

# GESTURES OF ENTROPY

Monica Bonvicini | Pierre Chenal | Carlos Garaicoa | Alejandro Mancera | Wallace Masuko | Jacques Tati | Paul Wolff | curator: Inti Guerrero |



*"The "city" performs no natural function, it simply exists  
between mind and matter, detached from both, representing neither"*

Robert Smithson, *Entropy and new monuments*, 1966.

In a thirty second video, three people are walking down a hill; their cars are parked at the upper side of the slope. One of them, a woman who seems to be in high heels, is being helped by a gentleman who kindly offers his hand in order for her to get to the place they are trying to get to, probably their workplace, which has not yet been revealed by the video sequence. Behind them, and in what looks like the same pathway, comes a young woman who without the help of a man dominates the steep territory while simultaneously speaking into her mobile phone.

Upon arriving on level ground, the woman in heels detaches herself from the young man's hand in a rapid yet clumsy maneuver that could have caused her to fall but does not, thanks to the help of another kind sir passing near by. As the young woman behind them joins the others, the video camera slowly zooms out, making the frame wider, revealing the huge structure toward which all three are heading: The National Congress of Brazil, located in the heart of modernist utopia city, Brasilia.

After the revelation of the geopolitical location where the aforementioned narration occurs, we become conscious of a specific cultural context, and thus the meaning of the corporal gesture of those who decided to go "down the hill" becomes truly uncanny. Brasilia is without doubt modern architecture's nearest accomplishment of its utopian urban ideologies. Though it was constructed as the main governmental project of a nationalist regime, the origin of its architecture and urbanism is strongly attached to the most radical, official and rationalist modern international production, especially that of Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, who in the early 1930's worked close to Brasilia's idealist architect, Lucio Costa.

In his 1957 proposal project for Brasilia, Costa referred to the city to be constructed in the following manner: "*As it is monumental, it is as well comfortable, efficient, welcoming and intimate.*" There is no doubt that Brasilia is monumental, it is itself a monument located in the middle of a tropical landscape. However, could it possibly be *comfortable, efficient, welcoming, or intimate*? For Clarice Lispector, a well known Brazilian poet, the new capital constructed in 1960 was everything but hospitable. On the contrary it was a space of hostility:

*"I couldn't cry at Brasilia, there was no place"*

Clarice Lispector, *Brasilia*, 1962.

The absence of place referred to by Lispector in a poem she wrote in 1962 while visiting Brazil's new federal capital indicates how this modernist city is a cultural construct that reduces the subject to a mere user of space, rather than an inhabitant of it. Within that sense, Brasilia and perhaps all modern architectural constructions, like the one hosting this exhibition, paradoxically hinder the possibility to inhabit, to cry, to enact even a minimal gesture for the construction of intimacy. Within this context, we may think that "a place" has been constituted by those three people who decided to take a shortcut that symbolically crosses and jeopardizes linear (straight) official hegemonic culture, a cultural reality that demands them to walk via the sidewalks and ramps ideated and constructed by modern men of the past. Why seek shortcuts in a modern city that was not designed to allow one to do so? Is the decision to go down the hill then a gesture that is more *comfortable, efficient, welcoming and intimate*? Or might this gesture possibly be considered a perverse human action that goes against normativity? Perhaps to unconsciously destroy it?

If those who live in and visit Brasilia are constantly revealing this antagonism, it must be suggested that although history may have constructed the city, up to now it has not produced its subjects. In other words, if Brasilia clearly reveals its cultural imposition/fiction on the topography where it stands, countercultural gestures like the one described could suggest that the people who live in Brasilia don't really belong to the city or that they belong to the group that Homi Bhabha calls the *unhomed*.

For Bhabha, being *Unhomed*, as opposed to being *Homeless*, is not when one lacks a home but instead when one does indeed have a home but does not feel it belongs to it. The situation resembles one that may be experienced with Duchamp's ready-mades; by presenting a urinal labeled as a fountain, Duchamp re-signified symbolic hegemonic culture by altering official meanings of objects that surround us. Within that context, if a urinal can be a fountain, is the base where it lays really a base? Is the door behind it a door? Once Duchamp has revealed that cultural reality is merely a construct of symbols and significant made up by men of the past, could we possibly think that the world we live in isn't really our home?

It may be that what occurs in Brasilia is a specific and precise situation, but it is also a metaphor that speaks to other different contexts: people constantly re-signify the world that surrounds them in order to "survive"

the day to day. It is what artist Helio Oiticica clearly meant when he said, "*From adversity we live.*" It is precisely through adverse gestures such as creating a shortcut through Brasilia's gardens that the fiction of reality emerges. It then seems that a dialectical situation will always occur in a space constructed by a hegemonic power, like the designed and built city (Architecture) from within which countercultural gestures aversively emerge. By escaping from the normativity that they unconsciously question, such gestures construct places, subjectivity, identity and re-significations of a cultural reality that denies these entities. This "escape" may be clearer if we understand these adverse human gestures as gestures of cultural entropy.

