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Superurbeffimero n. 7: Umberto Eco's Semiologia and the Architectural Rituals of the U.F.O.

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INIZIO... INIZIO... BARNARD... INIZIO
Un oggetto non meglio identificato si incastra proprio nel tetto del comune valdarnese….
Nella preesistenza locale torreiforme il grande alchemico trova il suo habitat convenzionale e li si arrocca. Dal suo pied-à-tour il grande alchemico smista le vergini al pied-à-toit e i tecnici pied-à-terre.
--U.F.O. 1968c, 76[1]

On 24 June 1968, the city of San Giovanni Valdarno opened its sixth edition of "premio di pittura Masaccio" with a performance by eight students from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Florence, grouped under the English acronym U.F.O.[2] Titled *Superurbeffimero n. 7*, it was in fact the last of the *Urboeffemeri*, a series of happenings performed regularly in Florence since February.[3] The date of the opening coincided with the religious procession for the city's patron saint, and the happening, which was promoted by the group as "sociourban architectural ritual," escalated into a public riot and later led to an inquiry by the *magistratura* on suspicions of blasphemy.[4] From the few sources available, the performance began with U.F.O.'s provocation to occupy City Hall's tower, roof, and other strategic points off the main square.[5] "From his *pied-à-tour* the great alchemist commands the virgins at the *pied-à-toit* and the technicians *pied-à-terre*." The great alchemist, the virgins, and technicians continued to perform complicated maneuvers on the theme of Valdarnese free-range chicken (*pollo ruspante alla valdarnese*, a local dish), which saw the deployment of "prefabricated elements for a new Tuscan architecture," that is to say, live poultry, large papier-mâché roosters, and half-chickens in tinfoil, as well as the group's notorious "unidentified

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[1](START...START...BARNARD...START
An unidentified object gets jammed right on the roof of the Valdarnese town hall.... The great alchemist finds his conventional habitat in this preexisting high ground and there he takes shelter. From his *pied-à-tour* the great alchemist organizes the virgins at the *pied-à-toit* and the technicians *pied-à-terre*.) Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

[2] San Giovanni Valdarno is located twenty-five miles outside of Florence, in the Valdarno region. U.F.O. was founded in 1967 by Lapo Binazzi, Riccardo Foresi, Titti Maschietto, Carlo Bachi and Patrizia Cammeo. A short account of the U.F.O. is available in Navone and Orlandoni (1974, 30-32); a more extended overview is in Rouillard (2004, 250-59).

[3] *Urboeffemeri* is a portmanteau word combining "urban" and "ephemera."

[4] The definition of this work as an architectural rite is given in the group's manifesto of February 1968, published in "Effimero urbanistico scala 1/1," (U.F.O. 1968a, 198). It is reiterated in the self-published pamphlet "U.F.O.: HAPPENING ! INTENSA ECCITAZIONE PLASTICO - TATTILE! U.F.O. UFFF...FFFF," distributed by the U.F.O. on June 24, 1968, the night of the performance at Valdarno (U.F.O. 1968b).

[5] See U.F.O. (1968c, 76-82); Trini (1968, 55-56); and the recent conversation with Lapo Binazi (Piccardo 2010).

objects" – long clear polyethylene tubes which were carried off by the furious Valdarnesi (U.F.O. 1968c, 76-77).

The overlooked progenitor of this neglected work and its contemporaries, which emerged in the Florentine architectural milieu between 1966 and 1969, was Umberto Eco, whose linking at that time of visual design to semiotic principles brought a new vigor and depth to the emergent ideas of Superarchitecture.[6] Indeed, of all the architects and writers associated with that decade or more of radical experimentation, Eco's contribution appears particularly decisive. While Ettore Sottsass did develop many of the design, production, and marketing strategies that came to characterize Superarchitecture, and while Alessandro Mendini's *Casabella* did set up the conditions necessary for the diffusion of the movement's imagery, it was Eco who first joined architecture to a structuralist position derived from Roland Barthes; and it was Eco who therefore first exploded the Modernist understanding of function, drawing on Barthes' social reading of "usage" and "code" to fuel Florentine anti-design agitators; and it was Eco who first introduced architecture to the idea of "a chromatic continuum" of visual codes and who persuaded succeeding generations of architects – from fellow faculty member Leonardo Ricci, to Superstudio, Archizoom, and U.F.O. [**Figure 1**] – to navigate and spatially program that continuum.

The history I will construct of Eco's early semiotic work is not the ultimate goal of this analysis; it is an instrument in my research on the experimental production of Superarchitecture, which I view in its unique aptitude for engaging with and expanding on the philosophical production of the sixties. It goes without saying that I do not claim to exhaust Eco's oeuvre, nor do I claim to take all his conversations with the field of architecture to their fullest conclusion. Rather, I am concerned with the specific point of intersection between Eco and architecture and the arguments that permitted this unique occurrence in Florence. Eco's Florentine period remains largely ignored by Italian and Anglo-American scholarship alike. The only exception appears in the field of architecture, where the influence of this cultural theorist has been much criticized. Still even this trenchant critique of Eco's writings concerning architecture is limited to a general overview and neglects the particular theoretical and historical settings in which this exchange unfolded. Thus Manfredo Tafuri and art historian Cesare Brandi, for example, both challenge, in different terms, the support lent by Eco's work to the architectural neo-avant-garde in pursuing its "poetica dell'aleatorio" (Tafuri 1982, 116-17; Brandi 1998, 267). A more positive view is found in Franco De Faveri's appendix to Pigafetta's *Architettura moderna e ragione storica* (De Faveri 1993), where the relevance of Eco's *Opera aperta* (1962) for Italian architectural history is clearly recognized.[7] The

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[6] The terms "*Superarchitettura*" and "Superarchitecture" have variously been used by scholars to refer to a wide range of experimentation that took place across Italy between 1963 and 1973. These terms have been revitalized by Sylvia Lavin to denote the generation of architects including Germano Celant – and, later, Paola Navone, Bruno Orlandoni, Franco Raggi, and Giani Pettena, among others – grouped under the rubric "*architettura radicale*." For Lavin, these terms relate to the *Superarchitettura* exhibitions (1966-67), as well as to the coursework offered by Leonardo Savioli in 1967 – a point of convergence for the protagonists of architectural experimentation in the 1960s and 70s Italy. The term "Superarchitecture" was used before Lavin by Rouillard, who denoted with this Italian term a phenomenon broadly European in scope. See Lavin (2007) and Rouillard (2004).

