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MILANO

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Book of Proceedings

Conference for Artistic and  
Architectural Research

AUID



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# Authorship(s) Book of Proceedings Colophon

**CA<sup>2</sup>RE-Milan AUTHORSHIP(S): Conference for Artistic and Architectural Research**

**Editors**

Fabrizia Berlingieri, Jacopo Leveratto  
with Sara Anna Sapone, Francesco Airoidi, Gino Baldi, Duccio Fantoni  
Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU), Politecnico di Milano

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# **Authorship**

## **The Impossibility of the Ordinary**

**Alessandro Rocca, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano**

**"He who searches for style, finds death; he who searches for life, finds style". In architecture tackling the theme of form in and of itself leads you onto an impassable road. It seems more fruitful to me to get there through coincidences, necessities, opportunities<sup>1</sup>.**

The figure, role and aura of the author have long been under investigation; on May 30, 1968, a group of protesters broke into the Palazzo dell'Arte where Giancarlo De Carlo had just inaugurated the exhibition of the XIV Triennale of Milan entitled *The Big Number*, canceling an exhibition of great names, some very young others less so, in an anti-authoritarian, libertarian and revolutionary outburst<sup>2</sup>. In 1962, Umberto Eco (one of the curators of the 1964 Triennale exhibition, *Il tempo libero*, or "Leisure") published his essay *Opera aperta*, subtitled *Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (*Form and indeterminacy in contemporary poetics*), in which the concept of a programmatically non-univocal interpretation of the work places the author in a mediating role between the writing of the work and its meaning (Eco 1989).

Presenting a new Italian edition of the book in 1997, Eco wrote a preface in which he accurately described a creative process used by musician Luciano Berio:

**a sound experiment whose original title was *Omaggio a Joyce* (*Homage to Joyce*), a sort of forty-minute radio broadcast that began by reading chapter 11 of *Ulysses* (the one called *The Sirens*, an orgy of onomatopoeia and alliteration) in three languages: English, French, and Italian; but then, since Joyce himself had said that the structure of the chapter was a fugue, Berio began to superimpose the texts in the manner of a fugue, first English on English, then English on French, and so on, a sort of multilingual, Rabelaisian *Fra Martino Campanaro*, with great orchestral effects (but it was always and only the human voice). Finally, Berio worked on the English text alone (as Cathy Berberian said), filtering certain phonemes, until a real musical composition emerged, the one that circulates on record under the same title, *Omaggio a Joyce*, but it no longer has anything to do with the broadcast, which was instead critical-didactic and commented on the operations step by step. (Eco 1997, v-vi)**

The starting point for the concept of open work is a voluntary reduction in authorial authority, as explained in the opening words of the text:

**Among recent instrumental music productions, we can note some compositions marked by a common characteristic: the particular executive autonomy granted to the performer, who is not only free to interpret the composer's instructions according to his or her own sensibility (as is the case with traditional music), but must even intervene in the form of the composition, often determining the duration of the notes or the succession of sounds in an act of creative improvisation. (ibid., 31)**

The following year, Gruppo 63 was founded in Palermo, an avant-garde literary movement founded by writers and intellectuals who were

important figures in Italian culture, such as Alfredo Giuliani, Edoardo Sanguineti, Nanni Balestrini, Alberto Arbasino, Umberto Eco, Angelo Guglielmi, Giorgio Manganelli, art critics Renato Barilli and Achille Bonito Oliva, and journalist Furio Colombo, all of whom would assume leadership roles in Italian culture over the next fifty years. This neo-avant-garde never published an explicit programmatic manifesto but clearly pursued a process of dissolving the author through a variety of different practices, all aimed at overcoming the established figures of the literary scene and beyond. Balestrini and Sanguineti, for example, nullified the aura that surrounded the poetry of previous decades, marked by the hermeticism of Eugenio Montale and Giuseppe Ungaretti, by practicing direct, even rough and conflictual, contact with the spirit of the times, drawing inspiration from directly to the political events of those years, from the hot autumn to the electoral advance of the Communist Party, but also carrying out an intense operation of deconstructing language and searching for new modes of production based on the dilution of the author into a collective form. The shared author in a multiple entity was very successful among the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, with epic formations such as Archigram, Superstudio, Archizoom, and UFO, finding an affinity with the pop music scene where the figure of the solo performer succumbed to the advance of hippy culture and the emergence of the new beatnik bands.

