

Discotheques, Magazines and Plexiglas: Superstudio and the Architecture of Mass Culture

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*If design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design; if architecture is merely the codifying of the bourgeois models of ownership and society, then we must reject architecture; if architecture and town planning [are] merely the formalization of present unjust social divisions, then we must reject town planning and its cities ... until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs. Until then, design must disappear. We can live without architecture.*¹

With these words, spoken in 1971 at the Architectural Association in London, Adolfo Natalini, founding member of the Italian Radical Architecture collective Superstudio, spelled out, in the boldest terms possible, the group's withdrawal from architecture as it had previously been practiced. As a discipline that actively supported and even perpetuated existing social and economic divisions, design became an activity to be resisted. And yet, as an apparent paradox (and in a career riddled with paradoxes and contradictions), Superstudio retained the title 'architects'. Over the 14 years of their career, from 1966 through 1980, the collective of six architects proceeded to turn out a dizzying array of images and objects - from furniture to glossy magazine illustrations; from polemical essays to multimedia museum installations - all of which reflected critically on the discipline of design and its founding principles. All the while, they obstinately refused to produce a single building.

It would be easy to read this introductory jeremiad as an orthodox statement of avant-garde refusal, in line with myriad other anti-art pronouncements of a previous era. However, far more important are the terms set down by Natalini to articulate Superstudio's withdrawal: by failing to meet humankind's 'primary needs', architecture had become increasingly removed from the core concerns of humanity. For architecture to once again obtain an operative and critical agency, then, it must respond to a set of basic concerns. Architecture's battleground, therefore, must - once again - be the viscera of the everyday, the ebb and flow and minutiae of our daily lives.

At this point, however, one must proceed with caution. The phrases 'primary needs' and 'viscera of the everyday' may all too quickly conjure up images of an atavistic return to nature, and while an anti-avant-garde and regressive rejection of advanced technologies may apply to some of Superstudio's work - particularly their later works - it cannot adequately account for the group's early embrace of the systems and apparatuses of advanced capitalism.² As was so often the case with members of the artistic and architectural pre-war avant-gardes and post-war neo-avant-gardes, 'the everyday' meant engaging head-on with the mediums and modes of popular or mass culture. Indeed, as architectural historian Beatriz Colomina has previously noted, 'Modern architecture becomes "modern" not simply by using glass, steel, or reinforced concrete, as is usually understood, but precisely by engaging with

the new mechanical equipment of the mass media: photography, film, advertising, publicity, publications, and so on.³ Superstudio's work of the late 1960s through the 1970s represents a paradigmatic example of a late-modern attempt to engage with the forms and logic of mass media technologies.

To better understand Superstudio's often-contradictory work, and to gain a clearer insight into late modern Radical Architecture in general, it is important to investigate the group's career-long fixation with the architecture of the everyday, while paying special attention to their often agonistic relationship to popular cultural and mass media forms, a relationship that entailed, at times, a tentative embrace of popular culture, at others, a more analytical uncertainty towards its critical value. Ultimately, Superstudio's provocative use of popular culture forms was meant to challenge a conservative and hidebound institution owing to their arguably more 'open' or democratic nature.⁴ However, the group's evasive attitude towards mass culture also points to an important problem: the escalating difficulty in finding spaces for individual action within a late capitalist system that co-opts any available space of autonomy. In charting Superstudio's shifting attitudes towards their so-called 'primary needs', one notes three distinct moments from their career that are illustrative of their different approaches: their initial attempts to develop an architecture of atmosphere, their subsequent investigations into paper architecture, and, finally, the group's ultimate endeavours to theorize the living of our daily lives as architectural acts. Of signal importance early in their career are Superstudio's investigations into the architectural implications of atmosphere.

Towards an architecture of atmosphere

The statement of abstention quoted at the outset was one of several in which Superstudio vocally withdrew from the act of building, and it is important, before proceeding further, to contextualize this statement. To be a progressive architect in

Italy in the post-war years was to be one of thousands in a profession where there were very limited options.⁵ On the one hand, one could cater to Italy's growing cultural and economic elite, made possible by the so-called 'economic miracle' of the post-war years. To do so would have meant being complicit with an advanced capitalist system that left vast segments of the Italian population in abject poverty during and after the country's immense economic resurgence. On the other hand, an up-and-coming architect who wanted to effect change on behalf of Italy's working classes could fight for one of a small handful of commissions for public housing projects, real estate schemes that often opened up urban areas to further development by Italy's predatory housing speculators, thus playing into the same capitalist system they sought to reject.⁶ Superstudio's solution, therefore, was a third avenue: complete abstention. As Natalini stated in the same 1971 lecture quoted above: '[One] type of action is that of refusing all participation, staying isolated and apart, while continuing to produce ideas and objects so intentionally different that they are unusable by the system without becoming involved in fierce self-criticism.' Natalini continued, by stating that, 'For us, architecture is always opposed to building.'⁷

Superstudio's stubborn abstention from the practice of building finds a close parallel in Italian political theory in the mid-1960s, particularly in the writings of the autonomist Marxist agitator Mario Tronti, whose so-called 'Strategy of Refusal' had a profound influence upon Italian artists and architects at the time.⁸ In his signature work, the 1966 book *Workers and Capital*, Tronti countered orthodox Marxist positions that lionized the proletariat's productive force.⁹ The problem with stressing the dynamic and virile capacity of Italy's workers, Tronti claimed, is that capitalist forces can all too easily reorganize the means of production around these very characteristics. The innovative industriousness of the labouring class may once again find itself corralled, harnessed, and contained by capital.

