Operaismo, Architecture & Design in Ambasz's New Domestic Landscape: Issues of Redefinition and Refusal in 1960s Italy

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As the subtitle to the 1972 Museum of Modern Art exhibition ‘Italy: The New Domestic Landscape’ suggests, the work involved was concerned with the ‘Achievements and Problems of Italian Design’ during the 1960s. Architecture within ‘The New Domestic Landscape’ does not immediately announce its disciplinarity in any significant way. And yet, although this was an exhibition about Italian design, here this term includes those objects and processes aligned with architecture as well as consumer design products. Architecture’s implication within this nominated category of design is important not least because the wider political and socio-cultural terrain that the discourse of the exhibition located itself on. Curator Emilio Ambasz, in his introduction to the catalogue, identified that, ‘the object is no longer conceived as an isolated entity, sufficient unto itself, but rather as an integral part of the larger natural and sociocultural environment’. Specifically within the exhibition, the propinquity of design practices (industrial and architectural) and Marxist theories within the context of 1960s Italy must be acknowledged. Here, the research identifies the coincident restructuring the political Left in relation to capitalism and the arrangement of the arts on a disciplinary level in relation to architecture and design. Moreover, this was not simply a case of cultural and political restructuring through their own internal logic, but was rather a process of redefinition as a complex, interrelated series of investigations. As such, this paper aims to briefly touch upon the way in which key theories from the Italian Operaismo (or Workerist) movement, and particularly Mario Tronti’s strategy of refusal, might be seen to have informed elements of the practical and theoretical work executed as part of the ‘New Domestic Landscape’, with the understanding that knowledge of this particular aspect of the exhibition has the potential to reveal a further set of questions relating more closely to the disciplinary status of architecture within the included work.
The Museum of Modern Art exhibited 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape' from May 26 until September 11, 1972. The exhibition brought together over 150 domestic objects from a variety of Italian manufacturers. In addition, Ambasz displayed eleven commissioned 'environments' from invited designers and manufacturers, and displayed the winning entries from a competition for young designers with the same parameters. It is important to stress at this point that we can talk about the 'New Domestic Landscape' exhibition with an unashamedly architectural agenda for a number of reasons. Aside from the fact that Ambasz himself was (and still is) an architect, a large number of domestic products included in the exhibition were works by designer-architects. Moreover, and although in a rather conceptual fashion, the commission and design of the 'environments' followed a fundamentally architectural process of invited participants (the vast majority of whom practiced architecture) responding to a brief to design 'spaces and artifacts' that give meaning to or completely redefine the 'rituals and ceremonies of the twenty-four hours of the day.' In addition, a number of critical and historical essays by Italian architectural theorists and historians were included in the catalogue.

The exhibition examined and deconstructed the discourse of Italian design throughout the 1960s and was grounded in an awareness of the new socio-political context for design that emerged in the country during the decade. The concept of autonomy was crucial to the discourse as a way of understanding design's potential relationship to this wider context and the use of the term as it relates to both aesthetics and cultural politics is of particular interest here. Within the exhibition then, we can think of questions of autonomy as referring not only to the boundaries and negotiations between architecture and the arrangement of the arts, but also to the (im)possibility for Italian design and architecture to act independently of capitalism, despite its perceived recent period of economic growth and diffusion through newly acquired social dimensions — often referred to as neocapitalism within Mandt theory. Alongside the physical work exhibited, a large amount of supporting material was displayed, aimed at communicating some of the theory underpinning the exhibition. As a number of critics argued, grasping the large amount of theoretical content within the exhibition was by no means a straightforward process.

To briefly summarise the layout of the work: entry to the museum, visitors were directed to an 'Orientation Gallery', which provided a detailed description of the exhibition and its layout. From there, they would proceed to the 'Objects Section' where a 12-minute introduction film outlined the aims of the exhibition and its underlying premises before walking through the objects exhibited in specially designed shipping containers that doubled as display cases exhibited on the upper and lower terraces of the museum. The third section of the exhibition layout was the 'Environments Section', also accompanied by an introductory film (just four minutes long this time) that preceded the work on display and summarised the brief given to designers by the Museum of Modern Art. Before leaving the exhibition as a whole there was a final 12-minute audio-visual presentation presented in the 'Commentary Gallery', focusing on critical questions raised by the exhibition.

