

# Found in translation

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# Found in Translation

## Aurélie Dupuis, Zoé Lefèvre

*In what follows, we wish to acknowledge the ambiguities and potentially productive approaches to reproduction within the work of John Hejduk. In it, reproduction finds itself embracing the ephemeral, the fluid and the hybrid. At a time of crisis in our relationship with the living, we wish to highlight the path that these works suggest for envisioning an alternative practice of building and inhabiting architecture.*

Since the 1980s, through architectural drawing and writing, John Hejduk has been developing the «masques» as an architectural repertoire of characters for cities. «Bovisa» (1986) is one of them. Departing from this project, we will lead you through five scenes as five declinations of the theme of reproduction in John Hejduk's work path.

### I FROM GEOMETRIC TO SPATIAL MEANING

Within his drawing explorations of the 1960s and 1970s, John Hejduk slowly builds up a vocabulary in which each of the geometric operations used in a project becomes part of a larger possibility of poetics. By associating geometry with metaphysical concerns, Hejduk «searches for connectivity in the poetics of geometry». <sup>(1)</sup>

In «Bovisa», «The Architect Observes His Models» <sup>(A)</sup> outlines a genealogy of these geometric/poetic explorations. The cube evokes both the pedagogical exercise of the «nine-square grid» (1954–1963) and the professional series of «Houses» in which Hejduk expands on the grid explorations through axonometric studies. <sup>(2)</sup> In the center, a ghost of the «Wall House» (1968–74) reproduces itself in a series of smaller Wall Houses, thus multiplying the possible spatial experience of a present once embodied by the project. Finally, the two human figures stand as witnesses to the passage of time and as actors of its reproduction, as it will later be explored in the performance project «The Collapse of Time» (1986). The confusion of scale between bodies and structures materialize the narrative tension that exists between meaning, geometric systems and the spatial experience.

For Hejduk, if the experience of architecture begins with observation from the outside, it ends in a «complete gestation [where] you become an element of an internal system of organisms». <sup>(3)</sup>

### II SPATIAL AURA AND ADJACENCY

While living in Texas (1954–1963), Hejduk is deeply affected by the anonymity of the urban blocks and the mysterious aura that emanates from these isolated

silhouettes. There, subject and object are constantly intertwining: the blocks act as characters looking at each other, while their austere and simple appearance contrasts strangely with the lives and stories they house. Each architecture possesses its own aura emerging from a constant interplay with other entities through adjacency.

This entanglement is particularly salient in «Victims» (1984), a masque project related to the city of Berlin and the Holocaust. In it, each structure has a double name referring to its object/subject condition. Same and different, constituted and constituting: in these dynamics of reciprocity, the void and adjacency play a connecting role. Saturated with the aura of the structures, the void becomes density. For Hejduk, «[his] contribution to architecture is the voided center. That's a real physical condition». <sup>(4)</sup>

In «Record Keeper of Hallucinations» from «Bovisa», this condition is staged by the presence of a peripheral barrier. <sup>(B)</sup> The void hosts the encounter between the «Record Keeper of Hallucinations», his wife, and two structures that would later be built for the Jan Palach Memorial in Prague.

