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A[-]human Time.
A Quasi-Architectural Tale in Three Acts

1.A-human Future

Modern architecture's *ethos* is based on a well-known myth: the idea that, alongside the arts, the sciences and philosophy, architecture would have contributed in the emancipatory project of freeing humanity from poverty, ignorance and unawareness by shaping a brand new world.

Such belief has been the power-engine of all modern architectural cultures. The democratic liberalism of Frank Lloyd Wright; Ludwig Hilberseimer's, Le Corbusier's, Antonio Sant'Elia's (and many others') urban visions – whatever it is their ideological background – share a similar objective: the promise of freedom achieved thanks to techno-scientific progress.

Undoubtedly, these ideals have had a phase of decline, being – rightly so – criticized for their tendency to develop ideological fundamentalisms detached from reality. And yet, these criticisms are not a retreat, nor they are reactionary desertions. On the contrary, they are symptoms of the constant and exponential development of techno-sciences. We have never experienced any true decrease of techno-scientific means, since (as known) any "crisis" is due to newer developments. For sure, in the last decades, some might have designed kitschy arches and columns or atmospheric spaces; others might have copied the 20th century avant-garde; while some might have metaphorically referred to the sciences of complexity, but technology has kept on evolving, and on being adopted. This is so true that it seems reasonable to affirm the following: form does not follow function – that's obvious – and it doesn't follow anything else. Form has its own life: it sprouts through experimentation. Even though some might read this statement as an oversimplifying slogan, it is important to notice how form and technology do not follow each other. That is to say: technology and scientific development are not subordinated to the demands arising from humanity. Technology is not at the service of humans, nor humans are technology's servants.

This is why, today, we experience a paradoxical and paranoid situation. On the one hand, we cannot believe in a linear, natural and positive

development of humanity, since we don't trust any emancipatory human dream anymore. On the other hand, techno-sciences keep on developing. We see the advancement of new immersive and digital ecologies: the "Internet" spreads, becoming one of the means for the structuring of humans' experience of reality. The sciences develop autonomously defining new methods, new experimental protocols and new paradigms. Finally, there is a true – and deep – transformation of humans' practices brought about by new technological means: the latest generation of AI, new mnemonic systems, robotization, new processes of industrialization; they all partake in the development of new practices and new forms of thought. Because of these reasons, many argue that we are becoming a new form of humanity. And yet, today's condition is revealing something that we have always unconsciously known: techno-sciences are a proper extension of human's nature. Today's peculiarity lies in the fact that while tools become more and more sophisticated on a daily basis, the only plausible human future seems to be nothing else than our extinction[1].

That is one of the most serious issues to face the architecture of the (not so far) future and, compared to that, the usual problems of architectural thinking seem to be inconsequential. The attempts of defining axiomatic discourses, meta-prescriptions and systematic ways of thinking will prove nothing once we will be going up in a blaze of anthropocentric glory. But still, does the probable extinction to come render the theoretical and artistic debates futile? Some might say: when the human will become extinct, theory will end and the same emancipatory horizon, still missed by some, will disappear.

But if this is true, then we might even ask a more radical question: is architecture going to disappear as well? Once again, an obvious answer: since architecture is supposed to be the sheltering of humans' activities, then it will. It seems to be a tautology: no human = no need for architecture. It is almost an equation, but as in certain cases 2+2 doesn't equal 4, so the former question might require a more complex answer. We know by now that our departure from this world may not necessarily mean the disappearance of technology. A change could be happening. Architecture may be the last sustainable thing existing, working on its own and for its own sakes. The genre of science-fiction has made us believe in the future exitance of dystopian worlds. We have seen humans fighting for a piece of land to own and occupy in sea-worlds; contaminated deserts after different sorts of catastrophes; belligerent robots turning against us; or even human minds transformed in algorithms. We tend to think

[1] See E. Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Henry Holt and Company, New York 2014.

about a future humanity without shelters, or without a body; but these visions render a human who will be still around; in some form or another[2]. Our extinction renders such fictions as nothing more than naïve optimistic hopes. The extinction won't leave behind a shattered humanity, nor anything like a post-human or trans-human subject. Or, as put by Jean-François Lyotard while discussing the possibility of human thought after the explosion of the sun:

> there won't be any humanness, there won't be living creatures, there won't be intelligent, sensitive, sentient earthlings to bear witness to it, since they and their earthly horizon will have been consumed.[3]

This is true for thought after the death of the sun (despite Lyotard's hopes in the possibility of separating human thought from its body) as it is for the human after its extinction: no human at all. The kinds of x-humans we talk about (the post-; the trans-; the in-) have lost some of their features, or they have even overcome themselves, but they are still conceivable: they are sublimated in something new, but still existing. What has to be taken into consideration is that in the leftovers of our extinction there won't be anything that can be called as "human"; there will not even be any being that can remember us, at least in our linguistic terms.

