

Dirk van den Heuvel

INSIDE-  
OUTSIDE  
On the Work of  
Petra Blaisse  
and the Archi-  
tecture of the  
Drape

## ORIGINS

For a long time, the drape was unthinkable as a part of architecture. Modern architectural thinking was dominated by structure and construction. Rereadings of Gottfried Semper's theories brought about a radical change in the description of contemporary architectural production. In retrospect, this rereading has led to fundamental rewritings of the history of modern architecture. The textile, the woven material that Semper indicated as one of the original, or primal, sources of architecture, was further elaborated into a possible tectonic theory of architecture. Textile, moreover, was linked with an understanding of the outer wall as mask and signifier, and, not least, with gender theories from the field of sociology.<sup>1</sup> These rewritings of modern architecture history imply an evaluation and a revaluation, a shift in the hierarchy of architectural teaching, or as Henk Engel paraphrases Adolf Loos: the lining (*Wand*) comes before the wall (*Mauer*).<sup>2</sup>

The drape itself remained absent for the meantime, both from the architecture debate and actual architectural production. Reflection on the drape can shed light on its possible meanings for contemporary architecture. As we will see, these touch on the very position and power of architecture itself. This is not about a monumental architecture, an architecture reminiscent of Semper, who in turn reminds us of the civilizations of antiquity and their 'primal' architecture; it is about an architecture that utilizes the drape to question its own pre-

1

The most interesting publications in this connection are: Hans Kollhof (ed.), *Über Tektonik in der Baukunst* (Braunschweig/Wiesbaden, 1993); Werner Oechslin, *Stilhülse und Kern, Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos und der evolutionäre Weg zur modernen Architektur* (Zurich/Berlin, 1994); Kenneth Frampton, *Studies into Tectonic Culture. The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge/London, 1995); Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge/London, 1995); Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Gottfried Semper, Architect of the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven/London, 1996).

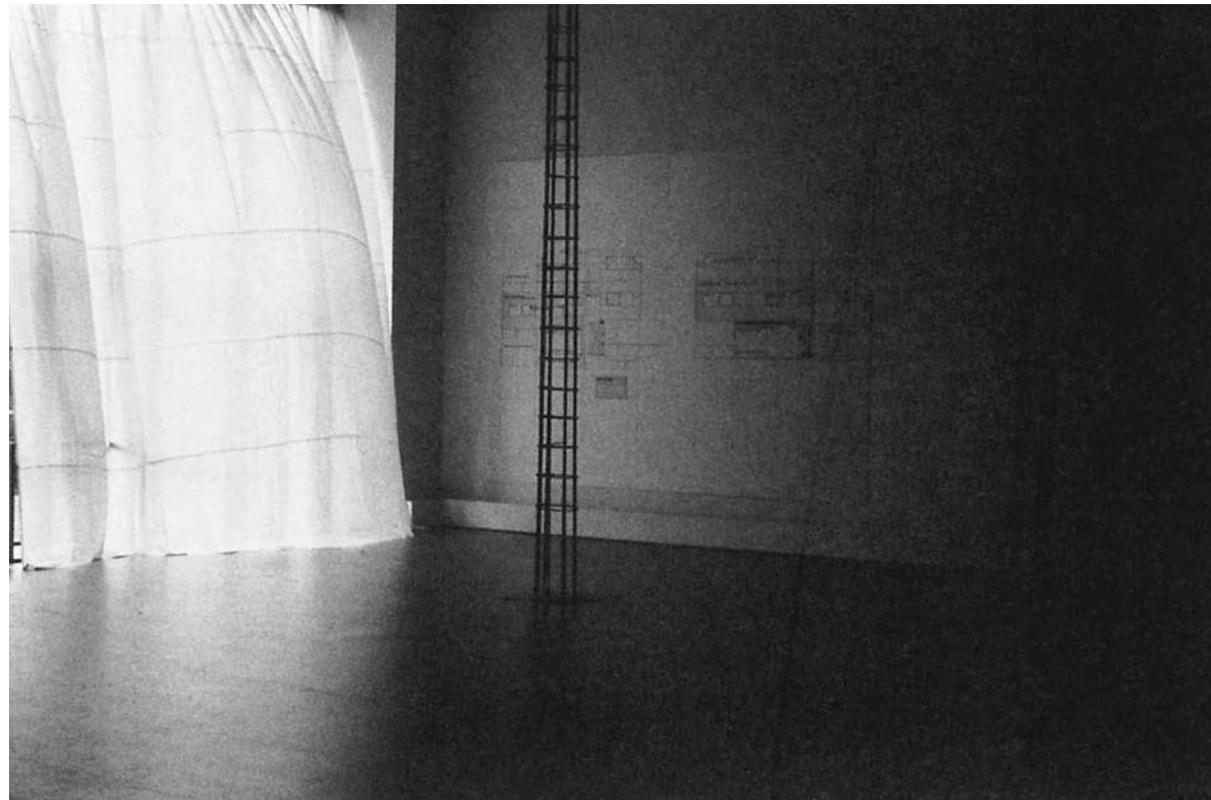
2

Henk Engel, 'Stijl en expressie', in: Jan de Heer (ed.), *Kleur en architectuur* (Rotterdam, 1986), 63-74.

ises and presuppositions, to reflect on them and formulate them anew.

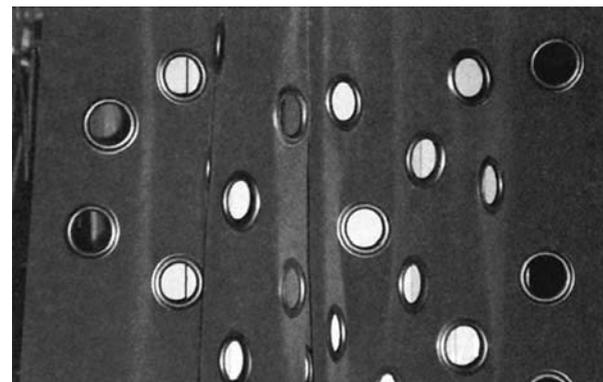
Seeing the drape as a primal source of architecture undermines our conventional understanding of architecture as a stable and slow discipline. The architecture of the drape is basically an architecture of the provisional, the temporary; the tent and the tabernacle, not the patio house or the temple, are the primal types of this architecture. From this angle, the drape denotes a difference, in this case a difference in time; and in tragic terms, it denotes the temporary and transient nature of human nature itself. A second important difference that the drape denotes is a difference in space, between inside and outside.

