

SHAPES

OF

LIGHT

Rimadesio

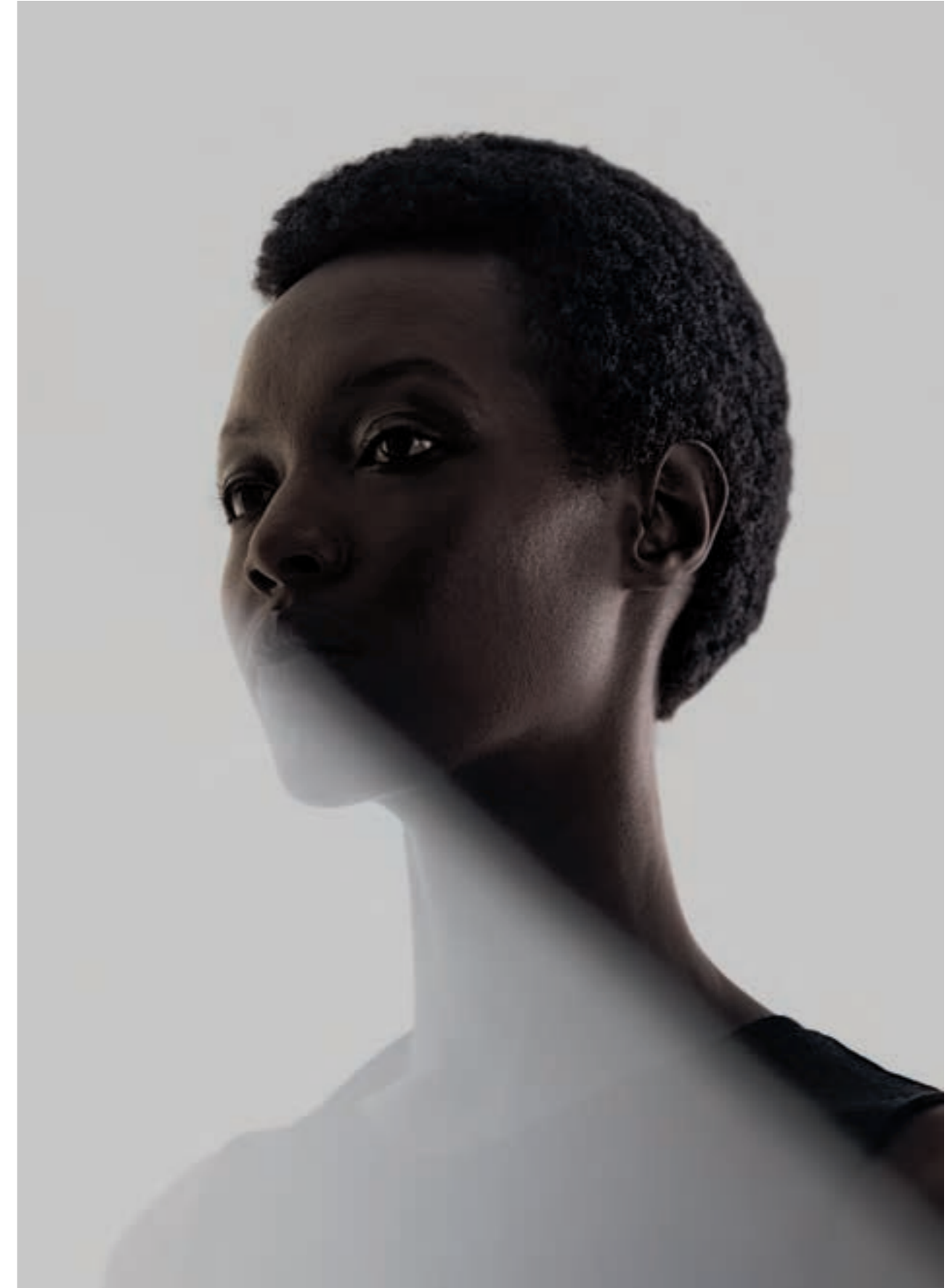
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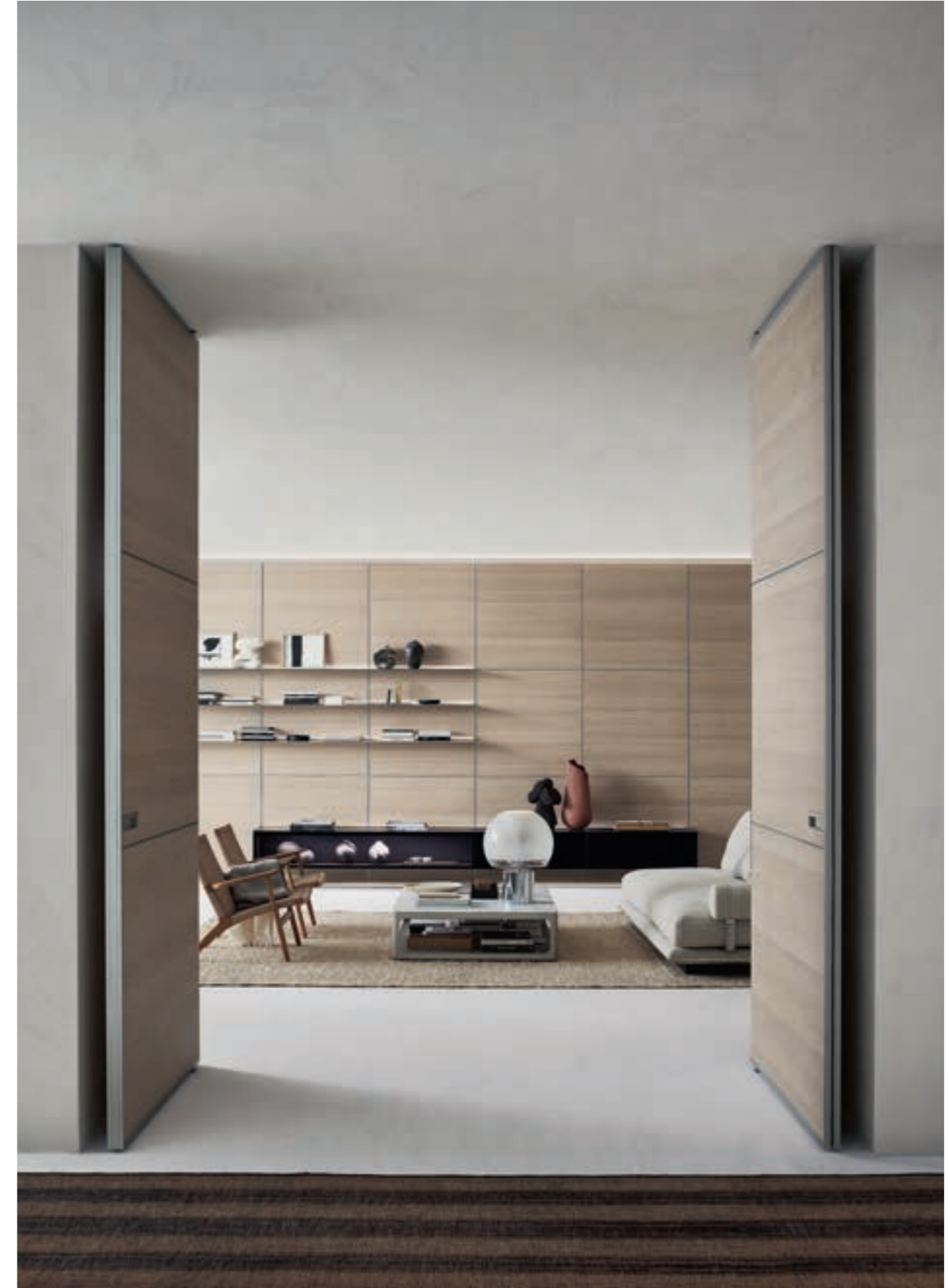
LIGHT

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THE

BEAUTY

OF

SPACE

AND

THE

BEAUTY

OF

TIME

ARE

REVEALED.









BACK TO MODERNITY P A S T

STEFANO SALIS IN CONVERSATION WITH GIUSEPPE LUPO.

