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Superstudio and the “Refusal to Work”

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ABSTRACT The Italian Radical Architecture collective Superstudio was infamous for their refusal to participate in architectural design. Their muteness was directed, however: they did not wish to secede entirely from architectural discourse, it was *building* from which they withdrew. This essay investigates Superstudio’s negation alongside Italian leftist attempts to recast the meaning of work. From the alienation of assembly line production to a more holistic form of labor, this shift in the nature of work privileged the individual sovereignty of citizens and workers. This emphasis on creative autonomy informs a new reading of Superstudio’s *Supersurface* as well as their *Histograms*.

KEYWORDS: Superstudio, Radical Architecture, *Autonomia*, Mario Tronti, *Supersurface*, Histograms, work, labor

In an infamous lecture presented at London’s Architectural Association in 1971, Adolfo Natalini, founder of the Italian Radical Architecture collective Superstudio, belligerently announced the group’s exodus from design practice, by stating:

If design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design; if architecture is merely the codifying of the bourgeois models of ownership and society, then we must reject architecture; if architecture and town planning [are] merely the formalization of present unjust social divisions, then we must reject town planning and its cities [...] until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs. Until then, design must disappear. We can live without architecture. (Natalini, "Inventory," in Lang and Menking 2003, 167)

As with many statements of avant-garde rejection, these words were perhaps a bit disingenuous, though. Superstudio and their Radical Architecture comrades in Italy and elsewhere did little to disengage fully from the fields of architecture and design; rather, it was specifically building from which they abstained.¹ And to this command they did indeed remain resolutely faithful: in the roughly thirteen years that the group was active, from 1966 to 1979, Superstudio did not see a single of their proposed edifices built. While the reasons for this were as much practical as they were ideological (the scales of their proposed works were intentionally, mammothly unfeasible; cf. their most infamous work, *Il Monumento Continuo*, or The Continuous Monument, of 1969), their vocal nihilism rankled contemporary critics who worried over the value of such seemingly juvenile provocation.² Such concerns have continued to dog the reception of Superstudio's projects to this day. The subtext of all this anxious hand-wringing is that the group could have advanced a revolutionary design program if only they had channeled their subversive energies into practical solutions to everyday problems. Put simply, what they needed to do, evidently, was to get back to work.

However, the evident lack of any Superstudio edifice should not be offered as evidence that the group had altogether ceased producing. For Superstudio's refusal of one sort of architectural work – the designing of habitable edifices – was merely replaced by other productive activities. As the immense profusion of images, domestic furnishings, essays, and films over their relatively brief career attests, the six members of Superstudio were hard at work all the while. As such, it is worth considering more closely the very sort of work that had supplanted building design, which Superstudio saw as impossibly compromised intellectual or creative labor. And here we are faced with a fundamental and perplexing question: How might one claim to call oneself an architect after renouncing the very activity that is usually thought to qualify oneself for that very occupation? Or, stated another way: What was at stake for the members of Superstudio in continuing to call themselves architects while steadfastly refusing to build buildings and instead producing all manner of non-tectonic objects?

What follows is an attempt to think through the meaning of design labor by considering what happens when its assumed output is

steadfastly withheld and replaced by other products. This study, therefore, involves parallel analyses: on the one hand, one must attend to Superstudio’s rhetoric and their translated statements in which they formally withdrew their labor from the field of architectural design.³ On the other hand, one is left with such a profusion of designed objects from the collective – including images, objects, films, magazine spreads, and museum exhibition displays – that it is important to contend directly with their formal and ideological properties. Specifically, when ranging over the visual data Superstudio left behind, contemporary viewers are struck by a special emphasis they place on the depiction of freewheeling drop-outs and liberated hippies. In short, even woven through the content of these lush images is a celebration of non-work. Beyond the depicted subject matter of some works, though, in other designed objects, such as their series of so-called *Histograms*, users are encouraged simply to *play* with the ambiguous product, thus upsetting our accepted notions of functionality and productivity. And so the issue of work – of both the designer and the user – is a recurring theme in Superstudio’s work, one that has, as yet, gone unnoticed in the literature on the group. It is the goal of this present study, then, to weave together this profuse visual and material array with the collective’s avowed commitment to refrain from supposedly “productive” activity. So, why this preoccupation with work, both the work of the architect and the work of architectural users?

To advance an answer to this question, this analysis situates Superstudio’s abstention within the context of Italian leftist labor thought, specifically by looking to the writings of the *Operaismo* (or “workerism”) and *Autonomia* movements. For just as Superstudio was dropping out of architectural production, so too were Italy’s factory workers withholding their labor, as part of what the Italian labor theorist Mario Tronti had termed the “strategy of refusal” a few years earlier (Tronti 1965, 234–52). Beyond the formal similarities between the workers’ and architects’ strategies, though, this study looks at the shared goals of both the *Operaist* writers and the Radical Architects: the ultimate autonomy of the individual (whether factory worker, architect, or domestic inhabitant) to determine his or her individual lot. This approach has the benefit of both expanding the current discourse surrounding some of Superstudio’s most infamous projects to include issues of labor value and adding to the ongoing discussion of how Italian labor theories played out within the broader cultural terrain in Italy.⁴

Ultimately, by looking to Superstudio’s unorthodox decision to refrain from building, one is forced to think closely about the role of the autonomous designer in the profession itself. Within the architectural discipline, where professional work is both decentralized and tightly networked as architects, urban planners, clients, structural engineers, and the like all have stakes in the final project, Superstudio’s declared right to refuse the labor assigned to them had the

utopian potential to upset the efficient operation of the design field. Ultimately, though, one might wonder if, for all their ideological purity, Superstudio's rejection simply amounted to merely a quixotic gesture. For what good is it for one group of just six young upstarts to go on strike?

