

# ② crisis.

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*Abstract*

Crisis seems to be one of the most overarching figures of the contemporary condition, at least since the Great Depression. But what if crisis – as a *krinein*, a cutting, a division, that here never seems to set – is not conceived in historical terms as an *échec*, but rather in architectonic terms, as an immanent structure?

Often evoked as a threat to stability, peace, and prosperity, crisis is in fact the one principle that via negativa founds the legitimacy of most – if not all – human orders. As French anthropologist René Girard has demonstrated, the violence that springs from what he defines as “mimetic crisis” (the unmediated clash between men and the consequent potentially destructive spiral of vengeance) is prevented in almost all human communities by the deflection of such violence towards an excluded third, a “scapegoat”, whose exclusion is enacted precisely through a crisis, a separation that characterizes him as substantially different from the members of the community.<sup>1</sup> Girard’s work has the merit of showing us that every *stable* order is erected upon the spectrum of *stasis*, of a general struggle where no parts can be *critically* discerned.

Such a structural understanding of crisis is echoed, roughly in the same years, by Italian philo-

sopher Massimo Cacciari, who developed a notion of crisis that is seemingly distant, but actually quite connected to the one of Girard. Cacciari's understanding of crisis is rather linked to the "genesis of negative thought",<sup>2</sup> i.e. to the response that Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard provide to Hegel's system and to its attempt to define a 'function' that absorbs anything that would present itself as a singularity. The critique of dialectical synthesis that negative thought carries, on the one hand shows, how the "movement of alienation" at its base is far from being universal, or belonging to a universal 'history', and is rather the expression of a part; at the same time, it reveals that the romantic *absoluteness* upon which it is built, is eventually destined to an *integration*: its claim to autonomy and separation is thus ultimately foreseeing a *construction*.<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely in the conflictual space that appears in the exclusion of a third – in the *Aufhebung*, or the positive annihilation of contradictions<sup>4</sup> – that technics and crisis can be seen as two faces of the same coin. In the 'tragic spectrum' opened up by *krisis*, by this cutting-off, technics plays its productive and *synthetic* role. "An authentic discourse on technics – Cacciari states – cannot be made unless one *theorizes* the structure of *crisis*: technics cannot occur unless based on a crisis".<sup>5</sup> Crisis is then not just an unfortunate eventuality to be avoided; "Crisis – Cacciari continues – is not a moment that the development of technics passes through, but rather it is its *immanent structure*."<sup>6</sup>

To see what a theory of crisis as a structure would look like though, we need to look at Manfredo Tafuri's 1980 book *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, whose "historical project" builds upon the framework set by Cacciari in his discourse on technics and crisis. As a historian – as someone who *writes* history – Tafuri is already aware that his work cannot consist in a mere description or representation of its object; in other words, he is aware that every written history is a *construction*, and not a reconstruction. Any claim to represent history as a description of events "as they really were" must be, therefore, denounced as an *ideological* one – what Tafuri defined since his early works as "operative" and further on as "normative" critique. But denouncing such normativity is not enough; a purely speculative criticism would be in fact perfectly *systematic* to the ideology that it tries to unmask; namely, it would still risk to be subsumed as the negative moment of a dialectical synthesis. In order to avoid such a 'Hegelian trap', in the eyes of Tafuri the historian must displace his point of view from an illusory external one and position his work and himself in the very midst of this construction: he must *produce* crisis. Crisis, as the very structure of technics, is then at the heart of historical production. "Historical space – Tafuri writes – does not establish improbable links between diverse languages, between techniques that are distant from each other. Rather it explores what such distance ex-

presses: it probes what appears to be a void, trying to make the absence that seems to dwell in that void speak." By 'seizing' crisis as a 'capitalist means of production' history is then *liberated* from any deterministic imperative, from any prescriptive and ideological normativity. What such liberation entails is that history is not simply a 'product' of crisis; once its production has been *freed* from what appeared to be necessary presuppositions, history becomes a *project* or, in Tafuri's words, a "project of crisis".<sup>7</sup>

This liberation comes of course with the bitter discomfort that every freedom entails, namely an opening for uncertainty, as Tafuri himself remarks: if history cannot cloak itself in indisputable "philological proofs", it is because it is found now on its own *arbitrariness*, it recognizes itself as what he calls "an unsafe building". "Every analysis – he writes – is therefore *provisional*. Every analysis seeks only to measure the effects that it sets into motion in order to change itself according to the intervening transformations." No consolation is to be found in such an analysis: "in history – Tafuri writes – 'solutions' do not exist." The crisis is not just the one between languages and techniques, but also "the constant struggle between the analysis and its object." As a technique-crisis, historical discourse must be turned back on itself: discourse itself is – according to Tafuri – "spoken through a series of censures, repressions, negations". Its technique

"decipher[s] only by hiding the traces of 'murders' committed more or less consciously".

