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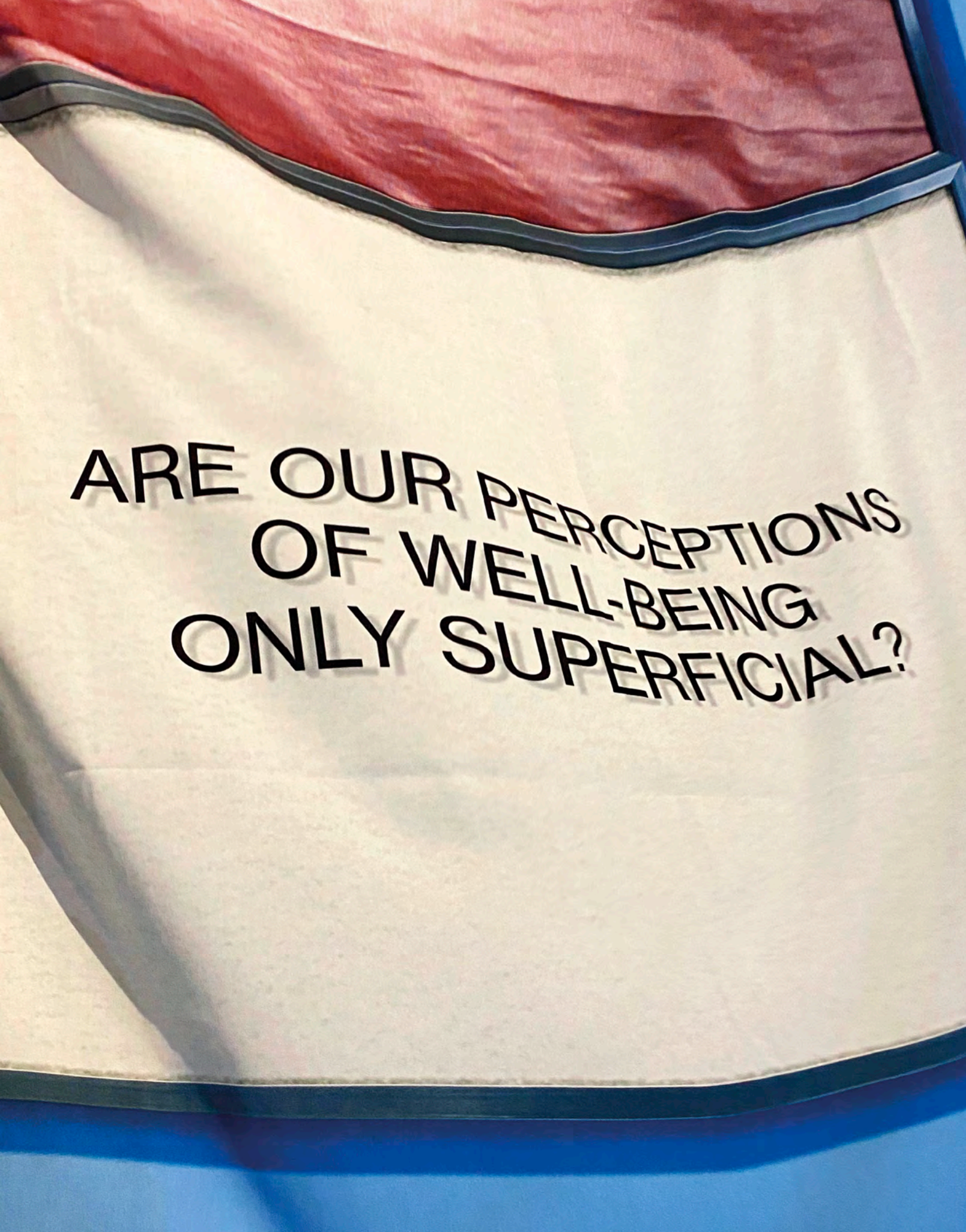
OUR HAPPY LIFE: AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCO GARUTTI

