

After the opening of the exhibition “Machines for Living: Flamenco” and Architecture in the Occupation and Vacating of Spaces in Madrid, and on the eve of the project’s relocation to Barcelona, we get this call from Pedro Barragán, from the El Dorado Flamenco Circle at Catalonia’s capital. He suggests we drop by to meet Raoul Vaneigem, who has become one of the regulars at this *peña flamenca*, and with whom Pedro has been exploring the connection between the Situationist imaginary, gipsy culture and flamenco. We then get to meet Raoul Vaneigem and his partner Eleni, together with Paco Aroca who facilitated the encounter, and as the conversation and the wine flow, Vaneigem gifts us with this brief, powerful text, which is perhaps an update or a revisitation of the Situationist’s radical position against architecture, but no less charged with emotion and truth. We felt this gift had to be shared, so here it is.

DISASSEMBLING THE MACHINE POETIC HABITAT AND SELF-MANAGEMENT

Raoul Vaneigem

No aspiration is more universal—nor more universally placed under a ban—than inhabiting one's own body. It ought to be the most natural choice in the world, were it not for the fact that we are prisoners of a system that, by plundering nature and subjecting it to the ravages of profitability, everywhere denatures the earth itself and all those who inhabit it. At each moment, men, women and children are confronted with a body where the requirement to work and to earn a salary clashes with a life drive that invites one to pursue one's desires and to abandon oneself to the joys of existence.

Trying to inhabit one's body means experiencing alienation; it means having to confront an alien presence that forces us into exile, separating and expelling us from ourselves. The exuberance of the life drives finds itself confined to barracks. Through the reduction of the world to a geometry of profit we have been militarised—just take a look at the regime to which children and teenagers are subjected at those concentration-camp-like breeding establishments that go by the name of “schools”.

Except for a few rare creatures dwelling in a poetic habitat—beings whose genius, madness and aesthetic originality are celebrated all the more quickly so as to avoid further examination of the “sense of humanity” that inspires them—architects have been and still are today more than ever bureaucrats in the hierarchical structures of power, recruiting officers for the military spirit, servile entrepreneurs of the geometric reduction of customs, life, and the world—enforcers of generalized reification.

I am not simply referring here to the makers of rabbit hutches, the builders of cages where boredom leads to evil, blind violence and crime. Landscape-ruining, concrete-laying developers, like the urban planners in their payroll, are but a version of this type of “architect”—a word which in the Brussels vernacular (a city devastated by the real estate mafia like most others) is an insult that may elicit aggressive reactions.

Not without reason do religions envision a Great Architect in charge of operations, organization, planning, comfort and climate control systems in this valley of tears where the sacrifice of one's life is the price to pay for a fictitious paradise in the hereafter.

The militarisation of the body and its dwelling habitat dates back to the construction of the first city states, with their hierarchical societies, their ramparts, their enclosures controlled by priests and princes. In the name of civilization, everywhere the felling of thousands of trees is decreed, simultaneously uprooting women's privileged connection with the vegetable world in the same strike. This is the type of decision that a multinational corporation might make today. The decree I am referring to here is mentioned in the Gilgamesh Epic, dating back to the third millennium BCE (incidentally it may be noted that in consonance with the Great Architect's spatial grid, our calendar follows a numbering system prescribed by his counterpart, the Great Watchmaker).

We have never been at home within ourselves. We have always been inhabited by machineries that made us go places where we did not want to go, despite the careerism that, instilled since childhood, traps the young into aging prematurely.

All of architecture stinks of barracks, prisons and hospitals, and yet whatever is still human within us has never relinquished the aspiration to preserve—even in the most squalid hovel—a poetry tightly knit to the fabric of existence, a sparkle of life capable of embracing the old world shrivelled up by boredom.

For as long as capitalism continues to survive its own breakdowns over and over again, the desiring body aspires—generation after generation—to get rid of the working body it is tormented by. It is a long-standing demand manifested today in broad daylight. It emerges from the ruins of these vast religious and ideological constructions that have for so long governed humankind by dehumanising it. In the 18th Century, Saint-Just remarked: “happiness is a new idea”. Today, happiness is much more than an idea: it has become a new reality, an actual force struggling against its own falsification in order to become embodied in social reality, to partake in the subversion which equates it with true progress.

At our own expense we have learned that technological progress hides its cash registers under the mendacity of the welfare state it contributes to. We are well acquainted with this renowned welfare state whose arrival was portended by consumerism. We no longer want these machineries of profit that turn us into cogs. We want to dwell in the country of our desires, a free land where life itself warrants our claim to be no longer abstract men, but human beings. For, just as survival usurps the title of life, abstract man is the simulacrum of carnal man. Like small sunny islands rising from a glacial sea, we witness the emergence of zones

whose inhabitants, resisting the encroachment of multinational corporations, are setting up the foundations for a new society, building new spaces for life. Some free lands are attempting to break away from the empire of commodities and states, rediscovering the riches of individual and collective creativity.

Here and there, an autonomous, ingenious, awkward, makeshift architecture is experimenting with the reconciliation of habitats and bodies restored to the fantasy of their desires. From the cottage in the forest to the self-built houses made of dirt meshed with straw, the same song is rising: that of true freedom.

So far we have only known an architecture that mirrored man's reification. But in a world where life prospects should succeed the death prospects imposed upon us by the dominant system after thousands of years, the possibility would open for us to establish the conditions for experimental accomplishments wherever the will to live affirms its sovereignty and breaks free from its chains. We need a rehabilitation of the body and of the poetic habitat it demands. We need an architecture that can sing and dance. It will not come to exist, however, without the individual and collective will to deconstruct the machine man and construct the human being.

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