

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS



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DESPITE GLIMMERS OF HOPE EMERGING FROM THE 11TH VENICE BIENNALE IN ARCHITECTURE, IT'S CLEAR THAT A NEW RETHINK IS REQUIRED TO RETURN THIS AUSPICIOUS GLOBAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION TO ITS FORMER GLORY.

TEXT RODNEY LATOURELLE

In contrast to the previous edition, the 11th Venice Biennale in Architecture is marked by an incredibly diverse and yet inherently contradictory collection of architectural display. In 2006, curator Richard Burdett's theme of *Cities, Architecture and Society* became a productive locus around which to evolve a discussion that went beyond the object to include a range of social dynamics. This year, Aaron Betsky's *Out There: Architecture Beyond Building* concentrates an experimental agenda, presenting many of the most excep-

ABOVE TORONTO-BASED AN TE LIU SUBMITTED *CLOUD* TO THIS YEAR'S BIENNALE, WHICH IS COMPRISED OF AIR PURIFIERS, IONIZERS, STERILIZERS, WASHERS, HUMIDIFIERS AND OZONE AIR CLEANERS THAT RUN CONTINUOUSLY.

tional practitioners of today. Its lack of focus and predictable inclusion of overscaled celebrity-architect installations ultimately makes its "visionary" proposition difficult to maintain. That said, this year's exhibition certainly provides a lively framework for current architectural debates.

Produced by a range of offices from Asymptote to Zaha Hadid, many of the installations at the main venue, the Arsenale, not only seem dated from the '90s, but contribute little more than an inconsequential prowess. To



MIKE CURRAN

Betsky's credit however, there are thankfully a few exceptions in this extensive exhibition, such as Philippe Rahm, An Te Liu, and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, all of whose works are not only formally sophisticated but conceptually resonant. Using Venice as a case study in cultural tourism and to investigate questions of spatial representation, Diller Scofidio + Renfro present two large-screen videos depicting tours through Venice simulations built in Las Vegas and Macau. Filmed from the perspective of a quintessential gondola ride, the naturally illusory quality of the city lends itself readily to the strange feeling of displacement engendered by these double fantasies. Philippe Rahm's preoccupation with the relation between climate, atmosphere and architecture is continued in the form of two minimal platforms offset from one another, the upper one heated to 12 degrees, the lower one to 28 degrees, which creates a continuous air flow using convection currents. With a neo-hippie sensibility, various clothed and unclothed actors articulated this architecture without walls at the exhibition opening, concentrating the ambiguous environmental metaphor and phenomenal conditions.

While immersive installations like the above truly do provide alternative constructions "beyond building," many of the works fail to formulate critical questions. Hani Rashid and Lise-Anne Couture, the Canadian-born duo that head Asymptote, exhibit a version of their retro-futuristic, modular blob furniture that is in fact much more luxury fetish than innovative spatial probe. However, fellow Canadian—An Te Liu—with whom they share one of the very first rooms in the Arsenale exhibition, succeeds in combining formal ingenuity with conceptual clarity. His installation, *Cloud*, is made up of over 100 domestic air purification appliances hung in elegant cluster formations. Appearing as part Metabolist megastructure, part Battlestar Galactica spacecraft, *Cloud*'s humming topography of domestic devices might be seen as a simultaneous parody and homage to the hygienic aspirations of early Modernism. Liu locates these altruistic ambitions not at an architectural scale but in the range of contemporary household devices that reveal a

particular psychological dimension to the call for light, space, and air. The installation is not only tightly composed and formally pleasing, but provokes a range of associations and responses, able to suggest the hope and fear inherent in Modernism's continuing legacy. In fact, Liu began working with air-conditioning units around 1995, just after Todd Hayne's film *Safe* was released, which depicted the psychological consequences of environmental illness. I am also reminded of David Cronenberg's first feature film, *They Came From Within*, set in a sterile and isolated modern apartment complex, where parasites travel through the modern conveniences of plumbing, garbage disposal, and air-conditioning ducts to infect tenants with a zombie-like lust for sex. The floating air cleaners connect notions of cleanliness to the characteristic purity of form initiated by modern architecture and urbanism, and while *Cloud*'s sci-fi superstructure articulates a gravity-defying optimism, it also embodies a darker, contemporary consumerist obsession, fuelled by corporeal paranoia.

