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The Blur: A walk-in Cloud

Conversation with Elizabeth Diller of Diller + Scofidio as representatives of the Arteplage Yverdon-les-Bains

The topic of the Yverdon-les-Bains-Arteplage is «I and the Universe». The New York architects Diller + Scofidio, responsible for the «Blur» (see also SI+A 33-34/2000) – a walk-in cloud which deprives the visitor of the visual context and the everyday sounds – describe their work with media art, architecture and atmosphere.



Rappaport: As partners in life and work, how do you work together or divide up the work in your office?

Diller: Ric and I are synthetic in our work and are both involved in every detail of every project. The problems actually arise when we are not clear about each other's ideas or when there are situations that we don't bridge. We are both involved with the design and the technical aspects of projects. Typically I make the presentations in front of audiences; otherwise we work together.

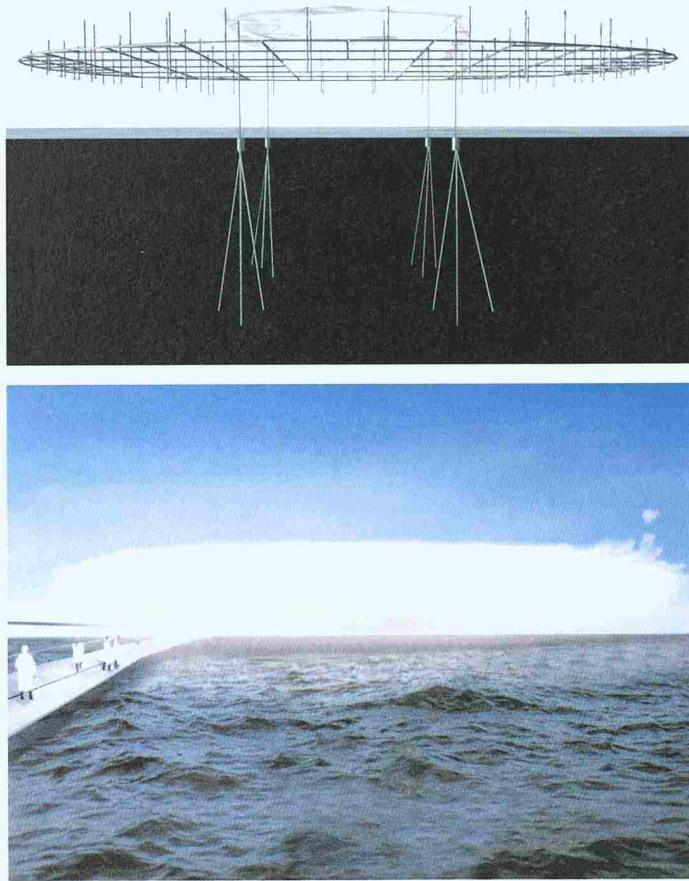
Rappaport: How does the computer impact on your work, and the way you work? Is it integral to your process and a tool like any other?

Diller: We have been using computer-driven systems in our media work since the beginning of the 1990s. In a sense, the issues in the New York Eyebeam competition around computing and architecture have just been part of our work. We are different from Greg Lynn and others who push computer programs to drive form. We have both analog and digital aspects in the kinds of processes we take on. So much of the media work is time based and has required a computer.

Rappaport: What are your thoughts about building now that you are expanding to larger scale projects such as ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts) in Boston and Eyebeam in New York, just recently awarded in a long competition process? And how does that change your work from real time performance work to architecture?

«Eine begehbarer Wolke»

Das in New York ansässige Architektenpaar Elizabeth Diller und Ricardo Scofidio interessiert sich neben den «klassischen» Bereichen der Architektur auch stark für deren szenografische Qualitäten und die Frage, wie die Leute Raum generell nutzen. So studieren und kreieren sie Bedingungen, unter denen spezielle Anlässe, «Events», stattfinden können. Vor die Aufgabe gestellt, einen Beitrag zu einer Landesausstellung vorzuschlagen, haben sie sich gegen den «heroischen» Bau entschieden und versucht, etwas Gegenteiliges zu machen. Sie orientierten sich in der Folge insofern am Ort, als sie «Wasser» zum Material ihres Eingriffs erklärten, als künstlichen Nebel für eine begehbarer Wolke. Diese lässt die Besucher, die sie durchschreiten, ihre Umwelt visuell und akustisch nur diffus wahrnehmen, sie wandeln in einer Art atmosphärisch abgefederten, bezüglich der Sinneseindrücke gedämpften Umgebung.