[7] Tellingly, this appendix to Pigafetta's account of Italian postwar architectural historiography stands as a supplement to the author's account of the relationship between architecture and semiology, which examines

problem is that scrutiny is reserved solely for Eco's pre-semiotic work, thus leaving aside Eco's exchange with the field during his Florentine period and the development of his semiology of architecture. Paradoxically, when Eco's Florentine oeuvre is reexamined and translated, as in *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture* (Bunt, Broadbent and Jencks 1980) it is presented as a pure work of theory, isolated from its historical and geographic context by the omissions and reediting demanded by Anglo-American academies in the 1980s and 90s and by postmodern theory (Eco 1980). As happens as well in a number of other English translations and reprints thereof, the versions of Eco's Florentine text resulting from such omissions are problematic, because they conceal rather than reveal the crucial relationship Eco enjoyed with the field of architecture in Florence (1973, 1986, 1997).

From Sémiologie to Semiologia

The field studied by Eco during his tenure in Florence was not architecture but semiology, the general science of signs first postulated in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* and re-envisioned almost half a century later by Roland Barthes in "Éléments de sémiologie" (Saussure 1916; Barthes 1964).[8] This research, which was gathered first as a two hundred page course reader *Appunti per una semiologia delle comunicazioni visive* (Eco 1967a) and later republished as part A, B, and C of *La Struttura assente* (Eco 1968b), closed a set of cultural studies on mass media and communication that included *Opera aperta* (Eco 1962) and *Apocalittici e integrati* (Eco 1964).[9] *Appunti* was Eco's first attempt at systematizing his theory of cultural processes and at applying linguistic theories to mass produced visual objects – from comic strips (Superman, Charlie Brown) to advertisement (Knorr, Volkswagen, Camay) to television – while insisting, like Walter Benjamin before him, on the central role of architecture in such a theory.[10] The magazine *Marcatré* and Eco's related publishing activities as editor of the Bompiani non-fiction division became the main platform for his reflections (see, e.g., Eco 1967b and 1968b); however, it was Eco's research in the faculties of architecture of Milan and Florence where the shift from the pre-semiotic *Opera aperta* to the first systematic theory of semiology took form.

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this theme through the work of Renato De Fusco (Pigafetta 1993; De Fusco 1967 and 1973). The author's own interest in Eco's Florentine tenure is indebted to Sylvia Lavin, who highlights Eco's relationship with the department (Lavin 2009).

[8] For Eco's discussion with other aspiring semiologists, see below. Eco is always clear about his outsider's position in regard to architecture. This is true from his early critique of architecture in "Arte programmata" (Eco and Munari 1962), to his introduction of himself in the 1964 *InArch* awards in Rome as a modern-day avatar of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Gustave Flaubert's dilettante duo, whose intellectual pursuits gone awry include architecture), to his studies in Florence, which explicitly refrain from providing architectural examples and analysis (Eco 1966, 7-9). Eco's professional interest in design can be dated back to 1954, and to his work in RAI TV together with art and critic Franco Russoli (1994, xiii).

[9] *Appunti* was published in a limited edition and sold at reduced cost for the benefit of the Florentine students. The last section of the text was reproduced in a somewhat shortened version as "Proposte per una semiologia dell'architettura," (Eco 1967, 56-76).

[10] Interestingly enough, Eco provides here a brief analysis of Benjamin, thus anticipating the discussion of Benjamin's thought in relation to architecture during the latter part of the 60s in the American academy.

While working on the French translation of *Opera aperta* (Eco 1965) Eco's theoretical approach shifted from the American information theories that had been the premise for his earlier work toward French structuralism. His uninterrupted contact with French intellectual circles, continuous after 1962, had undeniably modified Eco's work. As Eco later observed, Roland Barthes' compendium for the creation of semiology, the very successful "Éléments de sémiologie," constituted the most decisive moment in this turn (Eco 1968b, ii; Barthes 1964, 91-165).[11] Indeed the strands of this text woven into Eco's research are only the most telling instances of the profound debt Eco owes to the French thinker. Particularly aligned with Eco's ambitions in fields like television and architecture at the time was *Sémiologie*'s point of departure, which proclaimed that "semiology must first of all...try itself out...[i.e.] its knowledge must be applied forthwith...to non-linguistic objects" (Barthes 1967, 13).[12] *Sémiologie* also gives a more or less programmatic description of the prerequisites for the creation of the field of semiology; the chief precondition appears in the passage that closes the discussion of metalanguage:

> Nothing in principle prevents a metalanguage from becoming in its turn the language-object of a new metalanguage; this would, for example, be the case with semiology if it were to be "spoken" by another science.... The history of the social sciences would thus be, in a sense, a diachrony of metalanguages, and each science, including of course semiology, would contain the seeds of its own death, in the shape of the language destined to speak it. (Barthes 1967, 93)

Such instances where one field of practice becomes the object of study of a related field appear regularly throughout the history of science. However, a semiologic analysis applied to a field that has already absorbed and is therefore fluent in the idioms of semiologic research would reveal semiology's true potential. Thus the possibilities which such a field's openness to the question of meaning makes available by "speaking" semiologically are, as Barthes goes on to argue, "the seeds" of semiology as a new "language of signifieds...[one whose] objective function is of a decipherer" in relation to the reality of all other fields. The philosophical argument hinges upon the reversed relation Barthes establishes in the beginning of the chapter between connotation (for Barthes, the prime concern of semiology) and metalanguage.[13] But more generally and to

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[11] Eco makes this point particularly clear in his 1989 introduction to *Struttura:* "Mi pare giusto ricordare qui ciò che quel breve testo...ha costituito per tutti noi...un impulso di lavorare su sistemi di segni e sui sistemi di comunicazione.... Senza l'appello di Barthes molte cose non sarebbero successe" (1968b, ii).

[12] Eco's adherence to that formulation and subsequent use of analytic concepts from linguistics for interpreting *non* linguistic systems would result in the following anomaly: Eco's linguistic analysis of architecture excludes *a priori* the notion that architecture is a language.

[13] This is because a metalanguage is constituted and finds its meaning, its very signifieds, in the system of signs it describes.

the point, the passage informs the ideal intellectual context for the institution of semiology as an autonomous field.[14]

Eco's move from Milan to Florence in 1966 reflects his search for such an ideal context. The appeal for an applicative rather than a purely linguistic study was particularly aligned with Eco's ongoing work in Milan in the fields of television and architecture. Yet Barthes' underlying assumption concerning the creation of the field of semiology – the theoretical case discussed above "if semiology was 'spoken' by another field" – is applicable to the Faculty of Architecture at the Politecnico of Milan, Eco's home department between 1964 and 1965. Indeed, the prevailing theoretical mindset at the Politecnico was tied to that of phenomenologist Enzo Paci, and Eco's research found little support outside his original friendship with fellow faculty member Vittorio Gregotti.[15] Surveying the Italian architectural debate at the time, only one setting fit Barthes' appeal: the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Florence. Indeed, four years before *Appunti* and the avalanche of related research it promoted, the Florentine faculty and students were already versed in Charles Morris' semiotics, and could already apply its fundamental principles to discussing the communicative and symbolic values of architecture and design.[16] It was only in the parochial setting of the Florentine department, then, that a lively if admittedly limited debate on architecture and language developed. It was here that the earliest encounter in Italy of linguistic theory with certain branches of architectural research by linguistic theory, from "Decorazione" to "Architettura degli interni" to "Disegno industriale" to "Elementi di composizione"; and it was ultimately only here that Eco could pursue his *semiologia*.

