

Inside the Chimera - an interview with Studio Ossidiana

During the opening days of *Have we met?*, curator and writer Maia Kenney sat down (virtually) with Alessandra Covini and Giovanni Belotti of Studio Ossidiana to discuss the process of and philosophy behind their design for the Dutch pavilion at the 23rd Triennale Milano International Exhibition. This conversation has been condensed and edited.

Maia: So, how did the project start with Het Nieuwe Instituut?

Giovanni: We had a conversation in December with Klaas and Ellen,¹ who were looking for someone to work on the exhibition design. We thought it needed an embassy or a pavilion – something that had its own agency and could continue to live and could also be something to take care of. In that sense we often described it as a chimera, a creature made of different body parts, not all necessarily making sense with each other. Our job at some point became to scold and caress – to domesticate all these encounters with these different people.

Maia: How did you approach the exhibition design?

Alessandra: It started with a lot of conversations about what a Zoöp is, but also how to translate this idea and the technologies of the three different Zoöps into a spatial statement. We love to work on these kinds of translations. Through these conversations we started engaging with the space as a kind of body you enter.

M: Do people enter through a sort of nomadic, tent-like opening?

G: There's no canopy, it's a single piece of textile, around 40m long and almost 6m high, a big panorama. You can fold it in many ways: into a circular pavilion, a spiral, a squiggly line. Or reimagine it in another place.

M: Can you tell me a bit about the material choices within the installation?

G: The materials were there from almost the beginning – the idea was that you would walk in, and you'd be in the woolen belly of an animal. We always had in mind Odysseus escaping the cave of Polyphemus, hiding under a sheep. You become a sheep, but you are also a creature at the bottom of the sea.

A: The platforms in the space are chimera-like objects with bird feet and human technologies. Animal, mineral, botanical creatures. They have lights inspired by anglerfish lights –

G: – with flexible bulbs that Hans² made, which can be flexed and turned to highlight certain things. But they can also blind you a bit.

A: They have ears – gigantic acoustic objects. If you sit next to them, you can listen to the sounds of the various projects' videos... When you sit at a platform, you become part of the creature. The materials of the different platforms relate to the different ecologies – so the marine platform has terrazzo with shells; the urban garden uses charcoal, wood and mulch; and the farm has terrazzo with clay.

M: I imagine a chimera as a sort of struggling body: a war between all of these species existing in one form. On the one hand, the human has to accept the parts, influence and sensations of the non-human, but on the other hand it's really a struggle for dominance. Is this more of a harmonious attempt at a chimera? Or is there still a struggle?

G: For us, awareness and the position of the work and the material choices are important in every project. The chimera is made of many body parts: you sit on this mineral creature, resting on shells that were living mollusks 10,000 years ago and are now minerals. Then

1 Klaas Kuitenbrouwer and Ellen Zoete of Het Nieuwe Instituut, the curators of the Dutch pavilion at the Triennale

2 Hans Jansen is one of the builders ...

there are technological parts, plus the work of the artists, other people sitting on the platform and other materials. The Zoöp is very much about giving voice to non-human representatives in a certain context. But we also know that when you give voice to one, you might also be taking it away from another. Even our idea of what it means to feel kinship with others needs to be reassessed all the time. There are forms of violence that we don't see today but perhaps will be aware of in the future.

A: In past mythologies, the chimera was seen as a motherlike creature. So, we are placing it in all these associations with chimeras – from war to mother, from life to death – to these other contemporary ways of looking at them. The main characteristic is a tension between the parts...

M: Seen this way, a chimera can also exist on an enormous scale, right? From a symbiosis between microbe and mycelium to fully industrial scales and platforms... In the case of the North Sea rig, it's an absolutely enormous object that is now an embedded part of an ecosystem which, because its members are collaborating and cohabitating, is chimeric.

G: It was even connected to the intestines of the Earth. The fact that it became an ecosystem doesn't make it safe or innocent either. In a way, the exhibition design had to be approached this way.

M: The space is described as a multidirectional observatory. How do people who enter the pavilion encounter the non-human, and how do you envision the interaction between different agents in the space?

A: One aspect is that we start inhabiting this strange chimera or these strange platform objects with different authorships. That is a way to get closer and to explore

these ecologies, materials and artworks. The curtain has a series of cutouts, which allow you to immerse yourself in the projects. At the entrance, there are these small eyes you can peek through to catch a glimpse of the installation – and from inside, you will see people passing by. The participating projects ask you to be part of the process of growing and thinking about what tools are needed to address the Zoöp. The materials invite you to touch them and sit on them – everyone is touching them!

G: It's a celebration of the tools we use to try to communicate with other forms of life. You can't feel what another animal feels, but you can try to think how another animal thinks. We need to accept that as a species we work through mediative objects. We build objects that help us overcome our extremely limited scale as humans. We inhabit a very thin section of the crust of the earth, we can only see a very small spectrum of light. All these elements, all these devices that maybe make us a little bit cyborg, are ultimately made to build proximity to other things.

M: Working with the space provided – that's also the urban environment – is really important. As in, it's the Triennale, but it's in Milan. I'd be curious to know if that context also informed the design.

G: We started to look quite a lot at the history of exhibition design, especially at what's happened at the Triennale. There have been some really important, really beautiful, groundbreaking moments here, so we were very happy and a bit humbled to be part of this story. Looking at exhibition design as an architectural type was really enriching. In exhibition design, the tensions of scale of the interior, the tensions between action and representation come out very powerfully. There is a very strong connection between the Netherlands and the north of

Italy. They resonate in so many ways – in population, type of economy, type of production, culturally, in the relation to water, in this idea of gardening the same patch of land for thousands of years... I think what we do in the Netherlands is very well-understood in the north of Italy, and vice versa.

M: Given the multidimensional context of the exhibition, it can transcend the institutional, academic context. One of your goals with the pavilion is to communicate with everyone, not just the art and design world.

G: Absolutely. I think this is quite clear in the exhibition. One of the reasons it was praised was because it is accessible on many levels. You can learn within it – there's no educational plateau you have to reach to have an 'aha moment'. You can actually stay in the space and learn from it; sit and talk to others who are learning from it at the same time, or who maybe understand different things. Our goal with the process of making the exhibition – the work we did with artisans and with the building team – was also to do new things. Making the exhibition also made knowledge in the process; it's a context where you can take a few more risks.

M: Now that you have done this exhibition design, has it started turning the wheels for your own practice?

G: If it allows a certain degree of experimentation and making of tools that can last, we could do more exhibition designs. If from the start, there's the possibility to challenge the idea that an exhibition is for six months and then it's gone, we're open to it. But we'd still prefer to approach it more as pavilions, as objects, as instruments – never as a mere display for stuff.

M: So, do you envision being able to recreate the space after the Triennale is over?

G: It can certainly be recreated; there is no material that can be damaged or that is single-use. That was one of the reservations we've had about exhibition design, in our mind it was the world of gypsum boards and paint veneers – things that go directly from being shiny to the dump. That's not the case here – of course it requires more work, more commitment and care. I'm not saying it has an infinite lifespan, but it could be installed many more times. Either all together or atomized in parts, the work should keep on living. In our studio we have two birds that live with us, so we think of ourselves as gardeners. It's not that we make something and, voilà, we've solved a problem. We constantly garden and reassess... it's really important to have an idea of how we want the future of human relations to non-humans and ecologies to become. An idea shouldn't be stagnant – as soon as you've moved a step towards it, it should already have morphed.

M: In other words, this is only just the beginning.

