

Trouble in Paradise – Appendix

Traumnovelle

TRANSCRIPT

Appendix is an expansion of the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition presented at the Polish Pavilion at the Biennale Architettura 2021. It is the result of discussions with members of the six architectural teams invited to work on the project, which took place between March and April 2021. A year of waiting for the opening of the Biennale, postponed by the pandemic, prompted the participants of the exhibition to ask themselves to what extent the themes and solutions proposed in their projects are still relevant in the new reality. In the second episode we listen to the conversation between Rafał Śliwa and Johnny Leya of Traumnovelle, authors of the *EURECA: EU Climate Resistance Agency* project.

POLISH PAVILION AT THE 17TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION — LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

Venice, 22 May–21 September 2021

Trouble in Paradise

curators: PROLOG +1 (Mirabela Jurczenko, Bartosz Kowal, Wojciech Mazan, Bartłomiej Poteralski, Rafał Śliwa and Robert Witczak)

participants

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Polish Pavilion office: Ewa Mielczarek, Joanna Waśko

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OFFICE BACKGROUND:

Rafał:

Johnny, as Traumnovelle, curators of Belgian Pavilion at the previous Biennale in Venice, you underlined your position within discipline by being concerned with politicized Europe-wide perspective on architectural matters. It precisely made us interested in how this foreign speculative gaze can envision the role of the Polish countryside within the larger territorial framework of Europe. Yet to limit you to politics would be to not tell the whole story. What is Traumnovelle and what does it stand for?

Johnny:

I think that somehow we don't know what Traumnovelle is but we know at least what our aim or where we wanted to be. We have some tools that we like to use, maybe to be able to reach that goal. The things that we are doing and how we envision architecture is normal for us. I guess, it is because you can't disconnect the architecture firm from the *milieu*, the environment. The office was born in an environment, in which we were already in discussion with people from different fields, photographers, but also landscape architects, artists, philosophers.

Even before the creation of our office we see our task as architects, as connected to many different disciplines, but still knowing that the architecture, the discipline itself, what we love with architecture, is that we can say that it's autonomous in a way, but autonomous in the sense that it's connected to so many disciplines and can be connected to so many more. Each time it is for each architect to define what are the connections that he wants to have in autonomous fields.

Few years ago, we decided not to use the term collective or office, but rather a militant faction. I guess we're still young, but we were younger at that time. But from day one, we wanted to look for an architecture that's trying to address some bigger topics.

Then the topics that we could have, when we talk with other architects, are just about architecture. We have two main questions. One of the questions is how to make society and how to build it. Somehow in all our projects we don't make a clear difference or division between what is built and what is not built, even if one is not built is a bit easier. It's always about how to give shape to ideals or to interrogate ideals that we have in our societies. There is this quote from the Berlage 'to build is to serve', and we just want to follow it. Then we have questions, to build what and for whom, and the series of questions. The other thing that is important for us is that, as we like to say it's impossible to find a good answer to a wrong question. I guess that most of the time we're trying to find the right question and hopefully at some point will also be able to find the right answers. But it's still the beginning. That's where we stand.

Now we can understand our position, but at the same time, the history of architecture is full of different positions and it's something rich, something that needs to change. I can say so many things that I can continue and continue about this Traumnovelle story. You mentioned the *Eurotopie* for the Biennale, it was actually the first built project as a practice. It was born out of anger and despair because of Brexit and also how we just realised that especially as architects we were into that bubble in which everything was fine and in which Brexit wasn't possible, in which Trump is not possible. Then we just realised that we have a European project that we always criticised because it's not perfect yet, to build upon that or to continue this construction. We just realised if we leave this European project, that we like to say was at the beginning communism project by Altiero Spinelli (on the way back, it changed a bit), if we leave that project to people from finance, then of course we will have the system that we have now, like a system just based on economy and other stuff. We wanted to see how it was possible to look at what exists and see if

it is possible for architects or other people in other fields to work on that project and to, let's say, optimise the real. It's maybe also something quite naive, but we also think that's maybe our architect formation.

You have the existing constraints. They are there. There is nothing that you can do to change them by themselves, but by being into those constraints, you can also produce an object or an act that will maybe influence all the existing patterns and that will optimise a bit the real. That's how we envision everything. We have an economy, we have a system, how can we be inside and then make a shift or sabotage that can stop the way things are done. We do fictions on paper, but we also build offices, castles, different things, but all of them are always connected to how to find the right questions and then how to make society somehow.

