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# The Architect as Bricoleur

Irénée Scalbert

## ABSTRACT

Im nächsten Schritt des Verfahrens (siehe Abbildung 3.6, Schritt 4) werden die Kosten für die aktuell ausgewählte Lösung der Nachbarschaftssuche berechnet. Diese Kosten ergeben sich aus monetären und virtuellen Kosten. Die monetären Kosten decken die realen Kosten des Ausbaus ab. Besteht die aktuell betrachtete Lösung beispielsweise aus dem Austausch zweier Leitungen, sind die Kosten für den Ausbau aufgetragen. Virtuelle Kosten stellen sicher, dass die Betriebsmittelauslastungen in der Optimierung berücksichtigt sind. Eine Lösung wird auch bei Nichteinhaltung der Grenzwerte betrachtet. Sobald Grenzwertverletzungen an einem Knoten vorliegen, nehmen die virtuellen Kosten einen hohen Wert an und steigen mit weiterer Belastung. Es ist auf eine sinnvolle Parametrierung der virtuellen Kosten zu achten. Die Gesamtkosten ergeben sich aus der Summe der monetären und virtuellen Kosten.

CANDIDE NO. XX - TITLE OF THE ISSUE  
CANDIDE JOURNAL FOR ARCHITECTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Irénée Scalbert

# The Architect as Bricoleur

8pt Helvetica Regular 12pt Spacing Modernism was founded upon common sense and convenience. Form followed function, and not much else, it was felt, needed to be said. But remove the universal of function, as happened in the 1970s, remove the certainties of common sense and convenience, and form knew not which way to turn. Suddenly it was free. Wordplay on the familiar dictum was common. Literally, form could (and still can) follow anything. This narrative, or rather the absence of narrative, has dominated the academic discourse during the last half-century, leading architects now to the excitement of discovery, now to existential confusion.<sup>1</sup> Consider OMA's 1989 competition entry for the French National Library. It stands and

## We have long been accustomed

falls at the high **watermark** of postmodernism. With engaging candour, OMA's Rem Koolhaas confided to his diary, published in S,M,L,XL, a desire to become free from "the sad mode of simulating invention," from "the apparent obligation ... to fabricate differences." <sup>2</sup> Two weeks later came a thrilling eureka in the form of a first sketch elevation, "astonishingly absurd, astonishingly beautiful." <sup>3</sup> In effect, the postmodern conundrum was to be solved with the cancellation of the remaining term of the modernist dictum: form. Architecture became "an absence of building." Drawing from the French postmodern theorist Gilles Lipovetsky and his 1983 book *L'Ère du Vide* (the third chapter is called "Narcisse ou la stratégie du vide"), Koolhaas described his approach to the library design as a "strategy of the void." No function, no form, and above all no following. Exit

modernism.

We have long been accustomed to the vicissitudes associated with form, to the contortions bringing about its improbable disappearance (Koolhaas and the French National Library), and to the acrobatics celebrating its triumph (the Guggenheim in Bilbao). Triggered by the collapse of modernism, assisted by the wanderings of postmodernism, every aspect of architecture was reduced to form (and for a few like Koolhaas, to nonform). Even detailing, usually associated with solidity and eeping water away, has become a means to texture and ornament. It is from this position that the architect must now contemplate his vocation. Enter the bricoleur.

Being at once designer, builder, and user, the bricoleur is central to the process of making things. The distinction between conception, construction, and living is not one that in his terms is particularly significant. Nor is bricolage, Do It Yourself (DIY) in English, a marginal occupation: it represents a considerable part of the building economy. The vast number of publications on the subject testifies to this, and ranges from electronics and plumbing to decoration, and even papier-mâché. They describe various sleights of hand, every possible way of doing things. Bricolage is shrewd and cunning.

On the other hand, the academic literature on bricolage is negligible. To this day, the seminal text remains the few pages written by Claude Lévi-Strauss at the beginning of his 1962 book, *La pensée sauvage*. <sup>4</sup> Lévi-Strauss describes not the thought of primitive people but the primitive foundation of thought, the process that explains the transition from nature to civilization. The "savage mind," he writes, "is neither the mind of

savages nor that of primitive or archaic humanity, but rather mind in its untamed state..." 5 This point must be emphasized. Bricolage, the means by which the untamed mind puts order into things, is not peculiar to tribes in the Amazon basin and elsewhere but is available to all.