The Florentine Department and Semiologia di Architettura (Appunti, section C)

The conception and elaboration of semiology came early to the Florentine department, chiefly through the work of art critic Gillo Dorfles, who was appointed as professor of "Decorazione" in 1959 – a position which Eco later inherited. The Florentine debate around language and architecture had remained fundamentally unchanged since Dorfles first introduced this theme to the faculty. The impact of linguistic theory on architecture is described in depth in his *Simbolo, comunicazione, consumo* (1967). This work also affords a clear examination of the Florentine debate in the early 1960s, before Eco's arrival. It introduces additional protagonists to the Florentine discussion together with three major concerns: (1) the definition of a new curriculum centered on architectural composition (Italo Gamberini, Giovanni Klaus Koening);[17] (2) a historiography that

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[14] This would not be the case until 1975, when DAMS was introduced by Eco at the University of Bologna. And it was only in 1990 that similar degrees were created in other universities, including Palermo, Rome, Siena, Salerno, and Turin. For a general summary of the history of semiology in Italy together with a useful list of references, see Marrone and Mangano (2005).

[15] Gregotti describes his indebtedness to Eco in *Il territorio dell'architettura*, a text that summarizes his course at Milan Politecnico. He does not name Eco directly, however, but only allusively, as "a friend of the new Italian literature" (1966, 7-8).

[16] The most significant texts on this subject to come from outside the Florentine milieu – practically on the heels of *Appunti* – are De Fusco (1967) and Brandi (1967).

[17] For the development of these debates, see Gamberini (1959) and Koenig (1964).

reassesses Rationalist architecture, in support of a Florentine organic school (Koenig 1967); and, finally, (3) the use of linguistic theories in the nascent discipline of industrial design, or *Progettazione artistica per industrie* (Koenig 1961; Spadolini 1960).

The department came at the debate from two angles. The first involved Dorfles' semantic and psychological assumptions, which relied in large part on the aesthetics of American critic Susanne Langer. "In my opinion" – he argued – "thinking of architecture semantically means considering individual architectural forms as the primary elements of a coherent discourse" (1967, 183). The second angle had to do with the reduction of Dorfles' thought to a simpler theory of stimulus and response in order to accommodate the diverse needs of the Florentine professors. For his part, Dorfles dismissed this approach as "mere behaviorism," and insisted that it had little to do with linguistic theories and everything to do with previous "conceptualization of that sign": the tired Modernist conventions of function and type – the conventional association of house with habitation or of school with learning, for example (Dorfles 1967, 193). The last point, on the evidence of Dorfles' next text, was a trenchant critique of the simple language-like rapport between user and architecture that the Florentine Rationalists were returning to in their analysis of the architectural sign.

Surprisingly, despite obvious affinities between the two philosophers, Eco did not choose to follow Dorfles' view in this divergence of opinions. Rather, his course reader makes a great effort at systematically integrating Dorfles' view and that of fellow faculty within one coherent framework.[18] This mediation is achieved in *Appunti* with the support of Barthes' "staggered system" of connoted and denoted meaning. The relevant passage appears at the start of section C:

> The semiologic perspective that we have accepted, however (with its distinction between signifiers and signifieds, the former can be observed and described *a priori*, at least in principle, of the meanings we assign to them, while the latter vary according to the codes we apply in their interpretation) allows us to interpret architectural signs and to describe and catalog their meaning. Interpreted using certain codes, such signs denote precise functions; but they might be "filled" with succeeding signifieds, as will be seen, not only by way of denotation but by way of connotation as well, on the basis of other interpretative codes. (Eco 1968b, 195)

The simple relation architectural Modernism instituted between architectural sign, function, and type no longer contradicts the complex signification processes semiology

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[18] One of the most striking attributes of this text, in fact, is that it accommodates disparate degrees of linguistic theory, moving from analysis of stimulus and effect to more complex systems of connotation. *Appunti* arose partly out of Eco's work on some of the particular problems posed in this debate, which was strongly influenced by Koenig's elaborations in *Analisi del linguaggio architettonico* – section C's underlying reference text (1964). At the same time, Eco's collaborations with his own students were providing his work an invaluable support. Such breadth of sources and aims is apparent in *Appunti*. Additionally, it extends the application of linguistic theory for faculty who were not directly engaged in the debate during Dorfles' tenure, such as Leonardo Ricci and Leonardo Savioli, two of the major sustainers of Florentine Superarchitecture in the department. On Ricci's course, see Koenig et al. (1985, 13).

was interested in, because such a relation represents only the very basic and conventional structure of *denoted* meaning. Eco argues – after Barthes – that once this first structure is put in place (i.e., once function is established as a "norm" or a convention of "usage") it "might be 'filled' with succeeding [connoted] signifieds."

The organizing conceit, of course, is the same one described in *Sémiologie*, where a secondary system, or "*connotata*," develops from and is based upon a primary system, the "*denotata*."[19] Yet the basic notion is not Barthes' but Louis Hjelmslev's. In fact, in its architectural reading of Barthes, *Appunti* recuperates Hjelmslev's original understanding of "usage" as the social realization of language,[20] by its insistence on the primacy of connotative systems. Eco's fortune in Florence lay chiefly here, in the way he revitalized Hjelmslev's definitions of function and "habit,"[21] vis-à-vis Barthes, to produce a much broader definition of function than that available to Modernist architecture – at the very moment when the faculty was discussing the bankruptcy of prewar Functionalism.[22] And yet for Eco to emphasize connotative systems over denotative ones also included a different question, one much closer in nature to that later articulated by Superarchitecture concerning the limits of conventional practice and the continuing expansion of the concept of architecture. Indeed, like the *superarchitetti*'s embrace of other cultural media in order to extend the scope of the field, Eco's preference for generalized rather than specific systems of meaning, for cultural rather than disciplinary codes, gave weight to semiologic investigations across the sciences, regardless of their specificity. As was the case with architecture, connotation and "connotative," "secondary systems" must be understood as the openings that enable Eco, who despite growing interest since 1954 had limited professional or theoretical hold on the field, to discuss the discipline profoundly and with impact.