Importantly, for this generation of Italian architects and artists, Tronti and the autonomists averred that the workers' response should be not just nonparticipation and absenteeism but also outright sabotage within the factory. In short, one of Tronti's solutions called for Italy's workers to remain within the factory while performing insurrectionist actions, and this position finds a parallel in Superstudio's choice to remain virally within the discipline of architecture, producing 'self-critical' objects and images.

This social and economic climate sets the stage for the appearance of Superstudio's early furniture designs. While it is tempting to see these objects as either yet more in a long line of architect-designed interior goods that bank on the brand name of a prominent architect, or a desperate attempt on the part of a new generation of out-of-work architects to go on designing something, *anything*, these are hasty conclusions that should be avoided. As the previous statements indicate, these 'intentionally different' objects were meant to *replace* building as an architectural concern - they *are* architecture and are positioned in opposition to building as agitational elements within the domestic sphere. In an important early essay, published in 1967, the group articulated the problem they saw with urban living at the time. The group's members declared, 'Apart from those fortunate mortals who can afford to build their own "house" (ideally in their own image and likeness), and those lucky enough to find one in which it is possible to live even without putting paintings up on the walls, those who live in "residential blocks" usually live in a room, a cubic box without memories, with vague indications of top and bottom, entrance and exit, a Euclidean parallelepiped painted white or distempered in bright colours, washable or no, but always without surprises or without hope.'⁹ With this essay, and this statement in particular, Superstudio shifts the attention away from the tectonics of the building itself in order to consider what everyday life is like when lived inside that container. The picture that is painted is a dim

one, to be sure: the rigid geometry of the housing block itself is carried over to the character of the interior, now seen as a mere 'cubic box'. The drabness of the interior infects the lives of the inhabitants who yearn to find some sort of grounding in a space 'without memories' and 'without surprises or without hope'. In short, Superstudio makes a claim here for the atmosphere of the domestic environment as an architectural concern. The appointments of the building's interior are not extrinsic to architecture but rather of primary importance to the discipline, especially when one accounts for the profound effects that such environments have on their users' bodies and psyches.

To counter and disrupt the dispirited spaces of Italy's nascent modernist apartment blocks the group so despised, Superstudio and their Florentine Radical Architecture cohorts sought inspiration from a seemingly unlikely source: the new chain of Piper Clubs that popped up in Italy's urban centres starting in the mid-1960s. As Andrea Branzi, founding member of the Florentine group Archizoom, described the new nightclubs, 'The spatial model of the Pipers consisted in a sort of immersion in a continuous flow of images, stroboscopic lights and very loud stereophonic music; the goal was total estrangement of the subject, who gradually lost control of his inhibitions in dance, moving towards a sort of psychomotor liberation. This did not mean for us a passive surrender to the consumption of aural and visual stimuli, but a liberation of the full creative potential of the individual. In this sense the political significance of the Pipers is evident as well.'¹⁰

Thus, in the Piper Clubs, a distinctly low culture establishment where one could indulge in one's love of popular music and consumerist excess, Italy's Radical Architects discovered spaces in which an individual could realize just the sort of bodily and psychological liberation that they deemed impossible within Italy's new, anonymous residential blocks. Note, especially, that Branzi is careful to

say that the club-goer does not submit passively to his environment. Rather, as an active participant in the construction of the situation within the club, he is freed to reach a state of radical emancipation. A state of play reigned in such spaces, and through playing, the individual's creative actions escaped the bounds of productive capital.¹¹ Importantly, for the Radical Architects, this newly liberatory architecture was realized not through novel formal mutations of the building shell - after all, the Piper Clubs were themselves large, empty black boxes - but rather through the addition of pulsing music and, significantly for Superstudio, light: acid-bright, strobing, vertiginous light.

Thus, it is not surprising that, when Superstudio turned towards the production of 'intentionally different' objects, their early research focused on pursuing the architectural implications of lighting fixtures. Lamps, such as the *Passiflora* and the *Gherpe* [fig. 1] fixtures, introduced to the market in 1966 and 1969, respectively, were fabricated in pale yellow plastic or a sharply glowing puce Plexiglas. Tables made of translucent Plexiglas, such as the 1969 *Falling Star* table, shocked the design community with their kitschy or gaudy colours. The addition of such objects to a room did not alter the physical parameters of the room itself, but did lend a different ambience to an existing living space previously lacking in character. When illuminated, the Plexiglas fixtures would stain a given room with its deeply saturated tone, temporarily transforming the space by casting an acidic light against the walls.

