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idea journal

(extra) ordinary interiors:
practising critical reflection

vol. 18, no. 01

2021

the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association



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IDEA (Interior Design/Interior Architecture Educators Association) was formed in 1996 for the advancement and advocacy of education by encouraging and supporting excellence in interior design/interior architecture education and research within Australasia.

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cover image

Lying motionless, listless. Consuming time; being present, each moment folds into another. Surfaces becoming expanses of inflections of hue. Normality expands into a stream of observing luminosity. Still image from video by Chora Carleton, 2021.

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this issue's provocation

(Extra) Ordinary Interiors calls for contributions from academics, research students and practitioners that demonstrate contemporary modes of criticality and reflection on specific interior environments in ways that expand upon that which is ordinary (of the everyday, common, banal, or taken for granted).

This theme has two agendas: First, the desire to amplify critical reflection as a key practice of the disciplines associated with this journal's readership. In short, to prompt interior designers, interior architects, and spatial designers to be more proactive and experimental in asserting their specialist knowledge and expertise as critical commentary. This asks authors to reconsider the role of critique and criticism in their scholarly and creative works, or, to demonstrate how to reflect critically upon a design and to locate the design's relation to material, political, social, cultural, historical and geographical concerns. Such an enterprise may reveal whether models of criticality centred on judgement, authority and historicism are relevant, constructive, insightful or generative, or, as Bruno Latour poses, have they 'run out of steam'?⁰¹ This exercise may prompt some to revisit key thinkers who pose new discursive, visual and temporal models for critical practice in this recent age of criticality. We draw your attention to *Critical Spatial Practice* by Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen, which asks for thinking "about 'space' without necessarily intervening in it physically, but trying to sensitise, promote, develop and foster an attitude towards contemporary spatial production, its triggers, driving forces, effects and affects... [to] speculate on the modalities of production and potential benefits of the role of 'the outsider.'"⁰²

We also look to Jane Rendell's introduction to *Critical Architecture*, which asserts that criticism and design are linked together by virtue of their shared interests in invoking social change.⁰³ Whether it takes written, built or speculative form, criticism is an action, which according to Roland Barthes, is a calling into crisis, a moment where existing definitions, disciplinary boundaries and assumptions about normativity are put into question.⁰⁴

The second agenda of this journal issue takes heed of the ordinary, and how, in its intense observation, what is normal or often taken for granted exceeds itself, becomes extra or more ordinary. Everyday spaces such as supermarkets, service stations, laundry mats, hardware stores, parks and four-way street intersections, and banal gestures such as washing the dishes, walking the dog or street sweeping become subject to critical scrutiny and introspection. Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage Around My Room*, Julio Cortázar's *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* are but a few historic examples that draw out critical depth and aesthetic meaning about ordinary interiors, interiors understood in the most liberal sense.⁰⁵ What new actions to the crisis of critical commentary lurk restlessly in ordinary interiors?

While a nostalgic or romantic response to this journal's theme may dwell on interior situations with no special or distinctive features, or explore the persistence and abundance of ordinary interiors, even commonplace spaces, noticed or not, it can not be denied that recent pandemic events world-wide have flung the many facets of everyday life into crisis, including long-standing notions of proximity, intimacy, hapticity, privacy, freedom and rights to access 'essential' services. For many, the world has become home and home has become an internal world, an interior contaminated or augmented by virtual technologies serving as lifelines to a previous highly social and diversified lifestyle. As the interior of one's domestic space finds coincidence with one's isolation bubble, many are finding that interiority and interiors are conflating to take on new meaning, new function, and new configuration. Ordinary scenes of dead flies on windowsills, sun rays pointing to poor house-keeping habits, mounting bags of uncollected rubbish and recycling, shuffling of mattresses, improvised work surfaces, revised chores rubrics, commandeering of the bathroom, and the commodity of headphones and adapters highlight an intensified condition.

Authors are prompted to practice a form of critical reflection on one (extra) ordinary interior.

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01 Bruno Latour. 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,' In *Critical Inquiry - Special issue on the Future of Critique* 30, no. 2 (2004): 25-248.

02 Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen, 'Architecture and Critical Spatial Practice,' 1 May 2020, criticalspatialpractice.org.

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transcoding structural ornamentation: a track-report of migrating characteristics around villa empain

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abstract

This visual essay reports on an artistic research residency that took place in and around Villa Empain in Brussels. The various explorations that were undertaken over a one-month period oscillated between the villa, the Vossenplein that houses a large flea market, and the studio space of the residency. A crucial part of the collaborative process was the continuous production and (re)adaptation — the ‘transcoding’ — of works across these various contexts.

The term ‘transcoding’ refers not only to the jumping back and forth between ornament and structure, rest material and essence, but also between locations, scales and configurations. Where — like in video transcoding — the effect can be minimal or substantial depending on the settings. Our visual essay attempts to organise the (spatial, physical, material) results of these movements back and forth. It visually depicts the dialogues that took place across three sites and three artistic practices.

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artistic research, collaboration, Villa Empain

The resulting visual essay is composed as a track report that consists of a series of composite visual pages that can be likened to a topography or choreography. The arrangement of images traces, arranges and compresses the movements that occurred in space. As opposed to a more textual approach to the subject of ornamentation and structure, our argumentation has taken shape by working with the images themselves and arranging them as constellations that contain multiple threads for interpretation. We invite the reader to engage with this 'image-thinking' and have provided the following list of acts that might function as an initial guide:

- Prelude: Villa – Square – Studio (page 128–131)
- Act 1: Observation (walking around) (page 132)
- Act 2: A cupboard (on, above, behind, around) (page 133–135)
- Act 3: Fictioning the cupboard (page 134–136)
- Act 4: Materialities that appear (page 137–139)
- Act 5: Cleaning, selecting, arranging the rest (pages 138–139)
- Act 6: Between jewels, clothes, and objects (pages 139–140)
- Act 7: New constellations: dismantling the structure, re-arranging on the ground (page 141–143)
- Act 8: Playing on tablecloths (page 143–144)
- Act 9: Copying the bar (page 145)
- Act 10: Floating space (and swimming pool) (page 146)
- Act 11: Moving the studio (page 147–149)

Three artist-researchers, three locations, thirty days. A temporary collective. A get-together of improvised methodologies. Scanning corners, cracks, and crumbles. Browsing the beauty of made as well as unintentional ornaments. Translators of space. Pseudo-archaeologists without pre-conceived intentions. Digging for trivial treasure. Formulating answers to questions that were never asked. Departing from individual practices to find a common territory: in and beyond the art deco villa in which they find themselves.

villa

In April 2019 we visited the exhibition *Flamboyant* in Villa Empain in Brussels. The scenography staged the art deco villa in a simulated, 'original' state, presenting art works within an imaginary reconstitution that emulated domestic spaces of the 1930s. The visit to this mirage representation of the villa sparked a shared fascination within each of us. Not only the intriguing interior itself but also the way in which art works were present(ed) as an integral part of the extra ordinary decor prompted the writing of a proposal for a research residency that would allow us to work on (and with) the site for an extended period of time.

