Vincenzo Moschetti
**Peter Märkli: Things Around Us**

Abstract
In defining his work, Peter Märkli has repeatedly indicated the existence of the letter A as a likely design phenomenology. As he related to Samuel Penn in 2012, «I remember very clearly being a small boy in class and being told by my teacher not to write the letter A in that way, that it always has to be written like this, upright».Text is constructed beginning with this symbol, with the letter A as the start of a genealogy orchestrated around three themes that intersects *alphabets* and *adventures* to explain, through the practice of drawing, the practice of design, that is, *architecture*, the third A. The various passages are expressions of events that enter the circuit of a possible world where representation marks inheritance, explorations, and the presence of the author, Märkli, who, working in a state of *boredom*, founds new geographies based on the *things* that exist all around us.

Alphabets
So these drawings refer back to the basic grammar of the elements. (Märkli 2021)

The architectures of Peter Märkli are nestled within the folds of the Swiss Alps according to a principle of *boredom* in the sense given to this word by Alberto Moravia[1], each time modifying the geography that hosts them. That is to say: by offering the observer an updated alphabet within its syntax where things that have disappeared sometimes return. The selection of the volumes is a slow process, a sort of storyline that unfolds around the letters of the composition. Expressed according to a series of recollections inscribed within a set of continuous drawings, the letters embark on an earnest quest to establish just a few elements that acquire new shapes. Märkli's drawings are flows of a sequence that he attempts to possess, to reconstruct, and to observe in his projects within a system that is open but fixed by just a few marks aimed at giving structure to a sort of collection rendered by topographic images. In this sense he affirms that «I realized that not only could these words be used to describe things […] but also that it had, in literature, the power to describe feelings and world views. […] I looked to the profane and the visual arts and started to observe and slowly learn the language. I simply began by observing the grammar of our discipline» (Penn 2012).

In the ordering of his language, Märkli uses the paradigm of letters as the basis of a design alphabet, the phrases of which – at times very complex, and articulated at the intersection of multiple focal points – introduce a reversal. This consequence can be replicated within an authorial machanism where, tracing this mode of expression back to its etymology, we discover
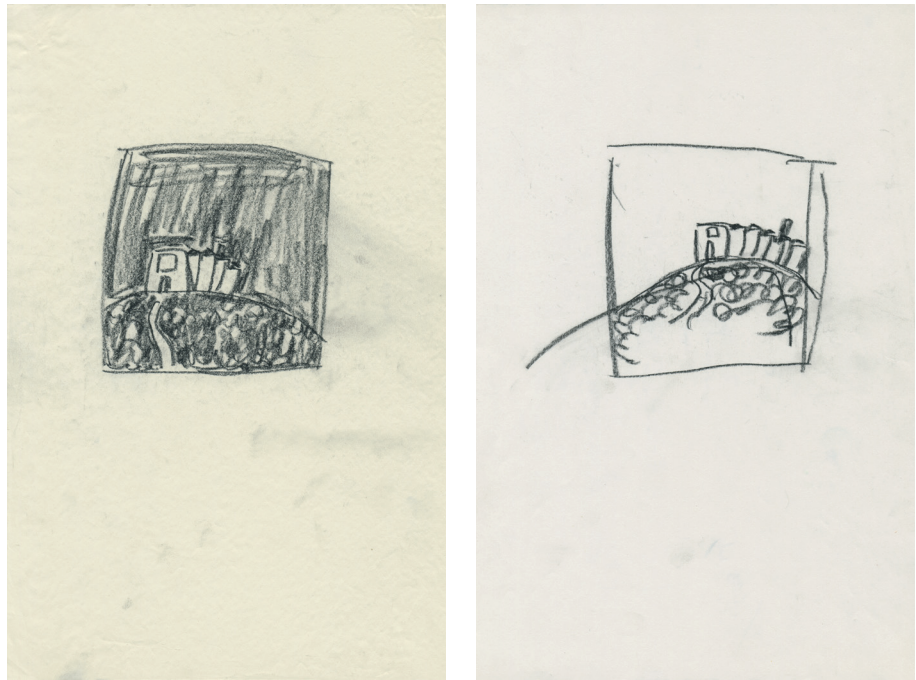
**Figg. 1-2**
Peter Märkli, *Drawings 1053 e 1050*, pencil on paper, 1980-1999. Courtesy: Studio Märkli.

that the architect is an *expander* (Marini, Mengoni 2020), acting in such a way that this increase becomes matter for experimentation for the *study of a language* (Azzariti 2019) that serves to rewrite portions of geography through professional practice. Thus, his practice is a sort of reduction derived from a programmatic approach that allows us to recognize the fact that «to be able to communicate, we have to know the rules of language» (Märkli 2008 (2006), p. 10).