Design and Labor During *Il Miracolo Economico*

To clarify Superstudio's statement of withdrawal from work, it is important first to pull back our focus and consider more broadly the conditions surrounding architectural labor in the era during and immediately after Italy's *Miracolo Economico*, or "Economic Miracle." In the 1960s, architecture remained the most popular major for Italy's graduating university students (Tafari 1989, 97). This is hardly surprising, given the rapid rate of industrialization and urbanization experienced in the country's northern cities in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Ginsborg 1990, 246–7). Indeed, during this time, the country experienced one of the most extensive internal migrations in modern European history. As American money flowed into postwar Italy via the Marshall Plan, the country's northern textile and plastics plants flourished, rural residents flocked to major urban centers, and the country's existing housing and urban infrastructure strained due to limited capacity.⁵ At the same time, Italy's growing middle class abandoned the city centers for inner-ring suburbs of the sort featured prominently in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *L'Eclisse* (1962), with its hauntingly empty, yet brand new, residential landscapes. An economic miracle it indeed was, but the expansion also resulted in remarkably uneven growth, with many of the rural poor changing their postal code but not their economic standing (Ginsborg 1990, 216–17). The dreams and ultimate fate of such workers is epitomized in the series of stories penned by Italo Calvino in his book *Marcovaldo: Or, the Seasons in the City* (1963), wherein the eponymous hero struggles daily to contend with the intricacies of city life, including making his paltry apartment livable for his family. For progressive writers, artists, and architects, then, the northern Italian city became the sight of both possibility and anxiety.

All told, this social and economic upheaval created an intense and immediate demand for affordable housing, and the country's newest generation of progressive designers stepped in, yearning to go to work and remedy the situation. Having studied under progressive designers Leonardo Savioli and Leonardo Ricci, whose courses at the University of Florence were central to many budding Radical Architects, Natalini and his peers felt emboldened both to support this swelling laboring class and to change the urban environment in ways that were more open, democratic, and vital. However, these architects ultimately encountered a situation in which real estate developers found they could erect public housing projects just as well without the hand of a designer. Mass housing projects were

erected quickly and cheaply with structural engineers drafting blankly utilitarian edifices. According to Manfredo Tafuri, by the early 1970s only two to three percent of the country’s housing stock had actually been designed by architects (Tafuri 1972, 97). In addition, the share of public housing in Italy had plummeted from roughly twenty-five percent in 1951 to an astonishing two percent by 1973 (98). Thus, for progressive-minded architects in Italy during Superstudio’s era, opportunities to effect real change for northern Italy’s urban laboring class diminished swiftly.

Most reformist architects chose one of two possible paths: either give in to market pressure and build soignée villas for the country’s nouveau riche or work in the service of wealthy developers to crank out, in the words of Superstudio, “cubic box[es] without memories, with vague indications of top and bottom, entrance and exit, Euclidean parallelepiped[s] painted white or distempered in bright colors, washable or no, but always without surprises or without hope” (Superstudio, “Evasion,” in Lang and Menking 2003, 117) Both options, though, inevitably meant capitulation to market forces. For if one were not laboring in the service of the wealthy elite, then one would attempt to land one of the very few public housing commissions. And, as Tafuri had noted, these, too, mainly served as catalysts for future development by the same land speculators (Tafuri 1972, 16). As cities became even more in the thrall of advanced capitalism and its tendency to condition and control every aspect of public and private space, for architects seeking to liberate the bodies and psyches that inhabited these spaces, compromise seemed the unavoidable result. In short, to be an architect in Italy in the mid-1960s was to feel constrained by several market forces, inhibiting both the range of clients for whom one might work and the broader impact one’s designs might have on the urban landscape. As workers, the Radical Architects felt inextricably bound to the capitalist construction mechanism, and increasingly they began to wonder if a sense of self-imposed autonomy would even be possible.

“Evasion Design”: The Struggle against Market Capitulation

It was this labor market and cultural environment that greeted Natalini as well as his Superstudio compatriots Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Piero Frasinelli, Sandro Poli, Sandro Magris, and Roberto Magris once they completed their studies at the University of Florence in the mid-1960s. Rather than concede their ethical positions, though, they chose to abstain completely from building and construction, an extreme position that soon caught the attention of the architectural establishment. Architectural critics, including the Marxist Tafuri, saw Superstudio’s position (one shared by their Florentine associates Archizoom, Gruppo 9999, UFO, and others in the movement that came to be known later as “Architettura Radicale”) as either

infantile provocation or philosophical navel-gazing.⁶ As Pier Vittorio Aureli has astutely noted, regarding Tafuri's attitude toward intellectual work, "He understood that a critique of capitalism could only be produced from *within*, from the categories and forms through which intellectuals were – consciously or unconsciously – culturally mediating the effects of continued capitalist production or participating in its reifications" (Aureli 2010, 89–90). In short, a leftist critique of architecture still needed to proceed through the difficult work of architectural production, not from a position outside that very labor. Superstudio's position was thus condemned as woefully ineffective.

Similar readings of Radical Architecture's utopian approaches are easy to find in the secondary literature on the group. From Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's gloss on Superstudio's work in their famous essay "Collage City" (1978) to Kenneth Frampton's summary of Italian architecture in his canonical *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1980) to Mark Wigley's skeptical assessment of their work in "Network Fever" (2001), critics and historians have been keen to note the important role played by Superstudio's provocative acts of disavowal. All the while, Superstudio's positions are cast aside as ultimately abortive or hopelessly romantic. However, such criticisms of the Florentines' radical rhetoric neglect to consider the fact that Superstudio and their Florentine peers maintained active creative practices and retained the moniker "architect" as their professional label. Nor, more importantly, do the authors question what it means to be an "effective" or "productive" designer in the first place. The tacit assumption is always that architectural design should be equated with building, and, furthermore, that the lack of a Superstudio edifice should be considered either a misreading of the architect's charge or a personal failing of the architects in question. What if one were to rethink what counts as architectural labor, though?