We intended to engage with the unique decor of the villa via ornamental details, following the idea that something that apparently only embroiders on the interior's structure — something seemingly eliminable — can itself become a type of autonomous structure as its own work. An essential first step towards achieving such 'structural ornamentation' was spending a lot of time on site. In this way we were exposed to the spaces, whilst also in proximity to each other's artistic practice and output. This intense durational proximity could be defined as our shared methodology and can even be understood as a precondition to finding a shared artistic language. Working in this way was a crucial factor in establishing a dynamic opening of form.

square

To balance our research proposal, we felt it was necessary to establish a counterpoint to the apparent beauty and richness which radiates from the villa as art deco monument. The answer came in the form of the Place de Jeu de Balle/Vossenplein: an equally well-known square in a popular area in the south of Brussels which is known for its daily flea market. Whilst surrendering to the decadent interior of the villa, the square would allow us to dive into the generic, apparently worthless, discarded collections of household interior objects that are constructed there in stalls on a daily, temporary basis.

Our initial proposal thus formulated an approach to the villa and the square that encapsulated a similar paradoxical potential. In both cases something that is discarded (the rest, the materials found at the flea market) or that one can do without (the ornamental) is defined as source material that has the capacity to become a carrier of meaning and value. Our proposal intended to recuperate these residual and ornamental values in the hope of making a self-supporting structure.

studio

A mediating space. As with any theoretical proposition, the practical execution of our initial plans was compounded by an infinitely complex layer of reality. The start of our working period coincided with the long-term closure of the flea market, due to COVID-19 restrictions. The square that had previously greeted seven thousand visitors a day lay dormant and empty for months on end. Nevertheless, we were determined to find a way of incorporating this site into the work. The closure exposed the square in its (apparent) emptiness, which caused us to scan the terrain even closer,

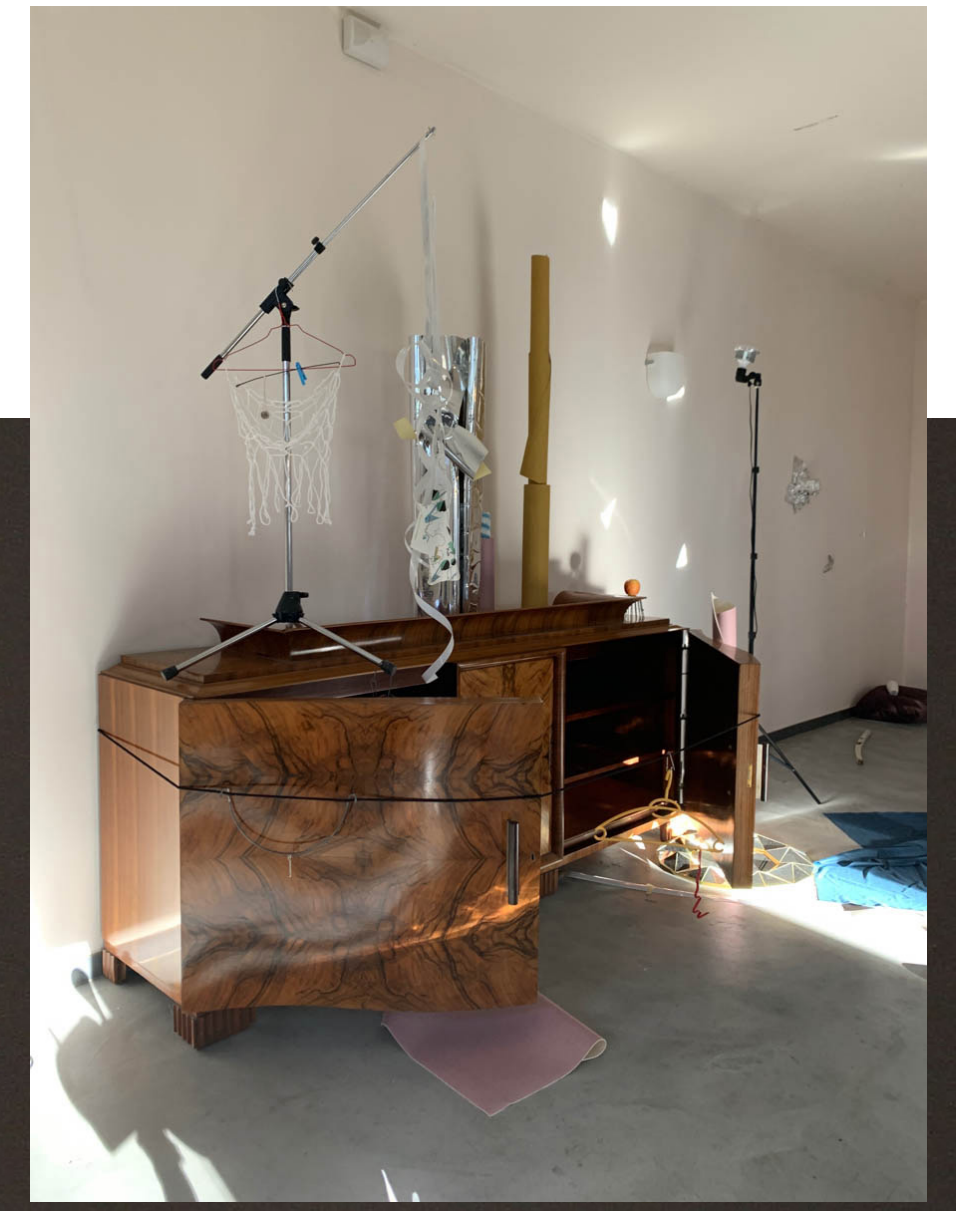
literally going into the cracks of the pavement to dig up fragments that had accumulated there over a period of many years. These 'archaeological digs' provided us with a collection of raw materials that better captured the essence of the site than any particular artefact we might have obtained under 'normal' conditions. We excavated into the ultimate 'rest': the refuse that was left behind on an empty square.

