

Tirtule after Tirtule

One Tirtule, many Tirtules. The hundred forty-two objects produced by BeNed, a firm in Opglabbeek, with technical aid of the bureau DWEN in Dilsen, exhaust more or less the budget allocated by FLACC to Adrien Tirtiaux. These stainless-steel elements - each made of Inox type Nuance 304, one-and-a-half millimetre thick - are designated Tirtules, a name that contracts TIRT[iaux] and [mod]ULE. It thus concerns a modular system, at once nominal and hybrid, whose parts need assembled side-by-side using screws on wooden battens. Contraction and hybridization: these modes, or plays, of form and reference set into motion a multiplication of uses and meanings.

For the design, Tirtiaux made use of SketchUp, a modelling software typically used by architects for conceiving three-dimensional surface polygons and sculpting elementary entities. Forms arise by means of simple actions - like rotation, extrusion or displacement - or through boolean operations on Platonic solids - mergings, subtractions or intersections. Such method is often determined by a principle of inference, in which intuition gets married to logic. The designer's choices and procedures are traced by the system, which in turn suggests consecutive actions. But in this case the project is predicated another strategy, one (over)determined by the interposition of schemes and images. SketchUp takes after video games and graphic novels, resulting in engineering plans in the *Ligne Claire* style. What intensifies its role, however, is that this graphic tool is about more than going from sketch to production. The status of the representation is both prospective (preparations) and retrospective (recaps), the files are finalised directly or indirectly, its application awaiting proper situations (occasions).

The Tirtules are realized by welding together two folded and perforated metal sheets, one rectangular, the other more complex and inducing assemblage. The perfectly polished rectangle is the unit that, in its different combinations, prescribes possible usages. The other part, shaped as a non-regular tetrahedronal form, serves as a multifunctional structural support as well as a means of fixation; its quirky morphology invites various interpretations. The whole object is made by lasercutting, using two folds and six soldering points in total. This sort of standardization distantly echoes the assembling activities in a Ford factory, a branch of which was established in Genk in 1964 (and closed in 2014). The de-industrialisation in Belgium and its distinct effects are rethought as a paradoxical ruin of possibilities and terrain for producing alternatives. For Tirtiaux, the postfordist 'release' of standardization is a field of play - with the word "play" resonating in all its different ways.

Contrary to a Meccano game, the Tirtules are not a niche product for bricoleurs; their ambition lies elsewhere. Suggested by their most unlikely cut, the one subjecting the rectangle to the triangle by closing the tetrahedron, the lever arm in this system is also a real arm, referencing the man in Le Corbusier's Modulor system. Thus the strange casuistry recycles a fragment of a myth, for the Modulor is nothing but a modernist sexist variation of the proportional rules characteristic to the practice of architecture since time immemorial, with Vitruve and Da Vinci. Contraction and hybridism, inference and casuistry, but also practice and theory or assembly and deconstruction: in these couples, all resides in the tension of the disjunction, the "and" (cf. Bergson's *Matter and Theory*, what makes an image seen as matter and matter seen as the memory of form).

Serially joined or assembled in webs on wooden battens, the Tirtules prove capable of becoming floorboards, partition walls, a ladder or staircase, beams or a shelving system. Yet something renders these functional products more complex. While the work clearly appeals to a condition of the schematic, of pragmatics, once looking closer something always eludes from recognition and technical logic. An impression of *déjà-vu* emerges from Tirtiaux's designs, but that impression is rebel to unequivocal interpretations that have no hold. Beyond or beneath a first intelligibility, the Tirtules prove captivating as both conjectural objects and polyreferential forms.

If there is *déjà-vu*, then, it is because there is a *déjà-là*: the projects are not imagined *in abstracto*. Or rather, the abstraction they contain - one fed by a dreamlike reverie of technical conquest and their avatars - is developed in relation to a concrete framework, considered in terms of referential, technical and social-economical conditions and resources. Recurring in Tirtiaux's practice, principles that concretize virtualities are inherent to the Tirtules as well: cross-references by scalar transfers; concomitance of the real and its representation; entropic/anthropic significance of the construction site; spatio-photographic visual efficacy; scenarization of any implementation with causes and effects; logic of structures, literally and metaphorically; two-, three- and four-dimensional examination of the site; externalization of both the utopic and atopic; conceptualization of the practical and convenient; performative actions stemming from experimental practice; scopical impulses doubled by a desire for realizing the work. The diorama of the real is virtual down to every eventuality. It is always a question of rooting ideas, which are often inspired by constructive principles or spatial schemes selected on the basis of their speculative cultural connotation, in the concrete.

