

C.I.I.I.I.I.I.I.V.A

VERLAG DER BUCHHANDLUNG
WALTHER UND FRANZ KÖNIG

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SUPERSTUDIO MIGRAZIONI

I

GABRIELE MASTRIGLI

FRÉDÉRIC MIGAYROU

EMMANUELLE

CHIAPPONE-PIRIOU

BEATRICE LAMPARIELLO

REM KOOLHAAS

ITW VÉRONIQUE PATTEUW

HIROMI FUJII

ITW YŪKI YOSHIKAWA

BERNARD TSCHUMI

ITW EMMANUELLE

CHIAPPONE-PIRIOU

& AURÉLIEEN VERNANT







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Edited by
EMMANUELLE CHIAPPONE-PIRIOU

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VERLAG DER BUCHHANDLUNG
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in the second volume (II). An edito's note
allows to identify them when cited
by the authors hereafter.*

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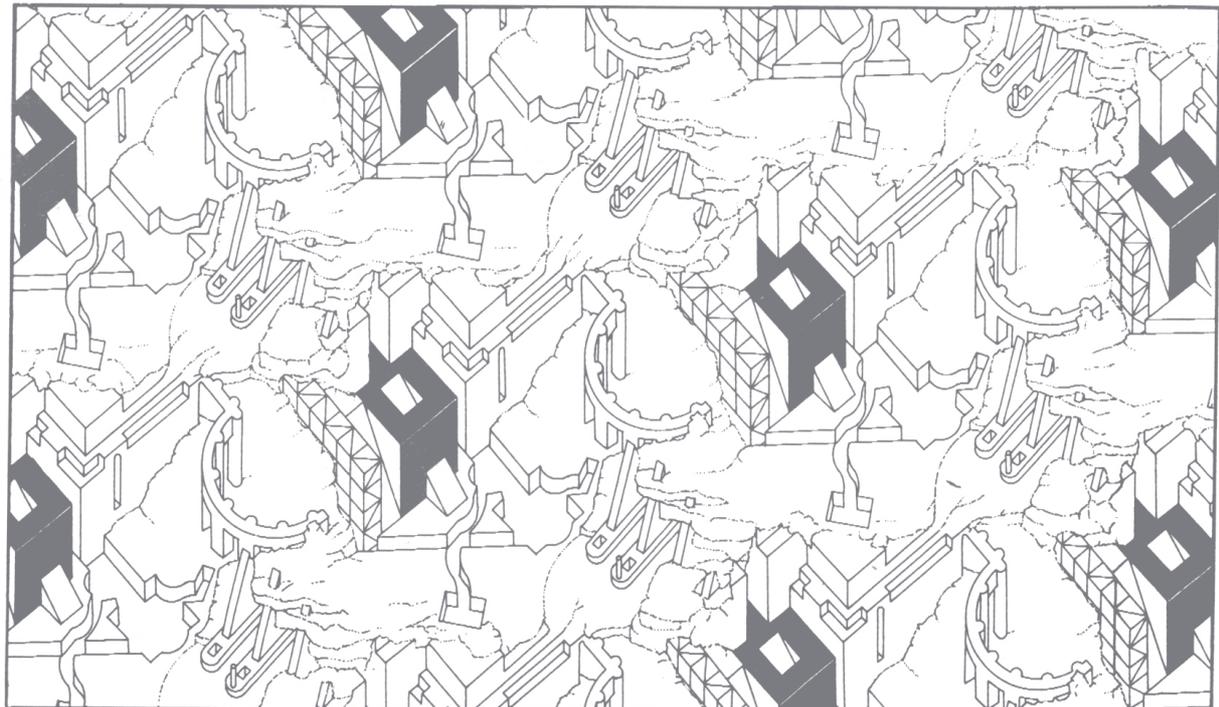
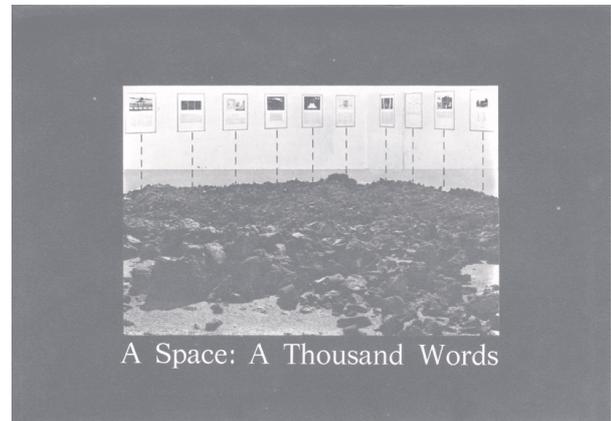
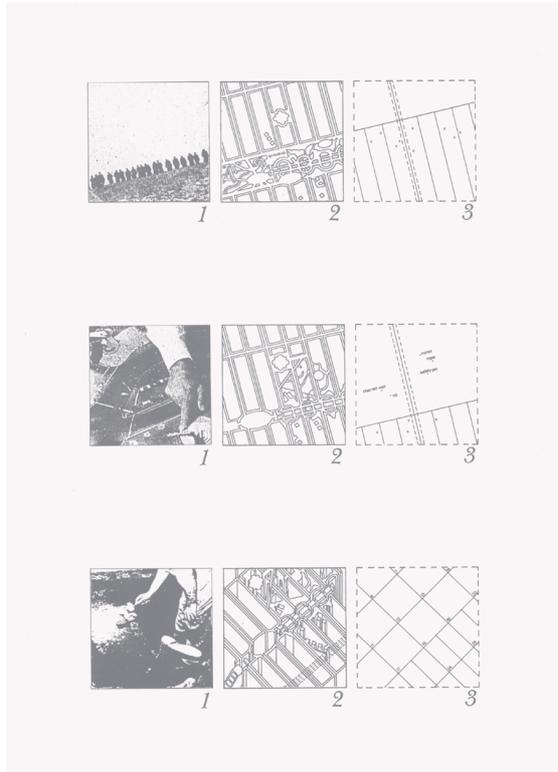
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Bernard Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts*, 1976-1981. Courtesy of Bernard Tschumi

