

# Black Conversations

Giovanni Corbellini

VICEVERSA

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anthological  
exhibition, Forlì,  
2017. Installation  
project: Antonio  
Ravalli, Mustafa  
Sabbagh.

# GENEROUS BLACK

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*Antonio Ravalli, Mustafa Sabbagh*

**GC** Antonio, it was you who drew me into this idea of black architecture some years ago, so you are the right person to start this series of conversations. I asked you to involve Mustafa, not only because of his personal research around darkness: your paths have often crossed and I believe this common passion grew up in your collaboration.

**AR** Even the latest exhibition by Mustafa<sup>1</sup> we set up in Forlì is entirely black...

**GC** But how did it all start? Is there any particular episode or influence?

**MS** Those who work with photography, then with light, naturally have a preference for white, but I soon realized that it is misleading: white reverberates, dazzles. Black is much more generous because it has the strength to accommodate every other colour. It is the opposite of the myth of the cave of Plato (and the correspondence between light and truth on which it is based): I think darkness is revealing as it introduces a contrast and allows us to see.

One thing I learned by teaching photography (when we mostly talk about light) is that three-dimensionality depends on shadow, and this opens up a world of possibilities.

Black is a paradox: it subtracts light to emphasize the light. Any light, entering a completely dark environment, comes out amplified.

**AR** In the use of black, there are also practical reasons. What Mustafa says is true: black is very generous. An architect, who has to lean on others for the execution of his work, knows it provides a way to reduce the perception of errors. It hides, somehow, and therefore it carries something that has to do with elegance...

I do not remember any decision on black: I started using it and my reflections came from experimentation, from the observation of its results.

1. Mustafa Sabbagh, 'XI Commandment: You Shall Not Forget', anthological exhibition, 'Onore al Nero-Atramentum', site-specific installation, Musei San Domenico, Forlì, 14 October 2017-14 January 2018. Installation project: Antonio Ravalli, Mustafa Sabbagh, realization: Visual Exhibition, Modena.



Mustafa Sabbagh,  
'Onore al  
nero'\_untitled,  
2016, fine art  
print on dibond,  
cm 100 x 100,  
ed. 1 of 5 + 1  
ap. Courtesy: the  
artist, private  
collection [bg].

The fashion world, with which I worked a lot, might have been an influence. Black in clothing is a sign of mourning, at least in the West. At a certain moment, in the 19th century, black also became the colour of refined people, a trendy colour. A poem by Baudelaire<sup>2</sup> dedicated to a woman dressed in black he had seen in the street highlights the poignant, majestic elegance of mourning.

2. Charles Baudelaire, 'A une passante', *L'Artiste* (1855).

3. Michel Pastoreau, *Noir. Histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008).

**GC** Pastoreau traced back these events in history. Somewhere in his book on black,<sup>3</sup> he writes that dyeing fabrics black has long been complicated and, therefore, very expensive.

**AR** The first dresses that could convey a true darkness were made of velvet: a particular fabric whose depth, according to the incidence of light on the direction of the fibres, always produces different, iridescent effects.

When we talk of black, however, we are talking about a multiple range of phenomena. Black is never 'black': it is a material condition with its specific depth, texture, filigree... A stratification that other colours cannot reach.

In general, we don't use black, we employ a dark colour that reacts to light in a complex way.

**MS** Last year I exhibited my series of works entitled 'Honour to Black' in Palermo. It is yet another tribute to its generosity: white gets dirty, black fades. We come pure into the world and acquire darkness by living.

In the colours synthesis, black is 000: the sum of three absences that amounts to a totality... Black is a whore: it is very erotic, not only for the fetish imaginary it feeds upon: depending on the Kelvin degree it meets, it produces various ranges of shades. When the colours we use get lighter, this inclination to unite and transform tends to get lost.

**GC** Do you photograph in colour?

**MS** Yes, always: it's a rather absurd challenge...

**AR** Indeed, your blacks are never simply such. The photograph I have in front of me shows a blue, petroleum colour cast, as almost always in your work.

Nothing like black matter expresses an ability to react differently to the surface. Think of a polished or opaque marble, their changing effects under the light. It is a surface that takes depth.

**MS** In the West, we have lost the notion of colours assembly. It is a form of laziness, almost a cowardice. In *Incomplete Manifesto*, Bruce Mau says: 'Don't be cool.'<sup>4</sup>

I have a deep love for black and I want to redeem it. It must be something more than fashion or an excuse to avoid other possibilities.

**AR** However, now I remember that we got to black because of fashion, with that first store we made together.<sup>5</sup>

At the first meeting, the client explained that it was strategic for them, as part of the sales process, to have the shop perfectly clean, and the staff was always busy keeping it shiny. They sold very expensive items by Margiela and other similar brands.

So we thought to do something that got so dirty that it would be impossible (and senseless) to clean it all the time. We started with the India ink blackened oak floor: as you entered, you left a series of footprints and there was this continuous action of overlapping and erasing.

**GC** So black is not always that generous.

**AR** Not always, that's true. Anyway, we decided to do everything black in order to make the characteristics of the materials visible. Different woods interact with the dark finishes in a very varied way and the Canadian plywood absorbed the colour differently from the oak.

We used a paint that was a mixture of glossy and opaque: it became reflective on the vein, while the sapwood absorbed it with an effect similar to graphite. It was with these experiments that I explored the possibility of obtaining black different depths and colour casts.

Pierre Soulages is reference from this point of view. In some of his earlier works, a background colour is covered with black, which, according to its thickness, lets the former get to the surface. There you can perceive how the depth of this black stratification interacts with the cooler blue or warmer brown nuances.

**GC** Yes. On the other hand, Soulages' *ourenoir*, which came later in his research, provides an ability to absorb the colours of the environment, to react with its different conditions, the daylight, the position of the observer...

It is a sensitive hue, which becomes automatically contextual, even though, in architecture, we tend to associate darker co-

lours with northern attitudes (tarred wood, clinker bricks...) and white plaster with the Mediterranean. Is fashion a factor in its widespread reception?

**MS** In fashion, at a certain moment, some Japanese designers such as Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons proposed all-black collections. It was also a way to deal with costs: making a complete collection of one hundred, one hundred and fifty items and managing a wide palette of colours can be very expensive.

Just two types of black fabric guaranteed an impact without spending too much. Moreover, from a symbolic point of view, black has completely different meanings in the East.

**AR** Southern latitudes force us to defend ourselves from light. White protects from heat, and whitewash sterilizes.

**GC** Indeed, one of the reasons for its success in the early modern times was the obsession with hygiene.

**MS** Mediterranean light is precise, violent, intrusive, long-lasting.

**AR** However, in the South black took on a sacred character too. Think of the Ka'ba: a black cube inside a very white space. An absolute monument.

**GC** Like the monolith of *2001: A Space Odyssey*?

**MS** Yes, black is an accumulator of physical and symbolic energy.

**AR** Nowadays, however, things changed and black, used for example with a ventilated cladding, can facilitate the recirculation of air and get better efficiency even in hot places.

**MS** It is not just a matter of energy. The function of social and political control carried out by monuments is now entrusted to other, more effective and penetrating media. A darker architecture can also be explained in this way.

**GC** It seems to me that the transition from white to black as a contemporary colour could be the consequence of an inversion between figure and background on many levels.

By the way, displaying your photos on the white walls that are so widespread today in art galleries must be challenging. What do you think of the white box phenomenon?

