Modern Man
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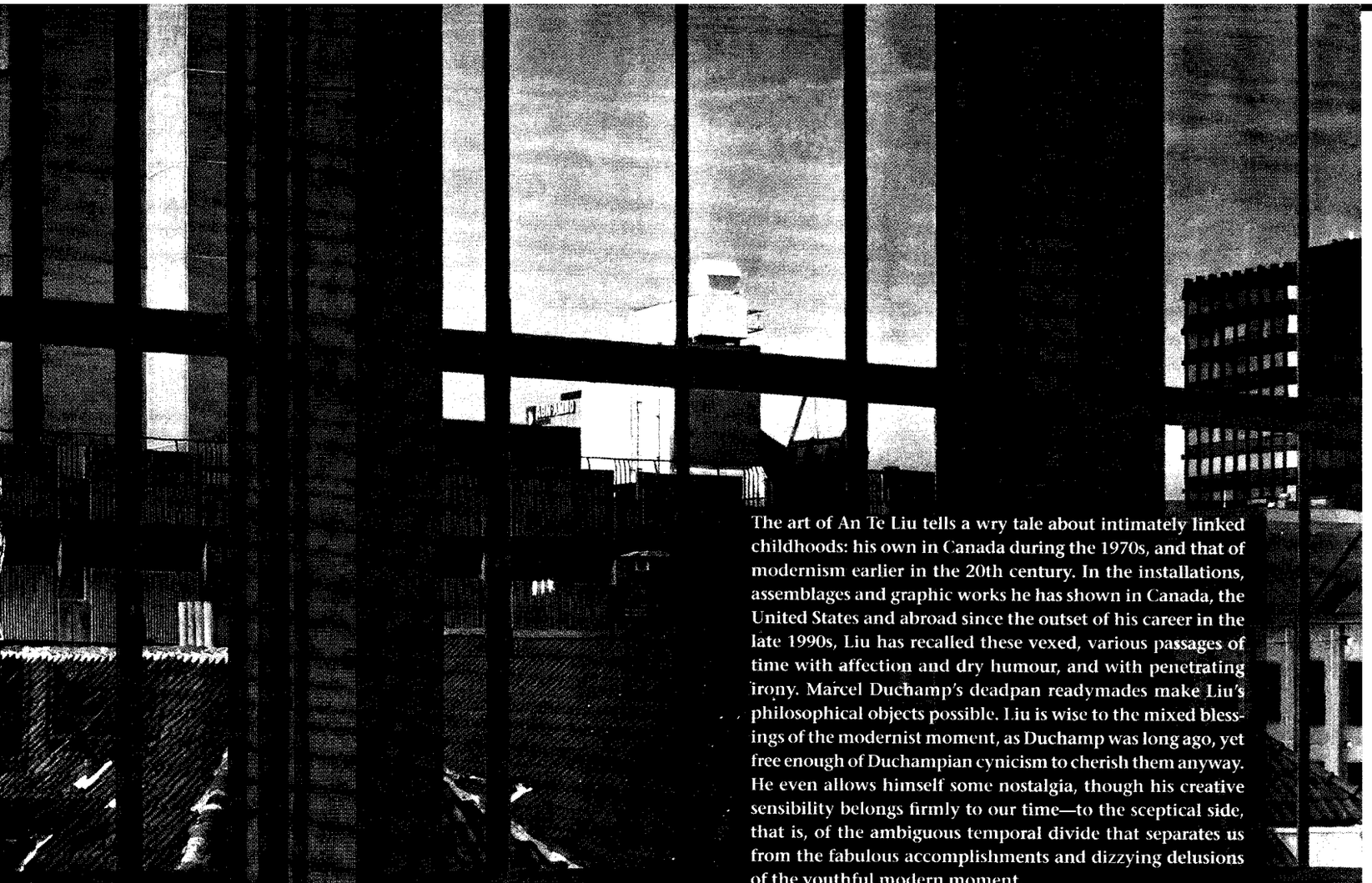

