



Association of Collegiate
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JAE REVIEWS

Exhibition Review: Environments and Counter-Environments

By Esra Akcan



Figure 1. Marco Zanuso and

Richard Sapper, *Untitled environment*, 1972. Photograph by Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, courtesy of Emilio Ambasz.

Environments and Counter Environments. "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," MoMA, 1972, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts

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Environments and Counter-Environments, a stimulating show at the Graham Foundation in Chicago (September 18-December 14, 2013), returns analytically to another exhibition that took place at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1972, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, directed by Emilio Ambasz. [\[1\]](#)

Juxtaposing the two concepts in the two exhibition titles would reveal the current curators' interest in the original show: the domestic landscape and the environment. While the 1972 MoMA exhibit on the domestic was divided into two parts, named as the "objects" and the "environments", the 2013 Graham show, curated by Peter Lang, Luca Molinari and Mark Wasiuta, puts forward the continuing relevance of the architects who designed the "environments" that were specifically commissioned for the 1972 revue. In Ambasz's terminology, the exhibited works from recent Italian design practice could be identified with three non-porous positions that he outlined in his Introduction: "the conformist" position of those who did not question the *status quo* but merely explored aesthetic quality in design that they defined as an autonomous activity; "the reformist" stance of those who adopted rhetorical modes and

played with semantic operations or sociocultural and aesthetic references, but without any ambition for social transformation or ability to cope with the contradictions they found themselves in; and finally, “the contestatory” ones, the favorites of the Graham curators and arguably also Ambasz, who sought for political action, postulation and revolutionary design. The twelve designers of the “environments” belonged to the latter category by virtue of their attitude of contestation against main trends. While some in this category embraced counter-design in the hopes of bringing “structural changes to the society” before design could meaningfully engage the human world, others refused to withdraw totally from the current socio-industrial system. Rather than “passive abstention” they pursued strategies of “active critical participation,” again in Ambasz’s words. [2]

The current curators, then, bring forward the contestatory environments as worthy of another show. Far from recreating these environments in the gallery, they excavate archival documents, drawings, collages, models, photographs of the original exhibit, and movies that accompanied each environment at the MoMA viewing. Equally significant are the associated public events with the curators, Ambasz, and the rare opportunity with 9999’s Carlo Calдини who in his lecture brought in original materials that could as well have been sealed off in the exhibition stands, and passed them around giving all in the audience the delight of being the curious researcher in the archive.

Based on the lectures by Lang, Molinari, and Wasiuta at the Graham Foundation, as well as a discussion session at the Art History Department of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), it is possible to conclude that the three curators of the current exhibit have different and complementary foci of interest: While Lang and Molinari analyze the 1972 show in relation to the Italian radicals in the 1970s and the country’s architectural history in general, Wasiuta is drawn to its making and influences in the context of the curatorial and architectural discourse in the United States. Ambasz adopted much of the terminology and interdisciplinary interest in environmental design in the US at the time, as evident at Berkeley University where architecture was repositioned as environmental design to secure its engagement with social sciences, or his own Universitas project (a new university of design) at MoMA that brought in intellectuals invested in behavioral psychology, systems theory, communication sciences and semiotics, including such names as Umberto Eco, Henri Lefebvre, Manuel Castells, Christopher Alexander, and Anatol Rapoport. [3] And yet, the choice of Italian design to inject new lifeblood into the contemporary American discussions on the environment must have been far from coincidental. Ambasz must have seen Italy as the place where he could find his ideal designers who engaged with political issues and radical action. Not surprisingly, his own texts emphasized the possibility of the users to relate to the environment in a contestatory mode. While objects exerted power over the users by turning them into passive receptors, environments could mobilize participation and political action.



Figure 2. Mario Bellini, Kar-a-Sutra, 1972. © Valerio Castelli, courtesy of Mario Bellini Architects. Environments and Counter Environments. "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," MoMA, 1972, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts

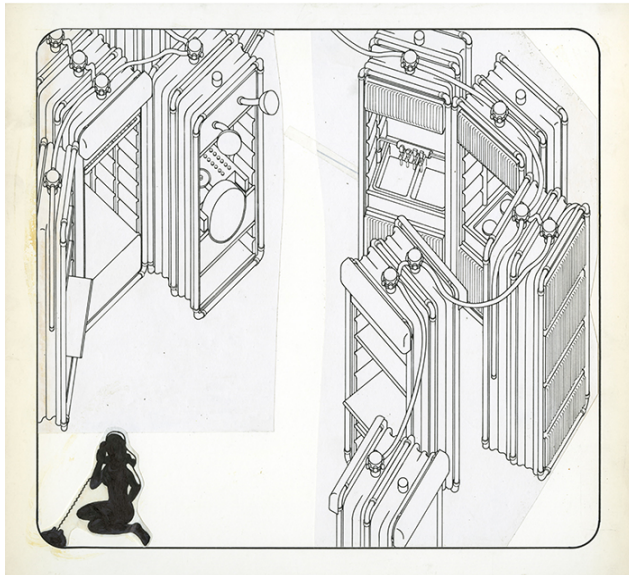


Figure 3. Ettore Sottsass Jr., Untitled environment for "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," 1972. Courtesy of CSAC, Università di Parma. Environments and Counter Environments. "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," MoMA, 1972, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts

An equally layered concept as the "environment" is the "domestic landscape." One of the most original contributions of the MoMA show is the fact that Ambasz construed the domestic space as a site of contestation, while it is usually the street which is given such a role. Ambasz's choice of domesticity as the sphere of revolutionary action, like it was in the 1920s, is further to be noted in the context of the contemporary discussions which focused on architecture's relation to the urban condition, whether through Manfredo Tafuri's article "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," Aldo Rossi's book *Architecture of the City in Italy*, or Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown's research that would be published as *Learning from Las Vegas* in the US. The starting point of *Italy: The New Domestic*

Landscape, on the other hand, was the re-imagination of domesticity—a concept traditionally associated with the indoors, with privacy and intimacy-- as a landscape, as a politically engaging social environment. Consequently, many designs in the exhibition abandoned the conventionally domestic notion of stability in favor of movable and nomadic compact units, including Alberto Rosselli's Mobile House, Marco Zanuso and Richard Sapper's transportable habitation (Figure 1), and Mario Bellini's Kar-a-Sutra, a livable car (Figure 2). Others exemplified multifunctional and infinitely adaptable furniture such as Joe Colombo's Total Furnishing Unit, and Ettore Sottsass's modular containers (Figure 3). Many designers proposed to dissolve the private sphere in the name of the public, the inside for the sake of the outside, the industrial in the interest of the natural: Superstudio imagined a Rousseauian domestic landscape that extended to infinity with no private secret lives, a life without objects, without property (Figure 4, 5); Gaetano Pesce commented on the current status of design by depicting the anxious and isolated life in a subterranean city sealed off from the outside (Figure 6); Group 9999, one of the two winners of the Competition for Young Designers, envisioned an "eco-survival device" composed of a vegetable garden, water and an air bed that suspended over vast green land (Figure 7); Archizoom made a call for dreaming of the outside, even when one was trapped inside the capsule of their boxy installation (Figure 8). Many hence anticipated the possibilities and demises of our network society where we are connected to the outside and the world at large, even when we are inside our homes, in front of computers. There were a few missed opportunities for imagining domestic sphere as a politically engaged environment. With the exception of Gruppo Strum who proposed photo-stories on the topic (Figure 9), there was no commentary on public/working-class housing or affordable materials to build for the whole society. This notable silence on the harsh reality confirms critics' doubts like those of Manfredo Tafuri whose catalog essay reiterated the impossibility of escaping consumerism and warned about the naïveté of design that did not confront the actual base of production and labor. Unless one could be satisfied with Gae Aulenti's inclusion as one of the twelve designers (Figure 10), a similar question can be raised about the lack of directly feminist issues in a sphere traditionally associated with women—a pertinent topic in New York at the time.

Both exhibits are also powered by the movies that were specifically filmed for MoMA in association with each environment. Ambasz himself chose this medium to introduce the show in an extremely evocative setting that staged the design objects in the Galleria of Milan—also on view at the Graham Foundation on a big screen (Figure 11). These movies created an additional, final twist on the sociopolitical difficulties and dilemmas that confined the designers. The divide that differentiated the critically optimist designers of environments and the non-compromising tone of the makers of counter-environments was mirrored and complicated in the movies. Some movies are self-explanatory, such as the one by Rosselli depicting a happy day in the Mobile House which is driven by a truck to a romantic landscape and whose flexible, extendable surfaces morph into a living room, a bedroom, and a portico as the narrative moves on. Other movies are self-questioning, such as Bellini's film that casts car crashes to introduce the design of a car as a livable environment; or Superstudio's ambiguously ironic film that ends with the dis/utopia of a life where individuals are so satisfied and serene that all they hear is the sound of the blood running in their ears; or most notably, Sottsass' movie that tells the story of a woman trapped in a life using his own modular, flexible, infinitely re-assemblable furniture (see figure 3).