Initially, Superstudio dove directly into product design and interior furnishing, as evidenced in the two *Superarchitettura* exhibitions they staged with their Florentine compatriots Archizoom in 1966 and 1967 soon after the founding of both groups. This move toward the designed object could be seen to parallel the work of many other architects who sought to put their unique stamp on the comprehensive environment, designing, in the apocryphal words of the Italian modernist Ernesto Nathan Rogers, everything "from the teaspoon to the city" (Aynsley 2009, 192; Sudjic 2009, 34)⁷ Having ceded their responsibility to design the building itself, however, this sort of hubris would appear inadequate to describe Superstudio's motivations. Indeed, Natalini and his associates saw their interior design work as a form of domestic insurrection, meant to disrupt the delicate cohesion of the sort of total design planning epitomized by their International Style forebears. Dubbing their broader critical project "evasion design," Superstudio described their aims as such:

introduce foreign bodies into the system: objects with the greatest possible number of sensory properties (chromatic, tactile, etc.), charged with symbolism and images with the aim of attracting attention, or arousing interest, of serving as a demonstration and inspiring action and behavior. Objects in short that succeed in modifying the container-unit and involving it totally together with its occupier. (Superstudio, “Inventory,” in Lang and Menking 2003, 166)

It is worth pausing to consider the broader implications of this passage, for what Superstudio calls for here is a shift in emphasis from the designer to the user. To repeat, the sorts of objects they intended to produce should “inspire action” and thus help to activate the user to take full ownership over his or her living conditions. The best way to do this was to produce intentionally disruptive objects, ones that get in the inhabitant’s way, that draw one’s attention to their (perhaps unwanted) presence, that wake the user up to the environment in which he or she is situated. Thus, with a series of overwhelmingly and intentionally gauche objects produced in the late 1960s, Superstudio used bad taste as a weapon against modernism’s staid interiors.⁸ Witness, for example, the profusion of faux fur in their celebrated *Bazaar Sofa* (Figure 1). Natalini articulates the group’s ultimate charge thus:

Our problem is to go on producing objects, big brightly-colored cumbersome useful and full of surprises, to live with them and



Figure 1

Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, and A. Poli), *Bazaar Sofa* (1969). © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Georges Meguerditchian/Art Resource, NY.

play with them together and always find ourselves tripping over them till we get to the point of kicking them and throwing them out, or else sitting down on them or putting our coffee cups on them, but it will not in any way be possible to ignore them. They will exorcize our indifference. (Superstudio, "Evasion," in Lang and Menking 2003, 177)

So, for Superstudio, they were tasked with the "problem," as they saw it, of carrying on producing objects. Though if this were to be their ultimate fate, they were going to create difficult, even obstructive ones that would critically, even virally, interrogate domestic life.

In so doing, Superstudio's tack was similar to that of other Italian Radical Architects at the same time. As mentioned above, Superstudio was not alone in its attempt to reform the architectural profession by dropping out of building production. Florence became a center for such extremist activity, with many groups similarly turning toward the domestic interior.⁹ Take, for example, Archizoom's founder, Andrea Branzi, who said, in a retrospective account of the era:

This new vision of the object also meant using architecture as "obstruction," i.e. as an impediment to the normal running of traditional urban life. The object, closed, hard and artificial, was placed across the routes of everyday affairs, creating an aggressive and ironical barricade and forcing a change in the ordering of the surrounding territory by its very presence as a "different" object, independent of the surrounding political and urban set-up. (Branzi 1984, 55)

Branzi intermingles two separate, but (for the Radical Architects) related, phenomena: on the one hand, the furniture object disruptively placed inside the home to intervene and alter the domestic environment, and, on the other, a series of architectural demonstrations staged in the streets of Florence that forcefully interrupted the normal flow of daily life. Of the latter, the most public were those by the UFO Group, who in 1968 wheeled out gargantuan inflatable sculptures into the city's busy streets in the middle of rush hour traffic. These massive balloons temporarily shut down the habitual operations of the city's businesses as workers were impeded during their morning commute. Messages scrawled on the sides of the inflatables caused viewers to scratch their heads at the vague, albeit poetic, slogans denouncing the war in Southeast Asia. Similarly, Gruppo 9999's *Design Happening in Ponte Vecchio* of the same year saw the group projecting psychedelic swirling lights across the surface of one of the most enduring landmarks of old Florence, and thus merging, albeit temporarily, the city street with the discotheque.¹⁰

Again, as with Superstudio's turn toward the domestic object, the emphasis with these various urban interventions was the viewer's

response: these urban interventions were meant to force spectators both to reconsider their habitual uses of the city and to take a stand against an international geopolitical crisis, in the case of UFO’s inflatable, the war in Vietnam. With Gruppo 9999’s light projection, one is meant to reconsider the ostensible uses of the city’s iconic structures. The goal, though, with both the urban projects and the insurrectionist furniture was to “exorcize indifference,” whether that sense of apathy pertained to global affairs or those of the more local – indeed, intimate – confines of one’s apartment. The viewer should feel that he or she has some agency in directing an ultimate course of action and should not take as a given the conditions that have been handed him or her. All these Radical Architecture groups, including Superstudio, foreground the ultimate autonomy of the individual to direct his or her own actions, and as such their positions correlate with broader leftist political activism during the era. It is important, therefore, to understand the intense debate surrounding labor reform in Italy from the mid-1960s onward, the same period during which Superstudio and their peers began to question the value of design labor.