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The Blur in Yverdon-les-Bains. Tensegrity-construction, full Blur and Raincoat Station

Diller: When we were awarded ICA, we were in the middle of the competition for Eyebeam. And had we gotten only one or the other we would have been perfectly happy to have the deviation from our regular practice. It is not as if it will change the nature of our work; we are still doing small media-oriented projects, and we are having a retrospective of our installation work at the Whitney Museum next year. But I would not be interested in becoming a straight architect. We are fixed on having a multidisciplinary process. The question is, how do we take on two very large projects, and maintain the control and keep everything else going?

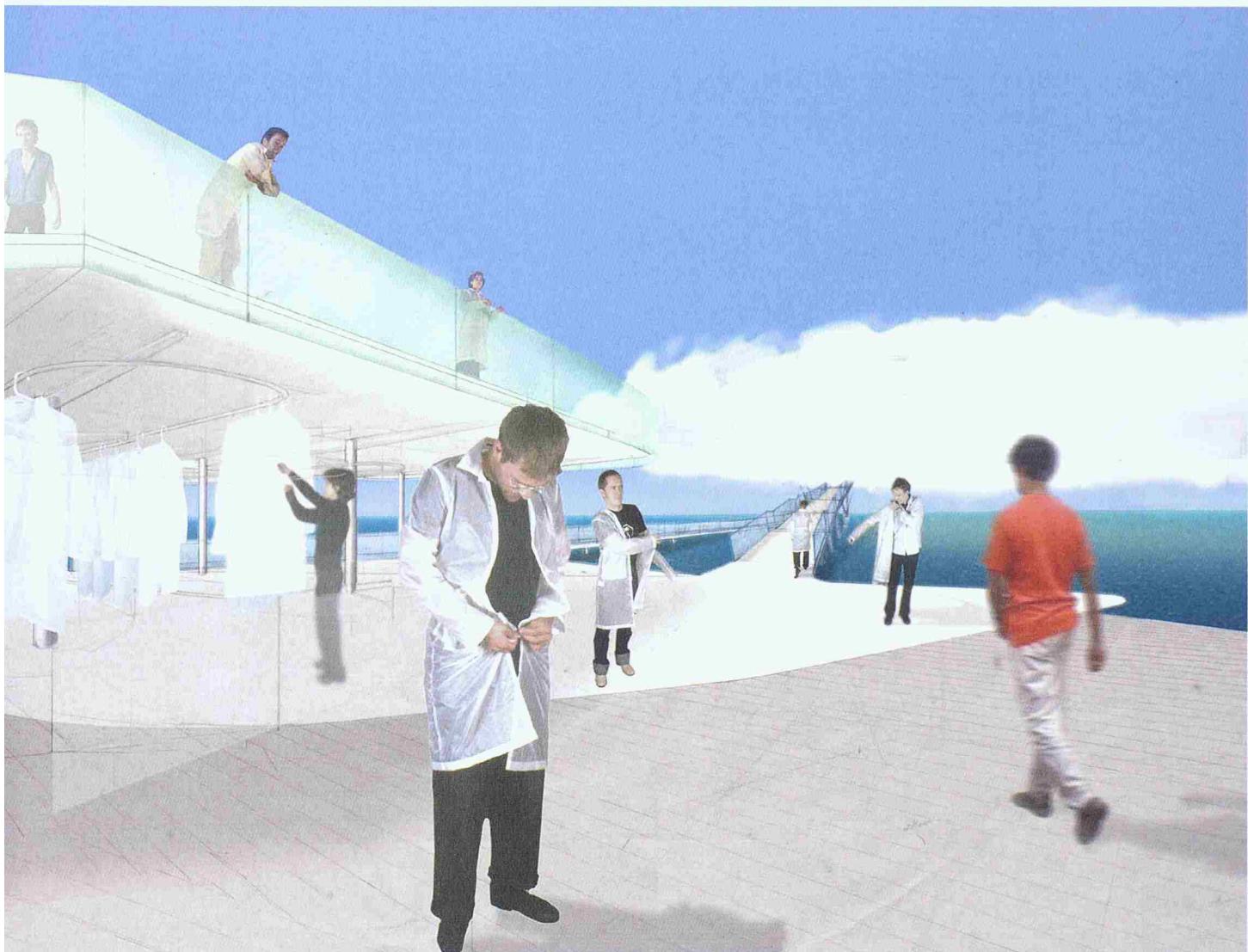
Rappaport: How do you see architecture in terms of installation and performance art? Are you more interested in the narrative you are creating, directing and influencing the way people behave and respond, than the aesthetic creation or the materiality of a project?