In his introduction to the work, Ambasz characterised the range of design approaches within the objects section according to three broad categories — conformist, reformist and contestative. The conformists, according to Ambasz, 'conceive of their work as an autonomous activity responsible only to itself; they do not question the sociocultural context in which they work, but instead continue to reline already established forms and functions.' This work was also referred to in the image section of the catalogue and orientation leaflet as 'Objects selected for their formal and technical means.' In contrast to this position, the reformist attitude was seen to be 'motivated by a profound concern for the designer's role in a society that fosters consumption as one means of inducing happiness, thereby measuring social stability.' These designers, Ambasz argued, developed a rhetorical stance in the face of the perceived irreconcilability of their role as a designer and their lack of control over the objects they designed. Within the catalogue section and the orientation leaflet, these works were further defined as 'Objects selected for their sociocultural implications.' The final contestative approach outlined by Ambasz was characterised by two tendencies: a 'moratorium' position, or withdrawal from the act of designing objects, and 'critical participation.' As the first tendency fails to result in products as such, the exhibition included objects created from within the second tendency that were 'selected for their implications of more flexible patterns of use and arrangement.'

Ambasz no doubt felt that an understanding of these objects and their basic categorisation in his eyes would lead to a more developed understanding of the environments in the exhibition. Without an appreciation of the contested role of the designer and their products in Italy during the previous decade and up to the exhibition, there could be limited appreciation of the designer's responses to Ambasz's design program that followed. The environments were also grouped into three categories: 'Design as Postulation', 'Design as Commentary' and 'Counter-design as Postulation'. In contrast to the 'pro-design' works by Gae Aulenti, Ettore Sottsass Jr., Joe Colombo, Alberto Rosselli, Marco Zanuso, Richard Sapper and Mario Bellini; Ambasz saw the invited environment responses by Ugo la Pietra, Archizoom, Superstudio, Gruppo Strum and Enzo Mari as belonging to a 'counter-design' approach to the brief.

The relationship between the object and environment categories is deliberately complex. On one level, the work was here transgressing recognised disciplinary boundaries between architecture and industrial design through the broader category of design and this situation cannot help but be complicated; on another level, Ambasz maintained throughout his work on 'The New Domestic Landscape' that it was the visible complexity of the issues within the Italian situation that lent itself to exploration in the context of more universal concerns within design at the time. In short, the categories were not designed to be mutually exclusive or exhaustive. Thus, the fact that Gae Aulenti, for example, contributed work to the exhibition that included objects within conformist and reformist categories, as well as a 'pro-design' environment, is not problematic, but rather an attempt to highlight the specific nature of Aulenti's position or positions over the decade.

Felicity Scott's paper, 'Italian Design and the New Political Landscape', describes the promise of the exhibition in detail and raises a number of key points in relation to situating Ambasz's approach to architecture and design. Specifically, her paper positions Ambasz's work on 'The New Domestic Landscape' as a critical alternative to contemporaneous American debates on autonomy versus integration. It is possible, following Scott, to draw parallels between the conformist and reformist positions Ambasz outlined in the exhibition and the American 'White' and
domination. While essentially opposing a position held by the majority of Marxists in Italy at time, this shift in attitude towards production and technology actually stemmed from the group’s re-reading of Marx’s Capital. Raniero Panzieri in particular argued that Marx himself, far from seeing production and its related machine-based development as somehow politically neutral or independent of class structures, positioned these activities well within the capitalist system as devices for maintaining its power over the working class. Wright acknowledges this point as Panzieri’s most important contribution to the early issues of the Operalista journal Quaderno Rossi.