by ASEMAN SABET

FIRST PRESENTED AT THE CENTRE FOR CANADIAN ARCHITECTURE (CCA) IN 2019, *OUR HAPPY LIFE* IS THE OUTCOME OF IN-DEPTH RESEARCH ON THE MODALITIES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE EXPONENTIAL QUANTIFICATION OF HAPPINESS IN THE CONTEXT OF LATE CAPITALISM. THE EXHIBITION EXAMINES THE INFLUENCE OF CRITERIA AND VECTORS OF WELL-BEING ON PERSONAL AND SOCIAL LEVELS, AS WELL AS IN URBAN PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE. TO HIGHLIGHT SOME OF THE KEY ISSUES RAISED BY THIS TENTACULAR PROJECT, WE DISCUSSED WITH ITS INITIATOR, CCA'S CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE FRANCESCO GARUTTI.

Aseman Sabet **From the outset, *Our Happy Life* underlines the recent political tendency to develop and value happiness rankings around the world, promoting subjective and affective parameters above the economical ones that have long prevailed. If this is echoed in the way we conceive and experience our collective spaces, it is also forging our intimate relation to the world through a reinforced spectrum of happiness protocol and requirements. Although, as your research points, the economic crisis of 2008 played a dominant role in this shift, where do you situate the most significant roots of this “authority of well-being”?**

Francesco Garutti This is a complex question. The roots of course are related to the history of philosophy, social science and psychology. But a possible genealogy—to name a few milestones—in the structured attempts to measure a community's level of joy, mental well-being and happiness can be traced back to the seventeenth century. This originated with Jeremy Bentham's catalogue of pleasures and his subsequent development of the felicific calculus, and runs through John Stuart Mill's utilitarian thought to John Flügel's empirical studies and physical surveys of well-being in the 1920s. But then of course we have to mention among the key figures that have explored the field

A red fabric banner with a white section containing text. The banner is draped and has a dark blue border. The text is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font and is slightly tilted.

ARE OUR PERCEPTIONS
OF WELL-BEING
ONLY SUPERFICIAL?



during last century the American psychologist Hadley Cantril, who in 1965 published the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale and of course George Gallup, the statistician who pioneered public polling and founded Gallup in 1935. Key to more recent developments in the science of happiness are Richard Easterlin's refute of the correlation between higher income and happiness in the 1970s, and then Martin Seligman's foundation of the true "positive psychology" movement in the early 1990s.

At this point, during the 90s, more subjective indicators about life satisfaction and personal well-being were added to the traditional objective indicators about the quality of health, housing, and working conditions. And this is the shift we have been the most interested in. In the last decade, with the spread of Happiness reports and protocols, economists and politicians have begun seriously exploiting this new realm of science that is made possible through new tools that allow quantification of intimate and private information. These tools range from self-tracking devices to the direct mapping of our online behaviours, the continuous questions asked for security reasons but also to rate things and, of course, the facial recognition software. And all

these metrics, all of this data has generated a kind of new science that is able to influence markets and our approach to designing the world around us.

The substantial and widespread use of these "subjective well-being" questions is really the basis of an informational revolution. And the shift—as you mention—has become really evident and relevant on a global scale since the 2008 economic crisis.

What are more precisely the articulations of this pivotal event?

F.G. It's somehow a key date for a specific reason: right after the global financial crisis—between ethics and rhetoric I have to say—governments around the world pushed for a different way of assessing our quality of life. No longer should only the GDP be taken in consideration, but also the indicators concerned with loneliness, friendship, the sense of belonging to a community, the meaning and values we give to a place like home, the problems of anxiety and stress. All well and good somehow, but it's interesting to note how the concept of happiness and well-being

P. 58 : *Hyper Comfort, The Stay Well TM Room*, Atlanta Marriott, 2016. Reprinted with permission of Marriott International, Inc. All rights reserved.