Above all, an exhibition about another exhibition creates a productive site for discussion both in the form of a physical display, and of accompanying lectures, discussion sessions and publications. As the number and power of architectural exhibitions grow by day, and as curatorial studies become a subfield in the discipline, *Environments and Counter Environments* at the Graham Foundation is a self-reflective exploration about its own medium's impact on architectural discourse. The show offers an unmatched opportunity not only to see firsthand some of the most inspiring images that captured the imagination

of generations, and watch the movies that had so far been unreachable, but also to think about the possible media of envisioning different futures.



Figure 4. Superstudio, Microevent/Microenvironment, 1972. Photograph by Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, courtesy of Emilio Ambasz. Environments and Counter Environments. "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," MoMA, 1972, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts

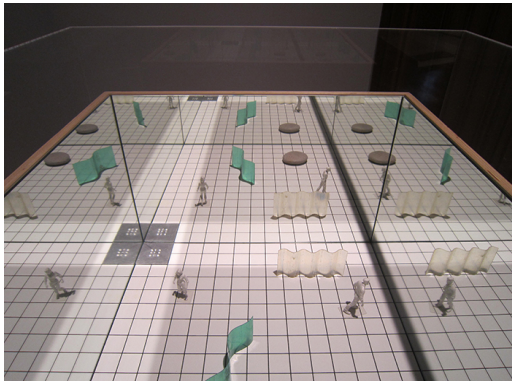


Figure 5. Superstudio, Model for Microevent/Microenvironment on view at the Graham Foundation. Photograph by Esra Akcan



Figure 6. Gaetano Pesce, Plan of "Project For An Underground City In The Age of Great Contaminations," environment, 1972. Courtesy of Gaetano Pesce Office. Environments and Counter Environments. "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," MoMA, 1972, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts



Figure 7. 9999, Bedroom for the Vegetable Garden House, 1972. Courtesy of 9999 Archive. Environments and Counter Environments. "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," MoMA, 1972, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts



Figure 8. Archizoom, "Gray Room" environment, 1972. Photograph by Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, courtesy of Emilio Ambasz. Environments and Counter Environments. "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," MoMA, 1972, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts



Figure 9. Gruppo Strum, Cover of Photo-story, "The Mediator City," 1972. Courtesy of Gruppo Strum. Environments and Counter Environments. "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," MoMA, 1972, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts

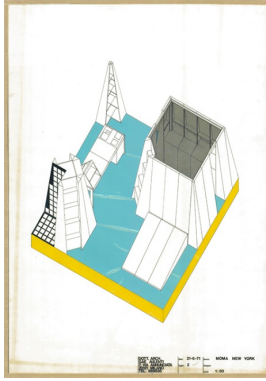


Figure 10. Gae Aulenti, Axonometric of "Three Elements," environment, 1972. Courtesy of Gae Aulenti Studio. *Environments and Counter Environments*. "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," MoMA, 1972, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts

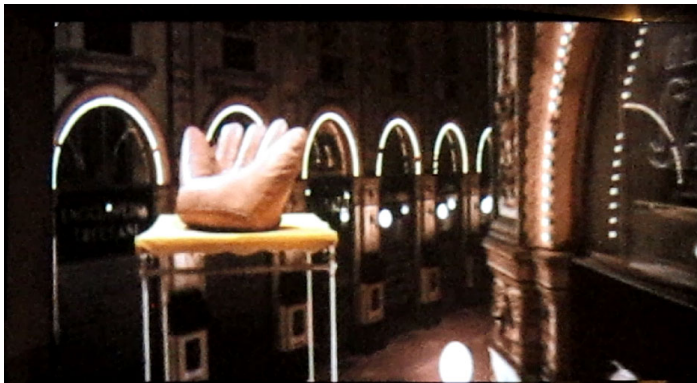


Figure 11. Emilio Ambasz. Movie still from the Introduction of "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," at MoMA, 1972. Now on view at the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts

[1] *Environments and Counter Environments* was originally produced at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. It travelled to the Swiss Architecture Museum (SAM), Basel; the Disseny Hub Barcelona (DHUB), Barcelona; and the Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm.

[2] Emilio Ambasz (ed.), *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape. Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*. Exhibition Catalogue. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972).

[3] Emilio Ambasz (director), *The Universitas Project. Solutions for a Post-Technological Society*. Proceedings of Universitas Project Symposium, MoMA, January 8-9, 1972 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006). Also see: Felicity Scott, *Architecture or Techno-utopia: Politics after Modernism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

Ackan, Esra. "Exhibition Review: Environments and Counter-Environments." *Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture*. (November 2013) [online]

<http://acsa-arch.org/acsa-press/journal-of-architectural-education/read-jae/read-jae/jae-reviews/jae-blog/2013/11/21/exhibition-review-environments-and-counter-environments>