The redefinition of key Marxian terms and the attention given to the process of production are generally accepted Operalista theories, but the movement itself was fundamentally heterogeneous. Mario Tronti’s work was central to Operalismo, yet his theoretical output from the final issues of Quaderno Rossi onwards was increasingly divergent from that of other key Operalista figures, including Panzieri and Antonio Negri. Two of his fundamentally linked theoretical concepts are of particular interest within this paper: the struggle ‘against from within’ and ‘the strategy of refusal’. The notion of ‘against from within’ refers to the ability for the struggle against capitalism to occur within the framework of recognised institutions (i.e. the political party, the union), in order to ultimately work against their perceived moderation by capitalism. This point is widely regarded as the basis for Tronti’s fundamental point of difference with Negri and lead to the dissolution of the journal Classe Operaia just over two years after its inception. In contrast to Tronti, Negri saw the party and union systems, and in particular the PCI, as having been absorbed once and for all into the process of capitalist development. As Aureli points out, however, for Tronti the PCI’s moderation by capitalism was not irreversible and was, in fact, the only way for the working class to achieve autonomy and perhaps eventually take power.

The second point of interest within Tronti’s work is the strategic notion of workers negating productivity in order to prevent capital from functioning, or having the ability to reproduce itself and extract surplus value from labour. In his paper, ‘The Strategy of Refusal’ (1965), Tronti, within the terms of his reversal of the capital-working class relationship, asserts by way of Adam Smith and Marx, that the political power of the workers is ultimately derived from the ‘productive power of wage labour’ and can be contrasted against the largely social power of capitalism. Further, because according to Tronti, capital relies on production, society then becomes production-orientated as a whole by way of capital’s domination, giving workers the power to disrupt the functioning of society through refusal of work from within the factory, as such.

Even at first glance, Ambasz’s contestative category within ‘The New Domestic Landscape’ seems to possess some basic links to Trontilian Operalista theory. Firstly, if we can conceive of the act of production in its broadest terms to include design phases, then both tendencies within the contestative approach (withdrawal and critical participation) make use of the notion of refusal within the act of production. Specifically and in negative terms we could think of the two contestative tendencies as the lack of producing an object and the lack of producing a finite object. In both cases, the designers’ actions attempt to contest capitalism’s conventional mode of consumption and distribution; either by creating work incapable of capitalist distribution in the traditional sense, or involving the user in the act of forming and
reforming the product. In both cases, as with Tronti’s worker, the designer is seen to possess the power to temporarily “halt” capital’s progress by the refusal to produce or to totally produce.

While Scott’s work draws attention to Ambasz’s implicit advocacy of a critically engaged contestative approach to design outlined in supporting material for ‘The New Domestic Landscape’, she also goes on to discuss the apparent links between Autonomist Marxism theory in relation to the ‘radical’ architects featured in the ‘Environments’ section of the exhibition, touching on Tronti and Negri’s work. Although Scott is right to suggest that the theories of Italy’s New Left might be much more central to this type of ‘radical architecture’ than Manfredo Tafuri acknowledged when he dismissed these practices as little more than vulgarised Marxism, one could contend that the situation may in fact be even more complex than this.24

Scott makes mention of Tronti’s contribution to the New Left in the form of his strategy of refusal and the re-appropriation of systems in opposing capitalism, but she makes no mention of Operaismo as such. Rather, the paper briefly acknowledges Tronti’s split with Negri without mention of the important divergence of their work following this point and refers only to Autonomia in discussing Autonomist Marxist theory. This apparently minor point actually has significant repercussions for a discussion of ‘The New Domestic Landscape’ in relation to these theories, not least because, as we have seen, Negri did not support Tronti’s theory that existing party and institutional systems could be re-organised against capital.

This leads to an important point about Operaismo and Autonomia, namely, that the two movements were actually radically different in terms of their relationship with existing communist theory. Autonomia did not, in fact, share Operaismo’s communist theoretical framework, but rather, positioned itself as anti-communist, as Aureli asserts, ‘to the point of conflating itself with the many forms of post-political subjectivity that emerged within the crisis of political representation of the 1980s’.25 So, while Negri’s theories can be considered Autonomist, Tronti’s earlier Operaismo-based theories are something quite different, to the point of being incompatible with this later work.

