

The background of the entire page is a high-contrast, black and white marbled pattern, resembling natural stone or marble. The veins are dark and irregular, creating a complex, organic texture.

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A Landscape of Contradiction

*The fragmented Apuan
Alps, consolidated with
a refuge constructed in
Cava Piastramarina*



A photograph of a massive stone quarry in the Apuan Alps. The image shows a steep, terraced cliff face composed of large, rectangular blocks of light-colored stone. The blocks are stacked in a way that suggests they have been cut from the cliff. In the foreground, there are several large, rectangular blocks of stone lying on the ground. A small, white, cylindrical machine with a circular opening is visible among the blocks. The ground is a mix of dirt and stone. In the bottom left corner, there is a body of water that reflects the sky and the quarry. The sky is a pale blue with some light clouds. The overall scene is one of industrial activity in a natural landscape.

A Landscape of Contradiction:

The fragmented territory of the Apuan Alps, consolidated with a
refuge in Cava Piastramarina

progetto grafico



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A Landscape of Contradiction:

The territory of the Apuan Alps, consolidated with a refuge
constructed in Cava Piastramarina

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Rhetorical figures of an Alpine hut

Ciò che è compiuto non può conoscere crescita o diminuzione.

The subject of this work is relevant to today yet also ancient, going back for over 12,000 years when man first started agriculture, or even two million when man first appeared on earth: the relationship between man and the environment, and more extensively in Robert Kane's words, "how can we appreciate, contemplate, and inhabit the new world that we are in the process of making?"

The object is also considerable: the design of a high altitude refuge located in an active quarry; according to the writings of Michael Heizer, in a place that could be considered the monument of our time.

Many questions are raised by these choices, some only enunciated or underlined: rhetorical figures that point to serious and deep reflections. In addition to the obvious symbolism of man's domination over nature within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and of cognoscere (meaning "thanks to science" from Sanskrit g'ñāna, science) as Baconian potential, in this work we find countless elements able to offer us opportunities for reflection:

- nature and how to live the world

of technological contemporaneity;

- Identity of the places and the outward or peripheral existence from which it is possible to gather a redefinition of the so-called "non-places" and of being "whatever";
- the summit as a place of privileged perception of "seeing above" that puts us in that particular position to project, to see ahead, to design;
- renunciation of the material world in order to find oneself or to relocate oneself in the world beyond individualism and mass individualism;
- the limit as a threshold and region of multimodality through which the possibilities of non-belonging are opened;
- aesthetic perception and experience in general as background conditions to know place and as an unamendable clause of verification against the ineluctability of rational speech.

In short, we can say that Kane's work, for its many possible and even contradictory interpersonal views, can be seen as a practice of environ-

mental hermeneutics. It is an opportunity and a device (made possible and symbolized by the refuge) to reflect on our relationship with the environment and to be in conversation with nature because "...there is no unmediated encounter with nature" and this mediation is represented by the unamendable reality of the quarry.

Considering that the "environment" has been given legal status, revealing an expansion of ethics as originally a question solely between humans now evolving into a question between humans and environment, Kane's design proposal is a kind of suspension of judgment, which is nevertheless productive. This suspension derives itself not so much from postmodern relativism as to the acknowledgment of the new physical dimension of the world which, from the Greek physis term, is generation and growth, but in our time beyond the limits of nature itself: a self-feeding beyond any sense horizon and hence an absolute, that is loose from every bond and judgment that is not the one of the instrumental rationality covered today by sustainability.

The resulting proposal is supported by an approach that mediates two apparently irreconcilable methodologies based on the aesthetic-perceptual experience and the objectification of reality. It is a perspective that I find interesting for its ability to overcome a vision that placed the world, nature, and landscape as objects in themselves, res extensa other than the subject, and has laid the foundations for scientific approaches to be entrusted to the knowledge of technicians and procedures of economic rationality.

