



Continuous Monument

Superstudio, Everywhere, 1969
John Leano

“If design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design; if architecture is merely the codifying of a bourgeois model of ownership and society, then we must reject architecture...”

The Continuous Monument is the central critical illustration of Superstudio’s foundational philosophy of life without objects. Superstudio came together with the core belief of conceptually-oriented human activity over a materialistically-determined existence in an effort to maximize human intellectual, social and spiritual potential. Envisioning such a utopia required a subsequent anti-bourgeois critique which grew out of their discontent with design activity (seen as merely “an inducement to consume”) in light of modernism. It was capitalism, however, that was the primary culprit for the alienation of human relationships - a critique possibly originating from Guy Debord and the Situationists in 1967-68. The bourgeois-imposed value system, repeatedly reflected in the production of objects people are forced to *live for*, should be replaced by a minimalistic lifestyle in which people simply live *with* essentially disposable objects meant only for greater fulfillment. Superstudio believed this would demand the transfer of design from an activity for the creation of objects intended to individualize, or alienate, human relationships, to an activity solely occupying a conceptual, non-commercial sphere. The endless grid is the result of the dissipation of objects, their reduction in overall meaning in life and therefore the end of work and the capitalist cycle of production and consumption – all in favor of a total network enabling the “raw” energy of the intellect and greater social participation, which for Superstudio was the basis for all congregation throughout history. As a stage for the ultimate act of the attainment of self-knowledge and purpose in the human drama, the Monument would thus become the architect’s and designer’s last statement and the answer to the human condition under capitalism and beyond.

The homogeneity of the continuous global grid mocks Modernist principles and particularly the cultural uniformity of globalization through ironic over-exaggeration. Further, it is an expression of Superstudio’s dissatisfaction with the urban form that they believed

was also a result of globalization and standardization. The endless aggregation of simple and materially-vague block components (architectural primitives which they thereby considered *pure forms*) reduces the role of the designer or architect. Their distribution over landscapes and cities is an ironic juxtaposition of an amplified Modernist utopian vision – as bold and purifying as it is absurd and horrifying. While the Monument seems to respect landscapes - obeying for example the edges of the Grand Canyon, spanning alongside mountain ranges or overstepping bodies of water - it more intentionally envelopes and often barrels through historic and contemporary monuments. In one of the more well-known images of the Monument it sprawls over Manhattan’s sprawl, surrounding or perhaps targeting Wall Street, which could be interpreted as Superstudio’s attempt to symbolically frame their capitalist critique by focusing on the financial center of the world. Additionally, the immense contrast of a uniformly modulated grid overlaid upon a “pixelated” Manhattan skyline suggests a return to a simpler order, a greater clarity of the “unfocused” modern city, or perhaps more deeply hinting at the inescapability of some fundamental human condition. Ultimately, Superstudio illustrates through their iconic photo-collages a conviction in the strength of rational dominance and order over the wild eclecticism apparent in the cultural monuments and styles of the modern city, as well as a faith in the superiority of their grid over that of the modern city’s.

Despite potentially dystopic associations that could be linked to the “Negative Utopia”, as it is embodied in the Monument it may not be dystopic in any sense but an inversion of a materialistically-deterministic Positive Dystopia. If the Positive Dystopia is the current model of bourgeois ownership and society in which material needs are met but social and cultural values are imposed from the top down through production-consumption cycles, then the Negative Utopia suggests a natural sociocultural evolution at the forefront within a

system liberated from the constraints of economy, commodification, the city and objects – all of which are either eliminated or reduced to expendable accessories. The material reality would no longer dictate choice or action and therefore freedom. Instead, humanity could realize a new freedom unhinged from the demands of production and consumption where choices and values become determined directly by human will. Superstudio imagined an egalitarian model of society that was purely intellectual in pursuit; ditching the superfluity of the commodity for the necessary substance of pure intellect and communication enabled by the grid to enrich knowledge and bridge the gaps in the history of human relations. The Monument is a metaphorical cleansing - nullifying or eliminating everything it spans, yet is utopian in ambition as the ultimate solution to civilization’s problems of energy, infrastructure and communication – what Superstudio deemed the essential building blocks for human progress. Further, its austerity, anonymity, homogeneity and boundless expanse engages and critiques the Modernist project of the mechanistic dominance of order and rationality through its own over-exaggeration, repetition and borderline ambiguity. The Negative Utopia, therefore, *is* an irony in word, image and concept. Its strength lies in its representation as an architectural and urban contradiction that is at once a terrifying prospect of unchecked Modernism yet a total illustration for an ideal human future beyond the limits and conventions of capitalism. Even as it reimagines a new agenda for human progress and a complete order for living the Monument becomes the final architectural project – a platform on which “a world takes shape without products and refuse, a zone in which the mind is energy and raw material and is also the final product, the only intangible object for consumption.”¹ In a sense, it becomes not so much about living *without* objects as living *with* a single, ultimate objective.

1. Emilio Ambasz, Italy: The New Domestic Landscape (Florence: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 251.