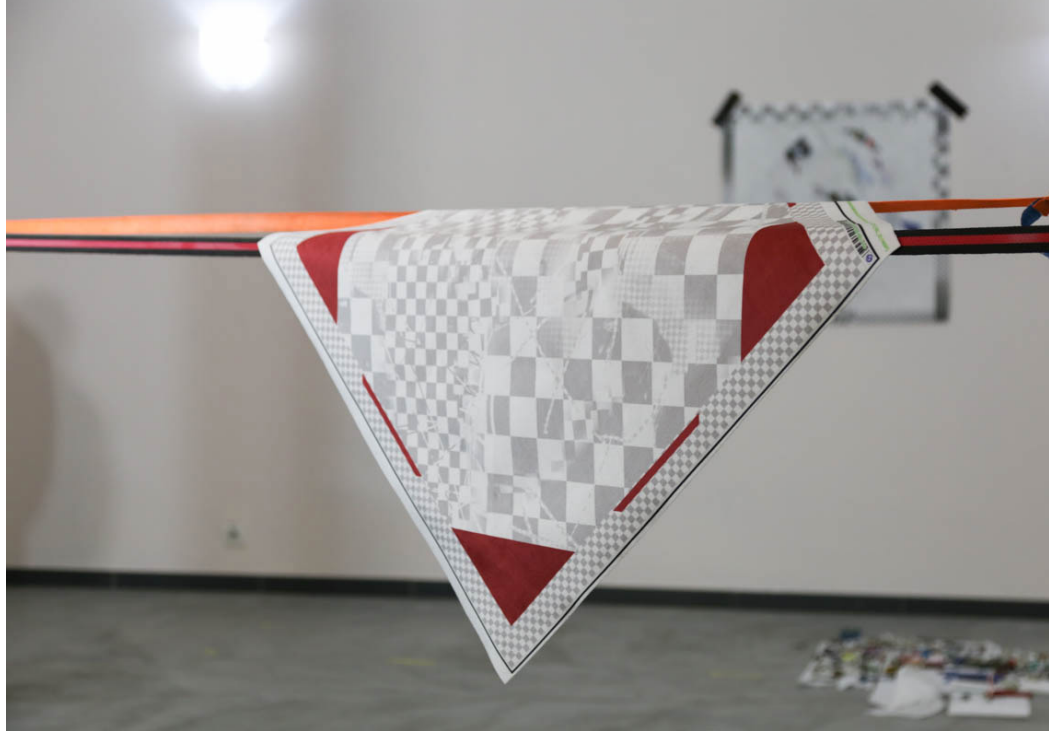
The residency period also forced us to calibrate three distinct artistic practices and three different approaches to the two sites. During this working process, the importance of the studio space as a shared and mediating common ground became apparent. The villa and the square were antagonists, with the studio as a mutual acquaintance that was able to connect them and allow the transcoding of apparent opposites via a series of modular elements, such as furniture, textiles, floors, columns, lamps, cracks, and seams.

The studio was a space that allowed the different artistic practices to manifest themselves and offered a podium where thinking could occur via the physical material itself. Via artefacts and attempts, interventions, and half-finished installations. The construction of this visual essay has happened in a similar simultaneous, layered, and intuitive manner. In a sense it mirrors the multiplicity of the actions that took place in the mediating studio environment, the villa, and the square, whilst also positioning those actions and the spaces and objects they produced in a meaningful relation to each other.

