«*Our dogs, the apple we should eat once a day, the flower we are staring at, exist only because they are the replicas of the cutest, the tastiest and the bluest of models.*»

PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE PIGEONS
Valerio Ciaccia, Marco Veneri (Watching Ourselves Watched)

Valerio Ciaccia, born in 1989, ETH MAS in Urban Design, and Marco Veneri, born in 1988, AA MArch in Housing and Urbanism, founded Watching Ourselves Watched in 2020. The duo's interdisciplinary agenda is focussed around issues of ecology, technology, politics and lifestyle and how these inform design, architecture and urbanism.

If there is one thing that makes humans the species that among others has evolved, reproduced and made visible its impact on a planetary scale it is the ability to observe, test, conceptualize, rationalize reality and its functioning through models. A model is a way of accessing reality. It is always an attempt to understand it, to perfect it in order to be able to reproduce and ultimately manipulate its functioning.

We understand this very special characteristic of humans as the basic foundation of what is known as civilization as well as the cause of the current ecological crisis the earth is experiencing. This piece is thus a reflection and attempt to open a discussion on the relationship between humans' essential and constant need of the model (conceptual and physical) and the complications occurring when the model — what we as humans think we can control — becomes uncontrollably reproducible to the point of blowing-up and becoming reality itself. We'll tell the story of urban pigeons (Columba livia domestica), a species that has been domesticated and almost engineered by humans through millennia of coexistence and selective breeding — a model of bird — that is now notably considered invasive and must be reduced in our cities. With the aim of opening up the possibility of changing the way, models are perceived through their narratives, the example serves to highlight the paradoxical and loop-like condition humanity has imposed on itself: Our attitude in solving what we call a problem is, in a strange way, imprisoning ourselves rather than liberating us from it. We ask ourselves if a change in the way we perceive the very structured reality in the face of a gained awareness of our imprisonment can be beneficial by way of helping us to question the logic we use to create more inclusive models and shape new narratives.

A model is a construct; it is not the «real» world but a reproduction, an approximation and an aid to understanding it. Be it conceptual or physical, a model is by definition «something that a copy can be based on because it is an extremely good example of its type».[1] It is thus by all means an abstraction. By isolating something from the rest, we look at it with an angle that allows us to extract from it an aspect we need, we open up a way of accessing something. Humans have been using this capacity to systematically construct the thick body of knowledge of present days and pass it onto future generations. From the fork to the car, financial systems, capitalism, the family, the city, the way we dress. Models are everywhere around us and we could easily argue that everything we can think of either comes from a consolidated model or it is the most updated version of an existing one. Everything in our culture exists because it is the reification or replica of an already accepted model.

We could even argue that humans and animals are models, too. The selection and refinement of a model can determine the evolution of the species, making it impossible to distinguish between natural and artificial. And if we allow ourselves to think of our culture and technological advancement as the accumulation of all the reproductions of successful models (and the selective adaptation of less successful ones) one starts to see the similarity between

METHOD OF WRAPPING PIGEONS FOR DROPPING FROM AIR-CRAFT.