The Activation of Italy’s Workers

It is impossible to separate the activation of the urban dweller called for by the Radical Architects in Italy without also considering the very public labor and student demonstrations in Italy’s northern urban centers throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was a period of intense agitation on the part of the Italian left, culminating in the so-called *autunno caldo*, or “hot autumn,” of 1969 in which workers demanded both higher wages and better working conditions within the industrial factories. Workers in Italy’s famed Fiat automobile plants devised a number of specific and direct methods to draw attention to the paltry conditions under which they struggled. Periodic and spontaneous work stoppages or slow-downs were common, but more visible still were the events that saw the workers take to the streets, shutting down vast portions of Turin or Milan during the day.¹¹

The workers were motivated in large part by the ideas being espoused by the leftist labor movements in Italy known as *Operaismo*, or “workerism,” and later *Autonomia*.¹² Importantly, in the writings from this era it was not the material fact of labor and its intense physical demands that were being protested (though working conditions were an occasional focus) so much as the mental and emotional involvement of the workers on the assembly line. To the *Operaisti*, attempts by management to involve the workers more directly in the production process were merely a palliative. As Maurizio Lazzarato noted in his important essay “Immaterial Labor”:

What modern management techniques are looking for is for

“the worker’s soul to become part of the factory.” The worker’s personality and subjectivity have to be made susceptible to organization and command. It is around immateriality that the quality and quantity of labor are organized. (Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in Virno and Hardt 1996, 134)

As a result of this tendency to harness the worker’s entire emotional character into the production process, Lazzarato goes on to claim that “It becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish leisure time from work time. In a sense, life becomes inseparable from work” (137).¹³ Everyday life becomes increasingly like work on the assembly line, though not (or not necessarily) because of the repetitiveness and regimentation that typified earlier protests against capitalist encroachment into the quotidian (think, for instance, of the Situationists’ critique of spectacle culture). Rather, it is the insidiousness of capital’s reach into even the most private spaces of the psyche – and how the psyche can then be yoked to capitalist organization on the factory floor – that is being rejected. Lazzarato diagnoses a situation in which the worker’s affective responses are still allowed free reign, though these are now incorporated seamlessly into the production process that feeds off the worker’s passions, creativity, and emotions. Against this condition, *Operaist* writers attempted to locate an affective space in which the individual worker’s affects remain his own.

What, then, is the solution to this situation in which both work and leisure time are so thoroughly conditioned by capital’s reach? The rallying cry heard time and again was the “refusal of work,” a phrase adapted from the Italian writer Mario Tronti, whose seminal “Strategy of Refusal” called for Italy’s workers simply to drop out from the act of alienated labor. Tronti explains the act of refusal thus:

Stopping work – the strike, as the classic form of workers’ struggle – implies a refusal of the command of capital as the organizer of production: it is a way of saying “No” at a particular point in the process and a refusal of the concrete labor which is being offered: it is a *momentary* blockage of the work-process and it appears as a recurring threat which derives its contents from the process of value creation. (Tronti, “Strategy,” in Lotringer and Marazzi 2007, 30)

Both the license to say “No” at the moment when an abstract idea of labor becomes a specific instance of work – *this* job – and the chronic menace of what that refusal entails to the shop stewards and the company management means that the worker ideally retains agency in the production process, a power that Tronti claims the worker always had in the first place.

The ultimate goal of these periodic refusals is harder to assess, however. Antonio Negri, the *Autonomist* writer whose critical project

was profoundly affected by his *Operaist* forbearers, called for the “self-valorization” of the individual worker: “It is only by recognizing myself as other, only by insisting on the fact of my different-ness as a radical totality that I have the possibility and the hope of a renewal” (Negri, “Domination,” in Lotringer and Marazzi 2007, 63). So, by means of the ability to refuse labor, the worker stands as an autonomous subject, free from the strictures of capitalist organization. However, according to fellow *Autonomist* Paolo Virno, this does not result in a monadic subject cut off from the world. Quite the opposite: the ideal after-effect is “a ‘pure’ socialization, detached from the sphere of material activity and by design not related to the historical forms by which nature is appropriated” (Virno, “Dreamers,” in Lotringer and Marazzi 2007, 113) In the world the *Operaist* and *Autonomist* writers foresaw, workers of the world would continue to work, products would continue to be made, paychecks would still be doled out; however, the pace of this work would not be determined from higher-ups. Rather the workers themselves would regulate the tempo of work. In so doing, they become indissolubly connected to one another. Autonomy from the constraints of capitalist authority is ensured, and relationality is a beneficial by-product of this new assembly line production method.¹⁴ This ability to form new relationships and affinities, outside those circumscribed by capitalism’s demands, was, therefore, central to both Superstudio’s decision to form an anonymous collective and their works’ libertarian bent.

Superstudio’s Autonomous Design Work

Architectural historian Pier Vittorio Aureli has carefully limned the connections between *Operaist* and *Autonomist* thought and the theories of urbanism espoused by Superstudio’s Florentine peers Archizoom in a series of essays and books.¹⁵ Aureli’s primary premise is that the group picked up on the *Operaist* critique of capitalism’s affective relationships and rendered them hyperbolic through exaggerated urban schemes that parodied the supposed aims of late modernist design. For example, just as capital treats workers as anonymous cogs in a larger production apparatus, so too does late modernist design rely on an increasingly depersonalized aesthetic. Thus, Archizoom’s decision to enter competitions as an otherwise anonymous collective (hiding behind a group name, or “brand”) and to produce obstinately blank urban proposals serves to isolate and interrogate the prevailing conditions within capitalist production and consumption (Aureli 2013, 162–3). Similarly, in Archizoom’s 1969 proposal titled *No-Stop City* that sought to expand the suburban shopping mall laterally across the landscape such that habitable space and consumerism are rendered coextensive and potentially infinite, the group was literalizing the existing manner in which our purchasing power becomes an urban necessity (Aureli 2008, 69–79). We are all trapped in a consumerist loop without any chance to disengage

from it, and Archizoom's hyperbolic display throws a critical light on the late capitalist city.