In front of such a destiny, we might decide to avoid any engagement with the problem and, as long as it is not here (isn't it already?), not to care about it. And yet, matter – whether technological or natural – changes, evolves and develops by chance and according to its internal laws. Then, we might say: we need to anticipate our end; we need to face it – muscularly and directly – with the right means for winning the fight. We need to complexify our practices; we must apply the laws of thermodynamics and quantum-physics and invent evolutionary systems; we could conquer Mars or, at least, create new concepts (post-Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene[4]), or even become computational matter and so finding a para-scientific *ambrosia*. We might win, possibly but improbably.

[2] This is the case of the so-called Transhumanism: a cultural movement that believes in the possibility of using techno-sciences in order to increase human abilities and get rid of what is undesirable, like diseases or even death. On the topic, see: A. Pilsch, *Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia*, University Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2017.

[3] J.-F. Lyotard, *Can Thought go on without a Body?*, in J.-F. Lyotard (translated by G. Bennington and R. Bowlby), *The Inhuman, Reflections on Time*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1992, p. 10.

[4] See D. Haraway, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*, in "Journal of Environmental Humanities", vol. 6, 2015, pp. 159-165; environmentalhumanities.org/arch/vol6/6.7.pdf (02/09/2019).

Let's face the darkest side of this story and, while putting aside our optimism, let's assume we lose the fight. If so, then: what would be such an *ahuman* world?

Everyone knows, nowadays, that technology is not diametrically opposed to nature. As biologists, technologists and scientists have told us for decades, there are forms of technology that can indeed be looked at as forms of life[5]. The assumption is very well-known: any system can be defined as a form of "life" as long as it filters information benefiting its existence in a process of memorization and re-iteration. If this is true, then we can break the barrier between technology and nature. Furthermore, if you allow me to slightly indulge in a speculative attempt, we can even advance a more radical hypothesis: techno-scientific apparatuses might become something autonomous from our existence. So, then, let's ask again: would architecture still exist after our extinction? In this scenario, it is impossible to affirm anything but this: yes, indeed. But, anyway, it would be something different from what we usually understand as "architecture".

Until the present-time, architecture has been a human environment; it has been our hardware: a sheltering place for humans' dwelling. The survival of the human requires an environment where our bodies can live; unless we think – as some still do – about our minds as something independent from our bodily functions[6]. This has been the quintessential condition for architectural thinking. In order to be able to design, at the very least, an architect needs a human purpose to be sublimated in something beyond itself. The human, then, might be considered as the *sine qua non* condition for architecture: without it, all of the theoretical speculations we have learned to master so well seem to be pointless. And yet, architecture may overcome us, becoming a form of thought by itself. Our extinction may lead to a new form of life that we will never experience, but that we might have contributed to create.

[5] It is, as Peter Coveney and Roger Highfield have very well explained, a matter of complexity: "Within science, complexity is a watchword for a new way of thinking about the collective behaviour of many basic units, be they atoms, molecules, neurons, or bits within a computer. To be more precise, our definition is that complexity is the study of the behavior of macroscopic collections of such units that are endowed with the potential to evolve in time", see P. Coveney and R. Highfield, *Frontiers of Complexity: the Search for Order in a Chaotic World*, Faber and Faber, London 1995, p. 7.

[6] This is the case of some branches of Transhumanist theories. An interesting critique about this topic is given by the journalist M. O'Connell in his *To Be a Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death*, Granta Publications, London 2017.