TalkingAbout 2023
MILANO, 23.11.2023

STEFANO SALIS: This evening, on my way here for our conversation launching this series on Modernity – a keyword of the 20th century – I ran into an interesting book in the second-hand bookstore next to my house. By Roberto Vacca, one of Italy's most eminent futurologists, it is a book I read when it first came out. In the 1970s and 80s, Vacca authored several books that convincingly described possible futures. *Il Medio Evo prossimo venturo* (published in 1974 as *The Coming Dark Age*) attracted a following with its speculation on dystopian post-technology scenarios and foreshadowed environmental and social issues that, at the time, were not exactly "front and center". I mention it not because this book predicted the future, which has brought surprises no one could have foreseen, but because it traced several distinguishing aspects of modernity, at least as they have been perceived in Italy. For our conversation, I have brought a series of images, but even without seeing them a simple description is enough to convey the heart of the matter.

Let me give you an example with two objects that are precisely the same age: Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and a 1907 Ford. Whoever sees them cannot help but notice something. The car appears hopelessly antiquated: a technology that was groundbreaking at the time but today seems ridiculous and inadequate. In contrast, Picasso's painting still strikes many of us as not merely contemporary, but futuristic. We are not accustomed to seeing faces and bodies fragmented in this manner, and art has certainly preceded its times, achieving a dynamism that even today seems projected toward what is to come.

My point is that when speaking of modernity, we must carefully consider the limitations, accepted meanings, anachronisms, and objective dysfunctions that we encounter. This theoretical knot is what makes the concept of modernity something we have not already surpassed (it is no coincidence we say we live in a post-modern, or even a post-post-modern world). Indeed, it urges us to continue reflecting on the topic. Establishing what "modernity" was, what it is, and what it will become enables us to orient ourselves in a dialogue that unfolds over time without losing its future prospects.

In your new book, *La modernità malintesa* [*Misunderstood Modernity*], you cite a quote by Fernand Léger that I know you hold dear. It appears in a chapter called "A matter of trains and hats", in which you discuss how, in the early 20th century, the train was a disruptive symbol of progress and modernity. Was it the direct result of a process of industrialization that emancipated individuals who possessed only the strength of their arms, their labor? Or might the train instead have marked the beginning of a slow retreat from an Arcadian civilization based on agriculture and craftsmanship?

GIUSEPPE LUPO: Léger's expression should be rewritten as a question: is it the train's fault if a hat blows away? Do we need to rein it in as it speeds across the plain? In my opinion, no. I believe the problem is another, yet in the majority of instances over the past century and in the new millennium as well, the train has been scapegoated. It is the train's fault, say the authors of stories set in factories. This is the train's symbolic function, if it is true that progress and technology (or shall we say more precisely, modernity) have ruined the landscape, destroyed the environment, and made humankind a miserable inhabitant of what T.S. Eliot called the waste land, a place of desolation.

But this does not mean that when a hat blows away as a train passes that our reaction should be: stop the train! The train can keep going.

IN PURSUIT OF A NEW LIFESTYLE.

What we need to do is modify the hats. However, to get to this point, to defend modernity's primacy over all that preceded it, we must set aside the misconceptions that surrounded it in the 20th century. We must declare its inalienable existence. We must overcome the temptation to feel nostalgia for a past that appears perfect only in hindsight. And, at the same time, we must envision a compromise between the need to build, improve, and produce and the respect that our planet asks of us. A human-centered approach to technology, without shadows and without prejudice.

Exhaustively defining modernity and postmodernity is a singular challenge. Modernity is as much the invention of the wheel as the discovery of America, shifts that took place in different historical periods. However, there is a widely acknowledged fact: at the close of the 20th century, the concept of the factory changed and, together with divestment and globalization, a new era began, the era "after" modernity. The reaction from modernity's narrators – the intellectuals, writers, and philosophers who have described its phenomena – did not always depict its complexity. Often, it was colored by ideological bias, leading to confusion.

My impression as I read the books published in the last two decades is of their fundamental continuity. A corrosive attitude toward workplaces remains, as if the 20th century were still ongoing and its mechanisms continuing to operate. Unfortunately, only a few writers avoided this view – Leonardo Sinisgalli, Primo Levi, Italo Calvino, Elio Vittorini – as most intellectuals have taken an anti-modern stance.

SS: This problem with our perception of modernity's processes, costs, and the benefits we have reaped (the latter routinely omitted) not only risks undermining the debate, but almost always severs it from its historical context. Not only that: it seems to me that in Italy, alongside the enthusiasm that coincided with its post-war economic miracle – a few years in which the country progressively regained its youth and, with speed and agility, seized the moment – many intellectuals delayed mourning for the passing era or for production systems that could no longer keep pace with the times.

What is so striking is that nearly all the writers, thinkers, and also many artists, publicly declared their skepticism, and even outright opposition, to the new modes of production and social life. Little did they realize that, speaking of trains, as a nation and society it was imperative that we not miss the arriving train, which would continue forward whether or not we were on it. This shortsighted attitude, if not utter misunderstanding, is absent in the point of view of the general public, with its basic common sense.

Today, for example, it is fashionable to condemn the use of toxic and indestructible plastic that pollutes the environment. However, we forget that plastic was the 20th century material that, democratically and economically, enabled the public to enter the age of modernity. Of course we cannot flip the argument on its head: at the time, we could not have foreseen needing to keep the potential harm in mind. And without plastic, the factory, and technology, we would not have achieved the ease of our current era.

GL: Undoubtedly, circumstances continue to change very rapidly, which leads to tools, methods, and systems becoming prematurely obsolete, despite having been cutting edge not long before. Yet this is the price we pay on the altar of technology, which has the power to both aid and damn humanity. It depends on how we use technology and how we approach it.

Shifting focus to a topic directly affecting us today, this argument is also valid or artificial intelligence. In theory, the dialogue between productivity and cultural evolution is still a path we can follow. Here as well, it depends on our approach.

A company that seeks to align itself with its current context cannot base its strategy on traditional methods.

If ever there was a time for culture and humanism, it is now. Entrepreneurs have grasped this: it is not enough to produce and make profits. They need to engage in a dialogue with the realm of ideas, with the language of art, and even with proposals from visionaries. Put simply, I believe that apparently unrelated worlds must collaborate, provided they respect and cooperate with each other.

However, the books I read these days give me the impression that today's intellectual efforts are leading to outdated points of view. Even the narratives about our present times retain many elements of anti-modernity. Factories continue to be characterized as de-humanizing places that promote drudgery, exploitation, and suffering. A factory worker is either fired or felled. This does not necessarily mean it is true, except in rare cases. The real problem is that many of today's authors who write about industrial labor have never set foot in a factory. Consequently, they write according to old 20th century coordinates, adhering to stereotypes that the publishing industry encourages (because readers can easily grasp them) but that do not correspond to reality.

How this anomaly came to be is destined to make us ponder. However, one thing is certain: not only has there been, and continues to be, an intellectual culture incapable of recognizing the potential generated by the proliferation of industrial systems, but the suspicion remains that this attitude originated in some kind of misconception – a misunderstanding generated by prejudices descending from an ideological humus, a political culture that sees the factory as capitalism's most inhuman icon, the heart of the conflict between social classes and exploitation, the battlefield of a cynical and unscrupulous middle class.

This is not to say that all this has not happened before, nor that it should not continue. However, this 20th century way of thinking, speaking, and acting cannot be our only guide for understanding the workplace in an era that has long superseded the 20th century. It may seem paradoxical, but this is what we read in the writings of Ritanna Armeni, Simona Baldanzi, Gianfranco Bettin, Angelo Ferracuti, Alberto Prunetti, Stefano Valenti, and Massimiliano Terrarossa. We are and remain an anti-modern country, most likely influenced by Benedetto Croce's philosophy that encouraged avoiding technology, rather than embracing it.

We are anti-modern because the temptation to return to a pastoral Arcadia persists in the dreams of far too many writers dissatisfied with our current reality and alarmed by the advance of progress. Unfortunately, this point of view risks poisoning the wells: it confuses reason with the sophisms of an abstract and unrealistic rhetoric, and it derails attempts to mitigate negative outcomes, thereby causing worse consequences. Faced with modernity's perils, we have two alternatives: negate modernity (but can we truly renounce the benefits it offers us?) or seek to redeem its errors and imperfections. This is the true challenge on which our future depends.