In addition to the stylistic mutations of the interior space, in keeping with an age of planned obsolescence, the plastic objects bespoke impermanence: an owner could abandon the object after a period of time only to replace it with another that better suits his immediate stylistic whims. In short, Superstudio indulged in the baser aspects of consumer culture by adopting what architectural historian and theorist Reyner Banham identified as a "throw-away

aesthetic', a term the author deployed to counter the assumed timelessness of International Style modernism.¹² Similarly, Superstudio likewise articulated a desire to rethink the modernist ideal of timeless beauty. In a 1971 essay entitled 'Destruction, Metamorphosis and Reconstruction of the Object', the group proclaimed that, while the desire to create durable objects remains strong, it should not be the designer's ultimate goal. They described the sorts of consumer goods they strove to produce as, 'Objects perhaps created for eternity from marble and mirrors, or for the present from paper of flowers - objects made to die at their appointed hours, and which have this sense of death amongst their characteristics.'¹³ Despite the morbid tone of this passage, the group tacitly advocates both the temporary delights that consumer goods provide and the rapid turnover of commodities as one product swiftly gives way to next year's model.

Superstudio's initial fascination with the everyday, then, was established through a sustained engagement with the sites, objects, and economic logic of popular culture and its mass-produced forms. Mass culture and shopping were, in Superstudio's mind, synonymous with the liberation of the individual. Market power led, seemingly inevitably, to personal agency. Just as Branzi's club-goer was an active participant in the construction of the events within the Piper Club, so too were Superstudio's design consumers vigorous agents in their power to alter their surroundings through the purchases they made. Herein lies the 'political significance' of the popular culture to which Branzi alluded and to which Superstudio uncritically subscribed early on. We see here the seeds for Superstudio's sustained engagement with an architecture produced by the users themselves. In the ensuing years, however, the group came to reassess this position, which essentially pitted the market for design goods (which, debatably, the individual middle-class consumer could control) against the real-estate market (where the average citizen is perceived as relatively power-



Fig. 1: Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, A. Poli), Lamp, *Gherpe*, 1968, © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

less), though as they shifted their focus Superstudio remained tethered to capitalist sites of production and distribution.

Paper architecture and the aesthetics of circulation

Beginning in 1969 and continuing through 1974, Superstudio turned its attention to a series of conceptual 'paper architecture' proposals published in numerous international magazines and journals. Such works, in which hypothetical buildings and urban design schemes appear solely as illustrations on the printed page, never to be realized in solid form, have long been an outlet for architectural dreamers who wish to foresee a hopeful future world that may come to pass once technological advances catch up to the designer's vision.¹⁴ Superstudio, though, as noted at the outset, was far less sanguine about the discipline of architecture and its utopian possibilities, and as such the group argued for this shift towards a more immaterial medium on more self-critical terms. Importantly, the new mode of expression was accompanied by a self-reflexive re-examination of their previous attitude towards mass culture. In a 1971 article, they stated, 'It became very clear that to continue drawing furniture, objects and other similar household decorations was not the solution to the problems of living in houses and neither was it the solution to the problems of life itself. ... It also became clear that no beautification or cosmetics were sufficient to remedy the ravages of time, the errors of man and the bestialities of architecture.'¹⁵ Their ultimate solution was to 'becom[e] ever more detached from these design activities' by pursuing a number of utterly unfeasible, and, in some cases, completely dysfunctional, activities. Once again, then, a further rejection of and withdrawal from architecture as it had previously been practiced became necessary.

Superstudio's position in the early 1970s also sets them apart in an important way from others within the architectural neo-avant-garde of the time. For

instance, the British group Archigram advocated an architecture of impermanence and expendability, a wildly consumerist stance that Superstudio, by this point, had come to reject. More importantly, though, Superstudio and Archigram are all too often grouped together due to their decisions to embrace utopian urban projections. The signature difference, as we shall see, is that, while Archigram steadfastly adhered to architecture's potential to reform and rebuild society through advanced technological apparatuses, Superstudio rejected such optimism on grounds that it represented a top-down, technocratic view of design and the authoritarian role of the designer as master planner. Indeed, this distinguishes Superstudio, and Radical Architecture in general, from much of the post-war vanguard that saw the megastructure as an urban planning panacea.¹⁶ From Yona Friedman to the Japanese Metabolists, one group after another saw in the megastructure the ability to provide an 'open' framework for planning that still dictates the broader means by which its residents respond to and inhabit the landscape.¹⁷ Importantly, Superstudio chooses the megastructure as a target for their most trenchant criticism.