4. Bruce Mau, *An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth* (2010-14), <<http://www.manifestoproject.it/bruce-mau/>> [accessed 05 May 2018], '14. Don't be cool. Cool is conservative fear dressed in black. Free yourself from limits of this sort.'

5. Antonio Ravalli, Mustafa Sabbagh, Tasmania, Ferrara, 2003.

- MS** It is a disaster. I use dark backgrounds whenever possible.
- AR** In this exhibition of Mustafa's works we have just completed in San Domenico in Forlì, we dealt precisely with this problem. The depth of the blacks of his photos results decisively from the conditions of perception. A too bright background makes it difficult for the eye to adapt, and reduces the complexity of nuances to a uniform black spot. Inside this very white church, with so much diffused light, we have inserted a thirty-five meters long black prism. But what kind of black? We needed something to enhance the depth of colour unfolded by his photographs. Therefore, we opted for material, natural or 'unpremeditated' blacks, derived from combustion. (I always find it difficult to think about colour, unless it is a feature of the material.) On the ground there are surfaces covered with charcoal, while we burned the large prism with flame. Again, it is a process that produces an imperfect black (knots and veins resist to the fire more than softer parts...), with a certain wealth of texture and overall pattern: all the wood planks come out different, with warm or cool colour casts, more opaque or shiny depending on how intensely they have been burned. From a distance, support and works merge into a single object, but at a closer look the former recede in the background while the latter offer themselves to the view without the need of further adaptation.
- GC** Art aspires to become figure in the individual and specific, while architecture is condemned to act as a backdrop (Benjamin defined it as 'the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction'<sup>6</sup>).
- MS** Art wants to break through...  
The attraction of the white cube for an artist lies in a misunderstood connection with the contemporary, but I think it is something out of date. I would say that it is a very Nordic form of separation between container and content. Here we are used to a greater integration between art and architecture, figure and ground.
- AR** The nudes portrayed by Mustafa are, paradoxically, very Nordic types, very white, and their skins let us see the veins in depth. We tried to make this transparency visible.
- GC** Although it is possible to trace the emergence of black even at our latitudes, these are all in all isolated phenomena and linked to specific situations. Its obscurity is hardly attributable to local



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cultures. Did your proposals face any difficulty in being accepted by clients or other actors involved?

**AR** Black is quite absent from our landscapes and can represent a disruptive element. In our design for the new museum at Palazzo Massari in Ferrara, we treated all the new parts in black. Whether polished or opaque, glass or metal, black was meant to display its otherness as a metaphysical presence with respect to the historical stratification in this building. Of course, there was an immediate refusal by the heritage protection authorities, precisely because of this otherness.

**GC** But this is a reasonable, even traditional approach: in Valadier's interventions on the Arch of Titus or the Colosseum, colours and materials make the restoration distinguishable from the original parts.

**AR** In this case, the fundamental point of the project – which finally convinced our counterparts – concerned the visual connection with the landscape, the park outside the palace. To bring it 'inside' the museum – inside its dark, synthetic and super-controlled rooms, especially from the point of view of lighting –, it was necessary to lower its brightness by sixty percent. Therefore, we opted for a very dark glass that Saint-Gobain began to produce in the 1960s. In this way, visitors could enjoy a seamless transition from looking at the pictures to seeing the landscape outside and back without waiting for their eyes to adapt. The glass surface required to achieve this effect has brought the graphite finish of the metal parts and the result is a large black mass that would have hidden in its darkness any clues about the internal partitions, the transparencies and the opaque panels, the casings of machines and other installations.

**GC** This sounds as an anti-functionalist disguise. It should be familiar to the preservation authorities.

**AR** But it would have been a strong presence. A water surface at the base of this black mass multiplied its vertical dimension by reflecting a glossy double, thereby conferring it a further strength. Again, black offers an extremely wide range of effects. It would have allowed us to obtain a pattern of different depths and nuances on a completely flat surface, thanks to the irregularities of the iron, to its degree of purity... It is a sort of decoration: a problematic issue for the designers of our generation that we usually deal

6. Walter Benjamin, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1936), Eng. trans. in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008) p. 40.

with by confiding a little in chance, orchestrating a field of possibilities in which the accidents of processing matter can play a role.

**GC** The opposition of the authorities is hardly surprising. What happens with private clients?

**MS** The architect deals with clients, while an artist works in solitude. He or she doesn't have any duty or the need to be understood. It happens that someone falls in love with a work or an approach for reasons completely different from those that led the artist to produce in a certain direction. Things are done and then shown as accomplished facts. Antonio must find a rational justification; I try to get short circuits. There are some exceptions, for example, the church with the burnt formwork inside designed by Zumthor has a strong character of freedom.<sup>7</sup> However, when there is a lot of money involved, motivations must be strong.

If I think of my experience, I find that black convinces in spite of and thanks to its darkness. It fascinates because it leaves you a little bit outside. It is not a reassuring or understandable colour. It requires an effort that can paradoxically prove to be a positive factor in attracting patrons and observers. Of course, it can also elicit a refusal.

Once, in an exhibition of mine, I saw a couple entering. The man stopped for a long time in front of each photograph and, suddenly, his wife took his arm and abruptly dragged him out while exclaiming: 'Let's go out, I'm anguished!' It was one of the best compliments I ever received.

**AR** We have never encountered any particular problems in proposing black finishes. Usually people come to us because they appreciate what we do. However, since our chromatic or material choices do not come from prefabricated ideologies but draw their reasons from the project, it is on these grounds that we negotiate with the client. If those reasons are good, people understand in the end.

**GC** How do we end this conversation? Do you have any advice on interesting issues, aspects and situations for my research?

**AR** The use of colour, including black, in Bruno Taut. The same in Le Corbusier: his *Clavier de couleurs*<sup>8</sup> shows great skill. And then all the Mediterranean blacks: plaster made with lava in Catania; the funeral carriages in Southern Italy, with their range of effects, from the skin of horses to the lacquering of wood; the black

velvet edges in Neapolitan churches; the dramatic black forged by fire in wrought iron; the black backgrounds of 17th century Spanish painting, full of complex depths...

**MS** There are so many things we didn't have enough time to discuss. The alchemical concept of *nigredo* introduces black as the state of a material in transformation. Now we no longer aspire to produce something that lasts forever and the duration of the black we discussed before does not derive from resistance but from an ability to react, to change over time without losing its identity. Black moves away, breaks through... The small underground clubs of the 1960s and '70s were black to erase borders and double the space. At the same time, black is a wound, it is a strong affirmation of presence: it wants to be there. It is its paradox. Black becomes a mirror, like no other colour...

7. Peter Zumthor,  
Bruder-Klaus-  
Feldkapelle,  
Wachendorf,  
2005-07.

8. Le Corbusier,  
*Clavier de couleurs*  
(Basel: Salubra, 1931).



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Next page:  
Mustafa Sabbagh,  
'Onore al  
nero'\_untitled,  
2015, dyptich,  
fine art print on  
dibond, cm 66 x 60  
each, ed.1 of 5 + 1  
ap. Courtesy: the  
artist, Farnesina  
Contemporary Art  
Collection, Rome.







Rudy Ricciotti,  
Pavillon 52, Quai  
Rimbaud, Lyon,  
2011. Photo Mateja  
Lux.

# REVOLUTION AND SADISM

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*Rudy Ricciotti*

- GC** Darkness emerged soon and reappears often in your work, which is unexpected for a Mediterranean architect.
- RR** Pierre Soulages, this giant of painting, had warned us: 'Black has an interior light.' He lives in the South of France... And so do I!
- GC** Was your Stadium in Vitrolles the first time you employed blackness?
- RR** Yes, it was black concrete and red Mistral. Graffiti concrete: last white page available for writing. It was 1990.
- GC** It seems to state its belonging to the asphalt ribbon of the nearby highway.
- RR** It was a land art situation. Violence done to the site. An abstraction against an abstract site, itself being a cast of red bauxite... A black square on a red background. An approximate Malevich.
- GC** The black interior fits the purpose of a contemporary theatre. Is the dark exterior a consequence of what happens inside?
- RR** No, it is just an autistic tautology: as I said before, a black square on a red background.
- GC** The Stadium was soon abandoned for political reasons. Had the black colour any role in triggering the hatred of the new administration?
- RR** No. Architects hated this rock room even more. The very disturbed French architectural milieu was more 'disco' than 'hard rock', or Bee Gees rather than Black Sabbath.
- GC** Modernist architecture (white, ideologically clean...) does not age very well, while your black box is still impressive in its aban-

doned condition. Is darkness a strategy to cope with the afterlife of buildings?

**RR** I am not so cynical... However, this abandoned place is not a ruin; it resists vandals and hatred of in-law, cyclist, vegan and politically correct architects. Because it is monolithic, self-contained.

**GC** Another black building you designed, the Centre Chorégraphique National (CCN), in Aix-en-Provence, employs a different strategy. Its irregular diagrid plays a complex game with light. Did you control its effects through representation or other means?

**RR** No, I do not control anything. Whatever happens, happens. Only the dictatorship of mathematics directs the forms of this type of project. The structural language of the CCN is the result of reiterated numerical modelling in order to discover which geometry is the most naturally seismic resistant. Its exoskeleton is structural and carries all the elastic dance floors on pre-stressed slabs. However, while I designed and built this project, I understood that rationalism did not exist and that it was just another metaphysical tension.

**GC** I bet there are very practical reasons also for the dark solution of the Museum of the Cultures of the Mediterranean in Marseille (MuCEM).

**RR** Yes, mainly the exposure to strong winds, sea spray and salt. This building needs no maintenance. It is made of an exceptionally dense concrete, almost without porosity.

**GC** The MuCEM's brise-soleil seems to behave in very different ways, according to the observer's positions and to light conditions.

**RR** Caravaggio, this great perverse aesthete, did understand the use of darkness: by sacralising the periphery, he densified the message of the centre. The MuCEM frames my own anxiety about the landscape.

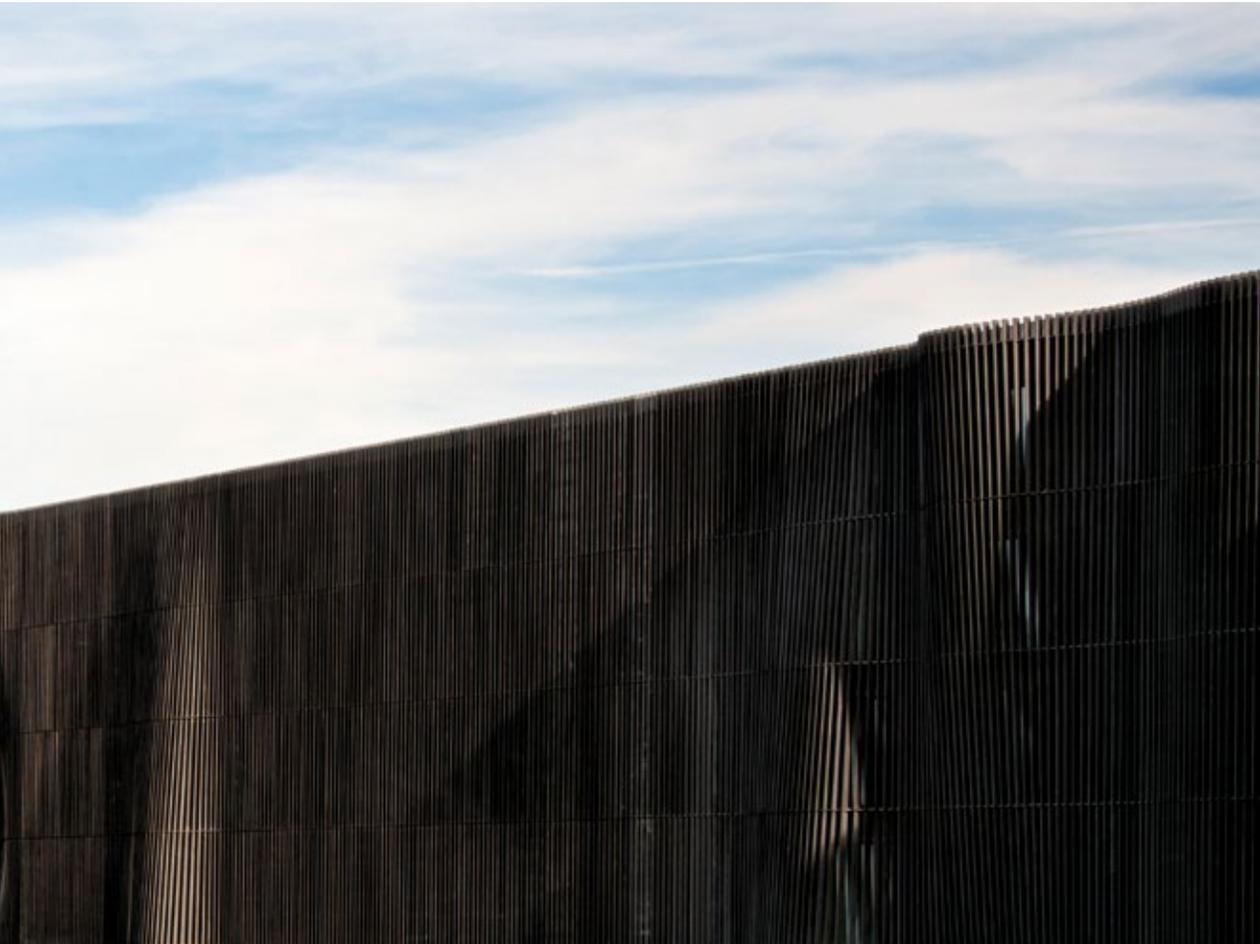
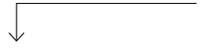
**GC** Its black lace filters the violent light of the Mediterranean by framing different views. Seen from outside, it recalls appealing transparencies. Is there any erotic intentions in their teasing play with vision?



Rudy Ricciotti,  
Centre  
Chorégraphique  
National, Aix en  
Provence, 1999.  
Photo Jean Claude  
Carbonne.



Rudy Ricciotti,  
ITER Headquarters,  
Cadarache, 2007.  
Photo Lisa  
Ricciotti.





Rudy Ricciotti,  
Museum of the  
Cultures of the  
Mediterranean,  
Marseille, 2013.  
Photo Lisa  
Ricciotti.

