<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Leach, Andrew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>‘Tafuri's eyes: the biographical subject and subjectivities of reception’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Tafuri's eyes: the biographical subject and subjectivities of reception

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ABSTRACT

Recent writing on Tafuri privileges the oral history recorded shortly before his death by Luisa Passerini (1992). A 'new' talisman for unlocking his secrets, it implicates the double meaning of autoritratto as autobiography and self-portrait. Starting from this premise, this paper considers biographical and autobiographical representation in Tafuri's 'early' and 'recent' reception. Vercelli's (1999) theory of the portrait exposes the complexities of biographical representation in which the biological subject remains distinct from the vicissitudes of representation. These arguments turn Tafuri-as-subject upon debates on the ethics of historical representation. His reception, divided neatly into two 'moments'—the 1970s 'turn to theory' and the recent 'return to history'—indexes a generational conflict that is intrinsic to this problem. In this, Ian Hunter's work on the theorist-persona is useful. The paper considers the status of Tafuri's intellectual autobiography, his own representational intentions, and the repercussions of these on Tafuri's reception today.


Despite an intentional coincidence of these events with the English-language publication of Tafuri's Ricerca del rinascimento: the correlation between the book's release (following a 14-year long translation project) and the rise in Tafuri's critical fortunes as evidenced by rapidly expanding Tafuri discussion in America is timely, but not inevitable.2

Tafuri's swift return to the centre of an Anglophone debate on criticality and the role of theory in architectural culture shadows increasing institutional pressure to respond quickly and intelligently to the 'question of design research'—evidenced (in Europe, at least) by demands upon practicing architectural academics to respond to requirements of the Bologna Accords—and to generational conflicts spawning (in the United States) a theoretical reflection on 'post-criticality'. The vulgar appropriation of Tafuri as a mannequin silently defending a theoretical, discursive intellectualisation of architecture and its history enlists him in the defence of contemporary discussions on theory's autonomy that appear to reject the terms in which he entered the American debate of the 1970s and 80s. His 'resurrection', in one sense, tracks a wider concern that the drive to more aggressively implicate a European critical theory discourse in architecture by Peter Eisenman, K Michael Hays, Joan Ockman, Anthony Vidler and others, is being undone by the generation that they either raised as children, or baby-sat as grandchildren.3

In Italy, where Marco Biagioli made the first attempt to conduct a synthetic analysis of Tafuri's writing on modern architecture in his Progetto di crisi. Manfredo Tafuri e l'architettura contemporanea (2005), the forced recollection of Tafuri's oeuvre has engendered a mixed response across corresponding generations, provoked by a completely different set of institutional imperatives.4 Recent PhD seminars at Venice International University ('Rileggere Manfredo Tafuri' and 'Riscrivere Manfredo Tafuri') and an accelerated effort to document his teaching at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (IUAV) constitute part of an equally loaded endeavour, where another kind of heritage is at stake.

Focusing, for the moment, on the figure Herbert Muschamp famously named 'the Marxist of Venice', the readiness of Tafuri's return today suggests that the relationship between his reception in America in the 1970s and the present moment is intimate and enduring.5

Accounting for April's events, responses to Tafuri's explicit 'return' are mixed. One reaction, published as a poster entitled 'Un cadavere'—mailed to speakers at the New York symposium and lodged on the internet under the corporate authorship of 'Architects for Volume'—captures the occasionally hysterical tone that inflects the call to understand what Tafuri offers 'us' today. Of the speakers, Architects for Volume write:

'They sang high to heaven his heroism, his integrity – an example for us all, they said,
an example to follow in these times of malevolent irony. The body remained unanimated, the weight of its authority flung against bastard heirs. A dead figure before death.

Despite the inflated language of their otherwise astute assessment—describing the conference as, among other things, ‘a National Geographic show on the alimentary habits of the scholarly fauna of the swamps’—and despite the factual errors and grammatical faux pas that undermine the document itself, revealing its reflexiveness, the plea for Tafuri’s contemporaneity rose to the surface as a desperate attempt to shock ‘the New York scene’ into some form of live debate: ‘between the anecdotes and the philology, what could the average student of architecture take away?’