The existence of an alphabetical code is the framework within which Märkli acts, comprising a system of tools of the discipline that, assembled together in the form of a drawing or of the project "under construction", configure phrases capable of building focal points that increase the established distances from territorial boundaries in order to update their positions and operate by means of prefigurations. In a manner similar to Ad Reinhardt's use of the color black (Viray 2008), Märkli too – in the wake of Max Raphael – often uses drawings to explore the possibilities through the opposition of two fields: on the one hand the solid mark, «the indeterminate, the unbounded, the immaterial» (Bronfen 1992, p. 9), and on the other hand the white of the paper, the constant. This use of the mark thereby establishes not limits but deep, distant movements in depth that the project will be able to experience as an object of discussion and comment. The subject of this discussion is a given place that the white of the paper, in the moment, does not always specify.

## Adventures

These drawings have to be small – they cannot be large because they are not about detailing. They're explorations of principles. They capture the essence of things in few lines that nevertheless encapsulate a lot of possibilities. (Märkli 2021)

Märkli's research defines an imagery that since his years at ETH in Zurich has operated along the lines of the adventure. His insistence on displaying a «unique event […] unexpected case»[2] serves to create the territory within which he can observe his production and position his letters in order to achieve the modernization of the discipline proposed by him with respect to a territory
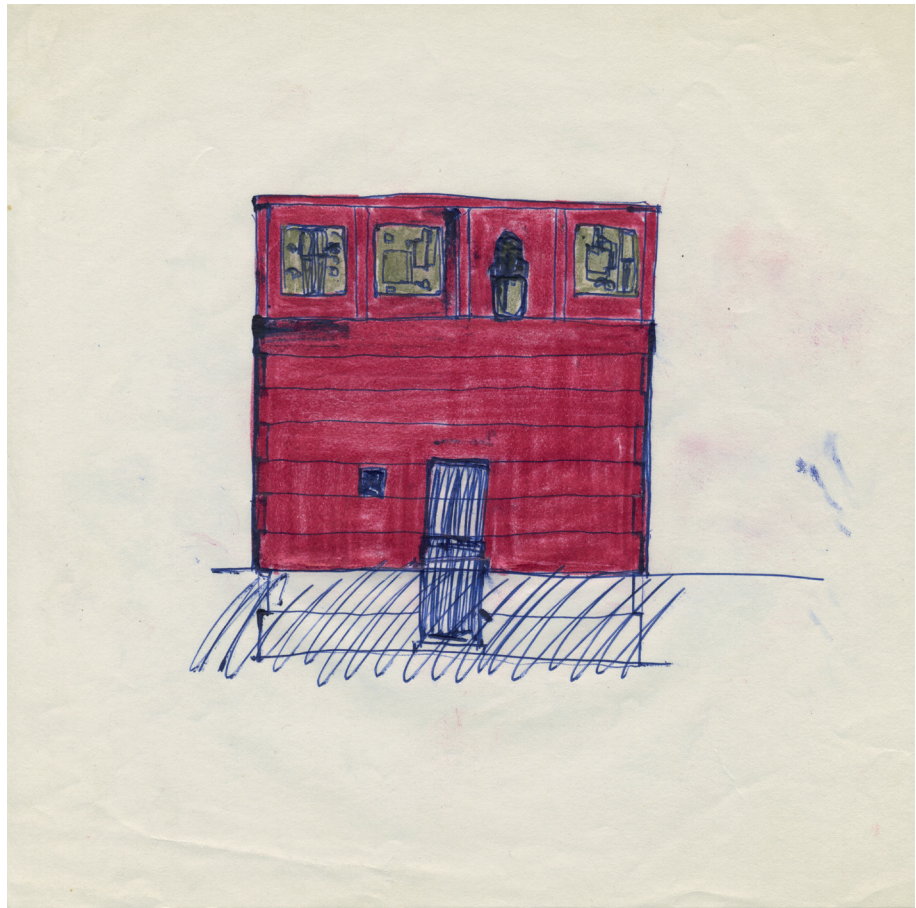
**Fig. 3**
Peter Märkli, *Drawing 1115*, pencil and ballpoint pen on paper, 1980-1999. Courtesy: Studio Märkli

