

Interview with Kulapat Yantrasast

26

If you're interested in art in Los Angeles, you've likely spent time in one of Kulapat Yantrasast's designs. The architect is the creative force behind the buildings that house the new Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles and the Marciano Art Foundation, among many others. From reuse projects to those designed from the ground up, his structures effect a pleasant experience without calling attention to themselves—industrial details are left intact, but painted to match their surroundings; gallery facades are made minimal in order to point visitors to what is within. Kulapat knows when to make a statement, when to let others speak, and how to combine these two modes into a harmonious built environment. At present, he's designing a structure to encapsulate the inaugural Frieze Los Angeles, which will debut in February 2019, while also working on the forthcoming Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. On a late-summer afternoon in Culver City, we met up at his office to discuss what art requires of its environment, design as a privilege or luxury, and what to expect from Frieze.

Christie Hayden: Can you talk to me about your structure for Frieze Los Angeles?

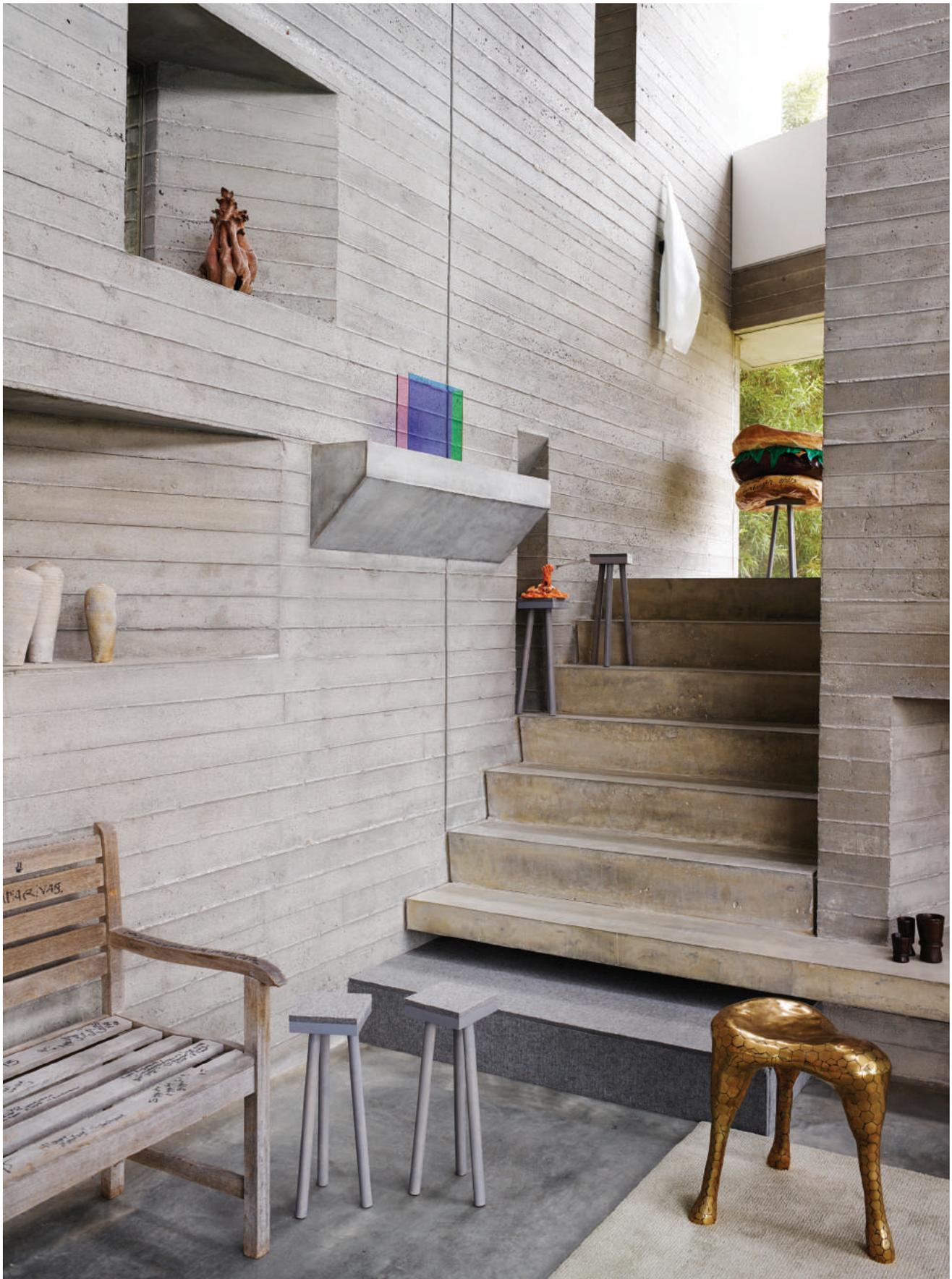
Kulapat Yantrasast: Frieze is really important for me, because I really want Los Angeles to have a focused energy. I've felt that L.A. has everything except for a sense of focus. So the tent—which isn't just a tent, but a back lot—at Paramount Studios is supposed to really bring people together. As an art fair, of course, it's about presenting art to buyers and the community, but beyond that I think it should be the place, for four or five days, that holds the best artistic energy that the city has to offer. Not just in terms of sales: Hamza Walker is working on performance; Ali Subotnick is working on [site-specific] commissions; there's retail; there's publications. So my job is to make sure that everyone has what they need, and to allow them to be comfortable and do their best job.

