

↳ RETURN
POLICY

17TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA
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LAIDA
AGUIRRE

Architecture¹² as² Measure⁷
Ölçü⁴ Olarak⁶ Mimarlık⁸

The image shows a detailed Return Material Authorization Form (RMA) with multiple sections and tables. The form is titled "Return Material Authorization Form" and contains instructions, notes, and a table for item tracking. The table has columns for "Model or Type", "Serial Number", "Description of the Problem", "Out of Box Failure? Y/N", "Warranty Y or N", and "Findings". There are also sections for "Return" and "Logistics Dept" with various fields for dates and initials.

Image by the author.

At first, a return receipt... A 15/30/90 day conditional.
Then a questionnaire, a form.
A label, a shipment.
After return, an assessment.
A decision, then a refund.
Money or credit, a "Return Material Authorization Form."

One mostly picks the first option on the form, or whatever the cursor lands on, really. To the question of why this item and that item are being returned, say no damage. The questionnaire brings about a common conclusion: the worth of one's time. To read through the return options and pick the correct one—literally nobody has time for this.

Return policies are a microcosm of material circulation, embodying multiple capitalist contradictions. These policies produce a temporary relationship to objects / a new timeline for material projects / a material dismissiveness / a reduced need for ownership / a new form of library / punk-ish access to free temporary materials / pre-calculated and already insured commercial loss / actual profit-drivers (those that return the most also buy the most) / small-scale preservation contract / techniques for value extraction and redistribution for no-budget-having-projects / cycles of waste. All of that. Returns are normal.

Where the return policies fall along these continuums depends on reverse logistics, an industry's ability to receive, sort, and assess the materials returned. This process decides whether an object goes back to the shelf, is sent to liquidation, or goes to waste. Contractual and dry, yet highly subjective and requiring human intervention, this handling of returns has resisted automation and streamlining. Each object presents a different post-consumer condition—assessing this requires a discerning eye. It's less industry standard and more reverse craft. A clumsy temporary deal.

About the author

Laida Aguirre is an architectural designer and director of stock-a-studio. Interested in the circulation of materials and commodities, their research focuses on the way our built environment is affected by the politics of aesthetics, logistics, and media. Laida is currently an assistant professor of architecture at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning.