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STOÀ OPEN SEMINAR. EMERGING PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

Open Seminar



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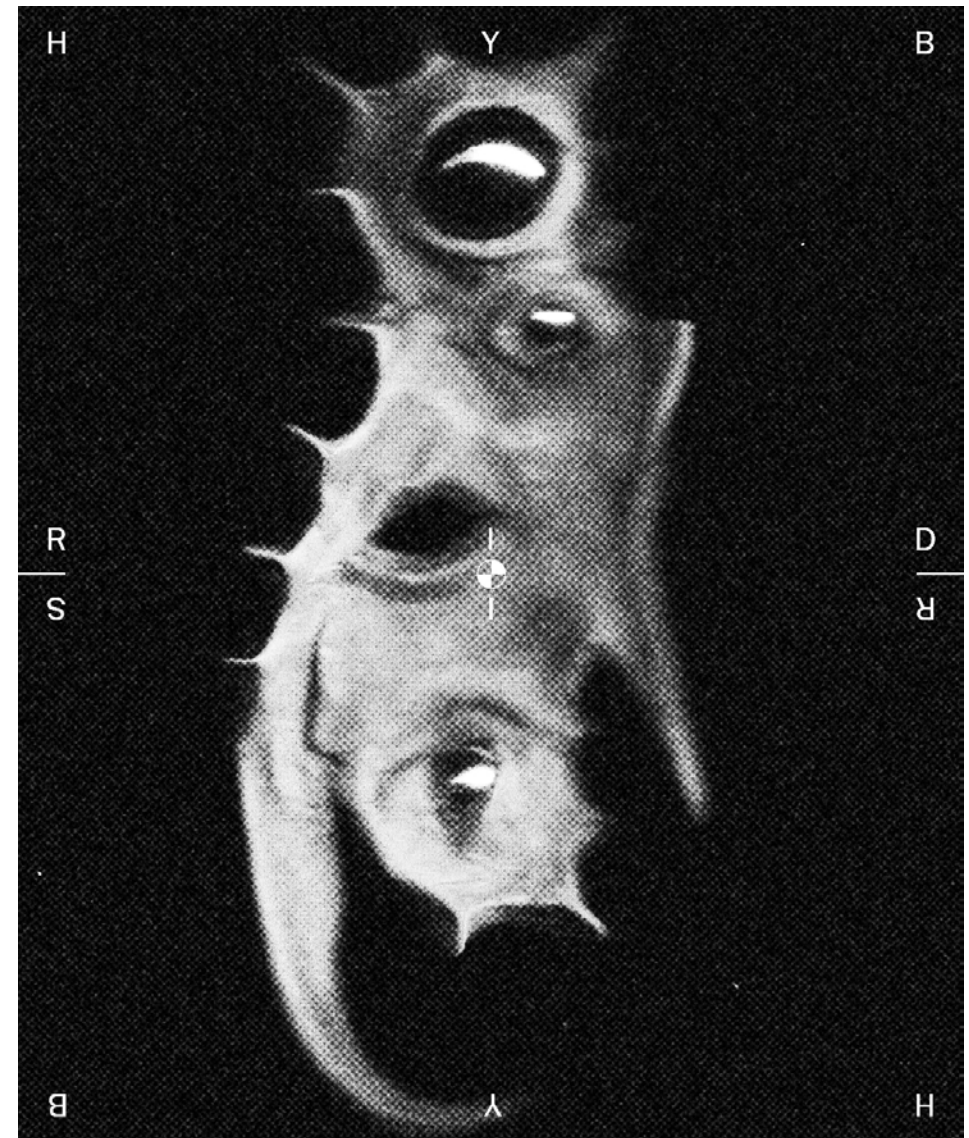
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HYBRIDA[C]TIONS. FOR A MONSTROUS ARCHITECTURE

HOUSSAM MAHI

«In short, you cannot do literature with literature, you cannot do music with music, or cinema with cinema, so you cannot live life with life. You have to do something else!»¹. In this *doing other* manifested the constant tension of research, a dimension that would not exist without recourse to experimentation. It may be noted that the very term *experimentation* derives from the Latin *experimentum*, composed of *ex*, meaning *from*, and *periri*, meaning *to attempt* or *to go through*, thus encompassing a double dimension: on the one hand experience (of a Dionysian nature) and the other the rationality of technique (of an Apollonian nature). This crossing of the unknown, supported by *technique*, allows certain concepts intrinsic to the artistic and architectural sphere to be unveiled and, consequently, shown, which previously might have appeared different or even unknown. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in defining the concept of the *bricoleur*, emphasises his ability to «perform a large number of differentiated tasks, but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate them to the possession of raw materials and tools, conceived and procured expressly for the realisation of his project: his instrumental universe is closed, and, for him, the rule of the game consists in always adapting himself to the equipment at his disposal, that is, to a gradually finite whole»². The framework in which design pedagogy operates takes on the nature of the *finite* universe of the *bricoleur*. In this sense, speculations in the field of art and, therefore, architecture must be able to admit the mixing of heterogeneous characters from different disciplines, thus favouring the concept of hybridisation. The concept of *hybrid* does not seem to be too far removed from that of *hybris*.

