

Error Earth: Displaying Deep Cybernetics in «The Universitas Project» and *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, 1972

Abstract

In November 1972, architectural critic Pedro L. Koe-Krompecher wrote an article for the journal *Systems Building News* entitled “World Scope” in which he reviewed The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)’s ground-breaking architecture and design exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*. The exhibition showed recent works by a diverse group of Italian designers, from established design icons to young, radical neo-avant-garde groups. On display was a myriad of everyday objects and full-scale environments: sleek, cutting-edge lamps and chairs; sci-fi architecture; flexible modular homes for an adaptable lifestyle; high-tech design utopias forecasting the Internet; ironical objects criticizing consumer culture; leftist anti-design statements; and dystopian atmospheres for a world after the end. Walking through the exhibition, Koe-Krompecher felt alienated in this new form of domestic landscape and consequently interpreted the display as a warning:

The Italian exhibition’s “homes” shock us with the bare implications of future possibilities: where is the privacy? where is the personality? where is the family?—where is my... our home? The New York exhibition makes us wake up. [...] It *reminds us to be realistically prepared to fight total dehumanization*.¹

Koe-Krompecher’s experience opens up two crucial points. First, his statement reveals a paradox—or a tension—within the new domestic environment. Newly developed design solutions with new capabilities of self-customization made to facilitate a flexible way of life in a new, liberated connectionist society gave him the impression of a home without privacy, without personality, a home without warmth. Second, his reflection raises the question of the status of human beings. *Are we human* in this new environment? he asked. Did we belong together with these objects? Did we belong inside these new types of homes? Koe-Krompecher’s experience introduces the point of departure for this thesis. The thesis is an attempt to understand his experience and then to reflect on the vast implications this paradox

¹ Pedro L. Koe-Krompecher, "World Scope: The Italians Are Here! - Again," *Systems Building News* November (1972). Emphasis in original.

opens up. Why did he consider a display of new Italian design to be a stark warning about the danger of “total dehumanization”? What is this exact nature of this danger?

In order to answer these questions, *Error Earth* studies the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* and the closely related, interdisciplinary symposium the “Universitas Project,” both of which took place at MoMA in 1972 and were both organized by the Argentinian architect Emilio Ambasz (b. 1943). Ambasz has been identified as “one of the most important pioneers of Green Architecture,”² and this thesis investigates the historical dynamics of two of his earliest and most significant projects. In these two MoMA events, new conceptions of both ecology and cybernetics were addressed, negotiated, and displayed and the thesis argues that these new conceptions are of the utmost importance for understanding why Koe-Krompecher considered *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* as a warning of total dehumanization.

Error Earth aims to explore the significance of the Universitas Project and *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* in a historical perspective (that is, in terms of art and theory) which opens up for using these two events as prisms to explore and discuss ideological, epistemological, and ontological characteristics of ecology and cybernetics in the early stages of the postmodern movement in both intellectual and aesthetic terms. By doing so, this thesis unveils hitherto understudied trajectories within architecture and design, namely the interdependencies of cybernetics, ecology, and ontology.

² Emilio Ambasz - *Emerging Nature. Precursor of Architecture and Design*. (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2017), outside back cover.