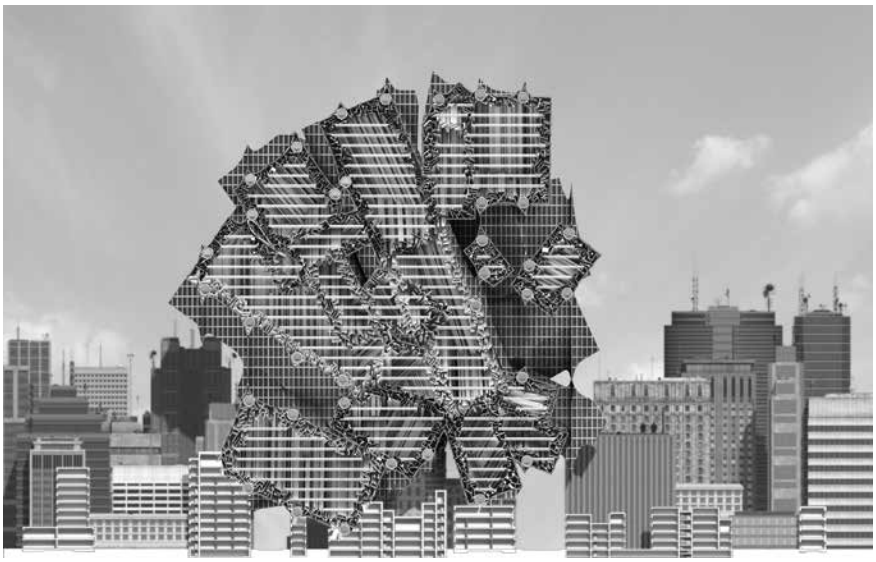

Image 01: Peter Trummer, with Sven Winkler, Simeon Brugger, Florian Smutny; *Pile City New York*

A new life will then be born: one that is different from the one we know, existing and proliferating with its own practical knowledge, its own language, its own memory and forgiveness[7].

Indeed, this is an extremization and, as such, it cannot be anything else than a clumsy, but hopefully stimulating, attempt to make a point. More realistically speaking, though, it seems to me that the problem posed by the question of the post-human and our relationship with technology – in architecture – can be framed as follows: to find ways to work on our a-humanity, due to the simple fact that our human existence is based on what is not human; the *ahuman*.

2.A-human Present

According to the vast majority among the most interesting and thought-provoking studies on these sorts of problems – whether about the relationship between the human and the *ahuman*; between nature and technology; betwe-

[7] An interesting point on this topic is made by Carlo Sini, who argues that computer-information technology cannot become a form of life because it cannot selectively forget. See C. Sini, *L'uomo, la macchina, l'automa. Lavoro e conoscenza tra futuro prossimo e passato remoto*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2009.

en subjects and objects – one fact seems to be patent: technology plays a fundamental role in the constitution of the space and time of our living[8].

Contemporary technology – it is known – performs complex operations by re-processing data: packing and storage; calculation of effects; development of future scenarios. These operations are possible, however, only if the data becomes information in a process of constant synthetization, compression, post-production and transformation.

This reality has had deep and wide-ranging effects. The crisis of aesthetics – starting with its explicit definition by Jakob Baumgarten and, then, Immanuel Kant – can be related to this problem, for instance. But this issue is very well-known, particularly in the debates regarding the arts and architecture: there is a profound and non-linear relationship – a relay – between the multiplication of media and the proliferation of languages; between the ever-expanding globalization of space-time and the multiplication of identities; between technological acceleration and the development of new political and cultural strategies (even though, more often than not, they are nothing more than inconsequential #hashtags).

Another problem seems to be more interesting, though. Digital and post-digital technologies -today's specific ways of producing and processing information – take the human away from its space-time proximity, freeing cultural and material production from its immediacy, both in terms of space and time[9]. In other words, technology complicates, estranges and re-signifies cultural habits, traditions and customs by means of hybridization and transformation. Traditions and customs – always self-legitimized and reinforced by sets of habits inserted in a frameable space-time – tend to become more and more marginal subcultures; no matter how much they attempt to resist.

There is, today, an overreaching technology that defines our world and that produces divides in terms of economies, politics and environmental conditions[10]. And this situation provokes, in each of us, specific doubts: what

[8] As the debates on the so-called "post-capitalism", the philosophical movement "Object-Oriented Ontology", the extraordinarily interesting philosophies of Michel Serres or François Laruelle; or the discussion about the inhuman condition in our relationship with the environment. As an introduction to such a variety of topics, see: B. Latour with C. Leclercq (ed. by), *Reset Modernity!*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2016.

[9] As put once again by Lyotard: "Current technology, that specific mode of tele-graphy, writing at a distance, removes the close contexts of which rooted cultures are woven. It is thus, through its specific manner of inscription, indeed productive of a sort of memorization freed from the supposedly immediate conditions of time and space.", see J.-F. Lyotard, Logos *and* Techne*, or Telegraphy*, in *The Inhuman*, cit., p. 50.