Superstudio's primary means of critical demonstration became the photo collage through which they illustrated imaginary urban dystopias in which a given aspect of International Style modernism or modern consumer culture was taken to its absurd, albeit logical, conclusion. The result was a series of horrific urban design prophecies that brought into high relief the technocratic aims of architecture as an institution. Certainly the most famous of these, and the one that has become emblematic of the Radical Architecture movement in general, is the group's 1969 work *The Continuous Monument*. First published in the Italian architecture journal *Domus*, the project was later fleshed out in the pages of *Casabella*, the British journal *Architectural Design*, and, finally, *Japan Interior Design*.¹⁸ The Continuous Monument, as the title implies, was an illustrated



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 2: Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, A. Poli), *Motorway*, 1969, © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

Fig. 3: Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, A. Poli), *Monumento Continuo (The Continuous Monument)*, ca. 1969, © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

proposition for a single cubic structure that resembles a high-modernist steel-and-glass high-rise set on its side and extended laterally around the earth. In one photomontage after another, the cold monolith, clad in a blank, isotropic grid, is witnessed snaking its way across the landscape, appearing at once in Rome, at another time in India, and later in both the desert of the American west and across the island of Manhattan [figs. 2-4]. Its reach is global, its domination of the landscape total.

The silent uniformity of the building that resolutely takes over every bit of available land - from abandoned deserts to tourist sites to metropolises - parodies the pervasiveness of the Modern Movement: it is the word 'international' in the International Style to which the group was calling attention. When considering the repetitive sameness of nearly mass-produced steel-and-glass boxes popping up in urban centres from Brasilia to Tel Aviv to London to Tokyo, architects and critics alike worried over the loss of local customs in the face of such imposing Western culture, and Superstudio's work must be considered an important addition to this ongoing conversation.¹⁹ With *The Continuous Monument*, Superstudio imagined an ironic 'final solution' to the problem of human habitation: all other buildings would cease to exist with this singular architectural act in which both the building (and the activities that it ostensibly accommodated) achieved a level of stultifying monotony that was rendered horrific. Here, modernist efficiency has led, seemingly inevitably, to its final, pure ideal, and individual variation falls away entirely. In describing this project, Adolfo Natalini explained, 'Superstudio's *Continuous Monument* ... used negative utopia with critical intent. Metaphor, *demonstratio per absurdum*, and other rhetorical expedients were all employed to broaden the discussion about architecture. Superstudio's involvement was manifestly didactic: to analyze and annihilate the discipline of architecture by using "popular" means of illustration and consumer literature.' And, referring

to those who failed to see the irony of the work, he noted, 'Naturally there were those who could not see beyond the metaphors and treated everything as yet another utopian proposition ... Too bad for them.'²⁰ Thus, modernism's resolute search for perfection and purity was parodied in a hyperbolic display of pure monumentality, suggesting the gruesome future if Modern Movement tenets were followed through absolutely, logically, and rigorously.

It is important to look more closely at Natalini's statement, though, specifically at how it is that *The Continuous Monument's* 'annihilation' of architecture would be accomplished through the use of "popular" means of illustration and consumer literature'. What often goes unmentioned in the critical response to this important project is the fact that it incorporated mass-reproduced illustrations within the individual photomontages, while the resulting series of images was itself mass-reproduced and widely distributed through the pages of different international architecture magazines. *The Continuous Monument*, then, was shot through with the logic of mechanical reproduction and mass distribution. As architectural critic and historian Sander Woertman has argued, this was an essential component of Superstudio's programme at the time: 'The media ... were illustrative of a changing society whose problems the radical avant-garde were addressing. Printed media was the way the emerging consumer society expressed its desires; ads, news, and entertainment were communicated through a multitude of magazines and newspapers.'²¹ What needs to be accounted for, then, are the implications for the field of architecture when mass-produced and -distributed means are deployed *as architecture*, rather than merely serving as instruments through which one might reproduce images of existing architectural works.

Considering the formal logic of both the figures represented in and the mediums used to create and distribute *The Continuous Monument* leads to some

important conclusions. First, on the level of content, the sampled images often depict channels of movement. The Continuous Monument, as it wends its way across the depicted landscapes, often mimics and mirrors a variety of byways, from ancient aqueducts to modern highways, revealing how the monolith itself is peripatetic: this is a monument on the move. In one particular image [see fig. 2], first appearing in the original 1969 *Domus* article and reproduced in each subsequent version, the building is seen from an aerial perspective as it follows the curve of an Italian highway, passes by a small rural village and continues on into the hilly distance. The accompanying text cryptically announces, 'The *autostrada* (motorway) is the yardstick of the dimension: the first continuous monument.'²² Thus, one of the primary inspirations for Superstudio's unorthodox and mammoth architectural work is, arguably, not an architectural object at all, but rather an infrastructural passageway that serves to link remote locations. It is not a site, therefore, but a conduit connecting other sites.

Second, the source imagery is often taken from postcards or travel brochures, once again suggesting a subject in perpetual motion. Scanning the work's various images in its 1971 *Casabella* iteration, a viewer would feel a thrilling rush at being whisked away to European capitals, exotic Asian waterways, the observation decks of New York skyscrapers or the ancient pilgrimage sites of the Near East. If one used the structure as a thoroughfare for such a journey, it would be possible to travel from the Palazzo Pitti in Superstudio's home city of Florence to the group's imagined 'New New York' where the city's skyscrapers were to have been abandoned and preserved as important historical artefacts. All these images are culled from flyers designed to instil in viewers an intense desire to travel far and wide. Perhaps most obviously, though, the postcard itself is designed for travel, for circulation around the world via the postal service. The very nature of this small, but rigid, piece of card stock is that it does

not stay put in one location. While it is designed to represent some 'original' locale, as a photographic image, its logic is peripatetic, like the tourist who mails it. As such, Superstudio deploys the postcard and, by extension, the international architecture journal to replace the place-bound, fetishized, and auratic architectural work with a fugitive and degradable object that exists only in multiple.