Some repercussions of this key difference between Tronti and Negri in terms of ‘The New Domestic Landscape’ are revealed through a more sustained discussion of Trontian refusal within the exhibited work – in particular the ‘Counter-designs’ of the ‘Environments’ section. The most direct link to Operaismo here was in the response by the group of architects known as Gruppo Strum (Strum Group) from Turin. The group’s contribution to the ‘Environments’ section was devoid of a tangible design as such and they instead used their space as a format for distributing three types of ‘photo-stories’ (fotoromanzi) prepared in relation to the design program that visitors were encouraged to take with them.26 The themes for each of the ‘photo-stories’ reflected Gruppo Strum’s main interests at the time of the exhibition: ‘The struggle for housing’, ‘Utopia’ and ‘The mediatory city’. The content of the contribution by the group clearly refers to the overall approach of Operaismo. For example, within the ‘Utopia’ fotoromanzo, the group chronologically listed what they considered to be the most important journals of the new Italian Left, beginning with Quaderni Rossi, Classe Operaia and Contropiano. The ‘Mediatory City’ photo-story detailed an approach to forming new political spaces within the city that ultimately would see the ‘building up of communism’ as an alternative to capitalist domination, which the group (like Operaismo) see as inherently linked to capitalist technological development as a device for the continued control of the proletariat.27

Milanese designer Enzo Mari refused to create a space at all within the exhibition, instead presenting a written piece.28 Of the eleven responses to the design program, perhaps this is the most obvious act of refusal.29 In this work, Mari underlined the importance of communication as the only valid response to the current conditions under capitalism. Although not explicitly discussing theories of the new Left in the same way as Gruppo Strum, the article is explicitly Marxist in tone, referring to ‘the will of the proletariat’, ‘superstructures’ and ‘dominating classes’.30

Ugo La Pietra’s response did incorporate an element of design, however the result was not, strictly speaking, an individual designed environment in the manner of the work in the ‘pro-design’ category. Instead, he presented drawings and text related to his concept for a ‘Domicile Cell’, the object of which was to provide a way to make use of communication technologies for the wider population by way of isolating their technical function and opening them up to transmit and receive information much more freely.31 For La Pietra, the ‘design’ or object presence of these communication devices (televisions, telephones, video and sound recorders) was what allowed them to create a ‘barrier… between us and reality’.32 The Domicile Cell proposed a radical reinterpretation of these devices, stripping their commodity factor away by concealing them within the cell rather than displaying them as objects capable of being connected to status. The project imagined a new freedom of information for users, meaning that the cell could allow everyone to participate or intervene in the act of communication.33

In suggesting that communication can somehow be re-appropriated for the inhabitants of the city instead of controlled by a few, La Pietra’s concept is theoretically in line with Tronti’s notion of working against a system from within. Understandably, Tronti was talking about the role of the Italian Communist Party in bringing about change, while La Pietra was focusing on participation in communication within the city but, importantly, both are discussing a way of reclaiming a perceived negative or controlling aspect of society at that time in order to empower the general population. Secondly, and returning to Ambasz’s notion of contestative critical participation, La Pietra’s work adheres to a strategy of refusal in that the ‘Domicile Cell’ refuses to present an individual designed environment in favour of outlining a concept for user engagement.

If, above and beyond any explicit connection between Operaismo theory and these three environments from ‘The New Domestic Landscape’, there is a thread of ‘refusal’ running through the work, what does this mean when we begin to consider the status of the work within its more immediate context of the arrangement of the arts and disciplinarity? For example, broadly speaking and in choosing to present a written response to brief, the Gruppo Strum environment approached the design program in a similar way to that of designer Enzo Mari. The differences between Mari and Gruppo Strum are in one sense disciplinary, in that Mari saw his role as a designer of objects to be hopelessly bound up with capitalist consumption at that point in time, while Gruppo Strum, as architects, saw a possibility for executing work as a proletarian ‘technical force… against the organization of work in the specific fields in which they operate’.34 The key similarity between the group and Mari is the fact that, regardless
on their other output at the time, neither chose to design to work within their discipline for the exhibition environment.

