

AIR MADE VISIBLE

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN RICCARDO PREVIDI AND TOMAS SARACENO

by Riccardo Previdi / Tomas Saraceno

Riccardo Previdi (1974) and Tomas Saraceno (1974). Two young artists, Riccardo from Milan, Tomas from Argentina. Riccardo lives in Berlin, Tomas in Rotterdam, although he's currently in Miami. Both studied architecture. The idea of the interview came about after Tomas's 2004 exhibition at the gallery Pinksummer in Genoa (where he presented an enormous installation, a 6 meter high transparent PVC membrane in which the public could enter and remain suspended in air) and Riccardo's desire to ask Tomas a couple of questions since they both work on themes that are similar, even if not directly. "There are risks in every research. (...) What pushes me to conduct research is: until what point does it transform? How a hexagon becomes a rectangle or a snowflake." Bruno Munari

Riccardo: I wanted to ask you a few questions after having seen your exhibition at Pinksummer in Genoa and having read the conversation (published in Arch'it) that took place between Pinksummer, Luca Cerizza and yourself. It was inevitable to think that many of the things that emerged were also very interesting to me.

ARCHITECTURE AND ART:

Riccardo: The roles that architecture and art play (or should play) in society. The relationships between these two disciplines: those that exist (and those that existed in the past), those that should exist and those that will probably never exist. The incomprehension that often occurs between architects and artists, or the incomprehension manifested by criticism.

Like me, you trained both as an architect and as an artist. Have these two paths created a conflict in you or, since they're complementary fields, did they help you to better understand how to proceed?

Tomas: A role...changeable and intermittent. Bucky (Buckminster Fuller, ndr) said: "Think global act local" ...having had the possibility to study art and architecture definitely helped me to proceed... and I would like to study a lot of other things still...

Perhaps we should use the word "discipline". If we refer to the theory of parallel universes we would realise that there is always a general context with a potential for each object, for each discipline...

One often hears architecture being talked about, by now the mass media also address the topic... also in very particular contexts: at NASA they're studying the possibility of an architecture for Space. How the problem is being tackled is really beautiful.

Architecture doesn't necessarily define people; it defines the structure and organisation. We speak about the architecture of a mission, of a system, software, or the architecture of a habitat.

So it seems to me that architecture is understood more as a kind of coherent logical system that allows for the creation of environments and for the running of secure, productive and, one hopes, enjoyable activities. Therefore, "architecture" is to organise logic.

I believe this is also valid when an architect designs a building. Actually, a building is a very complex organism. It's part of a community that, in turn, is inserted into an infrastructure of communication paths used by people. Then there's a structure that sustains it, and a structure that organises its functions, there are materials and safety requirements to respect.

I believe that architecture is a profession that involves everyone; we are all called to the cause. Therefore, the process is very important...but then I realise that this way of thinking also bores me... The truth is that sometimes it's very difficult for me to explain the things I do... I just have a lot of fun doing them and every so often it's exactly this that an architect doesn't understand...perhaps it's more introspective work...I like it and that's that!!! I love art because...I don't know...the idea of constantly looking for an answer is what makes me keep going!!!

In art, the possibility of enlarging the process of perception activates a critical attitude that pushes you to reconsider, reinterpret and decipher your position in relation to reality and the world.

Riccardo: Which of these two disciplines (art/architecture) do you think has more instruments to modify "reality"?

And do you believe that it's important to modify reality? Is it a problem that you put upon yourself when you think of a work?

Tomas: Yes and no; sometimes to change reality, sometimes to try to interpret it, which is actually quite similar in the end...

Tomas Saraceno tomas_saraceno@yahoo.com wrote:

Hi dear Marengo, an Italian artist called Riccardo Previdi asked me if I could respond to some questions which will be published in an Italian magazine called Nero... I thought that you could have helped us to respond to this question...

The idea appeals to me... if you feel like it...write what you want...a hug

Tomas

Eduardo Marengo answers:

I had to hold back...it took me a while to understand your question...

I have no doubt that in art one always finds the space to express the most human aspects, like freedom, and that one can leave the materials out of consideration: with a sound or a movement of the body you can do a lot of things. While I can imagine a man without architecture, it's impossible for me to imagine a man without art. I don't know a lot about architecture but, to me, art seems to be the only path to take in order to change something else on earth, something more important. Otherwise, there remains the architecture of resignation. This is what frightens me. Today, a lot of art, like architecture, seems to devote itself to preserving reality rather than changing it. How do you say it: "to change everything in order to change nothing".

I know...I'm a little pessimistic.

Eduardo Marengo

SCHOOL:

Riccardo: I'm very interested in the role of education in society. I believe that a community's state of evolution is also measured by the quality of its schools, by the resources that are provided for research. A lot of young interesting artists have graduated from the Städelschule in Frankfurt, where you also studied. Despite their very young age some of them have already taken part in important international exhibitions. Do you believe that art can be taught? What importance have the schools where you studied had on your formation? How have they affected what you're doing now?