Finally, the resulting images are ultimately reproduced and mailed to an international audience of design and architecture enthusiasts who are knit together into a diffuse global communications network. The production of all these reams of paper and the profusion of all these images argue for an alternative mode of 'architecture', defined not by its solidity but by its ability to communicate. Superstudio, in addition to other architects, critics and urban theorists in the 1960s and 70s, had begun to look beyond both the building and the city as the primary epiphenomena of a global culture defined by the connections to be made across cultures and continents instead of the unique qualities specific to a given locus. In short, the flow of information cannot be contained within the confines of a building's four walls, and the exchange of ideas no longer takes place in the public forum; instead it is the television, the telephone, the telex machine and, of course, the magazine that bring together individuals. The attempt amongst architects from the 1960s to today to keep pace with this amplified information flow has led architectural historian Mark Wigley to term their obsession a 'network fever'. 'Whereas buildings house function,' Wigley states, 'networks are pure function, function without shell. If modern architects are serious in their commitment to function, they will have to reduce their fixation on shells and become responsible for networks.'²³ According to Wigley, magazines and journals exemplify this 'network fever': '[...] All magazines are prosthetic extensions of their readers, far-reaching eyes monitoring a distant world for a particular community', and thus serve to knit together a given community within a

particular social network.²⁴ The medium through which Superstudio had chosen to communicate their network, therefore, was itself networked, linking together architects and designers in Europe, America, Japan, and elsewhere, thus paralleling the global reach of *The Continuous Monument* itself while critiquing architecture's continued dependence on the building as its ultimate mode of expression.

Thus, just as *The Continuous Monument* appears to critique the global marketing of high modernism, it, too, is beholden to the very logic of advanced capitalism that both enables and requires the international circulation of goods, images, and information. Superstudio used the magazine's placelessness (due to circulation) and lack of originality (due to serial repetition and mass production) to counter the place-bound identity and solidity of traditional building, thus discouraging the fetishization of the building-as-luxury good that had come to dominate the architectural culture of the late modern era. All the while, however, thanks to their slick advertisements and carefully styled images of *au courant* interiors, the glossy architecture rags they employed played (and continue to play) a central role in furthering that very fetishization. Thus, in a Deleuzian fashion, Superstudio used the very same tools of capital flow - in this case the globally circulating magazine - to critique the logic of a commodified high modernism from within, creating an architecture of information and communication to counter the design world's continued fascination with the consumer object.²⁵ By the mid-1970s, Superstudio's antagonism towards the corruptness of consumer culture reached its apex as they made the extreme pronouncement that they would reject all objects entirely in favour of a fully ephemeral architecture. However, in keeping with the contradictions inherent in this form of avant-garde refusal, their position still found them bound inextricably to the systems of late capitalist consumer culture and mass distribution.

The fundamental acts of architecture

Superstudio's career could be written as a gradual process of dematerialization in which the collective first considered the ways in which domestic objects can be used towards architectural ends before examining the critical potential of paper architecture.²⁶ In the final stage of this narrative, Superstudio ended its career with a phase of 'pure research' in which the group members argued for an architectural practice that would not be mediated by buildings or objects of any kind: the actions and rituals of daily life would be all the 'architecture' society would need.²⁷ In short, if, according to the Radical Architects, architecture should be a means by which the individual comes to realize his or her 'full creative potential', then this can be achieved not through the mediation of buildings or objects, but through a more direct engagement with the everyday itself, and no building or lamp or magazine article could usefully assist in this goal.

This reading of the arc of Superstudio's career privileges the group's own statements of abstention, refusal, and silence, and overlooks the palpable material vicissitudes of the group's speculative enterprises. For while buildings and objects may disappear from the group's oeuvre, their critiques remain mediated, and one must first attend to the material logic of these forms of mediation, forms that are borrowed from the channels of information flow and mass media culture. Of particular importance from the latter stage of Superstudio's career is a series of poetic works from 1972-73 entitled 'Five Fundamental Acts'. Originally intended as a series of five films, only two would eventually be produced. As with their previous endeavours, however, all five of the 'Fundamental Acts' were published in the pages of *Casabella*, complete with elaborate photomontages and cryptic texts. In the introductory statement to the series, the group asserted that, 'Architecture never touches the great themes, the fundamental themes of our lives. Architecture remains at the edge of our life,



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Fig. 4: Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, A. Poli), *The Continuous Monument, In the Swamp*, ca. 1969, © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

Fig. 5: Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, A. Poli), From *Life–Supersurface (Fruits & Wine)*, 1971, © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

and intervenes only at a certain point in the process, usually when behaviour has already been codified.' Due to architecture's perceived impotence and irrelevance, Superstudio proposes to consider the very foundational constructs of everyday life, as doing so, 'becomes an act of coherence'.²⁸ These 'five fundamental acts of architecture' are 'Life', 'Education', 'Ceremony', 'Love', and 'Death'.