Lévi-Strauss calls bricolage the "science of the concrete." He offers only few examples of this science: the Palais Idéal of the Facteur Cheval, already well-known to Jean Dubuffet and the protagonists of art brut, the sets constructed by Georges Méliès in his film studio in Montreuil, and the suburban castle of Mr. Wemmick in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. The fundamental characteristic of bricolage is that its inventory is made of all kinds of different things and that, even when this inventory is large, it remains limited. The bricoleur uses what is at hand because that is all that he has. His materials bear no relation to his task because they are themselves the result of previous constructions. Lévi-Strauss refers to these materials as being "pre-constrained." Before embarking on a project, the bricoleur interrogates the materials in his treasury. He tries to discover new significations and new possibilities. What were ends in previous projects become means in the next. The bricoleur rebuilds his set of tools and materials by using the debris of previous events, the odds and ends left behind by other ventures. But the set always remains the same. Inevitably, the result will be a compromise between the project that he first had in mind and the means available to him.

This text by Lévi-Strauss became wellknown among architecture critics in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is not difficult to see why. Lévi-Strauss contrasts the bricoleur with the engineer. Unlike the bricoleur, the engineer—so Lévi-Strauss claimed—subordinates materials to his project. There will be as many sets of materials and tools as there are engineering projects. Unlike the bricoleur who recycles the leftovers of older projects, the engineer (and a majority of modern architects after him) imagines his project in the context of universal laws. He imposes his concepts on reality. The bricoleur on the other hand looks for signs and images in the reality

that is around him.

In the 1970s, architects were looking for a way out of modernism. For half a century, their predecessors had been obsessed with the figure of the engineer. Hence it is not difficult to understand why the text by Lévi-Strauss proved so enticing. Bricolage seemed to offer an alternative vision to that of modernism. It was the perfect riposte to the doctrine of functionalism, to the excesses of rationality and to the worship of science. Bricolage signified improvisation, freedom, and populism. It was a means to individual creativity and to art. Already in 1956, Alison and Peter Smithson, together with their artist friends Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson, had constructed "Patio and Pavilion." Here the simple shed and the debris of everyday life expressed basic necessities of habitation. By the 1970s, these debris from life came to mean far more than the waste of individual lives: they designated the whole of human history, the totality of culture. Sifting through the debris of centuries, architects found their new materials. Hence Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's fascination with Rome in their 1978 book *Collage City*. With its mish-mash of obelisks, columns and statues, with its collision of palaces, piazzas, and villas, with its collection of formal compositions and ad-hoc stuff in between, Rome represented, in their eyes, the bricolage mentality at its most lavish.

Six years before *Collage City*, Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver published *Adhocism*. In this book, bricolage was offered as a more direct way of making architecture, as a means to a "democratic style" by which anyone could be the author of their own environment. Already it was manifest in the DIY industry, in the constructions of Hippie communities and in the recycling of waste. "Instead of a city of 10,000 architects," Jencks argued, "we need a city of 10 million architects." 6 On the aesthetic plane, what appealed to the authors is the ingenuity by which everything can always be turned into something else. Thus in the films of Buster Keaton, Jencks observed, an umbrella served as a parachute, a door knob was used to pull out a tooth, and Keaton himself performed as a canon ball. For