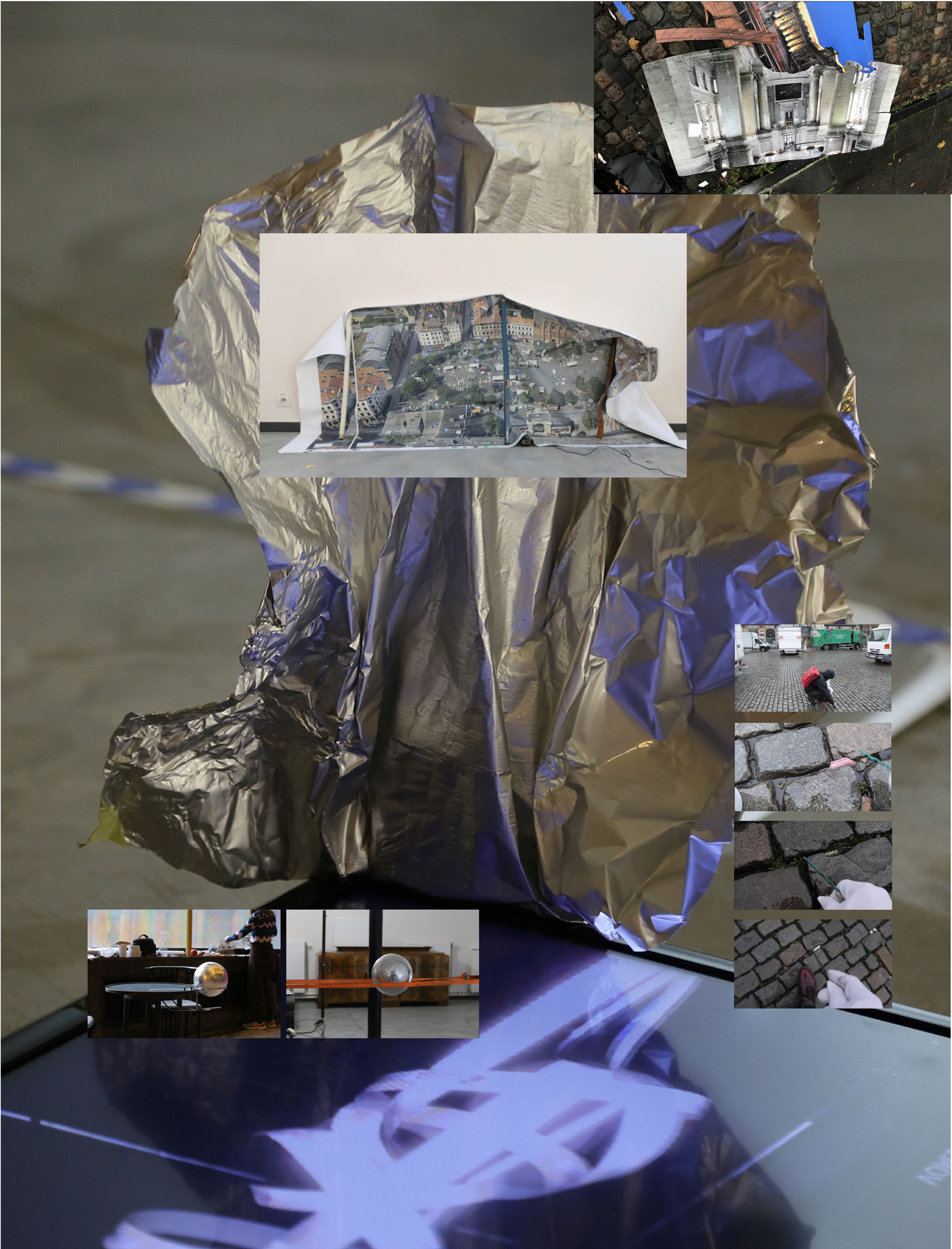


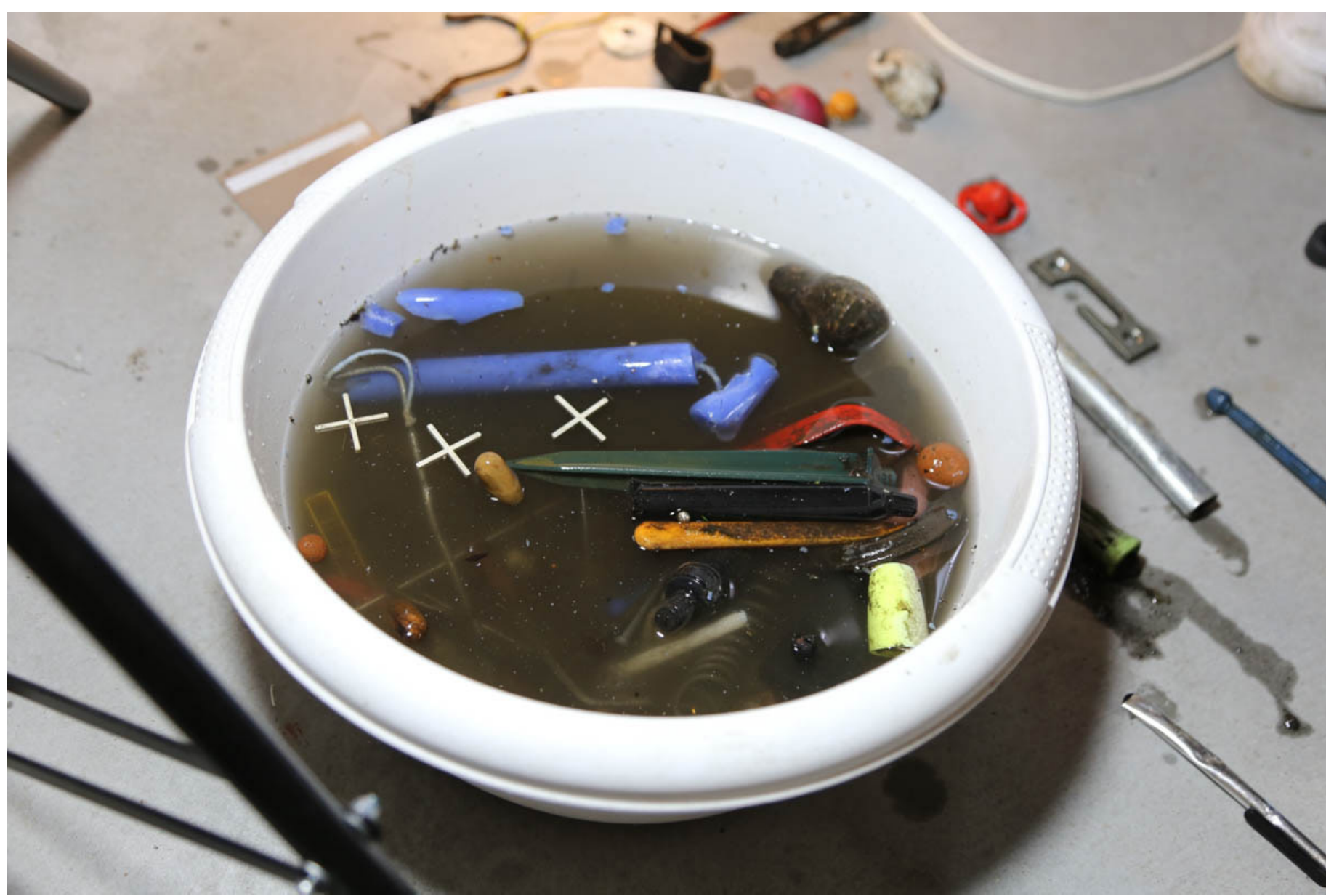






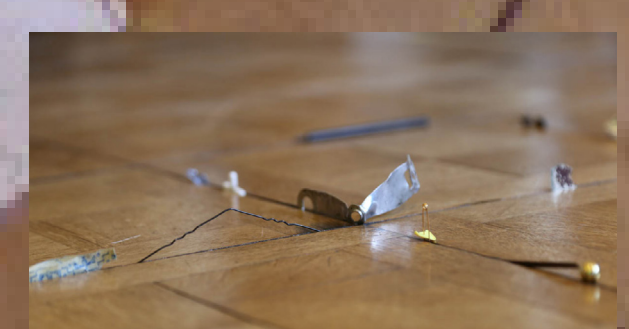