As a metaphor, the dialectic pair of inside-outside is capable of supporting the organization of a cultural model. The interior becomes the place of the self and the subject, the exterior that of the other and the object. The interior is a space that has been cleared within the expanse of the world, a space of appropriation, colonization and occupancy by the active subject. The lining of the wall constitutes the inner horizon of this space. Window and door occupy a special place within this organization: they are the openings between inside and outside, and vice versa. This applies just as much to the spaces of the threshold, balcony and garden. They offer a view of the outside world, from the known to the unknown, from self to other, and also, to use Heidegger's words, from the earth to

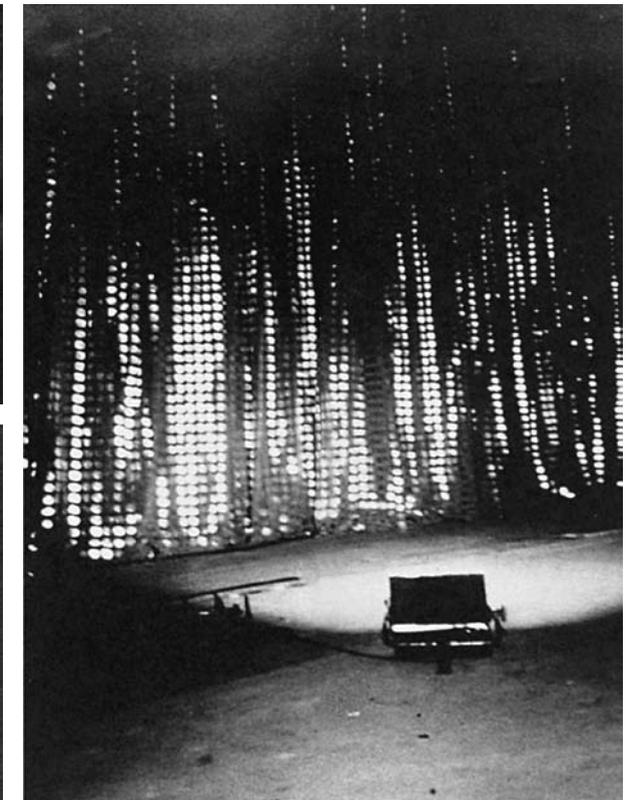


Drape at the exhibition 'OMA, the first decade' in museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam

Sewing the hem



The drape for MoMA, detail



287

Stage curtain in the Nederlands Danstheater

the sky. He calls this room the 'in-between', which has been allotted to human living.<sup>3</sup> Here, in this 'in-between', inside and outside are simultaneously separated and brought together.<sup>4</sup> The exterior is interiorized, domesticated, the other is appropriated. The other way round, this is where the self mirrors itself in the other world, measures itself against it, determines its own value.

In his study *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, Mark Wigley goes a step further.<sup>5</sup> The drape does not just denote any difference. A mere denoting at most confirms what is already there. The radicalness of the drape lies in the fact that the drape itself puts people in a position to think in terms of inside and outside. Before the drape was there, there was no inside or outside. Like a mechanism, the drape produces the difference between inside and outside, and sets a dialectic in motion between inner and outer, between ideal and appearance, structure and ornament. The mask and the theatrical originate from the architecture of the drape.

### ILLUSION

Although the processes in which buildings come about nowadays give every cause for an architecture of the temporary, the manifestation and materialization of buildings appeal to values of solidity and permanence. In the 1980s, the provisional featured largely in the rhetoric used by the OMA office

3  
Martin Heidegger, '... dichterlijk woont de mens ...'; Dutch translation, in: Martin Heidegger, *Over denken, bouwen, wonen* (Nijmegen, 1991), 91-110, esp. 99-101.

4  
About wall and opening, see also: Fritz Neumeyer, 'Mit dem Kopf durch die Wand: Annäherung an das Unwort "Fassade"', in: D. Kirchner, J. Kostka and C. Rothe (eds.), *Hans Kolhoff* (Berlin, 1995).

5  
Wigley, *White Walls*, op. cit. (note 1); *OASE 47* contains a translation into Dutch of the first chapter, 'The emperor's new paint', as 'De nieuwe verf van de keizer', 20-35.

