

THE NEW MOMA AND THE ULTIMATE ISM: TOUR-ISM

By JL MARZO

Photos: JLM

A group of American tourists are on a trans-European trip chartered by *Economic Airlines*. Arriving in Paris, they realize that the airport is identical to the facility they left in Rome. French roads merely replicate Hamburg's thoroughfares. European streetlights resemble fixtures found in New York. Their movements are choreographed, and take place on some international stage. Monsieur Hulot, a goofy Parisian, repeatedly gets lost between the crystalline lobbies of skyscrapers, new transparent postmodern homes, and the fanciest restaurants, as he tries to make his way to his appointments.

Such was the plot of *Playtime*, 1967, a cult film by French comedian Jacques Tati. The worlds of business, social relationships, home and leisure have been swallowed up in a game of appearances normalized by the triumph of the avant-garde. This victory requires standardization of experiences and spaces, to ensure the rectitude of our expectations about things and people we will meet on the way.

Tati's film ushers in a new ism, tour-ism, the ultimate ism of modernity. MOMA can, in turn, be seen as one of its terminal manifestations: "The model for MOMA is Manhattan itself," said Yoshio Taniguchi, the new building's Japanese architect. The museum thus bets on the big trend, tourism. If modernity constructed—not without enormous contradictions—a notion of debate by means of differentiation of practices, this is no longer operative. The gradual conversion of tourism into one of the great structural axes of identity, community, city and worldview leads to a definitive state, an ultimate ism that absorbs everything that comes within its orbit.

After seventy-five years of existence, the museum had, in the words of its direction, become too small. Expansion was necessary. This decision and its architectural interpretation show the extent of the Modern's conservatism. Founded at a critical historical junction in 1929, blissfully unaware of the Great Crash, MOMA successfully positioned itself as the definitive reference through

the curatorial output of such individuals as Alfred Barr. They provided the authoritative historical map to the European and American avant-gardes, and brought it to bear on the development of the collection in the Forties, Fifties and Sixties. MOMA always projected itself as the institutional author of modern art history, and was recognized as such. If it was in the Modern, it was modern. MOMA got stuck there, however. While its collection kept expanding during the Seventies, it stopped being the reference point. MOMA missed the train at this critical junction. Its twenty-first century take over of PS1 can be seen as a muttered recognition of this failure, a half-hearted attempt to redress an embarrassing situation.

What of MOMA's expansion of its emblematic see? What, precisely, is being expanded? The remodeling has nothing to do with the rectification of outdated policies that have long crippled the museum. Nor has the building project been used by the institution to reposition itself. This may remind us of the inability of giants like IBM to face the boom of personal computing in the early 1980s. Lacking an articulate and definite exhibition policy, unable to discern the new challenges and opportunities posed by contemporary practices, the museum bets on spectacularization to maintain the brand: MOMA itself and its collection. Save the furniture while you can! This process perfectly reflects what also stifles Manhattan: they rely totally on a logo that both weighs too much, and prevents even the most urgent changes. Manhattan is such an exalted icon of modernism that it is difficult to think that it may reinvent itself. Having become its own model, any proposed experiment will look to the past, not to the future. This can also be observed clearly in the new MOMA. A collection is the MOMA; MOMA is Manhattan, and Manhattan is Manhattan: ergo, the collection is Manhattan. The expansion merely means more tourists.

Since the end of the Eighties, modern and contemporary art museums have been multiplying their exhibition fronts. Works of art are no longer the only objects on view: museum buildings, their walls and galleries themselves, are the new stars. Tourists need to be lured. New civic icons have to be created in order to secure the city—any city—its place in the new globalized skyline. If this civic impulse gave rise to huge museum building projects, it also shaped audiences and

programs. Traditional art exhibitions began to integrate new type of displays about design, architecture and technology. Architectural models, often including models of the very museum where they were shown, products of well-established graphic, industrial, commercial design firms, and the latest technological gadgets have become a substantial part of museum programs.

Politicians, publicists, corporations and urban planners thus shaped the redefinition of museums. They reconfigured them into places that could better meet their goals. Museum buildings and programs should consolidate relations with sponsors and attract broader audiences, that is, users who are much more interested in aesthetic consumption than in modern art. Displaying objects of mass consumption, museums adopted a strategy that underscores the proper role of modern art and aesthetics in global consumerism. This strategy also betrays the avant-garde's success in infiltrating society. It would be difficult for anyone to get why Apple's iPod, Aibo's robot dog, a 1945 Bell 47D-1 helicopter or Pinin Farina's 1946 Cistalia 202 GT Sports Car are displayed in the new MOMA, unless we finally understand that twentieth-century avant-garde has morphed into global consumerism and tour-ism today.

Yoshio Taniguchi's architectural assignment for MOMA focused on the remodeling of David and Peggy Rockefeller Gallery Building, and in the near future will continue in the Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building. What can be said of the building? Several interpretations of Taniguchi's work have already been proposed. For some, he has brought a zen scent to Manhattan. For others, he has launched a frontal attack on the Bauhaus and its classical influence on MOMA. Looking at the building's exterior from 53rd and 54th streets, however, we may think that we are facing just another office building. This is as strikingly clear as it is surprising, since contemporary architects are driven to turn their facades into big signatures. It is true, however, that these two streets are both narrow and difficult to handle. This makes the immersion of the new MOMA in that glassy visual environment somehow unavoidable.

Inside, the axis of the building dominates: showrooms and floors are distributed around a huge, empty cubic structure of phenomenal height. This

cube is undoubtedly the landmark of Taniguchi's design. It is its postcard. A threatening image, indeed, to any work that will stand there. Even the enormous Monet canvas, shown at ground level, is ridiculously annihilated by the space. The second floor is given over to contemporary art. Photography, drawings, architecture and design occupy the third floor. The fourth storey is mainly dedicated to big canvases, from Abstract Expressionism to the Seventies. The fifth floor is reserved for classic modernism. The top floor, a gigantic space out of any proportions, is for special exhibitions—whatever that means—although it is easy to predict that it will be a space of special glorification. Why else would it be on the top floor?

Black marble, green slate, aluminum and glass. 630,000 square feet. 858 millions of dollars. Twenty dollars charged for admission. The new MOMA is open in midtown Manhattan, and ready to receive thousands of Mr. Hulots.





