

On agency and the artist's negotiation with technology



Visual artist Marco Brambilla discusses working with AI, the illusion and hope of utopia, and what is at stake for the artist who embraces the future

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As told to Katy Diamond Hamer, 1866 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Technology](#), [Architecture](#), [Inspiration](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#).

Let's talk about your upcoming project *After Utopia*. The word "aspiration" appears throughout your concept of utopia. Over time, these aspirations have manifested through technology, which led us to AI—a tool I know you used for this work. What are your thoughts on aspiration in the face of technology?

That's a great place to start, because I think the concepts of aspiration and utopia are really connected, right? World's Fairs have always been about this idea of better living through technology. The host countries show off the newest innovations developed by their engineers, architects, and technicians. I've always been fascinated by expos as these very discrete, specific time capsules—snapshots of where technology was heading, whether railroads or electricity, entertainment or visual culture, and after that computing. I've visited a lot of expo sites as a hobby over the last 30 or 40 years.

When AI first emerged as an image-generation tool, I was contacted by OpenAI to test DALL·E—one of the first people to do so. And I thought: if I were to use this technology, perhaps it could add to the subtext and the conceptual meaning that technology can both inspire and bring us closer to our aspirations, but it can also redirect them. That was two and a half years ago, and now AI has become far more pervasive. Now, everyone is talking about disinformation, loss of privacy, and so on. Whether you're an accountant or a storyboard artist in Hollywood, whatever your craft, it's being affected already. It's also impacting decision-making in government.

So yes, it's a double-edged sword. This is a technology meant to enable utopian societies—like what you saw in *Logan's Run* in the 1970s, where there is an oracle telling us how to live. I'm using these world expos as a case study of how technology has been adapted into our society.



How did the visual quality of the work come to fruition?

I used snapshots of archival information to train AI models with all the metrics for each expo—everything from visitor numbers to the architects, the music that was composed, logos, illustrations, floor plans, and so on. I gave a talk in Miami at the Knight Foundation a few years ago, and afterward the director of The Wolfsonian introduced himself and said, “We have the largest archive of world expos anywhere in the world,” because Mickey Wolfson is obsessed with futurism. He collected a tremendous amount of materials.

So my team and I scanned a lot of these objects and analog ephemera from each expo. This archive became digital, and I trained AI models to react to those metrics.

Were you influenced by any early technology-oriented architectural studios?

Yes. I’m fascinated by [Superstudio](#) (the Italian avant-garde collective founded in 1966) and [Archigram](#) (the

British architectural group active in the '60s and '70s), who created pre-digital, digital-like models of neighborhoods. Archigram's "Plug-in City" or Superstudio's grid that you could plug into from anywhere—those ideas really resonate. In the '70s we had this retro-futurist idea that by now we'd be driving flying cars. Their aesthetics embodied the same hopefulness that expos embodied, and that helped inspire the visual direction of the work.

The video and animated objects are so complex. How did the aesthetic evolve through AI?

AI helped me sketch what the pavilions would do and how to use massive amounts of information to create animations and building configurations. Once I crystallized that idea, I moved away from AI and made the work in conventional computer graphics.

The work is called *After Utopia* because it's really a kind of theoretical nirvana, a collective intellect. Expos serve as a case study in a container that is like a Superstudio grid. The idea is that we're now looking at a canvas without geography or chronology, but the people are still making transitions—crossing from one environment or time to another. It's a dream vision of where humanity could be in the near future, if at some point we were to abolish physical constraints—and that's where technology is taking us.



The more research I did, the more I realized that all the spirit-lines associated with each expo shared the same mantra: *We can do better. If we embrace the future, we will live better.*

But the question my work poses is: We can embrace it, but do we then become passengers in our own destiny? Do we guide that destiny? This work is almost an illustration of that concept. The installation consists of an 8K projection with a microcosm of details and information. It looks somewhat like a schematic of a treasure map to a future we may never get to. Even going back to Karl Marx and the "general intellect," or comparing that to the concept of AI's final predominance—Walter Benjamin predicted much of this.