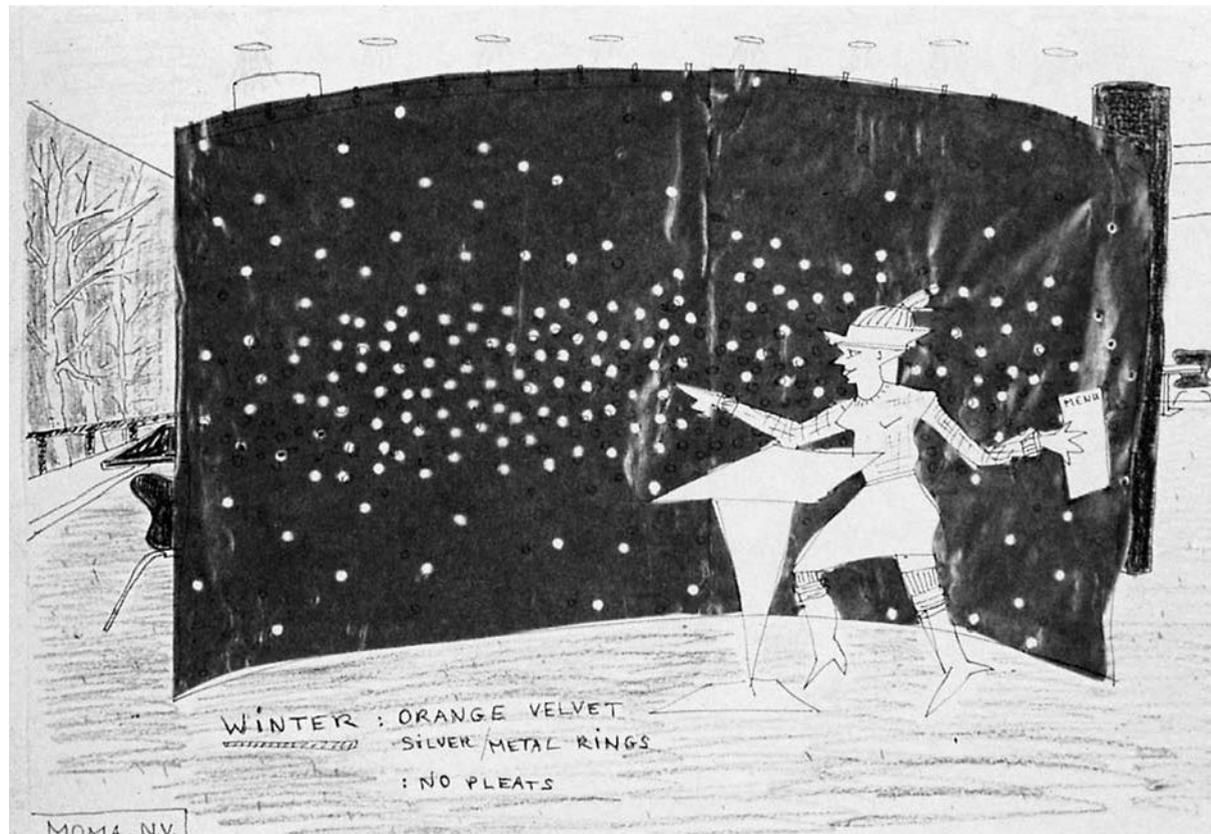
when describing its architecture and the use of its architecture. The Netherlands Dance Theatre by OMA is one of the realized designs in whose materialization this aspect was a guiding principle. Petra Blaisse, together with photographer Hans Werlemann, largely determined the design and dressing of the interior, particularly the furnishing of the auditorium. For instance, Blaisse was responsible for the upholstery of the chairs and designed the stage curtain.

The spatial set-up of the dance theatre auditorium was kept to a bare minimum. The auditorium, without balconies or boxes, is soberly furnished, with a black interior and chairs upholstered in a dark blue, so that maximum attention is focused on the proscenium. The curtain hangs in the traditional position between auditorium and stage. Proscenium and curtain can literally be described as an 'in-between'. This area separates auditorium and stage, audience from dancers, while at the same time bringing them together. It produces a desire in the audience and guides this desire on behind the curtain. Proscenium and curtain mark the borders, and freedom, of the theatre, in space and in time. A temporary opening offers the illusion of a glimpse into another world, which here in the theatre is above all a projective space, one that reflects the audience's own feelings and desires, intensifying them and giving them a place and a direction.

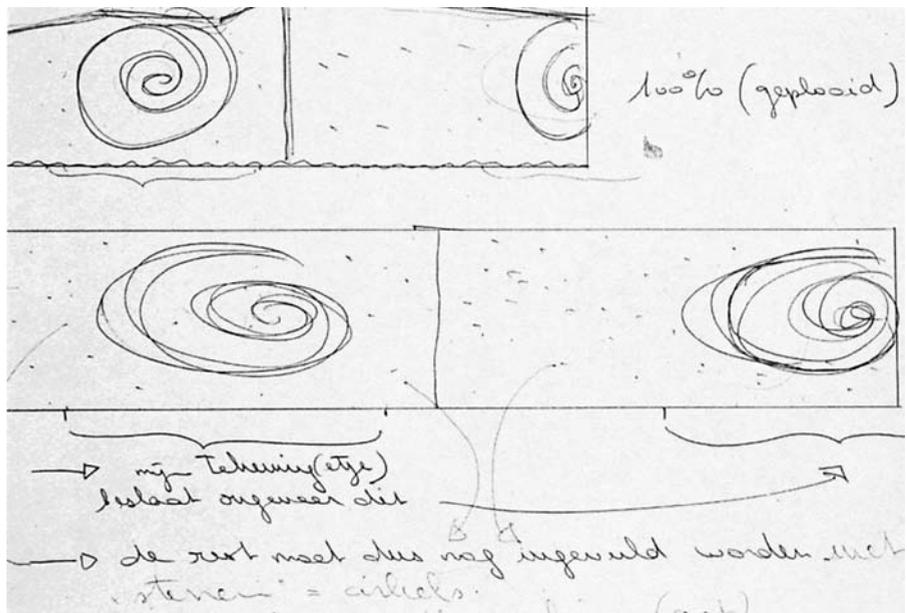
The curtain, in contrast with the sober furnishings of the blue-black auditorium, was meant to give a rather old-fashioned impression of theatrical decadence and extravagance. The incongruity of the curtain's glamorousness with the minimal, almost meager budget available for the theatre was intentionally emphasized by Blaisse. Almost automatically, illusion became the effect that the curtain had to bring about; an illusion of the theatre, of the pretensions of clients, but also of the curtain itself, an illusion of the material appearance. The most important means for this were found in changing light effects, while lamp and gold print, fold and rails constitute the composition that produces these effects.

The illusory effects of depth and transparency through light reflections and the movement of the folds were central considerations in the design and production of the curtain. These determined the nature of the cloth and the pattern printed on it. The cloth is grey velvet – the thickest, heaviest imaginable. The gold print, in a pattern of embossed discs, is made of a gold-colored plastic film. The pattern was applied with a press. First of all, the press was used to flatten the pile of the velvet, then a silk screen was used to apply the glue, after which the gold film was pressed onto the curtain. When dry, the film was pulled off, leaving the pattern behind.