Diller: We are interested in the performative aspects of architecture and how people use space. We provide the context in which certain kinds of conventions can be put into question – and also set up conditions where events might take place. We have a broad interest and

range, and we see each opportunity for what it has to offer. We also don't try to do everything in every project. The ICA is a museum that comments on the problems and conventions of showing contemporary art in a public space, so we are looking at the issues of popularity of museums and crowd control. We have the advantage of having been on the other side of the wall: we want to make a great building that will perform for the artists as well as the visitors.

Rappaport: During the Eyebeam competition did you see the project calling for a work of media art and is that how you engaged the project, versus the more standard gallery as the white box?

Diller: It took a great deal of restraint on our part to not make Eyebeam a media arts project. Our objective was to take the social and programmatic aspects of the building and contribute to a unique way of display. The main puzzle was to find interesting spatial relationships as well as the continued friction and stimulation between the big divisions of the production and presentation parts of the program. Eyebeam is not a conventional institution, housing separate museum, education, and production facilities, so our project is about the diffe-



rent functions coming together. The concept of the ribbon that brings two populations, viewer and artist, together and then shears or aligns them, became a strategy for making the building change its nervous system. There is also paradox in terminology: architecture and new media. New media by its very definition is always new and different from yesterday. So the building has to be able to withstand movement in time and be adaptable. We made big column-free spaces, so that the formal idea was structural and the mechanical systems were treated as a nervous system so the building is a continuous interstitial space, which was sometimes for equipment or for people. The whole principle of the design had to do with redefining the institution and not with making an interactive media project in itself. But we couldn't resist a few media adventures, so we made a robot and an invisible wireless tracking system throughout the building so the museum could use the interactive space in a variety of ways with artists' installations to make the entire building «smart».

Rappaport: So in many ways your Blur building for the Swiss Expo.02 this year becomes that next place where you can create a more ephemeral flexible and adaptable space. Expos seem to be a perfect place for your work –

you can explore temporary and artificial landscape, and critique the issues around spectacle and audience.

Diller: What was interesting was that we didn't generate Blur autonomously, it was part of a competition team. We analyzed what the competition was truly about and realized that all four sides were on water. Our team called the project the «Extasia», relating to our designated theme of sensuality and sexuality-ecstasy. Each group did a separate project and we decided to make invisible heroic architecture, a media building on the water rather than a retreat from it. It came about as redefining an expectation of the heroic architecture of expos, so we wanted to do something contrary. As a media piece we wanted to analyze the whole notion of spectacle, and play with and defy certain conventions. We thought it would be great to make architecture from the indigenous materials of the site – water – and of atmosphere rather than of interior and exterior.

Rappaport: I see it becoming the ultimate of architecture of effects as atmosphere beyond memorials or visceral projects like Libeskind's Jewish Museum. What do you hope that people will experience as they enter the Blur?