(See "Pigeon Service Manual" Chap XIII.)
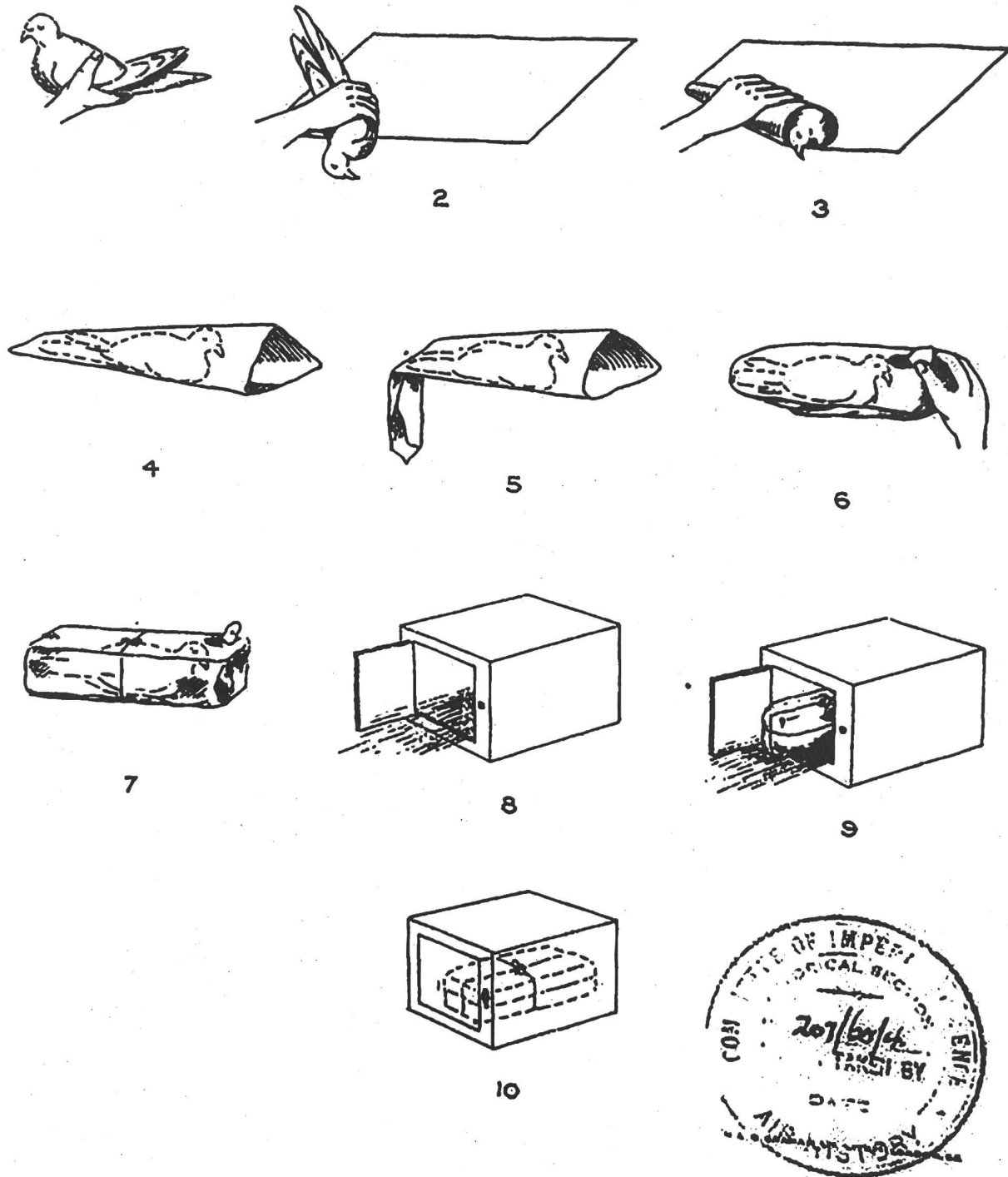
(fig. a) Method of Wrapping Pigeons for Dropping from Aircraft, RAF Pigeon Service Manual, London, 1919. Image: British Library
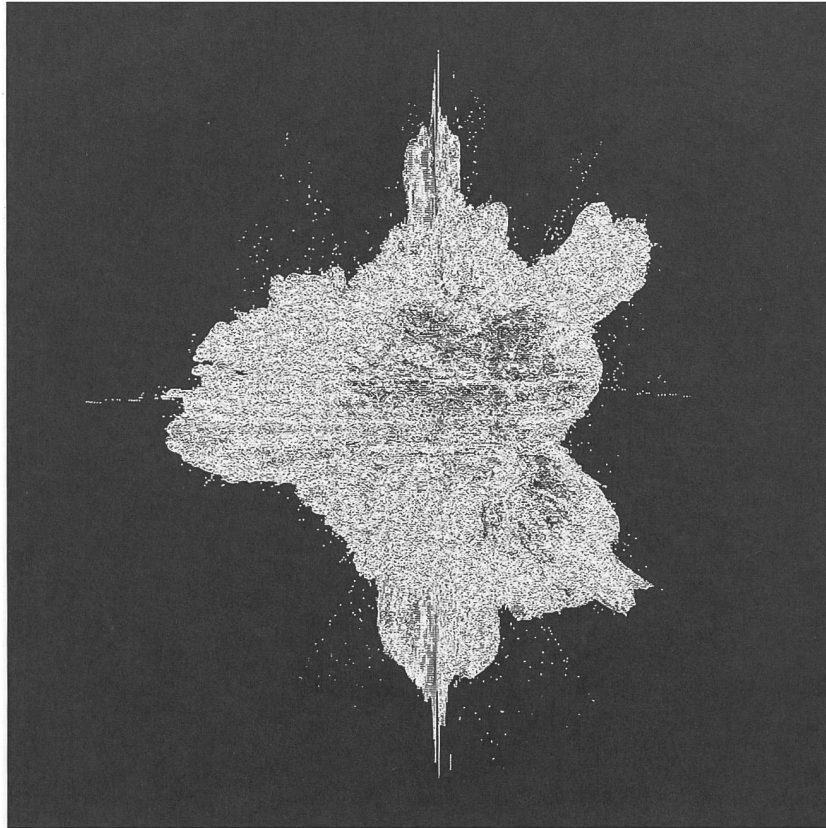
(fig. b) A 3D fractal model showing the entire population of pigeons
(400 millions) on Earth, 2020. Image: authors