characterized by severe shadows. The fundamental idea at the base of the operations between drawing and project is that of «tout *ce qu*'on *invente* est vrai» (Flaubert 1998), where representation, above all in the form of "sketches", long before construction, establishes a process of rewriting and programming, of pillages apparently from other worlds. Already from the start, the relationship between drawing and project seems like a program where the expression can be recognized according to which «our earliest ancestors built their huts only after having conceived their image» (Boullée 1967, p. 55).

Märkli's drawings offer a basic course on comparative anatomy, much like what is taught in the first years of veterinary sciences. The comparison between the structures of the various groups establishes a possible re-signification of the content, applicable to both the representation and the architectural project. The architect's gaze enters into the rooms of the drawing with its volumes rendered in dual dimensions, spaces that are only apparently enclosed by the orthogonal boundaries of the sheet of paper, where black lines emphasize connections in which the architecture is presented as an action. The figure of the room is an illusory strategy that allows the imaginary world to be rendered as both visible and concrete, while the drawing permits the production of inhabitable tensions in which the play of mirrors between the various geographies and worlds builds complexities on several levels. «By connecting the regular and irregular, Peter Märkli could create order, organized forms and immersive space. Inside the work, through Peter Märkli's eye, I could move around and feel my presence in the world, either in silence or with a pleasant whisper. Peter Märkli's 'eye' is 'I'» (Viray 2015, p. 114). This being *inside* is the lens that serves to activate the reconstruction process, not something that has to do with ruins so much as a program that in reality observes a genealogy for *making*
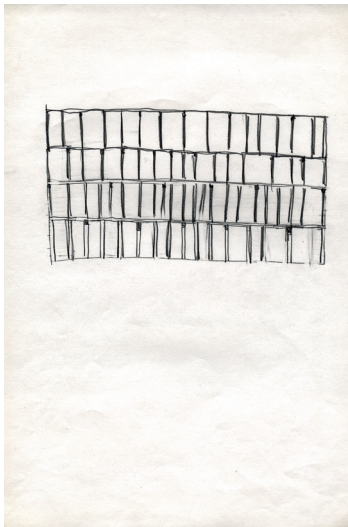
**Figg. 4-5**
Peter Märkli, *Drawing 1147*, pencil and ballpoint pen on paper, 1980-1999. Courtesy: Studio Märkli. (On the right), Peter Märkli, Haus Hobi, Sargans, 1983-2014. Courtesy: Studio Märkli.

architecture. The drawing, with its "rooms", anticipates the construction of the building without having to observe the laws of statics beyond those required by the representation itself.

Not all of the drawings will come to fruition; they are in part *exempla*, experiments of an open construction site that still feels the need for figurative representation to make the project a reality. Arranged together, indeed they represent adventures, established by means of marks that are none other than narrative practices where the inversion between light and shadow, and the testing of colors and materials, and of grades and proportions, connects the parts of the worlds from which they originate. They are questions that move the design investigation away from predefined distances, making it possible to verify the declaration according to which Märkli, like «Shakespeare approximates the remote, and familiarizes the wonderful; the event which he represents will not happen, but if it were possible, its effects would probably be such as he has assigned; and it may be said, that he has not only shewn human nature as it acts in real exigencies, but as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be exposed» (Johnson 1765, pp. XI-XII).