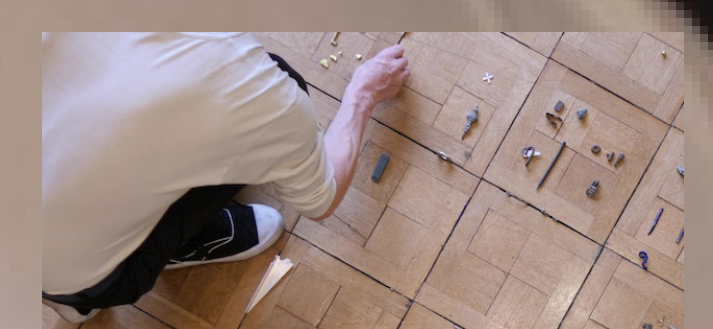
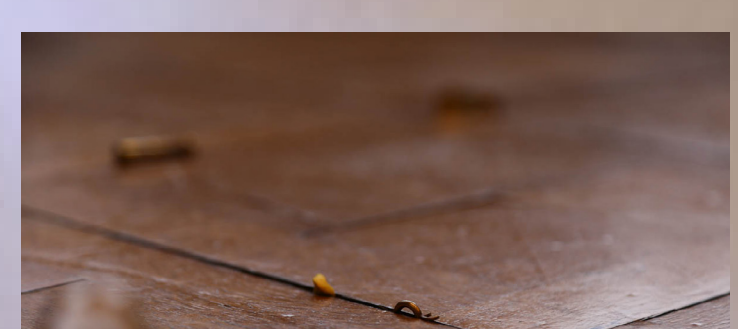
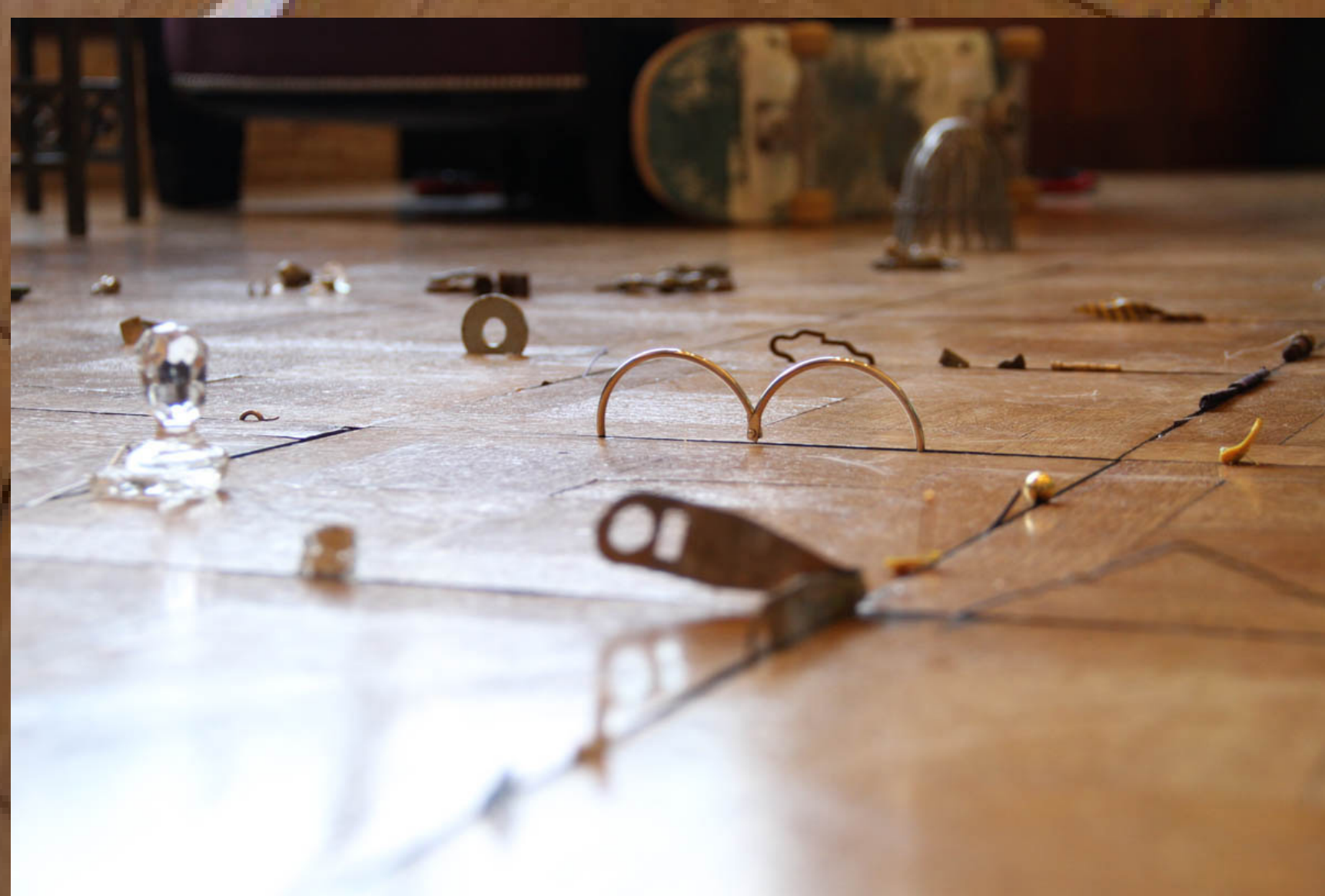


