it alive. **Slide Lounge** (2004) is a recent example. The backs of two lounge chairs on castors are extended laterally by a monitor; these chairs are positioned facing each other. The occupant of each chair must thus watch the screen attached to the chair of the person opposite. This is an insidious arrangement which, under the pretext of better accommodation, leads to a gradual slippage from one person to the other.

With these artists, beyond their differences, their ideas for mobile furnishings, a peculiar gaze is cast on the economy of life: not the desire for the fixed framework and common usage of a storage site, but the desire to continue to adapt, without fear of change, and to become capable of itinerancy without for all that becoming homeless. They share, in other words, Jacques Rancière's interest in "the way in which, by tracing lines, by using words or by dividing up surfaces, we also sketch the way in which common space is shared.... This is not merely defining the forms of art, but rather certain configurations of the visible and the contemplable, certain ways in which the sentient world can be inhabited."<sup>14</sup>

In this way, one can understand that Blum, even though she may well define herself as a sculptor, considers the questions around the borders between art, design and architecture "academic." What is important to her is "what is felt and how this experience is shown." And shared.

### Privacy Exposed

With the same artistic ethic (encouraging individuals to emancipate themselves, to protect their dignity as subjects), Andrea Zittel designed **Living Unit** (1993), a sort of tool box for domestic life, and commercialized it in different forms (**A-Z Comfort Work**, **A-Z Selected Sleeping Arrangements**, etc.). Her **A-Z Escape Vehicles** (1996), dwelling units on wheels which are precisely adapted to the scarcity of living conditions, meets peoples' basic needs, but unlike the work of Blum, they do so by aspiring to exhaustiveness and perfection, whose lineage can be traced back to the Constructivists and their followers. The "A to Z Administrative Service," whose initials are found on every one of her products, presents itself as a beneficiary of utopian services or even a tool for formatting and controlling our environment and behaviour. This ideological program is part and parcel of the social utopias of the early avant-garde, especially the Bauhaus. It is not the program of Blum, who for her part is not interested in systematizing dreams of autonomy or promises of happiness.

In the same way, their work follows different trajectories. Zittel's **A-Z Vehicles** are mobile refuges which narrow modernist experiments in individual comfort and dreams of privacy and isolation. In a centripetal movement, they lead viewers inside themselves, while a centrifugal force animates Blum's work – because, for her, what is still at issue, within the context of a private commission, is to remove oneself from a condition, to create movement and thus open a space, a place which will mobilize desire, a zone of vibration between two poles: interior/exterior, private/public, intimate/social, psychological/functional, symbolic/practical, etc.

**La chambre de Christophe Durand-Ruel** ("Christophe Durand-Ruel's Bedroom," 1996) repositions this centrifugal movement in the interior of private space itself: Blum reconstructs the bedroom of a collector by seeking, she says, to emphasize the qualities of this "elegant and very private man." On the walls of the room, which has been designed in the form of a box, she has placed brackets, which can be folded in or be used to exhibit the work of other artists in his collection. Her work functions as the medium for exhibiting the work of others and transforms the room into an exhibition space. Exhibiting his works of art, but also his privacy. The light comes from below and traverses transparent chests in which his shirts, socks and underwear are exhibited. Blum has succeeded in making that most private space, the bedroom, a "set off" space which offers its occupant an unusual perspective on his own personality.

### Freeing Oneself

Blum does not create places for fleeing or retreating from "hard reality." She dedicates herself to living rather than surviving, to having the strength to "free oneself" from conditions, fixed positions and guarded spaces, while remaining in contact with an environment, with structures which make it possible to "squat" in the world the way it is and not the way people would like it to be. Her houses, with their minimalist comfort, derogate and derange, because the logic of their functionality does not prettify or optimize them (**Nomadic House**, for example, does not come with a bathroom).

Exhibited in galleries and produced in small numbers (singly or in editions of five to seven pieces), her work's form is close to a zero point, out of which the personality of each person is measured and finds the form that suits them best. Their not very "stylized" nature contributes to the subject's emancipation. In the case of **Nomadic House**, Blum has created for the collector, who generally buys distinctive works on the art market, a mobile lodging which certainly does not correspond to his present-day lifestyle. On the one hand, the "model" does not match the needs of its buyer, and on the other, the instructions in the **Nomadic House** catalogue make it possible for anyone passing through the art network to freely adapt the work in order to project their own "archi-sculpture." This is a network which has the advantage of informing about the project's symbolic element and not of vaunting the practical qualities and adaptability of the "product" the way large-scale distribution does.