To Aureli, then, the importance of leftist thought for Florentine Radical Architecture exists primarily on the level of metaphor. It was the role of the architects to give graphic form to the compromised position in which urban residents live and to do so hyperbolically so as to render these capitalist forms unnatural. Certainly, this argument pertains to many Radical Architecture works, including Superstudio's own parodic works of the late 1960s and early 1970s – *The Continuous Monument* (1969) and *Twelve Ideal Cities* (1971), in particular. I would like to extend Aureli's initial research, though, to get at a series of more fundamental questions about how design work itself might change in the light of leftist critiques of labor and how the architect then designs for newly liberated workers in a utopian future scenario.

The importance of such leftist thought for Superstudio's brand of Radical Architecture is, I believe, twofold. First, on a rhetorical level, Tronti's and Negri's positions may help to situate Superstudio's own act of refusal. Rather than play into the increasingly industrialized mechanism that was the real estate and mass housing market in Italy at this time – rather, that is, than give in to one's ultimate powerlessness in the face of capital's prodigious authority – the members of Superstudio found that they could refuse the very sort of labor that the housing industry demanded of architects at this time. However, this does not mean that they did not intend to work. Indeed, they would make use of their powers as designers, scholars, and educators. They would do so, however, from a state of ultimate autonomy, not beholden to either the incessant demands of the market, of real estate developers, of clients, or of municipal building codes. They would “go on making objects,” as they said – as well as images, films, essays, lectures, and university courses – but in so doing they would be beholden only to themselves. It is not surprising, then, that Superstudio's own strategy of refusal was read initially, as it still is today, as a sort of solipsism. While producing only for themselves, though, they were defiantly not producing for a system that would otherwise contort, twist, and exploit their positions for economic gain. Importantly, their work was also a collective effort of six members, and as such it demanded that the group operate collaboratively and socially to create their products at a new pace now determined by their interpersonal relations. As such, their position follows remarkably closely the positions adopted by both Virno and Negri above. Importantly, against those critics who read Superstudio's position either as mere provocation or as poetic metaphor, their refusal of instrumentalized design labor was, in fact, a concrete and productive elaboration of *Operaist* techniques applied to the design process.

The second way in which *Operaist* ideas can be brought to bear on Superstudio's activity from the 1960s and 1970s is reflected in the

group’s products themselves. Two types of work stand out in particular. First, in a series of graphic illustrations of a hypothetical future world, one is witness to an open-ended type of networked architecture – titled *Supersurface* (1972) – that is responsive to the user (Figure 2). Contrasting with their previous ironic works that treated the architectural form as an authoritarian barrier, the collective became more interested in producing an accommodating and welcoming architectural form, one that activated the architectural user and his or her body. Suddenly, in photomontages illustrating this new form of sybaritic architecture, the viewer is witness to so many hippies, drop-outs, and nomads. They sprawl out upon the ground, naked bodies writhing about, wine bottles strewn here and there, but there is not a single building in sight, only an isotropic grid underneath the figures and extending laterally in all directions. As the accompanying text describing *Supersurface* explains, the work assumes a future world where all edifices cease to exist (Superstudio 1972, 242–51). Freed from the houses to which we are tethered, as well as the status anxiety of acquiring their seemingly endless array of accouterments, the earth’s inhabitants are rendered nomadic. One is allowed to venture wherever one wishes, and a pervasive grid, concealed just underground and networked throughout the globe, would provide everything one would need to survive. Instant shelter, food, the means to communicate with others: the grid would provide all of this as soon as one plugged into one of its nodes.

The architectural form Superstudio imagined here allowed for just the sort of self-valorization and autonomy that the *Operaist* writers advocated. The user is in full possession of his or her creative faculties and makes use of the architectural network however he or she sees fit. The client is a fully engaged design participant or collaborator; indeed, he or she *completes* the design. Importantly, too, the invented user of the *Supersurface* grid was the hippie, that countercultural figure who similarly refused productive labor, making good on Timothy Leary’s invocation to “drop out” of the exploitative rat race.¹⁶ In a retrospective account of his infamous phrase, Leary explained:

“Drop out” suggested an active, selective, graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments. “Drop Out” meant self-reliance, a discovery of one’s singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice, and change. Unhappily my explanations of this sequence of personal development were often misinterpreted to mean “Get stoned and abandon all constructive activity”. (Leary 1982, 253)

So, just as Superstudio was so often accused of excessive self-absorption or laziness, so too was Leary’s hippie misunderstood as an indolent. However, the nature of “dropping out” meant both “active detachment” and “self-reliance,” and Leary’s remarks focus on the



Figure 2

Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, and A. Poli), *From Life—Supersurface (Fruits and Wine)* (1971). © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Georges Meguerditchian/Art Resource, NY.

“singularity” of the individual who remains a productive, vital force. Superstudio’s choice to incorporate images of hippies into their photomontages of a proposed democratic network was anything but arbitrary and reveals a thorough understanding of the hippie’s own conscious strategy of refusal. The autonomy that Superstudio envisions, then, is not a separation from society, but rather a strategy of clearing a necessary space for action free from capital’s strictures.

Superstudio’s images, published so widely at the time and in the years since their inception, do give one pause, however. After all, just as Simon Sadler has argued vis-à-vis the similarly free-wheeling work of the British group Archigram, such works appeal primarily to those who wish to turn a blind eye to the invisible sorts of power that they contain.¹⁷ Who, after all, controls the grid of *Supersurface*? Is this work really as self-governing as it first appears? While Superstudio’s work was never meant to offer the degree of detail that Archigram’s similarly liberatory utopian designs evidenced, critical questions remain about the nature of the user’s relationship to the system to which they have plugged in. Do these hippies retain the autonomy so longed for by the Italian left?