- RR** Yes, it is done so that citizens masturbate all together behind the 'lace' by becoming aware of their mystical destinies.
- GC** One of the projects that struck me the most in your exhibition at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris was the ITER headquarters, especially its black striated sunshade's reaction to light. However, this building is part of a research centre for nuclear fusion. Does its darkness convey secrecy (or menace)?
- RR** It is a paranoid building funded by many countries (including Italy). It houses engineers who will try to get the temperature of a star. It already feels guilty about the upcoming planetary ecological disaster when they manage to reproduce the sun. Therefore, you have understood the whole thing: they are going to fuck everything up, I'm sure. A stream of magma will pierce the earth's crust; it will explode and fall back on Rome. It's a guaranteed catastrophe... A real Chinese syndrome.
- GC** However, it seems to benefit from the dialogue with the natural landscape.
- RR** Thank you for your blessing, but I do not belong to the family of fools or fascist ecologists. The artefact is the answer... to nature; not the blowjob of nature.
- GC** Are your black hues always intrinsic to the construction matter?
- RR** Concrete painting is pornography. The dye I use for black is dry ink and, for the white, goat's sperm. For grey, I use the brains of North Korean political prisoners.
- GC** On the other hand, this sequence of black buildings displays a tendency towards dematerialization, from the almost impenetrable concrete box to a sort of veil made of thin slats...
- RR** If you say so... My focus is rather on research and development. Plasticity and red wine. Revolution and sadism. Love and reason. Sex and existential difficulty. Citizenship and sardines! Anyway, you see the thing. I would add that the metaphysical horizon of the Mediterranean forces us to excess in order to avoid sinking into architectural sympathy. We must refuse the exile of beauty. Excess is a way of participating in this refusal. Being and having an attitude is the real necessity. No matter the colour... But black is always very graphic and very nervous.

Mustafa Sabbagh, A  
Portrait in Black,  
2014, projects of  
the students of the  
Master in Visual  
Arts and Fashion,  
Iuav University of  
Venice.



# THE COLOUR OF CHANGE

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Maria Luisa Frisa, Mario Lupano

**GC** In the last century, architecture has become very dark. If white was the ideological colour of modernism, it is black that seems to drive or mark now every ambition of contemporaneity.

1. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: a Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978).

**ML** The white architecture of Modernism is also the result of an idea of hygienic order connected to the affirmation of clean, electric energy, the source of a new luminosity on the industrial landscape, so different from the black landscape of the early industrial age produced by the energy derived from the combustion of coal. The desire to forget the sooty 19th century black city pushed this idea of white that erased the early 20th century expressionist impulses as well as the search for a coloured new architecture, also rich in gloomy recesses (only the Surrealist avant-garde will carry on a battle for the black and its intrauterine obscurities within Modernism). This theme, already investigated by some critics of Modernism in the late 1970s and '80s, was the subject of conversation I had with Italo Rota when we were working as editors for the *Electa* magazines.

The black city was the compact city of the 19th century – Victorian London (that would return in the 1980s with the revival of Victorian black and dandyism) as well as New York. This rediscovery of black and its complexity has certainly a long history. *Delirious New York*<sup>1</sup> is a quest for the black city, the city of Batman filmed by Tim Burton.

**GC** They say that Metropolis is New York in the daylight and Gotham City is its night vision.

**ML** Gotham City is at the core of Koolhaas' book. Much research on the contemporary condition starts with this attraction for the black, for its complexity and contradictions. Now, the preference for black has almost become a fashion. Anyway, even within the other field there are whites that are nothing like Le Corbusier's white (or rather the white created by canonical Modern historiography), for example that of Martin Margiela. A white

with depth, a dirty white that covers everything and takes possession of everything, even its replicas.

**MLF** It is the strength of absence: Margiela's labels are simply white, with no written information or trademark.

**GC** A white that appropriates some characteristics of black.

**MLF** The leading role of black in fashion is a relatively recent achievement. For a long time it was used for uniforms and related to poverty: dirt and worn-out spots were less evident on black. The gaudy silks, and very expensive colours like lapis lazuli, used by nobles symbolized their wealth. Black was the colour of renunciation, of mourning, of the lower classes.

The period when men decided to wear the bourgeois uniform, which is dark anyway, is defined as the 'great renunciation'. The renunciation of a highly decorated, invasive, even feminine style of clothing. In fashion, we also speak of 'Victorian black', a black that covers everything. The death of Albert and Queen Victoria's long mourning helped black extend its dominion on women's clothing.

**GC** It is a case of a colour becoming almost institutional.

**MLF** At that moment it was, although it is also and definitely the colour of change. Consider the meaning black acquired in the 1920s with Coco Chanel, a great revolutionary. She started from the uniform of the orphanage where she grew up and got to a very simple dress, defined by a colour that gives an idea of precision and modernity.

The ascent of the Japanese, Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons, in the late 1970s was one of these moments. When they used a very dark blue together with black, they broke the rules that had forbidden such combination until then. At the beginning, they worked on a non-form, the so-called post-atomic, something that goes beyond the body and does away with the need to follow or improve a silhouette. From then on, black becomes a unifying factor that opens up to the daily use we see today.

**GC** I was thinking about a similar role of black as the harbinger of change in architecture. Maybe the darkness explored by Le Corbusier after WWII at Marseille, at La Tourette, or the black ceiling of the assembly hall in Chandigarh. However, the blankness of white makes it a better candidate.

**MLF** Alessandro Michele, Gucci's creative director, recently told me a meaningful episode. His last show was a reaction to the comments on his previous ones: everyone said that they were too black, that things were almost invisible, immersed as they were in darkness. For this reason, he decided to explore the opposite condition, using this very white, violent, almost quivering light.

**GC** Another attempt to blind.

**MLF** White and especially black have an ambiguous relationship with innovation and tradition. For instance, a spectre haunts fashion and always comes back: the Little Black Dress (attributed to Coco Chanel, even if she never designed a LBD like the ones we are familiar with now). The LBD is the most difficult thing: it must be very precise and take advantage of the contrast with the body.

**ML** Indeed. It also happened in the 1980s after the rise of the Japanese mentioned by Maria Luisa before. Black has become a sort of uniform for those who do research in the field of form: in fashion, art, architecture... It is a way to signal a personal presence and, at the same time, to communicate an absence with respect to the field of research; a willingness to investigate it without prejudice. It expresses the belonging to a category of people who design without affirming what is designed.

**MLF** Again, it represents a renunciation. People working in the fashion field are overexposed to a constant variation of shapes and colours: the choice of a non-colour, of darkness, means creating a distance. In this sense, black acquires an intellectual character, either because people choose it as a uniform for their status or for its effect once worn. The black dress is often used to highlight the face. It says 'Look at my face!' It diverts attention from the body and highlights the 'head'. It is a denial of one part to exalt another. At the same time, black defines, exalts and fragments the body: the neckline on the back, the porthole, the white arm...

**ML** It cuts the body into pieces and therefore conveys a different reflection on the body itself. The fetishist component of black is very important too. Fashion also deals with sexuality and desire mechanisms. If the Japanese have proposed an intellectualized approach, others have used black in another, opposite direction. The glossy finishing, the latex, come back in this sense, as allusions to the desire mechanisms.



**MLF** However, at the Golden Globe 2018, Hollywood stars expressed their allegiance to the #MeToo movement by dressing in black: a not too bold form of protest, in my opinion, since black is the most normal colour for an evening dress. What's more, it is notoriously the sexiest colour and all the fashion houses have committed themselves to making fantastic models for the occasion... If they really wanted to protest, a white t-shirt would have had a stronger effect.

**GC** Is there a relationship between fashion designers' identification with black and the use of this colour in their production?

**ML** The silhouette, traditionally used to represent the idea of a dress, is a device that can play a decisive role. It is a synthetic way to trace, capture and communicate the volumes.

**MLF** The silhouette is a feature that has been used in fashion since the beginning of its history and is also used to make comparisons. The so-called 'wheel of time' shows immediately how the sense of volumes has evolved in fashion, for example by increasing or reducing shoulders, breasts and backside. Fashion forces and expands the body.

**GC** Therefore, the body is always present.

**MLF** Yes, and black is a colour that needs human skin to give its best.

**GC** It becomes a background. One of the reasons of the modernist white, in addition to its 'hygienic' aspect, can be its ability to make the volumes visible 'under the light', to offer itself perceptively to the *promenade architecturale*. Therefore, the recent success of black would seem to be the symptom of a greater attention to the surface.

**ML** When we talk about Modernist white, we must remember the Weissenhof, all whitewashed by the imposition of Mies who had thus mortified the Expressionist imagination of many of the architects invited. In that case, it was a choice aimed at comparison, at the evaluation of outcomes. In fashion design, something similar happens with the use of 'calico', a neutral, ecru fabric that allows to gauge all the constructive aspects, the volumes, and to focus on this specific design feature. I always thought that Mies' white at the Weissenhof had a similar function, of comparison with a precise architectural vision. This curatorial choice made

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Mustafa Sabbagh, A Portrait in Black, 2014, projects of the students of the Master in Visual Arts and Fashion, Iuav University of Venice.

the Stuttgart exhibition a manifesto, probably beyond his intentions.

Regarding the relationship between volume and surface, there has certainly been a cross pollination between cultures, between East and West. Something that Bernard Rudofsky explored in architecture and that also belongs to a certain Modernism. The Bauhaus didn't like fashion, it loved fabrics. The Western tradition is less respectful of fabrics, because it cuts and reassembles it with the modelling technique. While in the Eastern outfit idea the fabric is preserved, it remains untouched. When they came to Europe, in Paris, the Japanese got closer to our approach and appropriated it in an original way. If we considered the cutting of the fabric as both the instrument and the consequence of an idea of the body and its forms, of their constriction and exaltation, in their hands it becomes something else. They build architectures that are virtually independent of the body, with asymmetrical volumes, protuberances in surprising places that hide, deceive, and work with postures in a completely different way (for example, their models wear flat shoes and stride down the catwalk rather than walk it).

- MLF** The Japanese traditionally have only one dress, the kimono, which changes in the fabrics but not in the forms.
- ML** This trend has also made the fortune of Bonotto, an Italian fabric manufacturer who at some point decided to give up with the continuous variation (of colours, wefts, etc.) so intrinsic to the idea of fashion season. In a sense, he had to because of too many imaginative, even bigger competitors he could not keep up with. Therefore, he specialized in the infinite variations of blacks obtained with different materials and looms. And he managed to start a new, hugely successful story, also thanks to the darkness of the Japanese fashion.
- GC** Probably, they too had to deal with the various meanings and uses of black that were emerging in the Western world.
- ML** Black was the colour of dark romanticism and later of punk. It belongs to some youth cultures related to music that are also very important in defining the contemporary condition. Although these are not usual references for architecture, they are part of a collective feeling: something architecture has to address. It is the black soul of introspection, even of despair, experienced with great pride in places where this music is played: dark caves,

Kieslerian interiors, a prenatal black... An architecture differently based on positive rhetoric, on its 'magnificent and progressive fate', can hardly grasp this dimension.

- MLF** Yes, black is also a romantic colour. While Mario was speaking, the figure of the dandy came to my mind. I thought of Baudelaire and other characters of that historical moment. They wore black as a kind of uniform, which later came back as existentialist, new romantic, neo-Gothic... Recently, this attitude passed from the Japanese to the Belgian school.
- ML** Therefore, it is also necessary to distinguish between black and black, between the dimension of the project and that of consumption, between a black the effects and the performances of which I can control, and a perceived, narrative darkness that relates to a certain type of experience. It's a black that has to do with dirt, waste...
- GC** One of the 'functional' uses of black in architecture plays precisely this role, dealing with the wear and tear of time, the accumulation of filth. Black lasts longer, especially outdoors.
- MLF** When Irene Brin dictated the rules of style in the post-war period, she advised the ladies that could not afford large wardrobes to have at least one grey dress for the afternoon and a black one for the evening. This way, by changing the accessories, they would have coped with all situations. Black (also diluted in grey-scale) is the colour of decency.
- GC** It becomes a sort of blackboard.
- ML** It is always somewhat graphic, whether it is the Oriental tradition, Modernism or punk fanzines.
- GC** One of the aspects that frequently emerges when analysing black is its depth, its ability to react to light in the distant and close vision according to its material characteristics.
- ML** From the point of view of customers, a black suit or dress requires a greater effort of interpretation. In some ways, it aims at educated people. Since the 1990s, many trendy shops have displayed monochromatic collections that often become almost indistinguishable and require a specific interest and knowledge. These shops are set up like galleries.

**MLF** In the case of fashion shows, the overall impression is very important. There are individual pieces, but they must work in dialogue with each other. Then, communication needs photography, and black can give some problems. This is why I find it more effective to include some form of contrast of tones: in order to give shape to black, because it risks becoming shapeless.

**ML** However, there are different kinds of audience. There are those who remain on the surface, but we work also and especially for those who can grasp some subtlety. Niche or research brands use other channels; they don't partake in fashion shows and lean, for instance, on word of mouth. And often they are among those who rely more on black.

The highly designed dress may be viewed as an object, it offers itself to a possible understanding even if only by hanging. When worn for a presentation, it becomes a performative act that naturally includes the intellectual investment of its design. And the greater attention and longer vision time required by black are part of this performative interaction. There are those who can grasp the nuances and connect the reasons of the project with its modes of perception or fruition. But everybody can get its aura of mystery, an intentional departure from glamour, a complexity that induces respect: qualities that black never fails to communicate.

**GC** Are there any episodes or issues you would suggest for a further investigation?

**ML** I would say the total black of Viktor & Rolf's Fall 2001 show: an all-black collection shown by models with blackened skin. For them it was a turning point that projected them on the international scene (confirming the role of black as a catalyst for change that Maria Luisa described before).

I also think of Diane Pernet, a very well known journalist, photographer, and designer in the 1980s, who later became a protagonist of the fashion film phenomenon. She still wears a sort of mournful uniform, always black, long and with a black Spanish veil. In her case, it is also a way to establish a form of independence, to obtain (and represent) a distance of observation from the world she deals with.

**MLF** I would insist on the role of darkness in Japanese culture: I think of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*<sup>2</sup> The geishas tinted their teeth black to bring out the glow of the complexion and,

in turn, the whiteness of the face made the black hair stand out. Even the great Diana Vreeland, director of *Vogue*, gave her face a white powder that, in contrast to her very dark hair, became almost a mask, which brings us back in a different way to Japan and the Orient.

2. Jun'ichirō  
Tanizaki, *In Praise of  
Shadows*, translated  
by Thomas J.  
Harper and Edward  
G. Seidensticker  
(New Haven, Conn.:  
Leete's Island Books,  
1977 (1933)).



↑  
Mustafa Sabbagh, *A  
Portrait in Black*,  
2014, projects of  
the students of the  
Master in Visual  
Arts and Fashion,  
Iuav University of  
Venice.



↑  
Church of  
Sant'Andrea della  
Zirada, Venezia.  
Photo Sissi Cesira  
Roselli, 2014.