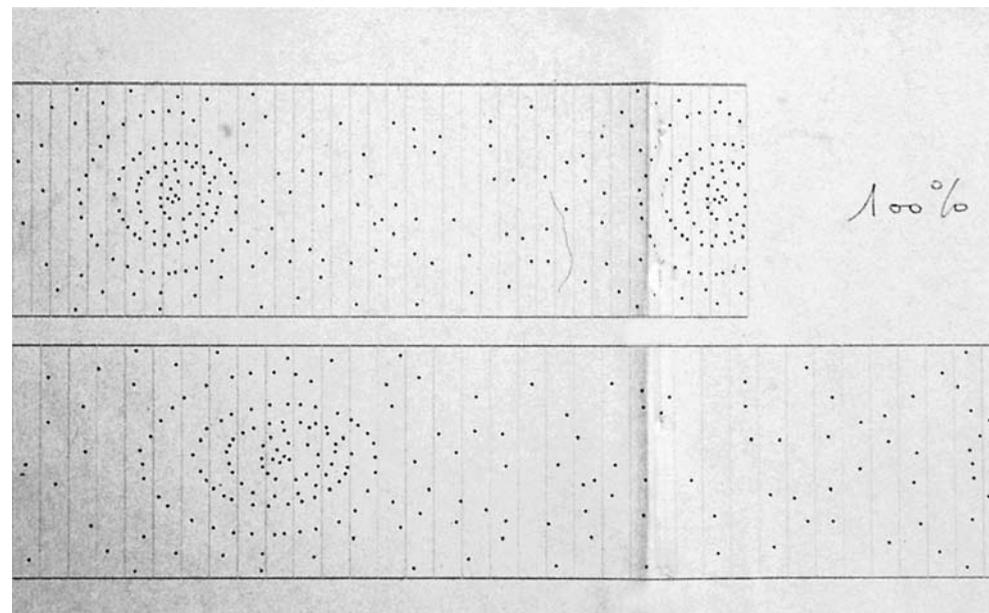
The desired 'fluid' effect of the curtain when it moves determined the form and 'grain' of the printed pattern of gold discs, each about 10 cm in diameter. A rectangular or square print would have given the curtain a certain stiffness and made a fluid, falling movement of the reflections and folds impos-



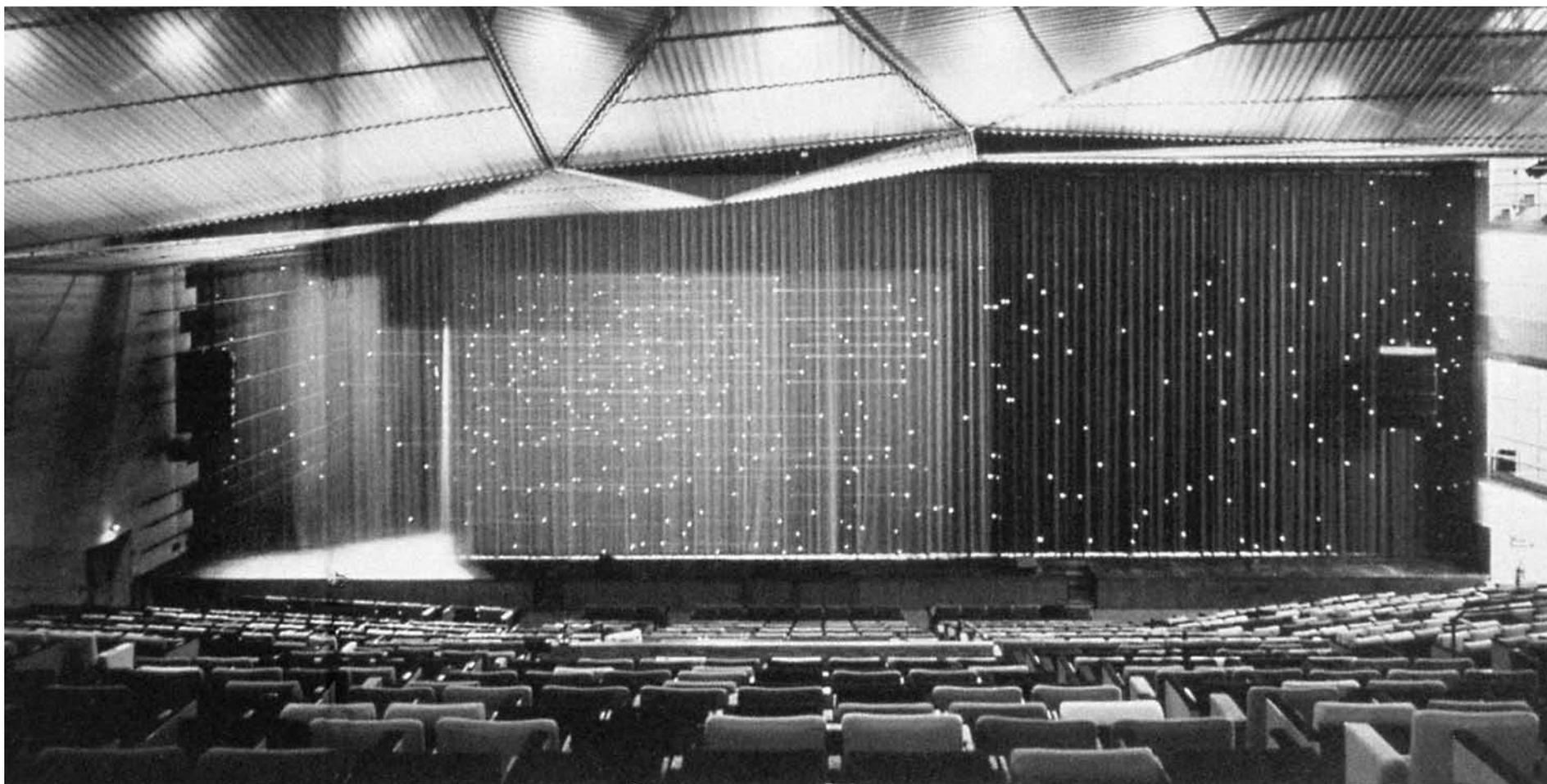
Design sketch for a drape for the Museum of Modern Arts (MoMA), New York



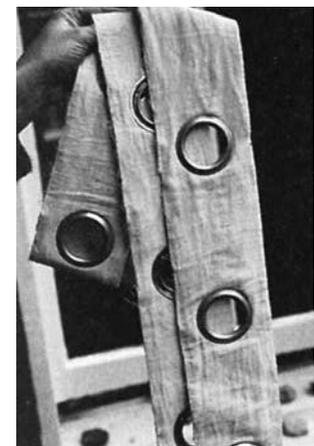
Design sketch for a drape for the Congrexpo in Lille