[10] This has been recently problematized by Benjamin H. Bratton and Thimoty Morton. Bratton, by introducing the concept of the "Stack": a global layering of natural, human and a-human conditions; including cities, earth, personal addresses, interfaces, users, clouds. On his part, Morton – while talking about our relationship with the environment – introduces the concept of the Hyperobject: a global condition that – like a city (London

is the role of the human in such a complex reality? how can this reality be defined? Should it be defined at all? how is it possible to face the difficulties deriving from the expansion of space-time? What is clear, anyway, is that identities no longer function as instances of cultural determination. If they do, they are presented as strict – and, because of this reason, false and dull – identarian politics: nationalism, sovranism, populism and, in the arts and architecture, any identity pretending to be a hegemonic *zeitgeist* of the day; by now nothing more than very easily recognizable marketing strategies.

Image 02: Andrea Samory, *Virtual Ikebana #001 "Phallic Laugier"*: a reinvention of the Vitruvian hut under the influence of OOO

Technology presents us a way of dealing with culture as a continuous and never-ending opening-up of new possible paths. But that has always been the case: we have always been, at least since we were monkeys, at the centre of a recursive interdependence between old and new languages; between old and new technologies. New forms of thought and new languages have always produced new technologies, and vice-versa[11]. If this is true, then, we can draft a first conclusion: any form of language is a technological, or better *technical*, mean. Writing, for instance, is a technique: it denotates, remembers, produces and abstracts reality[12]. And, in

is used as a metaphor) – frames our reality. See B.H.Bratton, *The Stack, on Software and Soverignity*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2015, and T. Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy after the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2013.

[11] In Beatriz Colomina's and Mark Wigley's words: "it is this [the complexity of symbolic design] this multiplicity and malleability itself that is evidence of the capacity to invent that makes us human, that invents the human even. The ability to go beyond what is needed, to make something different or differently is crucial. The making of useless things, or things whose use has yet to be discovered, makes all the difference." B. Colomina, M. Wigley, *Are We Human?, Notes on an Archaeology of Design*, Lars Müller Editor, Zürich 2016, p. 69.

[12] As put by W.J. Ong: "To say writing is artificial is not to condemn it but to praise it. Like other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, it is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials. Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness and never more than when they affect the word. Such transformations can be uplifting. Writing heightens consciousness. Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and indeed is in many

doing so, any technic and any language [technology: *techné* and *logos*] can produce a novelty, showing glimpses of future by starting to develop new possibilities in the present.

3. A-human Past

Allow me to sum up what said until now. As seen, technological developments and the definition of newer and newer technics tend to get us out of our traditional ways of thinking, projecting our present towards the future. Furthermore, the development of culture and history is related to the development of technology, to the problems they create and to the chances they give us. In this context, architecture has to be considered as one of the technological factors defining our present and future and that, maybe, might even overcome us.

Here lies, though, a problem: our relationship with the past and history. If there is one thing that technology has always done – from writing to AI – this is the de-temporalization of our past: the definition of myths, the uncovering of facts and their inscription in histories. And this – today – takes place in a process of constant storage of information and its access regulation thanks to the structuring of new forms of political and economic powers for which any diachronic construction of the historical time seems to be impossible.

We are facing a constant post-production (referring to Nicolas Bourriaud[13]) and reproduction – if not transformation – of our past, thanks to coding systems that are *ahuman*. On the one hand, the a-human past transforms memories and history in a *tabula rasa*. A predictable observation, for sure, but this is one of the many sides of the a-human: it goes, in the jargon of journalism, by the name of "post-truth". In this sense, the post-production of the past consists in nothing else than in the erasing of truths. What has been called here as "post-production" is something different and more profound. It is not the "fake" truth shaped by social media, nor *just* one of the various problematizations of the present's anachronisms (the Nietzsche's "unzeitgemäß", or Ernst Bloch's "Ungleichzeitigket", for instance). Rather, it is the proper synchronic and xenochronic amalgam of the past – as such – with the present and the future.

Today's past unavoidably tends to become non-linear, transforming our present in what Peter Osbourne has clearly defined, with a quite

ways essential for full human life." in W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (2002), in S. de Freitas and J. Jameson (ed. by), *The e-Learning Reader*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York 2012, p. 249.

