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Scandal of the limit and anesthesia of the form in the society of a-mortality.***I celebrate* by John Hejduk, a formula beyond death**

Abstract

The culture of our time has removed the concept of the limit. Death is more and more a matter of others; spectacularization, or thanatology. Yet its cancellation is impossible. Farewell halls and funeral homes are neutral zones designed more to minimise than to comfort. They represent the extreme attempt to anaesthetise the pain of loss, to remove death. Anaesthetic architecture for an a-mortal society that has to reduce its sensitivity. Whereas death itself is the limit that humanises us.

John Hejduk, in spite of his time, puts death back at the centre of his work, revealing to us the only way not to succumb: to celebrate it. His work proves nothing, it celebrates everything. Through pain, his architecture recovers the sensitivity of form, its empathy.

Keywords

John Hejduk — Celebration — Architecture and death — Representation of pain — Corporality

The culture of our time progressively removes the concept of limit. Even death, the limit par excellence, once being the acme of the great architectural tradition (pyramids, tholoi, mausoleums, funerary monuments, etc.) is now reduced to a hindrance, to something scandalous. It is a degenerative disease to be treated with fury and to be hidden with hypocrisy even from the dying. As the long agony of Ivan Il'ich reminds us. The end is increasingly a matter for others; spectacularization, or thanatology. Preventive medicalization becomes the priority of a society that aspires to eliminate the confrontation with the limit, to become a-mortal (Illich, 2009). But, in fact, removal is impossible. In fact, if the technique today promises a progressive elimination of human limits, however pain and death are ineradicable. And when architecture stops reflecting on pain and death, it assumes the same automatic and procedural nature of technology, to which every authority of the project is delegated today. Normative, safety devices that, as the name itself says, *sine-cura*, exempt us from any responsibility. Even from life itself. Because it is precisely through care that our attention, our being, passes. The more we try to erase pain, the more it expands into boredom, neutralizing any difference (Jünger, 1997).

If we are no longer able to accept our end, how can we imagine an architecture that is able to accommodate or represent something that we ourselves reject? The emerging construction of funeral halls and funeral homes projects on death an attempt of removal. No longer a specific architectural typology, but an oscillation between the residential and the commercial type. A hybrid that testifies to the distraction, almost embarrassment at the base of the concept. Environments that are the extension of that clinical-aseptic space where death is materially consumed. Neutral zones, designed more to minimize than to comfort

Almost in an extreme attempt to anesthetize the pain in those who remain. Anesthetic architecture for a society that must reduce its sensitivity, standardize it. While death is the very limit that humanizes us. If we try to remove it, if we stop thinking about it, we end up suppressed, swept away like objects, like things (Paz, 2013, pp. 44-49).

John Hejduk, in spite of his time, puts death back at the center of life and work. As it has always been. Because our singularity cannot be but inscribed in its mystery. Hejduk, like a Virgil of our time, accompanies us into the abyss of pain and death, revealing to us the only way not to succumb: celebrate them. Stubbornly. His work proves nothing, it celebrates everything. He translates Rilke's words into the project: *Tell me what is your task as a poet? -I celebrate-. But the monstrous and the terrible, how do you accept it, how do you endure it? -I celebrate-* (in Cacciapaglia, 1990, p. 183). Hejduk entrusts his theoretical legacy to verses, the liturgical form of the word. To their meter, the dimensional scale of his project figures. To architecture, the task of awakening in matter the distance between us and the world, and the mystery. Death opens poem n. 1, *The Sleep of Adam*, and closes the last one, n. 158, *Sentences on Death*. It marks the extremes within which all its forms move. Persephone, Eurydice, Medusa, Hades, Christ crucified and his Mother, St. Stephen stoned, St. Mark stolen, Jan Palach burned and his mother, the birds of Braque, Marat in the bath, etc.. The poems rekindle the theme of death through the different shades of form. The more than five hundred architectural figures outline as many modes of the limit, an experience that is imprinted in the form and re-directs it. In order to do this, he puts into action an unexplored device, the splitting of every architecture into object (the project itself) and subject (the emotionality that animates it). To the 67 architectures of *Victims*, to the 68 of *Lancaster Hanover Mask*, to the 73 of *Berlin Night* correspond as many souls, each with its own genre, character, past. For example, the Physician, the subject of the Office Tower (Hejduk, 1986, fig. arch. n. 19) represents the obsession of not being able to distinguish within his own body the weight of his own heart; the Mechanist, the architectural subject of the Box Car Parts project (Hejduk, 1986, fig. arch. n. 9), has his eyesight forever bleached by the shock of the atomic bomb, etc. Each subject resonates with the others, prolonging their movements, creating a continuity (a community) in which the limits of each constructs the sense of the work, its particular direction and vocation.