Tomas: OK, art or other disciplines...it would be necessary to look case by case, by every school and country...I myself was invited to conduct lessons at the university, in Argentina. I believe that

one can teach an attitude towards something. For example, for me there were Thomas Bayrle and Peter Cook in Frankfurt...in Argentina Martin Olavarrieta, Pio Torrojas, Claudi Vekstein, and Ciro Najle.

To help expand your time for personal interpretation and perception...to try to help find oneself...for example, at the Städel, when no one could think of anything to say one tried to find or invite someone suitable to criticise the work of an artist.

In Argentina, a colleague, Claudio Do Campo, once told me that perhaps the best way to judge the work was to look at the time that one dedicates to it, at the passion that one invests, at the enthusiasm, as if there were no other way than to learn from oneself...and then, what comes out will be something once again tied to your conviction, to your enthusiasm... We have a lot of fun...

THE PROJECT:

Riccardo: In the golden age of Italian design, projects often had strong political connotations. What importance do you attribute to the planning phase that precedes the creation of a new work? Do you believe that working with economy of resources is a value that the artist should also keep in mind, or do you think that it's a problem that only those involved in the industry should confront?

Tomas: To generalise is impossible. You need to contextualise every question and intention for every artist...for example, if one is certain that a meteorite will strike the earth in a couple of days, I'm sure there would be no doubts about the economy of materials; of the energy and the attitude to take; of the possibility of constructing a city beyond the confines of earth...we would concentrate on something that, today, appears to be of little interest... the costs would be zero...

If we look at biology, an organism is more resistant if it's able to change in relation to its habitat or if it's able to remain immobile until times are better (a seed that still has to germinate...an animal in hibernation...). So one could say that there is equilibrium between moving and staying put...to modify the habitat...to modify oneself...or to change habitats...

So if we understand that the survival of a species or an individual depends on its capacity to adapt itself, to communicate and interact with the outside world, we would probably realise that one is more fragile when completely alien to the surroundings. You're more resistant if your capacity to create links is greater...the greater your capacity to communicate, the less likely something bad will happen.

But perhaps I'm getting too far off track...however...however, the principle of Google is exactly this...the more links a page has, the greater the possibility that it appears among the first on the list...and that it will be the most visited...and, consequently, it will also be less likely that it "dies".

UTOPIA:

Riccardo: Your way of planning seems to draw on the visionary ability of imagining new worlds, in agreement with the provocative proposals of groups of architects in the 1960s. Under the name of "Radical Architecture", architects gathered in Italy whose research moved in a field often balanced between the architectural profession and the more abstract needs of contemporary art.

Do you know the work of these architects? If you do, can you explain how they have affected what you do?

Tomas: Yes, Superstudio and Archizoom have always interested me...for a while in Frankfurt, I studied with Peter Cook, one of the founders of Archigram, and in Argentina with Gyula

Kosice...Yona Friedman...Thomas Bayle...with regards to how they've affected my work, I wouldn't know...however, they surely have...

Buckminster Fuller said, "Utopia exists until it's realised".

Wasn't it utopian a hundred years ago to think that people could travel in aeroplanes? Now five hundred million people fly each year. In 2010 there will be three billion...

TECHNOLOGY:

Riccardo: I would like to better understand your relationship with technology, technique and, as a direct consequence, progress.

When you speak about your work you use words like mobility, ecology, lightness. It seems to me that all the elements are there to interpret your rapport with technology (for example, the technology that allows man to fly) as, all things considered, a positive one, one of faith. And yet almost all technological innovations are developed for war purposes made available to society only later. And when these innovations become public domain, only a privileged minority can actually use them. To believe in technology as an instrument of social redemption doesn't risk being a little too naive?

Tomas: Yes, if we don't change our way of reasoning...if we don't find another system in which to see and do things...but my work tries to confront and find solutions in reality...

There is an ever-increasing awareness of the concept of the sustainability of our life on planet earth...in this sense my work tries to investigate and interpret existing reality, utilising technological innovations for new social objectives.

For example, my idea for Air Port City is to create platforms, house cells or cities that float in air, that change shape and intermingle like clouds. In relation to nation-states, this flexibility of movement finds an answer in the organisational structure of airports: the first international city. The airports are in various cities and are divided by "air side" and "land side". In "air side" you're under international laws; every action made will be judged according to international regulations. Total control under freedom. Air Port City is like an airport that flies: it can legally travel around the world, utilising airport regulations. I work on this structure to try to challenge the political, social, cultural and military confines accepted today, to try to re-establish new concepts of synergy.

I can explain to you what happens with patents and how one can also reason...the 1960s are over...I hope that something was learned there...

However, it's always relevant to hold on to the concept of utopia. It's one that mutates according to each era...let's see if we succeed in giving it another character...