The real challenge lies therefore in practicing this "language of criticism" while at the same time – in preventing it from turning into what Tafuri himself defines as "the instrument of a sacred rite" (here in an unaware echo of Girard). Despite embracing openness and arbitrariness, the role of this history cannot be 'resolved' in the celebration of its own 'criticality', nor could limit itself into a description of polysests and genealogies, for how 'critical' this operation might look. Tafuri's aim is not the one of establishing a tradition as much as the one of confronting the contemporary condition, in all its *realness*. "The real problem – he writes – is how to project a criticism capable of constantly putting itself into crisis by putting into crisis the real. The real, mind you, and not merely its individual sections." By staging historical space as a "space of conflict", Tafuri's project is at the same time profoundly architectonic and political (and political must not be here confused with politicized). The freedom from any given ground, from any principle imposed from the outside that is proper of the project does not result in being thrown into a blind "construction of the future", as in the case of the techno-scientific project; rather, the recognition of its own arbitrariness opens up the possibility of a truly *autonomous* construction. Autonomy in this case, is not to be misunderstood as

merely autarchic or as undetermined (freed from any determination), but rather as something "determined and determining": determined, on the one hand "by its own traditions, by the objects that it analyzes, by the methods that it adopts"; but, at the same time, something that "determines its own transformations and those of the reality that it deconstructs." As *projects* – as structuring techniques, able to constantly redefine their principles through their own inherent openness to the inexhaustible chances of the 'real' – history and architecture are then able to question, stem and re-articulate the apparent imperatives of 'reality'.

Cacciari's reflection on technics and crisis, and Tafuri's subsequent edification of a "historical project" can perhaps be considered as models of thinking able to overcome and re-articulate any discourse that sets crisis as a 'point at infinity', as an *eschaton* from which to extract (or project) necessities and moral truths. At the same time, precisely through crisis, the project opens up a possible space of autonomy and 'redeems' itself from a blind progression and from a contingent programming.

In 1972 (roughly the same year of the publication of Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia* and of Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*), Rem Koolhaas, along with Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe and Elia Zenghelis, presented his diploma thesis at London's Architectural Association. *Exodus, or the voluntary prisoners of*

*architecture* is a project that divides the city of London through a giant inhabited wall. The reference is of course to the Berlin Wall, which in those years was still to be demolished, and stood as the architectural manifestation of the post-war division of Europe between the US and the Soviet Union. The Wall itself – described as a “masterpiece” – is evoked as a sort of preliminary tale for the following narrative development of the project; without explicitly addressing Berlin, the text that accompanies the visuals of the project tells of a city that was once divided in a “Good Half” and a “Bad half”. Yet, these two moments that recall the positive and negative ones of dialectics are not resolved in a synthesis; instead of mediating and dissipating their contradiction, the project rather overcharges it: “Division, isolation, inequality, aggression, destruction, all the negative aspects of the Wall” become, in *Exodus*, “the ingredients of a new phenomenon”, a “mirror image” of that “guilty” architecture whose devastating force is here twisted to “positive intentions”. If in Tafuri’s project the element of contradiction was forced to “speak” in its “silence” through a careful work of critique as *delimitation* – as a tracing of limits – here those limits are found only to be exceeded. The critical point is reached through a drastic overstepping, a sort of ‘electroshock’; in other terms, the contradiction that Tafuri pointed out as a void is here forced to shine forward through its own ‘incandescence’. The notion of self-emancipation through education (*ex-ducere*, to lead out) of Enlightenment and the Augustinian credo of a man walking in the world as a stranger are faced with their specular image: the “voluntary captivity”

of this *Exodus* leads neither outwards nor inwards, it does not transcend; rather, it gives form to an immanent *in-between*.

But it is perhaps *beyond* this limit – beyond the limit as a ‘suspension’ of the subliminal in-between – and in its overstepping towards that frenzy and ‘madness’, which constitutes the noisy background upon which the limits of norm and normality are traced, that another image of such an *exodus* can be ‘sounded’. Koolhaas’ *Delirious New York* is the ‘novel’ of this voyage of discovery. At the time of its publishing (1978), Manhattan is the capital heir of the techno-scientific project of the West, the world-stage of economic progress in which finance and architecture are bound in a ‘Faustian contract’: in New York, architecture’s prefigurative role seems to be extinguished by a mere elaboration of fashions. Yet, what to critics of the modern metropolis seems to be a definitive conclusion is for Koolhaas a point of departure: Manhattan is a place of *delirium*, of overstepping of boundaries (which is the literal meaning of *de-lirare*). If the form of European cities sprung from Greek-Roman heritage of a ‘measure’ – Delphi’s *medén àgan* and Horace’s *modus in rebus* – Manhattan finds itself precisely on the opposite, on what Aristotle called *pleonexia*, unlimited desire.