Working drawing for a drape for the Congrexpo in Lille



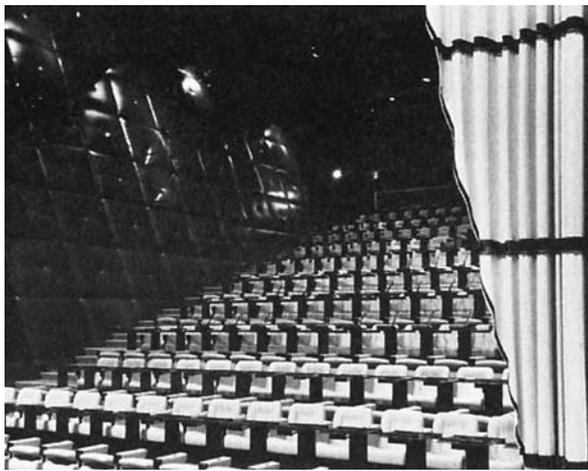
Drape Congrexpo, Lille, featuring starry sky pattern



Sample for starry sky drape



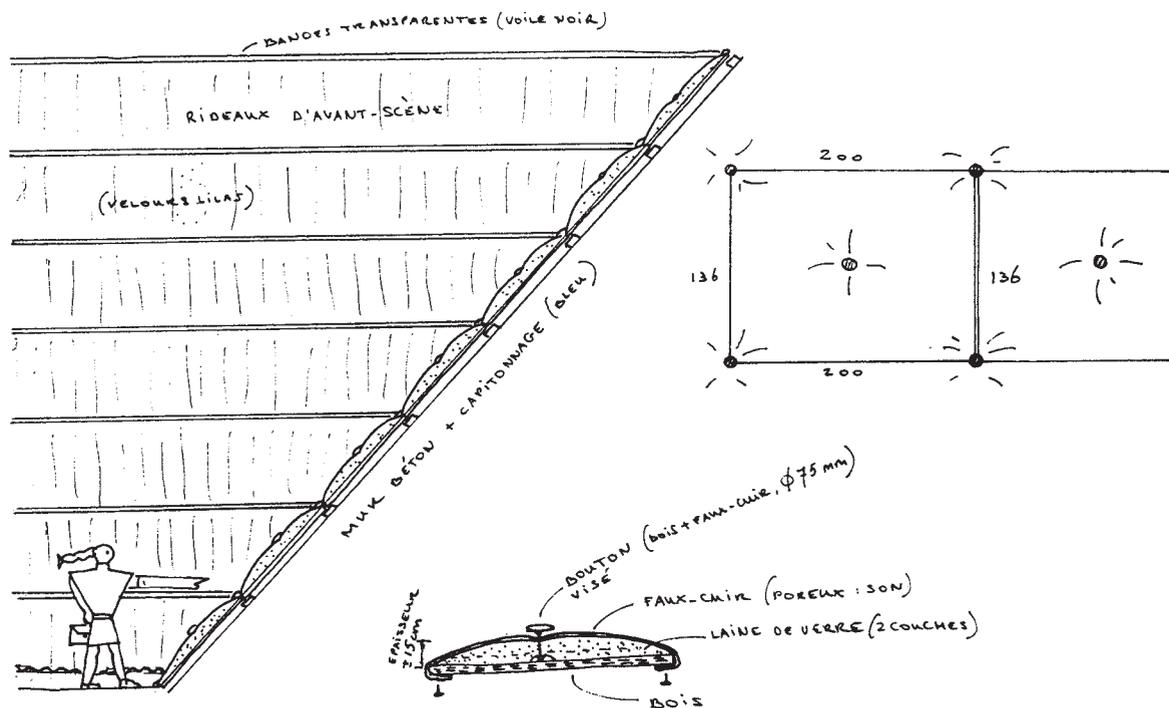
Detail of starry sky drape, Congrexpo Lille



Drape Congrexpo, Lille, with voile



Drape Congrexpo, Lille, with voile



Design sketch for drape Congrexpo, Lille, with voile

sible. Depending on the lighting and the movement, these gold 'discs' reflect now like the sun on the sea or seem like holes appearing in the curtain. On the theatre's ten year anniversary, Jyri Kilian, art director of the dance theatre, seized on the ritual of the opening and closing of the curtain to make a separate choreography for this tinsel waterfall. Rising and falling, closing in and yielding, the curtain itself 'danced' for a few minutes before the beginning of the anniversary performance.

### EFFECT

Petra Blaisse now has an office of her own, called Inside-Outside. The office makes the widest variety of drapes, each one unique, and often for OMA projects. Blaisse made a drape to function as an acoustic and spatial partition in the Main Hall of the Kunsthal in Rotterdam. For the Congrexpo in Lille, Blaisse made two hall drapes. Smaller drapes have hung at various exhibitions. For the MoMA in New York, she designed two drapes for the restaurant, a soft green for the spring season and a bright orange for autumn. Just like with the curtain for the Netherlands Dance Theatre, the focus in the conception of these drapes was largely on their making and the position they would assume in the space. You could call the first the tectonics of the drape, the second its architectural effect.

Although the making and the material itself are of primary importance in Blaisse's working method, she is not aiming for an architecture that wants to show the materials and characteristics as such. Architecture here is not understood as pure materiality, or a pure surface that is made empty, free of meanings. Architecture is understood as an effect. Only in this effect does the material become architectural. Blaisse takes this as her starting point. She finds this effect in the material, in its processing and in the reciprocity between the two. This leads to intensive concentration on the idiosyncrasies of the available material and the specific ways of processing it. In the actual projects, the furthest limits of processing possibilities are sought, and effects considered essential are intensified.

Blaisse uses the following means to give the curtain an architectural effect: (1) light, air and movement; (2) seam, hem and fold; and (3) texture and pattern. The directly intended effects relate to volume, scale and sculptural quality, transparency and reflection and division of space and time.

At the OMA exhibition entitled *The first decade* in the Boymans-van Beuningen museum, a drape hung in front of one of the windows in the large exhibition hall that, like a sail billowing in the wind, created the impression that the window was open. In its simplicity, this drape summarized the aforementioned means and effects. A wind machine blew air into the drape and made it flutter a bit, letting it trail on the floor. The resulting volume was emphasized by horizontally stitched seams instead of the usual vertical ones. At the same time,

these seams acted between the strips of material as a scale division. Artificial light behind the curtain provided the illusion of sunlight filtering through. Moreover, this light emphasized both the sculptural quality of the swelling curtain and the texture of the material.