SS: Another dimension comes into play here that I want to reiterate. We are looking at Uliano Lucas' famous photograph of a laborer, a migrant from Southern Italy holding a cardboard suitcase, with the stunning Pirelli Tower, the utmost in innovation at the time, rising starkly behind him. Therefore: the Italian South versus Milan, the labor of the soil versus that of the city, the land versus tram tracks, an anthropological mutation underway before our very eyes. Yet I ask myself and you: what is the modern element in this image? Undoubtedly, it is Gio Ponti's glass and cement "Pirellone", a slender cuttlebone towering over Italy's most industrialized city. But I assert that it is the person standing in the foreground who truly embodies modernity. Even if constrained by circumstances, this individual chose to begin a new life under an unknown sky – impelled by necessity, but also attracted by a better future.

Post-war Italy launched itself thanks to these individuals, who hailed from a Dark Age that was not coming, as Vacca would have said, but already present. In exchange for the disruption of traditional, at times millennial, paradigms, they leapt headfirst into the future: a future not only filled with electrical appliances – washing machines and electric ovens, stoves and telephones, later the television – but one that gave their children access to education, liberating them from a societal condition that had become far too obsolete.

GL: The conversation around what "modern" means can occur at two levels: on one hand, ordinary people, living each day in a technological euphoria; on the other, a dialogue between intellectuals that implies a judgment on technology and on our country's altered anthropology. Observing the panorama of literature, film, and art, it is easy to think

that this attitude originates in a distant ideological prejudice that distinguishes a priori between "poetry and not-poetry", as Benedetto Croce posited in his *Estetica* (1902) [published in English in 1909 as *Aesthetic: As science of expression and general linguistic*]. Croce's philosophy made this sharp distinction based on a principal of exclusivity, conforming to a tendency to segregate, creating hierarchies that would inevitably lead to a society stratified from highest to lowest.

The entire 20th century can and must be understood as an extended struggle between contamination and purity, between destructive impulses and the restoration of order. On this watershed, the intellectuals could have played their hand. Choosing which side to take would have had ethical and political value, giving meaning to their individual efforts, as well as to the country's prospects. Yet, despite being aware of its significance, in response to modernity's revelations that converge around manufacturing, the most widespread attitude among intellectuals has been that of denial and outrage, as if modernity were a fault to avoid, a structural error that only returning to an uncontaminated natural state can erase completely.

They deemed it better to reject the unknown rather than to accompany its trajectory toward a hyper-technological dimension that would have implicated coming to terms with machines, debasing themselves to the same level of objects enslaved to utilitarian logic. Little mattered that, already, these tools had indelibly modified our perception of time and our relationship to reality. The machines' fault was being the manifestation of a capitalism to be opposed on ideological grounds.

They have even become the principal cause of human suffering, the suffering of the century, as portrayed by Simone Weil in *La condition ouvrière* (1951, translated in Italy by Fortini in 1952) [transl. *The Worker's Condition*].

That the 20th century was a century running away from itself – to the extent that it seems difficult to characterize, if not undefinable – underscores the challenges of discussing a chaotic, pluralistic era, the majority of whose voices are dissonant. The fact that we mistrust any attempt to neatly describe the 20th century is a symptom of its complexity. Walter Benjamin understood this mid-century, identifying its key in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* [*New Angel*]. This "Angel of History" is a creature without mythology (or with a mythology falsified by horror), a cross-eyed monster that is both witness of calamity and harbinger of death.

If indeed the 20th century bears the stigmata of its conflict with tradition – as the avant-garde movements have pictured it – its rebel nature and its revolutionary furies cannot help but instigate an irreparable process of rupture. The more all trace of the human is abolished, the more the sacred dimension is lost. Then literature's only task becomes the illusion of keeping alive a relic of the past, taking refuge in that veneer of eternal secularism that is the realm of memory.

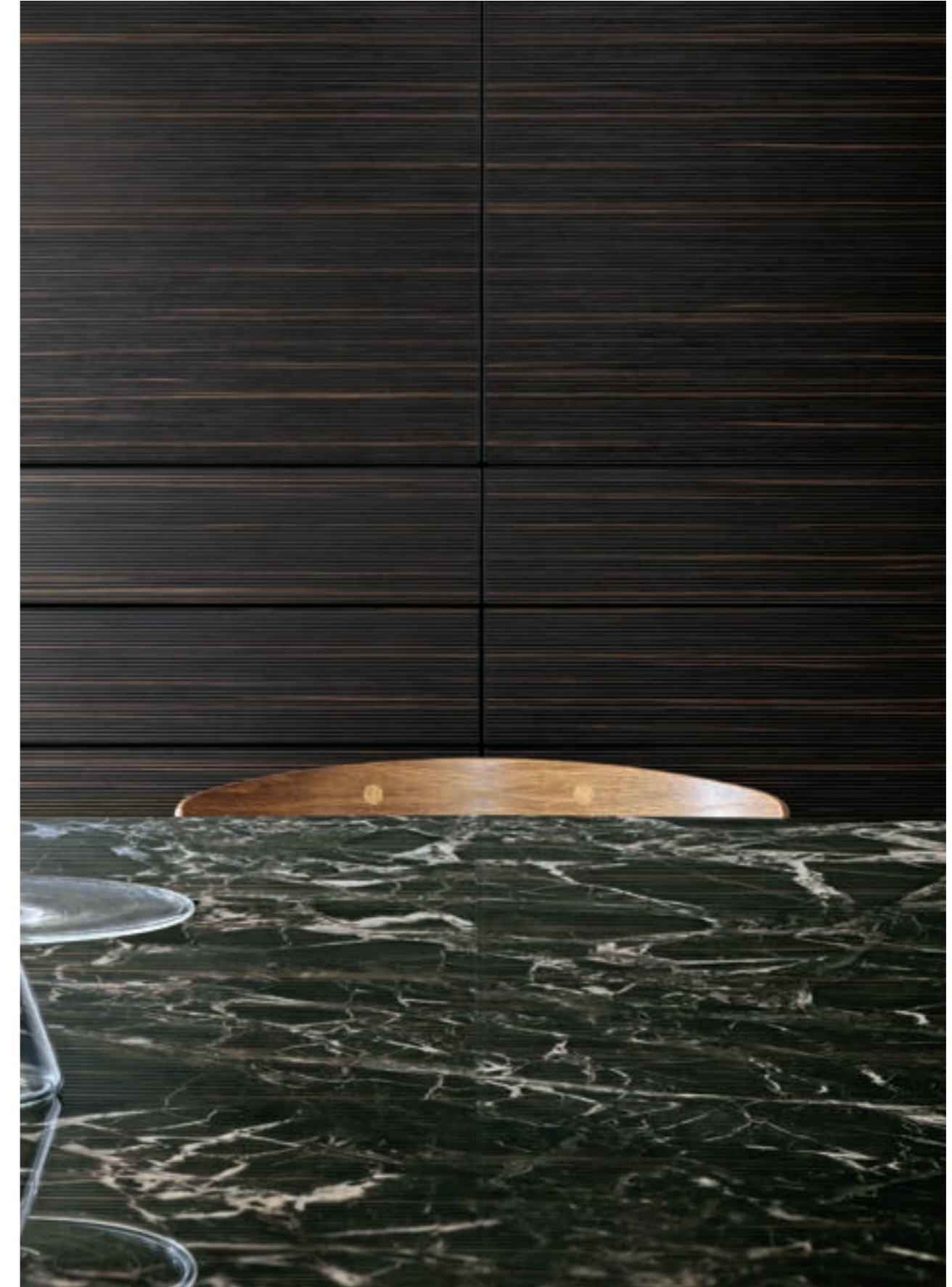
SS: The dimension of memory, to conclude, is sacrosanct, provided it is not all-absorbing. Constantly asking the question – what is modernity and what is it becoming – is a cultural endeavor that requires great self-awareness. Particularly when it is undertaken by companies that must continually make sense of this paradigm shift through innovation, experimentation, design, and production. Without disregarding the past, they must create new ways of life that help us adapt to our era, while accompanying us toward the future.

Born in 1970 in Sant'Antioco in Sardinia, Stefano Salis is a journalist for Il Sole 24 Ore where he edits *Commenti*, the opinion and editorial page. In the newspaper's Sunday culture insert, he writes frequently on bibliophilia, publishing, art, design, and literature. He has led conferences on these topics around the world and taught university courses on journalism at the Università di Milano and the Università Cattolica. Stefano's contributions in book form include curating (with Barnaba Fornasetti) *Piero Fornasetti: Certi paraventi sono stati disegnati due volte* (pub. Henry Beyle). His latest book is *Sulla Scacchiera* (pub. Franco Maria Ricci). Pending publication is a book on Roger Callois' stones (Franco Maria Ricci). He is on the advisory committee of FMR magazine.