the adhocist, bricolage was the springboard of the creative process, being instrumental for instance in the invention of the bicycle, of the automobile, and of the space program. Jencks and Silver associated bricolage with the student movement in the 1960s. In the event their political vision was abandoned. Freedom of choice for people was downgraded to freedom of design for the architect. Hence the legacy of bricolage became the new eclecticism outlined in Jencks's 1977 *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, the studied inconsistency in forms, and the "difficult whole" theorized by Robert Venturi in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* in 1966. The treasury of the postmodern bricoleur runs the entire gamut of history. Its limits were those of human imagination and memory. Though he was never formally a postmodernist, Robert Harbison, in his wonderful work of 1977, *Eccentric Spaces*, gives the best testimony to the postmodern project. It encompasses the full range of human creation, the entire spectrum of human culture, and by means of a book it brings aspects of the world "indoors" and makes them available to our powers of reinvention. The postmodernist may find occasional delight in nature, but, like Joris-Karl Huysmans whose 1884 book *A Rebours* (aptly rendered in English as *Against Nature*) was widely circulated among architects a century later, he seeks to experience and transform the world from the comfort of his drawing room. That was in the 1970s. What about our own time? The bricoleur today is not, as he was for Jencks, a consumer adapting the products of industry to his own project. Nor is he an antiquarian rummaging, like Rowe, through the debris of the past. The closest affinities of the bricoleur in our own time are with Robinson Crusoe. In 1967, French writer Michel Tournier gave Robinson the figure of a demiurge in his version of the story, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*.<sup>7</sup> He imagined him at a workbench covered with all kinds of objects. Robinson is an organizer, "one who does battle with a world in disorder which he seeks to master by whatever means come to hand."<sup>8</sup> Shipwrecked on what became his island, he brings to shore biscuits, a hammer, a plane, planks torn from the ship's

decks. He also brings things of no immediate use: clothes, table service and silver, maps, a chest of coins. These objects are stored in a grotto that becomes Robinson's treasury. When he starts work on a new boat, his only tools are an axe and a pocketknife. Unlike in Daniel Defoe's original, early eighteenth-century version, Tournier gives him no nails.

To the materials rescued from the wreck, Robinson adds the resources of the island. A tree trunk is made into the keelson of his boat. The bark of a holly is boiled into a sludge and smeared over its hull. Robinson himself is part of this arsenal, his body bearing the marks of construction in so many cuts, burns, scars, and bruises. With the passing of time, his identity becomes indistinguishable from that of the island. "Henceforth," Tournier writes, "there is a fluttering 'I' which comes to rest now on the man and now on the island, making of me one and the other by turns."<sup>9</sup> Robinson abolishes the divide between nature (incarnated in the savage figure of Friday) and culture (represented by the shipwreck and its crew)—the same "Great Divide" discussed by anthropologist Bruno Latour in his brilliant 1991 pamphlet, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*.<sup>10</sup> Robinson and the island, humans and nature are at one in the naïve, unreflective condition that is the ordinary mode of our existence.

Yet Robinson remains human. Only from his own industry can he expect that which nature provides freely to animals: his dress, his weapons, his sustenance. Like every other man, he must replace what is given by what is created. In short, Tournier's classic book can be regarded as an allegory of bricolage.

In Robinson's island, we find the essence of Levi-Strauss's closed instrumental set, a place that is finite in extent and clearly circumscribed. In Robinson himself, we find the essence of the bricoleur, making do with what is at hand. To be born is to be shipwrecked in nature, and our happiness, our existence even, depends upon the wisdom of our ecology.

And yet bricolage is more than a means to survival. Robinson's island is more than an allegorical miniature of Gaia threatened by

climate change and rising sea levels (though it may still come to that). The island that Defoe called the "Island of Despair" Tournier renames "Speranza Island." Yet for Tournier (as no doubt it would for Latour), the island signifies far more than what its name designates, hope. It presents Robinson with the means to reassess the rationality presiding over modern civilization. It presents him with the opportunity to repair the rift between object and subject. Having forsaken the possibility of escape presented by a visiting ship, it comes to signify a new contract between self and nature. Hence Robinson's ecstasy when, hearing the breeze in the foliage, he feels within himself that "the leaf is the lung of the tree which is itself a lung, and the wind is its breathing."<sup>11</sup>

For Rowe and Koetter, and for Jencks and Silver, the bricoleur belonged to a vision not of nature but of society and culture. They argued for a society that was liberal and pluralist, one that could accommodate a multitude of individual projects. For Rowe in particular, the most eloquent expression of bricolage was a city, like Rome, that was demonstrably built upon and with the debris of events. Buildings drew directly from their context and, in turn, they provided the context for subsequent constructions. Hence contextualism, an idea that dominated urban design for thirty years, was indebted to the concept of bricolage and Lévi-Strauss's "science of the concrete."

