

THE SECOND LIFE OF THINGS

OF RAGPICKERS
AND AVANT-GARDE
ARTISTS AT THE
BEGINNING
OF THE 20TH
CENTURY



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THE SECOND LIFE OF THINGS

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The second life of things

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The circular economy is one of the great challenges society faces today. We can no longer link economic growth to the endless consumption of resources.

The traditional linear economic model, based mainly on the “use and throw away” concept, requires huge amounts of materials and energy. In contrast, the circular economy is a healthier and certainly more efficient option, both for us and for the planet.

An economy in which products and materials are kept in use for as long as possible implies significant savings in costs and resources. This model of production and consumption invites us to share, rent, reuse, repair, renew and recycle, which all translates into new service-based business models.

In practice, this system means minimising waste and creating added value from the materials and substances that are recovered and fed back into the production process, in a way that is safe for human health and the environment. Reducing waste means creating cleaner surroundings, a healthier environment and a higher quality of life.

The European Union produces more than 2.5 billion tons of waste per year. The work of the public authorities in promoting the circular economy requires the amendment of the legislative framework to promote a change in current waste production and management models. It also requires raising awareness and disseminating information on the best ways to promote this new economy.

Within the framework of this awareness and dissemination of the circular economy to the public, the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge is organising this exhibition in

collaboration with the National Sculpture Museum, which reports to the Ministry of Culture and Sport, coinciding with the meetings of the Council of Ministers of the European Union during the month of July in Valladolid.

The idea of circularity – recycling and reusing materials to create new ones – was a discovery and a *modus operandi* of the twentieth-century avant-garde movements. Artists such as Picasso, Miró, Schwitters and Ferrant started using waste to produce works of art, thus reclaiming waste as material for their creations.

Through this exhibition the Ministry has ratified its commitment to the dissemination of sustainability. There is no better place than the sphere of culture to transmit the ideas that are essential for a not-so-new form of circularity.

Teresa Ribera
Third Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge

Please allow me to use a hyperbole: history has turned avant-garde artists into pioneers of sustainability. Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Claude Cahun, Pablo Picasso, Joseph Cornell, Joan Brossa, Andy Warhol and so many others, who turned recycling, found objects and the ready-made into a manifesto in favour of ground-breaking art, turning what was not art into art, could all be seen today as standard-bearers of sustainability. The revolutionary gesture of turning a urinal into a piece of art, as Duchamp did, the Brillo detergent boxes stacked by Warhol, and Miró's sculptures made with everyday materials such as chairs, cardboard and spoons, all enjoy a second reading today in terms of sustainability: is it necessary to produce more in a world that has already produced too much? Artists, converting into art what consumer society has discarded, pose a challenge not only in artistic terms, but also in environmental, economic, ecological and even philosophical terms: has the time come to wane, and to use what we would otherwise have discarded into the driving force of change?

Social, political and economic challenges in a global context of climate emergency also have a direct impact on artistic practice, which can serve as a space for reflection, rehearsal and proposal for the future; and also on cultural institutions, such as museums, which have to transform themselves in order to respond to an emergency that concerns us all. Museums thus become spaces for response and thought, banners of policies for change and sustainable development. It is not for nothing that this year's topic for International Museum Day is "Museums, sustainability and well-being", which gives us an idea of the

significant role they play and their responsibility as institutions that provide a service to society.

In addition to the necessary changes in their structures, in their forms of consumption, in their installations, the reflection and the role they can play as motors of change are also evident. *The Second Life of Things* reflects the National Sculpture Museum's commitment to the environment through artistic thought and practice. This exhibition, produced with the support of the Ministry of Ecological Transition and the Ministry of Culture and Sport, explores the concepts of the circular economy and the reuse of materials based on pieces produced in the early avant-garde period. Useless objects are turned into art, saved from waste and launched into posterity.

Miquel Iceta i Llorens
Minister for Culture and Sport

Our present age, defined as the Anthropocene Era – because the serious ecological imbalances caused by humans on the planet have now taken on a “geological” dimension – often invites us to reflect on the things that surround us and their ultimate destiny. This destiny is inseparable from that of mankind on Earth, as the anthropologist Bruno Latour (1947-2022) recently warned: “Take things into account and you will have human beings. Think about humans and you will soon be interested in things”.