This duality of formal ingenuity and a response to social concerns is analogous to the Biennale's thematic exhibition, which takes place at two main sites. In collaboration with Emiliano Gandolfi, Betsky's curation at the Italian pavilion is a well-chosen relief to the overscaled ambitions that are typical of the Arsenale. While a bit exhausting to take in on one visit, this tightly woven series of predominantly smaller-scale installations, videos, and exhibits from a variety of practitioners, presents a wide range of compelling experiences that concern a plethora of experimental yet germane discourses, from raw formal studies, to social and media relationships, and an almost utopian environmentalism. Beside a recent video interview with Archigram's Dennis Crompton, Raumlabor presents *Stick On City*, a large drawing of iconic projects and existing visionary proposals composed among an imaginary landscape. The visitor is encouraged to sketch his or her own utopian contribution, and stick it right on the drawing, thus creating a participatory yet informal discussion about architecture's communal dreams. While many of the installations at the Arsenale seem to interpret

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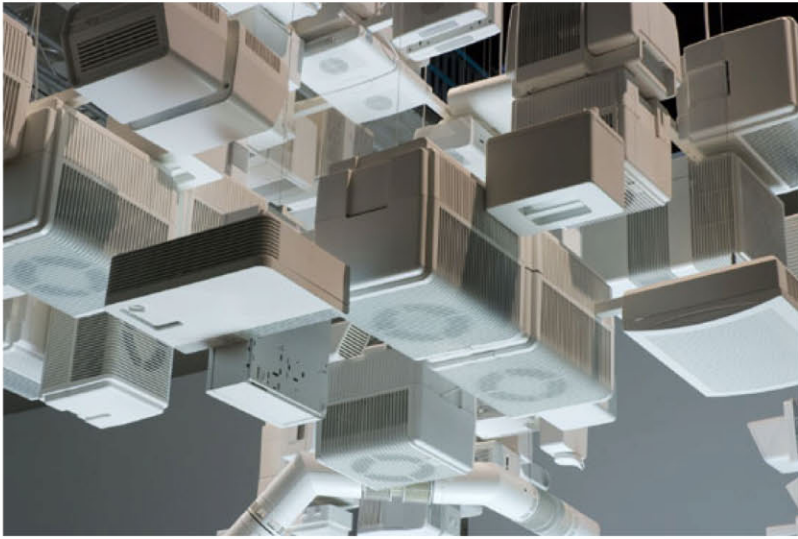


as part of this year's venice architecture biennale, the taiwanese artist an te liu will create an installation at the city's arsenal. liu described his 'cloud' installation to designboom:



'good hygiene is important.

'cloud' is comprised of domestic air purification appliances, produced and consumed around the world over the last decade. they wash, filter, ionize, ozonize, and sterilize our airspace, separating us from bacteria, allergens, germs, spores, dust and other bad things. armada-like clusters converge to create a floating polis, perhaps of the future, but also recalling visions of futures-past.



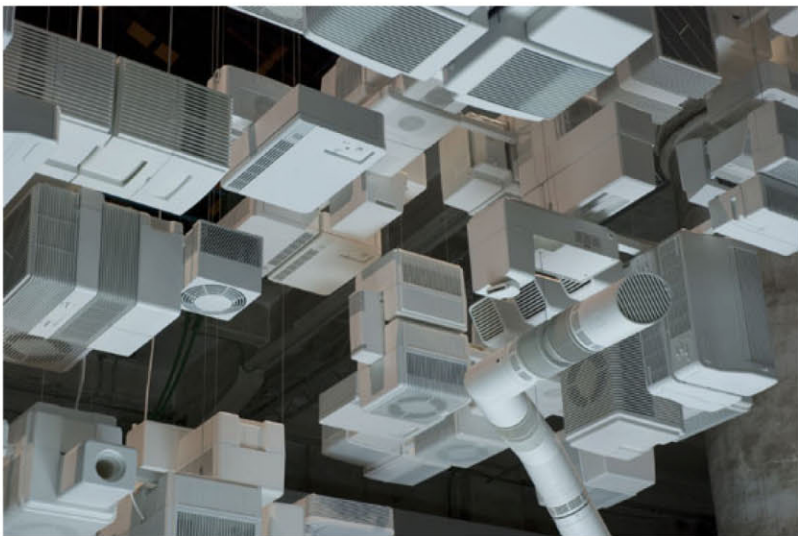
in the early twentieth century, ideas about cleanliness and healthy living were influential in the development of modern architecture and urbanism. they were connected to the call for sunlight, greenery, fresh air and spacious expanses free of congestion. rhetorics of hygiene would resonate psychologically and translate visually in the creation of new, pure forms.