The drawings of Peter Märkli thus cannot be considered exclusively as an exploratory tool so much as a design event in itself, where the process of *spolia in re* is substituted, within the territory of the sheet of paper, by that of *spolia in se,* effectively translating a principal of *auctoritas* in the field of architecture[3]. The composition then undergoes reversals in which the continuity of the ancient is assumed by the reappearance of color, in a correction of Winckelmann's interpretation, thus embodying the return of a compositional tool that had been superimposed over the stones of the ancient temples before its disappearance. The use of color is the unique and unexpected event of the adventure into which the architect invites the observer, where the causes and effects of a time (that of architecture, which sees no pauses but only returns) become immersed in a collection and repositioned. Based on the idea that the animal structures of today are derived from those that came before them, biologists use scalpels and microscopes to access the concrete world of vertebrates. Märkli uses sheets of A4 paper and colored pencils to construct the space of architecture in an inquisitive process of verification, analogous to that of the veterinary scientists but born of his hands-on experience of teaching architecture.

**Figg. 6-7**
Peter Märkli, *Drawing 1249*, pencil on paper, 1980-1999.
Courtesy: Studio Märkli.
(On the right), Peter Märkli, Mehr-familiernhaus, Sargans, 1986.
Courtesy: Studio Märkli.

## Architectures

The mechanisms traversed mark the existence of lists in which the positioning of the elements of architecture, treated as letters of an alphabet, permits the discovery, through the practice of drawing, of the existence of an updatable grammatical syntax. Upon entering Märkli's architectural studio in Zürich, as if in a dizzying list of things (Eco 2009), one sees that «his modus operandi is made explicit by the drawing board with Mayline parallel motion […] books lie open on the floor, sketches and drawings are pinned to the walls» (Chipperfield 2020, p. 22). His studio expresses the need to remain within, as if in a density within which «the drawings become the place where the ideas are found and formulated» (Chipperfield 2020, p. 20), thereby defining an operational centrality.

The territory of representation becomes, for Märkli, the field on which to let flow and prefigure the physicality of architecture and its making. Paper architectures, before reaching the ground, thus negotiate an inventive possibility with geography and time. Their relationship with history translates into one with multiple "stories," and drawing becomes a project in itself. Märkli, therefore, has the merit of working on a dual track, that of paper and that of the construction site. He composes devices (Deleuze 1989) by means of these architectures, identifying with what will become the "structures" of the finished project and of the inhabited space.
Märkli's building for the European headquarters of the Synthes company in Solothurn, Switzerland, completed in 2011, is an investigation of history through drawings. A series of lines and surfaces sunk into the paper gave structure, long before the concrete was poured, to the entire workspace. In his graphic execution, the architect's questions traverse much of the history of architecture. Summarized in a collection of images in which the façade of Alberti's Palazzo Rucellai is overlaid onto that of Palladio's Palazzo Thiene, they led to the creation of a solution that can be defined by the term *node*. His executive accuracy is thus the result of a crossroads where «the joining of the horizontal and the vertical became a preoccupation» (Johnston 2017, p. 120), and where both the construction of the work and its structural solutions are discussed within the two-dimensionality of the sheet of paper. Horizontal areas, devoid of thickness, anticipate the verticality of the project, where the presence of black marks in the field of the A4-size paper compiles practical questions by depriving itself of the regularity of measurements. The absence of right angles does not lead
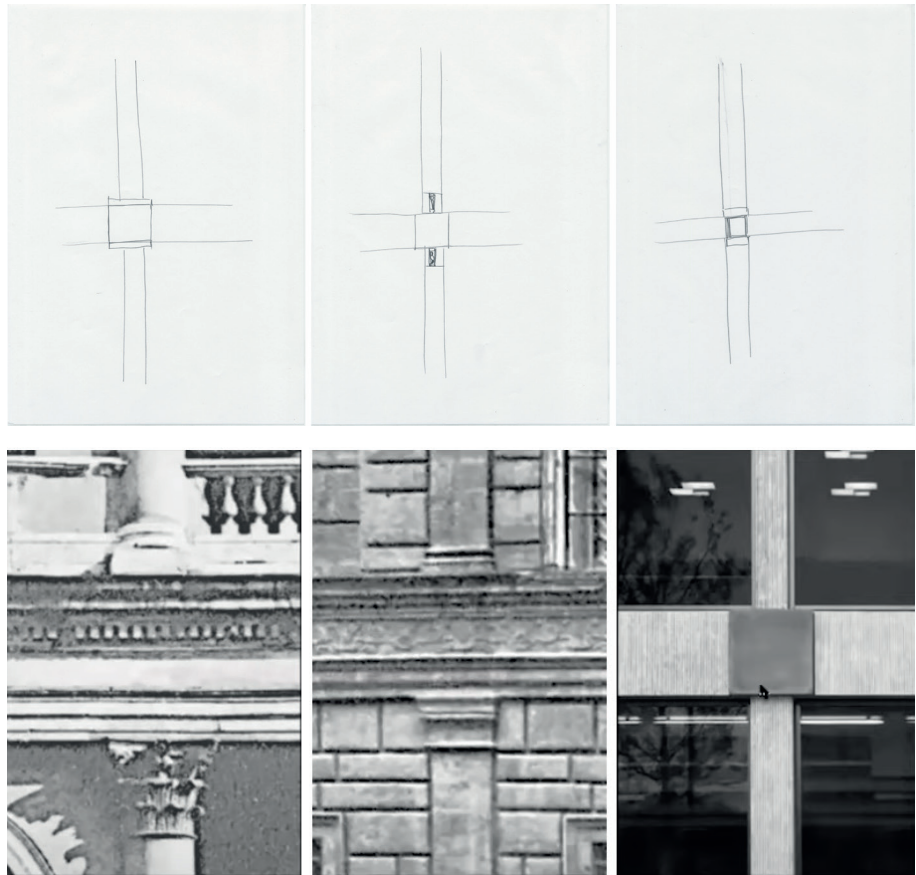
**Figg. 8-9**
Peter Märkli, *Drawings 2066, 2072 e 2083,* "Nodes", pencil on paper, 2000-2019. Courtesy: Studio Märkli.
(Below), Andrea Palladio, Palazzo Thiene (dettaglio), Vicenza 1542; Leon Battista Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai (detail), Florence 1446, Peter Märkli, Synthes Headquarters (detail), Solothurn 2011. Courtesy: Studio Märkli.