This question brings us to the independent importance of Tafuri’s work in reception over the last thirty years. He may have been an historian, but he was equally the arch-theorist of architecture’s place in the world. As such, while historically explaining the relationship between architecture and modernity after the Enlightenment, Tafuri’s work—significant as it is to architectural theory culture—undermines his own call for critical distance as a key dimension of historical practice. In the acuity of his analysis, Tafuri’s historiography implicitly confronts his audience with the need for action, silently weighing it down with the responsibility to do something with the historical knowledge he conveys. Both the initial magnitude of his work—and here I refer to its Anglophone reception—and its enduring import have been due to its function in architectural culture as a theoretical provocation rather than to its status as a ‘scientific’ analysis of historical phenomena.

For many, ‘Tafuri’ as a persona is inseparable from Progetto e utopia (1973, Engl ed Architecture and Utopia, 1976), the arrival of which in America surged a groundswell of politico-theoretical activity redefining ‘architectural theory’ from treatise to a disciplinary genre of writing. Architecture and Utopia broached a field dominated by the Leftist avant-garde intellectualism of Oppositions and the programme of New York’s Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, which was already attempting to address the role of theory in architecture, to understand how architecture could be recast as a discourse legitimately circumscribed by writing, drawing, or modelling. It dislocated the definition of building as architecture’s only legitimate endpoint.

Tafuri explained architecture’s ongoing disciplinary ‘crisis’, using language paralleling the Frankfurt School’s earlier diagnosis of cultural crisis along with the medical sense of the term that he learned from Freud. In his account, the interbellum avant-garde initiated a watershed in the Weimar Republic, its effects defining architecture’s later twentieth century relationship with society, commerce, art and the construction sector. This critique questioned the capacity of architecture to affect the world beyond Architecture, leading to a new category of thinking on architecture’s artistic autonomy and its demands.

The persistence of Architecture and Utopia as a point of reference for those architect-theoreticians (and their children, and their grandchildren) underpins his importance in articulating ‘the problem’ of contemporary architectural culture, even if his conclusions do not necessarily remain unchallenged by time. Indeed, since the mid-1970s his perspective on modern architecture constantly finds new life in historiographical iterations, even if the writing in question is not overtly Tafurian.

April’s interterrestrial squabbling takes exception to the unquestionability of this Tafuri ‘image’. Many, in the vein of Architects for Volume, seek the enduring valency of his assessment of modern architectural culture, asking how we can bring him to bear upon the role of architecture today, in a globalised era, after September 11. Where for example, ought we position Architecture and Utopia, alongside Antonio Negri (on globalisation) or Giorgio Agamben (on ‘il campo’)? Without explicitly questioning the validity of this search, which seems motivated by a genuine desire to render theoretical discourse—or the intellectual activities of the University—politically relevant, imitating intellectual structures of the 1960s and 70s, it relies on an illusory vast gulf separating Tafuri as an image, formed through his writings’ reception, from Tafuri as a reconstructed biographical subject.

Although elements of Tafuri’s biography entered into play with the commemorative issue of Casabella, edited by Vittorio Gregotti (1995), the first scholarly commentator on his work to consider the biographical dimension—separable from the patterns and exigencies of his reception—was Carlo Keyvanian in an article drawn from her MSc dissertation (MIT, 1992). A slightly later wave of academic writing, charting Tafuri’s ‘life in history’, leans heavily, and now predictably, on the publication (in 2000) of an oral history conducted by Luisa Passerini with Tafuri in Rome (1992). Originally commissioned by the Getty Research Institute as one of a series of interviews with art historians, in its American publication—never having appeared in Italian—the interview rendered available a history of Tafuri’s activities that had previously fallen beyond the relevant fields of influence on his work: personal, political, intellectual, academic. It further asks readers who had not paid close attention to Tafuri’s early writing to be made available in English and who had found his ‘turn’ to the Renaissance at odds with everything they previously knew of Tafuri to broaden their outlook in consideration of a Tafurian opera completa. Consequently, Passerini’s oral history has quickly become, within five or six years, a classic reference in describing a chronology of Tafuri’s development that sets a number of traps for adherents to the image of Tafuri bound to Architecture and Utopia. Once again, this has intergenerational consequences.
CONTESTED TERRAINS SAHANZ PERTH 2006

The resulting discussion in New York expressed this division with some clarity, though with many important exceptions bringing new and nuanced readings to the table: including James Ackerman, Deborah Howard and Marco de Michellis. As for the rest, to again cite Architects for Volume: ‘The old guard gave us luke-warm leftovers; the young pups tried for historical acuity.’ Yet even the attempt for ‘historical acuity’ in terms bound to Passerini’s oral history, documented most explicitly in the widely read doctoral dissertation of Rixt Hoekstra—who was not, after all, in the line-up of speakers—and in the biographical insights of Progetto di crisi, by Biraghi (who was), relies on the specious premise that Tafuri, in the Passerini interview, presents his own life without mediation. As ‘autobiography’, readers directly access some form of ‘truth’ pertaining to the relationship between Tafuri’s life and work.

