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ARTFORUM

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David Hartt, *Mutirão III*,
2013, USM Haller
table, nine hand-blown
glass sculptures,
magazine, neon sign,
41 1/4 x 70 x 59".

David Hartt
At Corbett vs. Dempsey
by Daniel Quiles

David Hartt's exhibition "For Everyone a Garden" took its name from a 1974 book of the same title by Moshe Safdie, an architect of the iconic Habitat 67 apartment complex in Montreal. Safdie's democratic proclamation more generally echoed the utopian modularity of late-1960s architecture (both "paper" and realized). In Hartt's hands, Safdie's phrase became a slogan appearing—in one of two sixty-by-eighty-inch framed illustrations by Marvel Comics draftsman Kalman Andrasofsky—as the message on protesters' signs in a march through a generalized urban setting derived from Katsuhrio Otomo's 1982-90 *Akira* manga series. The protesters, however, fill only the left hand of the composition. To their right are generic urbanites—bland couples and professionals talking on cell phones—seamlessly integrated with a modular apartment block, designed by Hartt in the Safdie or Yona Friedman vein. The second illustration depicts a man in a suit befitting a gangster or an actor of this structure. Rather than bank buildings or public spaces, it is '60s modular futurism—here indistinguishable from bourgeois modernism—that these ambiguous figures occupy.

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Hartt implicates himself in this cultural ecology by assuming a role perhaps better described as “collaborative designer” than autonomous artist. For this show, he produced a series of handcrafted multiples informed by the iconic *cellules juxtaposables* proposed by French architect Jean-Louis Chaneac in 1962. Termed “Para-Sites,” Hartt’s glass modules were fabricated using a mold computer-designed by master artisan glassblower James J. Riviello. Pod-like, but with wide openings on all four vertical sides, plus an additional opening on the top (theoretically rendering the objects stackable), the forms (exhibited here in five groupings) mimic the glassed-in urban living units shown in Andrasofszky’s drawings. At Cobett vs. Dempsey, Hartt arranged his Para-Site models on, under and around examples of USM Haller modular furniture, pieces of a system designed in 1963 for the company’s offices in Munsingen, Germany. Originally prized for their clean factory-made lines, the tables and shelves installed here bore the minor scuffs and nicks of use. Meanwhile, the glass sculptures that were fabricated for this show, each piece charmingly distinct from the other, hardly signaled “new.” Rather, both components satisfied the present-day fetish for human contact—whether evidence of handling, or of having been handmade—among the creative class. One could easily imagine both elements as décor within the absent “original” living module of the drawings: utopian design as lifestyle, the Para-Sites as ghostly recombinant miniatures invading modernist design.

Other details only added to Hartt’s panoply of historical references. For example, in the first Andrasofszky illustration, one of the protesters bears the insignia of the British anarchist punk collective Crass, whose 1978 album, *The Feeding of the 5000*, features a postapocalyptic photomontage by Gee Vaucher on its jacket cover. A speech bubble attached to the lone male figure in the second illustration quotes Guy Debord, recalling the Situationist International’s detourned comics. Back in the real space of the gallery, a neon sign resting on one of the USM tables read NEW MAN in the jagged lettering of Raymond Lowey’s ambigrammatic 1969 logo for a French fashion line. Signs mingled with signs, modernist optimism with Occupy-era rage, revolutionary impulses with their deft incorporation into the machinery of mass consumption. Another Hartt exhibition, “Stray Light” (on view through June 30 at New York’s Studio Museum in Harlem), features photographs of the now defunct, still luxuriant former offices of the Johnson Publishing Company, home of Jet and Ebony magazines. The dream of a middle path between revolution and assimilation embodied by this African American-owned business seemed absent in “For Everyone a Garden,” in which ostensibly revolutionary forms oscillated between serving as a sign of exclusivity (indeed, Habitat 67 is now one of the most expensive properties in Montreal) and haunting the places they appear with the spirit of coming insurrections.