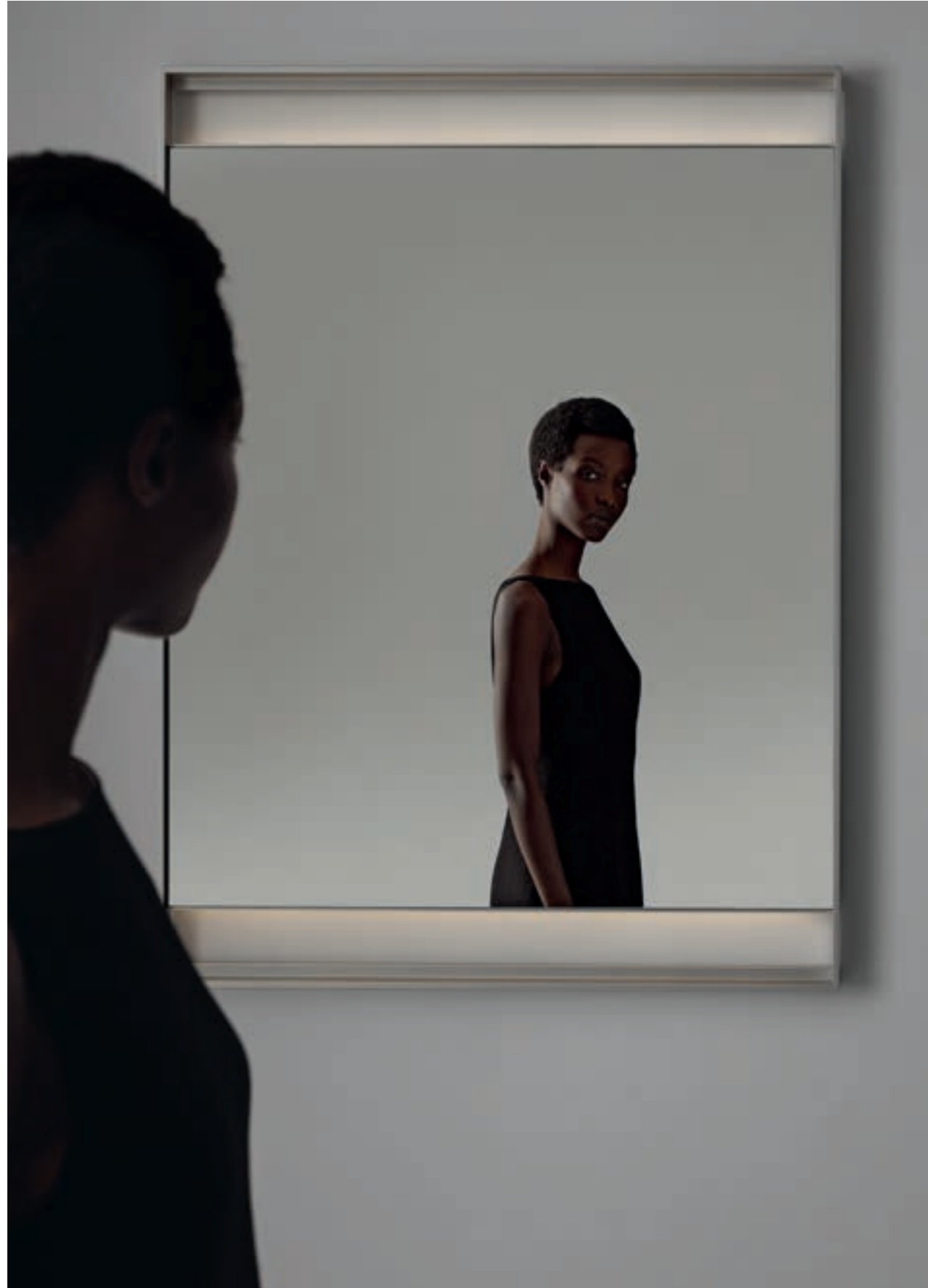
Born in Lucania, Giuseppe Lupo lives in Lombardy, where he teaches Theory and History of Modernity in Literature at the Università Cattolica in Milan. In 2018, he won the Premio Viareggio with *Gli Anni del Nostro Incanto* and, in 2011, the Selezione Campiello prize with *L'Ultima Sposa di Palmira*. Giuseppe is the author of numerous other novels, including *L'Americano di Celenne*, *La Carovana Zanardelli*, *Viaggiatori di Nuvole*, *L'Albero di Stanze*, *Breve Storia del Mio Silenzio*, and *Tabacco Cian* (2022). His most recent book is *La Modernità Malintesa* (2023). He has published many essays on the culture of the 20th century and industrial modernism, and he collaborates with the cultural sections of Il Sole 24 Ore.











AN

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SUDDENLY

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BACK TO MODERNITY P R E S E N T

A FLUID CONCEPT: COMPLEXITY AND TURNOVER.

MARCO SAMMICHELI IN CONVERSATION WITH EMILIA TERRAGNI.

TalkingAbout 2023
LONDON, 30.11.23

What follows is a conversation. On this occasion, the people who interpreted modernity from a contemporary perspective as well as the challenges it offers, were an editorial director, Emilia Terragni, publisher of Phaidon, a British publishing house dedicated to the arts and the promotion of creativity, and a museum director, Marco Sammiceli, superintendent of the Museum of Italian Design at the Triennale Milano, a century-old institution established to give an international home to the disciplines of design, applied arts and everyday life.

The exchange between Terragni and Sammiceli provided an opportunity to narrate how the Phaidon publishing house and the Triennale cultural institution have, for the past century, succeeded in interpreting their time and telling the story of its transformation into new artefacts, new languages and new knowledge. Books and exhibitions, research and trends have become commodities to offer their communities moments in which to meet and reflect and opportunities to engage in discussion. A venue, the museum, and objects, namely books, have become increasingly widespread and popular educational platforms that are crucial in the processes of corporate evolution.

Exhibitions, publications and podcasts, architecture, gardens and shops, architects, designers and artists, follow one another in the Q&A session between Terragni and Sammiceli, drawing on both historical cases and contemporary anecdotes. They offered viewers of the London conversation and today's readers vivid scenarios of cultural design, tangible actions to reach out to the public, and experimental activities all focused on bringing the arts and everyday life together.

EMILIA TERRAGNI: In the context of design, modernity traditionally refers to particularly approach or style that was more or less shaped at the beginning of the 20th century. Modern design is characterized by starting from traditional shape and forms, but it becomes an embrace of new technology, new form, functionalism. Modern design is also considered to be global, democratic, and bringing new useful object to a larger audience.

But modernity is actually an action. It's an attitude. It anchored to his progressive principles, but it's always in constant evolution. It is much more than a style, even if it is often confounded with a style: in my opinion, modernity is an approach to life. Modernity is about being innovative, both in the sense of the thinking and in the making. It is about being ahead of the time and timeless, at the same time. Modernity is intellectual and cultural timeframe, characterized by progress, by reason, but also by collaboration.

Modernity involves the desire to embrace new ideas, new values, new approaches to very different aspects of life, in the fields of art, philosophy, science, politics, or even social organization. It is very challenging to stay modern when you get to a certain age. I am not talking about myself, only. Phaidon this year is turning 100 years old: it was founded in 1923 on the very principle of modernity, of being innovative, democratic, functional, open to embrace new forms and new technologies, and very... collaborative. All these principles continue to influence what we do. Actually, it is not only Phaidon that is 100 years old, but it is also Triennale Milano. We share the same birth date. We organized an exhibition in New York and in London for our 100th anniversary: it was very interesting because we went

back to our archives to look for the books that somehow made our history. It turned out being an incredible journey through our publications, and while we were walking through the exhibition, we noticed a fantastic story behind each book.

MARCO SAMMICHELI: As we can see, modernity is in all disciplines. It is part our life. It's everywhere. I personally think that is very interesting to talk about modernity in the context of design, since design is one of the most powerful embodiments of modernity. Between exhibitions and books, this is exactly what we do, since we have the chance to do that in many different ways. And when we write books about design or we realize exhibitions on design, we are really bringing modernity to another level.