Diller: The intention has been to remove context. It is an erasure; there is a removal of a visual context and an erasure of acoustic context, which is replaced with whiteout and white noise. It is sensory deprivation. What is replaced for vision and association of contextual sound is a heightened awareness of the humidity, wetness, snow, and ionized water, as sensual qualities.

Rappaport: The project then is like surround sound of an Imax theater, is the immateriality your commentary on the material aspects of architecture? How does it relate to virtual reality rather than real materiality?

Diller: The idea was to take on spectacle as a visual orientation, as at fairs, and as a high-fidelity extravaganza in terms of visual and acoustic technology. Our project is decidedly low-fidelity; you will not see or hear too much. The fog and the white noise will distort it. The challenge for us was to make a spectacle where vision is put into question. Or where attention that is

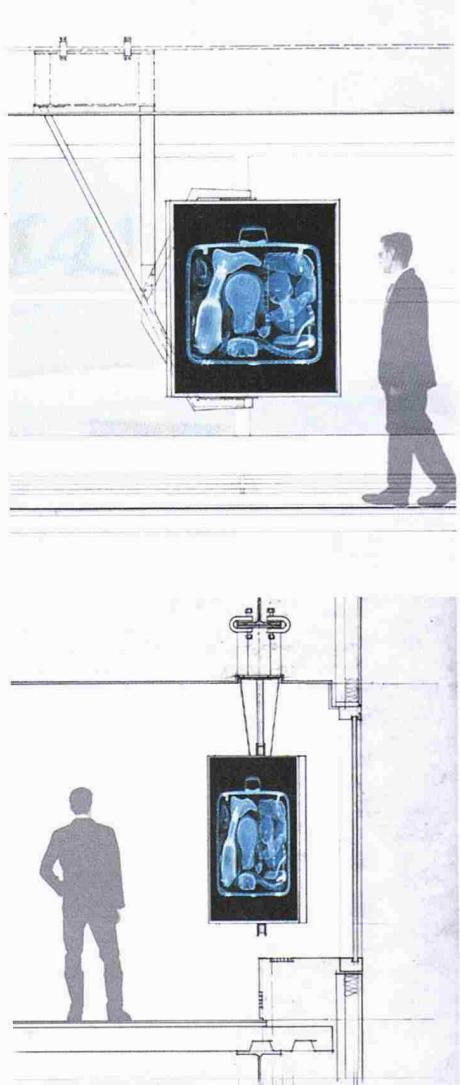
normally focused on a spectacle is out of focus; and where there is a relationship to crowd and performance, and the crowd is dissipated and wandering; and where there is no beginning and end but there is a heightened sense of anticipation because people are looking for something. There is nothing really there, so we tried to figure out if we could do a spectacle that was antispectacle – that was the motivation.

Rappaport: You had originally planned a media project with Braincoats, is that to be realized?

Diller: Sunrise, a telecommunication company, was to be a sponsor of a high-tech project where visitors would fill out a questionnaire before they go in. But that fell through. The project was very Dada and doesn't establish norms for responses. The questionnaire would be given back to an attendant, who would plug it into a PDC. You would then be given a braincoat (raincoat) with a built-in wireless communications network that



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Media Art Installation at JFK International Airport,
by Diller + Scofidio



would communicate with other braincoats with a simple response. As people go in anonymously the system would know who they are from the questionnaire responses, so when two people would pass each other the coats would respond: if they were sympathetic they would turn pink as if blushing and with antipathy they would turn green. The people in coats would swarm like fireflies passing each other. We wanted to take an involuntary response, like blushing, and make it high-tech. Unfortunately we lost the sponsor. So now it is just the atmosphere, and Christian Marclay is doing an acoustic project inside.

Rappaport: Do you think that it will have the same architectural effect with just the Blur? Do you feel that is enough?