The choice to not re-naturalize the quarry shows that technology is no longer simply a tool for transformation, but an environment capable of influencing man's ways of being, as well as biology, and can even at times anticipate it, as Emanuele Severino claims. This is a situation that we must accept for "what it is", to face it without fear and to reject nihilistic discouragement. Indeed, if people were once curious, surprised and puzzled by the products of technology, today their feelings have become fearful.

This fear, as Jean-Françoise Lyotard writes, is dictated by the invasion of technology on our ways of conducting our experiences, our memories, our work, and our ability to create. Today, technology is both imbedded in our lives and defines our existence so much we renounce our freedoms to have an orderly coexistence. Massive marble blocks and gigantic bulldozers are the tangible reification of how technology can overpass the human-to-nature scale. Even more disturbing can be the excavations that take place in the subsoil far from our perception of which we can only imagine as the daily torment upon the “flesh” of the world.

Despite this, we do not want to foster ideas of nostalgic attitudes of refusal nor exaltation. The proposal is rather an act of mediation. This is however different from the democratic compromise of safeguarding that is embedded in the “Piano di coltivazione” in which development is always justified through explanations, limitations and rational controls. Kane’s proposal is to continue to fuel a dialectical critique under

countless points of view the contradictory condition of the place.

In the contemporary world in which to decide is a matter of mediation delegated to specialists, scientific experts or believers (including believers who become fanatics) his intent is instead to relocate the subject into the center of the conversation, even if the experience of this relocation is one of discomfort.

We can therefore say that, contrary to what Nietzsche has written and widely diffused by post modernity, for Kane there are also facts. There is also personal experience and not just interpretations. That is why we can talk about a new hermeneutics of the environment, beyond simple relativism, beyond the rational interpretation of technicians and specialists.

For this reason, Kane resists any temptation to structure experience, an approach that is typically used in natural-landscaping tourism projects, filled with ‘informative clues’ created by specialists for the benefit

of visitors. His project is not an act of imposition.

The project is instead neutral, and aiming to recover the original meaning of the technique that is the medium, in this case to favor an intimate and personal experience. The fundamental feature of the refuge supports this inclination. The refuge is a space of recollection, in which to gather in us the spirit that is dispersed in the world, bearing in mind the original meaning of the verb to understand, which is cum-prehendere, to keep together facts and meanings through different – and sometimes unexpected – structures and forms. It is place of still silence in a place of dynamic noise coming from humans’ productive activities. Therefore, in this case, comprehension brings the necessity to mediate some singular contradictions:

- how to both maintain an industrial factory and care for the landscape together?
- how humanity’s work can become aesthetic and spiritual object/subject?

Or deeply, in Kane’s words: “how a mountaintop marble quarry could really be a spiritual place for our times?”

As mentioned, Kane’s work underlines other non-secondary issues such as the site or rather the identity conditions of spaces that make places. In the present case, the question of non-lieux (non-place), a category coined by anthropologist-ethnologist Marc Augé, is of interest. It is potentially applicable to a refuge, at least for being a temporary structure, and a place of rest and transit for the use and consumption of the tourist.

This question of non-lieux, like the suburbs, is highly contradictory particularly if you start defining the essence of being or substance of beings through negation. Definition by negation overturns the principle of Spinoza (Omnis determinatio est negatio) and reveals that “non-places” are the infinity of all the possible things that doesn’t be-

Rhetorical figures of an Alpine hut

continued

long to “the places”. This is, according to Parmenide, the impossibility of any knowledge or how, as Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, the result is that “non-places” do not exist. When saying “non-place” are simply saying nothing.

More importantly, we can also point out that in a definition through negation there is an equivalent “colonialist” judgment where “non-sites” are defined negatively and only through their relation to “sites” which are implicitly assumed as positive. It is therefore evident that for both reasons such a definition is unacceptable, and by consequence, the anonymity of their inhabitants is also inadmissible. The question is therefore to come up with new definitions of unexpected and emerging ways of being and where people, as Richard Ingersoll argues, may call themselves citizens even though they reside in the sprawl. People still have their own identity as exemplified by Sir Alfred, alias Merhan Nasseri, an Iranian refugee relegated to live for twenty years at a Charles de Gaulle terminal for the impossibility

of the system to identify him.