Perhaps the best-known example of Superstudio's architecture of everyday life is found in the first instalment, devoted to the subject of 'Life'. Their design, presented both through the *Casabella* photomontages and in a short film entitled 'Supersurface: An Alternative Model for Life on Earth', proposed a networked grid of electrical wires that would have covered every habitable surface of the planet.²⁹ As this idea assumes that all buildings would be demolished (either as part of the scheme or by some unnamed apocalypse - the cause is left unclear), the world's inhabitants would be rendered nomads, stopping wherever they chose along their meandering route to plug into the grid [fig. 5]. This networked grid would provide the new migratory citizens with all their basic needs for survival, including sustenance and, if necessary, shelter from the elements - invisible domes would emerge from the web and enclose the wanderer in the event of inclement weather. While remaining tethered to the grid, users may travel the world according to their whims, yielding global citizens who are activated and empowered to make of their lives what they choose. As to the new sense of freedom that the web provides, the narrator of the short film extols the virtues of 'A new mankind freed from induced needs ... A new society based no longer on work, nor on power, nor on violence, but on unalienated human relationships'.³⁰ With greed, want, and status anxiety removed from the social milieu, thanks to the eradication of all consumer objects, individuals would be able to devote more time to interpersonal relationships, to their physical environment, and to their own bodies. With *Supersurface*, then,

architecture's functions as we know them would be absorbed into the network, buried below the surface of the landscape; what would remain visible are the daily rituals that make up the flow of everyday life. Or, as Superstudio claimed in the final statement of their 'Five Fundamental Acts': 'Our only architecture will be our lives.'³¹

As a further illustration of Superstudio's attempt to deploy network aesthetics so as to render the everyday events of one's life architectural acts, take the group's proposal from the second of their 'Fundamental Acts': Education. One component of their re-envisioned educational system is what they termed 'a project for the universal system of information exchange'. Under this scheme, education would become radically decentralized as students learn not in classrooms, but rather at any point where they have access to a computer [fig. 6]. In short, what Superstudio proposes is a system remarkably like the World Wide Web. The full explanation reads as follows:

Imagine five continental complexes each composed of a central computer, a feedback computer, relative auxiliary memory-banks and a concentrator. These complexes collect all possible information. They are connected together by a sixth complex, situated on the moon, equipped with receiving and transmitting apparatus. Four orbiting relay stations cover the whole earth with their areas of transmission. In this way, every point on the earth's surface is connected up to the network of computers. By means of a miniaturized terminal, each single individual can connect to the network described above, and thus obtain all the world's information. The hypothesized 'machine' receives all inquiries and sends answers. If the answer does not satisfy the inquirer, he can refuse it, the machine from thenceforth will bear his refusal (and the proposed alternative) in mind, and will transmit it together with the information supplied by others. In this way, the machine supplies data for decision-making without influencing the decisions

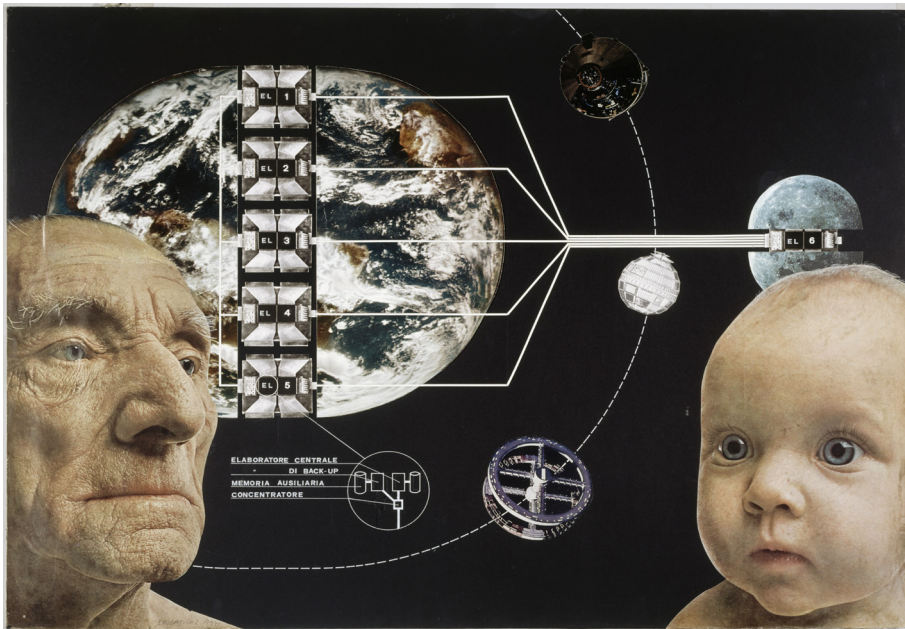


Fig. 6: Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, A. Poli), *Fundamental Actions, 'Life, Education, Ceremony, Love, Death'*, 1971, © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

*themselves: everyone is connected to everyone else in a form of expanded democracy in which education as a continuous process is consistent with life itself.*³²

Thus, individuals would no longer learn from a central authority figure (teachers would cease to exist) as information would flow to and from every single person connected to the network. Furthermore, everyone would have access to the network, making it a truly 'democratic' tool.

