

Balancing Acts – From Big Beams to Multi-Culturalism

BY NGIOM

ARTISTIC INSTALLATIONS FREQUENTLY HANG IN PRECARIOUS BALANCE BETWEEN AWE AND AVERSION; BETWEEN INTRIGUE AND NONCHALANCE AND, BETWEEN INSPIRATION AND ENNUI. ALL THE WHILE, KEEPING THINGS IN PRECARIOUS BALANCE CREATES CURIOSITY.



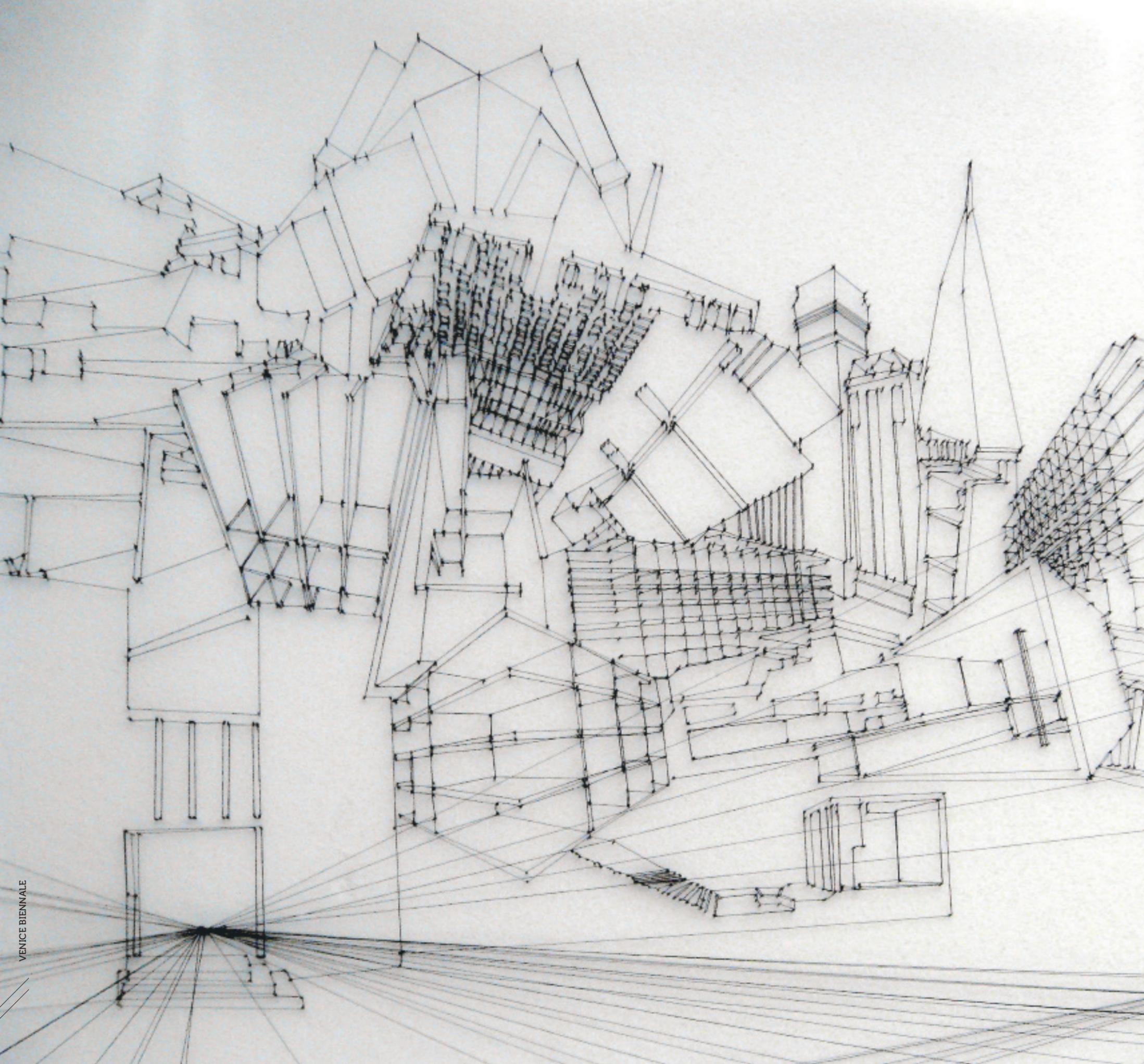
Architectural coverage is wide, grazing on the whole aspects of physical issues, environmental, occupation and void, and cultural issues. The 2010 Venice Biennale architectural exhibition was introduced at the beginning with a display of precariously hanging beams supported by spring coils, turning normal structural components into tense structural compositions. What was the point that author, Anton Garcia-Abril tried to make? A few years earlier he built 'Hemeroscopium House' which used bridge beams as walls, turning the house into a kind of installation art.