to the abandonment of geometric rule, of a logical and proportional construction; on the contrary, it demonstrates a knowledge of the disciplinary codes of the profession, which emerge in the guise of objects, elements and colors aimed at solving the entire composition. In this sense, Synthes joins the logical succession rendered by the architect on paper, where, from the Renaissance onward, things have re-emerged with the reintroduction of a letter A, which has nevertheless been able to update the positions, bringing together the experiments of a destiny that can produce new figures from copied objects.

The junction between the vertical and horizontal systems is highlighted by the presence of a square element made of exposed concrete: the knot, an important synthesis that Märkli finally reaches after much research and after a thorough investigation of the ability to reconstruct an entire network of relationships based on a simple allusion to partial formal clues. This research finds its origin in the columns of Olgiati's Radulff house, in Palladio's moulding designs, and makes its way through to his first houses with Josephsohn's reliefs above the pillars, finally reaching maximum abstraction in the junction/knot of the Picassohaus in Basel. One of the images that was used to illustrate the project presented two different architectural references: Palazzo Thiene – in which the distinction between vertical (columns), horizontal (entablature), and transitional (capitals) elements is rather canonical – and Palazzo Rucellai – where instead this distinction tends to diminish. (Azzariti 2019, p. 111)
The façade is a process of re-signification of this design program, where the architecture asks questions to which the building site attempts to respond in an attempt to verify the existence of a drawing that is not only visible but also, more importantly, is traversable. The node – an adept ad-

**Figg. 10-11-12**
(Above), Peter Märkli, Synthes Headquarters, Solothurn 2011. Photo: Caroline Palla.
(On the right), Peter Märkli, Synthes Headquarters, Solothurn 2011. Photo: Alexander Gempeler, Bern.

vancement of the sculptural practices learned in the studio of Hans Josephsohn[4] – announces the work performed by the project in horizontal section, determined by a pattern of dots, and in vertical section, where the pillars meet the floors on which the rooms are placed. The presence of the architectural order signals the insertion of a double register that addresses multiple scalar dimensions: the first order, "giant" at 22 meters high, seems to want to position itself in a territorial paradigm, while the second order, the interior one, speaks to the lives of human beings. This distinction is the discussion of an executive palimpsest of graphic investigations in which geometric grids, orthogonal to each other, verify the grammar between the primary and secondary objects that emerge or are submerged by the chosen syntax.

