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Architecture as Artwork

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Each week the population of our planet increases by the equivalent of a country the size of Portugal.

Around half of the world population lack access to any type of commercial energy supply, meaning that they are strangers to acrylic paint, electric light, typewriters, magazines, telephones, cars, computers and hundreds of other things and ideas which make up our everyday life.

If that part of the world population were to escape from poverty and start consuming only fifteen percent of the energy which the rest of the planet consumes, the effects would be devastating.

Over the next thirty years some thirty billion people will be born, more than 90% of them in the poorer countries of the world.

By 1990, world emissions of pollutants rose to around 3% above the planet's regenerative capacity.

The Internet currently has more than twenty million users plugging into information in various parts of the world. In another year, this number is set to rise to around one hundred million!

The great challenge for the youth of today in the called *First World* is unemployment, not technical education. It represents their main daily concern. Our societies are in thrall to politics and the economy.

Many of the independent professional classes – like independent doctors, architects, dentists or lawyers – are slowly disappearing in our overpopulated world, absorbed by large groups.

The large industrial conglomerates are desperately seeking new means of survival – such as GATT and NAFTA pacts – whilst virtual networks of *enterprise-person* silently replace them.

In parallel with demographic growth we find an intriguing phenomenon: growth in trade is dramatically higher than growth in world industrial output.

From the telephone and cinema to electric lighting and the first computers, good part of the inventions we use today came out of the nineteenth century.

These inventions include the bicycle, photography, the automobile, the cathode ray tube, anaesthetic, elevators, refrigerators, genetics, celluloid, radio waves, X-rays, the oscilloscope and the submarine.

But, in a period of only thirty years, from 1960 to 1990, the world experienced a tidal wave of new inventions, which rapidly replaced the previous technological universe.

These new inventions included the laser, space travel, communication satellites, holography, cloning, supersonic transport, pocket calculators, laser disks, micro-chips, AIDS, fibre optics, micro-computers, laser printers, digital plotters, micro-waves, micro-waves, virtual reality, cyberspace and nanotechnology.

Almost all of those new inventions are products of information research.

The first totally electronic computer was created in 1946. It was known as ENIAC, weighed thirty tons and occupied a small building. Its memory capacity was laughable in comparison with some of the microcomputers manufactured today for the use of children aged four and under.

The concept of education as instruction has today been replaced with that of contamination.

The digital universe of computers has introduced the idea of ephemeral memory. The slightest error and large stores of memory can be automatically destroyed.

In the next thirty years, 80% of the world population will be concentrated in the poorer nations.

This interactive global panorama implicated a radical change in the structure of Western thought. Specialisation in departments has given rise to a kind of *decentralised specialisation*. That is to say, to dynamic transdisciplinary knowledge.

Since the invention of the compass and the Gutenberg press, the eye has played a fundamental role in Western culture, but it is now replaced by the *tactile* work of emitting, or massaging, light on the retina.

In this way, the optical scanning, responsible for the perception of form, has been replaced by the sweep of light produced by television's cathode tubes and computer's monitors.

The eye is transported to *outside* of itself while operational condition.

Retina becomes a kind of *negative* of the computer or television screen.

The *link* between eye and hand acquires a new dimension. The finger that clicks the camera is replaced by a set of operations that transforms the *mouse* into a direct extension of the central nervous system.

Curiously, unlike what happened in the sixties and seventies, when there was an explosion of musical experiences, the great revolution of the last decade of the second millennium is visual.

This also means that the great sensorial revolution going on today belongs to a sense that had been *down-valued*. Or, that the *content* of a new medium is its previous one.

We *travel* in a vast cultural spectrum.

Our ideas ramble through centuries of history – for the first time ever compacted in a single package.

Since 1980 I have been developing *WOIKSED* – a virtual planet, permanently *in progress*. An open environment for free participation of architects, choreographers, musicians, painters, sculptors and scientists. It is a parallel reality, like a new planet, where people throughout the world can meet each other.

This new iconology is not only established by the ephemeral, but also by transdisciplinarity.

Unlike what happened with the beginning of photography – which caused an apparently precise iconological change, founded on a *visual verisme* – virtual environments establish a new aesthetic: a new sensorial order.

Architecture adopts the condition of a deprogrammable game, leaving behind the old concept of *mobility*: it is no longer about moving walls – the whole space is reprogrammable, transforming the city, the building and their users into true self-regulating galaxies.

Edified space no longer means closed compartments, stable facades or precise functions, to become instead a trans-sensorial experience.

In 1849, John Ruskin argued that «we have no right whatever to touch the buildings of past times. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us». This principle, which has been put into practice for over a century, is now superseded by a conviction that there is no permanence without life. There is no preservation without constant transformation – although this continuous metamorphosis might mean the rescue of forgotten ideas and spaces.