Rafał:

And also somehow how to ask the good questions. What you mentioned about autonomy aligns very much with the sort of subversiveness that you just described. This position of being within and against, trying to subvert the existing condition. It makes me feel that your placement within the other fields gives you an ability to strive for the autonomy of architectural discipline, which is a constantly ongoing question (where lies the autonomy in terms of the discipline of architecture? This kind of political engagement seems to be automatically one of the responses for you to try to define your own subjectivity within it. Is it precise that one of the agendas to engage with the politics by Traumnovelle?

Johnny:

Absolutely. But I think that on the one hand, we see politics as this big thing, as politicians. On the other hand, politics is an everyday element. Politics is what is left at the bottom of the world, but still you have rules and what we aim to do to the politicians or at the top or just like. For us this political thing is really how we decide to live together and what are the solutions.

Rafał:

When you mentioned fiction, it was precisely your sentence that you used in order to interrogate society, to test in different new conditions. So maybe this idea of fiction is one of the tools that is constantly ongoing within your practice. Precisely not to be radical or far-fetched with it, but in order to test the limits of the society for which you are working?

Johnny:

Yeah, absolutely. We love to say that everything is fiction and by that we mean that the world that we inhabit and our cultures are based on stories. So stories that we decided to create altogether that changed and that will have to change. Architecture is a cultural construction. As such, culture is a shared story. Then the question is really how are you living in the world, in a story, in which you want to belong? If not, which one could be another one?

That's something important to consider. I know that, now talking about fiction, you can connect to fake reality or Trump even. They are taking those arguments, but to talk about something, which is still important to notice, is that there is nothing such as culture for culture or that human nature is something that for thousands of years has been challenged and we knew that even when you build a wall there is a story behind. If you don't understand that and you just think that you're building a wall because it's a natural act, then then you're a bit lost. We know that most of the bigger systems will always try to look natural to you, to look as if everything is there since ever and can't be changed. It's a bit like talking about the fact that it's easier to imagine a meteorite coming to the Earth, than the end of capitalism, even if capitalism is a 40 or 50 years old story.

The mind is made in a way that we are trapped in our own fictions and we are also afraid to just realise that: OK, those are stories. It's not bad. We need to have stories. We need to find things that connect us. But what we know now is that we need a lot of new stories, because we have a lot of new requests and also a lot of new challenges.

THE PROJECT

Rafał:

This fiction seems to be an extremely interesting subject to which I think we will return soon in this conversation on another occasion. You've made up a story precisely for the Polish countryside also. What was the title of it?

Johnny:

The title of the project is European Climate Resistance Agency. We know that one of our biggest challenges is somehow how to survive on this planet. I was about to say, the climate crisis, of course and it's really about how to deal with that situation, knowing that everywhere that you're looking is pretty bad. The stories that we had before created a situation of pure exploitation, pure destruction, and it's not working. It's just simple. What is also interesting is that most of the texts and most of the architects that work more on that topic are from 1968like [...], but also even radical architecture, landscape architecture. Since that moment, there are still no new ideas about how to deal with it, because it's still not really a topic. We have some issues to deal with because we see it as something invisible, which is invisible, but also super visible.

Then I will talk a bit more about Poland and how we came up with this idea. I think that one book that was important for us for this project is James Lovelock, *Revenge Against Gaia*. I think in the last maybe two or three years, we started to read as much as possible about the ecology, ecological thinkers from Latuor to XXX, all the things that were possible. I think that the big idea is that we are fucked up, but still you have James Lovelock, for instance. In his book, *Revenge Against Gaia* he is telling that the only way for humankind to address this issue is to act as if we were in a state of war. History proves to us that when humans are at war, then they start to act. All this book is about how we are at war with nature, which yet nature is not a friend, is an enemy since day one.

I guess that as architects we kind of know it. But then it's about how you play with your enemy, how you make dams and how you move things. Now we are in this war that we are losing without even realising that we are in this state of war. So in his book, he's trying to say that we have one enemy, it's carbon. So we need to do all the things possible to fight that enemy.