We can therefore say that “non-place” is located fundamentally in our inability to understand rather than its intrinsic deficiencies. It is from this awareness that Kane chooses the design of a refuge as an opportunity to know a peripheral site that is inaccessible for most of the year. Paraphrasing Yi-Fu Tuan, it is only through knowledge and recognition that an undifferentiated space becomes place.

Extreme experience and the exploration of unknown spaces as opportunities to know the world are also ways to access ourselves from unprecedented views, in this case, far from the world. The refuge is, in fact, the continuation of the samnyasin practice of the Indian renunciant who elects his exile from the world. The renunciant chooses to go outside of things by abandoning social obligations in order to devote themselves to seek truth, to rejoin the world, and later, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, to rejoin God.

But if in this practice one sees the

emergence of the western individuality of a separate subject that “does not divide with others” to affirm its identity, what can today be the meaning of a refuge of contemporaneity in which technology continues to provide personal devices enabling the autonomy of the individual? What can be the meaning of retreating into solitude today when the loneliness of individuals is a matter of day-to-day essence of homologation?

Rather than the above absurdity, isolating ourselves from the isolation produced by technological contemporaneity is a necessity that Kane brilliantly addresses by placing the individual in a cave still in activity where the noise of technology is deafening.

In the shelter of Piastramarina, we are not isolated because we have everything we need to make us autonomous, but because we choose deprivation: denial of belonging or quolibet exodus as Agamben would say to be its pure existence, it’s being such as it is.

* * *

At 1,642 meters above sea level, the Piastramarina quarry is the highest in the Alpi Apuane and Kane could not have chosen a better site to establish this exodus. The choice of a summit, in Kane’s case, is relevant and paradigmatic. To summarize, the summit is a privileged point for observation, which enables the perception of distances and as such fosters an ability to look beyond. It is therefore a metaphor of rational knowledge: the fire that Prometheus, “the one that looks beyond”, gives to humanity in order to dispel us from the natural constraints and animal conditions.

An even more significant detail is that the Piastramarina quarry is set in mountain pass: the Focolaccia pitch that we can assume as a further rhetorical figure of our discourse.

The mountain pass is not a place. It is rather an entity that can be defined as the point of a line, of a border, of a boundary, of that boundary through which a place takes shape and manifests itself: the point of an

entity that divides one place on the other.

It is therefore a threshold where the unexpected one is waiting for us, where the form of knowledge Husserl defines as adumbration takes shape, where there is anxiety about what we can find beyond that we cannot see but we can only presume. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, the edge is also an occasion of possible violence and that is why we want the limit as a security condition bartered for the freedom of space. It is the same dismay produced by the technological development that, as a promise of wellbeing, has become a dark threat to our survival on earth: in advent, besides the reason, of the tragic Nietzschean superman who we want but we feel we can no longer bear within the limits of reasonableness.

Placing the dwelling in the Focolaia passage, at a point that is the eidos of transformation and overcoming limits, can be an hypothesis of extreme interest where hard edges are replaced with shaking boundar-

ies and consequently create spaces that, in the definition used by Eugene Minkowski to frame schizophrenia, are of “soft geometry”.

There are limits that move with the observer as those of the horizon line or there are limits like that of the Italian Limes, where our northern national boundaries are constantly moving due to glacial melting: where imperceptible transformations are carried out independently of us, but ultimately occur as a result of our catastrophic actions.

The refuge on the mountain pass of Focolaccia, a place that is in the process of transformation, is therefore a paradigm of changing boundaries, where to be or not to be are shaking and coexistent frames of the same picture. Where in an “isolated terrain vague at the fringe of civilization ...” the noises of quarry activities are exchanged with the silent ones of a refuge. Indeterminate spaces because their boundaries are indeterminate which, as Kane writes, “are waiting for a meaning to be found for them.”

