

The Museum of Modern Art

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RELEASE NO. 48

ITALY: THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE

Counter Design as Postulation

Director: Emilio Ambasz

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Patron: Abet Print, with the participation of: Silcon, Moro

La Pietra operates on the premise that the designer's materials are not physical entities but communication bits. Rather than manipulating formally the elements which give meaning to our behavior, he is more interested in directly dealing with the production, transmission and feedback of meanings through available communication techniques. His criticism to the present communications structure is that, except the telephone and the rare case of a ham operator, all the communication equipment we have in the house are only one-way in direction. His "stand" is a didactic box, measuring 16' x 20', triangular in section, although the shape is not important. Dividing the box is a mesh screen; behind it are stylized present-day electrodomestic and cinema/photographic equipment. The mesh becomes a screen on which, by means of projections, the designer expounds his views.

Exhibition stand constructed of plastic laminated panels.

Audio-visual preparation in collaboration with Piero Castiglioni.

Photo credits: Castelli

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Statement by Ugo La Pietra

"The domestic cell: a microstructure inside the information and communication systems."

The proposal for the space designed on the occasion of the "new domestic landscape" exhibition is not intended to be one of the many contributions to the evolution of the "domestic cell" through particular environmental solutions, and it certainly is not an attempt to rediscover, in the invention of "new objects," the possibility of solving tricky social problems of which the domestic environment is one of the chief areas of expression.

The "objectual" reality has to be sought by analyzing a social and environmental situation in which alienated objects and persons interact in a form of mutual exploitation. The loss of reality of the objects corresponds to the moment in which they overcome their elementary message, becoming bearers of structural reality that can no longer be explained by a plain relation between labor force, purchase-power and value of use.

As soon as a process of accumulating culture grows up among the classes, the yardstick with which membership of one or the other class is measured becomes a manifestation of power as the ownership and possession of objects that are historically suited to this role. It is indeed in this respect that the reality of objects can be analyzed sociologically. The status symbol objects can in fact be either quite useless and overloaded with messages for a semantic operation dictated by consumer needs and hence the sheer expression of labor strength, or else by representing a true use value, they will be mediated by super-expression and will therefore be simulacra of the real object.

The formalizers -- the architects -- have played a pre-eminent role in this respect, at the service of that class which asked them for the decorum of propriety and which wanted an aesthetic fulfillment. Today the difficulties affecting the formalizers who dissent from these positions must in any case drive them toward a logical rejection of the utopia, where this utopia means an escape toward a reality that is not factual by accessory.

To deny the utopia means getting involved in the head-on collision with the logic of production. It means trying to find those forces within them that can be used to give some superstructural conformation in view of a structural transformation.

The chosen operative attitude is that of identifying the degrees of freedom still in existence within the "organized" social structure. The strategy to be maintained by the formalizer is that of picking out the forms corresponding to the subversive logic of the productivity-oriented system. Thus I decided to give this compound of forms and behaviors the name UNBALANCING SYSTEM.

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The political groups perform unbalancing operations in terms of political and economic order; the formalizers have to operate on environmental phenomena: namely, on the relations created by the presumed categories of person, background and object. It is thus necessary to single out strategies, providing a contribution, which is a disciplinary one, to the awareness of a phenomenon of behavioral and formal malaise.

Comprehension model A

"Immersion"

The immersions are an invitation to adopt an attitude of departure from reality to rediscover a sort of privacy, which is a form of separation and an instrument for verifying the scope for intervention through rupture elements that will shift the coded terms of tradition.

In this way a movement is set up, in which the free behavior of the individual makes the potential contained in spatial action significant.

While pushing for a certain behavior the containers define a space in which the individual person believes he has rediscovered an autonomous decisional environment. In reality, his having chosen to fit into this casing separates him from any interaction with the surrounding environment and makes him the object of a formal intention which he is powerless to act upon.

The result is a "crisis" between the desired isolation of the individual from the context and the aspiration to achieve an unbalanced inclusion in the system. But this very same ambiguousness, which is a clash between the aspiration to freedom and the limitation produced by each choice on that freedom, is presented as an "awareness" that a liberation from the social and psychological conditionings of the context passes through a personal immersion in a space that is offered as a point of critical and imaginative reflection on the context itself.

Fig. 1 : "Progressive flooding of a container" (metal container, with protective methacrylate cover).

In the wide case history of "objects" accumulated in the domestic landscape, the ones I maintain should take priority for analysis and new propositions for use (degrees of freedom) are the audio-visual information and communication objects.

At this particular historical moment I believe that the most distinctive elements capable of transforming and even overturning all of the formal principles, the acquired typologies and rites developed within the domestic space can be refound precisely in the use of these instrument-objects. This typology too comes under the category of decoration objects denoting a sort of fetishism, semantic redundancy and "social communications" and "authoritative communications" which we are accustomed to come across in the prefiguration of bourgeois models. We must therefore free ourselves from the object still perceived as a "message" whose characteristics can still make it referable to a specifically differentiated class of beneficiaries.