Modern Man

AN TE LIU and the space between idea and object

BY **JOHN BENTLEY MAYS**

The art of An Te Liu tells a wry tale about intimately linked childhoods: his own in Canada during the 1970s, and that of modernism earlier in the 20th century. In the installations, assemblages and graphic works he has shown in Canada, the United States and abroad since the outset of his career in the late 1990s, Liu has recalled these vexed, various passages of time with affection and dry humour, and with penetrating irony. Marcel Duchamp's deadpan readymades make Liu's philosophical objects possible. Liu is wise to the mixed blessings of the modernist moment, as Duchamp was long ago, yet free enough of Duchampian cynicism to cherish them anyway. He even allows himself some nostalgia, though his creative sensibility belongs firmly to our time—to the sceptical side, that is, of the ambiguous temporal divide that separates us from the fabulous accomplishments and dizzying delusions of the youthful modern moment.

This abyss had not yet fully opened in 1971, when Liu (then four years old) and his parents decamped from a house in Taiwan crowded with antiques to a modern apartment in Toronto. The artist remembers his fascination with the new world into which he had been parachuted, one of brightly lit supermarkets, vast stores crammed with gleaming white and silver home appliances, and (a little later) showrooms of flat-pack home furnishings. Canada still basked in the optimistic afterglow of Expo 67, and still enjoyed its self-advertised reputation as a liberal, unwarlike America, full of opportunity—hence its wonderful allure in those years to the elder Lius, and to myriad other immigrants from Asia, the United States and elsewhere.

But then came the oil crisis and the economic dislocations of the mid-1970s, and the onset of the decline (which continues to this day) of modernity's promises and prestige. It was in this newer time of disillusionment—the dawn of the "contemporary," the seemingly timeless zone of consumerism and spectacle we now inhabit—that Liu grew up, and went to the University

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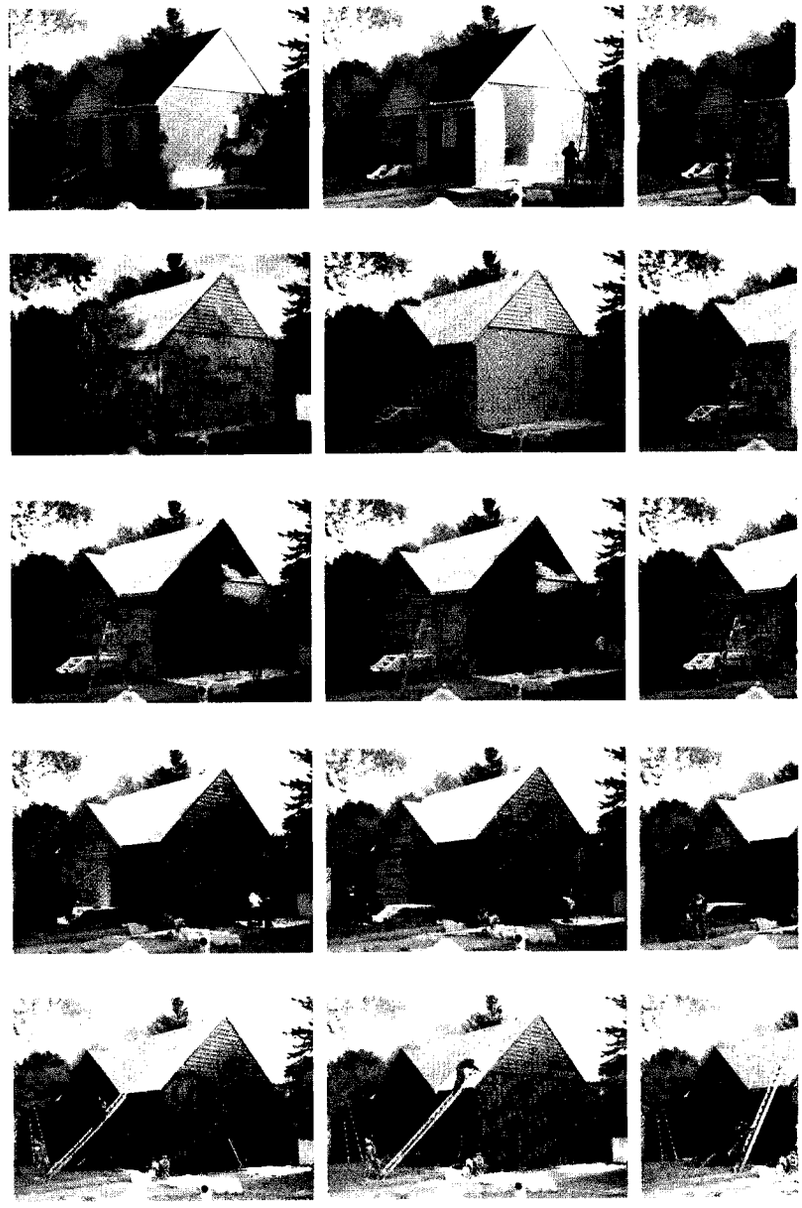