From personal experience, I believe there's great possibility and potential in the registration of a patent...for example, one day I telephoned a company that produces a film which I needed for a new work...after a while, the engineer with whom I was speaking to tells me that this material is used as an insulator in satellites and that the particular type which I needed can only be used for military purposes. In addition, it could be attained only with a permit (impossible to get) from the United States army... now...what could I do? I continued asking, but...this is an art project...etc...I'm making Flying Cities...nothing doing, he tells me!

The film was patented with these conditions! The patent prevents the use of the material for non-military purposes...

OK, now let's look at my patent. After having registered at the Patent Office there's a period of time, about a year, in which you can sell your idea to industry, or to whoever may be interested in it. However, if after a year, the patent has still not been acquired (and I made sure that this didn't happen), one loses the right to make a profit from their invention. This means that everyone in the entire world can now use the patent, but that no one can make an economic profit.

This means that no large company will be interested in its use because the company is unable to

gain a direct earning; but ordinary people will have the possibility to use it in a more accessible way (we hope!). On the one hand, the invention's potential is limited, but on the other, possibilities are opened to others...sustainable change does not occur if it doesn't come from the bottom up...

I'm not that ambitious...I leave the thinking to others...isn't it better? To believe that one can resolve everything...I like Rirkrit (Tiravanija, ndr) when he tries to find the space and time for things to happen...as if these things already existed and others could do them also without us...not only for technology or, one could say, for the ethics of a technology...things should not be disconnected... it's hard for me to see differently.

THE EXHIBITION:

Riccardo: At a certain point in the 1990s the conviction that the exhibition had to be consumed in an experience was widespread among artists. This happened (and still happens) using elements like light, sound, etc. I'm thinking of the fog of Olafur Eliasson or the sound installations of Carsten Nicolai, to cite only a couple of the most striking examples. To a certain degree your intervention in Pinksummer's space in Genoa could also be included in this kind of exhibition. In that same period lots of architects also made experience the cardinal point of the work. The Americans Diller and Scofidio and their Blur Building ("the cloud building" made for the last International Expo in Switzerland) come to mind. After the last Documenta, however, a new approach seems to have been declared. There are an increasing number of exhibitions in which the works, installed rather traditionally, follow one after the other and accompany the spectator in a route. What do you think? Do you also see this trend?

Tomas: Yes, to go, to come, to return, to come back to stay...I'll write something... In general, I don't think about how to show my work. I remember an exhibition in Bonn, Germany, where I showed up the evening before and still didn't know what to do. The next day I asked if they had enough money to rent a truck instead of a car...so I put the entire contents of my studio inside the truck... I arrived at the cafe of the museum...I saw the exhibition space...I went to the cafe with my Greek friend Odysseus...we ate and drank still without having decided what to show...we took the entire studio and transported it into the room...I scattered a lot of things around...sculptures, models, texts...a year and a half of work in Germany... It seemed impossible to me that the people would understand, it seemed impossible but in the end everything came together... A pause, you expose yourself, to be able to check oneself, to expand your, or our, time (every once in a while), to share something in a continual process...it was like showing the process of something that I was trying to produce, but without being able to produce anything...

Or perhaps something...for example, for an exhibition in Berlin curated by Caroline Eggel and Christiane Rekae... But perhaps it's better if I include an excerpt from the text that accompanied my work. The work is called WMPT, World Meeting Public Telephone...

(...) In the art project WMPT, World Meeting Public Telephone, I was engaged in the possibilities and relationships of improving or opening a new means of making communication more accessible, profiting from the global connection of telephone networks (...) by creating a connection 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, between 12 public telephones around the world. Using these public telephones by simply dialling the prefix "0800", people had an opportunity to connect with the other 11 telephones in different cities. This public telephone inverts the relationship between public and private: one can receive a telephone call from a private number (a house, for example) or from one of the other 11 telephones involved. With this system, up to 5 simultaneous conversations are possible...so next time...when you find yourself walking down your street...answer the telephone!

Perhaps the connections between various exhibitions are made by themselves... perhaps one begins to perceive something only later. Sometimes I think that if the room in Pinksummer had been filled

with helium and made to fly, it would have become “earth specific”, as if we were connecting a more specific thought to a more general one...

Riccardo: Good, it seems to me that some things have come out of this discussion... perhaps it will take time to understand what we actually talked about. The best thing is that, instead of providing answers, in the end we did nothing other than increase the complexity of the questions...

If you feel like it, and only if it's useful to you to finish up the discussion, could you briefly talk about your rapport with Italy?

Tomas: “Still from the planet Earth, do you like it?”

Riccardo Previdi, Berlin, 23 November 2004

Tomas Saraceno, Miami, 18 December 2004

link:

<http://www.neromagazine.it/magazine/index.php?c=articolo&id=567&idnum=21&num=14>