In the design for the curtains for the two conference rooms in the Congrexpo by OMA, Blaisse mainly elaborates on aspects of lighting the curtain and the way in which the effects of transparency and depth are created. For one room, she designed a curtain with a 'starry sky'. This curtain is riddled with a holey pattern of rings that together form the spiraling geometry of a milky way. The pattern was set out and punched by hand in the various strips of cloth. The size of and distance between the holes is geared to the size of the fold and the changing speeds at which the curtain slides open and closes.

Just like at the Netherlands Dance Theatre, the pattern fulfils several functions. It provides a scale division: the metal rings, like the gold discs, are an in-between element between the large size of the curtain as a whole and the texture of the cloth. In addition, they provide different light effects. With lighting from inside the room, it seems as if holes appear in the cloth, and when lit from behind with wide-beam lights, the blue satin lining of the curtain produces a bright blue pattern of holes on the room side.

This lining, incidentally, hangs separately from the velvet drape, and flutters behind it a bit when drawn. A lead chain



Auditorium of the Kunsthall with unrolled drape

sewn into the seam prevents it from flying up in a wild and uncontrolled manner.

## DISPLACEMENT

The organization of looking, of the gaze, is crucial for a proper understanding of the architecture of the drape. Mark Wigley suggests that in modern architecture the architectural object is not a neutral object at which you can look in an unbiased way, but the architecture itself implies a certain way of looking.<sup>6</sup> The architecture is not subjected to a certain look, it presupposes and conditions a certain way of looking. In the case of the architecture of the white wall, it is about a rational look of hygiene and control, a look that detects impurity, a spiritualized look that moreover is blind, or blinded, to the physical that is behind the white screen. The white wall sets up a detached look, a subject alienated from itself.

In her discussion of Loos's architecture, Beatriz Colomina arrives at a similar conclusion: 'Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject.'<sup>7</sup> Wall and opening play an important role here. Colomina points out that in Loos's houses an ambiguous relationship is created between subject and object, between inside and outside. The opening in the wall is not clearly transparent and does not allow the gaze of the observing subject through without hindrance. Openings turn out to be mirrors or at most, are translucent. Transparency becomes reflection and projection. Theatrical spaces are introduced in the house. Colomina then demonstrates how the architecture of Loos's houses works like a mechanism, with the positions of subject and object constantly changing and rendered ambiguous. The looking subject knows it is being looked at by the object being looked at: '... when Münz describes the entrance to the social spaces of the Moller house, he writes: "Within, entering from one side, one's gaze travels in the opposite direction till it rests in the light, pleasant alcove, raised above the living room floor. Now we are really inside the house." That is, the intruder is "inside", has penetrated the house, only when his/her grace strikes this most intimate space, turning the occupant into a silhouette against the light. The "voyeur" in the "theater box" has become the object of another's gaze; she is caught in the act of seeing, entrapped in the very moment of control. In framing a view, the theater box also frames the viewer. It is impossible to abandon the space, let alone leave the house, without being seen by those over whom control is being exerted. Object and subject exchange places.'<sup>8</sup>

What results is the displacement of the autonomous subject. The interior in which this subject lives has suddenly changed into no more than another exterior. There remains nothing more for him/her than the difference between inside and outside. Living itself gets a fundamentally different content here. Colomina therefore speaks of *inhabiting* rather than

<sup>6</sup> 'Architecture is no longer simply a visual object with certain properties. It is actually involved in the construction of the visual before it is placed within the visual. Indeed, vision itself becomes an architectural phenomenon. The place of architecture becomes much more complicated. A building can no longer be separated from the gaze that appears to be directed at it. Before having a certain look, the building is a certain way of looking.' In: Wigley, *White Walls*, op. cit. (note 1), 2; *OASE* 47, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Beatriz Colomina, 'The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism', in: Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space* (New York, 1992), 83.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

*dwelling*. This detached living is comparable with the condition of the post humanist subject described by Michael Hays, a subject that can no longer be described as a psychologically autonomous and individual person, central in the universe, but as a subject that has lost its control and authority.<sup>9</sup> According to Colomina, this detached subject can only still live in the wall itself.<sup>10</sup>

The mechanics of the wall that simultaneously separated and brought together inside and outside now produces temporary positions of inside and outside, and more often, different positions of outside and outside or inside and inside. If we try to describe inside and outside on the basis of this mechanism, we can only talk of gradual and immanent differences within the expanse of a world, where before there was still a clearly defined interior that had been cleared. The architecture of the drape at most makes these differences temporarily present, and in that sense, the architecture of the drape is an architecture of situations. The term situation can be described as an unstable, transient unity of time and space. In his dissertation, *Beweging tegen de schijn*, René Sanders described the essence of the situation as the possibility of what is immanently present to come outside, to step into the foreground. Desire and its projection are therefore guiding aspects in the construction of situations. In this context, Sanders also refers to the relationship between theatre and situation, although he does not elaborate this further into an architectural or spatial definition.<sup>11</sup>

9

K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject. The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* (Cambridge/London, 1992), 6-7.

10

Beatriz Colomina, 'The Split Wall', op. cit. (note 7), 94-96.

11

René J. Sanders, *Beweging tegen de schijn, de situationisten, een avant-garde* (Amsterdam, 1989), esp. Chapter 4. 'Over de negatie en de negatie van de negatie van de kunst, de Situationistische Internationale in de periode 1957-1962', 101-144, and chapter 5, 'De heerschappij van en de aanval op de warenconomie, de Situationistische Internationale in de periode 1962-1968', 145-174.