Artists have meditated on things for centuries, have looked at them more closely than anyone else, and have endowed them with a relevance charged with sensitivity and symbolism. And yet about a hundred years ago there was a major break with tradition, when the first avant-garde artists included real waste and vulgar – poor, useless and second-hand – objects in their work, rescued from dustbins, pavements and beaches. It was a masterstroke against convention, inspired by the desire to introduce real, unfiltered matter into the inviolable territory of Art.

Even though not all artists and not all movements pursued the same goal with these practices, they were all equally fascinated by the “cultural virginity” of ordinary, old things, ideal for them to play with and for the spirit of anarchy. A new astronomy of things was thus defined, favouring the order of the inferior, the fragmentary, the fragile, the rusty and the worn out, and which, in short, found on the ground a magnetic and inspiring attraction. As Georges Bataille warned, “Narrators have not noticed the certain fact that the Sleeping Beauty will awaken from her millenary sleep covered in a vast layer of dust and rubbish”.

This predilection constituted, so to speak, an unexpected form of “poetic ecology”, already foreseen by the poet Jean Cocteau when he defined Picasso as the “king of rag-and-bone men”: “Every time he goes out, he picks up everything he finds and takes it back to his studio, where he raises it to the dignity of usefulness. Not only does he collect unusual objects with his hands; his eye catches the slightest show. If you look closely at his work, you will always see things in it that inattentive people do not notice: chalk drawings on pavements, shop windows, posters, gas outlets

splashed with plaster, treasure from rubbish bins...”. Cocteau was thus bringing this mixed quality of waste, partly economic and partly aesthetic, into the limelight by placing these urban collectors of rubbish and leftovers in the streets on the same level as the avant-garde artists at the dawn of the twentieth century, who were ecstatically discovering the plastic qualities of a yellowed newspaper, a lost button, a pebble, as counter-figures of a society that was embarking on an unstoppable race to the accumulation of waste.

The aim of this exhibition is to show, on a smaller scale and somewhat toned down, this artistic dignification of waste, which developed in the workshops of painters and sculptors, in photographers’ laboratories and on film sets, through some thirty works of art from different genres: collages, photographs, sculptures, paintings, objects, assemblages and films. Great names from the first half of the twentieth century – such as Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, Manuel Ángeles Ortiz, Leandre Cristòfol, Joan Miró, Claude Cahun, Brassai, Man Ray, Angel Ferrant, Marianne Breslauer, Eugene Atget, Herbert Bayer, Aho & Soldan, Raoul Ubac, Walker Evans, Esteban Vicente, Ferdinand Cheval, Georges Lacombe, André Papillon, Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton and, in a Baroque excursus, Gregorio Fernández – are all brought together in a clear manifestation of “cultural Europeanism”, due to the varied origins of the artists (France, Russia, Belgium, Hungary, Austria, Romania, Finland, Germany, Spain – as well as a few Americans). They also highlight the richness of the Spanish collections in this exciting period of the early avant-garde.



IN THE STREET

◀ [Previous page]

1. Eugène Atget (1857-1927)
Porte d'Asnières, cité Trébert : chiffonnier (Gate of Asnières, Trébert City: rag-and-bone man). 1913

↕ 2. Georges Lacombe (1902-1990)
La zone. Au pays des chiffonniers (The zone. In the country of rag-and-bone men). 1928



In the great capitals of the first industrial civilisation in the nineteenth century, a new use was found for even the tiniest piece of waste. Everything was picked up and reused. The main player in this primitive form of the circular economy was the rag-and-bone man, exercising an itinerant, miserable but essential trade: a disturbing marauder of the suburbs, a decisive player in industrial progress and a picturesque human type in the arts and literature. They were dirty, alcoholic, misfits, immoral, but also useful, industrious and a bit philosophical. Their activity was "foraging". At night, they roamed the streets collecting used rags, the bones and skins of dead animals, broken glass, tin cans, nails, chipped plates and other scraps from which paper, buttons, sugar, matches, gelatine, dominoes, children's toys, ornamental skins, crockery, hair buns and hairpieces were made. It was a huge industry. Abandoned and unusable things were the stuff of a new transformation.

