

Air Apparent

An Te Liu: Man and Machine

That a collection of air-purifying units can bridge the gap between art, architecture and hygiene is just one reading of the hybrid-honed work of An Te Liu. Household appliances and objects are just one of his source materials, but it is the compositional provocations and ambiguity-laden forms and densities that keep the minds of the audience whirring.

text RODOLPHE EL-KHOURY

An Te Liu strikes a discordant note in the lecture room at the University of Toronto. In his skinny McQueen jeans, Comme des Garçons blazer and vintage riding boots he doesn't exactly blend with the other professors. They are here to introduce themselves to the graduate thesis class at the launch of the academic year. Beneath the blazer, his hooded sweatshirt boasts an integrated mask with gold lamé flames and is straight out of 'lucha libre', or Mexican wrestling. The look is slightly bizarre yet elegant, despite the Luchadores' kitsch. Indeed, Liu's sartorial flair (which not incidentally gained him a 'best dressed' accolade from the city's major newspaper), points to techniques at work in his art practice.

Transgressive Hoodie

In the early Soft no. 5, multicoloured 3M household sponges are packed into a rectangular field, and hung like a painting. The sponges are not processed or transformed. They are glued tel quel, with their lowly origin unapologetically laid bare. But the intention is not to provoke the high-low clash that motivates pop art. The work also diverges from postmodern pastiche in its treatment of the found object and the commitment to its formal and material qualities. Soft no. 5 is cheekily

frivolous, but with its meticulous compositional precision it also exudes the ponderous gravity of abstract art. It is also dead-serious in aligning hygiene, mass production and modernist aesthetics in tight, thought-provoking formations; the fact that it is at once flippant and serious accounts in great measure for its effectiveness. The same holds true for the clothes. Framed by the tailored elegance of the blazer, the transgressive hoodie is like the 3M sponge. It seems relevant and even compelling in its new position and redefined role. The outfit also works because it's beautiful.

Liu now takes the stage for his presentation. In elucidating his scholarly interests, he turns to naming the magazines he currently or has recently subscribed to: 032C, Vanity Fair, Monocle, Grey Room, The New Yorker, ArtForum, The Economist, Purple, Dazed & Confused, and the list goes on. It is an eclectic mix of journals, trendy zines and glossy fashion monthlies that belies any attempt to frame his core interests. The list instead maps a vast constellation of references that exceed the reach of academic disciplines. The act itself - listing the magazines in lieu of the expected formal introduction - is closer to performance than academic procedure. It is

An Te Liu
photo: William Hollingdale

Complex (Tower of Squash no.1),
2004 (background image)

Matter, 2008
Closed-circuit surveillance camera, light, airborne particulates; two projection installation over 18 day duration. Installation view, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin

Cloud, 2008
(facing page)
Air purifiers, ionizers, sterilisers, washers, humidifiers, ozone air cleaners; running continuously. Installation view, 11th Venice Biennale of Architecture
photo: Cameraphoto Arte / La Biennale di Venezia

humorous and somewhat jarring in this context. But it is effective in situating him at the intersection of different fields, underscoring the complex relationship he cultivates with his multiple interests and affiliations.

Theory and Practice

Liu trained as an architect at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in Los Angeles at a time when the famed school's experimental orientation was most pronounced. He practiced architecture in firms in Paris, then in the office of Frank Gehry and afterwards as a founding member of the LA-based Hedge. The precocious group promptly generated acclaim for its innovative reshaping of professional practice as an alternative and collaborative enterprise. But Liu's professional career as designer was short lived. In a sudden departure to Vancouver, he inexorably moved toward architectural theory and art practice, reviving interests that hark back to his undergraduate degree in art history, Renaissance studies and film. In a short time he had solo exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver and the Henry Urbach Gallery in New York. While his reputation was growing in the art world he was recruited and then tenured as a professor of architecture at the University

of Toronto. Although he had long forgone professional practice, he directed the graduate programme for several years until a Canada Council fellowship landed him in Berlin as an Artist in Residence.