Our Happy Life: Architecture and Well-Being in the Age of Emotional Capitalism, 2019. Installation view. Photo: © CCA.

has been exploited to face one of the post dramatic crashes of our recent era. Don't worry if you don't have any more money, what it counts now is *being happy*.

And if the study of all the sentimental conditions that transect the socioeconomic dynamics of our time contributes to a more complete evaluation of the quality of our lives, at the same time, it establishes the political agenda of happiness. An agenda that easily and very quickly became the backbone of a sort of ideology of positivity, an ideology that actually obscures the real pursuit for quality of life. There's no more choice, the agenda is pushy and compulsory: we *must* be happy. "Smile or Die"—to quote Barbara Ehrenreich.

At the opening conference of your exhibition, you defined the architecture of happiness as a way of furnishing space more than designing space, with examples of objects and gadgets that enhance well-being within living spaces. Do you associate this tangent with a major transformation of the architect's profession as such, or with an increasing attention to the work of industrial designers?

F.G. In the last ten years we've been experiencing a sort of "emotional boom" as philosopher Byung-Chul Han mentions. Emotions are tracked for political purposes—Gallup published the first Global Emotions Report in 2017—, subjective well-being questions and data about feelings are key to producing influential quality of life rankings, and emotional states have started to play a crucial role in a market in which the most decisive asset has become the "affect." In this context, emotional conditions connected to space—darkened streets, romantic views, deep shadows beneath old trees, dreams of a job in real estate, soft and non-toxic surfaces for a better sleep—construct an image that is more important for conceptualizing space than the actual design tools of the architect: proportions, light, spatial volumes, plan.

The many standards for achieving mental well-being and emotional health compiled and published after 2008 have replaced sustainability as the gold standard for design. If the leading certification for architecture in the past has been the LEED protocols, connected to energy efficiency and sustainability, today the new key certification to position your real estate product on the market is WELLtm, for example. And this type of certification, among other aspects, points to redefining the idea of "comfort" in our interior spaces. The comfort of our new happiness standards is the design of a composite "surface," a physical veil—equal parts



material innovation and self-satisfied placebo effect—that is overlaid on existing surfaces like a new and reassuring filter. It's not just a matter of objects. In this sense, you should visit some of the new refurbished interiors of the TD Bank buildings by Mies van der Rohe in Toronto, or one of the new Stay Well Deluxe rooms in the John Portman Marriot Hotel in Atlanta. Happiness standards grant your design to be successful on the market and it could be as easy as a set of bed sheets that help regulate body temperature and a lamp that mimics the sunrise. And talking about happiness and rest, in the show we displayed an interesting research that artist Yuri Pattison carried out on the sleep industry.

Happiness protocols insist that we need at least 7-9 hours of good rest to be happy. But an exponentially connected world has resulted in sleep becoming a luxury, as more people work longer hours, often across many time zones. As is so often the case, the apparent solutions marketed to counteract the ill effects of technology are often more technology. Light therapy solutions, such as Apple's Night Shift or DriftTV, mitigate exposure to blue spectrum light that hinders sleep. And Sunrise simulators can



Plogging, Stockholm, Sweden.
Photo: © Richard Blazeeley.

treat circadian rhythm disorders and artificial soundscapes may aid in meditation. This series of objects builds a picture of society's dehumanised relationship to sleep. No longer detached from capital—time spent away from the 24/7 culture of production and consumption—sleep is now enfolded into a market that treats it as a commodity.

Have you ever bumped into some of the 2019 posts by the online American star Tavi Gevinson? Tavi—a 21-year-old writer and actress—was asked by developers to live in an apartment belonging to the brand new 300 Ashland real estate development in DUMBO (NY) designed by the architecture firm Ten Arquitectos and James Corned Field Operations. She has been posting online photos of her most intimate life: messy corners, clothes, piles of shoes, a few plants on the windowsill and a long sequence of pink sunsets seen from large panoramic windows. While celebrities endorsing products online is nothing new, real estate as sponsored content on social media is a new territory to explore. How do we imagine to conceive and design an apartment in an age in which the images that we use to sell an apartment are private, emotional and just as personal as those of Tavi?

