

---

## Marcel Lods, or: Modernity in Action

**Pierre Chabard**

Translator: Simon Pleasance

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/106>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.106

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

**Publisher**

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 April 2010

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

**Electronic reference**

Pierre Chabard, « Marcel Lods, or: Modernity in Action », *Critique d'art* [Online], 35 | Printemps 2010, Online since 08 March 2011, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/106> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.106

---

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

---

# Marcel Lods, or: Modernity in Action

Pierre Chabard

Translation : Simon Pleasance

---

## REFERENCES

Uyttenhove, Pieter. *Marcel Lods: action, architecture, histoire*, Lagrasse: Verdier, 2009, (Art et architecture)

- 1 The book just published by Pieter Uyttenhove with Verdier is nothing less than a comprehensive survey devoted to the French architect Marcel Lods. Their two names simply written on the spotless white cover of this lavish volume indicate the close intellectual struggle that brought them together for the duration of a lengthy dissertation at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales—an institution itself partly housed in the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, designed and built by Marcel Lods between 1959 and 1970. This unusually far-reaching doctoral research, supervised by Hubert Damisch and filling more than a thousand pages<sup>1</sup>, and based on a considerable archival corpus, was submitted in 1999. The said corpus includes, in particular, Lods's voluminous archives, which Pieter Uyttenhove helped to have assigned to the Académie d'architecture, and which he has patiently inventoried<sup>2</sup>.
- 2 As a contemporary of Le Corbusier, and a member of the Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne [CIAM], Marcel Lods (born in Paris on 16 August 1891, died in Paris in 1978) was a major figure in French and international "modern architecture" circles from the 1920s on. A committed advocate and practitioner of industrially prefabricated architectural components, he designed and co-designed some of the famous buildings which stake out the history of 20th century architecture : the controversial Cité de la Muette at Drancy (1932-35), the Ecole de plein air in Suresnes (1931-35), the Maison du Peuple and the covered market in Clichy (1935-39), the M.S.H. in Paris, and one or two large post-war complexes (La Zone Verte at Sotteville-lès-Rouen (1945-56) ; the Grandes

Terres at Mary (1952-60), etc. This dashing and athletic figure, who wrote many committed articles in specialized magazines, had an abiding interest in aeronautics and photography, and was informed by an unflagging faith in progress and technical innovation; as such, he tallied with the archetype of the modern architect, not to say “Modern Hero”.

- 3 This brief overview, encompassing the main commonplaces about Lods, the way a dictionary entry might, merely backs up a conventional narrative which Uyttenhove’s book strives, conversely, to challenge, and systematically deconstruct. The author’s work, which is *a priori* monographic, sidesteps most of the genre’s pitfalls. Breaking with an approach which, in the tradition of a certain art history, would remain focused on “the œuvre”, he also refuses to focus his research exclusively on the man, as in the great hagiographies of the “pioneers” of Modernity. Between these two horizons, between architecture as a collection of stable and definitive objects and the architect as a total biographical entity, the historian has blazed an in-between trail whereby he tries to grasp what circulates from one to the other, within a particular time-frame which is one of action. It is actually the concept of “action”, considerably worked by 20th century philosophy, from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Hannah Arendt by way of Henri Bergson, which articulates the lines of thinking and organizes the book: architecture as action, architect as actor, rather than author. In assuming the theatrical metaphor, this historiographical system makes it possible not only to reinstate the actual time-frame of architecture, from drawing to construction, but also to resituate the architect in the collective scenes of his work (traversed by the figures of Eugène Beaudouin, Jean Prouvé, Vladimir Bodiansky, Henri Sellier, and others); a (hi)story, when all is said and done, which “deals with a man and only talks about his day and age insofar as this helps to shed light upon him.”<sup>3</sup>
- 4 In the manner of Jacques Le Goff who, in his biography of Saint-Louis, systematically resituated the monarch within the specific circumstances of his reign, Pieter Uyttenhove has constructed his (hi)story of Marcel Lods in a thematic way. The book is divided into seven chapters, each one built around an example of architectural action: “Reason”, a mapping of Lods’s thinking in the intellectual, historical and philosophical arena of Modernity; “Series”, involving notably his pioneering prefabrication activities, his rationalization of construction sites, and his quest for new constructive standards for a finally totally industrialized architecture; “Plan”, as a bastion against the disorder of the world, on every scale—a chapter where we find, in particular, the urban and territorial vision of this aviation enthusiast, who took to the air almost daily like some Daedalus looking down on the labyrinths of chaotic metropolises; “Frame” as a “regulatory device” governing the action of the architect as well as the lives of people, a chapter where, *inter alia*, Lods’s political ambiguity is subtly analyzed, lying as it does somewhere between liberal model and socialist ideal; “Momentum”, where a parallel is made between the image of Lods in his speeding machines and that of the architect as “pilot” of the multi-disciplinary teams with whom he cannily surrounded himself to undertake his projects; “Obstacle”, the inseparable flipside of Modernity, whose different forms (adversity, shortcoming, catastrophe) help us to observe Lods in the various critical situations of his life; and lastly “Scene”, the most historiographical chapter in which Pieter Uyttenhove very subtly re-injects a biographical dimension, but askance, letting both Lods himself speak as well as those, supporters and detractors alike, who helped to write his (hi)story, and his legend.

- 5 The book is illustrated mainly with the architect's own amazing photographs, and comes with a rich bibliography, a repertory of Lods's projects and completed works, and a helpful index. In determinedly breaking with the chronological form, it contributes, in the architectural field, to making the shift from a "narrative (hi)story" to a "problem (hi)story"<sup>4</sup>. Written by a historian who is first and foremost an architect, this book raises from within issues involving architectural "action", like "an experimental laboratory, an ignition of the relation between the subject and the modern world." (p. 414).
- 

## NOTES

1. Uyttenhove, Pieter. *Marcel Lods (1891-1978): une architecture de l'action*, Paris: History Dissertation/ EHESS, 1999, 5 volumes
2. Cf. Uyttenhove, Pieter. "Guide du fonds Marcel Lods", typescript, Paris: Académie d'architecture, 1989; *Catalogue des collections*, vol. II: 1890-1970, Paris: Académie d'architecture, 1997 (pp. 29-42 and 249-268); *Archives d'architectes: état des fonds, XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris: Direction des Archives de France; Centre d'archives de l'Ifa; Documentation française, 1996
3. Le Goff, Jacques. *Saint-Louis*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996, p. 13
4. Cf. Furet, François. "De l'histoire-récit à l'histoire-problème" (1975), in *L'Atelier de l'histoire*, Paris: Flammarion, 1982, pp. 73-90