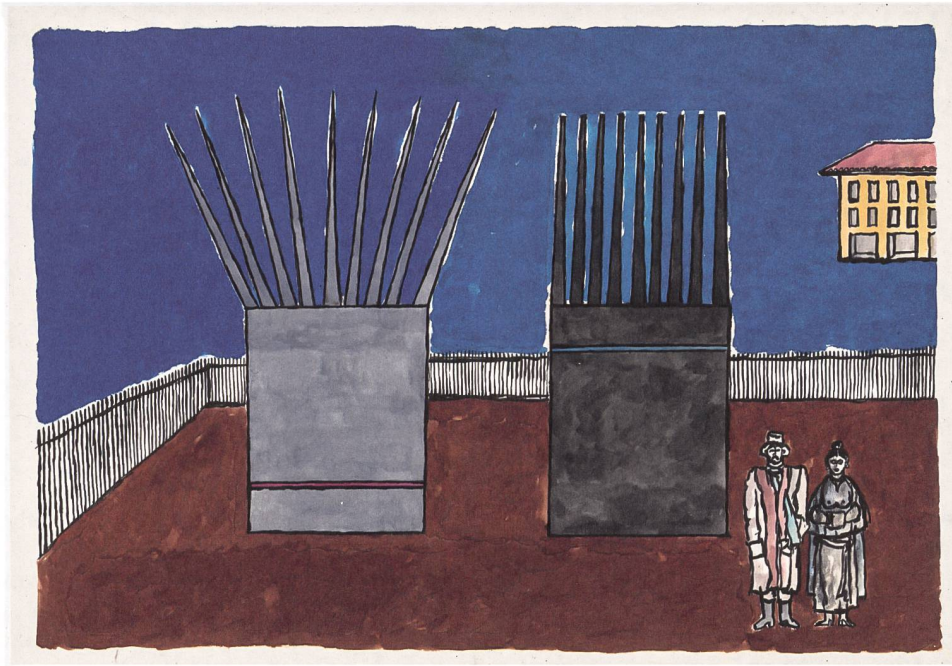
### III MOTION/FRICTION

In giving as much importance to facts as to the fact of fiction, Hejduk provokes a productive friction between context and his structures travelling from city to city.

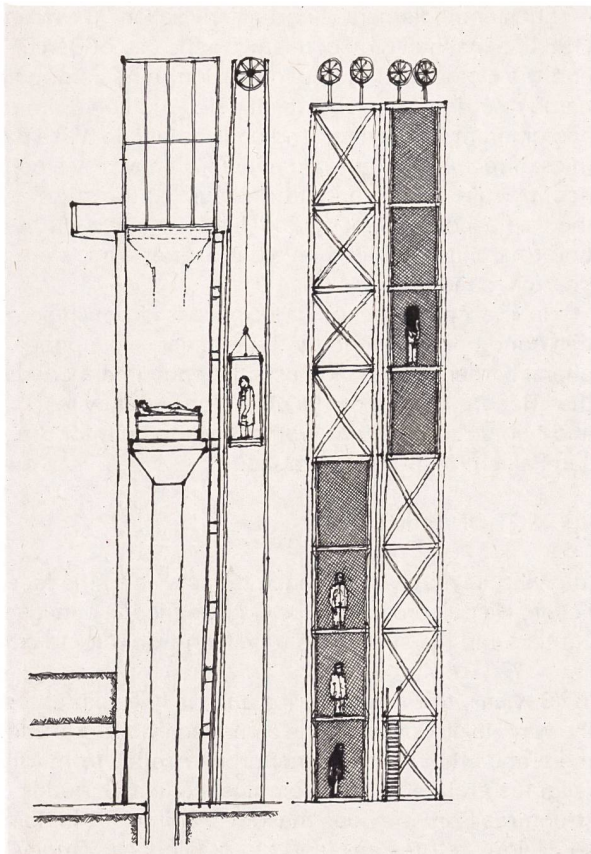
In «Bovisa», this search for balance is fully expressed in the way Hejduk paints in the same tone what is already there and what might come: urban scenes from Milan, religious architectural typologies, collective rituals, structures from previous masques, animals... In doing so, Hejduk refutes any kind of nostalgia or complacency towards the context. The newly achieved fluidity between the different elements disrupts the established social order.

In «The Chapel of the Dead Angel», <sup>(C)</sup> typological elements of Milan are subverted by imported structures that provoke a new friction: the «Physician-Office Tower» of «Victims», a crown of protruding peaks, a dome