As a rejoinder to Superstudio’s networked architecture, then, I would like to turn to a different, often overlooked project from the era immediately preceding their *Supersurface* proposal. In the late 1960s, the group had designed a line of home furnishings in collaboration with the Italian design firm Zanotta (Figure 3). The so-called *Quaderna* series consists of an assemblage of drastically pared-down tables, desks, and cabinets, all covered with a simple white plastic laminate overlaid with a black grid (the word “quaderna” in Italian is used to refer to a gridded, ruled notebook). These design objects represent an attempt, in the words of the group’s members, to “adopt the theory of minimum effort in a general reductive process” (Superstudio, “Histograms,” in Lang and Menking 2003, 114). Such “minimum effort” expended in the creation of these design wares is consistent with Superstudio’s ongoing attempt to recode design labor, but the importance of these works extends beyond the group’s public statements about them and the labor that went into their development. Indeed, woven into the form of these objects is a rethinking of the design object’s signifying functions. It could be said that this was the Italian radicals’ attempt to discover a “degree zero” of design in which a functional object could be reduced to its bare minimum or pure essence.

By looking to Superstudio’s 1971 essay “Destruction, Metamorphosis and Reconstruction of the Object,” first published in the *Radical Architecture* journal *In*, one sees how the group attempts to connect this extreme stylistic and typological reduction to changing notions of work. At the outset of the essay, they claim:

The destruction of objects, the elimination of the city and the disappearance of work are events closely connected. By the destruction of objects, we mean the destruction of their attributes of “status” and the connotations imposed by those in power, so that we live with objects (reduced to the condition of neutral and disposable elements) and not for objects. By the elimination of the city, we mean elimination of the accumulation of the formal structures of power, the elimination of the city as a hierarchy and social model in search of a new free egalitarian state in which everyone can reach different grades in the development of his possibilities, beginning with equal starting points. By the end of work, we mean the end of specialized and repetitive work, seen as an alienating activity, foreign to the nature of man; the logical consequence will be a new, revolutionary society in which everyone should find the full development of his possibilities; and in which the principle of “from everyone, according to his capacities, to everyone, according to his needs” should be put into practice. (Superstudio, “Destruction,” in Lang and Menking 2003a, 120)

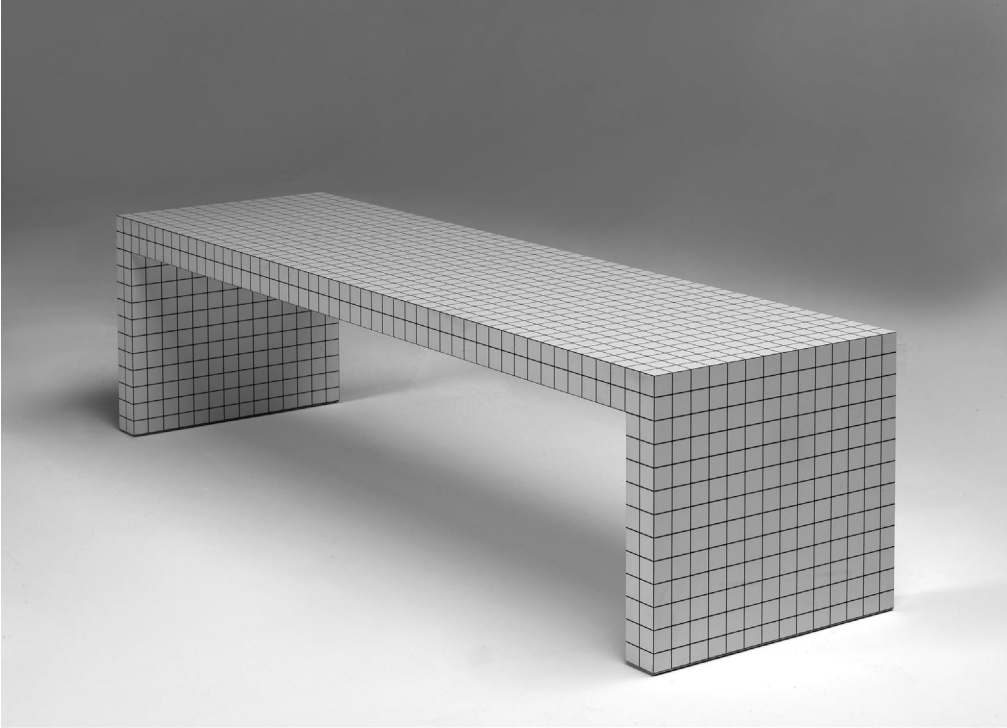
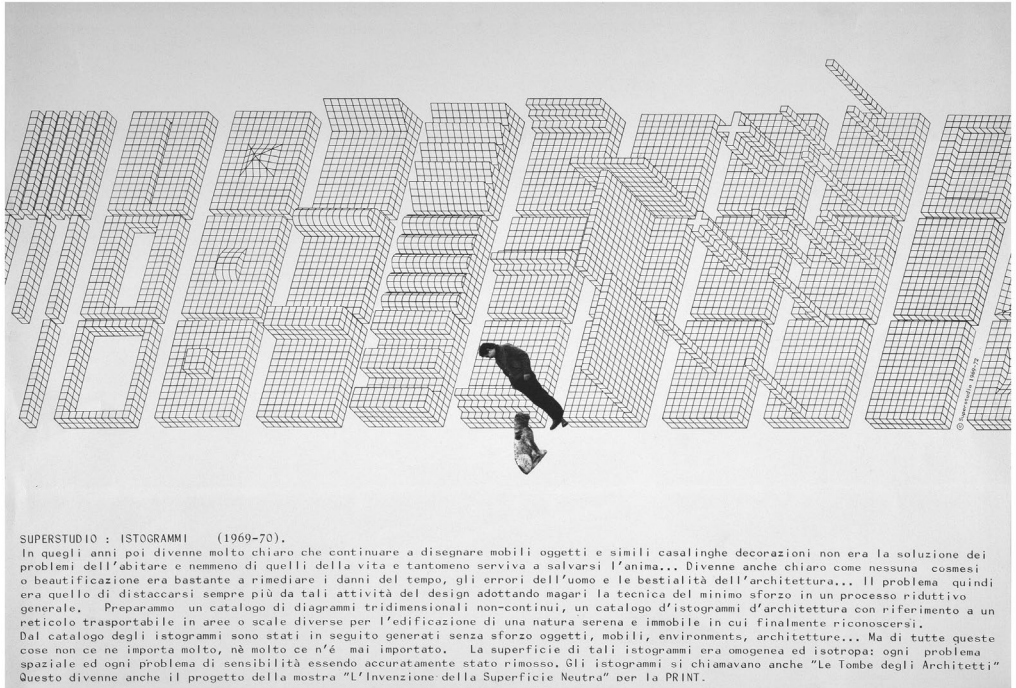