Although his work had long since settled in galleries and museums, Liu never deserted his architectural base. Works such as *Airborne* and *Exchange* capitalise on his double expertise. Here, he exploits a fertile territory between installation art and architecture by playing with ambiguities of genre, medium and scale. Should we approach *Airborne* - a sprawling (and fully operational) assortment of air-treating appliances on a platform - as a symbolic representation or as an indexical process? Is it a scaled model of an imaginary utopian city? A Van Doesburg-inspired composition of solids in space? An homage to Hannes Meyer in a tableau of mass-produced consumer goods? A showroom display for Honeywell? A minimalist sculpture, or cluster of mechanical equipment for a new-age wellness centre in downtown Vancouver? All these readings are relevant - together they account for the ambiguity in form and the density in meaning that characterise Liu's work. *Exchange*, first exhibited at the Henry Urbach Gallery, develops similar





Untitled (Complex II), 2002
air ionizers, humidifiers, various
materials; running continuously

Exchange, 2001
(facing page)
HEPA air purification units, cords;
56 unit installation, running
continuously. Installation view,
Henry Urbach Gallery, New York

Soft Load, 1999
(previous spread, left page)
3M Rainbow Pack foam sponges

Pattern Language: Tantric (gold),
2005
(previous spread, right page)
Ultrachrome print on Tyvek

themes in the interstitial territory between architecture and art. Here, purifying HEPA appliances are assembled in columnar formation - a quasi-spiritual hypostyle hall, and a somewhat deranged one. Exchange pushes hygienic obsessions to the extreme, recycling and purifying all the air of the white cube gallery every 40 seconds.

Mechanical Swarm

Liu's most ambitious work to date was commissioned for the 2008 Venice Biennial of Architecture. Visitors to the main exhibition space at the Arsenale were greeted by the impressively looming sight - and sound - of the Cloud installation. A suspended mass of functioning domestic appliances dedicated to washing, filtering, ionising, ozonising, and sterilising air, commentators have likened it to a metabolist megastructure, an armada of starships from *Battlestar Galactica*, Moshe Safdie's *Habitat*, the amorphous designs of Luigi Colani, and El Lissitzky's *Proun* architecture. Some embrace its overt optimism. They appreciate it literally as environmental remediation at work, overlooking its quixotic nature - though one tree-hugging critic faults it for not using solar cells mounted on the roof as a power source. Others are fascinated and disturbed by its darker un-

dertones. In the buzzing cumulus of immaculate white plastic they see an ominous figure: a mechanical swarm at once terrifying and comforting in its stubborn and hopeless operation, descending in squadron formation upon the exhibition, with a mission to eradicate all pathogens from the air we breathe. All pick up on the provocative connections Liu draws between space, architecture, machines, hygiene, environment, and modernism: a complex map of relationships that Cloud artfully condenses into a humming icon.

Cloud and much of Liu's work is preoccupied with air, deploying machines that literally process it, incessantly sucking and pumping it back into the atmosphere. You can't see it but you can feel and smell air around Liu's installations - ionised air has a distinct odour. Air also figures conceptually in the work, beyond the palpable physical presence. It is implied in the modernist predilection for autonomous bodies in space and the corollary vision of the city as a field of atomised and hygienically isolated pavilions, a vision that stemmed largely from preoccupations with air and ventilation. Most eloquently perhaps, it is presented as a virtual absence, in the implied vacuum of outer-space where Cloud hovers.