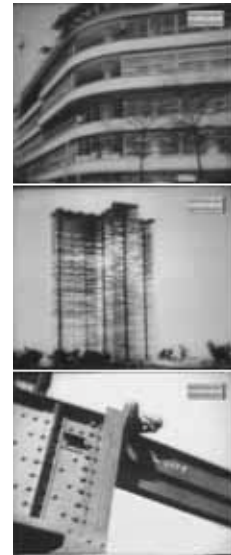
For Robert Smithson, entropy alters our perception of space. For him, entropy is an event, an action, a gesture that when its gestuality decreases simultaneously increases the clarity of the surfaces of structures around<sup>1</sup>. In that sense, the adverse action/gesture of those in Brasilia decreases Brasilia's monumentality; it "darkens" the surfaces of its architecture, revealing it as a cultural fiction by decreasing its physical and symbolic scenographic presence. In other words, those kinds of gestures of entropy are oppositions to progressive hegemonic culture that intends to control the subjects who produce them. This may be the reason why Smithson, quoting Wyle Sypher, pointed out that "*Entropy is evolution in reverse*".

In *Gestures of entropy*, the works that make up the exhibition do not all intend to alter normativity; instead, as a group, they create "a place" where the audience may interrogate the architecture where the exhibition takes place, and hopefully, the cultural reality/fiction outside. In fact the earliest works found here are a selection of short black and white silent (with subtitles) films from the 1930's that highlight the technical, functional, aesthetical and economic advantages of *modern architecture* made at that time.

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<sup>1</sup> "*As action decreases the clarity of such surfaces increases*" Robert Smithson, *Entropy and the new monuments*, 1966.

Pierre Chenal's short-films *Batir* [35mm, B&W, 11 minutes, 1930] and *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* [35 mm, B&W, 18 minute, 1930] illustrate the construction process and the resulting buildings made by Robert Mallet Stevens, the Perret Brothers, Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier, who also co-scripted and subtitled both short-films. The Swiss-French architect's presence is prominent in almost all sequences, not only through Le Corbusier's "silent" narration but also due to Chenal's careful illustration of *Plan Voisin* (1925): Le Corbusier's urban utopia reform plan for the city of Paris, based on his cross-skyscrapers repetition.



Pierre Chenal, *Batir*, 1930, stills from b&w film, 18 minutes

In the case of Paul Wolff's film series *Neues Bauen in Frankfurt am Main (A new way of building in Frankfurt)* [16mm, B&W, 6', 8', 10' and 10'min] it specifically documents the construction of a small standardized home to be built in Germany, right from its design up to its occupation. The cinematographic series ends with sequences depicting the daily life of what seems a typical family, a sexist and heterosexual family living in the *Siedlung Praunheim*, filmed while having breakfast, during a visit, at lunch time, etc. These last scenes demonstrate the uses of especially modern furniture design, in particular design elements that help the woman in the kitchen: 'Just as in factory or office work, greater production is the result of a reduced waste of energy,' the film's subtitles inform us. If we understand the subtitle purely within the context of thermodynamics, it is accurate in that less energy is wasted, but since the rationalist architecture imposes greater control of the body, there is thus a higher probability of energy tending to be liberated, and if so, entropy is at stake:



Paul Wolf *Neues Bauen in Frankfurt am Main*, 1930, stills from b&w film, 18 minutes

*"Like energy, entropy is in the first instance a measure of something that happens when one state transformed into another"*

Bridgman, *The nature of thermodynamics*.

After being bombarded with progressive male sexist architecture propaganda that shows how to construct "a new world", the audience is confronted by a woman's hand wielding a hammer as she persistently tries to break through a wall, literally showing us how to *deconstruct* what has previously been constructed. Monica Bonvicini's video *Hammering out (an old argument)* [1998, DVD, 60 min] offers us a powerful gesture of entropy which, as in most of Bonvicini's works, comments on the ways in which architecture promotes a gender-specific hierarchy, especially as we've seen, the way that modern rationalist forms eagerly control subjects, women in particular. Within this exhibition, her video would not only directly respond to Pierre Chenal's and Paul Wolff's films, but may also suggest to the audience, due to its being projected on an inner wall of this house along with the title Bonvicini has given it, the radical gesture of an *unhomed* from within. The inconformity of being determined by the walls that historically have constructed one's identity leads to what in this case could be a conscious destruction of normativity.