We see how the term *hybris*, etymologically translated as *excess*, *insolence*, *arrogance*, was understood by the Greeks as «any violation of the norm of measure, that is, the limits that human beings must observe in their relations with other human beings, with divinity or with the order of things»³. Breaking this balance gives rise to a monster (from the Latin *monstrum*, which refers to the verb *monere*, meaning primarily *to show* and *warn of the presence and will of the gods*, but also, according to some less frequent usages, *to correct* and *to punish*), which generally carries with it a negative connotation. Hence its possible classification into four basic deviations: «the “deformed”, which represents a departure from the correct form through hypertrophies and hypotrophies; the “shapeless”, which implies morphological unrecognizability; the “hybrid”, which is the intermediate result of the coupling of dissimilar generative elements; and the “chimera”, which is the result of the assemblage of body parts of different entities»⁴. How, then, can this dimension of monstrosity and, consequently, hybridity, be useful for the architect or the artist in general? We should assume that monstrosity is not to be sought exclusively in the form of the result, or at least not only. Monstrosity is opposed to conventional taste. When Emil M. Cioran discusses the necessity of language *corruption* to survive history, concerning the post-revolutionary French language, he means precisely this concept. He states that language, to «survive, to maintain itself, needed to corrupt itself, to enrich itself with many new improprieties, to move from the drawing room to the street. [...] If it wants to reinvigorate itself, to avoid unreality or sclerosis,



Houssam Mahi, *Untitled #08*,
Milano, 2023, clay and steel.

it must renounce its own needs, it must shatter its pictures and models, it must acquiesce in bad taste»⁵. There is no time for taste, it slows down the process. It indeed reveals nothing except the preference of the author. Taste works solely on the character of the author. «Taste is the prerogative of the idle and amateur, of those who, having surplus time, employ it in subtle trifles and concerted futilities, of those – above all – who employ it in themselves»⁶. Experimentation, therefore, cannot admit taste a priori. In this sense, the concept of hybridisation acts as an antidote to this kind of prefigurative impulse.

If «everything that acts is cruelty»⁷, such action must affect something that previously possessed a form and a name, particularly a body. Various bodies, including those of the various artistic disciplines, including architecture, have undergone modifications and alterations over time, influenced by the transformations of the world in which they operated. These metamorphoses have not occurred only naturally, in the evolutionary sense of the term, or at least, not only in this way, but have manifested themselves through processes of hybridisation with bodies belonging to other disciplines, or through the grafting and use of foreign bodies, such as prostheses, derived from new technical knowledge. Viktor Sklovsky, in his *Theory of Prose*, observes how the world changes, and along with it, art changes to preserve a link with life. This change is not turned towards the new but takes the form of Paul Klee's angel of history; in fact, «it changes while also preserving the old forms, as a criterion of measurement»⁸. With this view, we try to see how hybridisation has allowed new languages to develop by corrupting and contaminating the structures that characterised them. Take, for example, the poem entitled *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897) by

Stéphane Mallarmé. The words emancipate themselves from their only evocative function, the sentence breaks up, breaking the narrative dimension with it. The body of the text acquires, within space and on paper, a double meaning. Now, words take on double meaning through their physical characteristics, understood as measurable dimensions such as width, height and weight. This breaking of the rule is initially determined by the desire to give physicality to the word – to *the sign* Barthes would say – and to give it a new *signification*⁹. This new language laid the foundation, at least formally, for what would be called *Concrete Poetry* in the 1950s.

To the question *What is theatre?* Roland Barthes answers by describing it as «a kind of cybernetic machine. At rest, this machine is hidden behind a curtain. But as soon as it is out in the open, it starts sending messages to your address. Messages that have this feature, are simultaneous and yet of a different rhythm»¹⁰. Similarly, to the question *What is theatricality?* Barthes states that «it is theatre minus the text, it is a thickness of signs and sensations that takes shape on the stage from the written subject. It is that kind of ecumenical perception of sensual artifices, gestures, tones, distances, substances, lights, which overwhelms the text with the fullness of its exterior language»¹¹. The work of the ALTRO-EQUIPE shows the influence of various artistic disciplines hybridised with the latest computer technologies, «with the aid of interactive methodologies and modelling software, architecture is proposed as a living body in transformation, in search of systems that reproduce the appearance of life»¹². The choreography and body language part are by Lucia Latour, while the spatial and architectural experience is led by Orazio Carpenzano. In the work entitled *Physico*, space disappears, merging