PREVIOUS PAGES: Installation view of **No Molestar** (2006) at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam

of Toronto to study art history, film and the Renaissance. In the 1990s, he concluded his education at the cutting-edge Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in Los Angeles.

Not that there was much public demand at the time for any architectural edge, cutting or otherwise. What was getting built was routine (the most distinctive work of Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind and Rem Koolhaas lay in the future), and the economic recession of the early 1990s rolled on and on, making the prospects for daring real-world architectural practice look dim. It was probably just as well that Liu had not gone to SCI-Arc to train for a conventional career in an architectural office. He was attracted, instead, by the school's emphasis on theory and speculation, the things that had captivated him as an undergraduate. So it was in the spirit of the institution and of the times—many a bright North American designer was hard at work on highly speculative "paper architecture" projects—that, in 1994, Liu plunged into an intense review of cultural modernism's trajectory, from rise to downfall to aftermath.

He read Michel Foucault (especially *Order of Things*), Roland Barthes, the Situationist Guy Debord, Walter Benjamin, and the books on cultural theory being published by the Zone collective on the American east coast. He read Peter Eisenman, but also Susan Sontag, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein and the science fiction of J. G. Ballard. He watched the films of Peter Greenaway and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet,* which plumbs the spiritual darkness behind the clipped lawns and white picket fences of small-town America. He listened to John Oswald's sound compositions, looted from sources high and low, and—perhaps most important of all—he looked at Gerhard Richter's vast archive of images and things, *Atlas.*

What Liu was learning from these inquiries had less to do with subject matter than with tactics for telling stories. The narrative ploys he discovered included cross-indexing and cross-referencing between discourses of knowledge; wrenching nouns and verbs out of conventional syntax and allowing them to play off one another promiscuously (as Stein did); and fooling around subversively with the agreed-upon meanings of everyday things (as Duchamp did). This wide-ranging intellectual adventure informed Liu's first important artwork, which travelled across several disciplinary boundaries (of visual art, design and even ethnography and library science) under the passport of a master's thesis in architecture.

House Parts (1995), his prize-winning SCI-Arc thesis, was what its author called a "rumination on elements of the domestic" in 40 collages, objects and accompanying narratives. The strategy here was bricolage, as elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (an important source for Liu) and applied to all narratives by Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference*—a mindfully perverse, revelatory rearrangement of fragments rescued from a "heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined," according to Derrida. In Liu's case, the "heritage" represented in the collection of objects and texts is that of modern dwelling, in its architectural, urban, historical and narrative dimensions.

The incandescent period of research and meditation in 1994 and 1995 proved seminal. Beginning with *House Parts* and continuing to the present, Liu has engaged in a semi-worshipful, semi-sceptical celebration of modern living. "what is there not to like about modernism?" Liu asked in an unpublished 2003 text fragment. "What about spaceshots, time-space relativity, heroic abstract painting, fast dreamy cars, kitchen appliances, clean edge buildings with calder sculptures in front of them, serial music, strange screwy narrative structures, the Helsinki Olympics, uncertainty principles and so on?... modernism brought us interesting things. the ideas were interesting too, but of course they are now outmoded, or at least the implications of the space between idea and product have changed."

In researching this changed, charged space between objects and their representations, Liu has maintained the stance of the bricoleur. He has rummaged in the attic of technological and cultural modernity, and in the attic of his own very modern boyhood, in search of talismanic artifacts that can tell us what it meant to exist then, in circumstances both different from and weirdly similar to now. (If indeed moribund, modernity appears to be dying a very slow, elusive death.)