(fig. c) Depending on the scale, the way we perceive the nature of a model that got out of control changes:
A bursting galaxy in the universe from a distance, an ungraspable nightmare once you get closer, 2020. Image: authors

technology and nature, between reproduction and evolution. Our dogs, the apple we should eat once a day, the flower we are staring at, exist only because they are the replicas of the cutest, the tastiest and the bluest of models.

Millennia before the Industrial Revolution, in order to satisfy an increasing need for calories, humans started reproducing and multiplying their food supply on a larger scale, using plants and livestock. By understanding the natural processes around them, studying empirically their functioning and selecting the best ways to optimize the production, they invented agriculture. [2] The effects of this technological revolution on our planet, as it often happens with radical technologies (alphabets, electricity, internet), are accepted, naturalized, invisible, but no less pervasive.

Take pigeons, for example. What today is notably considered a nightmare of every city council, used to be one of the species we considered useful and crucial for our survival, an ideal model of a bird that we domesticated and welcomed in our settlements. Around 5000 BC, in Mesopotamia, some Rock Doves (Columba livia), a species that used to live in the southern Mediterranean — Middle East area, started flocking to fertile fields searching for seeds and were soon encouraged to roost in nest-houses in the first human settlements. [3] This was the beginning of what in centuries became a very profitable interspecies relationship.

Their monogamous life and their sense of home — pigeons always remember where their home is — made them well accepted in human settlements and quite easy to be tamed to provide a source of protein in the form of food and fertilizer for the crops. Pigeons, in return, could always count on our garbage as a copious source of food and the shelters we used to build in our houses as protection from their natural predators. This symbiotic relationship allowed the pigeons to withdraw partly from their natural regulation system and, by escaping the pressure of natural selection, they had more time to breed (naturally they would reproduce once a year) becoming really prolific. The result was the selection of the Common Pigeon (Columbia livia domestica), widely bred by later civilizations such as Egyptian, Phoenician and Greeks. Romans started breeding these animals on a bigger scale (ruins of pigeon lofts for 5000 birds have been found including tube systems to supply food and water), exporting them to northern Europe, and selecting breeds on aesthetic grounds. [4] As of today, the number of fancy pigeons' breeds, the ones selected for aesthetic reasons only, are more than 300 000. [5] Through the centuries pigeons have been selected by humans to become holy symbols, food, fertilizer producers, compasses and toys (Mike Tyson owns over 2000 pigeons. [6] There have been specialized carrier pigeons, camera pigeons, war pigeons and all sorts of pigeons. [fig. a]

The technological developments, the demand for increased hygienic standards and the introduction of the cheaper mass-produced chicken meat drastically reduced the role of pigeons in our societies. We did not need them anymore as they were no longer «fit for purpose». Too bad or too late, the pigeon population keeps increasing and living in our city as uninvited guests.

Listed in pest control services, kept away by spikes and poison from the spires of our churches and window niches whose geometry is reminiscent of their natural habitat, they are no longer models but a failure, a crack or a glitch in our design world: an uncontrollable reality.