Desire here is not only fulfilled, but *produced*; to Koolhaas, Manhattan is a laboratory of the unconscious. *Delirious New York* is a collection of actual historical episodes and projects that tell the birth of “Manhattanism” in a way that borders mythology – a sort of modern theogony of the skyscraper and of Manhattan as its Olympus. This “retroactive manifesto”

1 Girard, René. 1977. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

2 Cacciari, Massimo. "Sulla genesi del pensiero negativo". In: *Contropiano* (No. 1, April 1969). p.131-200.

3 Cacciari.

4 "To sublimate [Aufheben] and being sublated [das Aufgehobene] (the idealized [Ideelle]) constitute one of the most important concepts of philosophy. It is a fundamental determination that repeatedly occurs everywhere in it, the meaning of which must be grasped with precision and especially distinguished from nothing. What is sublated does not thereby turn into nothing. Nothing is the immediate [Unmittelbare]; something sublated is on the contrary something mediated [Vermitteltes]; it is something non-existent but as a result that has proceeded from a being; it still has in itself, therefore, the determinateness from which it derives." Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2010. *The Science of Logic*. § 21.94. Cambridge University Press. p.81.

5 Cacciari, Massimo. 1975. *Nuova Corrente* (No. 67). Di Alcuni Motivi in Walter Benjamin (From "Ursprung Des Deutschen Trauerspiels" to "Der Autor Als Produzent"). p.209-43.

6 Cacciari. *Italics are mine*.

7 For an overall orientation in the "sea" of Tafuri's historical project, a very precious "compass" can be found in Marco Biraghi, *Project of Crisis: Manfredo Tafuri and Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Alta L. Price, Writing Architecture (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013).

8 To this regard, if Tafuri's reference is Walter Benjamin, the one of Koolhaas is Salvador Dalí. Similarly to the way, by "exploiting" time, money "engenders" interests. Concerning architecture as a "financial interest", see my article: Villa, Riccardo-M. 2019. "Architecture as a Currency". In: *ARQ (Santiago)* (No. 102). p. 64-69. doi.org/10.4067/S0717-69962019000200064.

9 Biraghi, Marco. 2013. *Postfazione: Surfin' Manhattan*. In: *Delirious New York: un manifesto retroattivo per Manhattan*, by Rem Koolhaas. Milano: Electa.

as Koolhaas defines it, is specular to Tafuri's project of crisis: both of them embrace history as an inexhaustible source. Yet, while Tafuri sets up a stage, in which contradictions can come forth in all the tragic impossibility of a univocal mediation, against a *historicist* conception of a history that would otherwise be considered as concluded and therefore 'dead', Koolhaas understands the arbitrariness of historical space as an opportunity to overcharge it rather than emptying it. If for Tafuri any mediation was to be removed so that conflict could appear, to Koolhaas mediation and conflict are short-circuited to generate an endless proliferation – a "congestion" of which Manhattan itself is the capital. Desire and the unconscious do not hold a promise of liberation, but are in a way turned against themselves, in order to produce their own images that are *put to work*.<sup>8</sup> Manhattan's congestion and the paranoid delirium of interpretation are considered, by a 'rational' mind, a sickness to find a cure for. Koolhaas and his New York rather re-inject them in the 'patient' as a *pharmakon*, an evil that does not kill but helps keep it alive: like Manhattan thrives through the "fever" of its own congestion, the autonomy of the project is preserved not by claiming it as superior to reality, but by drowning it in the manifolds of it. Rather than a mere management tool, the project becomes the instrument of "a concrete exploitation of a conceptual ground"<sup>9</sup>: as Koolhaas himself declared, "I wanted to construct – as a writer – a terrain where I could eventually work as an architect." This "ground" is not exploited as a *resource*. Reality is not taken as a given, as a finite *datum* to either accept or refuse. Instead, the real is sounded as an infinite *source*, as an abundant and fertile ground on top of which an autonomous construction can happen. On this ground, reality stops being a mere given and eventually turns into a *project*.

# This is *blank*. Issue number

Created and published in the midst of a global pandemic, this second issue of *blank* contains an array of literary, visual, critical, and artistic contributions from all over the world individually dealing with the subject of *crisis*.

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