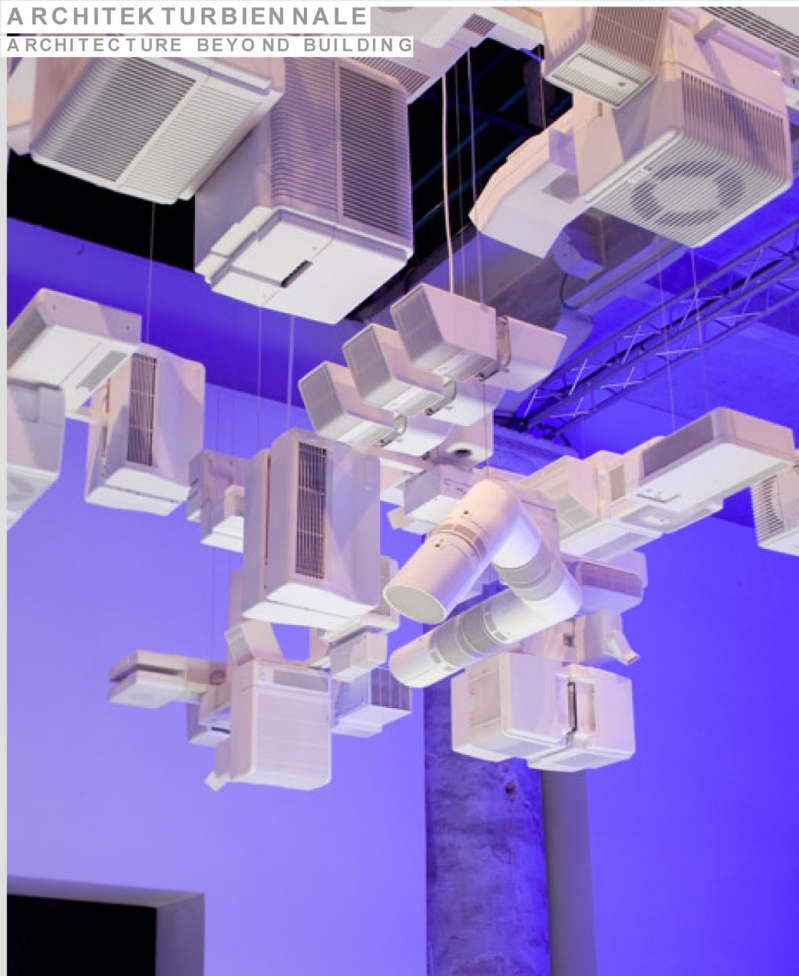
some time later, reynar banham made a provocative suggestion. why have buildings at all? the increasing sophistication of our environmental technologies will allow us to survive fine without traditional forms of shelter. we could live in completely controlled environment-bubbles, with all our needs met by an array of systems and devices.

these days, we still live in our houses, finding ways to feel at home.

what will our new brave world be like? clean, at least.' - ATL



ARCHITEKTURBIENNALE
ARCHITECTURE BEYOND BUILDING



An Te Liu: "Cloud", 2008 (Foto: Stefano Graziani; © La Biennale di Venezia)

DIE GESPENSTER AUS DEM GRAB DER ARCHITEKTUR

Die 11. Architekturbiennale will unter dem Motto "Architecture beyond Building" Experimente und Visionen vorstellen – und vermeidet nicht immer Klischees.

// GERHARD MACK, Venedig

So vergraut man auch die wohlwollendsten Besucher: Inmitten des Biennale-Gartens, auf dem Weg zum deutschen Pavillon, liegt eine mannshohe gelbe Stahlröhre. Die Esten haben die Kulturidylle jäh mit Elementen einer Gaspipeline durchbrochen, um an das Projekt Nordstream zu erinnern, mit dem Gas übers Baltikum von Russland nach Deutschland geleitet werden soll.