At the start of his public artistic career (which followed a brief, post–SCI-Arc turn as a designer in Los Angeles), for example, Liu sensed in popular air-purifying home appliances—ionizers, cleaners, humidifiers and the like—a potential to function metonymically in an expanded field of modernist mythology. Distributed like buildings in a model of a futuristic city (*Airborne*, 2000), stacked in skyscraper-esque, totemic columns (*Exchange*, 2001), or suspended in clusters from the ceiling (the brilliant

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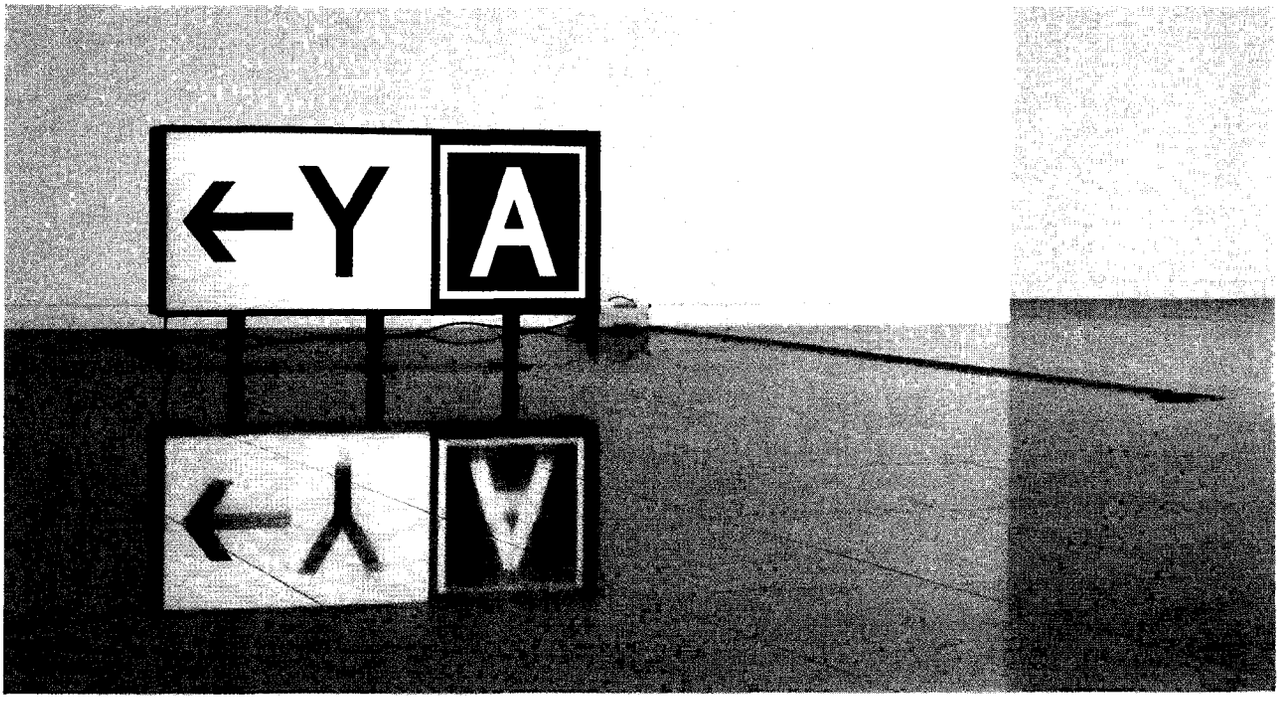
ABOVE: **Title Deed** (process sequence) 2009 Latex block filler, paint and house COURTESY MKG127
PHOTO SALOME NIKURADZE