The purpose of design is always to be innovative, democratic, progressive. And at its best, design solves problem and is trying to build a better and more sustainable future. In doing so, it really needs to establish a new relationship, more responsible, more respectful, and even more dynamic with nature, exploring innovative ways to minimize the harm to the environment.

We have at our disposal well-planned urban spaces, sustainable infrastructures, and thoughtful design that really can contribute to a harmonious coexistence. But we also have to be more flexible.

Real progress has to do with respect for nature: when I talk about nature, I include both human beings and avoiding waste and pollution. But while the concept of modernity is in constant evolution, its mission is always to work for progress, quality, social justice, and our modern society has come along from where we were in the past century. For sure, we know that there is still a lot to do.

If we think about an institution like the Triennale or a publishing house like Phaidon, and the role that an exhibition or a book can have in bringing the arts to a wide audience, we understand how important is the role that these exhibitions or books have in making culture even more available. There is always an interesting tension between being in constant evolution and being faithful to our principles and values: in the moment we stop evolving, we stop being relevant. For this reason, we can never stop.

ET: People think that modernity is all about new materials, simple lines, but these are just tools constantly evolving. They stay, they go away, they come back. What is important is always to have a clear idea, a mission, a purpose. Our main mission as a publishing house is really to deliver interesting contents in an innovative way, as we have seen in the past, the story of art, the art books. The other important issue is always how to organize the materials: in the end, it is all about design. Sometimes there is no need to change. But occasionally the best way of being modern is also to invent a new concept.

Especially when you are dealing with books, you really ask yourself the question, are books still relevant? Are books still the best way to deliver contemporary content in a digital era? Of course, being a publisher, my answer is yes, but that doesn't mean that we do not question about it every day. The technology maybe changed, but the support is more or less the same. It is very interesting to see how you can deliver very contemporary and relevant content through books: an item that a lot of people think that are quite obsolete.

What we can say about contemporary books is that they are very close and very far away at the same time from the Gutenberg Bible. As much as a contemporary book is a contemporary book, it's still a contemporary book. It is very interesting to see how a contemporary chair is very close and very far away from a Roman chair. It's more or less four legs, a seat and a back, sometimes three legs, sometimes one leg. For us, it is important to understand if the books are still serving the purpose that they are for.

I've been at Phaidon for 20 years and I can say that the way in which we do books has actually changed quite a lot. I remember that when we started, we were working on all the books with Renzo Piano and there was this idea of displaying his work; every three, four years we were coming up with a new volume with his best works. It was a huge project, if we compare it to a modern website: there is no question about it because a digital site can be updated, and continually changed. This matter pushes us to really rethink the role of the book: what is really important is not just displaying things, but the narrative, the storytelling, the editing, the care that you put into it.

The core of the issue is the tension between what is already there, what we can do in the present, but also how we can innovate a medium that is actually quite old and quite obsolete. There is always a tension between innovation, technology, and the fact that the book is immortal, is forever: a very interesting concept is also that once a book is printed, is there with us forever. Every mistake will be there forever, and this is a way of working. So the ephemeral of the digital world is fantastic, but it also allowed people to be a little bit sloppy because it's there and then it's not there anymore. So there is this, and then it's not there anymore. And I think that is the permanence of the book really oblige us to have a very different approach in the content.

That is fact checking, proofreading, all of the things that it becomes an obsession, but also a service. And the idea it's real to always have something in which you continues to renovate the concept of the book, but actually at the end of the day, it's not. And I think that's the key to the book. And so, at the end of the day, the book is the book. And you can keep it, it can remind you things, you can enjoy, you can go back, and it's there forever to be enjoyed.

MS: Yeah, I mean it's, I also have an example in this sense because there's not a drop of nostalgia in what we are seeing tonight. No, it's just a combination of factors and different elements. Like two and a half years ago, we did a big, a exhibition on Saul Steinberg. Saul Steinberg for the one that knows this great artist and illustrator is, you know, you are, there's a lot of people obsessed with him, but would say is a niche, it's a group of lovers. Then the rest of the people, maybe they don't even know who he was or if he was an architect or an illustrator or if he was European or American. Yeah. And he was actually a great Romanian architect that was trained in Milan and then he became probably the most New Yorkese artist in the recent history of contemporary art and developed, the author of incredible New Yorker covers and so on.

We did this show, we did exhibition at Triennale, and we were aware that this figure was not probably as popular as could be, you know, an Italian *maestro of design*. So we invited a young journalist, Francesco Costa, to develop a podcast. And this podcast was an incredible success, but was also an access for a completely diverse audience that were coming at the beginning of this. So we had a lot of people that were interested in the exhibition. So at the beginning, whether, you know, people that they were into illustration, people that they knew, Sol Steinberg. And then later came people that they were, okay, we heard about this man because of Francesco podcast.

So what was actually designed by Triennale as a complementary experience to the real experience, to the physical experience, it became actually the access and the way that pushed people to the exhibition. So that's how we do it. We also have a lot of people who come to the exhibition to see the exhibition. It's a great way to encourage people to come to Triennale. So as you said, like now there's, you will continue to do books forever.

This also will be the job of Triennale. We won't ever, ever stop to publish catalogs and arrange exhibitions and install physical experience in a building because we know that people, especially Milanese citizens, when it's 6 o'clock on a weekday, they're like, what to do? Oh, I can go to Triennale, I can have an *aperitivo*, and I can see an exhibition, or I can come for lunch, and they feel that that is a very familiar space, but it is also a place where there's many, can happen many encounters, let's say, with art, with architecture, and with different formats.

That's why I mentioned the podcast. Yeah, I think that's also interesting, because a structure like the Triennale, it's a place where you go, you enter, maybe you go for a specific exhibition, but then you always have any other three or four things that you don't know, you learn, but it's really the physical experience of going there, and look at things that really enrich you, and the summer was really a very interesting show, because you heard about it, you knew it, you saw it, it reminds you of the New Yorker, but it was not really a mainstream designer or illustrator, but a lot of people went there because it wasn't the Triennale, because it was in a space, and then discovered it, so there is this continuous chain of events and of physical experience that really makes it a very interesting place.