Figure 3

Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, and A. Poli), *Quaderna Bench* (1971). © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/ Georges Meguerditchian/Art Resource, NY.

Here we see that the creation of fundamentally mute objects was intended to banish any sense of status anxiety or what Baudrillard had termed “the political economy of the sign” (Baudrillard 1981, 143–63). Absent the signifying relationships that serve only to buttress the existing power dynamics in an advanced capitalist culture, the autonomous urban resident rediscovers an unmediated connection to the viscera of everyday life. And so the *Quaderna* objects, with their blankly utilitarian character, would point only to their ultimate use, allowing the user freedom to engage with them directly. The abstraction and organization of one’s domestic sign system is, according to Superstudio, part and parcel with the division of labor and psychic subservience the worker experiences as well. The end of such production practices would similarly free the individual worker to “find the full development of his possibilities.” Design reform and labor reform, then, both take on the regimentation of everyday life. Naturally, this is a tall order for a chair or a bench, and the reductive look of such furniture, produced by an elite Italian design company, could still become co-opted by a high modernist

**Figure 4**

Superstudio (A. Natalini, C. Toraldo di Francia, R. Magris, G. P. Frassinelli, A. Magris, and A. Poli), *Study for the Poster for Istogrammi, 1969–70 at the Department of Architecture, Lausanne* (1970). © Gian Piero Frassinelli. Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Georges Meguerditchian/Art Resource, NY.

sign system, as one will readily note flipping through any number of contemporary shelter magazines.

Related to this line of furniture, though distinct from it, was Superstudio's sculptural group of so-called *Histograms* (Figure 4). These works are much more ambiguous, as their ultimate function is not immediately obvious. They could be formally compared most readily, perhaps, with the serial sculptures of the American minimalist Sol Le Witt. Most started with a low platform, roughly six inches high, again covered with the regular black-on-white laminate grid. The platform was altered by the addition of a basic shape, or the subtraction by a simple cut, and this alteration was then developed through a series of logical repetitions, illustrating all the possible variations on the basic theme. A narrow cut is made down the central axis of the platform and widens at regular intervals until it reaches the outer edges. A raised portion on one short side of the platform cycles through different shapes – a square, a semicircle, a wedge – when seen in section. Posts three feet in height are added in the center and around the perimeter, from one to five in number. Thus, a mathematically simple process is set up in advance for the purpose of merely generating forms.

With each of these formal operations, a new architectural “model” is proposed, with no a priori program assigned to it. As the group explained in their accompanying essay, this series was “a catalog of three-dimensional, non-continuous diagrams, a catalog of architectural histograms with reference to a grid interchangeable into different areas or scales for the construction of a serene and immobile Nature in which finally to recognize ourselves” (Superstudio, “Histograms,” in Lang and Menking 2003, 114). Thus, what the collective provides is a mere index of forms, and the ultimate use to which they should be put is left completely open to the user. Scale the object up, and it may become a factory. Scale it down, and it becomes a bed. Such works steadfastly repudiate the modernist dictum that “form follows function.” Rather, in this case form follows one’s immediate fancy. This is an open-ended system that allows for play, but, as with all games, it requires an active and engaged user to complete it, or in the group’s words, to “finally recognize ourselves.”

Is engaging with the *Histograms* mere play, though, or is the act of permuting, enlarging, or shrinking the available objects not also a form of work? The separation between the two is, crucially, hard to make out, but the activity itself – the playful work of habitation – is given over to self-governing users who make of their living environment what they want. Or, if communities of denizens choose to amplify the *Histograms* further still, whole cities could be permuted in as-yet unforeseen ways. In this shift from object to action, from product to performance, might the autonomous resident carve out some psychic agency? This indeed was Superstudio’s hope in creating such an open-ended design system rather than a strictly proscribed suite of furnishings. Avoiding the monumentality of building, the *Histograms*’ form, in the way they posit the activated user, anticipates and images the *Operaist* worker, now freed from the repetitiveness of his workaday life. Newly liberated, he can work without the necessity of a job, and he can play at the everyday. He can make his own world in a direct and unmediated fashion.