Either these written works by Gruppo Strum and Mari are an ultimate Trontiian act of refusal, or, taking considerable liberty with Tronti's theory, this complete withdrawal could be viewed as a form of isolation from the potential to disrupt capital. That is, both Gruppo Strum's and Mari's approach removes them from their particular disciplinary role as such and perhaps even prevents the kind of 'within and against' strategy that formed the basis of Tronti's notion of refusal. It could be that, not unlike Tronti's workers, both Gruppo Strum's and Mari's power as 'designers' within the context of the exhibition lies within a tactical approach to their work and thus their ability to refuse to accept work as a designer. By only writing here and choosing not to work within their discipline, are both perhaps no longer acting as designers refusing design work as such and, if so, is there no longer a direct action? Or, could we still think of this work as a direct action, but perhaps just on Negri's terms rather than Tronti's, meaning outside rather than within the system?

La Pietra's refusal was in the design of an individual manifestation of a concept. To be clear, instead of presenting a design solution as such, he designed a representation of a concept that could not be confused as an actual solution. The 'Domicile Cell' as La Pietra shows it has a form, but no materials and often no representation of material thickness. It never appears on a site or within a context, apart from the diagrammatic collage that show 'comprehension models' in different communication scenarios. Unlike Mari and Gruppo Strum's work, in La Pietra's Domicile Cell we have a design, but not necessarily any clearer disciplinary status for the work. And so this nevertheless returns us to the earlier questions: does this work remain an act of refusal in Tronti's terms, or does obscuring the disciplinarity of the work involved here also obscure the potential to engage in this form of 'refusal'?

Scott's examination of the exhibition does not explicitly deal with a disciplinary concept of autonomy in this sense or those potential acts of refusal by Gruppo Strum and Mari. Rather, she suggests that Ambasz saw in the counter-design work evidence of the 'contestative' critical participation approach, that appeared to make use of a form of a Trontian 'within and against' strategy. For Scott, the work, and particularly the environments by La Pietra, Archizoom and Superstudio fitted into Ambasz's definition of this approach by presenting 'strategies for operating within the existing socioeconomic and technological systems, while aiming to transform them.' However, in a disciplinary sense, these works are not taking action against from within because they are effectively outside of recognised practice. Bearing in mind this notion of the work potentially forfeiting its right to take part in a Trontian process of refusal as such, could this approach be considered (in Ambasz's own terms) as more of an example of ‘passive abstention’ or withdrawal characteristic of the first tendency within a contestative approach, rather than critical participation?

There are arguably tensions between disciplinary and political strategies within the work of 'The New Domestic Landscape'. but recognising this ultimately leads to further questions, namely: what happens when aspects of redefinition and refusal in the political system overlap with redefinition and refusal in a cultural or disciplinary system? These questions form part of a much larger analysis of the exhibition and Autonomist Marxist theory in Italy during the 1960s, the terms of which have only been briefly touched upon here.

Endnotes

1 Some figures well-known outside of Italy include: Ettore Sottsass Jr., Marco Zanuso, Mario Bellini, Archizoom, Superstudio, Gruppo Strum, Gae Aulenti, Ugo La Pietra, Cini Boeri and Ignazio Gardella.


3 Among them Paolo Portoghesi, Leonardo Bovolo, Vittorio Gregotti, Alessandro Mendini and Manfredo Tafuri.

4 The term 'neocapitalism' is used by the figures within the Italian Left during the 1960s. Pier Vittorio Aureli defines the term by contrasting it with the traditional, less sophisticated, form of capitalism as solely focused on profit and also through paraphrasing Adolf Berle when he states that 'neocapitalist enterprise focuses on the wealth of its labour force because this also means the wealth of its consumers, which also means the wealth of society as a whole.' He later quotes Raniero Panzieri's use the term: Aureli, The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture within and against Capitalism, FORUM project. (New York: Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003).