Bernard Tschumi, *A Space: A Thousand Words*, 1975. Cover of the exhibition catalogue edited by the Royal College of Art Gallery. Courtesy of Bernard Tschumi

Bernard Tschumi, *Joyce's Garden*, 1976. Ink on paper. Courtesy of Bernard Tschumi



INTERVIEW WITH
BERNARD TSCHUMI

BERNARD TSCHUMI
^{ITW} EMMANUELLE
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& AURÉLIEN VERNANT

AURÉLIEN VERNANT

Bernard Tschumi, you were a major player in, and eyewitness to, a particularly productive period in architecture, which, after 1968, underwent profound changes and established itself as a fully fledged field of research. If we look at your intellectual journey, a number of constants stand out that were symptomatic of this theoretical upheaval: on the one hand, political engagement, which appears to be embodied in the issue of the action and the event; and, on the other hand, a practice of architecture strongly influenced by the philosophy of language, a semantic and even semiological approach to space. This interview is an opportunity to examine the historical context in which these structuring themes emerged and to explore what they owe the radical Italian scene of the 1960s and 1970s. To begin with, how and when in your career did you first encounter radical Italy?

BERNARD TSCHUMI

The encounter was twofold. First there was an actual encounter, which happened at the Architectural Association in London, where I taught between 1970 and 1975. I was 26 at the time. At the invitation of Rem Koolhaas, Superstudio had taken part in the Summer Session of 1971. For the 1972 session, Alvin Boyarsky invited Superstudio, Archizoom and a few other representatives of the Italian scene

in the wake of the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. This was an inaugural encounter and soon followed by many others. But the encounter was also intellectual in nature, of course. And I must say that I found it fascinating because it involved points of discussion that were key to that specific point in history. We should take a step back and look at what was going on at the time: A “dramatic” break occurred in the discipline in 1968, since architects were split into two camps—those who had completely abandoned architecture and those who asked themselves, “What is architecture? What is its relationship to authority, to the State?” Of course, we were rereading the Situationists Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, and we were discovering Henri Lefebvre and asking ourselves how architecture could have an influence on politics. This position and the accompanying questions were awkward, because there is no actual impact or direct relation of cause-and-effect on a project. I recall a saying from the time: “There is no such thing as fascist architecture or socialist architecture; there is only architecture in a socialist regime or a fascist regime.” Hence, all the ensuing discussions around the question of the autonomy of architecture.

So I would say that questions of politics and the city were predominant at the time. Ultimately, we didn’t even talk about architecture; rather, the questioning revolved around urbanism,

which seemed a lot more political than form or formalism. This made for a particularly productive period. We can learn a great deal through “politico-philosophical” relationships—to my mind, at least.