A Building Site for Iconic Architectures (Appunti, section B)

As seen above, *Appunti*'s section C is chiefly dedicated to specific issues that had arisen repeatedly in Florence since 1959 in relation to architecture's performance as a communicative medium and its limits of form and signification. Eco's response, while not an architectural theory *per se*, is surely a philosopher's response to an architectural dilemma: an apt mediation between both parts of the Florentine debate. Yet for all its bravura, this response provides a partial and not wholly satisfactory estimate of the place of Eco, his semiologic approach to architecture, and its application in the department. These can be grasped, however, in the context of Superarchitecture and, in particular, the experimental architectural group U.F.O. U.F.O. produced and performed seven

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[19] The *denotata* has, of course, a more limited scope as it is not general but specific to the objects it describes. Barthes famously opines "the future probably belongs to a linguistics of connotation," that is to say, to a science that studies diffused and general systems of signification. See Barthes (1967, 91).

[20] Hjelmslev's definitions of "usage" as discussed by Barthes (1964, 17) appear in "Langue et parole" (1942).

[21] This observation is made by Giovanni Klaus Koenig in his notes on Eco's *Appunti*, taken as part of his preparation to take over for Eco in the Florentine faculty for the academic year of 1969-70. See Koenig (1970, 223).

[22] Koenig is particularly important in this regard (1967).

Urboeffimeri between February and June, 1968. The group's main members included Lapo Cammeo, Riccardo Foresi, Sandro Gioli, and Titti Maschieto, all students of Eco from 1966, as well as Lapo Binazzi, who succeeded Paolo Fabbri as Eco's course assistant in 1968.[23] It was formed at the end of 1967, but only became active during the students' occupation of the Florentine Faculty of Architecture at *palazzo* S. Clement a year later. The manifesto U.F.O. created in occasion of the occupation, and posted on walls and bulletin boards, discloses a programmatic, conscious, and particularly precise set of intentions. Titled *Urboeffimero scala 1/1*, it announces the opening of an experimental *cantiere* (a building site and workshop) in S. Clement and urges students to make contributions, such as plastic paint, overalls, crash helmets, balloons, and firecrackers. Other less obvious items such as fly paper, live chicks, tragic masks, and useless machines complete the list, as well as simple alimentary items (fresh ricotta cheese, sugar-cones) and elements directly related to everyday student life, such as "hallucinogens and joint upon joint of marijuana" (U.F.O. 1968a, 198).

A closer examination of the use of capitalized type glyphs in the manifesto reveals another peculiarity: they form out many of the key terms Eco introduces in *Appunti's* section B, dedicated to "iconic codes." In fact, through the simple arrangement of type, line continuity, leading, and tracking U.F.O. illustrates some of Eco's chief concerns around "the iconic." The term "iconic" and "iconicity" have been widely used in architectural scholarship; however, the singular premise of Eco's iconic coding as laid out around 1967 is little known and may be briefly clarified here. Eco criticizes the classic definition of iconic sign, according to which the sign possesses certain properties of the object it denotes, and is thus immediately recognizable and attributable to that object. *Appunti* erodes this definition by examining different figurative objects. A prevalent beer commercial, the drawing of a lion by architect Villard de Honnecourt, and Dürer's Rhinoceros woodcut all indicate, according to Eco, the fallacy of simple similitude between iconic sign and its denoted meaning and the existence instead of a more complex iconic system of perceptions and identifications. I will not reiterate the resulting multipart definition of iconic sign but will only underline Eco's two conclusions and the promise these held for the Florentine designers: (a) unlike the clear articulation of language into familiar and discreet elements, an iconic system is defined by complex contextual relations; (b) visual codes are essentially "weak" because they exist in an "iconic continuum" where "pertinent" or familiar aspects of the code are unsettled and, in fact, vary according to aesthetic conventions. In an iconic code there is therefore "a welter of idiolects;" the semiologically conscious designer is "a technician of the idiolect,…[one with a unique] autonomy with respect to the system of norms, one unavailable, in fact, to any speaker [except a poet]" (Eco 1968b, 123-124).

In considering this premise, it is not surprising that U.F.O.'s subsequent work continued to elude clear architectural meaning, opting instead for increasingly more independent code sources and private idiolects. What distinguishes U.F.O.'s work with respect to similar impulses attributable to Eco within the Florentine department is this uncompromising affinity with Eco's theory of "the iconic" and, therefore, a particularly risky position that tends towards the incomprehensible, the idiosyncratic. In fact, the *Urboeffimeri* and later work, such as the group's proposal for the University of Florence competition (1971), *Il Giro d'Italia* (1972), and its installation for Eurodomus 4 (1972),

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[23] This account is based on a conversation I had with Brunetto De Batté, June 17, 2009.

were all driven by specific theoretical impulses (respectively, *semiologia*, *prossemica*, and *cinesica*) to produce communicative objects that actively elude clear architectural meaning. Moreover, considered for a moment in contrast to similar experiments in Europe and the U.S that broached the question of architecture and language, the results are striking. Rather than a new architecture *parlante* as the one proposed by the Venturis, for example, U.F.O. endowed architecture with mobile, soft, forms that are beautifully structured, and which are in turn slippery and open to multiple distinct readings, yet almost never to their conventional architectural meaning. Similarly, while clearly related to the inflatable "action" pieces of Hans Hollein (Mobile Office, 1966) and Walter Pichler (Grosser Raum, 1966, and Intensive-Box, 1967) U.F.O.'s inflatables were not easily reducible to the realm of the habitable (and the architectural convention of house-as-habitation) as were those of their Viennese counterparts.

As mentioned above, the group's first manifesto, written in 1968 and posted publically, already outlined U.F.O.'s program for its event architectures by way of typographic conceits. In "Effimero urbanistico scala 1/1," the printed word itself is manipulated to form an "iconic continuum." Thus conceived, the compound MANOIPERDONIAMOANCHEIFRATELLICHEHANNOSBAGLIATO designs two parallel strokes that divide the manifesto from left to right. While clearly echoing the strategies of the historical Italian avant-gardes, in particular futurism, U.F.O.'s aims are markedly semiological. By fusing distinct morphemes into a single expression, it bends the structure of a simple and familiar linguistic code (the conventional religious slogan BUT WE ALSO FORGIVE THE BROTHERS WHO WERE WRONG) to the complexity of iconic codes, affording it something like "a chromatic continuum." This trait, which as Eco has demonstrated in *Appunti*, confers on both classical artistic mediums, such as painting, and on new media, such as film and advertising, their multiple and open character, is accomplished here not in image form but with the paradoxical use of the written word (U.F.O. 1968a, 123).[24]