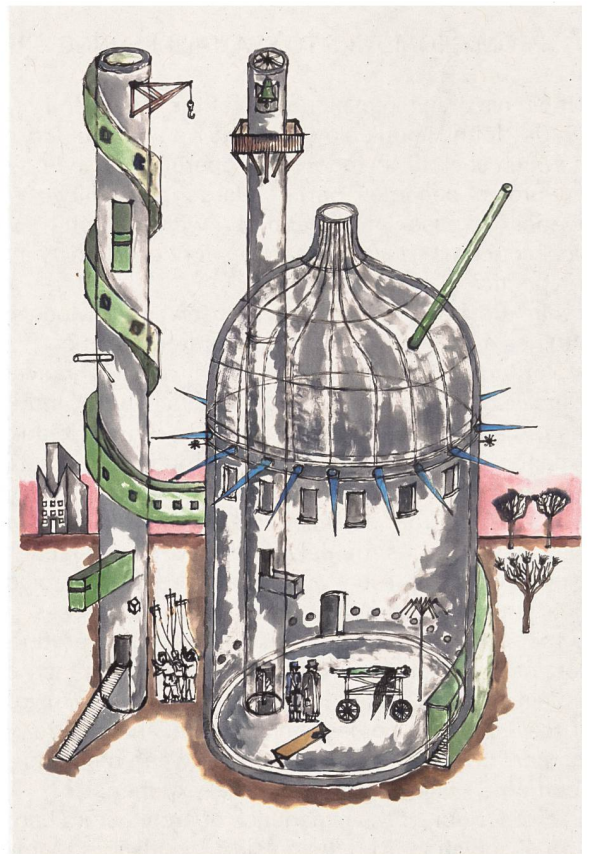
A



B

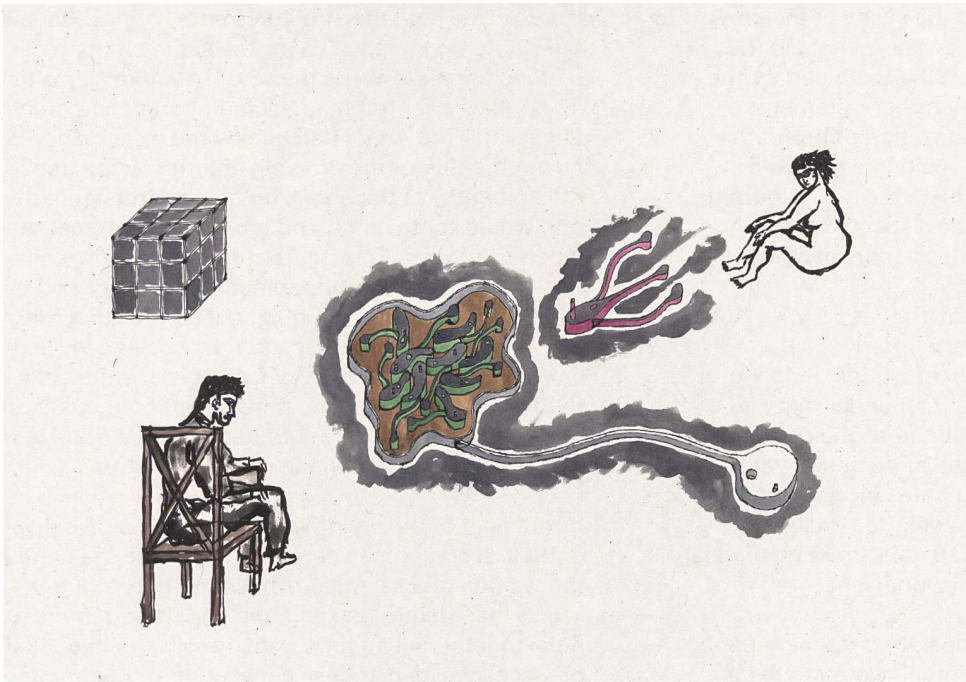


C

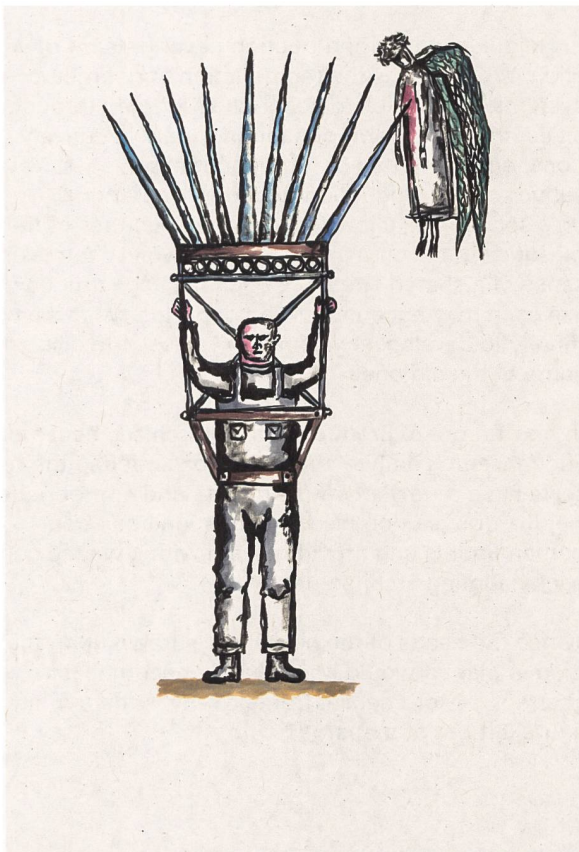


- A John Hejduk, *The Architect Observes His Models*, in *Bovisa*, 1986. Image: Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA)  
 B John Hejduk, *Record Keeper of Hallucinations*, in *Bovisa*, 1986. Image: Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA)  
 C John Hejduk, *Chapel of the Dead Angel*, in *Bovisa*, 1986. Image: Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA)