A. V. *How did you make use of this political and urban dimension in your practice? I believe you carried out research into interventionist forms in the public space and experiments related to the temporary occupancy of abandoned sites with your students at the AA.*

B. T. Yes, at the time I was interested in the historical study of urban uprisings and in the concept of *détournement*, which was important then. I saw that the city was generally subjected to a *détournement* to allow a new social schematic to emerge, but most of the time without visual aids, that is, without producing images. Also, I started paying attention to the work of artists who were trying to position themselves “at the margins,” trying to avoid museum constraints by freeing themselves from categories like painting, sculpture, and so forth. This sensitivity allowed for political awareness with simultaneous reflection and, at the same time, to reflect on a practice which, while not yet entirely architectural in nature, was both conceptual and material; it allowed me, if you will, to articulate both materiality and conceptualism.

That is when the incredible drawings by Superstudio, Archizoom,

and all the young Florentine teams emerged. Their visions brought out something astonishing, because they were at once negative, due to their critical weight, and positive, insofar as they opened up a new field of possibilities. This kind of duality, which consisted in being critical while making propositions, was a revelation.

I’m reminded of a statement by Germano Celant, who argued that these groups were trying to verify where the system was heading: “Where is the system going?” In other words, it had less to do with offering a new system than with checking the horrors that awaited us in a few decades, or that had already occurred. From my perspective, the *Monumento Continuo* (*Continuous Monument*, 1969-1970) was a reading of capitalism and the logic of the networks that belonged to the world in which we were already located.

EMMANUELLE CHIAPPONE-PIRIOU

Beyond the visual dimension of Radical architecture’s productions, which the critical reception of Superstudio has largely been confined to, how do you see the introduction of text and the relationship to language in the space of the project?

B. T. It brings to mind the *Dodici Città Ideali* (*Twelve Ideal Cities*, 1971). To me, that was a fundamental project which involved both a critical reading and an inventive or innovative reading, by selecting a dozen models – each

different and each accompanied by a text. The text and the image were absolutely complementary, and neither is of any use without the other.

I remember having seen, a few years earlier, Antonioni's film *Blow-up*: the first time, with the image only and no sound; the second time, with a blindfold so I could only hear the soundtrack; and the third time, for a full viewing. This idea that the soundtrack and the image are independent of each other, or can reinforce one other, is certainly something that was important to my future interest in relationships of indifference, reinforcement, and conflict.

The *Twelve Ideal Cities* is interesting because the models are very architectural. They are typologies that are distinct from each other, that we know, that we recognize; but through a slight twist, they can generate a reading that is simultaneously critical and inventive. This was very important to us as architects because it showed that we could do both things at once. The same phenomenon can be found in Archizoom's *No-Stop City* project: the architects used well-known images, like Mies Van Der Rohe's plans, but they dealt with them through a form of accumulation that makes it possible to evacuate the exercise of composition specific to the previous era. *No-Stop City* proposed something that lies in acclaim for continuity, but a critical continuity.

All this revealed to me the possibility of examining architecture using tools that were not necessarily

architectural. This practice is exemplary in the case of Superstudio, who enact a form of contamination of different disciplinary fields – literature, architecture, cinema – with scenarios often more beautiful as pictures than as films.

I'm sure you know about the famous controversy surrounding the question, "Did Calvino's *Invisible Cities* precede or follow the appearance of Superstudio's *Twelve Ideal Cities*?" The interesting point here is that we can make architecture using literature, and this, from the perspective of my own trajectory, was essential.

A. V. *Your interest in conceptual art also led you to explore relationships between architecture and performance, which was a form experimented by the radicals. In 1975 you were behind the exhibition A Space: A Thousand Words, which you organized with RoseLee Goldberg at the Royal College of Art in London, and which was a landmark in the history of projects connecting artists and architects under the auspices of conceptual art.*

B. T. One point should be specified. The word "architecture" became tainted after 1968 and was completely discredited. In 1970, when I arrived in London, one of my friends said to me, "Bernard, you certainly can't call yourself an architect here. Architects are viewed with contempt in England. Architects are to blame for those towers that old ladies get stuck in because the

lifts are out of order. No, here you must call yourself a *designer*.” The negative, and certainly restrictive, connotations of the word “architecture” meant that from 1970 on, it was no longer the word “architecture” that counted for me, but rather the word “space” undoubtedly under the influence of Lefebvre, who opened up fantastic paths forward in talking about “The Production of Space”. This meant we could talk about the hills around Florence – we could talk about everything, including with people from other intellectual fields. We could talk about space with an artist, a musician, a writer. *Les Cahiers du cinéma* had already talked about “cinematic space,” and Gilles Deleuze had not yet produced his work on the cinema. For artists doing “performances,” it was also a matter of space, of the movement of the body in space.