Passerini questions Tafuri on his childhood, education, private life, mentors, enmities, friendships, motivations, desires and aspirations. As a result, historians using the interview often synthesise Tafuri’s œuvre in light of biographical factors supplied by Tafuri himself, tending even towards psychoanalytic readings. As a document, it is enticing because it supercedes—by dint of its aforementioned ‘truthfulness’—any of the more remote attempts at biography or explanation of the multiform forces informing his historical methodology or theoretical positions. However, in its easy rehearsal, positing Passerini’s record as ‘the final word’, it is problematic. As with illusory paper, it changes colour according to a new hegemony that demands direct representation of Tafuri the individual, Tafuri the intellectual, Tafuri the teacher, and so on. Displacing more diagnostic approaches, it privileges essence over evidence.

It is crucial to accept the inherent differences between Passerini’s long interview with Tafuri and his later interviews since the early 1970s. Whereas those conducted in newspapers or in professional, cultural and critical journals tend to occupy restricted spaces, coinciding with publications, reflecting post exhibition or restoration, Passerini’s record—even though restricted (to 60 pages) in its published form—exists on tape and as a transcript in the Getty. Without reconciling the public versus archival forms of the history, the ANY edition already offers far more insight than any other published interview. In its content, though, ‘History as Project’ (the title of the interview as it appears in English) shares many of the exigencies of Tafuri’s most explicitly methodological writings, doing so with the unique authority of auto-commentary, but without the accountability of those methodological works written in an academic mode. Not ‘simply’ a text on the ‘reasons for history’—such as we find in Teorie e storia dell’architettura (1968), ‘Architettura e storiografia’ (1975), ‘Il “progetto” storico’ (1977) or the prefaces to Venezia e il rinascimento or the Ricerca—‘History as Project’ is also a meditation on those ‘reasons’ in the most private of terms, autobiographically, at the limits between his work and his life. In this sense, its responsibilities are different.

Notably, the oral history is set up with no in-built ‘right of response’. Having been ill for some time, Tafuri did not expect to live long after the Passerini interview, anticipating his imminent death on record. Indeed, he died less than two years later. His earlier (and less substantial) interviews appear to provide fewer ‘answers’ than those documented by Passerini; intended for immediate consumption (and open to discursive ‘negotiation’), they self-consciously account for their supplementary function as explanations or ‘entrances’. Rather than taking part in an intellectual exchange, the Passerini history takes liberties with the almost certain knowledge that Tafuri’s own life—as the interview’s subject—will, in turn, be subject to enquiry only after his death.

Its claims, both autobiographical (in authorship) and posthumous (in release) are awkward for current scholars, closing down discussion according to the most problematic authority: that of the historian offering a history of his own life, to another historian with a controversial, experimental approach to historical subjectivity, Tafuri was certainly aware of Passerini’s historiography; so too, we must be cynical enough to suspect that he envisaged the interview to remain closed for his lifetime, official moratoria aside.

In short, Tafuri appears herein (with Passerini’s complicity) to establish the terms of his own reception by a new generation of scholars, and to undermine the image of his work that dogged his later practice as an historian.

If this document offers the greatest challenge to the image of Tafuri as Marxist theoretician of modern architecture, an impression implied by and bound to his 1970s reception, and if it offers the most explicit provocation to younger readers of Tafuri to expand the number of his writings that receive critical attention, then the auto-construction of Tafuri-as-subject is crucial in positioning ‘History as Project’ relative to the rest of his œuvre, as well as understanding the status of this document in the current phenomena of his reception. But to what degree can we accept its insights without question? Does its function as autobiography forgive its representational subjectivity? How can we bring Tafuri’s ‘explanations’ of his work into discussion without either unnecessarily diminishing his authorial stance through suspicion or turning to his account for concrete answers, for the truth?