So, to reply to your question: the architect has just to reconsider her/his role in light of a different market—the emotional one—and a different set of values—the happiness agenda—to be able to contribute to the design of our built environment. Embrace or react, reshape our role and redefine what an architect does. Take a position in relation to an agenda that we somehow can't escape. If happiness is so enshrined as a normative social value, then unhappiness—not the feeling of unhappiness, of course—might act as a tool to resist and critique the issues that are masked by the obligation to pursue happiness. Can we go beyond this market and its surfaces? Can we reconceive today the less and less relevant role of the architect?

In your opinion, how will the COVID-19 global crisis affect this happiness agenda that has unfolded at almost every level of society?

F.G. The global crisis of COVID-19 might revolutionize the world today, we know. The only positive aspect I see concerning this dramatic new socio-economic catastrophe might be a push toward a new sense of awareness. I feel it might suddenly demolish these past ten years of hypocritical and compulsory happiness culture.



Our Happy Life: Architecture and Well-Being in the Age of Emotional Capitalism, 2019. Installation view.
Photo: © CCA.

We're suddenly forced to live in a state of solitude. We think we are dramatically grounded at home. Even if in constant and obsessive physical and digital connection, are we sure that we were not already alone, that we were not already forced to think about the "self" as the only condition for pursuing real happiness instead of embracing what Hanna Arendt mentioned as the only possible notion of happiness, which is that of a "public happiness"?

We have been encouraged to take care of our personal emotional well-being, we have been pushed to constantly monitor our personal physiological and psychological states, we have been pressed to control our real-time reactions to the conditions of our surroundings, from room temperature to social atmosphere. We've already been living in the era of the "self"—quantified, transactional, emotional self—, but everything was somehow mystified under the deceiving ideology of pursuing happiness—and not wealth—sustainability—and not mere consumption of the environment. But we were already alone in front of our screens. We were already alone pretending to be together. Among the many stories in *Our Happy Life* show, we explored the controversial relation between the happiness agenda and the environment. For example, we selected a case study discovered in one of the happiest countries in the world—according to the UN—which is Sweden. In 2019, "plogging" was a hyper popular movement in which runners could simultaneously improve their health and the quality of their environment by collecting litter while they were working out. Ploggers proudly track and demonstrate their contribution to their community, constantly taking and posting selfies, and the IG hashtag #plogging is one of the most used in the whole country. In this case, could we say that civic engagement and maintenance of the Earth are rolled into the vanity of the gym? Is sustainability then a collective affair or a personal pursuit?

This new tragic crisis is pushing us back to simply think about our bare life, without any falsity, without any insincerity. It might bring us to rethink the structural elements of our everyday and the profound nature of the space around us.

Francesco Garutti is a contemporary art and architecture curator, editor and writer. He currently works as Curator, Contemporary Architecture at the Centre for Canadian Architecture (CCA) in Montreal, where he recently developed the exhibition and research project *Our Happy Life: Architecture and Well-Being in the Age of Emotional Capitalism* (2019) and is now directing the "Out of the Box" project on the Gordon Matta-Clark collection (2019–2020). Among his major books is *FAIRLAND – Explorations, Insights and Outlooks on the Future of Art Fairs*, published by Koenig Books, London in 2014.

Aseman Sabet is an independent curator, art historian and lecturer at UQAM. Her current research explores the sensorial turn in aesthetics and contemporary art, with a focus on touch, sensory memory and synesthesia. Her most recent exhibition projects include *The New States of Being* (CEUM, 2019), in collaboration with Harvard's Petrie-Flom Center for Health Law Policy, Biotechnology, and Bioethics, and *Through the Forest* (MAC LAU, 2018), the first in a series of three cartes blanches invitations, focusing on intersecting epistemologies and representations of nature and history.