In Rome, for example, around the early 1960s, a series of design collectives emerged that clearly presented themselves as alternatives to studios founded on the prestige of a single architect or, as was also frequently the case, a single family:

**There were professional firms that also carried out research projects: e.g. the Society for Architecture and Urban Planning (SAU), founded by Leonardo Benevolo; the Roman Group of Architects and Urban Planners (GRAU), headed by Alessandro Anselmi; and the STASS practice, led by Giorgio Ciucci and Mario Manieri Elia, among others. Along with these offices, there were others that took their names from the streets where they were established, such as the Flaminia Street practice, the Mercati Street practice, and the Nicotera Street practice, which later became Atrio Testaccio. (Malfona 2024)**

The collective model is now expanding again in line with the growing demand for interaction, participation, negotiation, and practices that are becoming increasingly widespread in certain areas where architectural action implies responsibility and an explicitly political vision, as can be seen, with different assumptions, in Rural Studio, Elemental and Rotor:

**Today, architects and other agents explore new forms of authorship in the built environment, which are connected to multiple forms of negotiation. The numerous collective design groups and collaborative platforms that we see emerging nowadays in architectural practice are the *epitomai* of a revised conception of authorship: no longer singular and heroic, but rather multiple, fluid, emergent. (Avermaete et al. 2023, 5)**

The shift from poetics to politics is also a recurring theme and is certainly linked to every technological acceleration. For the industrial age, in which we still find ourselves in some ways, Walter Benjamin's reflective contribution remains fundamental:

**For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice-politics. (Benjamin 1969, 234)**

To participate in the Armory Show, the First Annual Exhibition of the Independent Artists organized in New York in April 1917, Marcel Duchamp asked Louise Norton to submit his *Fountain*, the famous upside-down urinal, indicating as the author a non-existent R. Mutt:

**The pseudonym Richard Mutt is derived from the famous comic strip characters Mutt and Jeff, whose adventures were read almost everywhere in the United States at the time. Having grown up in poverty, Bud Fisher, the inventor of Mutt and Jeff, became famous and incredibly wealthy. A success story directly comparable to the dreams and expectations in the art world. (Banz 2019)**

The ironic attribution to a comic book hero emphasizes the autonomy of the work, of the readymade, with respect to its author, who, in Duchampian logic, is nothing more than a discoverer capable of choosing and transporting objects, with a simple gesture of the index finger, from everyday life to the realm of art. In some ways, one could say that Duchamp also foresaw this, the role of the artist, the author, essentially as a curator, as a manipulator of already existing objects and meanings. Assembly and collage were means of expression through which the architect expressed himself not as a demiurge but as an intermediary, a manipulator of existing materials: the two versions of *Città analoga* ("Analogous City") are famous, one consisting of a collage on cardboard of projects, engravings, and drawings from various sources; the other a painting by Arduino Cantafora for an exhibition by a group of young architects led by Aldo Rossi<sup>3</sup>, as well as the collage created by superimposing buildings and disparate fragments of cities, in the manner of Giovambattista Piranesi, which becomes the icon that sums up the entire meaning of the *Collage City* project (Griffin and Kollhoff 1978, n.p.).

In more recent times, Duchamp's approach has been put into practice by numerous artists and in Nicolas Bourriaud's theoretical work based on the concept of postproduction: "Since the early nineties, an ever increasing number of artworks have been created on the basis of preexisting works; more and more artists interpret, reproduce, re-exhibit, or use works made by others or available cultural products". Strategies which, according to Bourriaud, "contribute to the eradication of the traditional

distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work." It follows that

**Notions of originality (being at the origin of) and even of creation (making something from nothing) are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape marked by the twin figures of the DJ and the programmer, both of whom have the task of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts.**

The figure of the author is weakened and sometimes abolished:

**Shareware does not have an author but a proper name. The musical practice of sampling has also contributed to destroying the figure of the Author, in a practical way that goes beyond theoretical deconstruction (the famous "death of the author" according to Barthes and Foucault). (Bourriaud 2002a, 86)**