The Italian word autoirritatto can pertain both to self-portrait and autobiography (properly autobiografia); its possibilities in oral historiography are most explicitly explored in Passerini’s Autoirritatto di gruppo. At the risk of playing a facile game of word association, brief reflection on the mechanism of auto-subjectivity as applied to the self-portrait equips us to accord ‘History as Project’ a more nuanced status for contemporary incursions into Tafuri’s bibliography. To this end, Bart Verschat-
feil’s essay ‘Kleine theorie van het portret’ (‘Little Theory of the Portrait’, 1999) makes some useful distinctions between the terms at stake herein.¹⁵

Verschaffel writes of the mechanism of ‘resemblance’ in portraiture as one that divests the genre of the need to be ‘truthful’. The face remains a final vestige of the personal while at once being that element most open to judgement as a ‘similarity’. The eyes reassure us, he continues, that the portrait indexes a real life, legitimating the representation, while the face is its ‘material’ and thus most subject to the vicissitudes of representational tradition. These ‘permissions’ irreparably divorce the depiction from that which it depicts, rendering it an independent phenomenon with its own imperatives and consequences.

But it was necessary ... that these representations liberate themselves and impose images that treated the individual alone, that the portraits acquire—a real format and a semi-public character.¹⁶

Utilising resemblance as an index of ‘real’ life—ensuring some form of relationship between artistic representation and the represented subject—calls for two forms of complicity. First, the artist must retain a portion, though not all, of the life at stake; second, the viewer must accept the artist’s licence. Without both the artist’s retention of the subject and the viewer’s tolerance of the artist’s deformations, the portrait, as genre, cannot work. So too biography.

In the autoritratto—read both self-portrait and autobiography—the subject’s accord with their representation cancels out the ‘meaning’ of the depiction, the visage, which is consequently more of a deception than the portrait-biography.

This ‘visage whose entire world speaks always the same thing, yet it says and does nothing. The face proves nothing. It is a mask, and the mask is a lie.’¹⁷

The autoritratto is a deception because it works within the ‘equipment’ of portraiture to convey a meaning with which both the subject-as-painter and subject-as-subject are complicit. The subject is not before the proverbial canvas, but projected onto it as an idea. Yet this idea originates with the subject, an idea uncompromised by the representation itself.

These deceptions are, of course, legitimate; they are bound into the very nature of representation, into the foundations of art. The point at which they become problematic, returning to Tafuri, is when an auto-biographical construction is pressed into duty to ‘explain’ the twists and turns of an oeuvre, and when those explanations are accorded the status of truth as though they are immune to the mechanisms of representation. As an autoritratto, it is impossible to accredit Tafuri with the naïve acceptance of a direct flow of recollections—corresponding to the psychoanalytic setting with which both he and Passerini were familiar. Rather, we must accept that he understood the material and media of his self-portrait, and knowingly intro-

duced a series of insights that would doubtlessly throw open the terms of his reception from the moment in which the interview reached a broad audience. Insofar as this would likely occur posthumously, ‘History as Project’ is Tafuri’s final word: resembling truth, impossible to question, but ultimately a lie in the same mode as the portrait.

This accusation does not call the content of ‘History as Project’ into doubt, even if a number of its interpretations drift away from the story advanced by other sources to which we can still turn for verification. However, as a meta-construction in which Tafuri fashions himself as subject, under the conditions considered above, we can question its iconic status as a definitive touchstone among the current wave of Tafuri’s readers. Ultimately, neither ‘History as Project’ nor the various indicators of his earlier reception, such as Architecture, Criticism, Ideology, portray an accurate image of our subject. Both documents—and all others positioned between these two poles—are prey to the politics of production and reception, to the whims of academic fashion, and to the irrecoverable, individual factor of biological continuity. Tafuri’s life is a continuous dimension of his œuvre; but his life and its representation, like the recurring dialectics of his historiography, demonstrates the difficulty of resolving continuity and rupture, image and fragment, narrative and account.