Something to mention which is important is that in the project that we developed, maybe we can talk about cautionary tale in the sense that we don't believe that it is the right answer, but it seems to be an answer. And so let's just test it, test it through fiction first, to see what happens and what is the result of it. Then what was fascinating is that when we were done with this project, which I would explain a bit later, we had another real life test, which was the COVID, during which there was the speech of the French president who said we are at war against the COVID. Because in the state of war everything is possible.

Then even the military were everywhere, everything was in a state of emergency. What we also see is that in the state of war a lot of questions are never raised and it's most of the time just acting out of fear against something. If we come back to our little story and the Polish story, the EURECA project is, of course, connected to the European Union but also to the Polish territory, as we see also as one of the territories that received a lot of funds from the EU in agriculture. This is really a big part of the EU.

We started by making different analyses of the territory, seeing how this low density was a real benefit and a real way to sprawl: this refusal to have big centres, because you know, that big centres, you always have also big dictators. So let's rather be everywhere, calm and things would be fine. We saw how the countryside and the Polish territory could become actually a first laboratory or first step on the construction of a bigger strategy to resist the climate. That is also related to the fact that the Polish territory and two other territories in Europe are now testing a new agricultural system in connection with the EU. Let's see what will be the results.

We have these top-down institutions, we have an issue, the climate. The project is also based on the fact that it's not that we don't know if it will happen or not, we know that it will happen, we even more or less know when and how. I will talk about the COVID, but for the COVID, something that we knew is that if we had masks or some equipment or hospitals ready before the crisis, then a lot of death or a lot of these situations wouldn't have happened. In the military, it's always about understanding what can happen and then to prepare yourself to make some trials and hopefully when the big wave will come, most of the people will survive. The EURECA project is all about that. It's all about preparing for the big waves that are already here, but that will also come.

Rafał:

It is a project that actually envisions pretty much the future that if it were to happen tomorrow, then the declaration of war would have to happen yesterday. It is taking two steps forward. Precisely this idea with entitling the work by the name of the institution, with this sort of engagement and writing the description as a form of a letter of the first prime minister that declares - where are we now? What do we have to do? - we are in this condition where we have to declare the war actually strengthened the condition of living in the age of fear, in the age of catastrophe, the age of disasters, in which, as you mentioned, we somehow didn't declare it yet, but most probably it's ongoing. I was interested when you mentioned the idea of having an enemy because, an ongoing notion of enemy is usually mentioned just in order to strengthen your own identity, strengthen your own ideology, strengthen your own position via your neighbours, via the other people. So this is a cultural notion, but if you culturalized it somehow to the level of nature then what is your identity? Does the notion of identity matter or it doesn't?

And then interestingly enough, you look at the map that you prepared and you notice that there are no borders between the nations, right? Borders are left, but the only thing that is delineating the differences in the European Union is somehow this natural disaster's condition which changes the level of how you perceive particular areas, whether they are habitable, whether they have an agricultural future, whether they are liveable, in any other possible way. So there are so many things actually going on which derive from the existing condition, not that much from the imagined fiction. And in this way, somehow I like very much the notion of the fiction that is very much rooted in today. It just acknowledges today's condition. So, about the notion of inhabitation. How do you envision the inhabitation in this condition?

Johnny:

I completely agree with all of that you just said. I think that unfortunately in most of our stories, we always need to have an enemy. And we know that to feel as a community most of the time, we need to have like this other enemy. And then it's changing all the time. I mean, an ideal world would be a world in which we don't have enemies at all anymore. But still, there are some existing patterns. Also, when we are together, of course, it's because some people are nice to talk with or others are funny, but it's mostly just to survive also, you know, to have some kind of benefits being together. When we are in a fight against the climate and we know that, you know, I was watching this documentary on Netflix about the sand in the Sahara that ends up in Amazonia and is responsible for the rainforest. Just to understand that things are connected and again we have now like this wonderful COVID that also explained to us that the border is nothing because a border is not how things work, how viruses the people, how the system.

So that's definitely something to look at to question now and about what you said also, we like or we are trying to our fictions to never go too far, but rather to highlight what is already present. Just to say, hey guys, look at it, it's almost there.