A similar "iconic" approach informed U.F.O.'s later event-architecture, the *Urboeffimeri*. This research traces architectural iconicity as understood by Eco, moving from "informal icons" to ever more "figurative" ones.[25] *Urboeffimeri n. 1* to *n. 3* [**Figures 2, 3**] began as a simple, abstract form – a white polyethylene tube, thirty feet long and twenty inches in diameter. Rather than the collective architectural action pieces for which U.F.O. later became famous, *Urboeffimero n. 1* involved a limited group of operators-users who occupied the atrium of S. Clement and perform all necessary maneuvers. Thus the bare cylindrical tube was erected, flexed, and deformed to fill the space of S. Clement's atrium. Its twenty-inch circumference was extruded, forming a

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[24] A list of iconic codes also appear in "Effimero urbanistico scala 1/1," alternately in the bottom right and in the middle left section. Thus the code POLICE/OF/CODES/MULTIPLICITY/OF/ INTER-RELATIONSHIP/HIGH/ENTROPY/OF/INFORMATION/ATROPHY/OF/OBJECT/HYPERTROPHY/OF/ IMAGE describes a hierarchy of signification, moving from the simple codes (used by police) to more complex codes such as those offered by the media (in Italian *informazione*) to visual objects and images. Similarly, the coded list PHILOLOGY/REREADING/BREAK/IN/UNDER/FROM/OPERATION/AND/ OR/PRODUCTION/OPERATION/METHOD/WORK/PRODUCTION/ELABORATION/SEMIOLOGY follows closely Eco's *Appunti* as it lists the decoding techniques used by different social sciences, from the most basic (philology and close reading) to Barthes' operative metalanguage to Eco's formulation on artistic form and production, finally to semiology.

[25] One of Eco's more interesting observations in section B is that "Informal Art" is, in fact, "iconic."

second structure that parallels the colonnade of the same diameter that lined the seventeenth-century courtyard. In *Urboeffimeri n. 2*, the same tube was deflated at 1:30 p.m., "ora italiana del lunch," and inflated from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., "ora italiana del dinner," for the second and third act, where it was introduced, still half rigid, to the student body convened in the second floor auditorium. Here, it was made to disrupt the collective meeting of the Movimento Studentesco or M. S. (Student Movement). It was subsequently carried out by other students from the north opening down to the park below and into the city. At this point, as the U.F.O. notes, the iconic tube already carried (and effectively replaced) the Student Movement's slogan "POWER to the STUDENTS." The tube was consequently rushed through the center of Florence: piazza San Marco, down via Cavour, then through piazza del Duomo, and from there to the Strozzi-Tornabuoni shopping district, and then to the Law Faculty (U.F.O. 1968c, 200-207).[26]

The abstract polyethylene tubes, or "profiles," of *Urboeffimero n. 1* were reused in *Urboeffimero n. 4* to *n. 6* [**Figures 4, 5**] to produce more recognizable, figurative icons. Thus *n. 4* sees the generic tube elongated to 100 feet and its diameter reduced to three inches to resemble Buitoni Spaghetti. These were accompanied by giant papier-mâché lips and fork. *N. 5* is an inflated cylinder-shaped rocket, six feet in diameter, while *n. 6* was shaped into the letter S after the insignia of Esselunga.[27] The latter was transformed on site into a dollar sign. From *Urboeffimero n. 5* onward, U.F.O. reserves a particularly important role for the practice of "counterinformation."[28] Thus in *n. 5* and *n. 6,* fly paper and plastic paint are directly applied to the polyurethane tubes to transcribe a variety of slogans. These blend coded messages and rhetorical techniques from information media and commercial ads, as well as a particularly idiosyncratic idiolect, which references Eco's more eclectic work. In *Urboeffimero n. 5* [**Figure 5**], for example, the slogan "Colgate con Vietcong," brings together the language of advertising and the conventional idiom of American anti-war movement, largely emulated by the Student Movement, while the compound "W il magozurlìnpiao" references Mago Zurlì – Eco's professed alter ego, a character he created for RAI in 1957 (U.F.O. 1968c, 54-68).

The most ambitious of U.F.O.'s performances was *Superurbeffimero n. 7* [**Figures 7, 8**]. It was put on for the "VI premio Masaccio" in June 1968, following a prewritten script, contrary to the group's typical loosely programmed acts.[29] Individual episodes of public outrage began even before the show in response to Gianni Pettena's installation for the façade of Palazzo d'Arnolfo a few days prior to the performance [**Figure 6**]. Pettena transformed the building's portico and loggia, which run along the front and rear of the

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[26] U.F.O. emphasizes the conflict with the Student Movement initiated by the group. In fact, the *Urboeffimeri* are seen as alternatives to the M.S.'s extensive and ineffectual negotiations during the occupation with local government representatives and among themselves: "ore 16.00 assemblea generale. La discussione: si scontrano da venti giorni a livello politico le forze rinverginate delle micro rivendicazioni sindacalistiche con una nuova sinistra composita per un'alternativa di potere; ore 18.30 due operatori U.F.O. intervengono: propongono di ribaltare gli obiettivi immediate della lotta dalla nuove strutture burocratico-organizzative alla operazione e/o produzione: verifica di garanzia della presenza e continuità del Movimento" (1968c, 202).

[27] Esselunga, which opened in 1957, was one of the first Italian supermarket chains. Esselunga's second headquarters was opened in Florence in 1960.

[28] For Eco's thought on "counterinformation" in relation to U.F.O., see Eco (1968a), and (1974, 510-511).

[29] Nonetheless, the script for *Superurboffimero n. 7* was written only an hour before the show, apparently in order to preserve something of the previous performances' casual and unstructured effect. See Piccardo (2010).

building, by using a simple pattern of oblique silver strips. As observed by Tommaso Trini, the result was an intelligent and ironic reversal of architectural "conventions: the old palace-Renaissance monument became a compact sign, the architectural volume was reduced to the flatness of the façade,…[and] the container of the exhibition and its function became, in fact, themselves the object of visual experience" (1968, 55).[30]

A similar linguistic approach is experimented in *Superurbeffimero n. 7*. The group achieves a comparable visual manipulation of the urban space by way of existing architectural icons: the fourteenth century Palazzo d'Arnolfo, the great transverse urban corridor of Piazza Cavour, the monument for Garbaldi, and the Marzocco. And yet U.F.O. also moves further, forcing on the public a different set of iconic codes and urging it to reinterpret and decode these local monuments through its active reuse. The links between the palpably "weak" set of codes offered in *Superurbeffimero n. 7* to the "iconic continuum" theorized by Eco are striking, as is the appearance of explicit semiologic devices like "secret weapon connotation" and, therefore, the popular narratives of James Bond; the more scandalous gossip concerning the Kennedy family, as well as the advertisement banners for Pastucol, the company that provided U.F.O. with its polyethylene. During the event, these banners were skillfully transformed into a wearable garment system, distinguishing between the technicians, the virgins, and the alchemist and the crowd, in a ceremony that included a mockup review from special fashion correspondent "Rolando Barthes" [**Figure 7**] (U.F.O. 1968c, 76-82).