What is most remarkable about the system is the recursive feedback loop that it uses. Instead of individual users logging into the system and receiving the answers to their queries as ultimate truth, they also have the option to 'refuse' the information received and to send it back to the central computer, where it would be collected along with other users who have similarly 'refused' what had been dispensed to them. Therefore, what Superstudio envisioned was not just a networked web of information, but rather a prototype for what is today called 'Web 2.0', in which communities of users control the content of the information that the web distributes.³³ The most notorious examples of these are Wikipedia and other so-called 'wiki' applications, where users are able not only to look up pseudo-encyclopaedic entries but also to add to or correct them as they see fit. No central authority or fact-checker presides over a given entry to check it for accuracy; it is assumed that users will do this themselves over time. No definitive, iron-clad 'truth' results from this process, though a sort of truth-by-committee does develop as users reach a provisional consensus regarding the merits of a certain argument or explanation. The ability to talk back to the source of information is present in Superstudio's plan as well. For them, the primary result is that the machine does not influence the decision-making process, as it exists purely as a conduit for information. All told, this is consistent with their broader aim of creating an architecture

driven by the people themselves, and indeed the global information network they envision is 'continuous with life itself', a life led continually educating oneself.

As supposedly invisible, ephemeral, and transparent as this architecture may seem, it is important to note that it is dependent upon an immense technical infrastructure. Once again, Superstudio's liberatory architecture can only be made available by advanced technologies not yet available, though based on the systems of distribution and information dissemination spawned by market capitalism in the new information economy. Indeed, one of the defining aspects of the post-war economy was its own 'dematerialization', as industrial society saw its dominance give way to the growing service economy and, eventually, the information and experience economies. Undergirding and facilitating this colossal economic rupture was a vast and ever-expanding network of communications systems that greased the wheels of information flow. Thus, as much as Superstudio and their group of Radical Architecture cohorts claimed to distance themselves from what consumer culture had wrought by advocating a world free of objects, buildings, and mountains of stuff, it is undeniable that their solutions derived from the logic and systems of late capitalism.

Towards a conclusion

In the final analysis, then, while Superstudio's output over the years varied widely in format and medium, like so many of their peers in Europe and America they were led in their research towards critical speculations that would lead to a more liberatory sense of the everyday, even as the sites of 'the everyday' shifted from the pulsing music and lights of the dancehall to the glossy pages of the magazine, and finally to life's daily routines. Ultimately, this attention to the quotidian was meant to overturn what was seen as the technocratic and elitist tendencies intrinsic to the discipline of architecture by offering

an architecture for the masses and, ultimately, by the masses, whether they buy their way to a new domestic landscape or create their own as they take to the information highway. For Superstudio, it was the radical openness of everyday life itself - the fact that each of us makes of life's events what we will - that rendered it the definitive architectural act, an architecture without building, given over to the messy vicissitudes of our own actions. However, while the group of six Radical Architects could remove building from their definition of architecture in favour of a series of more 'open', democratic, and even populist mediums, they could not, in the end, disengage from the ideology and logic of late capitalism, as they so desired. The result was a complex and contradictory architectural practice that remains as frustratingly ambiguous as other avant-gardist attempts to engage with popular culture while endeavouring to maintain a critical distance from it. The ultimate question remains: how can architecture cultivate a sense of individual agency within a tightly controlled network of commodities, magazine images, and information, not to mention within the resulting society of power, authority, and control they both spawn and sustain?

