



Counterform in architecture and inner space

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The philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman in his book *La somiglianza per contatto. Archeologia, anacronismo e modernità dell'impronta* [*La Ressemblance par contact, Minuit, 2008*] allows us to bring into focus the reflection upon traces, in the relationship between archaeology and the project. Traces and imprints are the expression of a peculiar and specific identity. With his analysis, the philosopher tells us of an archaeology that speaks in the plural form and, investigating the XXth century, shows heterogeneous levels and layers. He is illuminating when he declares that: «It was thus that Walter Benjamin formulated, through the expression 'dialectic image,' an exemplary hypothesis on the anachronism of those works of art that still haven't attained history's 'readability:' in them, according to Benjamin, "the relation between the Already-been and the Now is not a course but a discontinuous image, a leaping one" — an image in which the past and the present mislead and transform each other, criticize one another, giving birth to something that Benjamin called a "constellation," a dialectic configuration of heterogeneous times» (Didi-Huberman 2009, pp. 10-11). The philosopher shows us how the historical interpretation (let us think of his work on Beato Angelico) needs to be constantly questioned in the light of a transformation not so much of the past, as of our perception of the present.

What is contact? Why is it the subject of this reflection?

Because in the relation between present and past, between the action of the contemporary project and archaeological remains, from classical findings to the industrial ones, contact implies a critical point, where a link that unifies times and alters them materializes. Archae-