Diller: The year before, as we investigated projects, we had 50 ideas of which two or three were possible. Along the way we met in think tanks of philosophers, technolo-

logists, futurologists, and writers, and wrapped our heads around the problem of the expo, new media, and how to make a meaningful experience with new media. There is a lot that people don't get, so how do you make it appreciated by the mass public? That was one of our big challenges – it is not a museum audience. We feel that the Blur alone is not enough, because we want to produce the friction between the atmosphere and another form of stimulation. Beyond making artificial weather, and defying expectations of spectacle, we were bent on making a media project. In the end, the fireflies to us would constitute a mass spectacle that would justify itself and would create an uncanny result. And you don't need to walk around with a libretto to get it. The Expo promised we could keep the LED forest of vertical signboards. But now that is gone, and that is painful. We are left with fog and the acoustic project. We still think there needs to be a relationship with something artificial that we would put inside. So I do envision some criticism – fog comes naturally, so why make it? But maybe as an experience itself it will be enough that people will be walking into the fog bank and will be temporarily disoriented. Then they can go to the Angel Bar and have a selection of waters so that it is all about an appreciation of water.

Rappaport: Perhaps then in the end it will be more of a critique of the temporarily and demateriality of a skinless architecture? Is there any architecture at all?

Diller: We made an elaborate structure, and it is not an uninteresting piece of architecture. You see it in a low-definition; the wind is always going to be changing, and you will see it in and out of focus. It will be dynamic in real weather, making trails and expanding, and will be volatile. I can't make any more predictions, because we could not do enough serious testing.

Rappaport: The concepts of spectacle and architecture are so prominent in all of your installation work and then in your book «Back to the Front» (Princeton Architectural Press) about the relationship between art and tourism. How do you feel as the designers of the recently constructed platform for the World Trade Center site? Was the project a real kind of voyeurism for you?

Diller: Oddly it is an extension of our thinking about the attraction that the public has for tragedy. It is a phenomenon of tourism, to go look at sites – especially bombed-out ones. But whereas the book has a more ironic twist about the contemporary world, our work on the platform is entirely different, almost atheoretical. The response to the events had to do with the need to bear witness to the site, even if you didn't lose a family member or friend. The symbolism and the immense tragedy of having this limb of New York destroyed were painful. We were out of the city on September 11th, and I couldn't even look at the site, and that evolved into that I had to look. It was a mixed gray area: it is not perverted, but it is also perverted to not want to see anything and pretend it is not there and see



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Eyebeam competition in New York, that just recently has been won by Diller + Scofidio



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Viewing Platform for the World Trade Center Site in New York by Diller + Scofidio

it mediated by the TV. It proves the power of actual sites beyond media. I tried desperately to get near it with Ric; and we saw the clutter of the workers and the public clamoring, and thought wouldn't it be smart to allow both things to happen at the same time. Other architects including David Rockwell and Kevin Kenan, were also thinking of creating a viewing platform that would not be in the way of the rescue effort so we planned the project together.

Rappaport: But it must have been so strange having theorized about war and tourism and then actually design a viewing platform, a spectator spot, for a real tragedy.

Diller: It was a tremendous coincidence, like an extension of the work. The book had been built on criticality and irony. The viewing platform is completely earnest. It is a real thing. The city wanted to get the public out of the way, and we took advantage of the varied needs of different people to make it happen. But we had no control of how they organized it. The original idea was to take every route into the site that was damaged and cap off that street with a raised platform, so that emergency vehicles could go in and out. It would be a frame around the site. In the end it was too expensive so only one platform was built, and it became more of an object. Now the crowds show the attraction and power that spaces and places have to move people.

Nina Rappaport is Editor of the Yale School of Architecture magazine «Constructs». She already has written for tec21 before (e.g. in 8/2001).
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AN «THE BLUR» BETEILIGTE

STANDORT

Arteplage Yverdon-les-Bains

AUFRAGGEBER

Expo.02

ARCHITEKTEN

Diller + Scofidio, New York. Principals: Elizabeth Diller und Ricardo Scofidio. Project Architect: Dirk Hebel

BAUINGENIEURE

Passera + Pedretti, Lugano

NEBEL-INGENIEURE

Biogenesis, Villars-sur-Glâne; Dutrie, St-Paul-les-Trois-Châteaux; MEE Industries, Los Angeles