RIGHT: Installation view of **YA** (2003) at the Seoul Museum of Art



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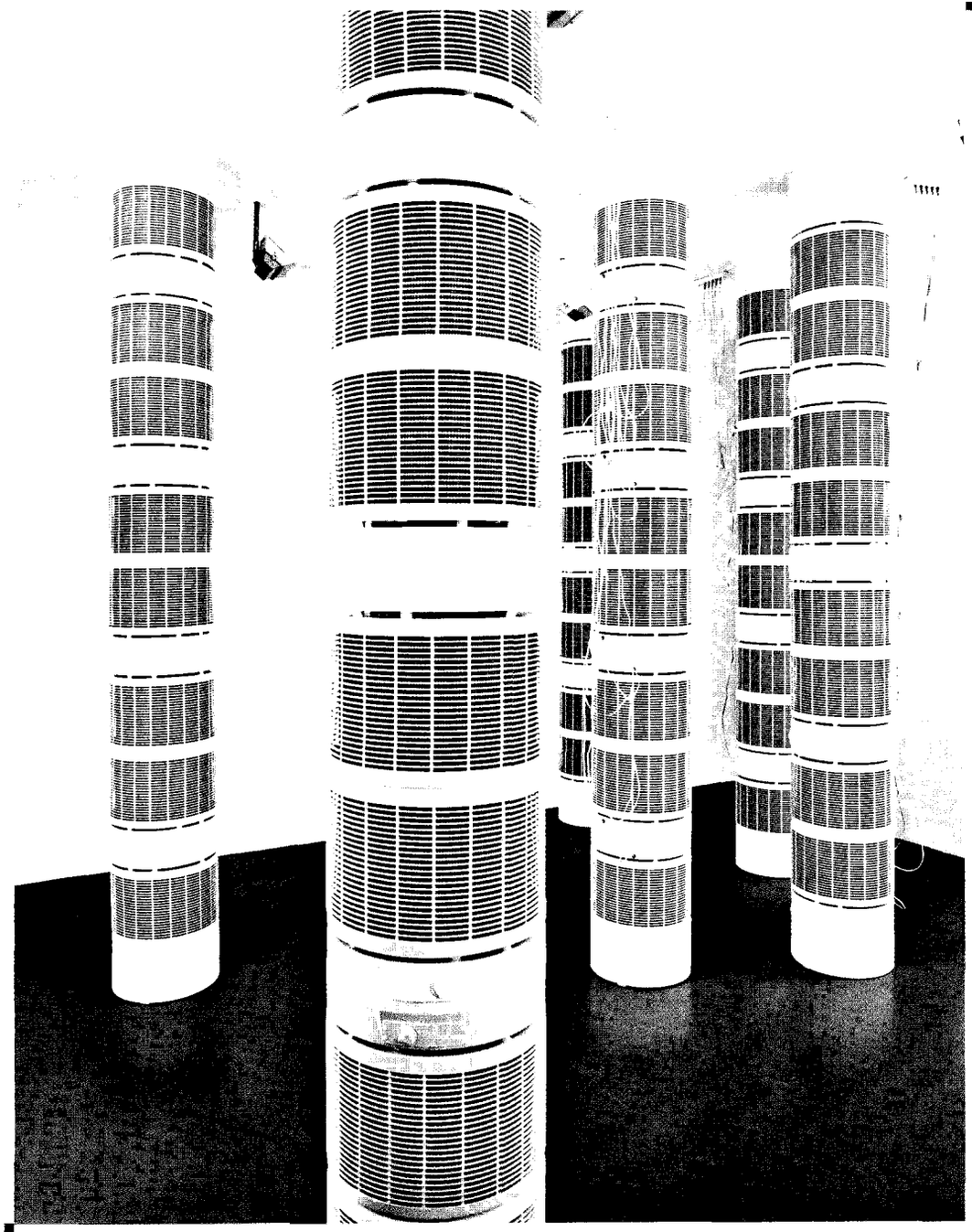

LEFT: **Exchange** 2001 56 HEPA air purification units running continuously COLLECTION SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PHOTO HENRY URBACH GALLERY, NEW YORK

OPPOSITE: An Te Liu in his Toronto studio, March, 2011 PHOTO GEORGE WHITESIDE

Cloud, 2008), these fully operational, buzzing electro-mechanical elements evoke memories of architectural modernism's utopian promises to remake crowded, smoky 19th-century European cites into marvels of cleanliness and health.