ology is a reflection on the body, material and auratic, the expression of a “defined” time and space, and in parallel it addresses the definition of an immaterial, of a cultural space which, exactly because it has passed through time, requires a reflection on what we are in this precise moment. Didi-Huberman offers us some interpretations that touch upon archaeology as much as upon new procedures of the contemporary project: the idea that architecture is the result of a subtraction and that, more than about form, we should speak of *counterform*, cast, trace, imprint.

The philosopher explains that the imprint defines a complex portion which incorporates the principles of Tyche and Técnica (chance and technique). «*Form*, in the process of imprinting, is never rigorously “fore-seeable”: it is always problematic, unexpected, unstable, open» (Didi-Huberman 2009, p. 31). Form «is a *model*, a *cast*, a *matrix*» (Didi-Huberman 2009, p. 50).

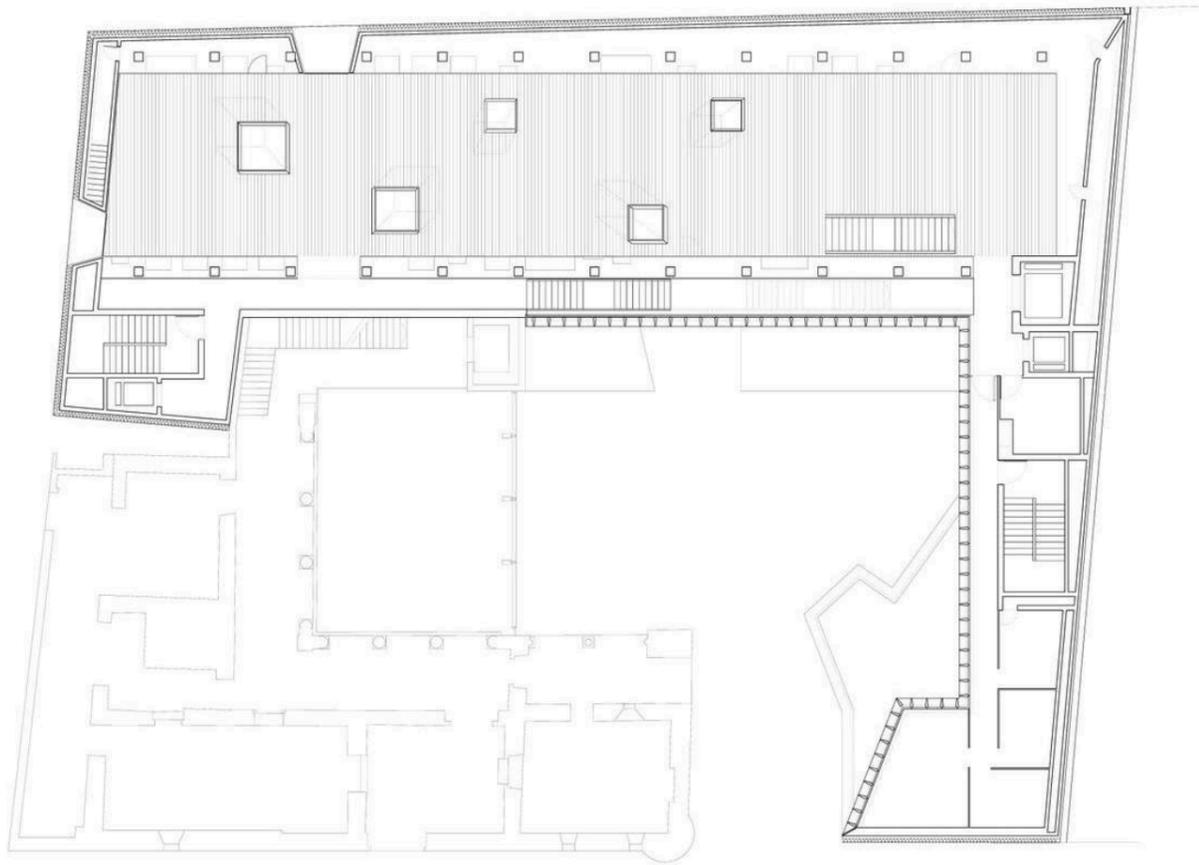
It is an interpretation that touches closely the past, from the gold masks of Mycenae’s Tomb IV (XVI C B.C.) to Canova’s neoclassical plaster models in Possagno and Rodin’s casts. I rediscover possibilities of research in many contemporary interventions in archaeological areas, where architecture is decreed from the counterform of a cast which, protecting memory, renames it. Thus the philosopher: «The imprint *redoubles*. On the one hand, it creates a lining, a kind of protecting casket, a cladding in which the forms seems, for a moment, to be protected by its counterform. Let us think of the face still wrapped in its matrix-like shell, in the moment it takes the plaster or takes the likeness. However it is a double-click “catch,” imposing a new meaning to the act of “catching” when it ends up *tearing off the likeness* to the body it has seized. The imprint, thus, is a predator: it preserves what we lose, it isolates us and even tears us off from our likeness» (Didi-Huberman 2009, pp. 224-225).