Using poultry in any form and shape, "caramelized" on site according to local conventions, the group went on to stage a conflict between fourteen, five foot tall chickens and the local *polli ruspanti alla Valdarnese* [**Figure 8**]. The conflict gathered new momentum when U.F.O.'s technicians supplemented Garbaldi's monument, the symbol of the Italian *Risorgimento*, with a sexy pin-up version of his wife, Anita. Crossing paths with an ongoing Catholic procession in honor of the city's patron saint, they carried a thirteen-foot papier-mâché Anita, then duly placed in Piazza Cavour, beside Garibaldi's pedestal. The addition of religious iconology and the ensuing babble of religious, commercial, and popular icons provoked a public riot; the group barely escaped the tumultuous crowd. In the following week, the pages of the press reported that *democristiani* and leftist factions exchanged escalating accusations, with the latter celebrating U.F.O.'s successful provocations – the former invoking the *magistratura* to move for the annulment of the *premio*. The quarrel ended the following week exactly where it began, in a public debate at Valdarno's City Hall. Participants included Furio Colombo and Giuseppe Chiara, as well as Claudio Popovich, the *premio*'s organizer, who defended his decision to invite the young architectural experimentalists. Representing U.F.O on that occasion was also Umberto Eco, who gave a short lesson in *semiologia,* in which he explained that the *Superurbeffimero n. 7* was, in fact, a complex "sincronic semiolgic elaboration." He concluded the debate by welcoming the council members to continue the conversation in an extramural seminar on the U.F.O. in his capacity as chaired professor at the University of Florence (Trini 1968, 56).

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[30] Pettena's installations of consumable, architecturally fragile semantic-cardboard structures offered another branch of experiments in visual communication. The most significant of these works was produced soon after *Superurbeffimero*, in December, 1968, in Palermo as part of a mass protest that saw cardboard six foot letters, spelling the message "Grazia e Giustizia." These were carried across the city and launched into the sea. See Pettena (1972; 2002).

Eco's Disappearance from the Field of Architecture

The symposium was to all effects the last occasion in which Eco was to support the position of the Florentine architects. He officially left the department in the academic year of 1969-1970, temporarily regaining his associate position at the Politecnico of Milan, only to then take up a position as the first Associate Professor of Semiotics in the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at the University of Bologna in 1971. His frequent absences were already becoming noticeable, however, in 1967, particularly in connection with the Pesaro conferences – a series of meetings between likeminded cultural theorists, including Pier Paolo Pasolini, Galvano Della Volpe, and Emilio Garroni. Immediately after these meetings, Eco began to fall short of his responsibilities in Florence as Associate Professor of Decoration, when new intellectual stimuli concerning semiology proper replaced his initial interest in the field of architecture. First came the non-commercial publication of *Appunti* and its success among the Pesaro group. Subsequently the publication of *Struttura* (1968b) led to a swell of critical attention it earned in an international intellectual milieu including Dublin, Brussels, Buenos Aires, New York, Bordeaux, and finally Paris. It was in this last locale that in 1969, he took part in the constitution of the International Association for Semiotic Studies – an event that was immediately followed by the creation of its Italian counterpart.

The relationship between Eco and the department quickly deteriorated. No document now exists for appraising Eco's late period in Florence. However, in relation only to the curriculum of the 1968-69 academic year, it is certain that Koenig stepped in for Eco, reluctantly taking over the philosopher's teaching responsibilities. In a text he wrote subsequent to his substitution of Eco, he still follows *Appunti's* main line of thought, but his general resentment is implicit in a reaffirmation of the physical, denotative traits of architecture over its connotative ones (1970, x-xi). For his part, Eco answered in 1971 with a text that castigates the field's overall "aesthetic fallacy" and, hinting in particular at Koenig's dependence on Bruno Zevi, argues against architecture's unwitting talent for confusing space, or *spazialità*, with the architectural signified (1971, 161-163).[31] Tellingly, the section that carries this trenchant critique is still titled "Analisi semantica dei segni architettonici," but Eco's particular attitude towards the architectural object, which is reduced *ad absurdum* to a stick wedged in an empty field, and his exhaustive discussion of Katz, Fodor, and Postal's lexical theory both attest to his intellectual shift away from architectural discourse and towards structuralist theory. This turn reached its logical conclusion five years later in Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976). In this text, written originally in English, semiology is rethought in line with Barthes' original appeal in "Éléments de sémiologie" as a master cultural decoder – a single, all-embracing theory, rather than a practical tool for the formation of "open" cultural objects. Only here, then, in the aftermath of waning disciplinary interest in and from the field of architecture and firmly within a developing literary horizon of postmodernism – away from his

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[31] Significantly, the shift from a theory that includes also the field of architecture to a purely theoretical work sees Eco use the terms 'semiotics' and 'semiology' interchangeably, with a general preference for the former, in alliance with a building international consensus.

original concerns with the politics of practice – can Eco comfortably renounce architecture, presumably for good.[32]

Yet to cast the relationship between Eco and architecture after these closing episodes as one of reciprocal mistreatment and growing indifference, as Italian critics in both fields were inclined to do, would mean to pass without comment over the indubitable support that architecture provided for the development of semiology in Italy and Eco's bold theoretical contribution to Superarchitecture.[33] From his intensive research period in Florence to his consequent international pursuits, Eco's ideas and attitudes had gained a considerable hold on the field. At the same time that semiology was being established abroad and domestically, Italian architecture was applying many of its ideas. Semiologic discourse proliferated, from Cesare Brandi's *Struttura e architettura* (1968) to Bruno Zevi's *Guida al codice anticlassico* (1973), finding continuous and important support in Naples in Renato De Fusco's *Op Cit.*, a journal that is still in circulation today. Moreover, though interest around Florentine Superarchitecture did shift from 1968 onward to Superstudio and Archizoom, the two other protagonists of the Florentine movement, Eco was able to promote Binazzi's U.F.O. in various publications and even produce some patronage for it. Such was the case of Sherwood restaurant, a small interior project Eco endorsed, using it as a setting for an interview he gave to Italian television in 1969, a gesture typical of the connection he established between architecture and mass media. Considered again in relationship with Eco's *semiologia,* U.F.O.'s oeuvre and the tumultuous episodes provoked by its *Superurbeffimero n. 7* appear less idiosyncratic. Rather, they reveal U.F.O. as particularly determined to thoroughly test out the implications of Eco's semiology of architecture, deeply driving and impressing that theory into the fabric of its work. Only reread against U.F.O.'s event architecture, can Eco's work be seen to regain its original appeal for the Florentine Superarchitects, whose conscious use of *semiologia* was nearly as fierce as their passion for its open-ended effects.