At the end of the process of subtraction which tends to make the model disappear, all that remains available are works similar to the catalogue **Nomadic House**, which informs about a concept's "background"

before giving the project's plans and dimensions and a list of its furnishings and instructions for its montage. It is as if the "poet's elocutory disappearance" dear to Mallarmé, who some people see as the founder of design, has become in Blum's work the jubilant disappearance of the object.

If we push the mechanism at work, this catalogue should one day find a place in a public library, among innumerable other works, yielding a multitude of other possible projects by those who have adopted Marcel Duchamp's formula: "my art would be that of living: each second, each breath is a work of art which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral. It's a sort of constant euphoria."<sup>15</sup> If design is concerned with a form's use value, then it should sculpt this form of thought, the way Blum does. It should sketch out the form of this design with as few aesthetic givens as possible.

### To Go Beyond

Is not this state of mind the same as that which leads to the staging, in forms which seemingly have little connection to each other, of the very idea of passage? From the house to the street, from the street to the institution, and then to domestic space, paralleling the itinerary taken by Blum, in 1992 **Jorge Pardo** installed his own kitchen as a work of sculpture in an exhibition (**I wish I would have made it this way the first time**). He returned to this idea in 1993, proposing to the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) that he build his own home with the money allocated to him. **House/sculpture/exhibition**, a project finally completed in 1998, is a house that could be visited during the temporary exhibition of a selection of works of art from the MOCA's collection. It then became the artist's home and was closed to the public. This unidentifiable work of art, simultaneously private living space, site of exhibition and object exhibited, poses in particular the institutional problem of the "re-appropriation" of a house which is indistinguishable from neighbouring houses. The borderline work has become completely lost in its surroundings.

Blum's manner of sculpting recalls the work of Jean-Claude Ruggierello, who, while he produces many videos, also defines himself as a sculptor. To sculpt, he says, is to create a space. His **Principe actif 2** ("Active Principle 2," 2004) is the image of a rectangle made up of a form and a counter-form: two projections of light, one white and the other pearl grey, which complement each other by being set in motion when they come into contact with each other. The vibration makes the image fuzzy. The space created on screen, divided in two, presents the experience of an erotic magnetic field which, of course, represents another field: the space separating the screen from the viewer. Ruggierello is concerned with space, and not the image, in the same way that Blum is unconcerned with attractive forms. They are both interested in gestures, in subtle chromatic relationships, and in physical and psychic shifts and displacements. Through these wavy movements, spaces are created, just like that: fine anti-monuments.

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#### Notes

1. Angela Bulloch in an interview with Stefan Kalmar, *Satellite* (Dijon/Zurich: Le Consortium/Museum für Gegenwartskunst, 1998).
2. Jouke Kleerebezem, *Andrea Blum: Domestic Arrangement/Public Affairs* (The Hague: Stroom hcbk, 1997), 22.
3. All uncited quotations of Andrea Blum are from an interview between the artist and the author in Paris on July 20, 2004.
4. Michel de Certeau quoted in Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 81, 83, 85. Further quotes in the paragraph are Augé paraphrasing and quoting de Certeau.

5. Nicole Lapiere, *Pensons ailleurs* (Paris: Stock, 2004), 18.
6. Andrea Blum, *Andrea Blum: Metropolitan Biography* (Crestet/Paris: Crestet centre d'art/Michel Baverey éditeur, 2003), n. p.
7. Robert Morris, quoted in *Le paysage et la question du regard* (Malissar: Éditions Aleph, C.E.R.I.C., Université de Savoie, 2003), 29.
8. Eliane Burnet, "L'expérimentation du paysage," in *Le paysage et la question du regard*, 29.
9. Blum, *Metropolitan Biography*.
10. See the poem "H" in Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations*.
11. Rüdi Baur, "La cuillère des villes: brèves réflexions sur les petites particularités urbaines," in *Design Intégral Ruedi Baur et associés (atelier), Constructions* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller, 1998), n. p.
12. See "Background" in Andrea Blum, *Maison Nomade/Nomadic House* (Valencia: Andrea Blum and art3 résidences production diffusion, 2003), n. p.
13. *50 espèces d'espaces* (works from the Centre Georges Pompidou, MNAM), exhibition catalogue (Paris/Marseille: Centre Georges Pompidou, RMN/Musées de Marseille, 1998), 114.
14. Jacques Rancière, "La surface du design," in *Le destin des images* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2003), 105.
15. Marcel Duchamp quoted in Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Da Capo, 1971), 72.