CH: What does it mean to you to be an architect engaged with the presentation of artwork?

KY: I always think, for me as an architect making space or an environment for art, what I really am is a matchmaker. I really mean that, especially if I work with my friends, people I know as artists. I've felt it was my job to really allow them to connect with people. I should not be seen as trying to be an artist; I should be creating a comfortable, uplifting environment. Of course, it should make the art look good and the artist should feel that it represents their thinking. More importantly, the visitors need to feel welcome and curious enough to dig deeper.

CH: Do you feel that there's ever an instance where you do really want the architecture to assert itself? For instance, the architecture at the Marciano has a very strong presence.

Christie Hayden



Kulapat's home in Venice, CA, completed in 2014. The house is constructed from board-formed concrete, with specially-designed niches along the back wall to hold artworks. At the bottom right is a hex stool by the Haas Brothers. Photo: Richard Powers.



28



Ibid Gallery is formed from a bow-string trussed warehouse space, with new walls offset from the existing structure to frame the existing architecture and artworks.
Photo: Jeff McLane.

The ICA LA's main gallery, with benches design by WHY's OBJECTS studio.
Photo: Florian Holzherr.

KY: In a way, yes, but it's not my architecture; in the case [of the Marciano Art Foundation, in a former Masonic Temple], I was almost like a surgeon. It already existed: not only the symbolism, but also the kind of rigor that comes from that kind of architecture. Of course we paired things down a bit. We took some of the walls down and cleaned it up, but, in that case, I feel like my work is even more invisible. I'm dealing with something that already exists, and I'm trying to make it generous. It's a beautiful building, but it's not generous in the sense that it doesn't allow anything else that doesn't belong in its system. As a quasi-religious architecture, the meaning system is built into everything so there's almost no room for non-Masonic thinking.

When people come to me and say "good job," I feel like I didn't do anything. I was just creating enough space for other things to happen.

CH: Can you talk about the effect that design can have on the viability of a business? For example, thinking about those that cannot afford to hire a designer, do you think good design is a luxury? Can you talk about democracy or elitism in the industry?

KY: I think design should be integrated into life more. In the '50s in this country, design was not a luxury. If you look at all the case study houses, midcentury furniture, or the Eames, those are not at all luxury. Those are from a time when design was supposed to allow people to move into a new generation in a better way. It was a time when people identified with their design and decided they could no longer use the older things because they didn't represent them. In that sense, it's democratic. Now, people don't have that—blame it on the designers, the media, and the architects. The people are lost [by] what we're trying to do because we're so obsessed with our trajectory. That's the problem [with] our generation. We need a new paradigm, because architecture can only exist if society is with it. It used to be that everyone needed to be modern,

because that was part of what society wanted. Now we've been so pulled apart that the terrain is very bumpy, and it's hard for architects and designers to relate to their foundation—it doesn't exist anymore.