Writing about architecture is as dangerous as it is necessary. The pleasure, power, and autonomy of the text exert an irresistible seductive force on both the writer and the reader. At the same time, writing is immaterial, aleatory, and, when compared to the technical authority of the project and the physical reality of the building, can dissolve into an intangible breath. Architecture books and magazines have used and abused writing in every way possible; they have exalted it, elevating it to an indispensable and often primary vehicle for the expression of architectural thought, and they have debased it with recurring jargon, an abundance of clichés, and the rituals of corporate advertising. Drawing places architecture in a broad but clearly defined field, between the two extremes of figurative art and technical and engineering graphic documents, two material and cultural polarities that vividly represent the artistic and technical margins of a discipline always caught between expression and performance, symbol and practice, social and individual. Writing, on the other hand, has the opposite status: it is the tool that architecture shares with the humanities, and therefore, due to its accessibility to non-architects, it is the primary platform for exchange, communication, and hybridization between architecture and knowledge, practices, and techniques outside its specific discipline.

Roland Barthes addressed the question of the author who, like Ulysses in Polyphemus' cave, finds fulfillment in his own annihilation, in calling himself Nobody. According to Barthes, "literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes (Barthes 1967). It is difficult to apply this interpretation to architecture, but it remains highly evocative and can be translated in different ways. For example, by analyzing the coefficient of authorship of the work, distinguishing how much of a project derives from the author's own, autonomous discourse, and how much derives from contingency: the client, the physical, economic, and social context. Barthes also recalls how the author is a modern figure, especially magnified by the romantic attitude of interpreting the work in relation to the author's biography:

The image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions; criticism still consists, most of the time, in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of the man Baudelaire, Van Gogh's work his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice: the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his confidence.

The conclusion of Barthes' essay effectively leads to the fate announced by the title, with the complete transfer of the creative work into the reader's dimension. The true author is therefore the reader who, entering a professional dimension, is the critic, the curator, the only one capable of understanding all the levels included in the work:

**A text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted.**

In Michel Foucault's view, the problem of the author is inextricably linked to that of the work:

**When undertaking the publication of Nietzsche's works, for example, where should one stop? Surely everything must be published, but what is "everything"? Everything that Nietzsche himself published, certainly. And what about the rough drafts for his works? Obviously. The plans for his aphorisms? Yes. The deleted passages and the notes at the bottom of the page? Yes. What if, within a workbook filled with aphorisms, one finds a reference, the notation of a meeting or of an address, or a laundry list: is it a work, or not? Why not? And so on, *ad infinitum*. How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after his death? (Foucault 1998, 205-222)<sup>4</sup>**

This problem has now been multiplied *ad infinitum* by digital technologies. When preserving the archive of a project or an architect, one is faced with an incalculable number of files that need to be classified and, perhaps, selected. This raises the problem of deciding which documents are part of the work and which are not, which are authorial, and which are not, which deserve to be cataloged and archived, and which should be confined to a secondary repository or even eliminated.

The prospect of design generated by digital sampling, a kind of equivalent to Deejay Music, provides a frame of reference for the frenetic way in which images and knowledge migrate freely from one desktop to

another. According to Mario Carpo, this process is caused by the spread of digital technologies and shifts the typically modern profile of the author. This is undoubtedly another factor in the crisis of authorship, which pushes the project from an auratic and strongly authorial sphere – which, according to Carpo, we owe to the intelligence of Leon Battista Alberti – to an open source environment of shared resources, information, and programs that dilute the figure of the author into a multitude of overlapping practices, exercised by individuals who do not hesitate to edit the work of others, producing an endless series of overlapping layers (Carpo 2011). When The Why Factory produces *Copy Paste*, it directly addresses the issue of authorship in the age of shared files, easy duplication and replication, and the dissemination of images that lend themselves to endless copying, distortion, and manipulation: “Opening up the archive of icons to further experimentation encourages creative copying and shared authorship: it is the ultimate act of ‘copyleft’” (The Why Factory 2017, 54).