D



E



D John Hejduk, Hospital Tower: Detention Centre, in Bovisa, 1986. Image: Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA)  
E John Hejduk, The Angel Catcher, in Bovisa, 1986. Image: Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA)

resembling an observatory and the scene of the preparation of a corpse inside the chapel all appeal to the profane rather than to the sacred announced by the program of the chapel. Together, these elements question «the reductive categorization of program» by the architectural discipline, inviting a renewed understanding of it.<sup>(6)</sup> For Hejduk, «the new program presents a highly charged political social manifestation. If that gets built, it will transport people».<sup>(6)</sup>

#### IV ARCHITECTURAL COMMUNITY

In the masques, rituals of inhabitation, told in the form of short poems or prose, act as a reminder that history is not something that is limited to the past, but includes everyday events and their interaction with memory. The use of text participates in the political dimension of the masques, allowing to «imagine moments of spatial appropriation, thus creating original architectural images of cultural significance».<sup>(7)</sup>

In «Bovisa», two of the drawings are large painted texts. One of them depicts the ritual related to the «Hospital Tower: Detention Centre»: <sup>(8)</sup> «the entire floor within the tower is movable up/down... down/up. [...] The process of failing or improving health is measured or indicated by the floor's height within the tower».<sup>(8)</sup> In the detention centre, the healthy patient can exit via a footbridge to a room occupied by a white bull. Once a year, a woman replaces the bull for a day. If the prisoner gets out that particular day, he is set free and moves with the woman to a small farm in the Po valley.

These narratives refer directly to existing institutions and the beliefs attached to them. In examining their impact on daily lives, Hejduk raises questions about the acceptability of prisons, of hospitals, or the role of chance. In this sense, his understanding of the social role of architecture is very close to that of the theater: «theater is a manifestation which is capable of keeping society balanced, and that is the point of *communitas*. In theater we can begin to undertake an investigation of the phenomena on which our present society stands».<sup>(9)</sup>

#### V NARRATIVES OF TRANSGRESSION

At the end of his life, Hejduk opposes the brutality with which late twentieth-century architecture treats reality in drawing fictitious elements transgressing conventions, thus allowing for new forms of alterity to take part in reality.

In «Bovisa», both the structures and the inhabitants are busy catching angels, using the same sharp geometries turned towards the sky. The entire city is turned into a device for trapping, dismembering and crucifying angels. In «The Angel Catcher»,<sup>(10)</sup> the discrepancy between the title of the drawing and the action underlines the ambiguity of the angel, both a floating figure that one would try to catch and a body of flesh that bleeds when murdered. This intermittent appearance of angels within reality underlines the fragility and the vitality of that which is ambiguous or transgressive, and which finds itself discarded by society. In Hejduk's words, «we are in a time where we have the ability to crucify angels».<sup>(10)</sup> The persecuted fictitious figures materialize the rejection of alterity as a terrible loss that society inflicts upon itself and its future.

But the act of crucifying angels and the public display of their dead corpses paradoxically make the angels the victims of a sacrifice, whose memory will transcend their death. As such, the angels and the relating ritual together plead for a transgressive architectural practice «which disobeys conventional constraints on what is deemed real».<sup>(11)</sup>

In Hejduk's work, reproduction never gets rid of variation. Whether it is the reproduction of geometric systems, of subjects/objects, their journey through cities, the social reproduction of rituals or conventions, each dynamic of reproduction is successively subverted. Reproduction becomes operational on a social level, allowing all of the structures of the masques to become active agents involved in making sense of a shared situation. Each new construction, like each new encounter, is an opportunity for the community to develop new common values or to discard some of the old ones.

In his attempt to produce less hierarchical, hegemonic and mastering architectural situations offering themselves in a renewed way to debate and appropriation, Hejduk draws upon his own questionings about human figures and provides them with a way to come back haunting architecture.

«Once the heads of the citizens are drawn upon the map in plan, it would immediately become less abstract... More dense. Darker. Why is the human figure left out of maps?»<sup>(12)</sup>

Auréli Dupuis, born 1989, is a PhD candidate in the Architecture and Sciences of the City programme at the EPFL. Since 2015, she has led several contributive projects for ALICE EPFL and since 2020, she is also a member of the cooperative Architecture Land Initiative. Her current research reflects on the implications of the notion of choreography for architectural theory and practice by forging new links between architecture and the performing arts. In this context she is taking part in the CCA's doctoral programme 2020 to study the drawings of John Hejduk.

Zoé Lefèvre, born 1993, works as a research assistant at ALICE EPFL and is currently completing her master's degree in architecture in Paris-Malaquais. She also worked at Grau and LIST in Paris. She is interested in the political relevance of architecture and its entanglement with the arts, as well as more broadly in the relationship between design and research.