# CROSSING-OUT

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Sara Marini

**GC** I have often teased you with this idea of black and I feel you have a certain interest in it, so it is time to probe it a little.

**SM** I've never thought about it in particular. It probably comes from a personal dimension: it is my favourite colour and the one I usually wear. It is also the colour we write with, which involves the noblest art, in my opinion.

**GC** We also usually draw in black...

**SM** Maybe a little less. In architecture, we lived a very grey season. In the 1990s, everybody was crazy about the number 253 of the AutoCAD colour index. That's probably why I conceived my degree thesis on a black background. Or, at least, that was the intention: black is a difficult colour to obtain and, in the end, the panels came out rather purple...

It is a complicated hue: you have to look for it. I feel it is closer to the linearity of writing than to the world of drawing. In writing, black is a certainty from which it is not necessary to escape: one can directly get into the matter itself.

**GC** So, the text is the centre of your reflection.

**SM** Thinking of the things I wrote somehow fit in with your black obsession, I would point out the issue of the 'redemption of darkness'.<sup>1</sup> I set this operation on five notes.

The first is dedicated to the redemption of the architecture of the night. In general, the rhetoric about space, architecture and the city suffers from a kind of 'diurnism' – everything, not only Modern projects, is designed to be viewed in the sunlight.

A second note is dedicated to 'descentism', a movement that pursues obscurity in opposition to that of ascent that always implies a quest for light.

A third note focuses on the 'returns' of things, the places we forget for a period and then, suddenly, look out for or not, are back,

1. Sara Marini, 'Architetture dell'oscurità', in *Cartografie dell'oscurità. Architetture e psicogeografie veneziane*, ed. by Sara Marini, Egidio Cutillo, Alberto Petracchin (Florence: Nicomp, 2018), pp. 15-26; Sara Marini, 'Found in the Dark', in *The Dark Side of the City*, ed. by Alberto Bertagna (Venice: Bruno, 2016), pp. 144-152.

changing our reality. For example, I chose this vantage point to read the abandoned churches of Venice in a research I am closing right now. The thirty churches I mapped are inaccessible and their absence is not declared in the city, their door is simply closed. Returning them to light means bringing them back into play and, with them, the idea of use, of emptiness, the idea of the city; the same happens with forgotten things, when they come back and we must find a place for them, maybe putting them next to the object that replaced it.

The fourth note focuses more on darkness and addresses the 'formless', in the sense that light often coincides with an idea of order and then I felt it was necessary to insist on the importance of unknown landscapes that require a change in our behaviour. Finally, the last note explores the 'obscure' features, always in a positive sense, of an interior. Think of Quentin Tarantino's *Hateful Eight*, a claustrophobic film, almost completely shot in an interior where the desire to 'shed light', to grasp the connections and reasons of the different protagonists, leads to long talks and a final massacre: a strange ending if one thinks that it happens in a shelter, and darkness is precisely something in which one can find shelter...

I have long explored the relationship between architecture and obscurity and I am still interested in it, even if it is difficult to find any reference in specialized literature. I think this is a fault.

**GC** In fact, the whole discourse still seems under the influence of Le Corbusier's famous definition of architecture as a game that must be played 'under the light'. As far as I know, these issues have nothing systematic about them, and that's why I believe it is a promising field of research.

**SM** Yes, the idea of being able to see in the unclear opens up many possibilities. First of all, the demystification of sight: the most abused sense in architecture and not only, even in social relations. Think of all the instruments of control in the city, night lighting, cameras... It is not so much a matter of bringing the other senses or the body (which attracted perhaps too much attention in recent years) back into play, as of involving a less physical perception, seeing with the mind. For example, I think of Anthony Vidler's interpretation of contemporary architecture.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, this recent attention to the body, to the senses, involves a risk of discrimination against those who, for all kinds of reasons, are far less than gifted in terms of physical fitness.

**GC** Perception is a subjective, culturally determined act.

**SM** I refer above all to the huge amount of texts about diversity and inclusion, the overcoming of the bodily dimension and the power of the mind: a condition that Stephen Hawking, the famous physicist recently passed away, has shown in all its evidence.

**GC** A theorist of black holes...

**SM** Indeed... This problem of darkness, of an imperfect vision, also involves a psychoanalytic dimension: it allows us to deal with the dark, even bestial, side of the human. A problem that is always too covert in architecture and culture in general.

Right now, I'm dealing with the 'forest' as the current scenario of the relationship between architecture and nature. The idea of nature as an asset to be preserved that attracts a broad consensus, also from a regulatory point of view, began to be challenged by some conditions of reality fuelled by abandonment. For instance, the return of wolves in the Marches, the Italian region I come from, even at the margins of the so-called 'diffused Adriatic city', or the invasion of bats here in Venice. The latter provides a particularly interesting example of coexistence between hyper-contemporary human pressure and a return to wilderness; between security, determined by its insular character (and the economic selection of those who can access it), and the darkness that describes its most mysterious heart. I think of the phantoms evoked by Agamben, of Cacciari's 'Venice of the mind', of the bisexuality a beautiful text by Alberto Semi recognizes in its urban form.<sup>3</sup>

All this seems to have to do with the image of the city: an indistinct, blurred image that becomes Venice's own flag.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that here the forest re-emerges as a fragmented patchwork. Despite the economic pressure of tourism, there are pockets of abandonment, of unexpected renaturalisation. You could graft here a whole series of questions intertwined with Bataille's *informe*, later analyzed by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss.<sup>5</sup>

**GC** Yes, of course, but don't you have the impression that all this stratified complexity of meanings risks to distance itself from architectural design and its pragmatic attitude?

**SM** When we interpret the city and its architecture, we act as a cultural counterpart – a counterpart that lately, I think, has become

2. Antony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

3. Giorgio Agamben, *Dell'utilità e degli inconvenienti del vivere fra spettri* (Venice: Corte del Fontego, 2011); Antonio Alberto Semi, *Venezia in fumo, 1797-1997* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 1996).

4. Sara Marini, Alberto Bertagna, *Venice: 2nd Document* (Venice: Bruno, 2017).

5. Yve-Alain Bois, Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

too uncritical. It is a way of rebalancing things, even against a certain return of realism.

As you know, I built a black slate house with Alberto Bertagna. In a certain respect, this almost forgotten, very cheap material was a pragmatic choice. I guess all the clichés linked to black have played a role in its oblivion. However, as soon as the house was built, with the slate still very dark, the neighbours asked the administration to demolish it because of its gloomy, disturbing presence (and here Bataille should be evoked again). In fact, we also chose this material for the way it reacts to the weather, and reflects time. It is a long building, with the main facades facing south and north. The sunny side has become very light, almost pale, while the other remained darker.

I think the neighbours reacted to their idea of black rather than to the visual reality of the built house. In some photos, it is rather indistinguishable from the sky, especially in the harshest winter conditions, when it is going to snow. The greatest contrast is, in fact, with the middle-bourgeois detached houses built around it, with the idea of a cheerful domesticity they intend to transmit. However, with the passing of time and the action of the sun, our house has become less dark and has even become one with the colours of the forest behind, but what remains disturbing, I think, is its explicit condition of shelter without domestic meaning.

**GC** The white domesticity you describe seems a perverse side effect of a naive functionalism, or an outdated version of the urban behaviour Loos devised for his houses, where a white plaster mask concealed the domestic unconscious... I came up with the idea that the blackness of many recent projects speaks of a general inversion of these patterns from many points of view.