In the case of Carlos Garaicoa, rather than performing a gesture of destruction to *deconstruct* reality, most of his works re-signify decaying architecture into utopia futuristic buildings and cities. His interventions to neo-classical leftovers or abandoned modern constructions become even more powerful when one realizes that all of these wrecked structures are located in Havana, a city whose urban reforms, though inspired and backed up by Soviet progress,



Monica Bonvicini,  
*Hammering out (an old argument)* 1998,  
stills from a color video, 60 minutes.

were abandoned after the fall of European communism. Garaicoa perpetrates a countercultural action by giving monumentality to what is absent, to what has been officially forgotten, imagining and reinventing a progress promised by political ideologies of the revolution. As the artist states, it is about "*the reconstruction of places and things by means of fiction,*" though most of his chosen places have already been re-signified and accommodated by the city's inhabitants through their own gestures of entropy, gestures of *bricolage* that arise out of the actual conditions of Cuban life today.



Carlos Garaicoa, *Somebody's Architecture* 2002. mixed media installation.

The criticism of historic utopia through the creation of one's own reality, though hindered by political, social and economical conditions, is also evident in Alejandro Mancera's photographs. In his case, the adverse entropic gestures have not been generated by the artist; instead, he documents a specific one that seems to have been abundantly repeated in different social spaces. His camera "simply" serves as a witness to a subtle gesture of adversity: though invisible at first glance, Mancera's images capture different types of stylish lamps that were designed to use a specific type of light bulb, but which have been outfitted with a different energy-saver bulb. All of his images are individually uncanny as they ironically question the progress and luxury that most the spaces where the lamps have been found are meant to symbolize or even perform today. The images installed in this exhibition are black and white photographs which are distributed in different parts of the house. They were taken primarily in spaces erected by modern architecture where special lamp designs were made specifically for the house or building.



Alejandro Mancera, *Daylight* 2003, b&w photograph, 70 x 70.

If Mancera's humour takes time to emerge, *Playtime* on the other hand, a 1969, 77mm film by French director Jaques Tati, uses a very precise comedy to question modernity and technology within the context of a never constructed modern Paris, not dissimilar to one that Le Corbusier might have desired. Though the film runs two hours, the viewer needs no more than fifteen minutes to grasp Tati's intention. The movie centres on a specific character, Monsieur Hulot played by Tati himself, who with his absurd clumsiness constantly disturbs the apparent harmonic normality of the places he deliberately or accidentally passes by. For example, in what seems to be the waiting room of an office, Monsieur Hulot is filmed "trapped" inside a glass-wall cube, from which the day to day activities of the utopian city can be perceived. The only objects present inside are pieces of black leather, modernist furniture and several big black and white photograph portraits of men who perhaps were former presidents or owners of the company where the scene takes place. Monsieur Hulot wanders around this modern, austere patriarchal room and as we see him waiting, his entropic gestures, his lumbering use of space and of the objects inside, interrupt the tranquillity that the space intends to project: he repeatedly sits and stands up, intrigued by the puffy sound that the modern chairs make when he does so. He then seems amazed at the way the rational form of this furniture is altered by the pressure and weight of his body, and by exaggerating this action he makes this "perfect world" *formless*.

[See DVD labelled *Playtime*]



Jacques Tati, *Play Time*, 1969,  
stills from a 77mm color film,  
2 hours.

Duchamp's countercultural gesture was mentioned earlier as an action that can make us *unhomed*, but it may also be said to make culture *formless*: in each of his ready-mades, the forms of objects are dislocated from their referent, resulting in our own dislocation from the world as we doubt the reality we are immersed in. The subject may experience a similar dislocation when one is "inside" one of Wallace Masuko's "architectures" [*Barcelona-Berlin*. Outdoor installation. 2003]. In his case, the subject is first seduced from a far distance by the presence of a well known modern designed chair by architect Mies van der Rohe for his German National Pavilion at the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition, also know as the *Barcelona chair*, a piece of furniture designed for indoor use that Masuko exhibits here in an open space. When we arrive at this white leather fetish object, we notice that the chair is installed inside an architectural drawing of a living room that the artist has drawn in a 1:1 scale on the floor of the chosen site along with the rest of a Van der Rohe house made in Berlin. It takes that long to realize that for some time now, we have been trapped inside this invisible modern architecture, much like in the *Playtime* scene described above, or more accurately like the scenography of a more recent film, Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* (not shown in this exhibition). Masuko's work shows us how modern architecture, especially Van de Rohe's, paradoxically seduces a subject to feel intimate inside an architecture that hinders and controls the body, as if architecture were an omniscient vigilant.



Wallace Masuko, *Barcelona-Berlin*.  
2003, Outdoor installation.

If one decided to sit in the chair, however, contemplation would never be fully acquired since the borderlines between public and private that architecture physically and symbolically constructs are disrupted/dislocated here by the entopic gestures that literally cross through the borderlines of a space which isn't *comfortable*, *nor efficient*, *nor welcoming* and nonetheless *intimate*.

Inti Guerrero



Wallace Masuko, *Barcelona-Berlin*.  
2003, Outdoor installation.