Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoîne, directors  

**Koolhaas HouseLife**  
BêkaFilms, www.koolhaashouselife.com  

In their documentary film series *Living Architectures*, Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoîne capture the intimacy of daily life within five icons of contemporary architecture. Each project was designed by a “star” architect and past winner of the Pritzker Prize, which is given to celebrate the “art of architecture” and “its impact on human behavior.” The filmmakers are intrigued by authority figures or scholars—none of whom appear here—but to convey an everyday view of these exceptional buildings. To do this, the filmmakers use informal filming techniques such as handheld cameras standing in close to human subjects, who offer refreshingly unscripted and spontaneous conversations while obscuring the architecture. This presentation of contemporary architecture with all of its imperfections marks a significant shift in the ideology of representation from a collection of fixed, beautiful, and flawless photographs of buildings without life to the buildings’ messy and actual reality. These films reintroduce the figure in a way that deepens a view into the discipline of architecture by engaging a recent anxiety—the problem of post-occupancy (the life that begins when a building is finished).

Two themes critical to post-occupancy are cleaning and maintenance, and these two, distinct activities are the subjects of *Koolhaas HouseLife* (1998), set at Maison à Bordeaux, and of *Gehry’s Vertigo* (1997), filmed at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. These films underscore the social, cultural, and economic differences between cleanliness and maintenance, two separate practices that require different protocols. Cleaning and maintenance often are seen as interchangeable or the same, and are even described as such. Deepening this confusion, the term *preservation* is often added, although it is physically an entirely different act, as is evidenced in *Koolhaas HouseLife*. Preservation has been regarded as an autonomous practice reserved for specialists, an act that some of the most experimental architects like Rem Koolhaas and OMA/AMO are championing.

Cleaning is domestic and therefore more private, involving chores that can be accomplished by one individual—like dusting, polishing and vacuuming, whereas maintenance is more formally organized, requiring skilled workers often in teams (e.g., window washers) and is done in public. Philosophically, they are different as well in that cleaning is an engagement with discrete parts while maintenance is dedicated to safeguarding the holistic architectural work. The distinction is important because cleanliness is a fundamental quality that we associate with modern and contemporary life and yet, today, as attention is shifting toward sustainability, maintenance has become increasingly pertinent to strategies of endurance and longevity, which inevitably involve labor.

These two films explore the intersection of cleanliness and architecture in a critique of the modern project. An earlier artist working in this vein is Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who proclaimed with her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* (1969) “The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay.” The significance of the manifesto was followed by a series of staged art projects in *Hartford Wash* (1973) part of the Maintenance Art Performance Series (1973–74) held at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, where domestic cleaning by the subject—the housewife—transgressed from the house to the museum in a public act of cleaning.

The Dutch artist Job Koelewijn’s art school thesis project, *Cleaning the Rietveld Pavilion* (1992), a series of photographs, is another such performance piece in which his aunts dress up in traditional Dutch outfits, complete with aprons, and clean the glass box building of the Rietveld Academy, “recleansing the idea of cleanliness.” The project that resonates most profoundly with the contemporary discourse of cleanliness and modern architecture is Jeff Wall’s *Morning Cleaning* (1999) for which Wall photographed a janitor cleaning the Barcelona Pavilion over a series of mornings. For those of us in the discipline, to see architecture not only messy, but also being cleaned, is foreign and uncomfortable. Confronting the mess is something that architects purposefully avoid. However, these fixed images testify to the amount of time and physical effort necessary to achieve cleanliness and to renew the image of the architecture.
Acts of upkeep and the issue of time are also addressed in Ilídio Mangano Ovalle’s film Le Baiser/The Kiss (1999), a video installation that records a performance staged at Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth house (1945–51) in Plano, Illinois.7 Within the thirteen-minute video, the artist dresses up as a janitor with a squeegee and washes the house’s entry doors and adjacent glass walls, while a woman playing a synthesizer inside ignores his presence; this juxtaposition brings to light the economic, social, and cultural divide that architecture creates. It shifts our expectation of the image of contemporary architecture from one of perfection to one that is made up of parts that require care to endure. Each project reintroduces the figure of the worker, whose repetitive tasks are necessary for the endurance not only of the physical structure but also of the image of architecture. Koolhaas HouseLife and Gehry’s Vertigo convey a fuller sense of time, and also clarify the distinctions between cleanliness, preservation, and what constitutes art making.