**SM** For us, it wasn't certainly a matter of ergonomics or functionalist habitability: the interiors are starkly white; the arrangement of openings makes it difficult to place the furniture; they are designed to bring in an excessive light...

In the end, the black wall is almost friendlier than the interiors, as well as its night condition: the house makes the darkness welcome. The daylight becomes blinding because the house is pierced by sunbeams like a Saint Sebastian. There's no escape, the light harasses you...

In my opinion, it is important for architecture to recover this dimension, something we can find, for instance, in Carlo Mollino's shrine-like apartment in Turin. Other aspects have been the object of a long and deep discussion: the body, again (now we only



Sara Marini and  
Alberto Bertagna,  
Black House,  
Urbania, 2013.  
Photo Fabio  
Mantovani.

→  
Sara Marini and  
Alberto Bertagna,  
Black House,  
Urbania, 2013.  
Photo Sissi Cesira  
Roselli.



talk about cooking), the perceptive issues... The power of sight has been explored in all its possibilities during the long season of landscape research. We have forgotten about the most delicate, perhaps atrophied 'organ' that is behind all this: our mind. The disciplinary focus on public space is also a thing of the past. I know, the next Venice Biennale is going to focus on 'Freespace', but free for whom? We should rather speak of exclusive space, paid access to every spatial organization of our society, of the turnstiles recently placed in Venice to control the number of accesses to the city.

If open space is more and more a sequence of enclosures and borders, the house, on the other hand, looks extrovert, overexposed, always forced to establish relations with the outside.

There is a problem of unveiling all this. Both the return to the *intérieure*, as illustrated by Mollino's approach, and a reconsideration of our relationship with nature, of our being part of it in problematic, obscure terms, seem central to me.

6. Carlo Rovelli, *Sette brevi lezioni di fisica* (Milan: Adelphi, 2014); Carlo Rovelli, *L'ordine del tempo* (Milan: Adelphi, 2017).

**GC** Mollino is an interesting character. His use of blackness evokes a powerful erotic, tactile imagination: luxurious and lustful. In your case, I think it is a more ideological darkness, a condition of threat and otherness.

**SM** Black is a very bright colour that powerfully reacts to environmental conditions and implies an equally wide range of possible solutions and effects. However, I'm more inclined to think in other terms: for example, I think that reasoning on the role of black in physics, the search for 'dark matter', for instance, may provide a greater potential.

I think we should skip a few steps, and redirect our thinking in terms of time and of relationship between disciplines. We should cope with the past as if it were happening right now and establish a direct dialogue with the Baroque or the Middle Ages, for example... We should try to get closer to the hard sciences, exploiting their ability to reach the origin of things, of matter. For instance, I found Carlo Rovelli's texts, both *Seven short lessons in physics* and *The order of time*, very useful for my work.<sup>6</sup> Both books clarify the concrete and dynamic consistency of the matter we work with and live in.

**GC** The problem of human sciences is that they are inherently historical: paradigm shifts are never definitive and good ideas often stem out from the deliriums of forgotten thinkers. Achieving a state-of-the-art knowledge in physics is necessary *and* possible,

while for us everything is potentially relevant. On the other hand, there is always the danger of misinterpretation: Einstein notoriously rejected Giedion's arguments on relativity.

**SM** Yes, architectural theories are accumulating waste that consumes and makes them too long at the same time. We need amnesia, as we advocated in our dictionary.<sup>7</sup> In order to start again, we need to erase, and black has an undeniable role in crossing out things.

In this regard, I am advising a thesis on architecture that becomes food. We are starting from fairy tales, for example trying to understand why Hansel and Gretel ate the house, if there is a historical reason, a tradition that nourished this narrative apparatus. Therefore, we are exploring an idea of architecture that disappears because 'consumed' by its own inhabitants.

**GC** Some more palatable architecture would be welcome...

**SM** For me, again, it is a way to oppose the recent overexposure of architecture, to make it become part of the background. It is also a way to make sense of the project on a different level from the eco-sustainable conformism that is now swallowing the whole debate.

7. Recycled Theory:  
Dizionario  
illustrato/Illustrated  
Dictionary, ed.  
by Sara Marini,  
Giovanni Corbellini  
(Macerata:  
Quodlibet, 2016).



Church of  
Sant'Andrea della  
Zirada, Venezia.  
Photo Sissi Cesira  
Roselli, 2014.

Next page:  
Church of  
Sant'Anna, Venezia.  
Photo Sissi Cesira  
Roselli, 2014.







↑  
No.mad, Executive  
Academy, University  
of Wien, Vienna,  
2012.

# BLACKNESS

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*Eduardo Arroyo*

**GC** Darkness comes out often in your work, even in your book *Create!*,<sup>1</sup> with the margins of its pages painted black.

1. Eduardo Arroyo, *Create!* (New York: Actar, 2014).

**EA** I would never use the word darkness for black things. The use of 'Blackness' implies a creative and straightforward intention, while darkness is more a result of an energy loss or a natural process with no inherent aim or insight. I believe in transmitting hidden information and in a certain mind 'manipulation' of the user/viewer. Blackness acts as an instant of confrontation between us and what we are not used to face regularly in our cities or in nature. The presence of black is not so common and means a way of bringing attention to objects and actions that try to convey new information to our lives. For a while, it stops us, makes us stare, be aware of what is in front of us and pushes our minds towards the discovery of hidden understanding.

**GC** Among your buildings, both Villa Levene, in the outskirts of Madrid, and the Wien University Executive Academy, in Vienna, are clad in black. How did you use black to interpret their very different contexts, dimensions, functions...?

**EA** I could reply as I did to the previous question. This comparison between buildings exemplifies that blackness has nothing to do with context. Nevertheless, some 'qualities' of blackness might address precisely that context (its brightness, shine, metallic or stone appearance, glow, vibration, etc.). The only direct relationship with a certain context that I can think of would be the opposition to the existing. Yet, again, that might be a more mental and abstract connection than a contextual one in terms of form or matter.

**GC** Both buildings match their black envelopes with the vivid, acid colours employed inside, which emerge especially in the night view. Is it a deliberate ambiguity, an exploration of figure/ground oscillations, or just a straightforward arrangement of their functional organisation?

**EA** I would go for the figure/ground oscillation option. Even more for a shell/guts concept that arises from the insight that volumes are not prefigured but found, and so they might be a result of the interaction with the exterior world rather than with its own interior. In this sense, the building's guts, with their colourful contrast, somehow convey a certain 'non-relationship' with the outer black shell.

Drawing attention to the user is more an urban than a private act and therefore black is more a 'territorial' colour to me. Once the user/spectator is inside an object, his/her attention to the object takes a backseat and other powerful forces come into place. We could even say that black works in the long distance while colours have a more intimate character

**GC** Often you use colours with a referential approach. Does black play such a role?

**EA** Colours are always treated as codes in our work (they are not only colours). They carry information about functions, the way to use the space, where certain spaces end and start, or even properties to manipulate our senses directed to create atmospheres and states of mind in the user. Black produces a deeper and more mystic effect in the spectator than any other colour (including white) and can only be used globally and at a certain distance. The other colours are more apt to a use in proximity. The use of black as a code is useless, its own presence is more powerful than any other information we would want to combine it with.

**GC** Since black absorbs light, it tends to smooth surfaces. Do you think the present trend of dark architecture could be a side effect of the shift from three-dimensional articulation to the skin underwent by contemporary architecture in the last decades?

