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Making Heimat: Statement on the opening of the German Pavilion

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Today, the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale starts and ingenhoven architects supports the current exhibition MAKING HEIMAT in the German Pavilion which deals with the challenges cities are faced with due to the arrival of refugees. It raises the question which role architecture and urban development play in this context.

Christoph Ingenhovens´ statement on the opening of the German Pavilion:
Café Deutschland

“A hole to see the sky through”— that was the name Yoko Ono gave to a small white postcard with a circular hole in the middle that she displayed at Documenta in 1972. “There is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in,” sings Leonard Cohen. And now they’re making four holes, four cracks in the unloved German Pavilion!

Until recently, the German Pavilion had been enough on its own—like the whole Biennale and the Giardini are still enough on their own: a perpetual reflection of the narcissism of architects and their admirers. But those days are gone. Light, the world is overwhelming the scene, and so far it’s unclear if this time, unlike before, under the pressure of outside developments - global warming, the global financial crisis, wars, hunger, poverty, social injustice, information overload, the European crisis - the refugee crisis, architects are really in a position to take notice of the world and learn from it, instead of continuing to give the world instructions.

So far scientists, engineers—practically the entire world—have been ahead of architects, who’ve remained ensnared in their

fatal notions of art. Back when Corbusier “discovered” the beauty of technology, this technology already existed, created by the same scientists and engineers who hadn’t bothered to wait on architects. We haven’t quite gotten over this narcissism; indeed, it’s possible it could even reach new heights this year—if the somewhat martial-sounding title “Reporting from the Front” entails architects once again thinking their ideas are going to heal the world, rather than understanding themselves as part of a community of scientists, researchers, politicians, and activists working together to solve the world’s issues. If we keep believing the world has been waiting on us—waiting to be taught how to solve their catastrophic social problems aesthetically, or however else. But there’s also a faint hope that something substantial is changing in how architects perceive themselves. Until now, architects have always done what was possible only because it was possible; seldom have they made an effort to change these possibilities or expand them — and even more seldom have we consciously held ourselves back and not done what was possible, but instead what was sensible or appropriate. Only time will tell if there’s now a real opportunity to change this, or if once again, paying lip service to the “social,” we’re just kicking off another round of the bonfire of the vanities.

You can look around outside the pavilions and understand that you’re standing on water, that you’re standing in one of the most entrancing panoramas in the world, that we don’t need all these white walls to experience something of the world, that life is there outside and not in the so very well-intentioned productions inside. And the world can force its way, flood its way into the pavilions. The most interesting place at the Biennale has always been the Café Paradiso, where homage has at least been paid to the illusion that architects communicate amongst themselves—even when everyone else is expected to remain outside. Where have all the engineers, construction workers, craftsmen, construction industry, residents, or contractors been all these years? How do we architects possibly think we can bring about something sensible without these people?

What’s the future of the German Pavilion after this four-windowed intervention? Is it possible that the next time the Biennale rolls around, the pavilion will have turned into a kind of Café Germany: the windows serving as the first stage in a more pervasive process of opening and transformation, with the Biennale transforming from a place of exhibition and presentation to a place of being and exchanging with others? Or could the windows herald the arrival of a real penetration of the world into the pavilion, a reconquest of the world by nature, an

unplanned and spontaneous ruination of the representative and official, and a reclamation of the natural? Of course, a reclamation that's also appealing and logical from an aesthetic perspective. Whatever the case, the openings shouldn't be covered back up. I like to imagine there's a world that wants to enter the German Pavilion and that encounters something of equal interest inside those windows—something worth the effort of forcing its way through in the first place.

Pictures: Kirsten Bucher/DAM.