Robinson, too, salvages human culture: everything in fact that could be brought to shore from the shipwreck of his old civilization. But unlike postmodernists, he does not privilege culture over nature. Unlike what postmodernists call "con-text," unlike what green activists call "environment," Robinson's island includes all creation: natural forces that have been humanized, and humans like himself who became natural forces. Robinson is no different in this from the drivers in big cities and motorways described by Lévi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage*. "It is neither men nor natural laws," he writes, "that are brought face to face. Rather it is systems of natural forces humanized by drivers' intentions, and men transformed into natural forces by the physical energy of which

they are the channel."<sup>12</sup>

Robinson the bricoleur merely happens to be the messenger between nature and culture, the mediator between his own modern past and the premodern past that is represented in the person of Friday.

Bricolage cannot have a form because, to the bricoleur, it is a life process. Nor can bricolage have a philosophy, insofar as it does not lend itself to concepts and theories. Instead, bricolage values flair, wisdom and forethought, resourcefulness, deception and vigilance, opportunism, skills, and experience. Bricolage is a form of cunning akin to the Ancient Greek *metis* associated with that other great castaway, Odysseus.<sup>13</sup> The bricoleur is always waist-deep in practical situations, nowhere more comfortable than between the sensible and the intelligible, between the earthly and the aerial. Where does this leave architecture? Jencks and Silver put forward Bruce Goff as the leading architectural bricoleur. They acknowledged Gaudí (greatly admired by Goff), and they mentioned kitsch. For Rowe and Koetter, bricolage was an attitude of mind that found

expression in collage and Le Corbusier was the exemplar of the architect-bricoleur. They saw bricolage in the use of industrial glazing in the ceiling of the Ozenfant studio, in the *objets trouvés* of the Beistegui penthouse, in the fake mountains on the roof of the *Unité d'habitation*, and in the commercial graphics of the Nestlé pavilion. But does this really qualify as bricolage? Rowe and Koetter's most interesting contribution was to invent a myth of origin, the foxiness of Le Corbusier being traced back to a single event: the invention by Picasso and Braque of *papiers collés*, specifically, Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* of 1912.

Picasso has been described as a modern-day Proteus, and no one has been a better artist-bricoleur. By his own admission, he was a painter without style: "I shift about too much," he said, "I move too often. You see me here, and yet I've already changed, I'm already elsewhere."<sup>14</sup> He prided himself on the irrepressible inventiveness that spontaneously led him to improvise. The *papiers collés* use ready-made materials with a

simple additive method (hence the name “synthetic Cubism”) and basic tools like pins and glue. When the right wallpaper could not be found in the shops, Picasso tore pieces off the walls. Provenance did not matter. In *Bowl with fruit, violin and wineglass* of 1913, materials and methods were all mixed up: the handmade and the mass-produced, the colored and the tonal, the patterned and the plain, the painted, the drawn, the printed, and the cut. Picasso’s treasury included wallpaper, Ripolin paint, stencils, and the decorator’s comb. The *peintre-décorateur* was Picasso’s alter ego and this proved immensely liberating, for him as well as for art.

But Rowe’s foundation myth is not enough. Picasso the bricoleur is like a castaway without an island. Something is missing: nature. Another artist, Giuseppe Penone, helps complete the picture. If Picasso is like Robinson making do with what is left of his boat, Penone, who having started work in the late 1960s belongs in our own time, is like Robinson making the best of what the island offers. For Penone, all things preserve the memory of nature. When he carves a timber beam he retraces the entire process of the tree’s growth as if in fast motion, but in reverse. Every object that is made in wood was once a tree. Thus it is possible to imagine forests, alleys, woods, gardens, parks, and orchards lying dormant inside doors, tables, floors, planks, and boats. Working with a chisel, Penone retraces the intimate history of wood, which the sun, the rain, the frost, as well as insects and other animals have inscribed in it. So did Robinson Crusoe when, with an axe and a pocket-knife, he carved a boat in a tree. If a timber beam conceals the form of a tree, a tree conceals the form of a boat. For some time already, bricolage has been accepted in the arts. The same cannot be said of architecture. Which architect has attempted to embrace the freedom of the *artiste-décorateur*? Which architect has tapped into the aesthetic possibilities of DIY, of repairs, maintenance, and decoration? Perhaps Gerrit Rietveld did at the 1924 Schröder House, where he was, one feels, ceaselessly adding to, tampering with, and transforming partitions and furnishings in ways

that were meticulous but seldom appeared definitive. Certainly Frank Gehry did, most obviously in his own house converted in 1977–78 and refurbished and extended from 1991 to 1994, described in the architect’s *Complete Works* as a residential “remodel,” as “sketches in wood.” 15 Parts of the house were designed prior to construction, others during, and the house, we are told, was used as a full-scale model.