To employ the themes of the imprint, of the trace, of the cast let us re-read some current research, particularly Francisco Mangado’s intervention on the *Museo Arqueológico de Álava* in Vitoria. The architect offers us one of the most interesting works on the relationship between museum, archaeology, restoration and insert on historical tis-

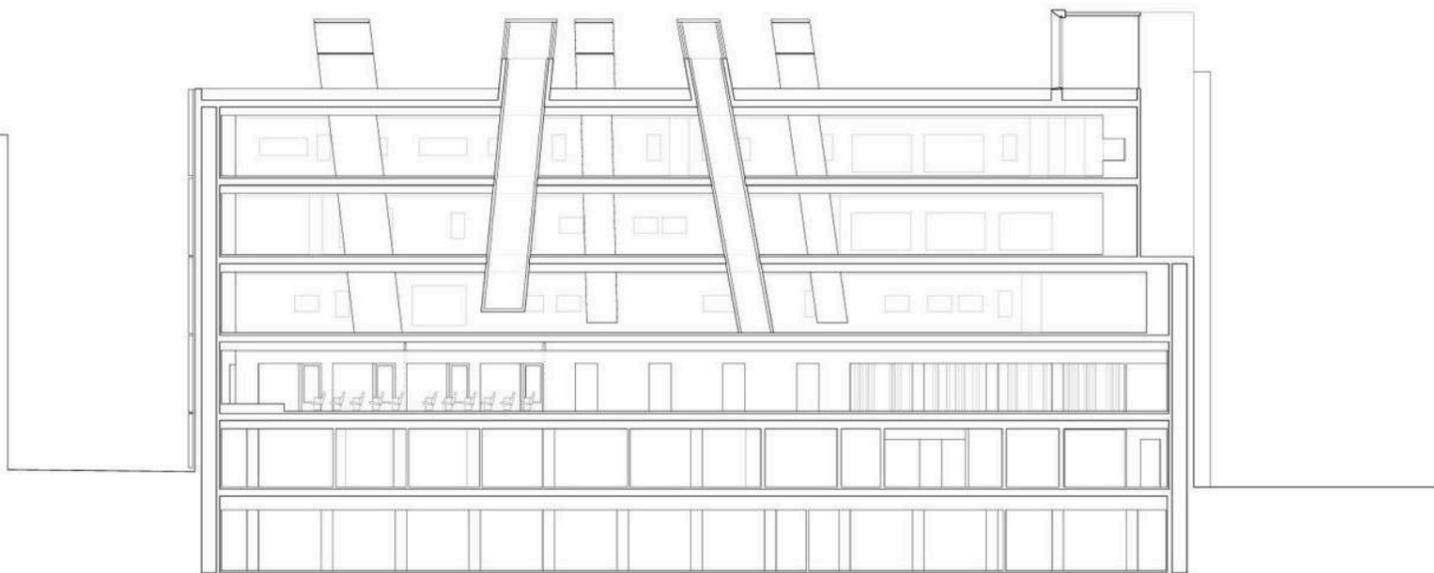


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sues. A L-shaped body is wedged into the medieval heart of the city to become tied up to a previous structure: Bendaña palace, built in the XVIth century, and housing Naipes Fournier’s museum. The new intervention appears as a closed and compact block. The outside, treated with prefabricated bronze sheets, makes the building an impenetrable display case, opened by some emptying of the mass, like cubes subtracted in order to give way to light. On the contrary, the inner side, prospecting onto an irregular court, is endowed with a structure



of metal foils which orientates the entrance of light, giving the elevations the strength of uniformity. Access to the museum is through the dynamic court. The building is resolved through an act of shaping of the void, of accordance between existing walls, of definition of a new identity within the historical site. Suddenly the whole perspective of the intervention opens up. While the outside is essentially hidden, in order to strengthen a urban and historical instance of medieval stronghold, the inside appears more open, as if to welcome the visitor. The court is resolved with a wooden level and skylights bringing light to the level below. History is reread by the designer as dynamic, ongoing, and it clarifies the present need to redefine the limits of the discipline's practice. In the exhibiting spaces, Mangado materializes the main choice of the museum, that is narrating archaeological history through a plan of shadow. Dug to be taken back to light, such history needs a mysterious and authentic immersion. Prisms of light cut and pierce, like tilted blades, the body's impenetrability. Such skylights, that take the light from the roofing, introduce it into the exhibiting spaces on the different levels. They create an interesting field of forces, dictated by the different size and inclination of the glazed prisms. The resolve is shifting the perception from the findings to the viewer's dynamic eye, onto the philosophy Duchamp introduced in the Twentieth century, to make the experience of the past transmissible through a reinterpretation of time. The ambient is warmed up by the dark wood walls, excavated to contain the display cases. Mangado's project should be counted among the most interesting works of the last generation, for its capacity to materialize the metaphor, to make the wall a mass which questions both archaeological history and the form of the city itself. The mould, the cast, the archaeology of contact manifest themselves here as a process of memory.



Such identity becomes a sort of manifesto in the recent *Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias*, in Oviedo, Spain, completed in 2015. The museum is made like a casket, which encloses two important buildings of the city: the Palacio de Velarte and the Casa Oviedo-Portal. The choice in terms of design was to keep alive the historical and urban identity of the traditional buildings and build alongside a con-

temporary space, working between the older volumes. There derives a strong tensions between the matters, the consolidated forms and the new glass membrane which, separating itself, creates a distance with the past as well as a dynamic spatiality.

Mangado works with the aim of connecting the city's histories and unifying the pre-existing buildings through a composition of complex volumes, built in the internal court. Working between the parts allow him to produce complex rooms, conceived in elevation, with large cuts bringing light into the different exhibiting spaces. These are completed with tilted skylights that create a new urban skyline. More than of form, as we said, we should be talking of counterform, a hollow, produced by a cast. The architect understands that in order to create a dialogue among the different moments in time the solutions must be complex in the spatial relations, as if to make one touch the perceptive diagonals with the senses, whereas the material choices are extremely clear and simple, such as to make the different archaeologies blend. Like a protective deity, there returns Louis Kahn's work, the *Yale Center for British Art* in New Haven (Connecticut, 1969-1974), where the American architect had invented the large sections of light. Mangado recovers such tradition and reinterprets it, offering with the *Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias* one of the most interesting works in the interaction between historical buildings and contemporary places.