The introductory frame of Koolhaas HouseLife features the housekeeper, Guadalupe Acedo, standing on the elevator platform with her mop and bucket as it slowly rises up from the basement level continuing toward the top, private floor (Figure 1). As the primary caretaker of the Maison à Bordeaux—one of the most important houses built in the late twentieth century—Acedo becomes the main character in this post-occupancy narrative. Guadalupe explains that she spends more time at the Maison à Bordeaux than in her own house, since she sleeps in the staff quarters every weeknight. The body is not separated from the building, and the film—in an archival act—preserves the image of the house by representing the body of its cleaner as a significant figure within it.

The second part of Koolhaas HouseLife opens on the occasion of the annual European Heritage Day, when all buildings are open to the public for touring. It was filmed on a rainy day, and visitors are asked to remove their shoes so as not to leave the house in a “bad state.” It is at this moment that the context of the house as a historic landmark, is revealed. The camera continues to follow Acedo on a tour of the house through which the viewer gets a sense of how long it takes to walk from one room to another, to climb the stairs, to cross the house. In addition to the moving portrait, the film (presented on DVD with an extra interview with Rem Koolhaas) is accompanied by a book of still photos of Guadalupe at work along with images of the window washers and the gardener. Notably, there are also several small drawings mapping Guadalupe’s route through the house that recollect Andy Warhol’s Dance Diagram series (1962). These document the movement of the subject through and around the space of the architecture—movements that are directed and purposeful, but also improvised in response to the house. The architecture itself demands the most of the cleaner. These demands are often comical or absurd, and the poignancy of the films comes from the humor of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves, when, as Koolhaas describes it, the “platonic ideal of cleaning meets the platonic idea of building.” Watching Acedo climb the metal spiral staircase with vacuum, mop, and bucket in hand, the architecture suddenly takes on other implications. In the interview Koolhaas responds to this scene with a critique of the cleaner, not the architecture: “I am kind of surprised by the fact that someone who has such a daily involvement with the building is so insistent on a kind of generic technique of cleaning something so exceptional. I can easily imagine if I were a cleaner—maybe this is something we should have thought of—is to devise some sort of protocol of what is convenient to be done by hand and what is convenient to be done by machine. I am completely surprised that something that is as harsh and exceptional as the spiral staircase is treated with a Hoover. It is completely insane.” His disappointment is not that the architecture gets dirty, or that the housekeeper is unduly burdened, but that his building has failed to inspire improvisation and creativity.

Koolhaas HouseLife is divided into brief visual poems with titles such as: “Shoes,” “Curtain,” “Back and Forth,” “As Soon as You Touch,” “Windows,” “Slopes,” “Hose,” “Not Like Before,” “Stones,” “Not the Right Way,” “All Grey,” “Pond,” and “Porthole,” which highlight discrete moments produced by things like the sound of the automated equipment and the movement of the curtains in the breeze. These are interspersed among lighter moments, as when Guadalupe pokes fun at Koolhaas’s extra-large ears in the scene “Hearing Us?” and more poignant moments when she describes how the owner laughs less often since the death of her husband, in “Not Like Before.” She states, “The house was made only for him, because of his disability.” His absence is most notable in the scene when the platform slowly descends, a beautiful moment that comes at the end of “Windows,” when the window washer’s squeegee moving across the skyline fades from view and the scene returns to only architecture.