CH: So do you think architects can bridge more of a connection with the populace? Is it possible to create design that is more accessible? How can functionality play a role in accessibility?

KY: Robert Venturi, who died on Tuesday at 93, wrote two books that really touched me. The first, which is my bible, is *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. This is where he states that he wants diversity of meaning rather than clarity of meaning. I think we suffer from the modern way of looking at architecture. Right now, even though we think we're contemporary, we're actually modern. We still think about those words: "narrative," "rigor," "structure," and "clarity of thoughts." All of these things are still held so dear to our profession, but by doing that we actually eliminate so many complex conditions that we cannot control.

I've felt, in my work, that a lot of what I try to do is let entropy enter the system. Yes, you can do a museum building or any building without any input from the public, but it's actually more fun to have a sort of curated brainstorming; we invite artists, sociologists, school teachers, writers, etc. to talk about what the city needs. For example, can we design a museum that also addresses homelessness? We try to talk about how architecture should not just be of one function. If that were the case, it would only contribute to create its own genre. I always try to convince a client to do more than one thing—if you design a museum, why shouldn't it be a design center, retail, or a soup kitchen? At the end of the day, we want people to come. Once you have a chance to build something, it should be many things.

CH: As the mediums for art evolve and change, what challenges do you foresee there being in presentation?

KY: Art has changed, and to a degree architecture can accommodate some level of flexibility, but not all of it. Using the Marciano as an example, that empty space where Jim Shaw did his amazing exhibition is crazy, but more conventional. There are walls that can easily move to accommodate new shows, as we saw with Olafur [Eliasson's subsequent exhibition in the same space]. So the fact that we didn't plan to have a precious space—the floor can be drilled into, the wall can be drilled into, light can be added—indicates a sort of “just do it” mentality. Had I, for this project, tried to make the space precious—with a wood floor and white walls—everyone would regret it. It wouldn't be money well spent. I would feel like the kind of shows you could do would be limited.

CH: What differences do you consider when creating a gallery versus a museum?

KY: When we do museum projects, like the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, these projects need to be icons. When we work with gallery spaces or museums, I have very different goals. With galleries, I mostly want to create a meaningful space. Many of these don't have much of an exterior anyway, so it's about the quality of the space. When we work on museum projects, it's always about creating an icon or something of a landmark that people can see. Most people do feel very intimidated just by the word “museum,” so this icon has to be exciting and also welcoming.

CH: What institutions built for the presentation of art most inspire you?

KY: I think a lot about the Schaulager in Basel because of the informality about it. Of course, it's very elitist because not everyone goes there; it's really only art lovers and art tourists,

but I keep going back and looking at it. I'm not as inspired by the architecture as I am by the programming and use of space. I'm also inspired by places like Naoshima by Ando in Japan; I look at the different pavilions, landscapes, and ways things are connected together. I'm very interested in how landscape and art are seen together. I'm also inspired by the Museum Insel Hombroich in Neuss outside of Düsseldorf, which was the brainchild of a man named Mr. Müller. He bought this old place and worked with a sculptor named Erwin Heerich to design the buildings. You buy your ticket and everything is open; there's no guards; there's no agenda. Eventually, you come upon a canteen where there's bread, wine, and cheese. You can eat whatever you want; there's no money to pay.

Christie Hayden is a writer and editor living in Los Angeles. She received her BA from the University of San Francisco and her MA from the Maryland Institute College of Art. She is the owner of OOF Books, an art bookstore and conceptual exhibition space. Her writing has appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Baltimore City Paper*, and others.

Kulapat Yantrasast was born in Bangkok, where he graduated with honors from Chulalongkorn University and received his M.Arch. and Ph.D. in Architecture from the University of Tokyo. In 2012, he was named one of the art world's 100 Most Powerful People and in 2009, Kulapat was the first architect to receive the Silpathorn Award for Design from Thailand's Ministry of Culture. He is an active board member of the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts.



David Kordansky Gallery Entrance
with wHY-designed reception desk.
Photo: Jeremy Bitterman.