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Furthermore, the audio-visual devices which technology has been perfecting for some time now, guarantee that each one of us (in his own privacy) can communicate with the outside world, thereby enabling us to dilate our physical structure and extend the physical space we use and know (Fig. 2). Nevertheless the relation that occurs between the person and the external world is achieved more and more through information (processed by other people) which we all receive, or rather undergo, "without question."

We must therefore get rid of the mediation tools (that is to say, eliminate the filter set up by the instrument between us and reality); (comprehension model B) overcoming them and gearing one's mind and behavior to a subjective vision of reality if necessary, thereby eliminating all risk (beyond the naive technocratic dreams) that our society may become perfectly organized and managed solely by means of "instruments."

Comprehension model B

"The new perspective"

Through the making of this particular object my aim has been to point out the necessity, at this historical moment, of reposing the problem of a direct knowledge of reality (overcoming the "barrier" of the "instrument" seen as a connecting filter between us and reality).

In this case the object (recovered from history; see the "chamber for the perspective representation of landscape" used by 17th and 18th century landscape painters) has been reproduced without the 45°-tilted mirror and without the lens, which items represented the indispensable technical "filter" with which to switch from the real image to the fictional one, projected onto the horizontal plane (drawing plane). Once this filter is eliminated it is possible to see the landscape directly (to see reality).

Fig. 2 : The perspective chamber with instruments; mirror and lens;
the chamber without instruments: "the new perspective."

And, going beyond the "neo-Luddites," who destroy or utterly refuse the use of information and communication tools (Fig. 4), having identified them as the instruments of power and the symbol of the programmed capitalist society and a negation of man's freedom, my proposal is designed to express:

the will to use the means of information and communication, keeping them, however, "under control" (i.e. by not undergoing their presence either as "objects" or as "instruments"); destroying their "design" and assuming their evolution, only as regards their technical, mechanical and electronic features, using them furthermore in such a way as to overcome the "barrier" which these means set up between us and reality. (Fig. 5/6)

Comprehension model C

"Microenvironment"

The microenvironment within the exhibition is intended to stress the problem outlined hitherto, concerning the relation between the living cell and the urban structure through information and communication tools.

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Naturally, this unit, too, like all the design precipitations that I call "comprehension models," is to be considered not so much as a "solution to the problem" as a means of approach to an "awareness" of these problems as they crop up.

The domestic cell is symbolized through an elementary volume (triangular section) capable of opening and hence of placing the inside in contact with the outside. Inside this "model" a series of containers (at floor level) can be read, in which are hidden all of the communication and information tools. These containers can, however, also be opened, thereby making the instruments contained in them available and accessible.

Fig. 6 : Closed microenvironment, open microenvironment;
closed containers, open containers.

All this is expressed (in the project) through the concealment of the devices (Fig. 7). This concealment is not total (in that the containers emerge from the floor with writings indicating the positions of the instruments). In this way their presence can: on the one hand guarantee a "sense of security," and on the other demonstrate their availability for use (comprehension model C).

The domestic cell is thus considered also as a place in which (through the means of communication and information) information can be recovered and collected from outside (either directly or via connections). When they have been processed these data can be put back into circulation and then compared with others; this proposal aims to throw light on the elements required for a comprehension of the problem zones relating to the overcoming of communication systems that are "accepted blindfold," with a view to succeeding in bring about a direct participation and knowledge of the physical, behavioral and mental facts that develop within the urban tissue. (models D, E, F)

All this means loading the domestic cell with an indispensable role in the evolution of the "organized society." In this way the living nucleus assumes an extra role; it becomes a center for the collection, processing and communication of data -- a microstructure capable of interfering in the information system for a widening and multiplication of exchanges between persons and for the participation of everyone in the dynamics of communication.

Comprehension models D, E, F

"The domestic cell: microstructure within the communication and information systems"

These three models, expressed symbolically, represent the possibility of considering the private domestic structure as one of the numerous points in which information and communication are gathered, processed and then put into circulation.

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The first model expresses the possibility of situating particular "devices" (within the urban structure) capable of recording all the messages dispatched telephonically from the private units, and which can subsequently be listened to, as a progressive sum of actions, by anyone.

The second model is again based on the same devices, through which, however, it is also possible to issue messages recorded by people in the urban space and later to hear them inside the private living space.

The third model, on the other hand, by making use of television equipment (television camera, recorder, screen), sets out to express the possibility of recording and subsequently dispatching to a centralized collector, audio-visual data and communications processed by each of us in his own privacy, and then projected by means of enlarged television screens within the urban scene. (This model, too, may be regarded in its opposite process.)

Fig. 8 : micro-audio event, urban privacy-structure

Fig. 9 : micro-audio event, urban privacy-structure

Fig. 10: audio-visual microevent, urban privacy-structure.