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PAVILLON DE L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU: A 21st Century Show Home

Exhibition Essay by Carson Chan

PAVILLON DE L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU: A 21st-Century Show Home, the exhibition curated by Felix Burrichter, is designed as a home furnishing show in homage to Le Corbusier's seminal temporary pavilion of the same name which the Swiss-born architect designed for the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratif in Paris. But the pavilion's 2015 iteration in New York also harks to another significant moment in the history of modern architecture: Sigfried Giedion's book, *Mechanization Takes Command*, a 723-page effort to assemble what the architecture historian called "the anonymous history" of the time. Beyond the museums, villas, and grand urban plans that by the early mid-20th century had become emblematic of a modern architecture, Giedion was concerned with the chairs, tables, beds, bathtubs, and kitchens – the objects that more immediately organized quotidian life and increasingly shaped the way that humans engaged with the world.

Though the mechanization of the household since the industrial revolution in the mid-19th century signaled the advent of a "serventless" gentry in Europe – and eventually that of democracy – critically, for Giedion, the mechanization of objects and systems that surround us indicated a broader, more essential shift in the manner humans live. As assembly lines replaced artisans, and as pastures made way for feedlots, the world we live in and the world we imagine begin to align. "Mechanization is the outcome of a mechanistic conception of the world," Giedion observes. In this way, we inhabit and perpetuate a cycle. The industrial revolution and the subsequent increasing mechanization of daily lives was as much an entry into modes of efficiency, expediency, and excess as it was cycling machine logic into human processes. Neither good nor bad, for Giedion, "mechanization is an agent, like water, fire, light. It is blind and without direction of its own." In scrutinizing the machines around us, we get to glean the disposition of the self-perpetuating systems of our own creation through which our "anonymous history" becomes individually authored and subjectively hewn.

The 2015 version of the *PAVILLON DE L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU*, designed by architect and artist Shawn Maximo, is essentially conceived as a home-show with as much affinity to *Die Wohnung unserer Zeit* (1931) – an exhibition of full-scale houses in Berlin organized by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe – as with contemporary IKEA showrooms. It brings into play the unsettling thought that the things sharing our intimacies and the objects that tell of our taste and self-image, are often things that entered our home as merchandise, retailed from an ever expanding list of options. Indeed, networked infrastructures of commerce, communication, and security pervade contemporary living. With Swiss Institute's interior walls painted "video" paint, the exhibition design transforms Swiss Institute into a giant "green screen," and in so doing, introduces metaphors of transmission, tele-presence, and surveillance into the home. In each of the six rooms – living, dining, study, kitchen, bedroom, and an outdoor patio – in lieu of framed artwork are flat screen monitors showing nearby furnishings and visitors transported – chroma-keyed – into other places digitally, from a desert scenes to a panic room-like

bunker-meets-aquarium interiors. If home shows have traditionally offered new ways to imagine our sense of home in the domestic realm, the exhibition at Swiss Institute seems to say: to be somewhere is to be somewhere else; to be inside is to be outside; to be at home is to be at work.

In this household scenario of 24-hour self-observation and digital transportation, the most private places can also become the most public. In a recent essay, architecture scholar Beatriz Colomina argues that “the city has moved into the bed,” citing a 2012 report from the *Wall Street Journal* which claimed that eighty percent of young New York City professionals regularly worked from the place usually designated for nighttime sleeping. As distinctions between work and play erode and a machine logic of what historian Jonathan Crary calls “24/7 capitalism” sets in, so too do the boundaries of our homes dissipate. “Networked electronic technologies have removed any limit to what can be done in bed,” Colomina continues and, as if relegating us to the isolating expanses of a digital desert, she concludes that, “new media turns us all into inmates, constantly under surveillance, even as we celebrate endless connectivity.”

Though none of the objects in Swiss Institute’s exhibition bear the interactive touchscreens or Internet connectivity one finds in the latest home appliances, all of them were produced through some sort of digital means. At the center of the exhibition is also a bed, a ritual place of rest where our bodily needs are confronted with the contemporary need to be always on. Made from a grid of powder-coated cubic steel, the canopy bed has the spatial compartment of Sol LeWitt’s boxes or Superstudio’s *Continuous Monument* – a sense that space and those who occupy it flow through each other in structured yet unimpeded ways, an effect amplified by the gridded canopy’s mirrored ceiling. Here, nature and artifice, individuals and their surroundings, are in communion in ways that seem to bypass the challenges raised by Colomina and Crary. In any case, for many environmental philosophers today, the nature and artifice duality is itself artificial and not particularly useful for forging ways forward. What surrounds us, be it mechanized objects or trees, valleys, and sunsets, exist equally within what we call our environment. Even without a green-screen, the great outdoors *are* the great indoors. Both Giedion’s study of furnishings as well as the one created by Burrichter and now on display in *PAVILLON DE L’ESPRIT NOUVEAU* at Swiss Institute point to the fact that we constantly need to reassess the way we engage with what surrounds us. As our environment changes, so too does the anonymous history need to be rewritten. “We must establish a new balance between the individual and collective spheres,” Giedion exhorts at the end of *Mechanization Takes Command*. “There is no static equilibrium between man and his environment, between inner and outer reality.” In other words, what we design around us are attempts to model larger, even global, systems. In that sense, according to Giedion, Le Corbusier’s original pavilion design “was not merely [the architect’s] protest” against design as decoration. The components of its interior – each table, vase, chair, or carpet – were words that could recombine into new sentences. Conceived as a whole, “it was at the Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau...that one first saw [the interplay of heterogeneous elements] clearly and consistently expressed.” And as if bestowing to furniture and household items a larger, connected sense of purpose, Giedion concludes that “it is time that we become human again and let the human scale rule over all our ventures.”

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