Of the more than five hundred architectural figures, at least forty are explicitly dedicated to death. Which is always double. Death of those who leave, but, above all, death of those who remain to live with the emotional drama of loss. Hejduk recovers in our time the sensitivity of an architectural tradition that for centuries has seen in the funeral artifact the only possibility of making architecture. The project *Cemetery for the Mothers of the Children* (Hejduk, 1997, p. 17) welcomes mothers who have lost their children. A cemetery made for those who, although alive, experience death every day. In *House of the Mother of the Suicide* (Hejduk, 1997, p. 254) he shows how the architectural body of the mother of the martyr Jan Palach, under the pressure of the pain of loss, can contract to the point of becoming the tomb, the living sanctuary of her lost son. The divarication of the sharp spines represents the incendiary moment of the boy. The vertical fixity of the blunt spines, the inexhaustible pain of his mother. The same sensitivity resonates in the poems as well, making the word and the drawing into a single project: *the emptiness / of Christ's tomb / reflected the emptiness / of his mother's*

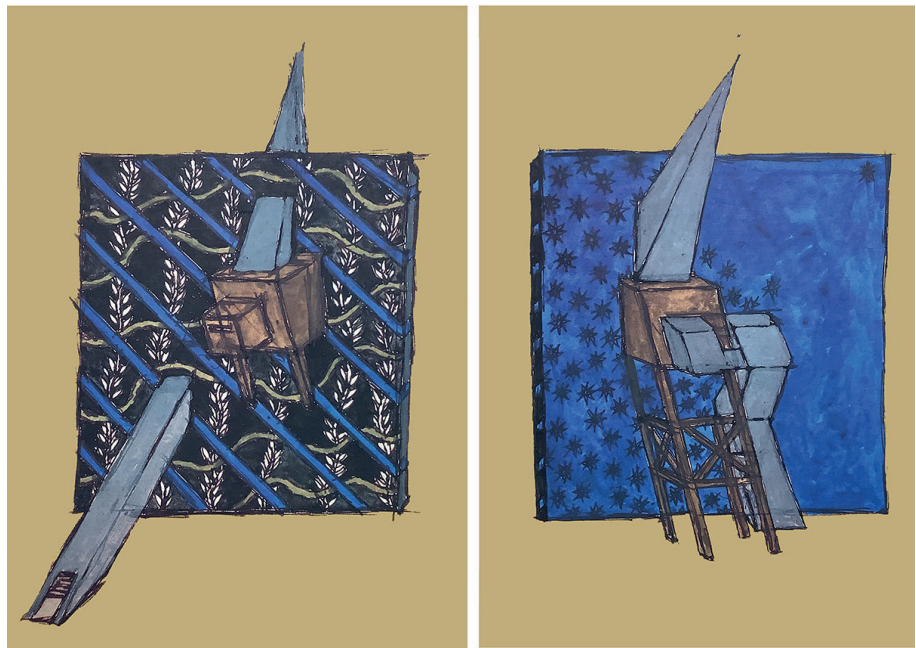
**Fig. 1**

John Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa*, 1985. Orpheus and Eurydice at the opening of the 158 poems. Medusa in the closing. In between: Persephone, Hades, Electra, Christ, St. Mark, St. Jerome, Marat, Uccello's dragon, Braque's birds, etc. All different shades of form. Each meets its own death, where its own singularity is hidden. Myth has always been a reworking of death. Whereas today's myths exclude it. Unable to deal with it, they continually remove it.