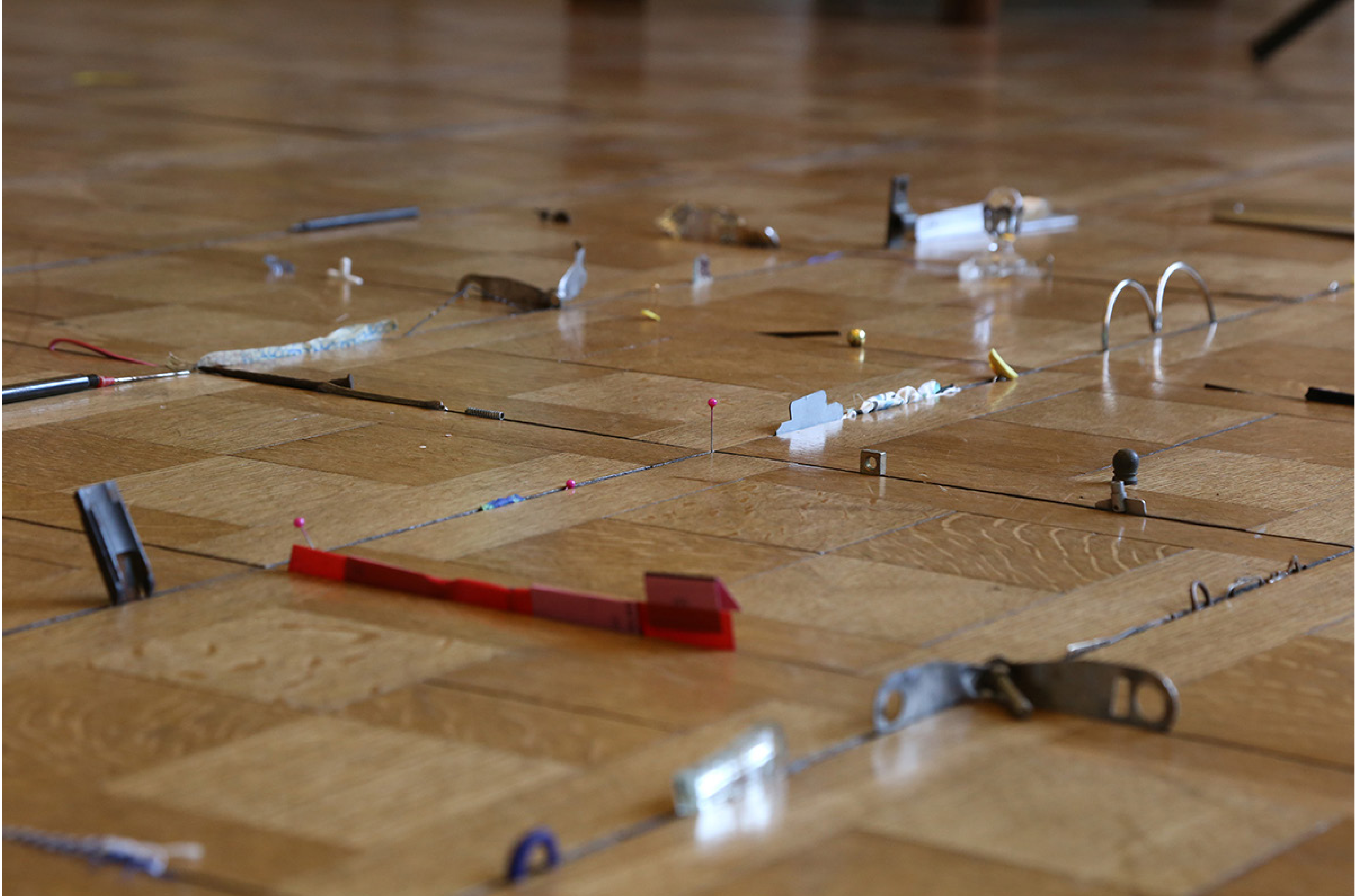


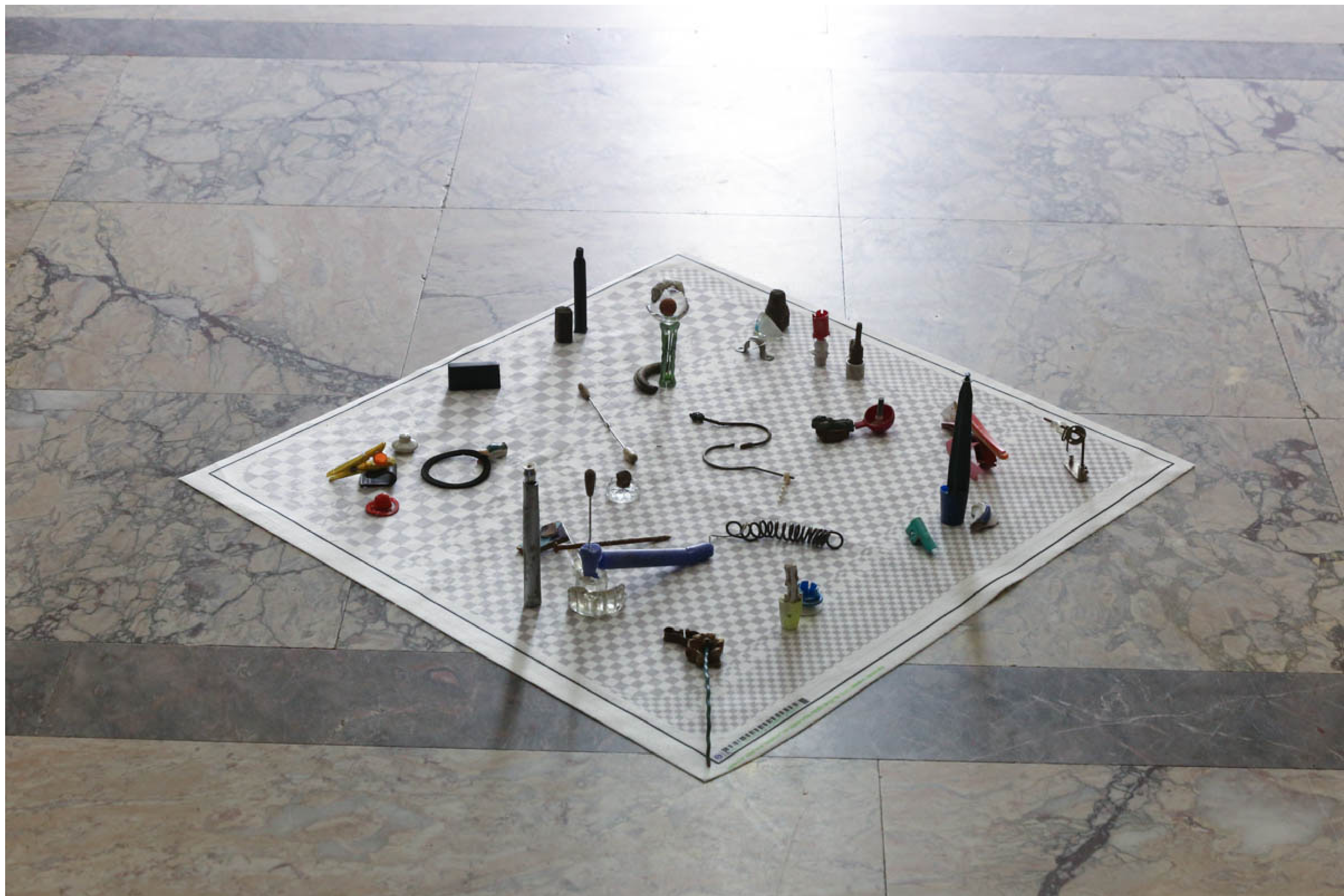
