Modernism has had a far-reaching influence over the worlds of art, architecture, and design. Although the conventions of Modernism remain popular among designers and artists, there have been groups in the past fifty years that have questioned its relevance. Modernism’s roots began in the late 19th century with a group of artists and writers challenging the conventions of the era. By the 1960’s, it had almost reached an intellectual stasis as a group of students from Florence looked to contribute to an evolving and growing international discourse about design and consumerism that once again challenged the conventions of the accepted paradigm. Superstudio worked in opposition to the trends that defined the first half of the twentieth century. Modernism, a movement that evolved into idealistic visions of an industrialized utopian future, had at its core an earnest simplicity that was evident in its products, buildings, and philosophies. To some, the hopes of Modernism had fallen short and the natural reaction was one of subversive, pessimistic irony.

Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro and Roberto Magris, and Piero Frassinelli founded Superstudio in 1966 while studying architecture at the University of Florence. For the group, it became fortuitous that they were located in Florence. Italy was still recovering from the economic devastation of World War II and many of the academic professionals in Florence had been parked in their positions for some time. Hence, the immediate possibility of building or teaching after graduation was
non-existent if they remained. However, they chose to remain in their city stating, "It is the designer who must attempt to re-evaluate his role in the nightmare he helped to conceive, to retread the historical process which inverted the hopes of the modern movement. And in Italy, Florence, a town where all such contradictions become most evident (the moment one draws the curtains of mythically misrepresented past) stands historically symbolic." The students from Florence were also very aware of groups like Archigram because of international publications that were circulating and art galleries such as Art Tapes that were bringing artists such as Dan Graham, Sol Lewitt, and Vito Acconci to Florence.

Superstudio’s aim was a systematic destabilization of modern architecture while working within the conventions of perspectival space. Over the course of their collaboration, the group produced photomontages, videos, furniture, and essays. Their work was realized not in finished buildings or competition entries, but in journals, museum exhibitions, and academic discourse.

In 1969, Superstudio unveiled a proposal for a monument that would envelop the globe. “Continuous Monument, an architectural monument for total urbanization” was a large white grid worked into cities, ocean shores, and pastoral landscapes. It was a comment on how globalization was “swamping the world”. The monument was described as a “negative utopia”, an example of what modern architecture had in store if left unchecked, and it also served as a tongue-in-cheek attack on the international modern style. In their view, things had become very bland and monotonous. Local culture had been stripped away by modernism and the world was becoming a repetitive grid of concrete and steel. The idea of the Continuous Monument was that eventually it would
continue to grow and cover the entire surface of the earth, leaving a homogenous, smooth structure that lay on the surface of the earth like an all-consuming desert. Superstudio wrote that ultimately the grid would form a “single continuous environment, the world rendered uniform by technology, culture, and all the other inevitable forms of imperialism. This would allow for a truly democratic human experience: because every point on the grid is identical, no place is better than any other.” The exaggerated proposal is at no loss for irony and their negative utopia becomes an ominous joke for the future.

The importance of the Continuous Monument was not in the thing itself but the method of working, the process of getting to their theoretical point. Modernism had been about production. In the 50’s the Eames’ help produce inexpensive furniture that could fit in almost any home in America. Their work was a production of ideas, but ultimately it became an effort to improve the everyday life of the common citizen in a practical, tangible way and to consume. Mies Van der Rohe expressed his philosophical ideals through building a physical object that could be experienced in a phenomenological manner, such as the Seagram’s Building. The viewer could literally experience his philosophies about architecture and industry by walking through and around one of his built projects. Superstudio worked against this standard and what became more influential than any of their individual projects (and was perhaps even Superstudio’s major critique of architecture and Modernism) was the idea that an architectural practice could be conceptually and theoretically based.

Their efforts were meant to undermine the certainties of the modern movement. The young Italian students had seen the horrors of World War II and the result of violent revolutions with the Fascists. The promises of Modernism had not materialized. Italian
society was looking for calm, accepting the idealistic views of the early twentieth century and a dreamy utopia. As a result, their revolution had to be subversive yet just as radical. Working within their paradigm, a practice could be focused on cultural criticism rather than the production of buildings. They questioned the role of the architect in society having come to the conclusion that the architect had helped to aggravate the world’s social and environmental problems, again in opposition to Modernism, which saw the designer and architect as a kind of savior.

They were a part of a larger cultural movement within Italy that included the *Arte Povera* movement, or “Poor Art”. The artists of this movement, like the architects and designers in groups such as Superstudio, were rejecting the established institutions of government, industry and culture. Similar to Superstudio and their questioning of the role of the architect in society, the *Arte Povera* movement also questioned whether art as the private expression of the individual still had an ethical reason to exist.

The influence of Superstudio on younger generations of architects and designers was inevitable. Their ideas have proliferated into the academic culture because of the nature of their output. Instead of being tied to building projects that could take years to complete, they worked instead with the spread of information and ideas through print, video, and exhibitions: all the mediums of a fast paced cultural exchange, working in anticipation of the information age. Also, the subversive nature of their projects will always appeal to younger generations that perpetually wish to overturn or challenge the accepted norms of the mainstream.

The Continuous Monument is the best-known example of Superstudio, but it is only one example of a body of work that questioned the conventions of the time.
However, it was not only their questioning of the conventions that made Superstudio so important and influential, it was the manner in which they went about challenging those conventions. Through irony, as opposed to earnestness, through academic channels, as opposed to the production of objects, they became agents of change. They were a part of a larger cultural movement in Italy in the late 1960’s, but they stood out because they worked with what little they had and started a revolution of thoughts and ideas that challenged an aging paradigm.
Bibliography


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