Rafał:

I like it, because it is what manifestos are doing usually. Most basic idea of the manifesto is to make a kind of a newsflash, like hey, look around, this is the existing condition. You just simply amplify it and the amplification is completely enough for the people to just get them angry and get them upset about the condition that you just mentioned. I mean, it's going on. It's nothing different. It's the same how Marinetti was just mentioning that you have a new beauty, you know, the beauty of speed. You just developed it today to such a condition that you make a completely new accident. Then people see, all right, we have our speed. This is something new, the acceleration. So it is precisely the condition of the climate that is also somehow accelerating here.

Johnny:

Yeah, absolutely. Somehow our thinking is also changing every day, thanks to what we read. Of course, there are some places in which we spent time. Now I kind of discovered a concept, but a part of philosophy, which is pietism. So basically they are philosophers that are saying that there is nothing practical in philosophy, but it's all about not disturbing people, but yet disturbing the situation so people would make you realise that they are wrong and that they will arrive to a more healthy condition. I guess there is a bit of that to break up or stop this ideal situation in which we think that we are comfortable, that everything is fine to highlight the fact that it's not fine already and to how inhabit this world, the future.

One of the difficulties that I have to explain the project right now is between what is good and what is bad. So that there are parts in the project in which we would like to believe and there are parts in which we are completely opposed to (but we don't feel that it's because we don't have to really build it). The purpose of this project is not to say this is a good project or a bad project, but just to raise different questions about what is good or what is bad.

So what is good and how to inhabit this world? First, I think that Europe is also a way to strengthen or just to go for a world of regions or a world where the centre is less important than the periphery. That's something which is basically the European project. This idea that you have so many points that somehow all the points become equal and it's not equal yet, but that's that should be one of the aims.

The world of the future or this world in the future is a world in which all the points are more or less equal because they suffer in a similar way, but they are also helped, let's say, in a similar way. That's why one of the projects that the EURECA project agency developed for every 100 kilometres, one big shelter able to protect people in case of emergency, but also to give energy or water.

So this idea that all the territory in an equal way can have protection. So this world and how to inhabit it is to understand it a bit like for the Dutch. When you're looking at the Netherlands, since day one they understood that they had to act collectively because they had to survive from the water. And so since the beginning, there is this understanding that it's in the collective that we will survive. And so how to inhabit this world will be in a collective way. Otherwise, we won't survive.

THE PROCESS

Rafał:

At the larger scale of the territory of the countryside. How do you envision it? Just getting back to the example of Poland which you placed within the larger territorial framework? There were these ideas that I remember about low density as political resistance, but low density of the inhabitation, which means actually also the placement of the houses. Seeing the countryside as this ecological resilience, the idea to recover somehow and to find new spaces when the ecology can breathe.

Is there actually an idea to limit the space of inhabitation in order precisely to stop the urbanisation also like this sort of half earth concept, you know, in which you delineate where do you live? Where is the space to cultivate nature? Is it this kind of world that you imagine in this project?

Johnny:

I think that's one of the thing that impressed us the most was the rate of private farm, of private fields and how in most of the territory is made by private owners that have their piece of land and not like big, big owners, but like a lot of small pieces and how a lot of dwellings were still attached to a way to access food. So I think that the best way to resist communism, fascism or a climate - is to have your own piece of land.

For us, let's say that these minimal units, they need to be connected to some infrastructure to be able to survive. But then about your specific question. It's a point that we didn't really address in a project. Of course the cities disappeared. But I mean, even how we see that future: it's not like, if there was, except, again like in Poland, like this primal forest in which you still have wild pure wild areas, nature.

Most of the rest, like most of our countryside or cities, have a man made environment that serves a different purpose, but I wouldn't say that the countryside is more ecological or even more green than a city, it depends. And it's also about how to define green because having plantations of potatoes has no benefit for the climate.

But I guess that's maybe connected to one another one of our other projects that we just actually finished or started right now. It's called Earth. It's a project that we started with a landscape architect, a philosopher making beers, and an artist. At the beginning of the pandemic, we started to think about something to do, like some kind of a movement. Our conclusion was that one of the best things that we have to do or what we could do is to do gardens in the sense that you don't need a lot of money or a lot of energy to have a small piece of land somewhere, which in most of the time is not used anymore in which you could plant trees from Azerbaijan that are disappearing or new species of tomatoes or just do nothing, because to do nothing is one of the most efficient acts. How this very private act of buying a piece of land and then even doing nothing can transform into like an archipelago of survival.