The figure was present in art, in books, on the pages of newspapers, in vocabulary, and also in photography, which often paid homage to these outcasts. They were seen as an alter ego of the modern artist, with whom they shared bourgeois marginality and the collection of waste and dross, which in their hands was given a second life, transformed into treasure. Baudelaire, the "painter" of modern life, spoke of this brotherhood in his *Artificial Paradises* (1857), describing the profession in a way that was as useful for a professional rubbish collector as it was for a poet: "Everything that the capital discards, everything it loses, everything it wastes and tramples underfoot, he catalogues and collects. He collects the rubbish which, thrown up by the industrial divinities, will become objects of value and pleasure".

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the activity ceased to be profitable thanks to the advances in industry, and the rag-and-bone man became a marginal figure, on the borderline of begging and the bohemian lifestyle, on the verge of extinction. This is how Eugène Atget and Marianne Breslauer portrayed them in Paris, and how Georges Lacombe filmed them.

Figuratively speaking, it could be said that the task of rescuing the useless, something the rag-and-bone man had ceased to do in the early twentieth century, symbolically shifted into the territory of Art, when the avant-gardists of the beginning of the century started to produce works of art with frayed fabrics, cardboard and torn labels, giving a second life, allegorically speaking, to forgotten things. As if, in modern times, waste had no future left but a poetic one.

↵ 3. Marianne Breslauer (1909-2001)
Chiffonnière à Paris (Rag-and-bone woman in Paris). 1929



↵ 4. André Papillon (1910-1986)
La misère (Misery). 1935



IN THE STUDIO

5. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
De la guerre au Sénat. 1921



It all began with a piece of oilcloth. We owe the first gesture of placing a real object on canvas or in a drawing to the Cubists, who, in their experiments, invented one of the most daring practices – the collage – made up of loose fragments, preserved in all their humility and crudity. Here begins the long history of the revaluation of waste – a history that continues today, in the art of the twenty-first century, more active than ever.

This exhibition traces the first decades of this plastic and conceptual discovery. From 1910 to the late 1940s, Cubism, the Dada group, the Surrealist painters and photographers, the Russian Constructivists, the Abstractionists and Informalists turned newspaper clippings, string, sacks, bus tickets, pebbles, broken wire and old wood into the heroes of their art. It was an exercise in defending the beauty of the precarious and the useless, the imagination of banal things, in short, of the transition from idealism to rubbish and things thrown away on the ground and in the dirt.

This “call of the street”, which was also a response to the political and social events of a turbulent Europe, set them on fire. Picasso, who nourished his playful spirit through dialogue with the inanimate things piled up in his workshops, turned collage into a way of seeing the world, and thus established a realism that was indisputable but unseen. The purpose of the Dadaists responded to a different concern. Kurt Schwitters, for example, known among his German colleagues as “the metaphysical dustbin of Hannover”, because of his habit of going around the city picking up rubbish, set out to “document” the moral misery of Germany defeated.

The versatility of the object, moreover, saved sculpture from discredit, and in Spain, artists as different as Leandre Cristòfol, Manuel Àngeles Ortiz, Esteban Vicente and Angel Ferrant straddle the border between the "thing" and the "statue", by assembling planks and light switches, pebbles and roots, wood and nails, always in a language of the provisional and the fragile, revealing their sense of playfulness, their love of the useless, their poetic gaze and their tenderness towards matter.

↯ 6. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
Études d'après autres artistes (Studies based on other artists). 1916



↯ 7. Àngel Ferrant (1890-1981)
Ave cabria. 1945



↯ 8. Esteban Vicente (1903-2001)
Untitled (Divertimento). 1968-97



↴ 9. Joan Miró (1893-1983)
Pintura-objeto (Painting-object), 1960



↴ 10. Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948)
He Goods, 1944



IN THE LABORATORY

↙ 11. Eli Lotar (1905-1969)
Aux Abattoirs de La Villette (At the abattoir in La Villette). 1929



The tumultuous presence of objects in art reached its moment of splendour in the 1930s, strongly encouraged by Dalí, Breton and their Surrealist friends, who were devoted to the passionate and fortuitous encounter of all kinds of things in flea markets and bazaars.