[13] See N. Bourriaud, *Postproduction, Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Sternberg Press, New York 2002.

successful formula, as "a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times"[14]. We face a true explosion of historical linearity: traditions, mythologies, histories and fetishes are all constantly post-produced and reinvented thanks to the fragmentary nature of today's cultural narratives. Every misunderstanding, every translation and every reinterpretation is allowed. This is, indeed, a scary problem – the success of scientific and historical negationisms in the market of media is there to prove it – but it can also be a chance; even though it may be challenging.

Betrayals and continuities; reinventions and new findings; next to variations, wastes and innovations: these are the conditions that support the a-human past. We feed ourselves on heterogeneous suggestions and narratives, to the point of having severe and acute cases of indigestion.

Image 03: Andrew Kovacs, *Collective Living (Bust of Medusa)*, Jai & Jai Gallery, Los Angeles, California, 2015

4. Imagining A[-]Human Time

As easily recognizable, the "timely" trilogy that has been guiding this text until now — a-human future, a-human present, a-human past — was to suggest some questions and to put forward a hypothesis: in front of our problems, we need to get rid of all the prejudices we have been developing until recently. The issue posed by the a-human, as problematized in this text, could be synthetized as follows: given the fact that the deployment of space-time is becoming more and more an *ahuman* affair, how can we deal with it?

An immodest thesis: one of the few things that may be assumed to be able to answer this question is what we have learned to define as "the arts". These are forms of technologies – writing, painting, computing, drawing, designing –

[14] P. Osborne, *Anywhere or not at All, Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, New York 2013, p. 17.

that transcend themselves, reinventing contents, ideas and realities. That is not to say that the sciences – when they are the revelation of the unknown – are secondary, but quite the opposite. The arts, with their potential for aesthetic speculation, are as necessary as the sciences: they can represent what has no name yet, by reinventing what is known, through the creation of new contents by means of estrangement and fictionalization.

It probably does not make much sense to discuss further this issue in this context, being so intricate – and intriguing – to require a whole discussion on its own. But still, the problem here seems to be an old one – even ancient – namely, the one of *imagination.* If it is true that every technology and every language – including, but not limited to, sculpting, music or construction – challenges the very nature of our world and ourselves, then we might also want to challenge these technologies[15]. To do so, there is nothing better than the "arts", being the ensemble of disciplines enabling the displaying of uncommon realities and the unveiling of possibilities never heard, never seen, never experienced or never read before.

Image 04: Liam Young, (Tomorrow's Thoughts Today), Sill of "Location from Where the City Can't See", 2017

[15] A problem existing since – at least – the primitive times. In Georges Bataille's words: "Directly we enter the Lascaux cave, we are gripped by a strong feeling we never have by standing in a museum, before the glassed cases displaying the oldest petrified remains of men or neat rows of their stone instruments. In underground Lascaux, we are assailed by that same feeling of presence – of clear and burning presence – which works of art from no matter what period have always excited in us. Whatever it may seem, it is to tenderness, it is to the generous kindliness which binds up souls in friendly brotherhood that the beauty in man-made things appeals. Is not Beauty we love? And is it not that high friendship the passion, the forever repeated question to which beauty alone is the only possible reply?" in G. Bataille (translated by A. Wiainhouse), *The Miracle of Lascaux* (1955), in J. Morra and M. Smith (ed. by), *Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies, Volume II: Histories, Archaeologies and Genealogies of Visual Culture*, Routledge, London & New York 2006, p. 223.

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A[-]human Time.
A Quasi-Architectural Tale in Three Acts

This paper is divided in three main parts – a-human future; a-human present and a-human- past. These sections – with a fourth (*Imagining a[-] Human Time*) – are meant as thoughts on our relationship with technology. The paper starts with the anthropocentric definition of modernity, in architecture, developing the following hypothesis: technology might become an *ahuman* affair, independent from us. Consequently, architecture may become a self-regulated object while we will be extinct. The second section – *a[-]human present* – develops further the investigation by showing that we have always been in a recursive evolutionary process in which technologies and languages influence each-other, to the point that the human may be defined as the outcome of the *ahuman*. The third part – *a[-] human past* – investigates how technology redefines our past by means of post-production and remixing of information. Finally, it is discussed how one of the few practices we can focus on in order to maintain a certain cultural relevance – as architects, at least – is to focus on aesthetics in order to re-present viable alternatives to the present-state of things.

KEYWORDS**:** time, architecture, aesthetics, ahuman, speculative.