The return to copying, repetition, and resemblance has some of its roots in typological studies that limited the procedural nature of functionalist design, reinforcing the idea of continuity and permanence that was already inherent in Ernesto Nathan Rogers' vision. Every architect knows very well that practice, teaching, and research share the assumption that each project, and each new building, aims to reach a status of originality and difference. On the other hand, each project faces a force that acts in the opposite direction, towards repetition and homologation: “History and typology emerge as two complementary aspects; while history illuminates processes of change, typological analysis reveals what stays the same during these processes. Furthermore, each of these aspects requires the other, as only change can shed light on what persists” (Martí Arís 2021, 37). Even outside of typological studies, the question of authorship is a constantly active vertigo, a point of imbalance that must be kept active, an actor that cannot be removed from the architect's table, or laptop:

**The themes of originality, copying and tradition have occupied the thoughts of art critics for many centuries. Different authors in different situations express statements that show unusual resonances, strange analogies, repetitions or slight variations. The author's personality sometimes gets lost in a myriad of linguistic events that together give rise to a great work of “collective literature” that passes through time. (Zucchi 2012, 82)**

The digital universe looms like an infinite repository, a hunting ground open to plunder by replicants:

**The internet changed design by replacing it with a Google search. Whatever we think to make has probably already been made, and some trace of it is available online, so that would be the first place to look. Looking at what has been made has replaced the proverbial blank page of a drafting table. Looking in our case involves being able to download parts of what has already been made, and proceeding to rearrange those downloaded parts, perhaps even using them as they are. (Angelidakis 2020, 16–22)**

In conclusion, the author is destined to extricate himself from the almost always obscure jungle of references, memories, and analogies (Scelsi 2022), trying to find somehow an identity of their own that can only be relational (Bourriaud 2002b), in a constant back and forth between the past and the present, disciplinary knowledge and reality, as explained by Jasper Morrison:

**I wouldn't argue with the concept of taking inspiration where you find it, and always having an eye open for what the mechanisms of daily life put in one's path. It always seemed to me absurd to imagine that inspiration can be found without the influence of things seen. I like the idea that creativity is in fact the art of reprocessing what already exists and not, after all, anything divine or mysterious. (Morrison in Lichtenstein and Schregenberger 2001, 19)**

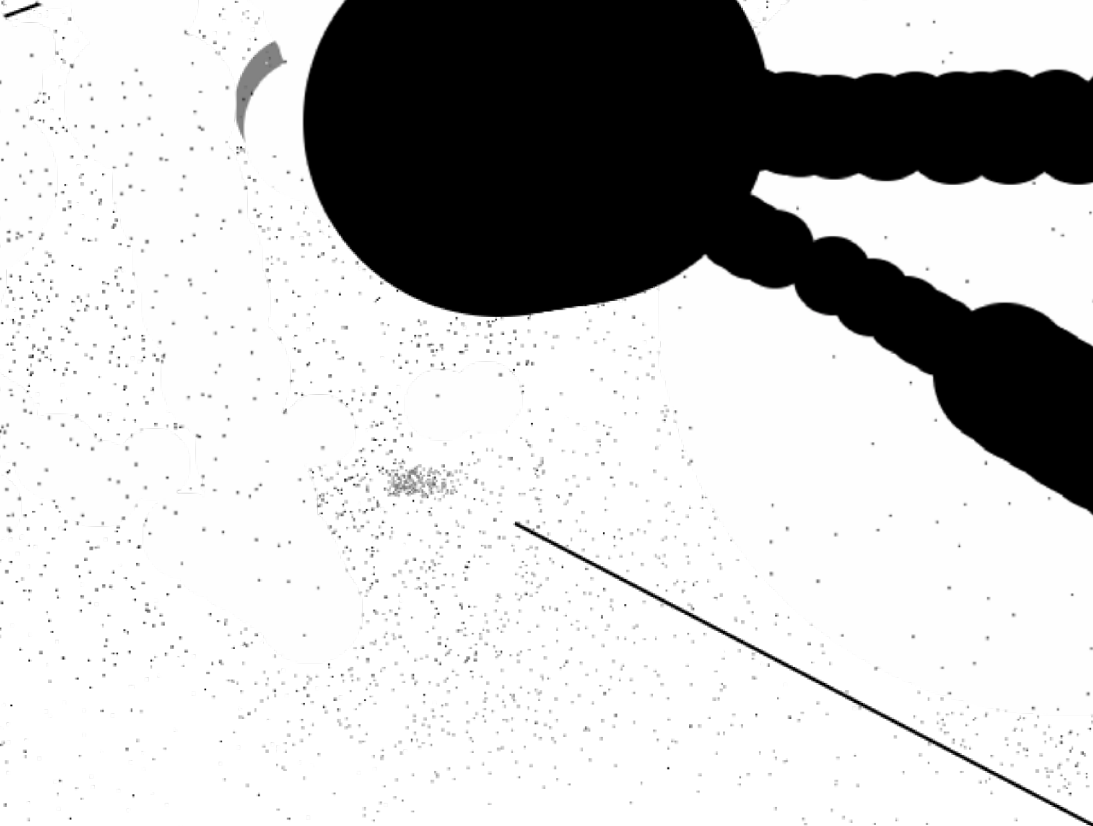
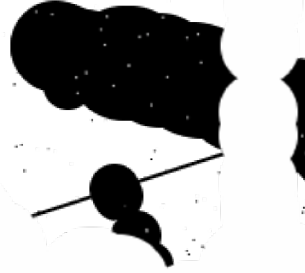
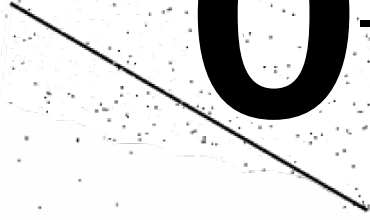
- 1 A saying of Eduardo De Filippo quoted by Giacomo Borella (2012, 23).
- 2 Among others, the exhibition featured: Arata Isozaki, Alison e Peter Smithson, Shadrach Woods, Aldo van Eyck, Archigram, Archizoom, Gyorgy Kepes, Hans Hollein, Marco Bellocchio with Giancarlo De Carlo, Renzo Piano with the Center for the Studies of Science and Art of London (Nicolin 2011).
- 3 The painting was exposed in the exhibition *Architettura-città*, curated by Aldo Rossi, Franco Raggi, Massimo Scolari, Rosaldo Bonicalzi, Gianni Braghieri, and Daniele Vitale; XV International Exhibition of the Triennale di Milano, 1973.
- 4 The text is the transcription of a lecture that Foucault gave at the Société Française de Philosophie on February 22, 1969.