However, to confine bricolage in architecture to works made by the architect’s own hands, for the architect’s own use or that of people close to him or her, is unnecessarily limiting. Colin Rowe described James Stirling as a “magpie architect-bricoleur” 16 and it is not difficult to see, in the mix-and-match of tower and lecture halls in the 1964 Leicester Engineering Building, what Rowe had in mind. Yet the thought of Stirling holding a hammer or a power drill is a distinctly uncomfortable one. His natural media, we feel, are the stubby pencil and the miniature sketch.

To a degree all constructions, all knowledge involves bricolage. Even the most abstract science must sometimes appeal to the science of the concrete. Witness the rough models that often accompany major discoveries, for instance Watson and Crick’s model of the double helix structure of DNA of 1953, with its props, clamps, soldering, and scribbles. Witness, too, the intervention of coincidence in science, for instance in the accidental discovery of penicillin in 1928, arguably the same “objective coincidence” theorized the same year by French surrealist writer André Breton in *Nadja*, and later recognized by Lévi-Strauss as an important aspect of bricolage.

Bricolage is not an alternative to architecture. It is present in all designs. It is manifest for instance in a child’s construction included by Richard Wentworth, an artist-bricoleur, in the 1998 exhibition “Thinking Aloud.” The construction represents a small house made with pins crudely soldered together end to end. Like architecture models, it involves no detailing. In effect, its design works like a magnet. It brings things together by a process of spontaneous attraction, according to the same objective

coincidence discussed by Breton and adopted by Lévi-Strauss. Aesthetic judgement is clearly part of it, and of all bricolage. The house of pins could have been made differently, with more precision, with anodized or stainless steel pins carefully aligned one with the other, and with no excess of solder. Yet it would still have been bricolage. This spontaneous attraction that is the *modus operandi* of bricolage is unpredictable. Sometimes tidy, sometimes untidy (when we are inclined to repress it), it invites much that is best in our creative capacity and it makes no presumption on the form of the outcome. Arguably, a Gothic cathedral is a product of the science of the concrete, a conception by untamed minds. Its builders have been known to proceed without knowledge of the final result. Thus in Milan the foundations of the cathedral were laid and columns were raised to the height of about a meter. Then came a pause of several years during which a succession of masons were consulted about how best to vault the edifice. Contrary to Viollet-le-Duc and the rationalist tradition, there is no necessary, logical connection between the foundations and the superstructure, between the inside and the outside of a cathedral. The exterior of a cathedral is not the necessary and sufficient condition to the existence of its interior. In a wonderful insight, John Ruskin wrote in 1881 in *The Bible of Amiens* that “the outside of a French cathedral, except for its sculpture, is always to be thought of as the wrong side of the stuff, in which you find how the threads go that produce the inside or right side pattern.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the flying buttresses, the tracery, and the pinnacles that commonly dominate the profile of cathedrals would constitute the loose ends in the weave, the wrong side of the fabric that lent itself most readily to bricolage. The Gothic builder may not have used, like the bricoleur, what was immediately at hand but he seldom strayed far (witness Abbot Suger’s well-known search for roofing timbers in a forest local to his abbey in St. Denis). However, it is in the lack of systematic method, in the making do—better, in the derring-do—that the builders of cathedrals can be said to be bricoleurs on a grand scale. Gothic masons, all including Latour would agree, have never been

modern.

Some will want to know what architectural bricolage might look like today. They will imagine the formulation of another aesthetics, making a virtue out of the provisional and the improvised and finding beauty in the shack. Adhocism was a step in this direction. So was, arguably, the eclecticism that defined postmodernism. Others will prefer to emphasize the essential freedom of the bricoleur. For them, bricolage will be first and foremost a political project, one that advocates the empowerment of the grassroots. It will be informed, for instance, by the biopolitics theorized by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, the individualization described by Ulrich Beck, or the novel constitution prefigured by Latour. And it will remember, via Jencks, the libertarian spirit of the student movement of the 1960s and, via Rowe, the liberalism of Isaiah Berlin.