When I was a student I read [Jacques Ellul's](#) book, *The Technological Society* (1954) and Alvin Toffler's [Future](#)

Shock (1970). We're now living in much of the science fiction phenomena that they wrote about.

I grew up in New York, in the shadow of the World's Fair that had taken place in Queens—the famous globe sculpture is still there. It's an amazing archive of time and how the World's Fair created this kind of dream space.

Yes, they all did this, even very recently in the Dubai World's Fair which took place in 2020. At the time, people were talking a lot about people living online and massive multiplayer video games. They built a meta-version of the World's Fair, so you could point your phone at a building and see through the structure, plus information about its design. The building existed in both the real and virtual worlds.

It will be interesting to see Osaka, with more philosophical discussions around sustainability. Many expo sites were designed to be repurposed. Each one is completely different. I went to Seville in 1992 when the EU was formed—they had an EU pavilion, a monorail, and a huge European Space Agency rocket. I revisited the site about seven years ago and it was completely derelict. I thought it would be interesting to resurrect it using AI, at least in the research phase—it's almost forensic.



ChatGPT only entered my world within the last year. As a writer, it's an incredible tool, but I've also talked to people I'd never consider "technological" who are using it to create diet plans and exercise routines. I'm curious how you're using AI in these creative spheres. Are you using word prompts?

There's a model-stable diffusion—that's essentially a closed model. You upload information, text, music, or visuals into a library. Then you can ask, "How many visitors came to Brussels on opening ceremony, and what would happen if all of them showed up at once?" And it knows. It can help you do a tremendous amount of research.

Text prompts generate images, and in this project they helped create landscapes or pavilions. But AI couldn't

understand the layout due to how complex they are. Early experiments my team made looked like primitive charcoal-braille hybrids compared to what's possible now. You could argue the more primitive AI results are more visually interesting because they contain an artisanal quality—the machine is trying to understand.

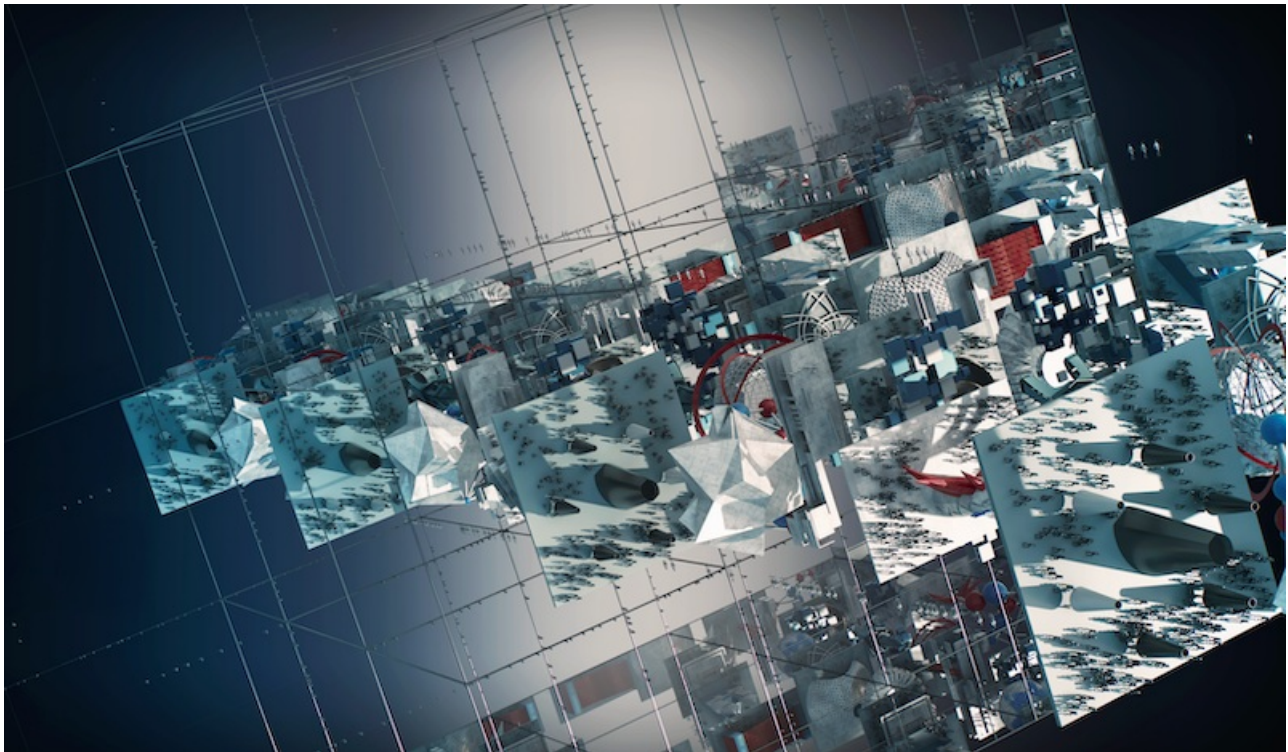
I had a talk recently where someone asked, "What do you think of using AI to make images or videos?" I shared that image making is what I actually like doing. If I were to say, "Now you can do what you enjoy without doing it," it defeats the purpose of being an artist.