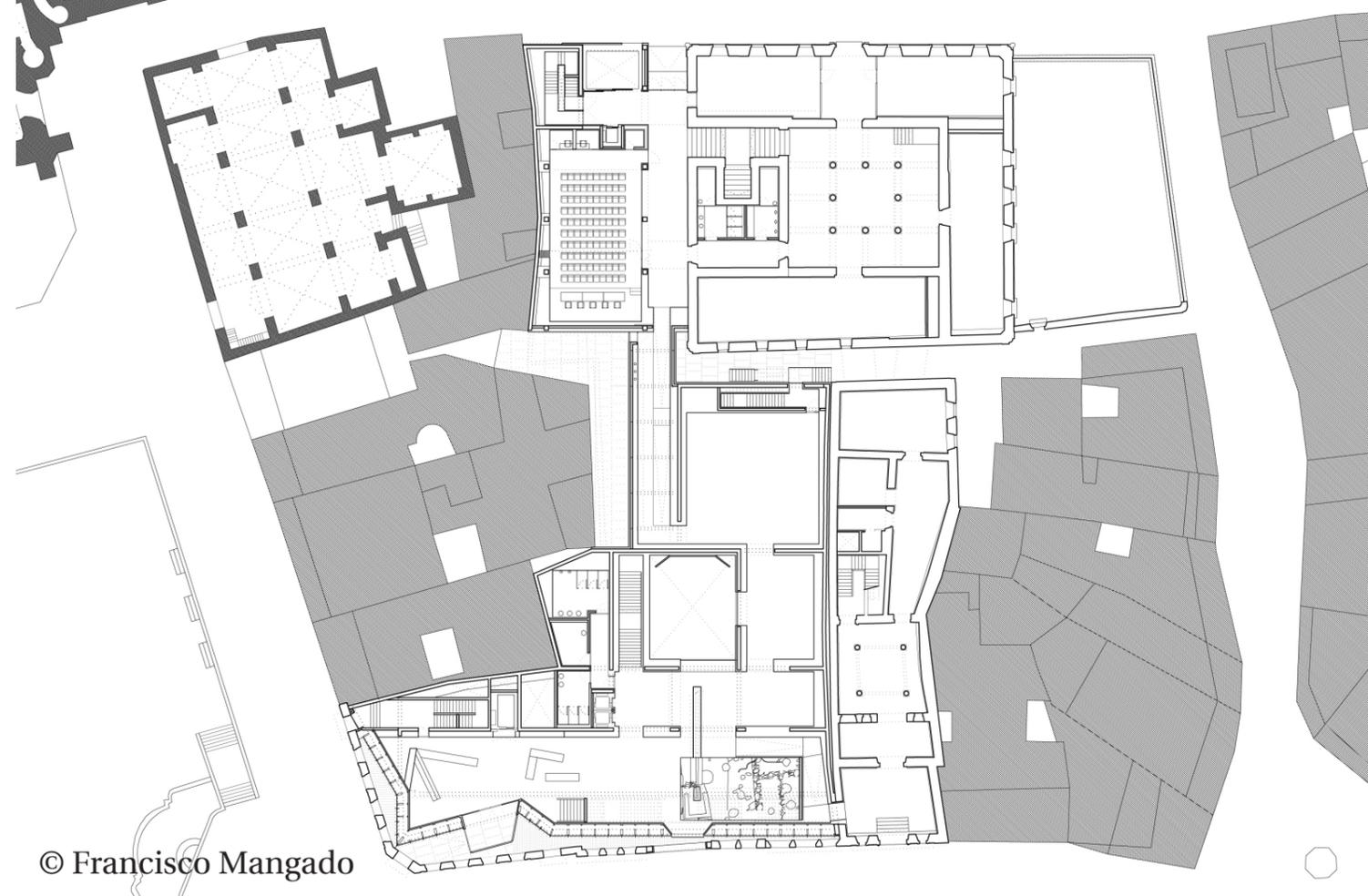
In order to understand more layers, we then call upon the world of art and music. The subject addresses the relationship between form and identity, between construction and interiority.

There re-emerges a literature of dissonance, based on contrast and counterpoints, that is experienced at the heart of modernity. An exchange of letters between Wassily Kansinsky and Arnold Schönberg in the years 1911-14 sanctions a friendship and a correspondence between two artists that were setting the foundations of the research for the total work of art. A complex phase of the century that has just ended, in which the romantic instances, absolute and total, clashed against the need to change, at an historical moment in which the imminent war spurred artists to raise questions about time, destiny, sin-



gularity, solitude, while the whole world was asking them to reverse their searching tools. The correspondence (the two write to each other almost daily) allows us to shed light onto the understanding of those processes. Kandinsky came from an aristocratic family, Schönberg from a relatively poor one. Such difference can be detected in their attitude and approach, which are substantially different: Kandinsky is straightforward, he leads the conversation, whereas Arnold chooses an indirect, not explicit, careful and gentler form of communication.