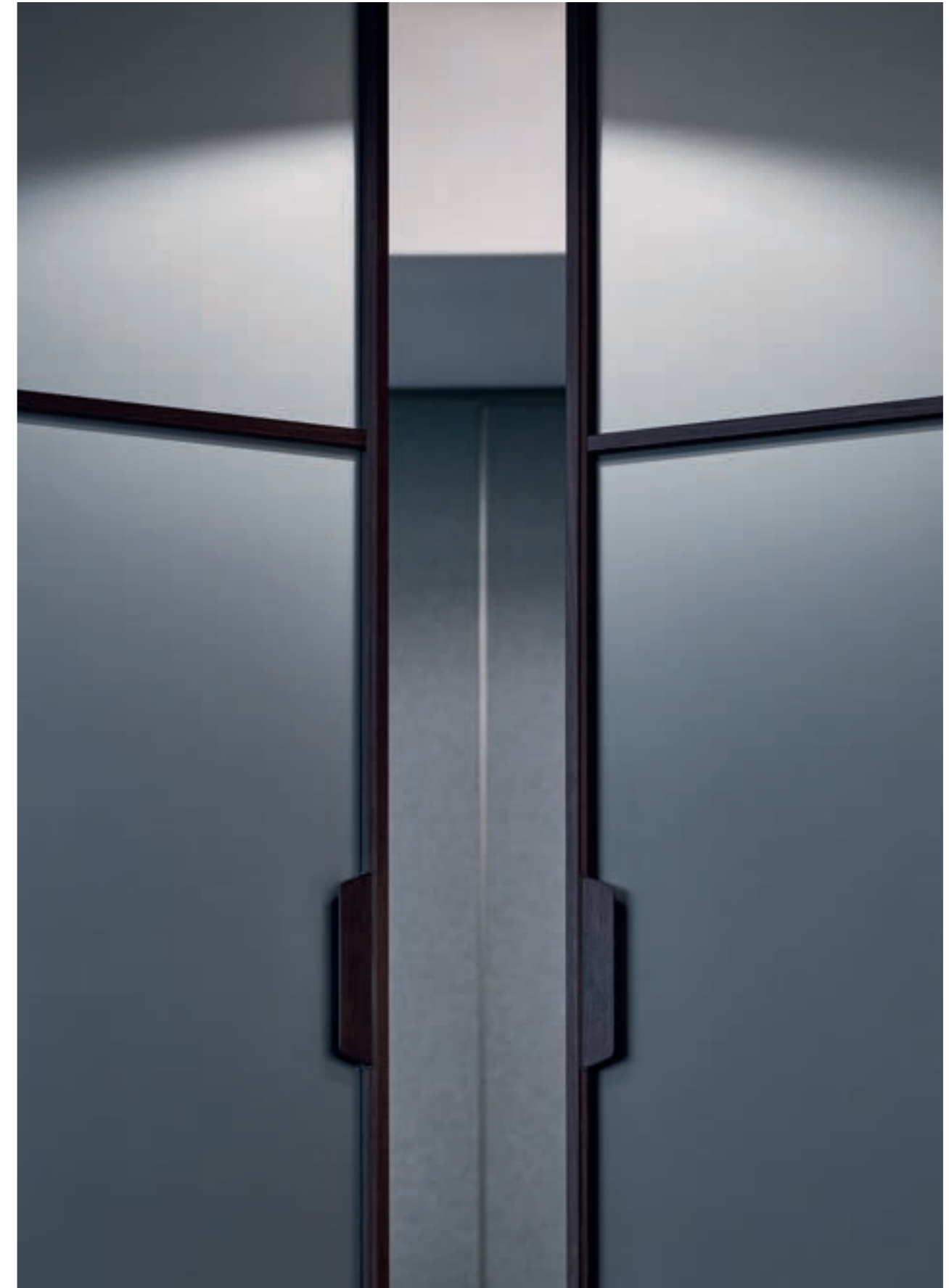
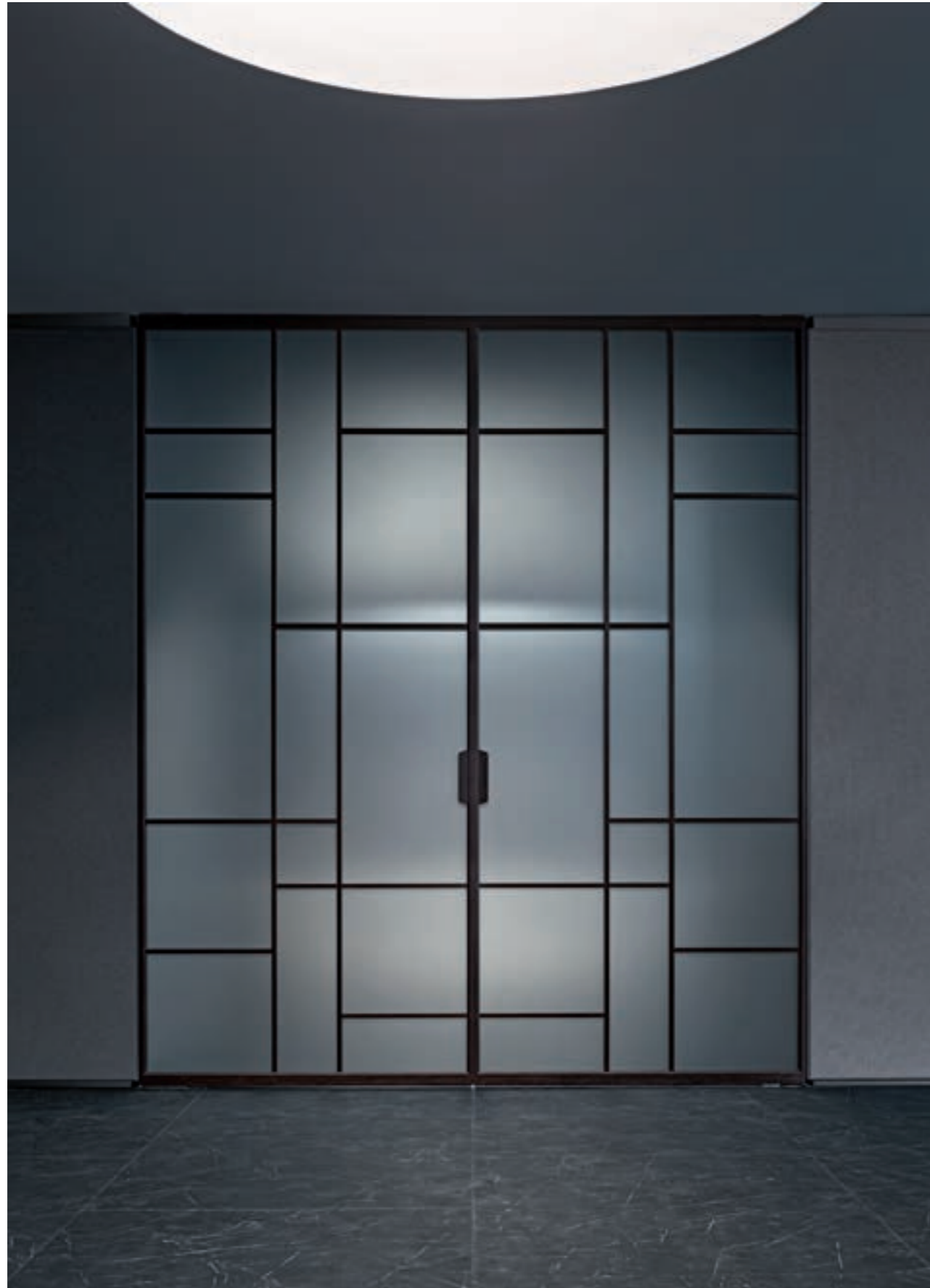
And I think that's what's so interesting about the Triennale, because it's a place where you can learn and have knowledge that maybe you wouldn't have had if you don't really stumble into it, and this is the beauty of this, and it's also the beauty when you are in a bookshop, in which you just see something that you have never, never heard about it, and you are just attracted because it's a curious cover, or because it's a strange title, or for many other reasons, or because that day you are in a specific mood. But it's really this physical experience. And then it's not about being against the digital, or the digital is a fantastic thing.

Marco Sammiceli is curator of the design, fashion, crafts sector at Triennale Milano and Director of Museo del Design Italiano. After graduating in Communication Science from the University of Siena and specializing in History of Design at the Bauhaus in Weimar, he earned a doctorate in design and technology for the development of cultural heritage at Politecnico di Milano. He curated shows and essays on catalogs for museums in Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Columnist for "Wallpaper" and for Il Sole 24 Ore. He wrote monographs on designers and publications on Milan as an urban platform for creative industries.

Emilia Terragni is Associate Publisher for Architecture, Design and Food titles at Phaidon Press — the world's premier publisher of books on the visual arts. She worked previously as a Curator at the Barragan Foundation and Vitra Design Museum and studied art history at the University Ca' Foscari in Venice. At Phaidon, she founded the design list and then went on to create and develop the culinary list, publishing books that combine lifestyle, food, and hospitality, while being beautiful objects in their own right.









UNEXPECTED

REVERBERATIONS

ARE REFLECTED,

AND NEW

RHYTHMS

ARE

CREATED.





BACK TO MODERNITY FURTHER

NEW VISIONS, THE MODERNITY OF TOMORROW.

CARLO RATTI IN CONVERSATION WITH JOANN GONCHAR.

TalkingAbout 2023
NEW YORK, 08.02.24

The future does not belong to the cities. The future belongs to humans, and humans love cities. What if we think about a new way to look at cities, and a new way to approach the concept of modernity? We have to overpass the idea of modernity we had in the XX century: "tabula rasa", destroy everything, get rid of everything. Think of Le Corbusier in the 1920s and his "Plan Voisin" for rethinking Paris: here we can see a picture of an architect behaving like an omnipotent god calling forth the floods to wipe the earth clean and build something new in its place. But architects aren't gods — and we can't think like that anymore. We have to forget this "rip it up and start again" attitude. Instead, my idea is to find a different kind of modernity, to get into a better future.

So, what about the cities? People say that cities are growing, but they aren't growing uniformly. In Japan, Europe, and the United States, cities are not growing — and the population is declining. So, are cities booming? Yes. But not everywhere. When we hear about new neighborhoods rising around the world, we do not hear of neighborhoods, but slums or *favelas*. So we have to think about *how* cities are growing, and what architecture as a profession can address their needs as they grow.