It was photography that was the ideal medium for capturing the uniqueness and rarity of ordinary things; this was somewhat paradoxical, since it seems a priori to be the art of the real. "Beauty", said Breton, "can be convulsive or not". It is this form of beauty that Man Ray, Brassai, Cahun and Eli Lotar went in search of with their cameras, using light and chemistry in their laboratories to explore the photographic possibilities of things right to the limit, in a "cosological" wave that also reached the Bauhaus photographers and American documentary filmmakers.

Photography thus became a higher power of understanding. By means of unusual framing, manipulations of the focal length, abnormal compositions and rarefying filters, they deformed objects and enshrouded them in a spectral, phantasmagoric atmosphere. Bread, a glove, a calf's hoof, a bicycle seat and toothpaste are subjected to an intense gaze, which abducts them from the continuum of reality and isolates them; they are seen one by one in their pure individuality. They lose their natural identity, become unfamiliar and attain an extraordinary depth, which does not fail to produce a disquieting unease.

- ↯ 12. Anonymous, 1905-1910
Palais Idéal de J. Ferdinand Cheval (Ideal Palace of J. Ferdinand Cheval).
 1879-1912



- ↯ 13. Aho & Soldan (Heikki Aho (1895-1961) and Björn Soldan (1902-1953))
Sans titre [Détritus] Nameless [Détritus]. ca. 1930



- ↯ 14. Walker Evans (1930-1975)
Stamped Tin Relic. 1929



- ↯ 15. Claude Cahun (1894-1954)
Objet, mannequin poisson scie (Object, mannequin, swordfish). ca. 1935



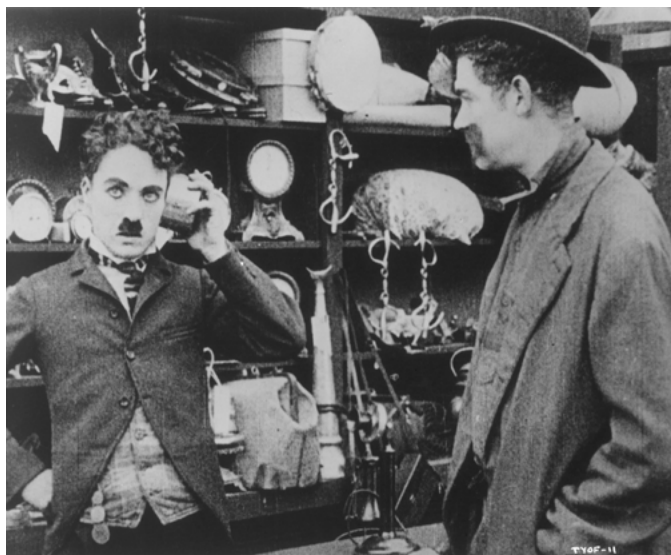
ON THE SET

In their own way, the great comedians of the silent era were acutely aware of their time and created a visual universe that was akin, in its background, to the aesthetic and thematic interests of the European avant-garde, which, in turn, fell in love with this new world. The best filmmakers like Charles Chaplin and Buster Keaton endowed the language of cinema with a radically modern inventiveness: there is in them a little cubist composition, a lot of Dadaist absurdity, some neo-plastic lightness, a touch of machinism, a hymn to social marginality and a great deal of urban poetry. And there is, in a deeply outstanding way, an intense and delirious relationship with things.

Two short films illustrate how they place the spotlight on the most anodyne inanimate objects, such as, for example, the alarm clock scene in *The Pawnshop*, in which Chaplin dismantles and destroys the clock, unperturbed and systematically, for several minutes. Keaton invents a home for the stars of *The Scarecrow*, a model of mechanisation, thrift and functionality, where each object can be used for several different purposes at the same time, in an anticipatory and hilarious model of the circular economy.