We are invited by these works to reflect, in turn, on the early 20th-century cultural matrix of this architectural preoccupation: a morally mixed back-to-nature phenomenon that included the Boy Scouts and the Wandervogel movement, fresh-air treatment for tuberculosis sufferers, and an upsurge of public concern for urban slum-dwellers, but also an enthusiasm for the pseudo-science of eugenics and for city-destroying programmes of "urban renewal." The viewer is prompted by Liu's art to remember all of it, both the noble and the suspect, as the childhood of what we are now—still obsessed by health and wellness and fresh air (hence our ever-expanding no-smoking areas). And there is a warning here: like the early moderns in the grip of the passionate vogue for revolutionary genetic and urban engineering, we may be oblivious to the deleterious side effects of our high-minded, well-meaning hygiene initiatives.

The anti-dirt moves of early modernism were also inspired by the utilitarian goal of achieving "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (see: Jeremy Bentham), as the motto was recycled and popularized by practical Victorian materialism. Liu satirizes this modernist dogma in more than one piece—most memorably in the ongoing *Pattern Language* series of "suburban wallpapers" he began fashioning in 1999. The imagery is based on aerial photographs of Levittown, a post-war cookie-cutter bedroom community on Long Island that was consciously designed to embody the modernist Benthamite principle as it applied to mass-produced housing.

Unlike the layout of tract houses in the black-and-white photographs, which is banal, efficient and tiresomely uniform, the pattern in the wallpaper is hectic and exuberant, and the colours are relentlessly cheerful. *Pattern Language*, then, makes a modern icon of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" into an over-the-top home-decorating product for the contemporary consumer, for whom the objective is, apparently, the greatest *pleasure*—excitement, titillation, gratification—for the greatest number. (In other words, the work is a double send-up: of both the old modernist piety based on notions of efficiency and economy, and the more recent cultural hedonism that descends from it.)

Liu's interests in domestic realities and bricolage, which began with *House Parts*, found especially interesting expression in 2009 with *Title Deed*, a work featured in a group interrogation of Torontonian suburbia called "The Leona Drive Project." Liu was given an abandoned house slated for demolition and redevelopment—a full-sized, mass-produced modernist bungalow—to do with what he liked. He responded by stripping the very ordinary house of all its external functional excrescences (power wires, and the gas and hydro meters, for example), boarding up the windows and doors, and then painting the structure a vivid green. When Liu was through, it looked (as he intended) like a radically scaled-up Monopoly symbol for residential real estate.

This effective removal of the "found" building's use-value transfigured it from a house into a "house"—a purely abstract sign for "houseness,"

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immediately comprehensible in any culture with timber-framed construction. Moreover, Liu's transformation of the house into a board-game item, in itself a smart, evocative play with scale and meaning à la bricolage, suggested the building's true nature as a commodity within a very large game of its own: the complex web of rules, contracts, rituals and procedures that together compose economic modernity. This web includes mortgages, appraisals and other mechanisms of the real estate market; municipal and provincial building codes and zoning by-laws; and the regulated relationships between labour and capital, suppliers and builders, brokers and clients. Most importantly, perhaps, the network also comprehends the demands of consumers (no less exacting now than they were in the heyday of modernism), who expect that a suburban tract-house will look like the pitched-roof ideal promoted, then and now, by the real estate industry (and by storybooks and movies), and not like something else.

During the childhood of modernism, the primary, most highly focused site of such concern with dwelling was the Bauhaus, and Liu's artistic career has thus far been a one-man version, reprise and brisk updating of that venerable institution. Like the sum total of creative personalities gathered by Walter Gropius into the original Bauhaus at Weimar in 1919, Liu creates formally various things anchored in a concentrated consideration of domestic space and its intimacies (such as reading, relaxing under air conditioning and so on). These things include wallpaper; typographical experiments; those air-purifying sculptures; a video-installation reference to Andy Warhol's anti-action movies of the 1960s, which documents the dust and other minute debris floating in the air of the gallery (*Matter*, 2008); and a whimsical video of his cat performing Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-up* in an architectural model (*Pook X Pookie*, 2009).

Like the Bauhaus, the only thing Liu does not produce is architecture. But what he makes encircles architecture, inhabits the resonant field around it. With high imaginative vigour and a playful spirit, Liu peoples this complex territory with multivalent images that speak to us of times rich in both possibility and pathology—childhoods in light that the artist, and the rest of us, have only tentatively outgrown, if we have outgrown them at all. ■

To see additional work by An Te Liu, visit canadianart.ca/liu

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