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# Panel Members

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**Joaquim Almeida**, University of Coimbra

**Ana Betancour**, Malmö University

**Silvia Bodei**, Politecnico di Milano

**Marco Bovati**, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

**Boštjan Botas Kenda**, University of Ljubljana

**Riccarda Cappeller**, Leibniz University Hannover

**Roberto Cavallo**, TU Delft

**Kristinas Careva**, University of Zagreb

**Giulia Cazzaniga**, Politecnico di Milano

**Cassandra Cozza**, Politecnico di Milano

**Barbara Coppetti**, Politecnico di Milano

**Per-Johan Dahl**, Lund University

**Johan De Walsche**, University of Antwerp

**Federico Di Cosmo**, Politecnico di Milano

**Lidia Gasperoni**, Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL)

**Pedro Guilherme**, Universidade de Évora

**Urs Hirschberg**, TU Graz

**Stamatina Kousidi**, Politecnico di Milano

**Thierry Lagrange**, KU Leuven

**Andreas Lechner**, TU Graz

**Fabio Lepratto**, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

**Maarten Gheysen**, KU Leuven

**Michael McGarry**, Queen's University Belfast

**Carles Muro**, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

**Sonja Oliveira**, University of Strathclyde

**Claus Peder Pedersen**, Aarhus School of Architecture

**Gennaro Postiglione**, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

**Sara Protasoni**, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

**Alessandro Rocca**, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

**Sascha Roesler**, Accademia di architettura, Mendrisio (USI)

**Edite Rosa**, University of Coimbra

**Emma Rowden**, Oxford Brookes University

**Sofia Salema**, Universidade de Évora

**Gerardo Semprebon**, Politecnico di Milano

**Giulia Setti**, Politecnico di Milano

**Jörg Schröder**, Leibniz University Hannover

**Markus Schwai**, Norwegian University of Science and Technology

**Sally Stewart**, The Glasgow School of Art

**Pier Paolo Tamburelli**, TU Wien

**Valerio Tolve**, Politecnico di Milano

**Alisia Tognon**, Politecnico di Milano

**Jo Van Den Berghe**, KU Leuven

**Esther Venrooij**, KU Leuven

**Liselotte Vroman**, KU Leuven

**Boštjan Vuga**, University of Ljubljana

**Francesca Zanotto**, Politecnico di Milano

**Leonardo Zuccaro Marchi**, Politecnico di Milano

**Tadeja Zupančič**, University of Ljubljana