It was a personal stamp to which each one lent his own focus: in the midst of a frenetic pace and a millimetric sense of detail, inert things become dynamic, disarticulated, insubordinate or spoiled. It was a way of projecting onto this disobedience of objects their own personal resistance to considering reality as an obligation they should submit to.

↙ 16. Charles Chaplin, (1889 - 1977)
The Pawnshop. Clock scene. 1916



A BAROQUE EXCURSUS. IN THE WORKSHOP

The revolution of useless objects and materials that the plastic arts underwent in the early decades of the twentieth century was an unprecedented novelty, as it responded to an aesthetic programme that aspired to complicate acquired ideas about the representation of the real and to subvert art's relationship with the world. In its "literal" dimension, however, in the broadening of limits that involved bringing unusual and non-artistic materials into art, we can already find similar practices three hundred years earlier, in the "poly-material revolution" carried out by the sculptors of the Spanish Baroque, who, also in search of "the-more-real-real", made use of an early form of assemblage, with a total lack of prejudice against the preceding codes, which revolutionised the imagination and technique of the most popular devotional art.

By incorporating everyday materials with great craftsmanship and solid training, they sought to achieve a verismo that should be understood in the context of Spanish Catholicism, which was very insistent on the need to foster prayer and piety in the faithful by creating an atmosphere in which the boundary between the real and the supernatural was blurred. Glass spheres, ropes, antlers, cork, leather, hair and cloth were glued, nailed or embedded in the wood with discretion and efficiency. The key figure in this revolution was Gregorio Fernández, whose use of organic and mineral elements was followed by Pedro de Mena and other great Andalusian sculptors.

↴ 17. Gregorio Fernández (1576-1636)
Reclining Christ. ca.1627



Seeing these Baroque artists in the light of avant-garde "immoderation" and looking at modern creators in dialogue with a distant tradition – which they never ceased to admire – is the best way to understand the artistic challenges that, each in their own way, they faced in their respective times and their commitment to their present. It also allows us to understand different historical ways of conceiving the depiction of "the real" and the battles that artists from different periods have fought in its defence. Finally, it is of particular interest to the National Sculpture Museum as it brings out a "transhistorical" re-reading of its collections and broadens the understanding of the art of sculpture, which is based on a profoundly complex foundation.

↯ 17. Gregorio Fernández (1576-1636)
Reclining Christ. ca.1627



↯ 17. Gregorio Fernández (1576-1636)
Reclining Christ. ca.1627



Everything that the capital discards, everything it loses, everything it wastes and tramples underfoot, he catalogues and collects. He collects the rubbish which, thrown up by the industrial divinities, will become objects of value and pleasure.