Then gardens also related to this idea of time. There is Francis Hallé, a botanist, a guy in love with plants. He is explaining basically the trees and plants, they master time and animals, us, master space. And I think that explains so many of our issues because we think that we can always move. When we have an issue, we always think that we can move, move somewhere else or go to Mars, for instance. But it's not true at one point. At some point, we can't move anymore. And so the relation with time is something that we don't understand because we don't care about it. It's just about how to move. But trees, they do everything based on time. They stay on the same point. And then it's about making fruits to attract animals, this fruit is really pretty, I should eat it, and then poo five kilometres away, then the trees are using us to develop. So I think that there is something with time. We know that we are lacking time now. And so how to master time. It is by planting a tree, planting seeds. That will not be really helpful for us right now, but will be helpful in the future maybe.

Also something that is important for us regarding this Earth project is to experiment, to test. To have the same tree and plant it everywhere on the planet and hopefully what will survive. What we also know is that now with the climate crisis, the temperatures are rising and also all of the trees and plants, they are completely changing like some species of trees are starting to die. We see how new species are coming. But it's also interesting to see how the conditions that you have, for instance, here in Europe, you can have the same one in terms of climates in Asia and North Africa and North America, because we're more or less in the same climatic conditions. So then you can learn things from there. But these projects are about their connexions of very small initiatives, but always the sharing of knowledge. I guess that's how they inhabit this world is to experiment with the living, to connect with people, but to on one side to have a legal basis or like an infrastructure able to help us, but maybe and mostly to help also people to develop their own god, in a sense.

Rafał:

'Develop their own God' this is so much the condition in which people actually find themselves today more like being God. This is present in your project. In fact, one of the plates that you have drawn for the project is the cloud insemination process. It tells you so much about this will to control everything, to develop your own condition. Of course, biotechnology and neural connections are being developed in order to make the brain work how you want to control others also in the way that you want. The struggle to control nature is not a new thing, because agriculture is basically about it. It is a very basic will to control nature at your own wish. But when it gets global, I mean, when you want to control by the clouds the local conditions of the weather to lower the temperature, to somehow find a way to make the precipitation possible. This somehow puts you in a future we did not acknowledge, but in which we are now. There is the will to control as much as possible. Does this project somehow also question the limits of this reality? Does this fiction question the limits of this reality?

Johnny:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's so in terms of ecological position, on one extreme you have primitivists that want to do nothing and then just like going back to the woods and on the other hand, you have the people that want to create a new planet and what we call it the geoengineering - to apply our knowledge on the Earth. The thing is that it's really something that we are doing and something that we have been doing since modernity, because we are changing like all the animals, all the plants.

But now there are already projects, even in Europe, but also in China, in which they are sending bombs to clouds, so it will rain in the region. They are also thinking of putting a new ingredient in the atmosphere and then it will change the air. Then it's connected to Paul Virilio and the relation with progress. For each progress or each discovery, there is a catastrophe. That's it! One of the examples is that when you're creating a plane with for one thousand people that can do Paris - New York in one hour, you are also creating a crash that will kill one thousand people.

It's something to be aware of and it's not saying that we should stop making progress, but just that at some point we should evaluate the risks that we have related to experimentation. We are now thinking about how to continue this engineering of the Earth and we see that what we've done so far is a big failure. It's not working well. So we shouldn't continue in the same direction. Maybe take another one, because it's not working. I think what is terrific in human history, as I read somewhere, is that the modern form of capitalism that we have was born from an experimentation in France in which they try to increase the price of the bread to see what will be created. It was pure chaos. It was an experimentation, it failed, but still, they decided to apply it everywhere.

So many things that we are doing are experimentations that fail. But still we continue to develop it, hoping that at some point it will work, but it won't. I think that's really dangerous. That's super dangerous. There is another project

that I have in mind, which is called Bio-dome. Basically they tried to recreate a new earth, so they created a big greenhouse and they created the different climate and continents on the Earth with the plants and also animals, and they put four people into it. That's example is still the example of how as humans we are able to recreate a new world. It failed.

It failed three times. Once, because there were too many ants. Second one, because there was no air. And the third one, because of the people inside. The thing is we still have this dream or we still think that we understand the world in which we are living. We understand it enough to change freely parameters and see what happens. That's kind of crazy. But on one hand, I would say maybe we should just have fun until the end and experiment a lot and test different things at the same time and see maybe when one thing will work.