For sure, bricolage, being essentially versatile, can and will embrace all this. Yet I prefer to envisage bricolage as a state of mind and a mode of design that embraces the rise of ecology. For some years already, it has become easier to see that we are all shipwrecked on the island that we call Earth. In each of us, there is a Robinson Crusoe. In each architect there is an anthropologist and an ecologist, a professional interested equally in humans

and in their habitat. In all bricolage, there is a recognition that resources are limited. But we need not return to simpler, more primitive ways. We need not renounce the use of hammer and nails and eke out an existence with an axe and a pocketknife. To the contrary, according to a recent article in *The Economist*, we would be on the threshold of a new industrial revolution with the advent of 3D printing.<sup>18</sup>

We shall imagine things, then we shall print them. What fabulous prospects for bricolage! No details, no carving knife, no sweat. For sure, Robinson would have liked that. Our sketches will encompass thought as well as building. No longer confined to paper, they shall be made in ink, in wood, in concrete, in whatever material happens to lay within our reach. Neither modern nor post-modern, Latour willing, architecture will be premodern. We shall add to, tamper with and



transform what lies before us. Circumstance and accident will be integral to our designs. At last we shall come to terms with the provisional nature of architecture.

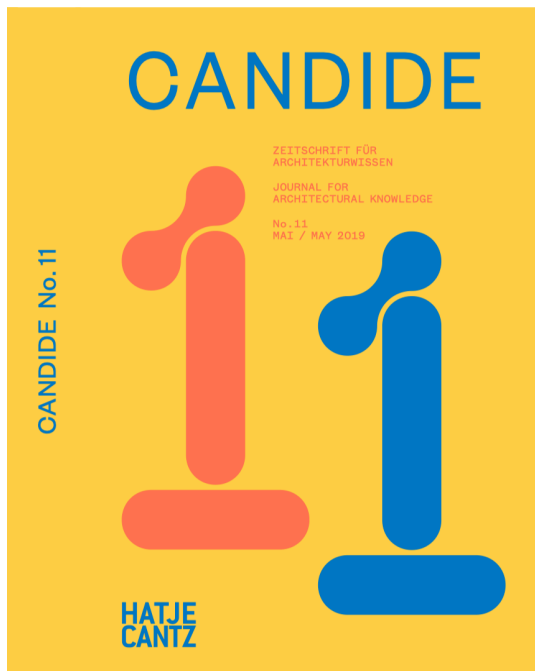


Figure 1. Title [Type of Media]  
It represents a considerable part of the building economy.



Figure 2. Title [Type of Media]  
It represents a considerable part of the building economy.

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Figure 3. Title [Type of Media]  
It represents a considerable part of the building economy.



Figure 3. Titel Test  
It represents a considerable part of the building economy.

## Endnotes

- 1 Rossi 1982 [1966]: p. 12 - 500.
- 2 Rossi 1982 [1966]: p. 452 - 500.
- 3 Rossi 1982 [1966]: p. 45 - 453.
- 4 Rossi 1982 [1966]: p. 45 - 45364.
- 5 Rossi 1982 [1966]: p. 45 - 456.
- 6 Rossi 1982 [1966]: p. 45 - 456.
- 7 sdfsd sdf: p. 3 - 5.

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- Figure 2. Title [Type of Media]: Picasso, Pablo. 1912. "Construction with violin in the studio on boulevard Raspail", Paris, (Copyright: bpk / RMN / Paris, Musée Picasso / Pablo Picasso).
- Figure 3. Title [Type of Media]: Picasso, Pablo. 1912. "Construction with violin in the studio on boulevard Raspail", Paris, (Copyright: bpk / RMN / Paris, Musée Picasso / Pablo Picasso).
- Figure 3. Titel Test: Picasso, Pablo. 1912. "Construction with violin in the studio on boulevard Raspail", Paris, (Copyright: bpk / RMN / Paris, Musée Picasso / Pablo Picasso).