heart (in Rizzi, Piscicella, 2020, P. n. 68, vv. 1-4); *an upheaval shook / his sleeping Mother / her heart filled with blood* (ibidem, P. n. 20, vv. 31-33). Funeral processions, crematoria, tombs, chapels, ways of the cross, cemeteries for the dead and for the living (Hejduk, 1993, pp. 394-396), necropolises for missed architectures, etc. For the very air we inhale every moment is the summation of all the living and the dead since the beginning of time (Hejduk, 1993 B.N. p. 18). A sensitivity taken to the extreme and, at the same time, the idea that only the *societas*, the pact between generations, can overcome death, guaranteeing continuity. And here we have the architectural communities of *Victims*, *Vladivostok*, *Berlin Night*, etc.

Bringing death back to the center of reflection then means trying to recover the liturgy of a more intimate and profound sociality. The project *Town for the new Orthodox*, a newly founded city for 18,000 inhabitants conceived not far from Venice, works explicitly towards this goal. In the era of unlimited, a-mortal growth, promoted by the myth of technology, this city imposes a time limit on itself. Its hourglass is the city cemetery. When the last of the 18,000 graves is occupied, the city must be abandoned. A peremptory limit, the death of the city itself. All of Hejduk's work enacts an oblique look at the dominant cultural paradigm. The *I Celebrate* (Hejduk, 1990) collapses the concept of time. In the age of constant timelessness and alienating collective acceleration (Rosa, 2015), liturgy is the contraction that suspends all chronology. It overcomes the absence of time by assuming a different, otherwise measured time. Because if the illusion of unlimited growth produces increasingly isolated individualities, the limit is instead the contraction that produces community. Also in *Victims* the project takes on a new temporality, the 30 years it takes for its trees to grow. Time returns to be marked by generations, two cycles of 30 years, the average time of a man's life. This circularity resonates in the plan, inscribed within the circuit of the tracks of a small train, as if it were inside a fort. The periodic, circular passage of the locomotive imposes a new temporality. The clock marks a fixed, immobile hour. Next to it, the hourglass turns without stopping. Finally, *Collapse of Time* sanctions the impossibility of continuing to measure time according to the neutral, homogeneous and unlimited unit of the clock, of chronology. Every man contracts time and space in his own way. Limit, but also resource.

Hejduk's architectures experience pain, a necessary condition for the recovery of the sensitivity of form. *The sound of a book can only be heard internally* (Hejduk, 1995, Architectures in Love*) the *Basic Elements* series (Hejduk, 1995, A.F. pp. 138-145), the front and back covers of *Architectures in Love*, which correspond to the *Seville Structure* project (Hejduk, 1995 A.F. pp. 216-220), expose architectures pierced from side to side, unarmed, like the anatomy of Mantegna's Saint Sebastian. Towards the end of the 1990s, Hejduk elaborated a triple program on the theme of the metaphor of the pierced body: *Lines No Fire Could Burn* (poetry), *Sanctuaries* (painting) and *Cathedral* (architecture). Three dimensions of the same project, which has corporality as its common denominator, since every experience, the essence of spirituality, gathers in the body. The first, *Lines No Fire Could Burn*, 1999 (74 poems) reworks the theme of the Passion: the wounds inflicted on the body of Christ, the different intensities of pain, its projection onto the external landscape, until the extinction of all colors at his death. In the second, *Sanctuaries*, 2003 (32 plates), the Passion becomes the fixed horizon of myth, of history. The U-shaped structure of the scene, open upwards, becomes the receptacle into which angels, demons