The notion of space was thus an exceptional common denominator. It allowed the idea for the exhibition to emerge by bringing together two dozen artists and architects, each invited to contribute a work on an imposed theme: to produce an image and a text of no more than a thousand words. The exhibition was also presented in New York. (It is still in my New York loft, packed up and boxed.) And this confluence of art and architecture led to a special issue of *Studio International* (Sept.-Oct. 1975).

E. C.-P. *To me, your comments on the mutual contamination of*

disciplines – what we call ‘migrations’ – also convey the idea that the practice of Superstudio has always been profoundly ambiguous and paradoxical, as though several intellectual programmes were at work in what they do. There is a movement towards architecture’s non-autonomy, something that opens itself, that transpires and that receives the questions and methods from other fields; and there is, at the same time, a dimension that is strictly connected to the issue of language, of an architecture that would speak for itself, through this way of processing all precedents, and monuments in particular, as generic symbols.

B. T. I believe that this phenomenon is strongly related to the era. To simplify, I’d say that if architecture went out the window in 1968, it quickly came back through the front door. How so? Through those who said, “Maybe there is something that is far beyond what the modern movement revealed, something fundamental that would be a constant, for each and every era, and therefore inescapable.” This is the position of Aldo Rossi and of La Tendenza. A strange opposition then arose between *Architettura radicale* and *Architettura razionale*, which in both cases is political. Rossi, drawing a distinction between the constants and variables that make up the city, in fact adopted a highly political position, which he framed within a clearly defined ideology. This was useful in that it erected a landmark or beacon, even if it

is a point we might oppose. Italy, which was intellectually “wealthy” at the time, is the place where this debate arose; major personalities stimulated architects to think, particularly architects of the contemporary generation and mine, who were a little younger. (At the time, five years was a huge difference.)

This is why the question of autonomy was understood differently on the *razionale* and *radicale* sides. In my view, there was no relationship between cause and effect, which, again, puts into question any functionalist notion of typology. To me, autonomy was to be understood as an autonomy of cause and effect.

More problematic was the way postmodernism took off in all directions—in simple irony, by systematically reusing Doric and Ionic columns, and then, in Anglo-Saxon countries, by exaggerated historicism. The point is that at any given moment, Adolfo Natalini himself, without seeking to return to the past, was inevitably trapped. But for me, the trajectory was different and consisted in looking for the connection between conceptual research and construction. I would never have been able to do the La Villette project in 1982 without the four or five years of theoretical research on *The Manhattan Transcripts* that preceded it. One is a transposition of the other.

A. V. *You say you were interested in artistic practices in that they offered a way to articulate the conceptual*

and the material. I tend to read your architecture as an attempt to inscribe – and to maintain as far as possible – the conceptual in the order of praxis and of construction. From this perspective, would you say that the radicals ended up an impasse?

E. C.-P. *To complete the question, I would add that the MoMA exhibition Italy: The New Domestic Landscape marked a turning point: counter-design was presented alongside progressive industrial design. Retrospectively, Adolfo Natalini would look at it as being simultaneously the climax and the announcement of the premature end of what would be known as Architecture radicale.*

B. T. The question of the practical implementation or concept or idea was raised through the contemporary debate between *design* and *counter-design*. In the Italian context, it was very difficult to reconcile something that was both political and critical and that simultaneously existed as an object for consumption. The radicals analysed it cleverly but then struggled to escape from it. It should be said that with people as talented as Ettore Sottsass Jr., it was difficult not to be fascinated. But I think that it was difficult to live with this fascination. I remember Paolo Deganello, a member of Archizoom, saying, “I write things with Andrea Branzi, but once a year, to earn a living, I draw a chair for Cassina.” And he did this very well!

How can one successfully free oneself from architecture, how can we create the conditions of a critical material production? Precisely by creating design for consumption. But this wasn't an easy attitude to maintain.

E. C.-P. *How do you understand the return to usage at Superstudio in its last period? After having worked on 'the destruction of the object', architecture rebuilt itself, away from the city, while taking on a ritual or mythological dimension. Does Superstudio's research on Global Tools, on the Extra-urban material culture sound to you as a step back?*

B. T. Personally, I've always been surprised by this attitude. I completely missed the slightly hippie phenomenon. Having spent part of my childhood in a small town surrounded by trees, I only aspired to the big city-Paris, then London, then New York. So I moved in the opposite direction. Between 1973 and 1975, I regularly travelled to Florence with my students, but we were guided by my arguments, nourished by Debord's Situationism, and therefore looking for something genuinely urban. We were interested in industrial archaeology. And an old, abandoned railway station is still a railway station; an urban wasteland is still the city...