The tension of the architecture revolved around the weight of those beams – appearing overly heavy and irrational – however, three giant concrete I-beams were originally intended to be part of a bridge, two concrete segments of an irrigation canal and two

steel girders — all of which were anchored by a 20-ton granite slab. It certainly was a one-off and unlikely to set a precedence in architecture. That house had taken two years to design, one year to engineer and seven days to put up. Wiring and plumbing works had taken several more weeks.

The balance beams at the Biennale was architectural art that spoke about tension that was far away from the normal doings of architectural practice – absurd in the everyday world of practice. What the installation had done was to evoke a discourse on the rightness of architectural works centering around logic and, of absurdity wading around the question of function and use, which in this case, a skilful display of structural control, creating incredible tension around the issue of structural precariousness.

Tetsuo Kondo and TRANSSOLAR's installation spoke about environmental balance, with also elements of precariousness, where clouds of gas blur vision. Called Cloudscapes, the installation was created by pumping three layers of air into the space: cold dry air at the bottom, hot humid air in the middle and hot dry air at the top. A spiral walkway guided visitors up through the layers to emerge above the cloud, before they descend back down through the vapour to the floor. The air in Cloudscapes is divided into three distinct layers by mechanical means and the audience was intended to feel the temperature difference as they ascend the winding stairs. The cloud was created through climate engineering. Creating the cloud was based on a stable temperature and humidity stratification in the space in 3 layers: below the cloud 18 – 24°C, 60% humidity, in the cloud 26 – 32°C at 100% humidity and above the cloud with 32 – 38°C at around 50%. Compared with Garcia-Abril's exhibits, Kondo/TRANSSOLAR's installation minimised physical structures only to those that served the purpose of creating environmental experiences, with finely balanced temperature at three different layers. The mechanism of control was entirely unseen as there were mechanical.



The Dutch installation spoke about another form of balance – a social and economic one that straddled between the physical and the void, while it called upon its government to address vacant buildings, which had amounted to millions of square metres in Holland. The opportunity was seen as a mean to provide employment and provide opportunity for innovation. The installation seemed to have shown the way the urban landscape had evolved into a balanced scale that asked not for more new structures but only to address the structures that had already existed – it was in a way, repairing an already existing and balanced urban weave. According to the designers of the installation entitled, 'Vacant NL', the Dutch landscape was one that was immersed with vacant properties, consisting of spaces that were not monotonous, but were very diverse because the buildings were once designed for specific purposes such as: "lighthouses, hospitals, water towers, factory buildings, airports, hangars, offices, forts, bunkers, schools, swimming pools and many more".

The designers, Rietveld Landscape created a balancing act for the installation where foam cut-outs of Dutch urban landscape was mounted on steel mesh to hang precariously at the middle of a void, creating an experience on the underside and another above the installation.



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Photo by Melisa Wong

The Malaysian Pavilion, entitled 'RE/MIXED' was about achieving balance to portray the state of creativity in the Malaysian context, which was a context of multi-culturalism, with a diverse range of architectural expressions. The underlying flavour of the exhibition was the propensity to draw upon the new as none of the exhibits cared about past issues: instead they sought to draw deep within themselves to find individual ways towards the future. The collection was the result of an invitation to the architectural community, including students, graduates and practitioners to submit drafts for a panel to select. Nearly all the works that were submitted were developed as individual models for the exhibition.

The architectural community acted in unison to put its best foot forward, seeking balance in diversity while the external community struggled with seemingly irreconcilable divisions. Considering the diversity of expressions, the exhibition was remarkably coherent and serene. Unlike most exhibitions at the Biennale which carried singular themes, the Malaysian one was content with the little narratives which each exhibit carried. It provided one of the longest stopovers in the journey through the Biennale as each exhibit was a story in itself.

It seemed that the Biennale was a tool for the creative community to demonstrate a cultural balance, which was made possible through a shared interest for creativity above all else. Creativity demanded an attitude of openness that was normally resisted by the external community, so 'RE/MIXED', could be regarded as a resistance to the external community while sharing an openness within the creative community. ◉

*Curated by PAM and
commissioned by MATRADE
Photos courtesy of PAM.*