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[32] Current Italian practices, such as Stalker, ma0, A12, and Multiplicity, are slowly reassessing Eco's brand of experimentation. Meanwhile, Eco is currently engaged, this time as a consultant to an international team of architects working on an updated 60s inflatable. The latter is scheduled to commemorate the London 2012 Olympics.

[33] A case is point is Manfredo Tafuri's "Architecture and Its Double: Semiology and Formalism." The Venetian critic dedicates this text to architecture's various links with semiology, while disregarding Eco's many involvements with the field (1973, 150-169).

Illustrations
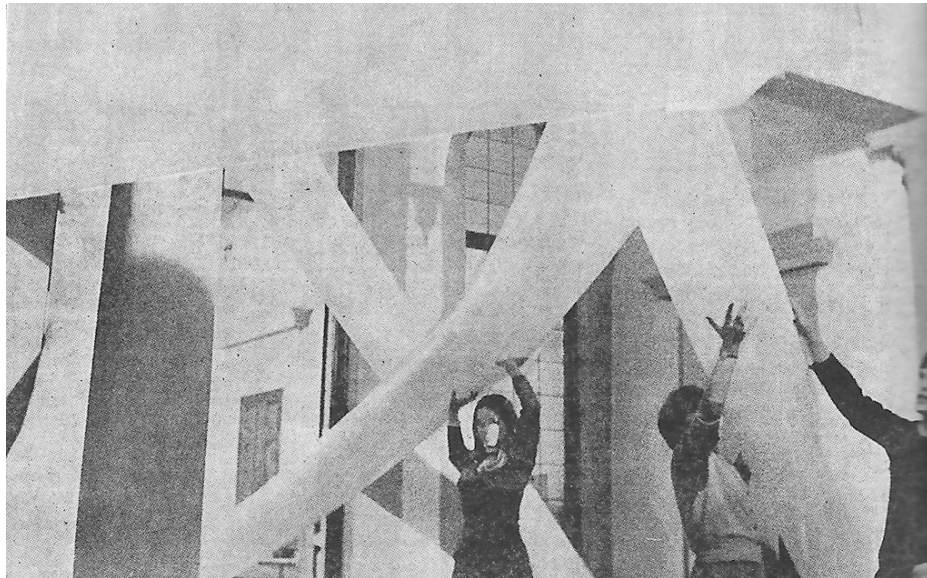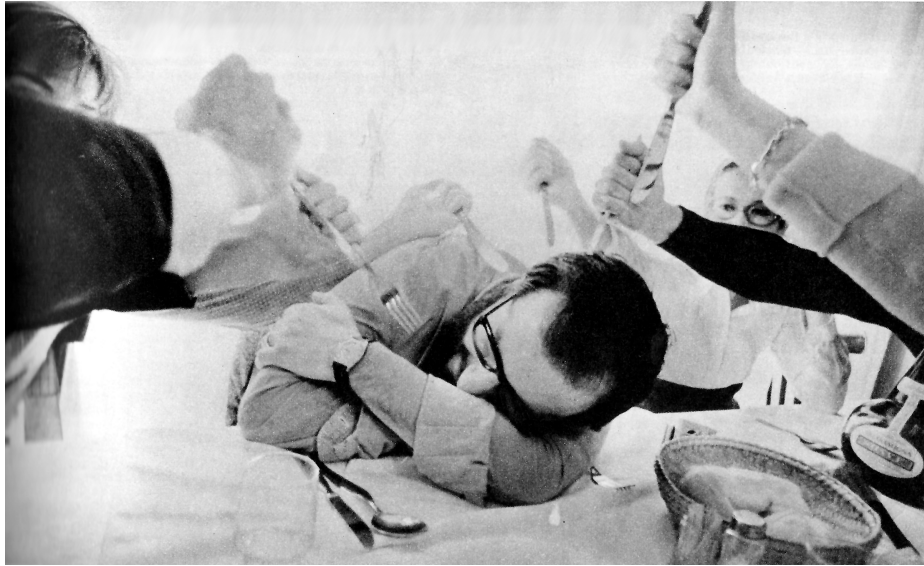
1 Umberto Eco 'made sign' by the numerous forks of the U.F.O. group (Milan, Italy, 1968). Courtesy of Lapo Binazzi, U.F.O.