E. C.-P. *The metropolitan dimension has always been at the heart of your work. You share this interest with Rem Koolhaas. Your*

respective works appear marked by the permanence of the grid in different ways – the grid that was certainly not invented by Superstudio, but that has left such an impression on their work. Whereas in their work it involves an abstract, purely quantitative approach – the Istogrammi d'architettura (Histograms of Architecture, 1969-1973) represent variable measurements and quantities – it becomes physical, in your work, particularly at the Parc de la Villette; it is not only an instrument for spatial planning, but also a mechanism by which to bring out quality, to generate variations in quality. Is it the metropolitan dimension of your research that prompted the use of the grid?

B. T. Let's turn back to the cultural context. The grid has always fascinated architects. Our generation and the one that preceded us were fascinated by Sol Lewitt's works and by the graph paper of conceptual artists. All this is part of a common sensitivity, which means that the Superstudio grid did not appear to us as a cultural shock. Superstudio introduced fluidity in the fact that the grid becomes limitless. They introduced the infinite and fluidity in a mystical way. And this permanently nomadic life, which you call *migration*, is not far from the spirit of Woodstock.

In my work, the grid appears in *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1976–81) – not necessarily as much as a grid, but more as an organizing abstraction. The notions of time and space are fundamental here, because time, hours,

and seconds are all abstractions. If I draw a spatial sequence, the way in which I fragment and articulate it is completely arbitrary. The grid proves useful for establishing a strategy, which can then be subjected to a *détournement*, or completely distorted. It started with the *Transcripts*, with the three squares – a way of breaking the system by the system. The notion of random movement became a vector, which is then materialized to transform the grid – a mechanism that would be explored regularly and at La Villette, in particular.

Furthermore, I was convinced that it was necessary to be freed from the constraints of the “contextual.” Numerous architects invoked the context to free themselves from the composition.

My priority was to develop work that was neither influenced by the contextual, nor compositional in the sense of involving the entire history of architecture. From this perspective, the grid proved extremely useful. The grid specifically makes it possible to study and confront all the different systems of urban organization (about 30, in total). But, essentially, what matters more than the grid itself is the overlap of movements and spaces.

A. V. *Is it in New York that you developed the Manhattan Transcripts project?*

B. T. Entirely in New York. It could almost be said that I started designing again in New York. Between

the moment when I finished my studies, in 1968, and when I produced the *Transcripts* from 1976 to 1981, I had stopped designing, with one exception: the *Joyce’s Garden* project (1976).

In London, I had the habit of giving my students texts by writers, usually short stories, for them to use – not as functional square metres, but as cultural matter, in order to translate or transpose it architecturally. At one point, I gave them extracts from *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, and I noticed that they were completely lost – and me too, for that matter. So I decided to do the exercise, like a student. I drew the project, very quickly and directly on white cardboard, because if you make a mistake with your rapidograph, you can’t erase it.

E. C.-P. *You mention Finnegans Wake, which is an important reference for Umberto Eco in The Open Work, published in 1962. Eco taught at the school of architecture in Florence and belongs to the intellectual environment of the radical movement. Is there a connection here for you?*

B. T. For me, Eco comes a bit later. My interest in a certain knowledge of literature led me to him. A book that was a great influence on me was Philippe Sollers’s *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, published in 1968, in which Sollers talks about Poe, Joyce, Kafka – writers who raised the question of writing. I loved taking a text, replacing the word “literature” by “architecture,”

and discovering that it sometimes worked.

E. C.-P. *Do you think there are contemporary resonances of Superstudio's work? Can we speak of a given legacy?*

B. T. In fact – and this is terrible – I think that memories are short. I still teach today, and it always interests me to see students from around the world and different cultures arrive. Very quickly, we see that ten years after Aldo Rossi was the centre of the world, students don't know who he was, and some have never heard of Cedric Price. It's curious, but that's how it is. They've never heard of Reyner Banham, either, and I would say that during a dozen years, no one knew who Superstudio was, prior to the small book published in 2005 by William Menking and Peter Lang. I'm convinced that your exhibition, and this book, will help rekindle interest in Superstudio. For my part, I wish to thank you for offering me the chance to reflect, again, on these important topics.