If, in light of this fact, the pillar appears autonomous, the drawings demonstrate that it is instead a "victim" of a heteronomy that was already reflecting on a dual track of considerations from the time of the apartment building in Sargans (1986). The mass of that building – primitive in terms of dimensions – positioned itself as a comment on the surrounding mountains, introducing a narration of darkness and cavities; in Solothurn, the comments have continued, responding to the geography with a contemporaneity that does not renounce the archaism of 1986 but which sees in it a possibility of proceeding towards new dimensions of things.

The drawing is also a thing. Once the hand has traced onto the paper – the drawing has a physical presence, its own presence. It has a "*Gestalt*" and comes forward towards the viewer. This form of its own is also beside its originating image, impulse, idea, search or context. It is a mark. It makes a mark. (Hatz 2015, p. 146)

The system of drawings that preceded the project, and that precede all of Märkli's architecture, reveals the presence of a method that seeks the

existence of a language that can establish itself as a graphic form of trial and error, thereby becoming constructed matter. Within the lines produced by his displacements, Märkli processes oscillations[5] capable of clarifying that those black marks are profound presences, with as-yet undefined but clear contours with respect to a linguistics of architecture. The objects that emerge are the result of a migration that collects clues on paper, where the project, in this case Synthes, but even before that Sargans, is the solution to an enigma in which the use of such fundamental elements as plinths, columns, and pilasters, that is the letters of the compositional alphabet, like a letter A, allows Märkli to found new geographies through the construction and re-elaboration of *things* positioned around us, with *space* as the reference.

## Notes

[1] «Märkli's working procedures, however, are self-induced and are in part a deliberate reaction to the prevalent notion of the architect's studio as an office machine. Among the writings of Alberto Moravia, one of a host of influential twentieth-century Italian writers well known to Märkli, is a novel published in 1960, entitled *La noia*. Moravia defines through his protagonist the concept of *noia*, boredom: 'The feeling of boredom originates for me in a senso of absurdity of a reality which is insufficient, or anyhow unable, to convince me of its own effective existence… For me, therefore, boredom is not only the inability to escape from myself but is also the consciousness that theoretically I might be able to disengage myself from it thanks to a miracle of some sort'. Most people think of boredom as the opposite of amusement, but for Moravia this is not the case. In fact, for him boredom comes to resemble amusement […]. In the same way that the interruption of the electric current highlights the artefacts of Moravia's fictional house, distraction leads to a closer reading of things» (Mostafavi 2002, p. 8).

[2] *Avventura*, entry in Devoto G., Oli G.C. (2000), *Il dizionario della lingua italiana*, Le Monnier, Florence, p. 193.

[3] «*Spolia in re* (through the physical transportation of ancient objects – sculpture, architectural elements, and gems – and their insertion in a new context) and *spolia in se* (objects created *ex novo,* but based on ancient models) are thus two sides of the same coin: in its new context, the antiquity is no longer perceptible in its entirety, yet it is clearly defined and endowed with meaning. This sense is embodied and translated into the principal of *auctoritas,* which surrounds the handed-down antiquities like an aura. On the one hand it is defined by their presence, visibility, and accessibility, and on the other by the (relative) lack of corresponding knowledge and technical abilities, and even more by the awareness or sense of that lack» S. Settis, *Continuità dell'antico*, entry in AA.VV. (1994) – *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica, classica e orientale*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, founded by Giovanni Treccani, Rome, 256.

[4] It is as if these nodes had taken on an ulterior precision or preciseness with respect to what preceded them. Citing Kubelik's studies, Märkli has repeatedly pointed out that Palladio's elements were also already present in Venetian architecture, and that they took on greater precision, for example, in his designs of villas. See Kubelik M. (1986) – "Palladio's Villas in the Tradition of the Veneto Farm". Assemblage, 1, 90-115.

[5] «What happens if the images [that is the maps] begin to oscillate?» Wittgenstein L. (1971) – *Osservazioni sopra i fondamenti della matematica*. Einaudi, Turin, 183; original ed: Wittgenstein L. (1956) – *Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik*. Blackwell, Oxford.

## References

AGAMBEN G. (1977) – *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*. Einaudi, Turin.