THE REPRESENTATION

Rafał:

It sounds like the last party on Earth. You need to consider the risks that are being taken with such a war. This is one of the things that one can learn actually from your proposal, that this is not necessarily the direction that you want to take if it is being taken. It is funny that the visualisations present the condition of reportage from the front of war, like the desolation, the ongoing construction, but which is rather a struggle, not the construction of a positive new city. If someone listening to us right now can probably access the catalogue and the images that are up there of your work and I think will have the same feeling of this sort of reportage from the future that is not necessarily the most wanted to be present. I was thinking: behind the representation of the maps and also on the visualisation, what was the idea for you within this project?

Johnny:

Yeah, I am not sure that we succeeded, but somehow what we want to do for this project is to create a condition in which people could think that it happened already. I mean, to be in this situation in which it's something coming from the past, so then where I am now related to that issue. It's not a distant past, it's something that already happened.

We try to play a bit with those codes of the documentary, the war reportage, how we see military maps. Then we had a lot of questions about, again, how now the military maps are made, mostly on Google Maps. It was too ugly for our taste. But I think one of the next steps would be to accept this ugliness.

I think that we are still a bit attached to the old school military stuff with nice drawings, because now it's more the 3D warehouse for tanks. I think that will be the next step. Somehow it's also interesting to see how we can connect more easily to those old black and white pictures of war than now on smartphones, videos - even if it's now the way that the war is made visible. It's still as if we needed to have a BBC black and white documentary to make it real, like it's just our daily life. That's something we continue to explore.

Rafał:

I remember that during the process of our work, you also had some of the drawings and sketches that were very simple, but with a strong linear perspective and a strong placement of particular objects. There was already the idea of the dam, the idea of the shelter, the idea of precisely an object within the landscape. That very much reminded me of SUPERSTUDIO collages, drawings in terms of the placement or maybe the confrontation of a strong object with reality. I think that there is very much a reference going on - I don't know how much of your own practice normally, but for this particular project.

There was The Rescue of the Italian Historic Cities. One thinks about the condition of what is there left, what is supposed to be left and what is supposed to be taken care of, on the one hand, but also, maybe the Italians are going on because Ettore Sottsass and Planet as a Festival was also in my mind when I thought about this, you know, two steps further and thinking of the condition in future. It made me think that the SUPERSTUDIO and the fictional imagination of the SUPERSTUDIO also played a role in the development here.

Johnny:

We would need maybe four or five hours to talk about SUPERSTUDIO. There are two main or most known projects. On one side, the Continuous Monument, and on the other side the Super Surface.

The Continuous Monument is: all humanity is inhabiting one last piece of architecture and then all the rest is wild and left to nature. The Super Surface is everything is wild, but there is a network and a grid and humans are inhabiting all the planet in this connection of small, big scale infrastructure, but which is everywhere and then nomads all over the planet. What I think is interesting is that those two projects from the 1968 are still the two positions that we have right now in most proposals to think of a relation to nature. It is either to retreat from it or to be living together.

I wonder if there is a third way, I don't know. I guess that's maybe what we tried to do is maybe like an in-between those two positions. In that sense, if it's an in-between, then it's a Super Surface in which you have everything connected. Maybe the dam and those shelters are a way to still have some architecture present in this network of interventions. SUPERSTUDIO they are amazing, fantastic Italian architects. They were architects, but also architects and something else. One of them was an architect and a painter, another one was an architect and photographer and another one an architect and anthropologist.

On one side, there was an interview a few weeks ago of Gian Piero Frassinelli, one of the last survivors, in which one of the journalists asked what Gian Piero thought of this new project in Saudi Arabia in which they want to develop a linear city and how strange it is, because it looks like the Continuous Monument. Someone asked Gian Piero if he was happy to see it. He said that you are not really happy to see one of your dystopia being built. I guess that's something that's fascinating with them, they decided to test different scenarios of living in more or less a free way just to see what can be the outcome and to hopefully have a cautionary tale associated with it.

But then, like most of the time all the dystopias that you can think about, they happen. But they didn't happen because of SUPERSTUDIO. It's not because of SUPERSTUDIO that now we have linear cities in Saudi Arabia that we wouldn't have. Indeed, because it's just politics and pretending too. We know how real estate is working, just hopes.