with the actor. The scene is here understood as a *living organism*, the bodies twist, fall and rise, each time starting the same composition all over again. In this way, there is a continuous relationship between body and architecture (space), arriving at a macabre fusion with «the scene that has become the *monster*»¹³. If we look at another body, that of architecture, we see that it is different from *building*. Architecture is the involvement of the mind through the senses in a narrative; this narrative, to become a poetic work, must not only respect the syntax and thus the rules of language but must work on it to corrupt it, to make it say something else. In this sense, the architect, as a poet, works on language through manipulations of language. Take for example the work of Jean-Jacques Lequeu, who is compared by Anthony Vidler to the work of Arcimboldo. We see Arcimboldo operating as a «poet, i.e. a craftsman, a worker of language. [...] The sense – of the compositions – is born from the combination of insignificant elements (phonemes, lines). Still, it is not enough to combine these elements once to exhaust the creation of sense: what has been combined forms aggregates that can be combined again. [...] Arcimboldo's painting is, in short, mobile»¹⁴. We find the same mobility in Lequeu's work, which goes a step further than Arcimboldo's, «as if, having broken down a face into its principal forms, he subsequently recreated it by composing it with facial elements that originally belonged to other facial elements»¹⁵. Lequeu's architecture is conceived as an *écriture architecture*, narrative and orthographic, whose character is also strongly linked to the modes of representation, presenting «his projects in elevation and section [...] but rarely in plan»¹⁶. In this sense, one wonders why Arcimboldo's heads, or Lequeu's architecture,

arouse a certain unease in us? Precisely because «they are *composed*. [...] The heads of Arcimboldo – and the architecture of Lequeu – are monstrous because they all refer, whatever the grace of the allegorical subject, to a substantial malaise: swarming»¹⁷. This type of manipulation, which pushes beyond the limit – be it physical, economic or social – generates *monstrosities*. Such hybridisations are not the result of fine gesture or fantasy, and therefore of taste, but rather the consequence of profound research that finds its experimental dimension in composition. Note how, in all the examples and experiences listed above, there is a common thread linked to the theme of *hybridisation* and that this does not necessarily lead to a single possible result. In this sense, the hybrid issue, as happens in the biological field, can take two possible directions: that of a new *vigour* of the discipline or its imminent *sterility*¹⁸. In the context of architectural design pedagogy, although it is a particular discipline that directly confronts reality, it is crucial not to respond directly to reality itself. Douglas Darden states that «Architecture posits the *authentic*. Architecture posits the *fake*»¹⁹. Therefore, the pedagogy of a discipline such as architecture should accept an Architecture of the useless, that is, an Architecture that while starting from a from a reading of reality, does not necessarily reflect it, but rather reinvents it, seeking the *swarming* of which Barthes speaks. In this sense, «if reality imitates the imaginary (Augé), art must reinvent reality (Ballard) with an added challenge: the anguish of lost experience to be put back into play»²⁰. This anguish takes on the guise of *Hybris*, *Monstrum* and thus *Hybrid*. In this sense, taking up the words at the beginning, it is not possible to create architecture with architecture alone. It is necessary to do something else!

Notes

1. Intervista di Sandro Veronesi, *Carmelo Bene versus Cinema*, 1995, Otranto.
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Il pensiero selvaggio* (1962), Il Saggiatore, Milano 1996, p. 30.
3. Nicola Abbagnano, Giovanni Fornero, *Dizionario di filosofia*, Utet, Torino 1998, p. 547.
4. Carlo Cantaluppi, *Una figura dell'efficacia filosofica: la hybris*, in «Il luogo pubblico della filosofia», n°1, 2010, p. 5.
5. Emil M. Cioran, *Squartamento* (1979), Adelphi, Milano 2022, p. 43.
6. Ibid., p. 41.
7. Antonin Artaud, *Il teatro e il suo doppio* (1938), Einaudi, Torino 1978, p. 200.
8. Viktor B. Sklovskij, *La teoria della prosa* (1925), Einaudi, Torino 1976, p. XIII.
9. Roland Barthes, *Saggi critici* (1963), Einaudi, Torino 1972, p. 303.

10. Ibid., p. 343.
11. Ibid., p. 5.
12. Orazio Carpenzano, Lucia Latour, *Physico. Fusione danza-architettura*, in «Universale di architettura», n° 136, 2003, p. 5.
13. Ibid., p. 79.
14. Roland Barthes, *Arcimboldo* (1985), Abscondita, Milano 2005, pp. 33-35.
15. Anthony Vidler, *The Writing of the Walls*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1987, p. 123.
16. Ibid., p. 121.
17. Roland Barthes, *Arcimboldo* cit., p. 48.
18. Kenneth L. Kaplan, *Heterotic Architecture*, in Joseph Fenton, «Hybrid buildings», Pamphlet architecture, n°11, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1985, p. 4.
19. Douglas Darden, *Condemned Buildings: An Architect's Pre-Text*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2009, p. 9.
20. Orazio Carpenzano, Lucia Latour, op. cit., p. 58.