2 U.F.O., *Effimero n. 1* (Florence, Italy, 1968). General view. From *Marcatré* 37-40 (1968).
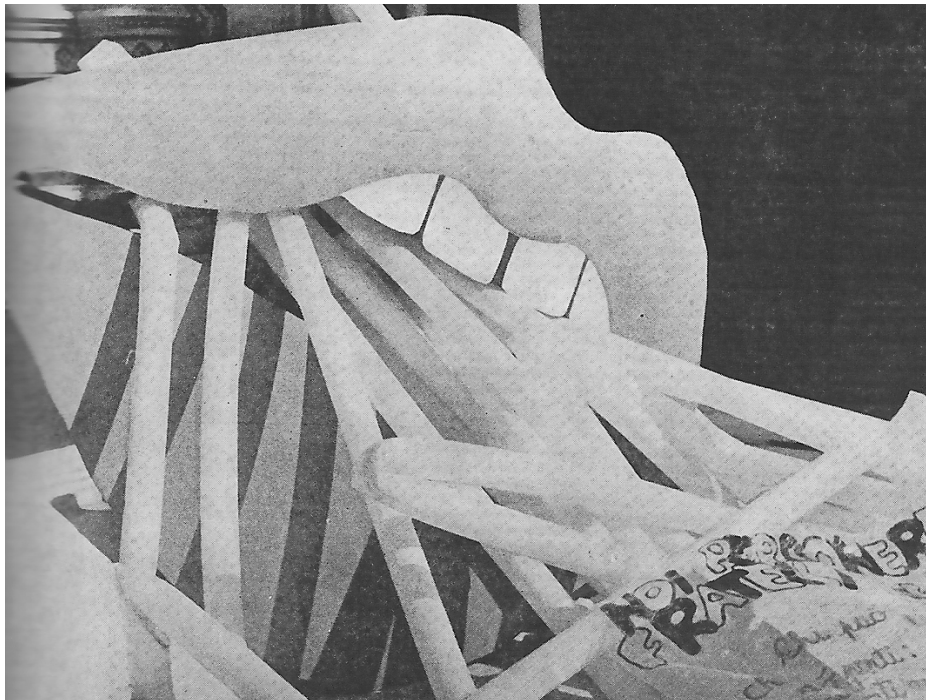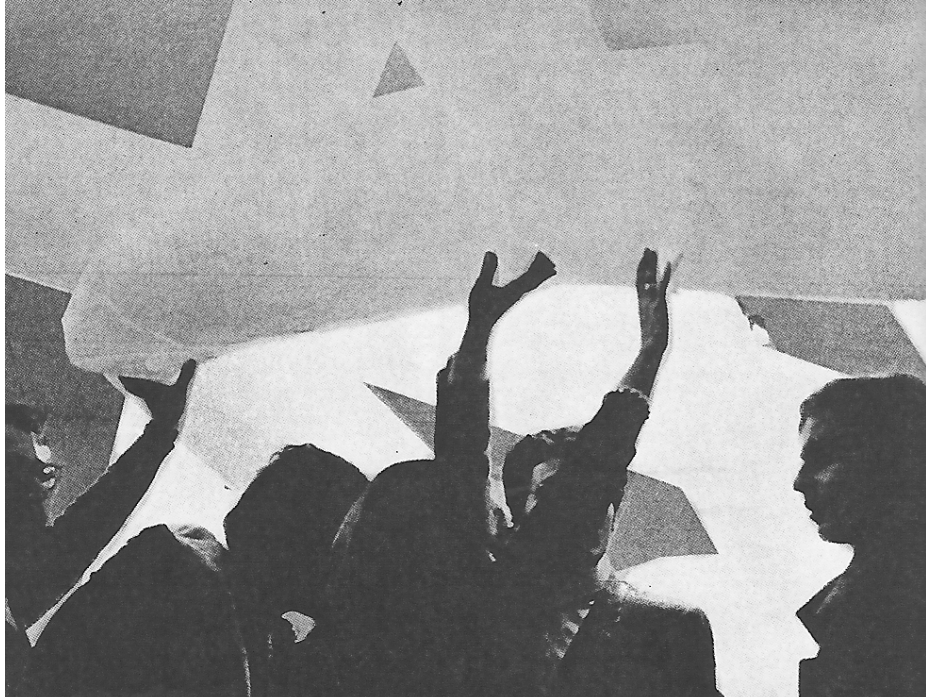
3 U.F.O., *Effimero n. 2* (Florence, Italy, 1968). General view. From *Marcatré* 37-40 (1968).
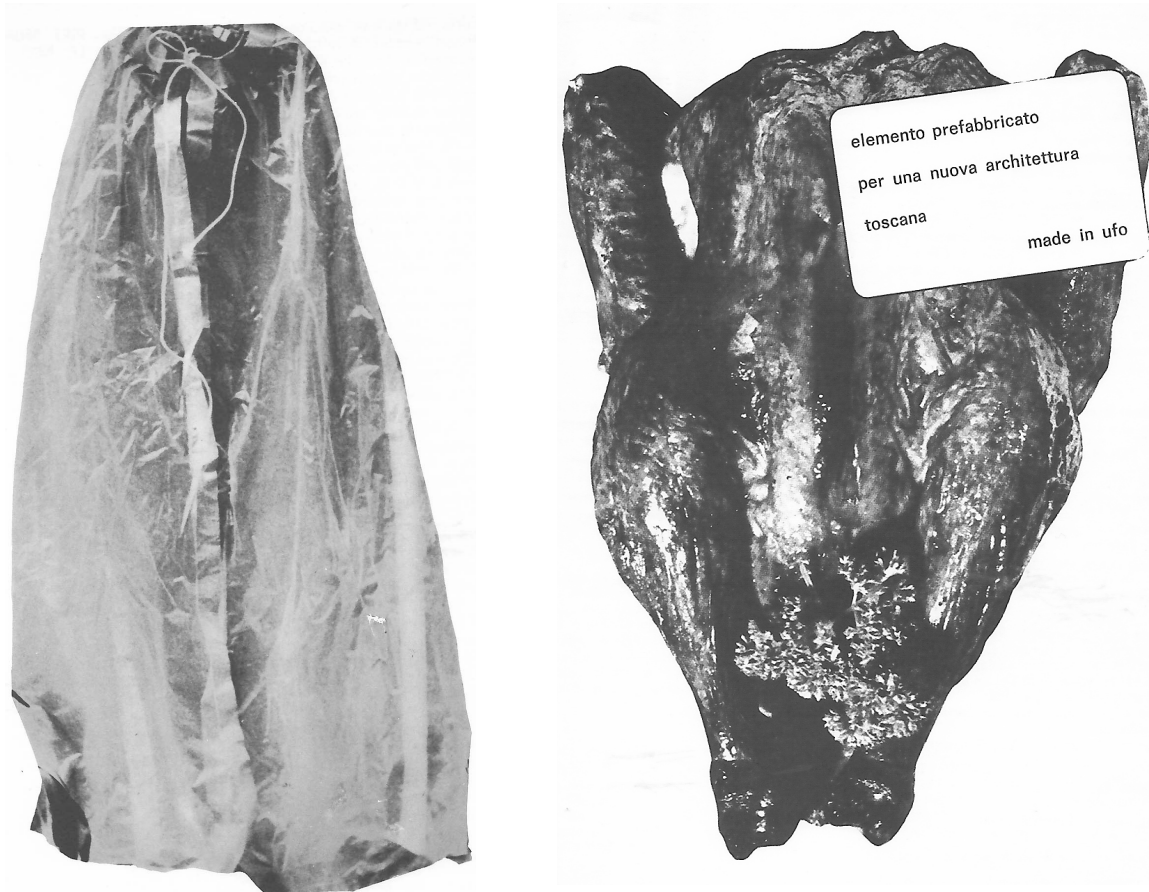
4 U.F.O., *Effimero n. 4* (Florence, Italy, 1968). General view. From *Marcatré* 37-40 (1968).

5 U.F.O., *Effimero n. 5* (Florence, Italy, 1968). General views. From *Marcatré* 41-42 (1968).

6 Gianni Pettena., installation for *City Hall*. (San Giovanni Valdarno, Italy, 1968). Detail. From *Marcatré* 41-42 (1968).

elemento prefabbricato

per una nuova architettura

toscana

made in ufo

7 U.F.O., *Superurbeffimero n. 7*, Urboaccessorio Alchemico, Pastucol garment (San Giovanni Valdarno, Italy, 1968). Detail. From *Marcatré* 41-42 (1968).

8 U.F.O, *Superurbeffimero n. 7*, "prefabricated element for a new Tuscan architecture, made in ufo." (San Giovanni Valdarno, Italy, 1968). Detail. From *Marcatré* 41-42 (1968).

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