Ian Hunter offers us another way into this problem. His insightful essay ‘History of Theory’ explains the importance increasingly placed on the theorist as subject in terms of ‘persona’, by which, as he describes, the work of the theorist subscribes to a long tradition of the ‘transcendental experience’ bound up in the history of metaphysics as practiced by Catholic and Protestant universities. The issue is one of intellectual rites and the relation of the thinker’s mental efforts to their outward appearance and appropriation as a thinker. Hunter thus asks a series of pertinent questions:

What kind of relation to myself do I establish when I seek to suspend commitment to my existing knowledges and experiences? What is it about me that is called into question on this basis? What kind of spiritual or intellectual exercise do I perform on myself when undertaking the transcendental reduction? And what kind of persona do I aspire to acquire on the basis of this inner work? With such questions, which derive from a certain form of intellectual history, we open a space for the history of theory.¹⁸

In discussing the distinctions between Tafuri as a biographical subject and Tafuri as an autobiographical subject, we encounter the space, following Hunter, of his intellectual historiography. Here, it is precisely the conflicts that arise between Tafuri as a reconstituted theoretical ‘persona’ (such as we find in the American Tafuri), Tafuri as he presents himself (through Passerini) and the Tafuri who might appear from a more philological analysis of his ‘biography-history’ that are open for discussion, often vigorous, at the present moment.

296
To now hold Tafuri to a form of auto-generated continuity, anchored to his own representation of a life 'lived in history', feeds his current reception with a desire to understand a broader range of his writings, and to privilege his extraordinary *Ricerca del rinascimento*—a book almost completely overlooked to date by Tafuri’s traditional Anglophone audiences. Yet this does not get us closer to solving the on-going ‘problem’ of Tafuri’s utility now, or—to take one step back—understanding fully the desire to press him into service. Are we right to demand of him the same importance to architectural culture now as he had in the late 1970s? Perhaps. However, to rest that demand upon an image, generated either by the architects who first read him in America, or constructed as a legacy for the generations that would doubtless call them into question, is to ignore the most potent of Tafuri’s own reflections upon historiography: his famous essay ‘Il ‘progetto’ storico’ (1977).19

The wash of metaphors lapping around the columns of this meditation on the problems of historical representation and documentation reiterates almost autistically the same basic point. Giving name to a problem causes more problems; identifying cause does not solve effect; all conclusions are open, interminable: the most radical methodology can be formalised and rendered impotent. Tafuri, in the decade and more since his death, has been subjected to each of these processes in turn in the name of criticality.

Even here, we take the historian’s liberties to draw conclusions, point to moments of significance. As such, we are doubtless in danger of advancing other Tafuri ‘personae’, equally marketable, equally open to repetition independent of his œuvre. This is inevitable.

However, both Tafuri’s valency as an image and the pressure placed upon his work to lead society to better architecture or more committed forms of criticism is the most problematic dimension of his contemporary reception, skewing Tafuri’s persona, his portrait, away from his ‘eyes’. That is to say, if (following Verschatte) the portrait’s eyes are the mechanisms of resemblance, through which subject, ‘biographer’ and audience reach an understanding of their respective decepts and self-deceits, then it remains necessary—perhaps more than ever—to understand the mechanisms that render Tafuri’s work available today, to treat him as history, as an historical subject, with all the complex implications that his work informs us that this entails.


"Death in Venice: Tafuri's Life in the Project", Architectural Theory Review, 8, 1 (2003): 30-43. It is not possible, given the constraints in space, to consider Passerini’s interview at length. The interview itself is readily available; there is, furthermore, a long discussion of the interview in the aforementioned doctoral thesis, available online at http://eprint.uq.edu.au/archive/00003989/


Passerini’s contextual-autobiographical study of her own generation’s experience of the long 1968 is exemplary of her approach. Like Tafuri, Passerini has had a long-term experience with psychoanalysis; as a pioneer in oral historiography with special interest in the representation of the historical perspective of women, she has had occasion to reflect explicitly on the construction of historical subjectivity and autossubjectivity. Cf Passerini, Autoritratto di gruppo (Florence: Giunti, 1988). She broke ground with her oral history of Italian Fascism, Mussolini immaginario. Storia di una biografia (Bari: Laterza, 1991). On the issue of subjectivity in oral historiography, see Passerini, ‘Becoming a Subject in the Time of the Death of the Subject’, paper presented to ‘Body, Gender, Subjectivity: Crossing Borders of Disciplines and Institutions’, Fourth European Feminist Research Confer-