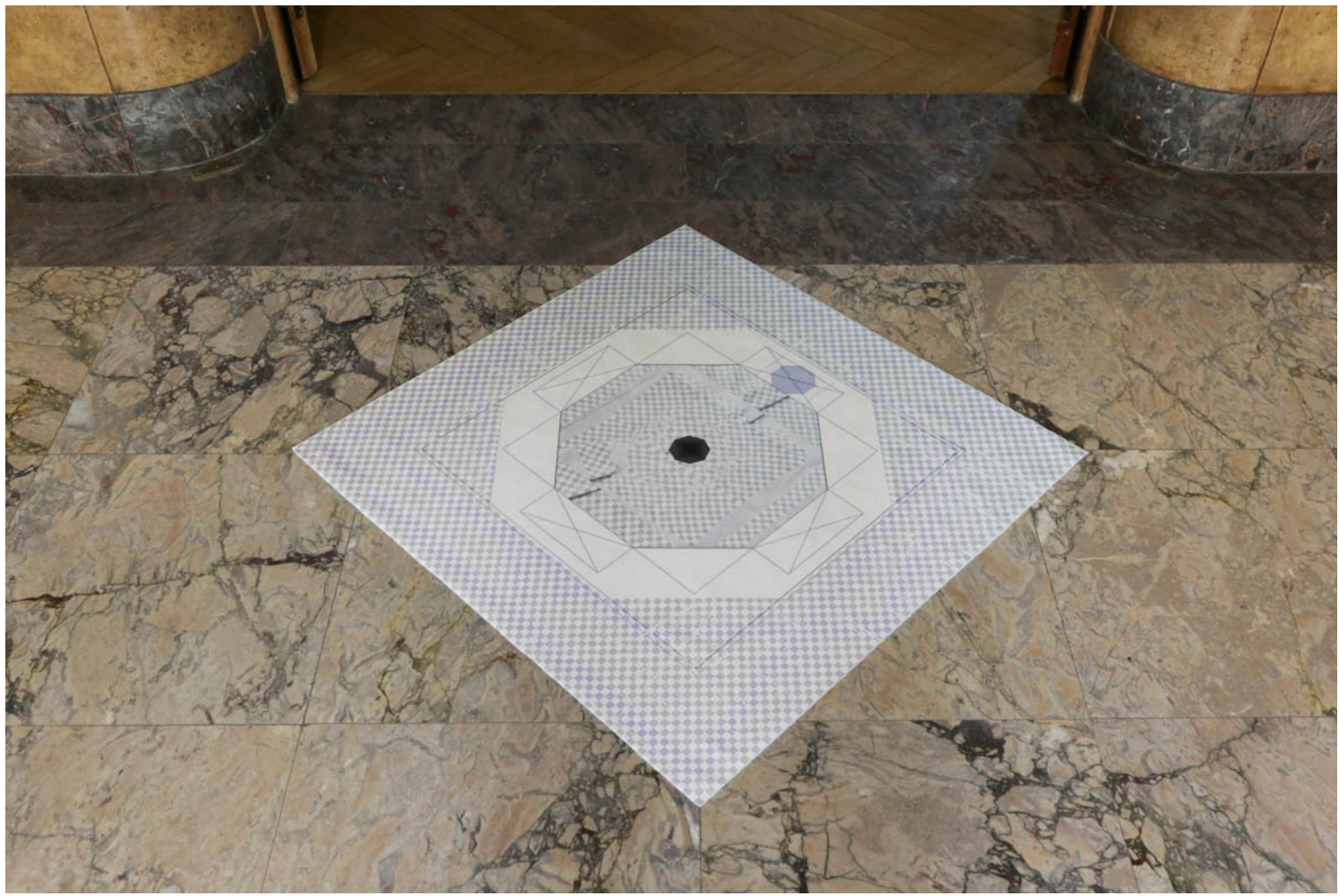