AZZARITI G. (2019) – *In search of a language. A journey into Peter Märkli's imaginary / À la recherche d'un langage. Voyage dans l'imaginaire de Peter Märkli,* CosaMentale, Marseille.

BOULLÉE E.L. (1967) – *Architettura. Saggio sull'arte*. Introduction by A. Rossi. Marsilio, Padua.

BRONFEN E. (1992) – *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Feminity and the Aesthetic*. University of Manchester Press, Manchester.

CHIPPERFIELD D. (2020) – "La buona pratica / Good Practice. Peter Märkli". Domus, 1043, 18-25.

ECO U. (2009) – *Vertigine della lista*. Bompiani, Milan.

FLAUBERT G. (1998) – *Correspondances* (or. ed. 1853), édition établie, présentée et annotée par J. Bruneau. Gallimard, Paris.

HATZ E. (2015) – "*Making a mark / Zeichen setzen*". In: F. Don, C. Mion (edited by), *Peter Märkli: Drawings / Zeichnungen.* Quart Verlag, Luzern, 146-151.

IMOBERDORF C. (2016) – *Märkli. Professur für Architektur an der ETH Zürich | Chair of Architecture at the ETH Zurich. Themen / Semesterarbeiten | Topics / Semester Works. 2002-2015*. gta Verlag, Zürich.

JOHNSON S. (1765) – *Preface to his Edition of Shakespear's Plays*. J. & R. Tonson, H. Woodfall, J. Rivington, R. Baldwin, L. Hawes, Clark and Collins, T. Longman, W. Johnston, T. Caslon, C. Corbet, T. Lownds, and the executors of B. Dodd, London.

JOHNSTON P. (edited by) (2017) – *Everything one invents is true. The Architecture of Peter Märkli*. Quart Verlag, Luzern.

MARINI S., MENGONI A. (2020) – "Materia-autore / Author-Matter". Vesper. Rivista di architettura, arti e teoria / Journal of Architecture, Arts & Theory, 2, 8-11.

MÄRKLI P. (2008) – "On Ancient Architecture. Fragment of a lecture at London Metropolitan University, November 2006 by Peter Märkli". A+U. Architecture and Urbanism, Peter Märkli: Craft of Architecture, 448, January, 10-15.

MÄRKLI P. (2021) – *Mein Stoff für Fassaden / My Facade Materiale*. [online] Disponibile a: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2g5581w8Js> [Accessed by 22 October 2021]

MOSTAFAVI M. (edited by) (2002) – *Approximations: the Architecture of Peter Märkli*. Architectural Association Publications, London.

PENN S. (2012) – *Interview to Peter Märkli for the AE Foundation for Architecture + Education*. [online] Disponibile a: <https://aefoundation.co.uk/Peter-Markli> [Accessed by 16 October 2021]

PORTOGHESI P. (2016) – "Combinando cose lontane / Combining distant things". Techne. Journal of Technology for Architecture and Environment, 12, 40-42.

VIRAY E. (2008) – "Peter Märkli, Structure Form Emotion". A+U. Architecture and Urbanism, Peter Märkli: Craft of Architecture, 448, January, 60-67.

VIRAY E. (2015) – "*Peter Märkli's eye / Peter Märkli Auge*". In: F. Don, C. Mion (edited by), *Peter Märkli: Drawings / Zeichnungen,* Quart Verlag, Luzern, 112-115.

Vincenzo Moschetti, Ph.D., is an architect and presently a Research Fellow at the Department of Architecture and Arts of Iuav University of Venice. His main research interests are in the fields of architectural theory and composition, in particular the relationship between design, the world of water, and vegetational systems. In this regard he contributes scientific observations and participates in research groups and national and international conferences. He is a member of the research group *TEDEA. Teorie dell'architettura* and of the PRIN (research project of national relevance) *Sylva. Rethink the "sylvan"*, both coordinated by prof. Sara Marini at the same university. His main publications include the essays *This Blue Love. Aldo Rossi in Samos, the "Wonder" in the Late Summer's "Scene"* (2017), *That Obscure Object of Desire. Aldo Rossi's Ghiffa House, a Collection of Promises* (2019) and the monograph *Camere azzurre. Costruzione di un'antologia mediterranea: da Palladio a Peter Märkli* (2020).