What I'd prefer AI to do is pay my electricity bill, call the plumber, or make a restaurant reservation. Making the work is what I enjoy.

As you were talking, I kept thinking about how, as the artist, you had to make very specific decisions because AI hits a wall and has limitations, right?

Exactly. The dialogue between myself and the process of AI was a two-year process. We started with the earliest image-making tools and moved through to the latest. That dialogue is part of what the work is about—the loss of agency and the negotiation as to what I am willing to give up? In my case, what am I willing to give up creatively to make the work?

In a way, it became a personal exploration of whether technology was actually making my life easier. Honestly, it added a year to the schedule; I could have finished it a year earlier if I had just used CG. But AI informed the process and clarified certain things. When I went back and decided to make everything in CG, it felt liberating—especially because the technology is so new that it's constantly changing.



Looking at the vertical composition of *After Utopia* and the way you've generated space, I'm reminded of the work of M.C. Escher specifically his lithograph *Relativity* from 1953. In this work staircases go every which way but are somehow also always going up. The same is true in his 1963 lithograph titled, *Möbius Strip II*. The way he used ants, you use people.

That was definitely a reference along with this idea of going everywhere and nowhere at once. He was a master of illusion, portraying motion and distance while in fact it's looping into itself. *After Utopia* also loops into itself. It's a five minute duration to go around the structure, but it's also endless...a state of an illusory future in an hour glass.

We can look at technology as enabling a vision of utopia, but also as leading to a dystopian state. Do you see your work engaging both ideas?

Yes, absolutely. If you look at my earlier video and digital works—*Approach* (1999), *Cyclorama* (1999), *HalfLife* (2004)—each explores how technology shapes our social conditions. The work doesn't necessarily editorialize asking, "is it dystopia? Is it utopia?" I prefer to present the thing neutrally. Because I'm making it, it will inevitably carry a point of view and evoke feeling, hopefully. But I think utopia is always out of reach.

Is there anything else you'd like to add? I love that you're launching *After Utopia* at the Wolfsonian Museum, where the archive was utilized.

It was very important to me to launch this work at the Wolfsonian because the building itself houses such a very specific collection and focuses on ideas not typically centered in the contemporary art world. The installation in Miami will be ten feet tall. It's a good place to anchor the first presentation of this work before it travels.

Marco Brambilla recommends

Early cyber-punk book *Snow Crash* by Neil Stevenson, 1992

Future Shock, book by American futurist Alvin Toffler, 1970

World on the Wire, film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1973

Logan's Run, film by Michael Anderson, 1976

The Technological Society book by Jacques Ellul, 1954

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Vocation

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