Both aware of their historical weight, they live totally their dimension. On the 18th of January 1911, Kandinsky writes the first letter to Schönberg. The dignified tone and the respect for his counterpart are deduced from the following words: «In Your works you have actualized what I, in a form which is obviously undetermined, I wished I would find in music. The autonomous path along the direction of one's own destiny, the intrinsic life of each single voice in your compositions, are exactly what I try to express in a pictorial way. In this moment there is in painting a strong tendency to look for the "new harmony" in a constructive way, therefore the rhythmic element is mounted in an almost geometric way. Due both to my sensibility and my commitment, I only partly agree with such way. *Construction* is what painting, in the last few years, has lacked. It is right to look for it. Yet my *way* of conceiving such construction is different. I think in fact that harmony in our time should not be searched for in a "geometric" way, but rather through a rigorously anti-geometrical, anti-logical way. Such way is the one of the "dissonances in *art*", that is also in painting, as much as in music. And *today's* pictorial as well as musical dissonance is nothing but tomorrow's consonance» (Schönberg, Kandinsky 2012, pp. 17-18). On the 24th of January, Schönberg's reply clarifies and reintroduces, through a concept that is as clear as innovative, the points raised by the Russian artist: «Every creative activity wishing to reach the traditional effects is not entirely devoid of conscious acts. Yet art belongs to the *subconscious*! One must express *oneself*! Express oneself with *immediacy*! However, one shouldn't express one's taste, one's education, one's intelligence, knowledge or ability. None of those qualities that are *assimilated*, but rather the *innate, instinctive* ones. Every creation, each *conscious* creation is based on a mathematical and geometrical principle, on the golden section or something similar. Only unconscious creation, which translates into the equation. "form=manifestation", creates true forms; only this form of creation produces those models imitated by people lacking originality, who transform them into "formulae"» (Schönberg, Kandinsky 2012, p. 19). Schönberg and Kandinsky speak to us of a private world, which links abstraction to spirituality, through a inner, underlying, personal



world. Themes that find an extraordinary allegiance in the relationship of the contemporary project with archaeology.

In Mangado's works, such inner identity is present, both in the *Museo Arqueológico de Álava* and in the *Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias*, for his ability in shaping the interior space, in intervening inside architecture, like that process of unveiling the form which in art belongs to expressionism, to Boccioni's sculpture, while the image on the outside reveals itself for its capacity to respect urban history, including the developments which nourished it.

In an important book by the photographer Alexander Liberman, titled *The artist in his studio*, we find a photograph of Kandinsky's studio in Paris, taken by the author in 1954. He portrays a wall with a cabinet the artist called "my keyboard", with the paintings of the expressionism season, made in 1911. In the thin cabinet Wassily had arranged in a meticulous order the sequence of colours, from cold to warm. It was a way to affirm that form is a process that starts from order to meet an unexpected dimension, that is the unconscious one.



Thus Liberman relates the visit to his studio: «In his memoirs, the artist describes the actual moment of the accidental discovery of non-figurative art, or abstract, when he was forty-four. One afternoon in 1910, at sunset, he was coming back home from an open air session, still concentrated upon the work he had done; entering his studio he was struck by an “incredibly beautiful painting, completely irradiated by some inner light”. In the mysterious canvas he could only make out “forms and colours, and no meaning”. He suddenly realized that it was one of his paintings, lying down on one side. “The next day, in broad daylight, I tried to recapture the impression. I could only do it half way. Even with the painting set on one side, I was able to find the object all the same, but the bluish light of dusk wasn’t there anymore. In that precise moment I realized that objects were harmful to my painting”. He wrote he felt “a terrifying abyss opening under my feet”. The thinking man of that epoch was divided between the unfathomable depths of his inner world, as Freud had demonstrated, and Einstein’s infinite universe which surrounded him, as if his skin were the dividing line between two universes moving away from one another, in immeasurable depths» (Liberman, 1955, p. 179).

Perhaps this is actually the research of the borderline between the sedimentary, archaeological, structured city and its inner soul, the one that in redefinition acquires a new contemporary memory. Francisco Mangado, as in the picture of Kandinsky’s studio, tells us of the disciplinary need to define new places that are internal to the historical city, interstitial spaces in which the present converses with immeasurable time.

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