In the years immediately following the *autunno caldo* and Superstudio’s dramatic attempts to design for the liberated working class that works like *Supersurface* and the *Histograms* presume, Italy descended into the *Anni di piombo*, or “years of lead,” a period in the mid to late 1970s that saw workerist agitation give way to outright terrorism at the hands of the Brigate Rosse, or Red Brigades. Negri, the *Operaist* turned Autonomist writer, would end up in prison, eventually fleeing to France. Natalini and his Superstudio compatriots would eventually go their separate ways, setting up individual design studios. Cultural radicals, including the Florentine architects of Superstudio’s generation, would find it difficult to advance their designs of personal liberation in a milieu that equated such emancipation with violent extremism.

However, it would be a mistake to assume, as Tafuri had, that the gradual dissolution of the Radical Architecture movement in Italy

was indicative of the overall failure of utopian architectural thought to effect any substantial or material change. Might we not turn the obvious lack of any Superstudio structure into a virtue and consider their strategy of refusal as an important design action? Through their steadfast belief in simply saying “no,” they cast a much-needed light on the specific role played by designers in a broader capitalist framework. Investigating their work from the late 1960s and early 1970s allows us to pose important questions that remain essential today: For whom does the designer work? Is there running room in our networked field of design for an autonomous designer to labor freely without his or her work becoming quickly subsumed under a slickly branded identity? And also: for whom do we design objects? With increased customization ruling the day in our contemporary design culture, is not the autonomous individual already freed from capitalist strictures? Or, alternately, does the appearance of individually customizable products merely demonstrate capital’s inescapable capacity to reach into our most private desires? As Superstudio maintained at a previous moment in our era of comprehensive planning, however, the refusal to participate remains a potent threat.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. The term “Architettura Radicale,” or “Radical Architecture,” can be traced to Germano Celant’s essay titled “Radical Design,” which appeared in the catalog to the landmark Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*. Immediately following its publication there ensued a spirited debate in the Italian architectural press regarding the term, with most of the prominent actors in the movement disavowing it, the subtext being that once the movement had been identified and named (with MoMA’s imprimatur, no less) the radical vitality once there had dissipated. The term has remained in use ever since, though, and the significant players in the movement include Superstudio, Archizoom, Gruppo Strum, Gruppo 9999, UFO, Ugo La Pietra, Ettore Sottsass, Jr., among others (Celant 1972).
2. For a paradigmatic example of the negative critical response to Radical Architecture’s critical position, see Tafuri (1972).
3. With respect to Superstudio’s translated manifestoes, essays, lectures, and other related statements, it is important to note Peter Lang and William Menking’s landmark *Superstudio: Life Without Objects* (2003), in which many of their most important essays appeared in the English language for the first time.

4. In addition to the architectural critics and historians who have made significant connections between *Operaist* writings and architectural production in the 1960s and 1970s discussed in this article, it is important to mention the strides made by art historians as well, including Cullinan (2008) and Galimberti (2012).
5. For a detailed account of the economic and social upheavals that followed in the wake of the “economic miracle,” see Paul Ginsborg’s essential text *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988* (1990), esp. 210–53.
6. See, for example Tafuri’s statement that “It was better to design an ‘armchair for crying’ for the bourgeoisie and recognize that it had conquered all enlightened utopias” (Tafuri 1972, 57). Here, the author is referring to Radical Architecture’s retreat from building in favor of furniture and product design, thus highlighting the equally compromised position of those architects who, in his mind, simply traded one product for another without altering the consumer.
7. There is some debate about the veracity of Rogers’ now-infamous statement. For more, see Sudjic (2009), 34. Jeremy Aynsley credits the German designer Max Bill with this statement (Aynsley 2009, 192).
8. For an insightful reading on the use of “bad taste” as a rhetorical design strategy, see also Branzi (1984) and Aureli (2013, 154–5).
9. While this is not the place to detail the complex history of all the Florentine radical collectives from the era, mention should be made of the pioneering work of scholars in this area. For detailed accounts of other groups working in Florence during this time, see especially Ambasz (1972), Navone and Orlandoni (1974), and Branzi (1984). In more recent years, other scholars have returned to consider the important early work coming out of Florence in the 1960s and early 1970s (Coles and Rossi 2013; Piccardo and Wolf 2014).
10. The discotheque had often served as a source of inspiration for Florentine designers. At the University of Florence, Natalini and other future Radical Architecture members focused on the Florentine disco the Piper Club as a final project for Leonardo Savioli’s design research studio. For more on this link see Elfline (2011). See also Caldini (2014), in which the author, a member of the Florentine collective Gruppo 9999, discusses the importance of the discotheque Space Electronic to the Italian radical avant-garde at this time.
11. For a detailed account of the events of these tumultuous years, see Robert Lumley’s indispensable *States of Emergency* (Lumley 1990), as well as Wright (2002).
12. This is not the place to discuss the important, though immensely complex, differences between *Operaismo* and *Autonomia*, as the labor movement in Italy morphed over the years. For a full account see Lumley (1990) and Wright (2002). In addition, see Aureli (2008a).

13. A similar position was espoused by Jean Baudrillard in his important essay “The Ideological Genesis of Needs” (Baudrillard 1981).
14. Aureli makes a similar point when he claims that “The possibility of autonomy was not a generic claim of autonomy *from*, but rather autonomy *for*. This *autonomy for* consisted of a bid by the workers to construct a source of power alternative to the one established and maintained by capitalism” (Aureli 2008a, 12). This serves to underline my point that the autonomy of the worker called for at this moment was the basis of a renewed form of affinity.
15. See Aureli’s important *The Project of Autonomy* (2008a) as well as Aureli (2008b, 2010, 2011, 2013) and Aureli (with Orazi) (2007).
16. For more on the connection between European neo-avant-garde architecture and American hippie culture, see Elflin (2015).
17. See Sadler’s comment that Archigram’s cybernetic visions from the late 1960s “made sense to those without a knee-jerk reaction against technocracy” (Sadler 2005, 121).

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