The question is therefore to understand the nature of these boundaries as access to knowledge and the meaning of places. Indeed, as Agamben writes, “what is change is not the thing, but their limits” and what determines being is not belonging to certain qualities or manifestations of beings, but being confined within limits. Limits that you can choose to overcome to access the quolibet, “whichever you want”, to that particular individuality that can choose its own indetermination, non-belonging.

In this perspective, the choice to place oneself out – including living in the suburbs – can be the hope for “La Comunità che viene” (The Coming Community) where singularity is exposed to the fraying of self through the indetermination of its limits. It is living in a locus confusionis where it is given the chance not to belong, not to be named, but “to be for what it is”.

This is an eversive possibility because it is intolerable to The State that can recognize its antagonistic

Rhetorical figures of an Alpine hut

continued

identity, but will never recognize the “qualunquità” (whateverness). A concept more clearly expressed by Alain Badiou that The State is held together not so much by the social bond but by banning the dissolution of ties.

* * *

Consistently, Kane’s methods of investigation, even before the final design proposal, are shaking and consistent. He refrains from scientific and/or naturalistic approaches inaugurated by René Descartes as well as rejects labeling, which is the cause of the opacity of knowledge. As Guy Debord wrote, it is an expropriation stratagem of speech. Kane “works with the idea that aesthetics are purely perceptual, and that the aesthetic experience can be evaluated alone, and then incorporated into the understanding of the site as a place.” He revisits the original meaning of aesthesis coined by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten of *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, the “science of sensitive knowledge”.

In the contemporary condition in which the relationship with the world is dominated by the image, Kane also relies heavily on the perception of sound. Sound, despite the fact that it is an extreme aleatory element it is a factive clause as well. Like Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari noted in ornithological observations, it is the way in which birds mark their territory.

Kane’s project is therefore a work that plays on a variety of aleatory forms to be kept together and comprehensively. It identifies in the vagueness of perceptual experience, a mode of knowing, that does not replace that of the sciences but is its necessary completion.

In Kane’s work, one does not pretend to know the world through the exclusive relationship of experience as would a sensist. Using the words of Mikel Dufrenne, the type of experience used is one that does not allow itself to be seduced by the imagination, which invites to wander around the present object, or from the intellect that reduces it to dominate it, to conceptual determinations.

Although perception may also be influenced by mental patterns of rationality and mediated by technological devices, the hypothesis that emerges here is that there is no privileged path to knowledge. The way of knowledge can be multiple and complementary including silence as, unlike the science that needs to talk to be transmitted, experience only demands to be lived.