The Tirtules can be regarded as prototypes, then - but of what? Of components serially made in the factory, tailored to different applications? Yes and no. A different set of intentions sits at the heart of their development, proffering a way of activating and associating production lines - from the sketch to fabrication, via technical study, and to a folding and unfolding of concepts drawn from fields linked in what I would call a poetics of the provisional. Which leads me to the idea that a prototype based on concrete reverie may emerge, one that is based on three polarities: a critical and projective reading of a Ford Genk-like deindustrialisation; an experimentation of the allying of a standardized folding of material à la Jean Prouvé on the one hand, and vectorial virtualities (Computer Numerical Control lasercut) on the other, followed by an assembling phase; and lastly a "masterly, correct and magnificent" collage of iconic references, brought together in the face of ruined hyper-modernities. Or else: a) postfordist critique b) prototyping and small series, c) flexible culture with irony - all in the genuine aim of revaluing the labour forces at work underneath the icons, or, as Barthes said, of "unscrewing theory a bit."

Like their conception, the manner of assembly of the Tirtules is compository. In terms of mechanics, it concerns a hypostasizing of a complex of prefabricated modules. In terms of tinkering, it is more a question of being able to transport everything in the boot of a car; it is lightweight, stackable, connectible and practical. In terms of concepts, it is a middle finger to categorization: one and the same object conjoins layout, logistics and modern myth. All that because a shape - the section of the raised arm - assimilates triangulation and an archetype of used values. The form neither precedes nor follows the function, but it fictionalises and relaxes it. The adventure that led to these hundred forty-two pieces could have stayed on paper, but the crux of the work lies in the passing from concept to material: at all costs, with limited means and the resources of a Sunday tinkerer, armed with his screwdriver, the jolting energy coming from Tihange and Doel,

guided by a passion to build every aspect of its form, Tirtiaux checks himself the active principles of his collages of references as well as their complicity with the context.

At the end of the day, the small possible constructions made from Tirtules do not have anything to do anymore with the Modulor - aside, that is, from their remainder of utopian desire to inflict upon the way things go. Utopias, however, are only interesting when they are not achieved, not because of the *cogito interruptus* but rather in their power to trigger improvisation and shortcuts. The Tirtules are a bit like talismans, albeit exempt of cynicism: the half-opened hand looks like a wrench, which dodges the question of knowing whether the fingers form a punching fist or not. Let us avoid that slippery ground and amuse ourselves with puns like lever arms or construction supports, load struts, braces and other spacers. Far from hype or intellectual design (like the Lépine Competition), it renders the sculptural uninhibited: architecture, civil engineering, urbanism, landscaping, the management of the construction site or management in general - all this works under the auspices of complex-free sensation.

The interest of Adrien Tirtiaux's work is to revisit the construction site in and through these categories, integrating conditions and margins for effective manoeuvre. Ford and fordism have born babies, and faced with an unfurling dematerialisation the challenge is to acknowledge that not everything is encapsulated in it. We will not deny the interest of testing at real scale, and here is where the work unleashes its power: on the terrain! Either way, the Tirtules will induce ordering, the sorting of forms, functions and fictions with or without nomenclatures. Melancholy stands in the background: IKEA and the Modulor are exact contemporaries in times of war. The acronym dates to 1943, that is, to the moment when Le Corbusier charged Gérald Hanning to couple the MODULE to the golden section: "Take the man with the raised-arm, 2.20 meters tall; inscribe him in two superimposed squares of 1.10 m; topple astride a third square on top of the others, which will provide a solution. *The location of the right angle* should help you localise this third square." In an airplane heading from Izmir to Istanbul, Corbu asked a question to a Turkish engineer from the merchant navy: "Tell me the average height that, in the construction of a cargo, defines the free space between two decks?" Answer: 2.26m. Which brought the belly-button from 1.10m to 1.13m! What it comes down to...

The Tirtules resort to the Aristotelian modalities of the *poiein* (ποιεῖν) and the *prattein* (πράττειν), capacities that do not dissociate knowledge and power, thought and actions. This leads us to observe that the assemblage of modules in the eye of convenience - the Albertian "commoditas, necessitas, voluptas": a variant of the Vitruvian "utilitas, firmitas, venustas" - corresponds to the Dutch term "stelling," which translates in French as both "theoretical foundation of a thesis" and "warehouse shelving." Indeed in constituting a proposition and position, representation and showcase, theorem and scaffolding, the Tirtules are ambivalent objects drawing on both practical and symbolic needs. They can be assembled and dismantled; one needs only to decide what to do with them. For their use as utilitarian objects constitutes but one aspect of their existence.

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