The Representation of Architecture, 1967-2012
The first retrospective of Massimo Scolari’s work since 1986 is hosted at The Cooper Union, New York. On show, over one hundred drawings and paintings, primarily composed in watercolor, architectural models, texts and ephemera by the artist, educator, scholar, editor and designer.
By Danielle Rago
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For Italian architect Massimo Scolari, “architecture is a way of knowing the world and exploring the world in the most poetic way”. This is what he said to me in a phone interview last week from Venice, Italy. Speaking with the architect, it became clear that his practice was both a way of seeing as much as it is a mode of representation. Just as architects of today use rendering as a tool to explore imaginative ideas and represent unbuilt projects, Scolari uses painting as his chosen medium to understand and further represent architecture. Through his visionary drawings and utopian paintings, the architect reconsiders and ultimately redefines notions of architectural autonomy and ideas about urbanism throughout his impressive forty-year career and oeuvre, which can currently be seen at The Cooper Union in New York.

Curated and designed by Scolari himself, the exhibition titled Massimo Scolari: The Representation of Architecture, 1967-2012 is the first retrospective of the architect’s work since 1986 and features seminal drawings first exhibited at The Cooper Union in 1977. Addressing issues of architecture, building, the city and the individual’s relationship to it through diverse means of representation, the exhibit itself is comprised of over one hundred drawings and paintings, primarily composed in watercolor, architectural models, texts and ephemera. Most notably, the exhibition features the architect’s project “Gate for a Maritime City,” 1979-80 alongside photographs of his accompanying installation for the Strada
Novissima: The Presence of the Past exhibit at the 1980 Venice Biennale. This work featured an axonometric representation of an abstract window or portal looking beyond the immediate foreground to another entry point.

It was a direct representation of the painting in sculptural form. The exhibition also includes physical models: a series of three-dimensional plaster prints made in 2012 produced from Scolari’s Laconic Architecture, 1976, originally featured in “Skyline Magazine” in November 1978 (also exhibited) and a wooden model of The Collector’s Room, from the Triennale of Milan in 1968. Continually questioning traditional forms of architectural practice in which building is the final component of design, Scolari asks the viewer to reconsider the architectural “product” through repetitive themes of physical/immaterial, reality/abstraction through the merging of art and architecture.
Gate for a Maritime City 1979-80, oil on paper linen 47 x 39.5 cm

The Collector’s Room, Triennale of Milan 1986, watercolor on paper 59.6 x 45.5 cm
While Scolari’s work cannot be categorized as one particular type or style of architectural practice, it constantly reconsiders and renegotiates the boundaries between art and architectural language. His work likened to the floating forms by Magritte or De Chirico and Carrà’s surrealist cityscapes, imagines a city or an architecture above ground, oftentimes suspended in air as gliders or objects hovering in the sky despite architecture’s incessant need to be sustained by the physicality of the ground. His theoretical position on architecture can be traced back to his formative years at the Politecnico di Milano in the late 1960’s under the direction of Ernesto Rogers and later reinforced during his collaboration with Aldo Rossi from 1968 to 1972. Rogers’ historical approach combined with Rossi’s neorationalist perspective allowed the young architect to explore various building types in relation to the generative form of the city through a historical continuum.
These ideas, developed in the late 60s, continue to influence the architect’s work to this day, through his depiction of the changing city within the context of time and space. Scolari has been and continues to be practicing outside the typical conventions of “architecture” in the traditional sense of being a builder. For the architect, drawing and painting or any act representing the architectural idea can be considered to be architecture. As he firmly attested, “I am a painter painting architecture... I was never interested in becoming a builder, I was more interested in knowing and learning architecture”. These interests continue to guide the architect to produce new work including paintings, installations, set designs and site-specific sculptures to this day, which are also represented in the exhibition.
The seminal exhibition of the architect, artist, educator, scholar, editor and designer, originated at the Yale University School of Architecture in Spring 2012. The restaging of the work in a different context, at The Cooper Union, another university where Scolari taught provides a different perspective to the work. More intimate in scale, not scope, observers are able to better engage with the artworks and appreciate the exhibited work at the intended scale for viewing as noted by Scolari. When designing, he told me, his intent is not for works “to hang on the wall, but to be reproduced in book form”. Working on this very humanistic and realistic scale, Scolari is able to frame the viewer’s experience and consequently produce a kind of dialogue about architecture and landscape through his vivid compositions.

This element of framing that Scolari talks about takes place from the moment you approach The Cooper Union’s Foundation Building, where the exhibition takes place. A 400-pound wooden and metal sculpture in the form of Scolari’s recurring gliders is purposefully perched on the balcony of the building, subtly marking the architect’s return to the University where he once taught and previously exhibited work. It also creates an interesting dialogue with the new addition to the school by Los Angeles-based architect Thom Mayne who like Scolari explores new technologies in his architecture, although in more of a physical than metaphorical form. While new advancements have been made in forms of architectural production, and projects once thought physically impossible or utopian can be built Scolari’s approach is extremely relevant and most important to a younger generation of architects and designers who through a better understanding of his work and practice might be able to better engage with the realities of the world – built or unbuilt. The exhibition, *Massimo Scolari: The Representation of Architecture, 1967-2012* will be on view through November 21, 2012 in New York. An accompanying text by the same name of the architect’s career and practice and including the work exhibited in this retrospective was recently published and is available at The Cooper Union and Rizzoli.

*Massimo Scolari (1943). Graduate in architecture in Milan in 1969.*

*In 1973 he started teaching History of Architecture in Palermo and History and Technique of Drawing at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (IUAV). He became Associate Professor in 1983 and a*
Full Professor in 1986. His studies on representation were published by Marsilio in Il disegno obliquo (2005). Between 1975 and 1993 he was Visiting Professor in various universities among which: Cornell University, Cooper Union N.Y., Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies N.Y., Technische Universität Vienna, Harvard University, Cambridge. In 2001 he resigned from the Italian university. He gained a pilot’s license in the same year. In 2007 Skira has published a monograph on the occasion of his personal exhibition at the Civic Museum in Riva del Garda now translated into English for the Exhibition at the Yale School of Architecture (February-May 2012) and at the Cooper Union (October-November 2012). He lives in Venice. www.massimoscolari.it