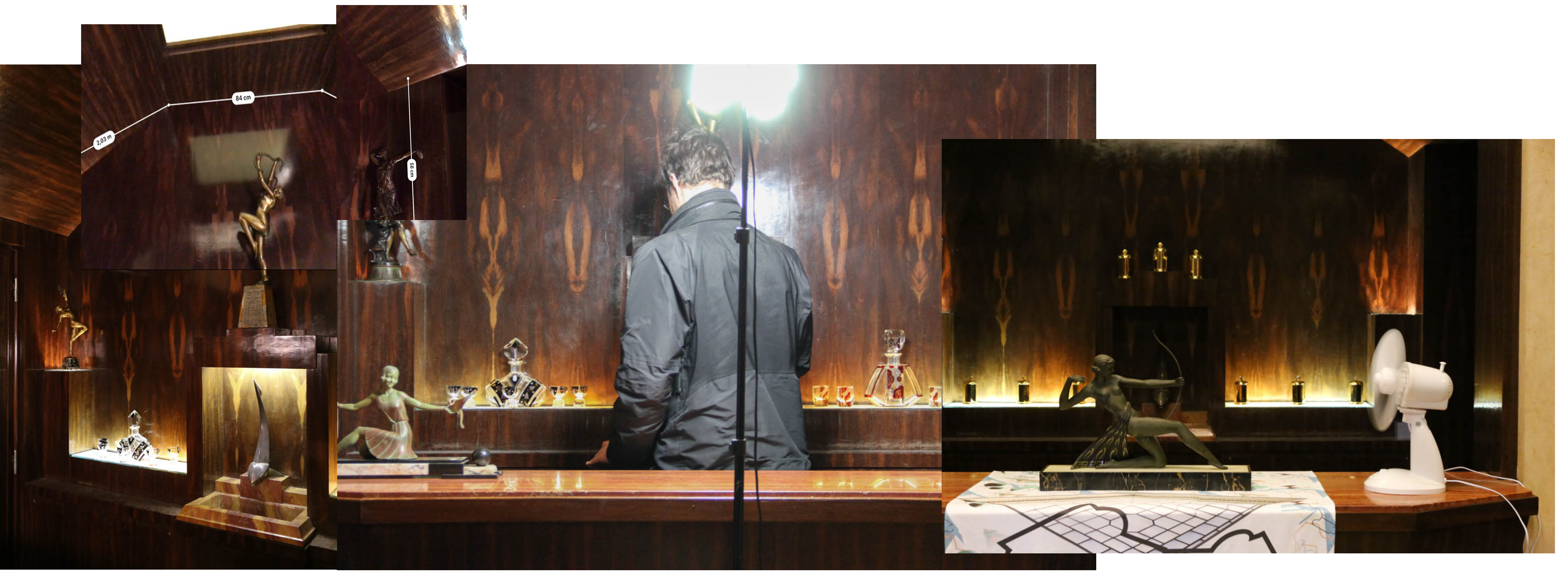


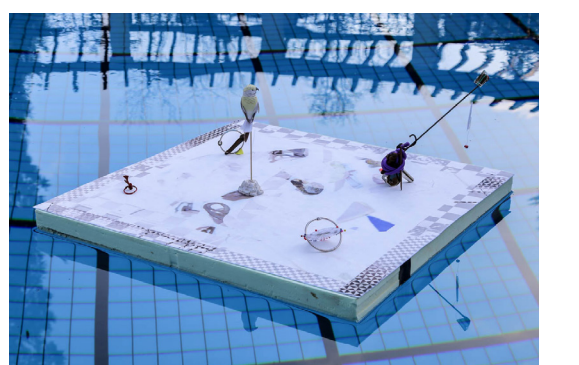
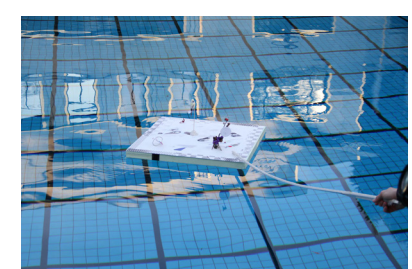
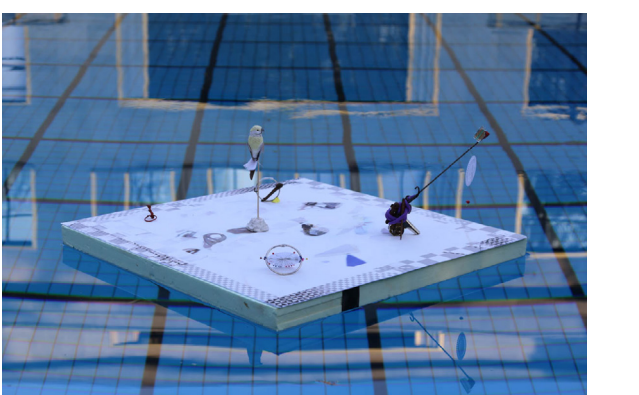
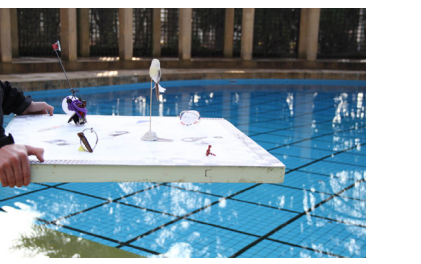
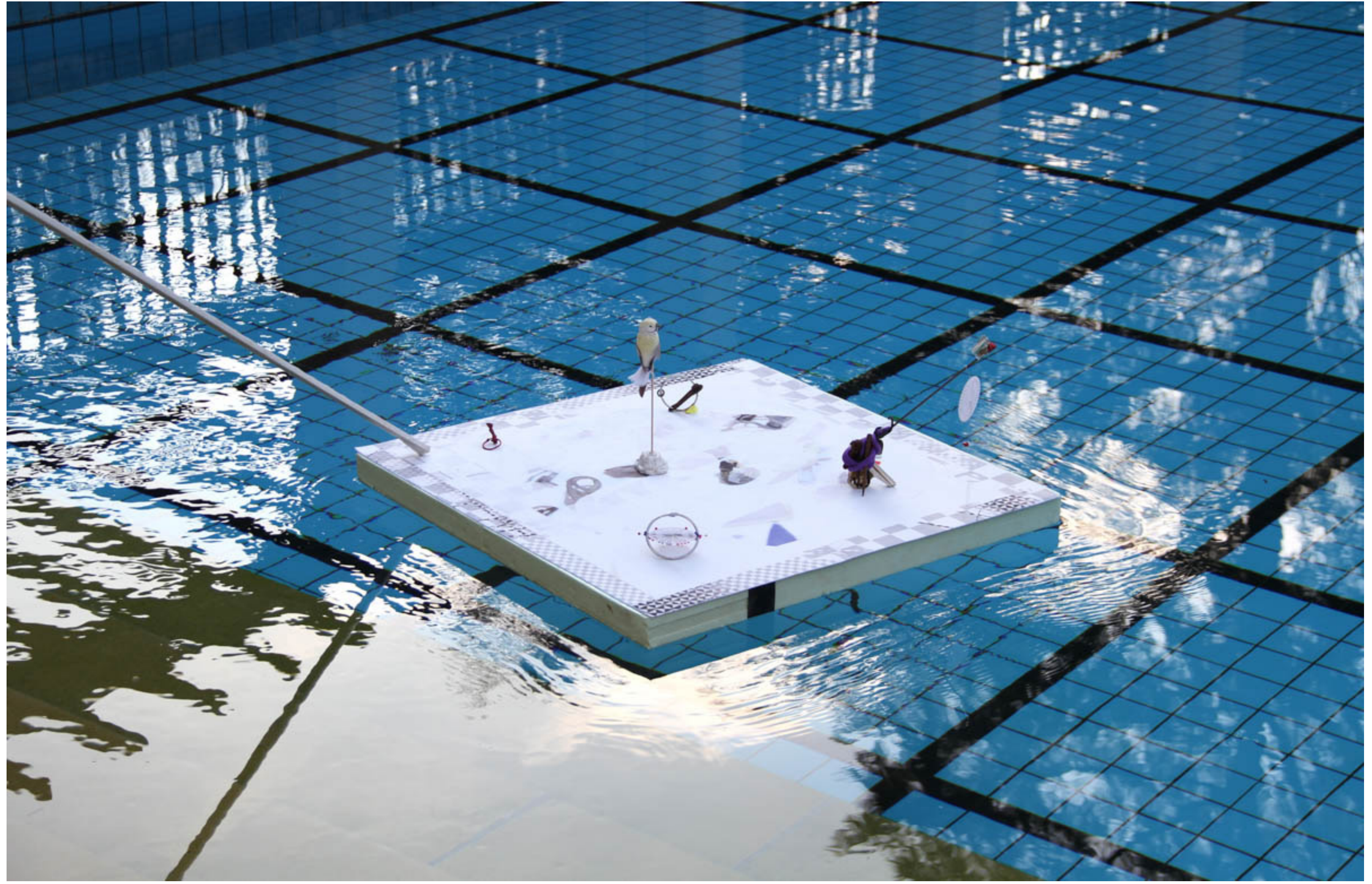


















author biographies

Remco Roes is an artist and a postdoctoral researcher at Hasselt University. His artistic practice departs from an archive of observations, traces, and spaces that he happens to find on his path. Working attentively amongst these fragments results in spatial installations, artist publications and video works, balancing between speaking and remaining silent, intention and coincidence, purposeful work and the usefulness of residues and accidents. Roes's research focuses on disclosing the spatial concepts within his artistic practice ((secular sacred) (space) (in digital times)), as well as exploring the visual essay and vulnerable dialogue as vehicles for artistic research communication.

Koenraad Claes is an artist/researcher and professor at ENSAV La Cambre and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp (Belgium). Since his master's degree at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, he has been an associate professor at various institutions (PXL MAD Faculty, Hasselt University, and Royal Academy of Fine Arts Ghent). His artistic practice is multidisciplinary. Fuelled by travelogues, fragmented pieces of thought and shreds of information, the work is conceived in an extemporary, organic fashion. Observations, sketches and (found) footage are hoarded and form an open-ended archive that is consulted on a regular basis. Print, self-publishing, paint, installation, video, and performance are the strategies of choice.

Usoa Fullaondo is an artist, researcher, and teacher in Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of the Basque Country. She finished her PhD in 2010 in the Department of Painting of the same University. Since 2017, she has been part of the research project Subjectivity in Practice-Based Artistic Research. She has taught at Oslo and Akhersus University College of Applied Sciences, and she has taken up residencies in Banff Centre (Alberta, Canada), Senselab (Concordia University, Montreal) and Villa Empain (Brussels).

Image credits:

Remco Roes, Koenraad Claes and Usoa Fullaondo, except pages 132, 133, 136 and 143 (small black and white); Boghossian Foundation archives, page 132 Lola Pertowsky (Flamboyant exhibition view), page 146 Georges De Kinder (Villa entrance).