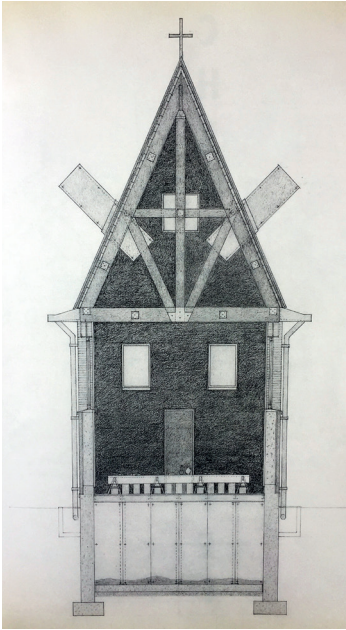
**Fig. 2**

Albrecht Dürer, *Christ nailed to the cross*, 1511. Hidden under the pseudonym of Dürer, Hejduk confesses: *The architect's life was turned upside down by his study of Dürer's engravings of the life of Christ. His research focused on the relics of Christ: the wooden cross, the crown of thorns, the garments, the iron nails* (Berlin Night, in *Soundings*, p. 154).

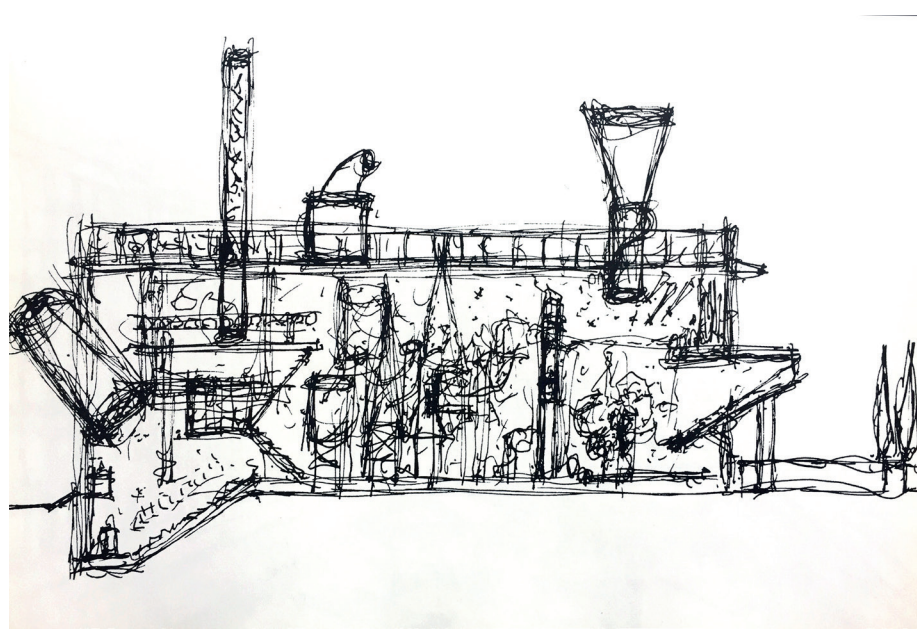
Fig. 3

John Hejduk, *Architectures in Love*, 1995. Cover, back cover. The wall, pierced, exposes the body, front and back.