We know the planet is spinning out of control, and what once seemed to be problems for the future, are now problems for the present. Temperature rising; overpopulation...

Let me give a little example — ever since I was a child, I would go to the mountains, but these days I can't bring myself to see how the glaciers that dominated them are diminishing — in the last two years we lost as much ice in the European Alps as the previous 20. These problems are accelerating and architecture is at the core of that because it deals with the built environment.

We know that cities are responsible for the majority of global emissions, and we also know that the architecture that shaped them has been part of the problem. I think that now architecture can be part of the solution. What comes to my mind is what Richard Buckminster Fuller said about "Utopia or Oblivion". If all architects think about is designing door handles, well, it'll be oblivion. But if architecture properly confronts the problems we are facing, then we could make a real difference.

Thinking about modernity also means to think about technology. Do we have all the technology that we need, or do we need new ones? The first thing I would say is that architecture is technology. But technology is not the solution. As English architect Cedric Price asked in 1966, "Technology is the answer, but what is the question?" His quip is just as relevant today as it was then. We have all the technology we need, but it is up to human beings to fix our problems. And climate change is a crucial challenge, together with social challenges... and I don't think they are just about technology. They're about us.

How do we start? By collecting information. Ildefonso Cerdà, the visionary urbanist who designed and expanded Barcelona, hoped in his 1867 book, the *General Theory of Urbanization*, that the future would be something different — through data. Today, looking into data is part of our daily routine. But this wasn't the case in 2006 when we started a project called "Real Time Rome" at our lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In that project, we showed a different way to look at cities, because data helped us to see not only the physical city — bricks, stones,

roads, etc. — but a city made of flows, of connections, of people. For the first time, Ildefonso Cerdà's dream was a reality. Analyzing data allows us to understand and describe relationships and connections between people as part of the complexity of cities, to design better ones.

I am not saying that data could solve everything. We know there is a huge danger in collecting data. When we did "Real Time Rome" we had less data than today. It's no mystery that with a smartphone in our pockets, we collect tons and tons of data every single day: where we are, what we are looking at, how we are moving (by foot, by bike, by car)... information that goes in servers in Silicon Valley, creating a "digital twin" of ourselves. How we allow data to be collected is a big problem and we need to ask for a better way to deal with data on a global scale (e.g. GDPR in Europe).

This discussion needs to be consistent, but I think many dangers are not related to the study of city architecture. First of all, because we are dealing with anonymous flows, and secondly, because this information allows architects to see the built environment in a non-monolithic way. There is a big group of people — in academia and architecture schools — who want to bring nature into the building world. Others are looking to open source to build a better environment. These two paths get to the same point and I think the two approaches have to work together, bridging the natural and the artificial.

What is a smart building but one that can respond like a living thing? Thanks to sensors and artificial intelligence, buildings become like living organisms. Furthermore, we can use nature as building blocks for what we are designing. How can we get into a dimension that is a coevolution between the natural and the artificial? The key point is the concept of "intelligence": the natural intelligence, the artificial intelligence, the collective intelligence. It's crucial to think of them not as different things but as a whole.

Many projects follow this idea. Projects that create smarter buildings, create energy, and also provide spaces for people to come together and connect. Cities are about people, as I said in the beginning. When we — as CRA-Carlo Ratti Associati — completed a big project in Singapore called CapitaSpring we not only built somewhere that merged natural and artificial, but we created a gathering space for people, in the tropical forest we designed in the middle of the skyscraper.

We are also developing the Hot Heart, a system of floating islands outside the bay of Helsinki, that will sustainably heat the city with batteries for energy storage and a new public space. Gathering people in a place like that allows them to learn about infrastructure, heating systems, and climate change as well. The Hot Heart is the biggest urban decarbonization project in Europe — so we have to involve people: the public dimension is always crucial to fostering collective intelligence.

People need to come together. And we have proof that when people come together, interesting things happen — and without that, we lose those things. Before COVID we did an experiment at MIT: we collected data from emails — anonymously, of course — to analyze networks and connections in a public space. Then, when COVID struck, something out of the ordinary happened: we were forced to remove the public space. Networks and connections dramatically decrease when people do not come together. Physical space is very important because it allows each one of us to exit our personal "echo chambers".

Another topic we have to deal with is the way we use space in cities. Do we need skyscrapers? How will we use empty ones? Let's take two completely different cities: New York and Barcelona. Which one is the densest? As Leslie Martin once analyzed in a paper, when you imagine filling a plot of land with a building, you have two options. The first option is a pavilion, when you build in the center of the plot with empty space around. The second option is a courtyard, when you build around the periphery and leave empty space in the middle. With simple geometrical analysis, you can see that given the same amount of surface — the same amount of volume, the same amount of square meters — if you build in the pavilion shape, you end up with a building that is very, very tall. But then if you build in the courtyard shape, in the same amount of square meters, square feet, or the same amount of people, with actually much lower rise. This is an interesting example because the difference between Manhattan and Barcelona is that the latter is organized in courtyards — Barcelona has more or less the same density as Manhattan, but while in Manhattan, you get very, very tall, very, very thin, and in Barcelona the buildings are all mid-rise.

We can have a big density, a very exciting city and a lot of urban life, even with low rise and Barcelona is one example of that. One other thing about the discussion over a vertical or non-vertical city is what the great Jan Gehl wrote: the closer you are to the street, the more you're connected to public space. Once, there was a psychological experiment, to verify how far you can live above the street and still feel connected with the city — if you live on the 17th floor, or above... well, the connection is lost! The bottom line is: stop measuring density with the high rise or low rise, sometimes you can be very dense in low rise. Also, let's remember the importance of connection with other people.

When you think about a building, you want to make it more sustainable. To do this, you don't need to follow regulations that sometimes force you to do something that's not necessarily optimized. Things have changed in a smarter way in the last 50 years, but I don't think we need a new set of rules. Adding rules is like generating entropy: every time you add things, you remove degrees of freedom and you end up in a condition where you are no longer able to do a lot of positive things. And this happens because a new set of things, a different system, sometimes is dragged from what comes from the past.

We have to work with what we have — with the buildings we have. Six months ago, I wrote an opinion piece for the New York Times with my colleague Ed Glaeser, the Chairman of the Department of Economics at Harvard. We called our idea "The Playground City". We started from the empty space in New York buildings and the fact that people still want to come together. The towers are empty *but* life in the streets of Manhattan is still really, really busy — because the city still performs its functions. Cities were invented almost 10,000 years ago as a way for people to come together, but cities changed so much over the years: they were markets; they were religious places; they were industrial places. That's why Ed and I think that we are at the beginning of a tipping point. We will see the 20th century cities changing their skin once again, but they will still be the magnetic force that bonds us together.

People today can work everywhere, but they still want to be in cities. A lot of interesting things are still happening in cities, including interesting, spontaneous, unpredictable conversations that can't happen if we just connect via Zoom. According to sociologists, you can pick all your connections and put them in two buckets that they call "strong ties" and "weak ties". What are they? A strong tie is a friend who's also a friend of your friends: I'm person A, you are person B, I know person C... and now B and C know each other. If you draw this on a piece of paper it comes out as a perfect triangle. A weak tie, instead, is a person who's not a friend of your friends, but actually becomes a bridge to another community. Getting back to our MIT research: when you remove physical space, weak ties disappear. As you can imagine, weak ties are very important because

they are the one that exposes us to new ideas! If you've only got strong ties you get things going around in circles and you reinforce your echo chamber. Weak ties bring creativity and they can challenge our preconceptions. And this happens in physical space, like the one we're in today. You meet somebody you didn't expect, and this person becomes a bridge toward new ideas, creativity... And maybe this is the key function of the architecture of tomorrow: bringing us together in a way that increases the randomness of encountering new people, and new ideas.