7 Ambasz, Italy: The New Domestic Landscape, 19.


9 Within the exhibition itself, objects belonging to different approaches were designated by the size of container or the colour of light attached to this display. There were 28 conformist object containers, each marked by a red light, while reformist objects were displayed in 9 smaller containers and contestative (critical participation) works were shown in 18 containers with yellow lamps attached.

10 Ambasz, Italy: The New Domestic Landscape, 11.


12 Scott, Architecture or techno-utopia, 126. Here she refers to Ambasz's definition of the second tendency within a contestative approach within the exhibition catalogue: Ambasz, Italy: The New Domestic Landscape, 21.


16 Aureli's work in The Project of Autonomy, provides an unparalleled English account of the major currents of Operaismo in relation to the architecture of Aldo Rossi and Archizoom in particular. While Aureli's discussion of Operaismo and Tronti was integral to his architectural reading of concepts of political autonomy and autonomy of the city, for the purposes of this research, these theories, along with Wright and Ginsborg's more strictly political approaches to the subject, will enable a discussion of the potential cultural uptake of their theories in the work selected for 'The New Domestic Landscape'.

17 Aureli goes on to state that: 'It was for this reason that the Operaists shifted their attention from an analysis of capitalism understood through its effects of circulation, distribution and consumption toward a structural and global analysis of capitalism in terms of its deepest source of power: the power of production.' Aureli, The Project of Autonomy, 17.

18 Wright, Storming Heaven, 41.

19 Ambasz acknowledges this point as Panzieri's most important contribution to the early issues of Quaderni Rossii. Although he goes on to discuss some of the limitations within the details of Panzieri's argument regarding the capitalist use of technology, particularly within his final essays, he stresses that this does not
diminish the importance of the wider concept for Operaismo and other key figures within the movement. Wright, *Storming Heaven*, 46.

20 Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy*, 44. Aureli specifically points to "Lenin in Inghilterra" as pivotal to understanding Tronti's relationship to the Communist Party and the ability to inflict change within this sphere. Tronti, "Lenin in Inghilterra," Classe Operaia 11 (1964).


22 Within *Storming Heaven*, Wright spends a sizeable portion of his chapter devoted to Classe Operaia on Tronti's conception of the use of institutional structures in the struggle against capitalism, explaining that 'Tronti's was a bluntly instrumentalist notion of organisation: that the PCI had tended so far to adapt itself to capitalist development did not, in his opinion, mean that it could not be used against capital in the future.' Wright, *Storming Heaven*, 71.


24 Scott quotes Tafuri's *History of Italian Architecture* in illustrating this point. Tafuri referred to radical architectural practices as 'deduced from a hasty reading of 'new left' reviews such as Quaderni Rossi, Classe Operaia and Contropiano.' Scott goes on to argue that these theories may have been much more central to the work than this statement acknowledges. Scott, *Architecture or techno-utopia*, 140., quoting Tafuri, *History of Italian architecture*, 1944-1985 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 99.


26 The themes for each of the 'photo-stories' reflected Gruppo Sturm's main interests at the time of the exhibition: 'The struggle for housing', 'Utopia' and 'The mediatory city'.


28 Although earlier in his career Mari had designed a large number of objects, some of which like the Giffo ( Glyph) Demountable Storage Cubes and reversible and 'Marble H' vases were displayed in the earlier objects section, by the 1970s he was no longer designing products.

29 As Ambasz not as part of the introduction to his work, Mari 'does not believe that the task of designing objects, as physical articles to be executed and sold, has any significance today and, as such, was invited to contribute to the exhibition in the form of an essay.' Ambasz, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, 262.


31 The work was also an extension of his 'Systema Disequilibrante' series, using a number of devices created as part of this larger body of work.


33 "The domicile nucleus thus assumes a further role; it becomes a centre for gathering, processing and communicating information; a microstructure that can intervene in the information system by enlarging and multiplying exchanges among people, with everyone participating in the dynamics of communication." La Pietra, *"Italy: The New Domestic Landscape,"* 228.


35 Scott, *Architecture or techno-utopia*, 141.