Rafał:

I think that precisely what you said about quoting Frassinelli, also maybe not sums up, but adds a lot to the reading of your proposal, to understand the general strategy of it and to not have the misunderstanding that usually people have at the first glance with these radical projects. They look too much into the detail, probably fascinating imaginary, but not taking into consideration the questions that the project raises.

This is definitely something that has to be taken as a primary element from your work. Getting back to something that you mentioned before within this work and the COVID pandemic: we are somehow still in this sort of suspended time and the moment when we were finishing the work back then was over a year ago.

Johnny:

Sorry. You know, I was thinking if it was two, but no, it's just one year, just one.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Rafał:

It is incredible. I was thinking that this was the moment when the COVID was acknowledged in Europe. Basically all of us actually stopped the work and were thinking that: we are all set on delay. The project was ready and the basic question was what changes now? Does it change something? A year has passed and now the basic question is also whether you would change anything to the project. What are your thoughts and the experience of the pandemic, which surprisingly enough, you manage somehow to include within the project?

Johnny:

Yeah, we had the pleasure to have those different talks with you and also the other participants. We discussed the topic and I mentioned the position of Michelle Houellebecq, a French author, who wrote a small text in the magazine about the future.

I have to say, Houellebecq is quite depressed also and he said that now in the pandemic and after the pandemic it would just be normal as it was, but worse. He highlighted how all the bad mechanisms that started are now just way more powerful. Taking examples of, for instance, the relation that we have to [...] it's more or less official.

That they can die alone in their little homes, not yet, but it will soon. Also, how now everything is online. The shops were closed, everything will be remote. We were living in Beijing, I think it was three years ago. Maybe in China or Asia, it's a bit like being in the future.

We had masks every day. There is more or less no shop, because you have to buy everything online. You're also controlled in the same way. It was kind of interesting now to be in a situation in which we also have to wear masks every day and most of the shops will also be online and a series of mechanisms of this society that we're waiting to get rid of some obstacles.

I guess that at the beginning of the pandemic, a lot of people were expecting that it would create more small-scale industries and that people can start again to do flowers, or just connect again to the earth and to not consider the exports, but try to be connected. It happened once. And then there was confinement again. All those small scale companies went bankrupt because once confinement was over people just started back their old habits.

In terms of economy, which company can survive those two or three years of no income? It's just making the situation clear that it won't be better. We are super happy to still have projects because it's the beginning, but things will change and we're happy to not have a bar, for instance.

In that sense, about the things that we would have changed: no, I think nothing, because our project is a bit like if we were a bit more serious about the COVID and we really decided to do that war. By saying that I'm not saying that we should have been more serious about it.

I'm not saying that we should have built a dam to protect the COVID because it's impossible but to have a bit more hospitals or a bit more structure able to take care of it. And mostly because the project is mostly about transnational

discussion, transnational combat, transnational action - to see how the health situation is so different from country to country. We had this virus in China and then most people in Europe were like, oh, yeah, it's in China, Chinese have viruses and that's OK.

COVID came to Italy and I remember I was teaching in Amsterdam and some of my students were like that: there is a virus, it is in Italy. I was OK but please continue working. Don't try to escape with this virus. We know, but maybe we won't have to present the project. Even if it was in Italy, we were all thinking that this thing would stop at the borders, but it did not.

To see how even now we still think in terms of regions or countries or where we try to think together. It's a fucking mess, like Europe and the vaccine, it's crazy. But then I can just talk about that in Belgium. In Belgium there are so many things that piss me off. In Belgium, they ordered at the beginning masks that were in two parts. One region ordered one part of it and the other region, the French speaking and the Dutch, ordered the other one. But the thing is that you can't put the two parts together because they belong to two different masks. Millions of things that can be used because there is no discussion, because people don't talk to each other, the people don't trust each other. Now we have stupid situation. At least EURECA is about let's discuss together, let's think together.

Rafał:

This is precisely the moment in which when you add administrative borderline in the map of the natural disasters and the pandemic it just complicates everything. That's the amount of the control that has to be imposed on limited areas. However, it reminded me of one of the references that you brought in one of our conversations, Demian by Hermann Hesse. What I found interesting from the beginning of Demian was the fact that he invented a fiction, a fiction that has actually turned into reality, which became more complex than he could imagine.