NEBEL-BERATER

Fujiko Nakaya, Tokyo; Thomas Mee, Los Angeles

BRÜCKEN- UND «LOG-IN»-INGENIEURE

Josef Kurath, Zürich; Thomas Pareth, Lyss

LICHTDESIGN

Delux, Rolf Derrer, Zürich

NEBULA

TON

Christian Marclay, New York

TON-INGENIEURE

Douglas Irving Repetto, Columbia University, NY; Nicolas Dhellin, Lausanne

KÜNSTLER

Diller + Scofidio für die Wolke / Christian Marclay für den Ton

VERTRETER EXPO.02

Noël Schneider, Chef der Arteplage Yverdon-les-Bains



Vier Interviews zu vier Erlebnisparks

In einem Monat werden die ersten Bilder und Kommentare zur Expo.02 bereits über alle hiesigen – und wohl nicht nur die hiesigen – Fernsehschirme gegangen sein. Neben der Vorschau zu den Arteplages und zu sämtlichen Einzelprojekten, die Sie bei uns seit Anfang Jahr wöchentlich im Magazin finden können, sollen die vier Gespräche dieses Hefts einen weiteren Einstieg zum Grossanlass im Drei-Seen-Land bieten. Pro feste, immobile Arteplage haben wir je ein Projekt und damit an diesem beteiligte Büros frei ausgewählt, die im Folgenden über ihre Arbeit für die Expo, die Zusammenarbeit mit den unterschiedlichen Partnern und ihren Alltag im Allgemeinen berichten.

Über die Expo.01 respektive Expo.02 wurde schon viel geredet und wohl noch mehr geschrieben – es ist an der Zeit, sie bald besuchen und sich ein eigenes Bild machen zu können. Eine Anmerkung aber vorweg: Die Jahre, als Landes- und Weltausstellungen ihre Macht oder Relevanz über gigantische Hallen voller Maschinen und Produkte aus den Werkstätten der jeweiligen regionalen oder nationalen Vorzeige-Industrien demonstrierten, sind bekanntlich vorbei; erhöhte Speicherkapazitäten oder die neusten Hochleistungsrechner unserer zeitgenössischen Dienstleistungsgesellschaft lassen sich nur schwerlich spektakulär ausstellen. Längst ist die Erlebnisgesellschaft¹ angebrochen, was sich, nach Gerhard Schulze, an folgendem Phänomen beispielhaft zeigen lässt: Während früher der Gebrauchswert eines Produkts – Haltbarkeit, Funktionalität und technische Perfektion – ein wesentliches Merkmal war, gilt heute zu sehends sein Erlebniswert als eigentliche Qualität. Form und Image werden zur Hauptsache; Nützlichkeit ist Accessoire. Auch für eine Landesausstellung reicht eine Enfilade hochwertiger Geräte oder Objekte im Sinne der Schaukultur des 19. Jahrhunderts nicht mehr, vielmehr erwarten Besucherinnen und Besucher *ein unvergessliches Erlebnis* (Zitat Expo-Prospekt), sei es das sinnliche und wohl einmalige Gefühl beim Durchwandern einer Wolke, der Nervenkitzel einer unverbindlichen «Instant-Heirat» für 24 h oder jener eines trockenen, da virtuellen Bades. Der Erfolg der Expo.02 wird ihr «Erlebnispotenzial» ausmachen, oder wie drückte sich Jean Nouvel vor dem Hintergrund solcher Grossanlässe kürzlich aus? «Heute geht es nicht darum, objektiv zu informieren, sondern darum zu erleben.»²

Ulrike Schettler

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«Nouvelle DestiNation» von Eckert Eckert Architekten und Caretta Weidmann Bau- management als Vertreter der Arteplage Biel

Karin Frei Bernasconi

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«Swiss Mini Nature» von Peter Spillmann, Hager Landschaftsarchitektur AG, und Gruber Pulver Architekten als Vertreter der Arteplage Murten

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1 Gerhard Schulze: Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kultursociologie der Gegenwart. Frankfurt am Main, 1992.

2 Interview mit Jean Nouvel in: Sonntagszeitung vom 7. April 2002.