**CHARLES BAUDELAIRE,
“ON WINE AND HASHISH” (1851)**

1. Eugène Atget (1857-1927)
Porte d'Asnières, cité Trébert : chiffonnier (17e arrondissement).
Série "Paris pittoresque", 2e série (*Gate of Asnières, Trébert City: rag-and-bone man, 17th district. "Pictoresque Paris", 2nd series*) 1913.
Positive photograph on albuminate paper, from a gelatine-bromide glass negative, undated. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, (BnF), Paris [exhibition copy] (C) BnF, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / image BnF
2. Georges Lacombe (1902-1990)
La zone. Au pays des chiffonniers (The zone. In the country of rag-and-bone men). 1928. Documentary. ©Les Documents cinématographiques, Paris
3. Marianne Breslauer (1909-2001)
Chiffonnière à Paris (Rag-and-bone woman in Paris). 1929. Silver gelatin print. 17,9 x 23,9 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne - Centre de création industrielle, Paris. (C) Pompidou Centre, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migeatón
4. André Papillon (1910-1986)
La misère (Misery). 1935. Silver gelatin print. Pompidou Centre - Musée national d'art moderne - Centre de création industrielle, Paris. (C) Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / image Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI
5. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
De la guerre au Sénat. 1921. Collage, gouache and ink on cardboard. 39 x 29 cm. Signed and dedicated "Picasso / à / Jean Cocteau" (lower centre) Abelló Collection, Madrid. © Imagen: Joaquín Cortés. © Sucesión Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023
6. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
Études d'après autres artistes (Studies based on other artists). 1916. Pencil on wooden matchboxes. 5,7 x 3,7 cm c/ u aprox. Abelló Collection, Madrid. © Imagen: Joaquín Cortés. © Sucesión Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023
7. Ángel Ferrant (1890-1981)
Ave cabria. 1945. Stones, shells and wood. Contemporary Art Collection Association. Patio Herreriano Museum, Valladolid. Archivo Fotográfico. Asociación Colección Arte Contemporáneo- Museo Patio Herreriano, Valladolid
8. Esteban Vicente (1903-2001)
Untitled (Divertimento). 1968-97. Painted wood, painted paper, wire and nail. 23 x 22 x 6 cm. Esteban Vicente Contemporary Art Museum, Segovia
9. Joan Miró (1893-1983)
Pintura-objeto (Painting-object). 1960. Oil on canvas attached to paper and wood with nails and staples. 89 x 82 x 19 cm. Joan Miró Foundation, Barcelona © Successió Miró 2022
10. Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948)
He Goods. 1944. Collage on paper. 71 x 55,2 x 3 cm. IVAM, Institute of Modern Art of Valencia, Regional Government
11. Eli Lotar (1905-1969)
Aux Abattoirs de La Villette (At the abattoir in La Villette). 1929. Silver gelatin print. Pompidou Centre - Musée national d'art moderne - Centre de création industrielle, Paris. (C) Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Jacques Faujour
12. Anonymous, 1905-1910
Palais Idéal de J. Ferdinand Cheval (Ideal Palace of J. Ferdinand Cheval). 1879-1912. Silver gelatin print. Palais idéal - Mémoire de la Drôme Collection
13. Aho & Soldan (Heikki Aho (1895-1961) y Björn Soldan (1902-1953))
Sans titre [Détritus] Nameless [Détritus]. ca. 1930. Silver gelatin print. 10,1 x 13,3 cm. Pompidou Centre - Musée national d'art moderne - Centre de création industrielle, Paris. (C) Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migeat
14. Walker Evans (1930-1975)
Stamped Tin Relic. 1929. Silver gelatin print. Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2023 Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence
15. Claude Cahun (1894-1954)
Objet, mannequin poisson scie (Object, mannequin, swordfish). ca. 1935. Silver gelatin print. 18 x 13 cm. Ordóñez-Falcón COFF Photography Collection. TEA Tenerife Art Space. Regional Government of Tenerife
16. Charles Chaplin, (1889 - 1977)
The Pawnshop. Clock scene. 1916. Short film
17. Gregorio Fernández (1576-1636)
Reclining Christ. ca.1627 . Polychrome wood, horn, glass, cork and ivory. 43x190x173 cm. Professed House of the Society of Jesus, Madrid. On loan from the Prado Museum

EXHIBITION

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This temporary exhibition has been conceived and produced in accordance with criteria of environmental sustainability, such as flexibility and adaptability, recyclability, provenance, harmlessness, efficiency and reduction.

The mayfly construction is highly ecological for the following reasons: the woodwork of the dividing walls has been reused, the paint on the walls is water-based to avoid solvents containing heavy metals, the newly produced elements are made of wood fibre with an FSC label certifying good forest management, the finishing of the wooden furniture is harmless, which makes it easy to recycle, the graphic production has avoided PVC, in such a way that texts and posters have been printed directly onto the recycled wood surface, the lighting is reused and only LED sources are used, which means low consumption and high efficiency, the production company is based near the museum, which reduces transport and CO2 emissions to a minimum, and finally, the materials chosen have all been manufactured locally.

Everyone taking part has cooperated in the application of these good ecological practices in the different phases of the exhibition: design, production, assembly, exhibition, dismantling and reuse, the latter being understood as an inherent stage of the project.

The printed catalogue consists of paper certified as coming from sustainable forest management, with a certified chain of custody (FSC system).

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