Reconstruction (II), 2008
C-Print

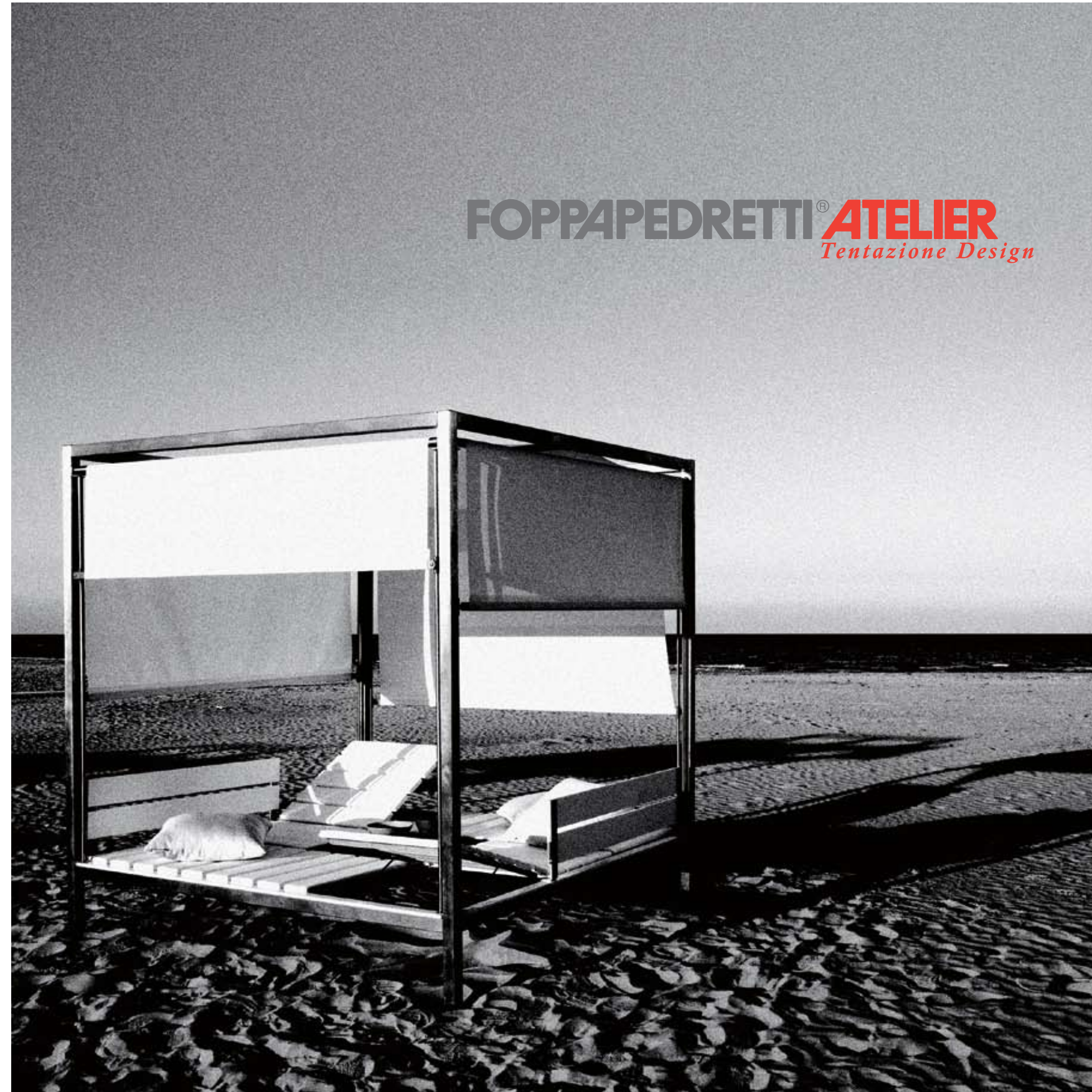
Cosmic Dust

Liu's installations gain much of their potency from the invisibility of the very thing they process, and represent. Matter, exhibited recently in Berlin, takes a different approach and aims for the visibility of air. Two large-scale video projections occupy adjoining walls in the far end of the gallery space. Watching these, viewers are exposed to shining particles moving against a black background - what may seem to be stellar matter, or alternately, snow swirling in the winter sky. But one later realises that both images come from a single feed, a highly sensitive surveillance camera focused on a beam of light in the same darkened gallery, filming airborne particles that fluctuate and intensify as more visitors enter the space. One projection depicts events in real time, while the other is broadcast at half speed, creating a time lag that increases over the duration of the exhibition. The spectacle has a cosmic quality that mesmerises viewers, who don't tire of contemplat-

ing the ebbs and flows of micro dust storms that they might have created, or which traversed the space of the gallery many days earlier.

Meanwhile, back in the lecture hall, Liu picks up his bag and promptly leaves. It is a vintage '70s BOAC on-board flight bag and a staple accessory. A souvenir from the day when his family emigrated from Taiwan via Hong Kong to their new Canadian home. Style and nostalgic elegance mix with a direct reference to his immigrant family history. The memory of BOAC jumbo jets negotiating the perilous skies above Kowloon's Kai Tak airport completes the mental picture. They glide in curving and exact trajectories above the city, magically suspended in the thick humid air.

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