The word *tradition* is etymologically derived from two Indo European roots – *\*tr* and *\*de*, which mean respectively *transition from one thing to another* and *to provide or to give*.

So, the ultimate meaning of *tradition* is identified with *rupture*, as there is no transition without change.

The belief in the simple replacement or mummifying maintenance of spaces, as has become convention in Western urban thinking, has given way to a continuous process of spatial mutation.

The belief in the universal validity of specialised education within a given time-span has given way to education that lasts a lifetime.

In cognitive, and even aesthetic, terms, the idea of *necrosis* has been replaced by that of *apoptosis*.

The concept of degenerative death has been substituted by that of generative, creative death, through continuous transformation.

The *hic et nunc* which Walter Benjamin defended as a condition of technical reproducibility in the artwork has been superseded by *real time*.

The idea of *paradigm* introduced by Thomas Kuhn as the base of scientific revolutions, has been superseded by *syntagma*.

The architect who in the past organised large teams working like a industrial *line-production* – unveiling the *project manager* role – is now required to master a new technology of design and a new scale of work. He is required to master *virtual reality* and *cyberspace* technologies, and to transform himself into producer of art – which was before restricted to the called *fine arts*, even among conceptual artists.

Now, the architect creates his projects like the musician or the painter: directly on the space.

There is no longer any mediation between the architect and space.

Project teams are now organised in parallel, arranged in computer networks.

The building, until then confined to classical functionalism and rationalism, is now transformed into artwork.

But the metamorphosis is even more radical.

The plastic formation of synaptic constellations is directly related to the existence of sensorial inputs. This means that in response to sensory stimuli we adopt a specialised electrical configuration in our brains.

This configuration is what we commonly call *mentality*. This is a *global* logical condition that structures cognition as a whole. So what we *perceive* is no more than our own *schemata*.

In a certain sense, we have recovered the argument of Heraclitus when he argued that «wisdom consists of a simple thing: knowledge of thought, which orders everything everywhere».

Given that all language is a non-linear representation of our *schemata* - as a continuous operation of *sensorial loops* - the introduction of virtual reality implies a profound alteration in our cognitive maps.

That which we project as a representation is no longer the *mirror* of our sensory filters, but one of its most radical prosthesis.

The aura of an artwork disappears before the maximum concreteness introduced by *real time*.

Art as an imitation of nature in its *modus operandi* has been replaced by art as a natural operation – while *non-intention*.

A universe mainly characterised by a single sense has been transformed into a trans-sensorial universe.

Vision gives place to all other senses. Never before has humankind consumed so much incense, a typically Oriental habit. Never before has there been such a large output of cosmetics, creams, moisturisers, perfumes and fabric softeners.

The conventional predicative and hierarchical order has been transformed into an organisation by coordination.

This profound metamorphosis has been accompanied by strange reactions.

Practically all over the world, large civil construction companies offer their clients architectural designs for free, contracting students or young architects with the illusory objective of *paying less*.

Municipal councils in many cities subject architects to absurd rules and regulations, in disrespect of the freedom of expression, all in the overriding cause of mummifying cities.

The great majority of architects have been driven into a kind of *quasi underground*, working on interiors, far from institutional persecution.

But in the virtual universe there is no persecution and no bureaucracy.

This means that iconological changes are even more intense and devastating.

Slowly, designs created in a parallel reality are being introduced into cities, contaminating, like a virus, societies of different types.

Operational Cartesian principles are founded on the movement of the human head – fixed to the body. The space created inside a virtual environment is a stranger to such restrictions. The angle of vision can be changed, along with the scale, speed, surfaces and light.

When exported to the *outside*, such a space retains the logic of thought that characterised its virtual environment.

By this means, the revolution produced by art in the past is transformed – for the first time – into a synaptic game: inside our own brains.

Its *residues* – in painting, sculpture or any other medium – are now on the market as symbols of something that *does not exist*.

The art market is transformed into a market of symbols.

For this reason, many people are unable to understand things that were absolutely natural only a few years ago.

India has had the world's highest rate of population growth in recent decades, and it is predicted that its population will exceed that of China in the next few years.

There are wars on every side of the planet, killing thousands of people.

Contrarily to popular belief, the fifty poor nations consume less energy than fifteen years ago.

We represent a tiny part of the planet – a minority that is apparently becoming extinct.

The whole interdependent world constitutes this new aesthetic.

Things we see everyday on television.

Our planet is surrounded by a highly contagious *ideosphere*. Everything is transformed by contamination and interchange.

Within this silent revolution – here and there surprised by emergent nationalism – some groups of cultural producers react to the interactive wave by retreating into an impetus of isolation, creating a clone of the curse which captured Narcissus: he who doesn't love the next, must be passionate by himself.