The films’ presentations of cleaning at the Maison à Bordeaux and maintenance at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao have gained traction within today’s architectural discussions. At this year’s Venice Biennale—where Koolhaas was awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement—along with OMA/AMO, he presented an exhibition centered on preservation projects. One of the posters with which he explored the theme announced that “The interval between the now and the preserved is shrinking, and is about to disappear.
From this moment, we do not only have to look back, but also forward; we will have to decide what to preserve in advance. In 2001, just three years after its completion, the Maison à Bordeaux was designated a historic monument. The cleaning that was documented in the film is an act of preservation, a daily upkeep that renews the house. The original house is no longer the original house, as parts and pieces have required replacement. This has required more work and created different effects; for example the concrete of the spiral stair is now more rough and imperfect than the original. The film identifies the difficulties of upkeep in an extraordinary house and raises significant questions about the ethics of cleaning and the status of preservation—protocols that must be readjusted for an art work that becomes designated a historic monument.

In Gehry’s Vertigo, the filmmakers shift to large scale at the Guggenheim Bilbao, one of the most significant museums of the twentieth century, and present the work of a maintenance crew organized to clean the glazing, inside and out (Figure 2). Maintenance of public buildings is not often represented within architecture publications or the discourse of architecture. One exception is found within Reyner Banham’s The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment, a photograph of the Lever House (1952) standing between a prominent Park Avenue street sign in the foreground and a window washing rig hanging from the top of the building in the distant background hints at the new technology being used. There are no window washers in the rig, only the apparatus is presented. Interestingly, Banham also does not mention the window washing system anywhere in the writing. Only with the development of large-scale projects, like skyscrapers and modern institutional buildings, did maintenance emerge as an organized concern. Banham’s inclusion of the Lever House image complete with window-washing rig affirms the necessity of maintenance to render the façade eternally new and pristine, here the façade mullions also work as part of the guidance system for the rig. Technological devices used for maintenance at the time of Banham’s writing were not considered architecture, nor did the apparatus contribute directly to the idea of comfort. And, so, it is here that Bêka and Lemoine’s film of the Guggenheim offers up, for the first time, a look at participants in the large-scale work that the system of maintenance is by and large an extension of those artificial systems that Banham wrote about. For this project, Gehry specifically selected a building material—titanium shingles—that would minimize decay, the problems of weather, and other effects of time. However, while the metal-covered façades do not require frequent cleaning, there are still vast areas of glass that do. Professional climbers were hired to scale the building as if it were a mountain. A similar method was initially used to clean I. M. Pei’s glass pyramid at the Louvre, however, the pyramid climbers were shortly replaced by a robot that animates its surface and attracts the attention of visitors. The film’s title, Vertigo, alludes to the dizzying heights and instability that are experienced in the act of maintaining the museum’s exterior and also to the instability of culture in general. The films point out that while architecture solves problems, it inadvertently creates new ones. These new problems of building created over the last twenty years affect architecture’s endurance, and multiple forms of media allow for a re-reading of architecture’s image.

These two films expose acts of upkeep without degrading the architectural work’s visionary status. They affirm the role of the architect but also point to a necessary private remaking in order for the canonic image to endure. The responsibility of shelter to provide “protection from time’s terror,” is as much a contemporary problem as it was a modern one. Post-occupancy has been a taboo topic for far too long, and architects who are perhaps afraid “to see what happens in the absence of the author,” should reconsider their distance from the life of the building. Film is an effective medium for capturing and shaping the performative aspects of architecture. These films contribute to an understanding that architecture’s value constructed through media, where its more hidden contingencies are exposed.

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Notes
2. Online at http://www.pritzkerprize.com/about/

3. In the interview between the filmmakers and Rem Koolhaas, following Koolhaas Hour, Koolhaas notes the project he did with his office entitled Post-Occupy, which was published as a special issue by Domus magazine. For more information see the signature issue, AMO/Rem Koolhaas, Post-Occupy, Domus, special issue, July 2006.
5. Michael Laderman-Ukeles, “Manifesto! For Maintenance Art: Proposal for an exhibition ‘CARE’,” 1969, online at http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/ Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf (accessed 2 March 2011). The word ‘preservation’ is a misnomer and what we usually mean by the term is something more like restoration, reconstruction, or re-creation.”
8. The house was named “Best Design of the Year” in 1998 by Time magazine. In 2001 it was awarded historic monument status.