This is the extremely interesting condition with which your project confronts reality. That it's also a sort of fiction. We live in part of it already. I'm thinking about how do you reflect on the possible come back to reality? Is it possible or is it just impossible and there is a completely new thing to confront with.

Johnny:

So you read it then? Tell me, what are your thoughts related to right now? It's my turn to ask your questions.

Rafał:

I haven't read it completely yet, but I would stop to the single idea of the inevitability, that you need to confront the thing that you have invented. This aligned very much with the idea of fiction, that one imposes precisely to test the reality. Of course, there is this, again, the ongoing problem with the consideration of what is evil or what is not, when evil comes to be considered. But somehow the simple idea of inventing a reality and having to confront it later in a way in which you didn't expect it at all. It is just the sort of terror of the choice, terror of the possibility to make something come through.

Johnny:

Last time you recommended Viktor Frankl. Because now I'm trying not to buy on Amazon, I ordered at my favourite bookshop. It's been like two weeks so I'm still waiting for it. But you mentioned that book because we were discussing Demian and the power of fiction. If I remember correctly, we were talking about this book and how at first people that can have an image of the future are the ones that will survive, but also how reading that book and by experiencing that story, you are also healed of something that also helps your process.

The beginning of our discussion was related to it. It was after reading Demian, I somehow realised that is all about wisdom, knowledge and how to have it.

Rafał:

Self-analysis, and actually self reflection, is the very basis of your understanding of your positioning, of finding your identity.

Johnny:

Yeah, absolutely. I have two notes. It's still something that I'm trying to understand.

Let's say that the Orient philosophy is trying to say that you should think first about yourself and that is from yourself, that everything will come out. But I think I had the wrong understanding of it, as I still may have. You can think that it's about how people are now thinking of Oriental philosophy, they will think that, OK, I just have to take care of myself, do yoga, and don't care about the rest of the world. And the most important is how good I am in the world.

But there is a missing part in this understanding because in the Orient, the people that are doing that, they are looking into themselves to be able to give more to the other people. And I think that's the thing which is important. Even now I'm just starting to understand it, because even months ago, I was against all those things that were putting the individual at the centre. 'Close your eyes and think.' Come on, they are dying, you know. I still think that it's something and I'm sorry for this very not clear thing, but I guess that you can see how I'm still processing something. To come back to Demian, to have wisdom or knowledge, you have to experience it into your inner self and it's something that he wrote in his book.

My thought is that when you're reading a book or when you are experiencing your fiction, most of the time you are the one experiencing it. The book is made in a way that you are talking to yourself, you are experiencing it yourself. And then I really do think that through fiction literature I understood some knowledge that I may have read in essays before, but thanks to this situation in which I am in the situation to live the facts, it's a bit like, you know, to read like an encyclopaedia about Metropolis or Urban Space and then reading about a book of a guy in a metropolis.

Of course, then you understand. You feel it. Fiction and fiction have this possibility. Now the EURECA project is about that: if that wall, if that dam, you know, that situation... (and now I'm sure that they don't want it to happen or maybe I want it to happen or something.)

Rafał:

I guess that we left at the point now still inside, not knowing how it will end. Maybe this is actually the one of the answers that we are at the level of experiencing it right now. You cannot conceptualise the thing if it is still in there working. I always love this phrase that Hegel coined in his Philosophy of the Right, that 'the owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering'. You can only conceptualise something the moment when it has ended, when it is complete. I guess this process is still ongoing, which is the reason why it's so difficult to find an answer for it.

Johnny:

Absolutely, but we need to find answers and as architects I don't think that it's possible for us to leave architecture but I really think that as architects, we have some powers to build stories or to envision stories. We shouldn't be there just to answer questions that people already have, like where should I put my kitchen? You know it, it is an

important question. But maybe more to answer that and at the same time raise another question, so I'm not saying that as architects want it alone, but I wouldn't put my money on architects to save the world from the planet. But there are a lot of small choices that we can make to not make the situation worse, but also mostly how to create a spatial condition in which people maybe will find a solution or in which they would be able to think of possible solutions.

That's I think where we can do something and where we've done something because we are responsible for a lot of things, but it's fine. Experiment, make stories and build but asking questions and discussing together.

Rafał:

I guess that's a positive note to actually end up. Thank you so much for your time and for considering the project again in this delay. Thank you.

Johnny:

Thanks a lot to you.