What happens when a model fails in being a model? J.L. Borges' short story «On Exactitude in Science» provides a metaphorical and powerful image on the issue the article is trying to highlight. As the mastery of the cartographers increased, their ambitions to draw a map that would cover the entirety of the empire emerged. The subsequent generations, however, realized that a map as big as the empire it represents was useless for its purpose. They decided to abandon it in the desert where the map became the foundation of a new strange desert-like territory populated by beggars and tigers. [7] It took on its own life. The map failed in being and functioning as a model since it would have needed another map to be controlled: a new reality requires new models to be understood again. This resembles in many ways the loop of continuous problem solving we are finding ourselves in today. A loop that is weirdly imprisoning ourselves much more in the phenomena we are trying to escape.

Novalis' «splendid stranger», the example of the extraordinary but vulnerable humankind surrounded by forces that cannot be understood or dominated, is still valid but with a little disclaimer: as of today, most of these forces are the byproduct of the unintended consequences of human models. [8]

Something about the droppings of the pigeons on our car as much as the rise in temperature, the traffic congestion and the polluted air, tells a bit about us and how we have been acting. Not knowing what to do about it is also part of the story. These phenomena are what philosopher and writer Timothy Morton calls ecological facts, meaning the «manifestations of unintended consequences of anthropocentrism». [9] By sticking out phenomenologically they signal the presence of bigger entities such as global warming, mass consumerism, housing speculation, poverty and capitalism that are nothing but the results of models that have gone too far or become too big to be handled. These massive entities, called «Hyperobjects» by Morton, cannot be directly perceived in their entirety as they are enormously distributed in space and time. [10] We can only perceive them through their effects, yet their pervasiveness is contaminating everything because the logic by which they reproduce is deeply ingrained in our functioning. [11] Ecological facts, like millions of pigeons in our city squares, can be seen as signals of an ecological crisis but as such, Morton suggests, they somehow behold a potential spiritual quality, a mix of beauty and an odd feeling of disgust, a weirdness that can inspire a shift toward less materialistic cultural values for future generations. [12]

When thinking how to deal with these looming presences it is useful to focus again on the idea that a model is, in fact, an act of abstraction. The necessary simplifications we employ when we create a model, the way we isolate something to look at or make sense of, the way we assume something is right or wrong, always imply that something else is not considered and eliminated from the equation. This does not mean that «something else» does not exist.

Poisoning birds as a solution acts at the same level of racial discrimination, gender oppression, transphobia, etc. that is a declaration that there are things that can and need to be suppressed in order to re-establish an imagined order. Could it be that in the face of the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves entangled, we could find salvation by questioning and adding instead of suppressing to the dominating narratives which currently shape our models? If it is virtually impossible to avoid elimination when creating a model then it seems ever more important to recognize that the predominant models that brought us here, are not sufficient on their own, nor inclusive enough.

What do we choose to include in our model? What do we take out? Who is left behind? What are we neglecting? Could it be that the stories we have been telling ourselves about how we can survive and thrive on earth have been privileging a quite narcissistic attitude and a one-liner mode of perceiving the world we inhabit by means of too predominant narratives? Donna Haraway, in the movie «Story Telling for Earthly Survival» reflects on the issue, warning us that by perpetrating in telling stories based on success, on the smartest, the latest and the most updated, these predominant narratives take up too much space and leave no room for other stories. Haraway's reflections reverberate strongly and invite us to contribute with our sensitivity, words and actions to the shaping of new stories to add to structures that already exist rather than superseding them. Including stories of non-heteronormative joy, stories of love and kinship beyond the biological family, stories outside the myths of progress and economic growth, stories of reverential care for the planet we live in, our stories, to the main narrative it's probably the only way we have to reduce its disruptive, self-consuming, looping tendency. [13]

To look for new models is undoubtedly a way to seek new foundations; but it is inevitably also a form of domination, and ultimately an act of violence with potentially spiraling effects. If behind a model there are stories that shape our lives in ways we don't fully realize, analyzing when models get out of control and sensitively looking at all the narratives they generate is the start to gain an agency on the conclusions.

«Please do not feed the pigeons» we read in the parks. This reminder of the much broader story of the human — pigeon relationship, reflects a necessary shift of attitude concerning the weight of our actions and the models we decide to create for ourselves and others. It is a sentence that reflects the relationship between humans and models, too. A story that tells about how much we are entangled to the molecular level to everything around us, forgetting that every little action shapes and reaches deep with its effects. In this complexity of relationships, to envision a world where different narratives can coexist, may be the way to overcome the loop-like condition that models impose.