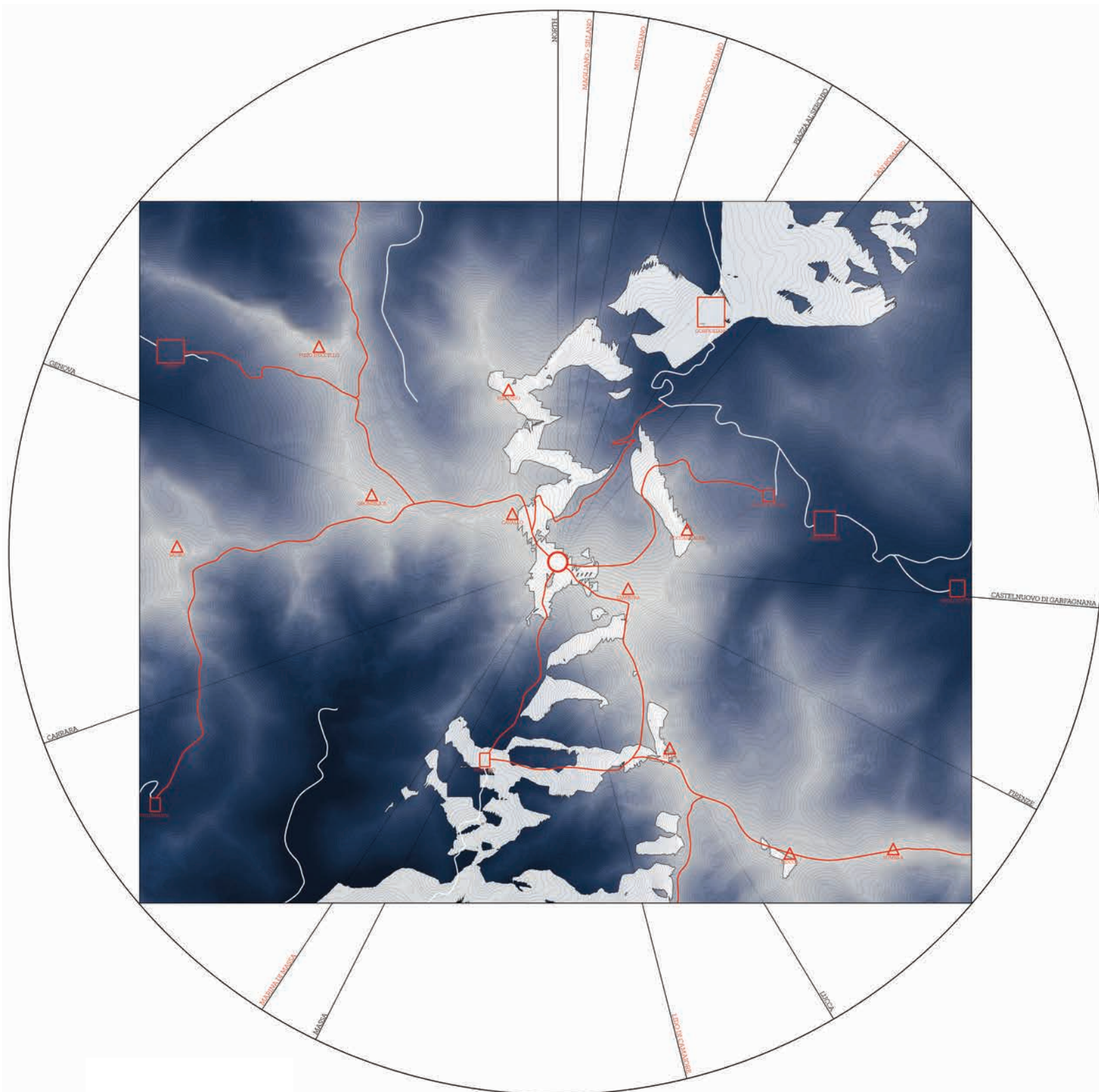
While accepting the possibilities of deceit, perception is seen and used as a chance to know the world, which is beyond the established patterns of rationality, from which we can accept the necessity but not the unavoidable and totalizing outcomes. From this point of view, we can say that what matters is not fidelity as the adherence/truth of the cognitive model or how elegantly and effectively we describe the world because according to Science knowledge will always be more perfectible. The fidelity to observe is that of the feudal *fideltas*, a fidelity that is embodied in the duty of assistance in the face of need: the unamendable necessity that experience, “as an act to which

nothing can be removed or added”, comes to the aid of our knowing in order to gather (*cum-prehendere*) as many possible and differentiated elements. Above all it is the fidelity of experience, aesthetics and the common sense of humanity that stand as a benchmark and assist us in validating the transformations of our world.

As in Edmond Husserl’s words, experience remains the original ground for nourishing the practices of science that returns us to the desirable and fundamental requirement of ethics. It is also Bruno Latour’s hope that we can finally abandon the blind trust in experts to come up with forms of “collective experimentation” where “closed experiments” (inside the laboratory) and “outdoor experiments” (inside society) are mutually supported.

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Florence May 20th 2017



Rhetorical figures of an Alpine hut

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"Our work is about exploring alternative worlds as a means to understand our own world in new ways...through real travel to extraordinary and alien landscapes, exploring the specters of nature and technology and the way they're becoming indistinguishable. "

-Liam Young, Tomorrow's Thoughts Today