Architectural studies based on a perspective of gender give us more to go on in this regard. Such studies, among which we can also count those by Wigley and Colomina, are capable of offering an idea of a new architectural instrumentarium and the construction of new architectural spaces. In their studies, they take as their point of departure the question of how the architectural space itself creates a subject of its own, a subject that assumes an identity along the lines of gender differences, and that complies with social conventions. The premise that architecture conditions the subject, and not the other way round, leads to a thorough investigation of the mechanisms that produce this subject and that are implied in the concrete architectures.<sup>12</sup> In this way, they go beyond categories of typology, iconology and construction that the discipline of architecture uses itself. In the introduction to the collection of essays entitled *Stud, architectures of masculinity*, Joel Sanders puts these mechanisms in a nutshell: 'dressing wall surfaces, demarcating boundaries, distributing objects, and organizing gazes.'<sup>13</sup>

### SITUATION

Of the series of drapes Petra Blaisse has made, the drape in the auditorium of the Rotterdam Kunsthal is the most radical. It occupies an entirely different position in space than the others. This curtain does not hang in the traditional position between audience and stage, but is draped round one of the concrete columns in the hall. The steel rails it hangs on were cast along with the formwork of the concrete ceiling, creating the impression that the movement of the cloth has drawn a groove in the unfinished concrete, which has been left exposed. Because the floor of the hall slopes upwards, the hem of the drape does so as well. This is immediately visible when the drape is rolled up, forming a sculpture of folds and seams that spiral upwards around the concrete column.

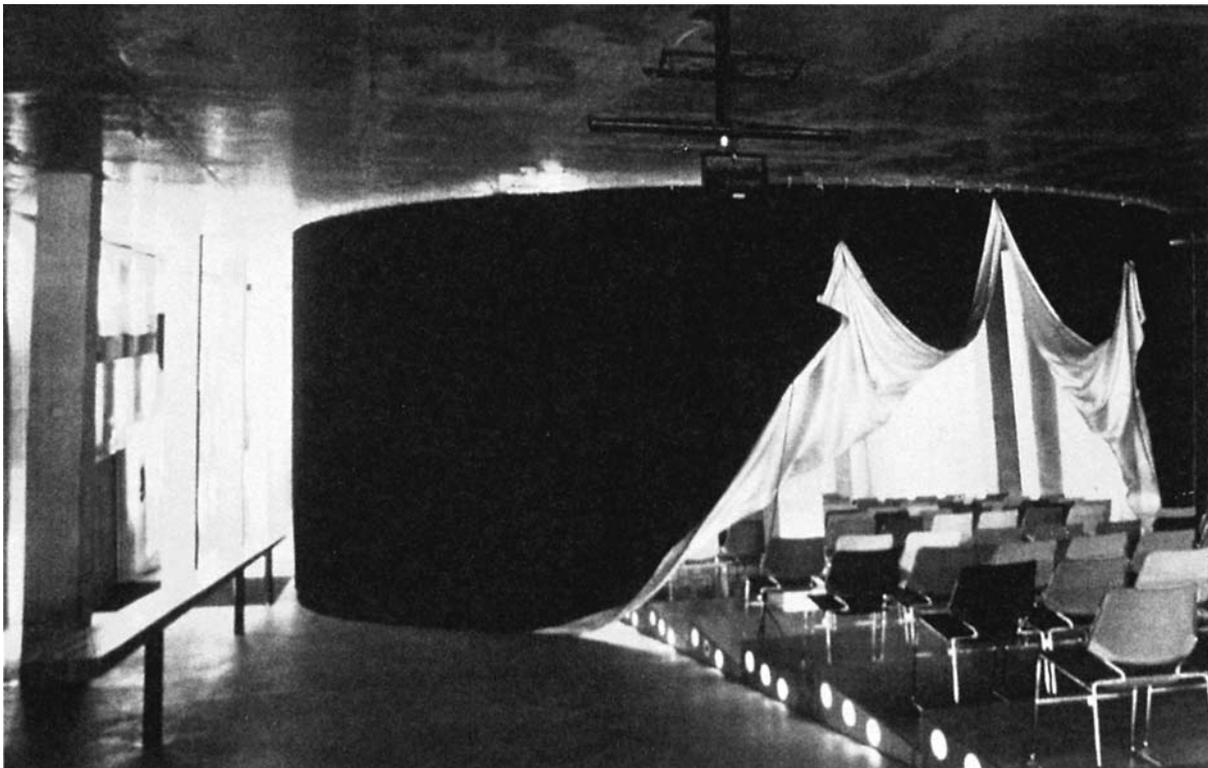
When the drape is unfurled, it acts like a tent that makes a second interior inside the auditorium. The spatial effect of a tent is further reinforced at the back by the way in which an 'emergency exit' has been provided – at the behest of the fire brigade. The drape is simply lifted up by the hem and held up. At that moment, a view arises from outside to inside. Inner and outer drape are then simultaneously visible. The two are different. The inside one is a silvery, woven glass-fiber cloth, the outside one is made of a black cotton velvet. The black drape reaches the floor, the glass fiber hangs slightly above the floor, and is finished with a satin hem. The choice of a glass-fiber cloth was partly prompted by the permanent wall lining of the auditorium, which consists of transparent corrugated polyester panels. The woven glass-fiber cloth is a 'soft' version of this hard material, as rope is a soft, flexible version of bark. This 'metabolism' (*Stoffwechsel*) is continued in the way the glass-fiber cloth falls into folds which relate to the undulating form of the glass-fiber wall plates.

12

Letting the architecture precede the subject has far-reaching consequences for criticism itself. Colomina refers to this in the aforementioned essay about Loos, 'The split wall': 'Incapable of detachment from the object, the critic simultaneously produces a new object and is produced by it. Criticism that presents itself as a new interpretation of an existing object is in fact constructing a completely new object.' Colomina, 'The Split Wall', op. cit. (note 7), 97. Research based on gender theories (particularly those of Irigaray, Lacan and Freud) has led to a seemingly inexhaustible series of American publications, which is being added to all the time. Where architectural mechanisms and the production of a (posthumanistic) subject are concerned – apart from the above-mentioned publications *Sexuality and Space* (note 7) and *White Walls, Designer Dresses* (note 1) – the following publications are the most interesting: Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity. Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge/London, 1994); Debora Fausch et al. (eds.), *Architecture and Fashion* (New York, 1994); Debra Coleman et al. (eds.) *Architecture and Feminism* (New York, 1996); Francesca Hughes (ed.), *The Architect, Reconstructing Her Practice* (Cambridge/London, 1996); Joel Sanders (ed.), *Stud, Architectures of Masculinity* (New York, 1996).

13

Sanders, *Stud*, *ibid.*, 13.