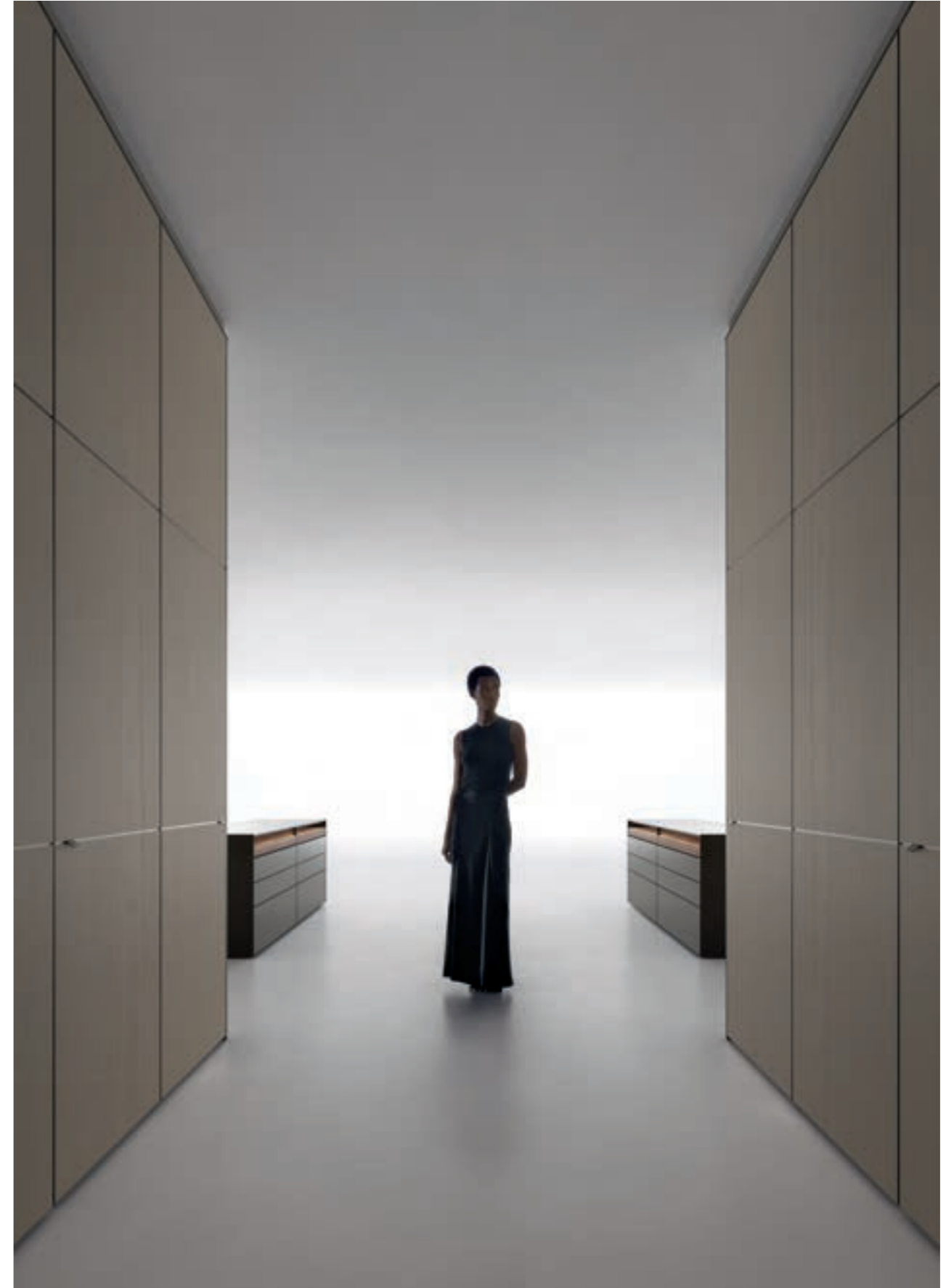
This is why I think the modernity we're looking at today is much more complex. Modernity is more about networks and is more about something that will be similar to natural evolution. Natural evolution never does "tabula rasa": it is something that keeps on evolving, trying things, making mistakes, doing things again, making new mistakes, and so on. What we can learn from nature also is a process: a process that never throws away anything but actually keeps on changing and looking at what works, and what doesn't work now is part of that.

Schumpeter once said that innovation is about doing things that don't exist yet, doing all things in a new way. And so I think the first thing I suggest to students is to imagine cities as a canvas, a living lab where we can use all possible creativity. And I know that what hasn't been done before is much more difficult, but I also think it is much more fun. Maybe that's actually what remains to all of us in a world in which with a press of a button you can collect all the prior intelligence and immediately turn it into a sketch or tomorrow into plans to build a building.

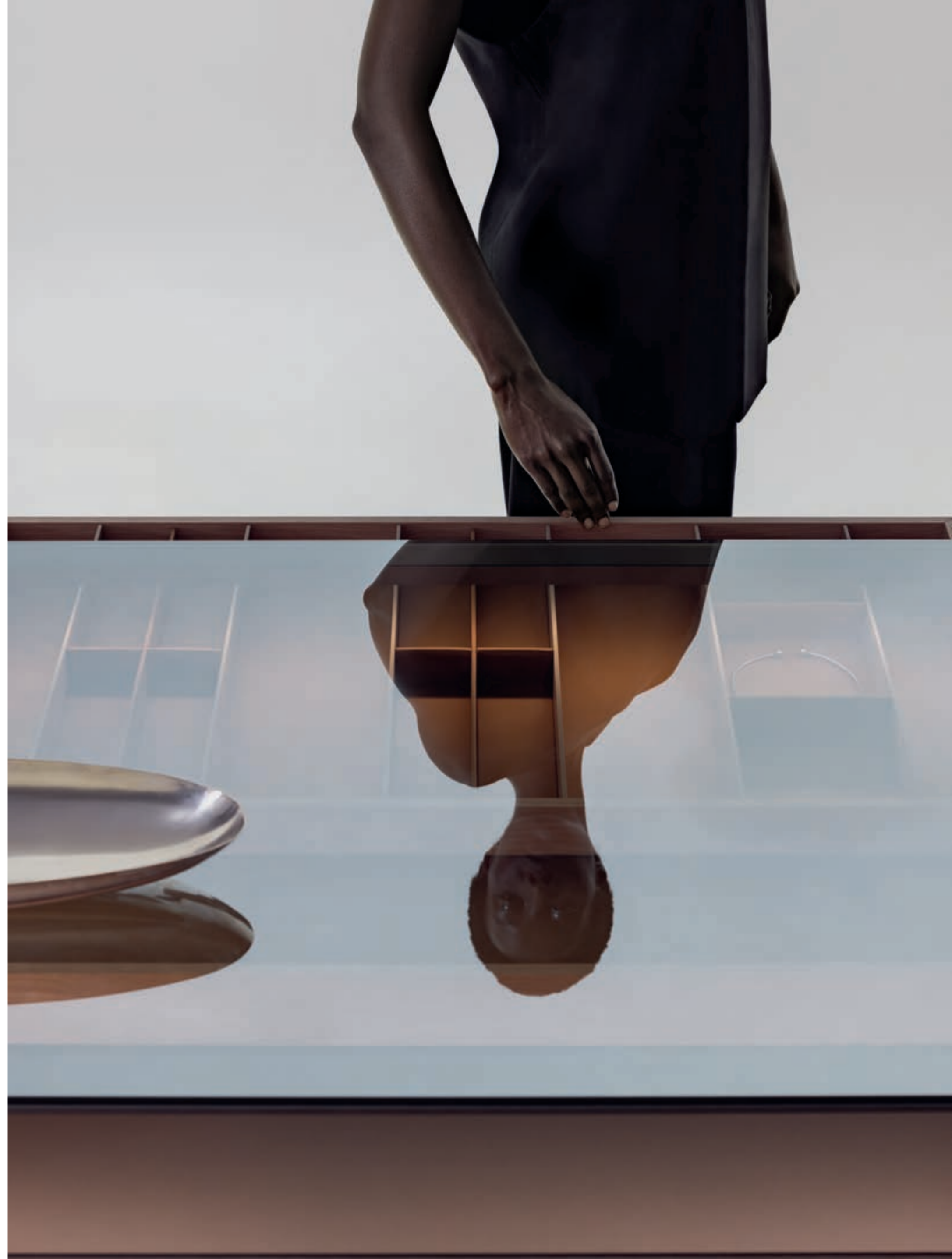
Am I optimistic? I would answer in the words of the great Karl Popper, who wrote optimism is a duty... and is a duty because the future is not predetermined.

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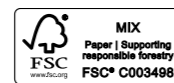
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