Notes

1. Superstudio, 'Inventory, Catalogue, Systems of Flux ... a Statement', in *Superstudio: Life Without Objects*, ed. by Peter Lang and William Menking (Milan: Skira, 2003), p. 166.
2. These later projects are beyond the scope of this study. For examples, see Superstudio's involvement with the design collective Global Tools, as well as their 1978 Project Zeno.
3. Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), p. 73.
4. Here, I am using the term 'open' in line with Umberto Eco's theorization of the 'open work'. See his important *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
5. For a more detailed account of post-war architecture and urban design in Italy, see the excellent *Italian Cityscapes: Culture and Urban Change in Contemporary Italy*, ed. by Robert Lumley and John Foot (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2004).
6. For more on this, see Manfredo Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture, 1944-1985*, trans. by Jessica Levine (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), p. 16.
7. Superstudio, 'Inventory, Catalogue, Systems of Flux... a Statement', in *Superstudio: Life Without Objects*, p. 166.
8. See Mario Tronti, 'The Strategy of Refusal', in *Semiotext(e)* vol. 3, no. 3 (1980): 28-35.
9. Mario Tronti, *Operai e Capitale* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1966). For more on the broader impact of Tronti and the autonomists on Italian architectural culture, see Pier Vittori Aurelli, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism* (New York: The Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture and Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).
10. Superstudio, 'Design d'invenzione e design d'evasione: Superstudio', in *Domus* 475 (June 1969), p. 28. Republished as 'Evasion Design and Invention Design', in *Superstudio: Life Without Objects*, p. 117.
11. Andrea Branzi, *The Hot House: Italian New Wave Design* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984), p. 54.
12. On the critical possibilities of 'play', the Radical Architects were inspired by the writings of Herbert Marcuse. See especially his *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
13. See, for instance, Banham's statement that, 'It is clearly absurd to demand that objects designed for a short useful life should exhibit qualities signifying eternal validity - such qualities as "divine" proportion, "pure" form or harmony of colors.' In 'A Throw-Away Aesthetic', in *Reyner Banham: Design By Choice, Ideas in Architecture*, ed. by Penny Sparke (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), pp. 90-91.
14. Superstudio, 'Destruction, Metamorphosis and Reconstruction of the Object', in *Superstudio: Life Without Objects*, p. 121.
15. See Joseph Abram, et al. *Nouvelles de Nulle Part*:

- Utopies Urbaines, 1789-2000* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux and Valence: Musée de Valence, 2001); Stephen Coates and Alex Stetter, eds. *Impossible Worlds* (Basel and Boston: Birkhäuser, 2001); Terrence Riley, et al. *Changing the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawings from the Howard Gilman Collection* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2002).
16. Superstudio, 'Histograms', in *Superstudio: Life Without Objects*, p. 114.
 17. For more on utopian architectural plans in Europe, Japan and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, see Dominique Rouillard, *Superarchitecture: le Future de l'Architecture, 1950-1970* (Paris: de la Villette, 2004).
 18. The signature early text on the megastructure is Reyner Banham, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). For a more recent reassessment of the importance of the megastructure, see *Megastructure Reloaded: Visionary Architecture and Urban Design of the Sixties Reflected by Contemporary Artists*, ed. by Sabrina van der Ley & Markus Richter (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008).
 19. See Superstudio, 'Discorsi per Immagini/Speaking Through Images', in *Domus* 481 (December 1969), pp. 44-45; Superstudio, 'Deserti Naturali e Artificiali', in *Casabella* 358 (October 1971), pp. 18-22.
 20. For a particularly telling chapter in this story, see Annabel Jane Wharton's *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
 21. Adolfo Natalini, 'How Great Architecture Still Was in 1966 ... (Superstudio and Radical Architecture Ten Years On)', in *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations, 1956-76*, ed. by Martin van Schaik and Otakar Mácel (Munich: Prestel, 2005), p. 186.
 22. Sander Woertman, 'The Distant Winking of a Star, or The Horror of the Real', in *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations, 1956-76*, p. 148.
 23. See Superstudio, 'The Continuous Monument', in *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations, 1956-76*, p. 139.
 24. Mark Wigley, 'Network Fever', in *Grey Room* 4 (Summer 2001), p. 88.
 25. Ibid., p. 93.
 26. On Deleuze's concept of critique from within a system, see his and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), especially chapter 12, '1227: Treatise on Nomadology - The War Machine', pp. 351-423. This concept has usefully been extended by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), to which I am greatly indebted.
 27. I am using the word 'dematerialization' in order to parallel art critic and historian Lucy Lippard's notion of the 'dematerialization of the art object' that she uses to describe the aims of conceptual art. While it is outside the purview of this current study, a reading of Superstudio's work through the lens of post-war conceptual practices would be quite profitable. See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).
 28. Indeed, this is the narrative that prevails to this day. See, for instance, Peter Lang and William Menking (eds.) *Superstudio: Life Without Objects* (Milan: Skira, 2003).
 29. Superstudio, 'The Five Fundamental Acts: Life', in *Casabella* 367 (July 1972), p. 26. Reprinted as 'Life, Education, Ceremony, Love, Death: Five Stories by Superstudio', in *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations, 1956-1976*, p. 192.
 30. An alternative version of this work was also included in the landmark Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*. For more on the exhibition and Superstudio's contribution, see *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems in Italian Design*, ed. by Emilio Ambasz (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972).
 31. Superstudio, *Supersurface: An Alternate Model for Life on the Earth*, directed by Superstudio (1972; Florence: Marchi).
 32. Superstudio, 'Vita, Educazione, Ceremonia, Amore, Morte: Cinque Storie del Superstudio, 6.' *Casabella* 380-81 (August-September 1973), pp. 43-52.
 33. Superstudio, 'Vita, Educazione, Ceremonia, Amore,

Morte: Cinque Storie del Superstudio, 3.' *Casabella* 372 (December 1972), pp. 27-31. Reprinted as 'Life, Education, Ceremony, Love, Death: Five Stories by Superstudio', in *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations, 1956-1976*, pp. 204-05.

34. For an interesting discussion on new technologies and their interactive potentials, see Lev Manovich, 'Variability', in *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 36-45.

Biography

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