Auditorium of the Kunsthal, exterior of the 'tent' of the unrolled drape

The position of the drape was primarily prompted by the various requirements set for the furnishing of the auditorium. For instance, the drape had to improve the acoustic quality of the hall. Apart from the fact that the drape has a muffling effect, a series of small speakers have been incorporated into it, with the particular purpose of improving the reproduction of the higher audio frequencies. These speakers are suspended between the two cloths. On the glass-fiber side, they are visible as round buttons of gauze in a rubber strip. They work like a pattern and an element of scale, comparable with the golden discs and the starry sky. A second reason to apply the drape was the wish to be able to darken the room and control the lighting independently from daylight. The softly gleaming silver inner cloth, the tent's lining, changes according to the inside lighting selected. The interior of the tent thus becomes a separate world within the auditorium, with its own light and sound.

This construction of a temporary and provisional interior seems to have been the main consideration behind the unconventional positioning of the theatre curtain. In earlier OMA designs, experiments had already been made with drapes suspended freely in space, including the design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute and the Villa Dal'Ava.<sup>14</sup> The limit that the drape draws in the auditorium is emphatically designed as a temporary one, not only by making the physical border out of cloth, but above all by letting the limits in space constituted by floor and ceiling continue unhindered. Photo-

14

The design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute was not carried out. For the Villa Dal'Ava, Blaisse made a number of curtains, including the golden curtain in the living room. Koolhaas's book *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam, 1995) contains one of the old versions of the plan of the villa, with comments by the 'master', Rem Koolhaas himself, also about the position of the curtain: 'Trajectory of yellow silk curtain to make room in the room' (177). Relevant photographs of the curtain in *S,M,L,XL* can be found on pages 153 (bottom), 154-155, 157 (top), and 158-159, 162-163 and 165. Here, the curtain is the temporary substitute of the sliding glass partition which is the – likewise temporary – substitute of an outer wall (photographs on pages 158-159 and 162-163).

graphs of the auditorium with the drape unrolled show, at the opening in the cloth at the back of the room, that even the arrangement of the removable chairs continues right through the opening.<sup>15</sup> The drape brings out all its trumps in creating the illusion of the interior, thus paradoxically reinforcing the idea of temporariness; on the one hand by having the material of the silver inner cloth differ from that of the black outer cloth, and on the other by organizing its own light and sound effects.

In addition, the drape lends the room an undeniable theatrical ambience. It directs the gaze and evokes expectations. The position of the drape and its material elaboration, however, create an ambiguous effect; it is not the 'stage' that becomes the projective room of desires and feelings, but the hall full of people.<sup>16</sup> To that end, the stage itself is transformed into an enormous wooden piece of furniture that takes up the entire front wall of the room. In this piece, a large window has been left open, like a black hole. It is black, or dark, because the window gives onto the darkened, covered delivery passage. Then the light from the auditorium reflects in this dark hole, this void. Where the stage was, there is now a transparent window that acts like a mirror. In the glass, the look outwards and the projective room of the theatre coincide with the mirror image of the interior. The space of the auditorium becomes a situation in which interaction between the users constantly causes the positions of subject and object to alter. Moreover, the curtain itself participates in this exchange: it is active in contributing the partition and determining positions and looks, but through its special position it is just as much an object of being looked at, a small spectacle that uses the techniques of theatre while at the same time undermining its conventions.

So the drape does not so much turn the auditorium into a house for the detached subject, it makes a displaced theatre. This displacement must be understood as a *situationistic détournement*, a reversal of the conventions that wants to make a new definition possible, one that wants to explore the limits between inside and outside anew.

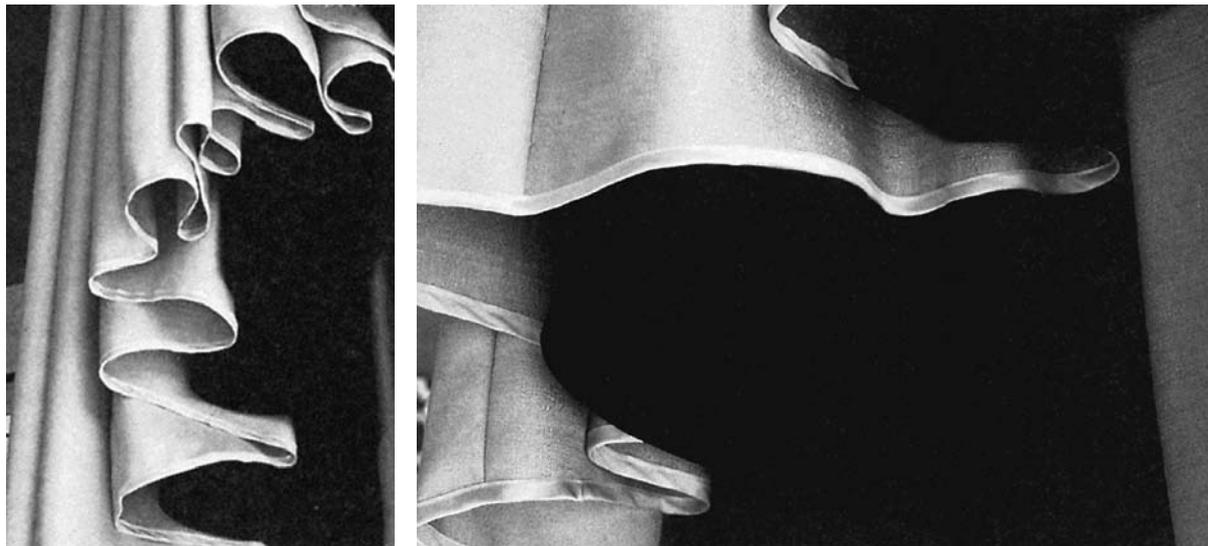
*Translated by Claire Jordan*

15

See the photography in *S,M,L,XL*, *ibid.*, pages 439 and 441, both at the top right-hand corners.

16

It is striking when looking at the published photographs of the auditorium that the camera is never aimed at the platform, the 'stage' at which the audience's gaze is primarily directed. Such photographs are, however, published of the halls of the dance theatre and the Congrexpo. In the case of the Kunsthall, the camera tends to be aimed at the seats (when the room is empty) or at the audience.



Hem detail