and beasts fall. Here it is the casing that is pierced by thunderbolts and rays of light. The metaphor of torture expands. It is no longer only the flesh that is tortured, but the very scene of the world. In the third, *Cathedral* (Hejduk, 1997, pp. 140-159), the ecclesia, a metaphor for life, becomes the place where all the architectural subjects of Hejduk's past converge. Vehemently attracted, they get stuck in the walls of the cathedral, piercing them, wounding them. As if the material body of the cathedral manifested its own intimate and archaic sensitivity. The theme of the pierced body translates into architecture the need to recognize the ineliminable presence of evil. The need to represent it, so as not to be dramatically overwhelmed by it. Hence the emphasis on the Crucifix in *Christ Chapel* (Hejduk, 1997, pp. 188-209), where the action of raising the Cross is reopened in its unity, as if to generate a sub-Via Crucis within the act of verticalization of the Crucifix. Somewhat like the architectural plans for $\frac{1}{4}$ House, $\frac{1}{2}$ House, $\frac{3}{4}$ House (Hejduk, 1985, pp. 258-273), *Christ Chapel* is a declination of this opening of the closed unity of the image. Geometry, again, does not play a merely graphic role; rather, it serves to measure the different coefficients of intensity of the scene, to record the degrees of pain of Christ's body. The Cross rises moving like a compass. Three positions: zero, forty-five, ninety degrees. A slowing down that is a necessary condition for the intensification of vision. When he reached verticality *his vision turned upside down / for the first time / he felt the weight / of his own soul* (in Rizzi, Piscicella, 2020, p. 285). The positions of her rotation pierce the ceiling of the chapel, producing precise points of light to illuminate the tortured body. A renewed liturgy of the passing, which also resonates in the three projects dedicated to the Via Crucis. *Journey I, Journey II, Journey III* (Hejduk, 1997, pp. 226-253) reopen the reflection on the singularity of pain, on its non-transferability. Thirteen stations, places of solitude. In *Journey I*, the thirteen rooms follow one another in clusters like a slow ascent to Golgotha; in *Journey III*, they wind along a linear path where the thirteen scenes are represented by as many medieval works of the Passion. As if it were a segment of rediscovered film. Hejduk proposes to the observer an exercise of concentration, of intensification of vision, akin to the work of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. In the lines of his poems 4-77 (in Rizzi, Piscicella,

**Fig. 4**

John Hejduk, *Pewter Wings*, 1997. *Cathedral*. The ecclesia becomes the place where all the architectural subjects of Hejduk's past converge. Vehemently attracted, they get stuck in the walls of the cathedral, piercing them, wounding them.

**Fig. 5**

John Hejduk, *Pewter Wings*, 1997. *Last Supper*. No one has ever returned to the hall of the Last Supper after the Crucifixion.

2020) the verses of the Spiritual Exercises resonate, an effort beyond the human to visualize the extremely remote, the invisible. But with details of the highest precision, as in the passage *The disciples lifted the white tablecloth / inflating it over the table / the cloth was pulled tight / then lowered / compressing the air between the cloth and the wood* (in Rizzi, Piscicella, 2020, p. 275). In poem n. 27 *The Remaining Space*, Hejduk even manages to enter the Last Supper room after Christ's burial. The empathy is maximal. The door is bolted. Inside, the table is still set. The white tablecloth, stained by the red wine of the Last Supper, transmutes into the sheet of Christ's shroud. A table set for a farewell. An *Apparecchio alla Morte* (Saint Alphonsus M. de' Liguori, 1993) that, like many other works of the great Christian tradition, for centuries has reconciled death with everyday life, making life the time of its preparation. Precepts to hinge a liturgical rhythm in the homogeneous and anonymous chronology of time. Prayers to push deep into intimacy the sense of sharing against a common evil. Community. Precisely through pain and death Hejduk awakens life, its enigma, in the form. He celebrates the miracle of the ordinariness of the human being, that singularity that passes precisely through its limits, without which the boundless and indistinguishable desert of technique opens up. Architecture was born as a liturgical form of death. By re-translating it, it can today regenerate its symbolic structure, its sense. The limit is the only condition able to set the liturgy of the work, its intensity.

*the book is without page numbers

Notes

¹ «In quel preciso momento / si illuminò / il corpo / dall'interno (l. vv. 1- 4) La pelle di Adamo era appesa / alla forma di Eva / quando Dio la liberò / da Adamo / Morte si precipitò all'interno / impedendone il collasso» (vv. 69- 75).

² «La morte aspetta vivendo nel nostro tempo» (158. v. 151). «L'altezza della porta di una casa è per l'ingresso dell'uomo; la larghezza della porta di una casa è per l'uscita dell'uomo. Una dimensione per la vita, l'altra per la morte» (158. v. 156). «Le parole del poeta sono incomprensibili per la morte» (158. v. 165). «Morte costruisce la sua città sottoterra» (158. v. 215). «La dimensione di Morte è una sola» (158. v. 232).

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