**EA** I find the 'shell' concept very exciting in terms of its relationship with the exterior world and in terms of structure and gravity. It has nothing to do with the realm of envelopes or skins even though the appearance of both might be the same. I believe a skin can be folded anywhere and a certain detail can be used virtually in any occasion. A shell has a different attitude, the whole system works together as an entity, not only in terms of volume and structure but also in terms of a unique concept. There is only one 'shell' suitable for a building that solves all the problems at the same time: gravity, energy, functionality or light acting all together in a single entity. There can be many envelopes to wrap



No.mad, Villa  
Levene, San  
Lorenzo del  
Escorial, Madrid,  
2002-06.

No.mad, Executive  
Academy, University  
of Wien, Vienna,  
2012.



a volume and that's why they are easier to use and the reason why pragmatism loves them. They are somehow exchangeable; shells are not.

2. Rem Koolhaas, OMA, Bruce Mau, S, M, L, XL, ed by Jennifer Sigler (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).

**GC** Other architects I talked with mentioned the range of qualities black matter can acquire. Do your projects rely on a sort of ideological black or do they exploit its perceptual, tactile attitudes?

**EA** Through the ages, black has been charged with many meanings, mostly from the realm of evil. Religion has always defended white (although most priests wear black) as the source of good. On the other hand, there have always been mythical Black Knights, Black Pearls, Black Holes, Black Magic, Black Music... things apparently distant and unattainable to most people. That is the real power of black: a powerful use of black deploys an aura of unreachable bravery and independence...

**GC** You used a metal cladding in Vienna and in other projects, for instance the tower in Durango, while in other cases, such as the Villa Levene, you employed stone. How do you select your black materials?

**EA** The Durango tower is clad in brushed steel plates protected with transparent varnish and welded to the façade as part of a structure that works with the steel frame. The use of stone for the Levene house was required by municipal regulations. Each situation provides an external or internal factor for the use and subsequent choice of the material that does not come from an aesthetical or taste reason. There is never a stylistic selection. What we choose and manipulate is the brightness, composition and other properties of the materials but that becomes a more sophisticated decision that relies on other architectural tools.

**GC** By the way, in SMLXL<sup>2</sup> you are credited for some projects by OMA (Kunsthall in Rotterdam, Euralille and Congrexpo) where black plays a role. Was it a matter of discussion? How did you come up with this choice?

**EA** I vaguely remember those times but black was always present in the office, in the sketches with big masses, in the inverted plans white on black background for competitions, and in materials like the big concrete beam in the Kunsthall. I remember Rem talking about 'black' charging the normal concrete with significance and a different meaning (but I might have also dreamt it).



No.mad, Villa  
Levene, San  
Lorenzo del  
Escorial, Madrid,  
2002-06.



↑  
No.mad, Executive  
Academy, University  
of Wien, Vienna,  
2012.

- GC** I find this issue of how we draw very interesting.
- EA** I draw a lot with coloured markers. I feel more comfortable with black markers when drawing three dimensional images or sketches (projections of how reality will be) but when dealing with concepts or ideas that are kind of complex, colour markers are unbeatable.
- GC** Perhaps Le Corbusier said something similar about how he drew... In *Create!* you referred to Goethe's idea of an 'active black'. Would you like to explain this concept?
- EA** Newton had the idea that blackness (darkness in his words) was the absence of light as a merely passive situation, a lack of energy. Goethe introduced the idea that the absence of light gradually leading to darkness gives birth to colours. In this sense, he explained that colours are an active product, a mix of light and darkness.  
This means that anything coming out of pure white (light as the mixed spectrum of colours) always includes some darkness (blackness). In a mystic abstraction, it would mean that once we are out of the purity of white, we are already approaching an 'impurity' the main character of which would be black.
- GC** Southern (Mediterranean) architects grow up in a white environment while northern ones look at darker buildings. This sort of local determinism, though less justified nowadays, still has an influence on architects, consciously or not. How do you feel about it? Has your design attitude anything to do with your Atlantic origin?
- EA** It is true that I feel less attached to Mediterranean architecture but to me white has a perverse meaning unrelated to hygienic or climatic reasons. In the past, white might have been used against the sun, etc., but since the 1930s it has reflected a more conceptual and a propaganda agenda. More than that, in Spain it became a true 'style' in the 1980s and 90s (Campo Baeza, Vicens, Tuñon-Mansilla and many others) with more trendy attitudes and a 'quality stamp' for a group of architects than any other consideration. Using white meant belonging to that approach. Black did not have many followers at that time, and its use is still rare. White and colourful architecture is safer and of a more evident use and so it is easier not to fail with it (developers anywhere in the world do not like/want black).

**GC** However, there are many clues of an attraction to black among architects nowadays.

3. International Klein Blue (IKB) is a deep blue hue first mixed by the French artist Yves Klein.

**EA** I do not think there is an attraction to black. It is probably the result of the zeitgeist: being tired of everything else. Some architects might think this can be something new or trendy in opposition to colourful, ecological green or white purity in architecture. I think there is nothing else behind the choice of black in most cases. Somebody has fooled architects, and convinced them that dressing in black is 'elegant'.

**GC** So, where should I look for my black search?

**EA** I feel the latest steps in the path towards blackness lead to many art researches like Goya's black paintings, Rothko's Chapel paintings before his suicide, Yves Klein's black objects after the IKB<sup>3</sup> or the patent for a light-absorbing black pigment Anish Kapoor recently acquired after working on his mirrored sculptures...

I have the feeling (probably reflected in my work) that the exploration into 'black' is a path we start and travel right after the experience with mirrors and reflected light.

Whiteness might approach the essential but leads to emptiness. Blackness apparently leads to nothingness but is full of invisible things.

Next page:  
No.mad, Executive  
Academy, University  
of Wien, Vienna,  
2012.





Paolo Scheggi,  
Intersuperficie  
curva nera,  
1969, acrilico  
nero su tre tele  
sovrapposte,  
120 x 120 x 6,5  
cm. Courtesy  
Franca and Cosima  
Scheggi, Paolo  
Scheggi/SIAE.



# NITESWEEPERS

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Ilaria Bignotti

**GC** Did you wear black to get in tune with the topic of this interview?

**IB** No: eighty percent of the curators I know dress in black from head to toe. Including me.<sup>1</sup> I believe that black is primarily a way to communicate: it means concentration, meditation, depth. It is also a way to feel 'at ease': it protects, outlines, defends, envelops...

However, I think a curator has to retreat from the hyper-role she assumed, and go back to letting the artist speak and do.

**GC** So, let's start from your 'black' experience as a curator.

**IB** I've always dealt with artists who work with this non-colour. In 2011, when I was working on my PhD, during a conference curated by Angela Vettese and Patrizia Magli dedicated to 'The Blackness of Black',<sup>2</sup> I talked about Paolo Scheggi, an artist I've worked on for many years. In a very long, unpublished interview, which I'm very fond of, Achille Bonito Oliva told me that their common denominator was a passion for the night as a place of black, of darkness, of the possible double. He met Scheggi in 1968, when his career as a militant critic had just started. He said that Scheggi was a 'nitesweeper'<sup>3</sup> like him: Oliva is a fantastic neologist, and the definition he chose for his friend, who died at thirty for a heart problem he had suffered from for ten years, is perfect.

Scheggi had black in his pocket. Raised in the existentialist Sartrean climate, imbued with French culture, he weaved a profound relationship with darkness. Black became an enveloping nocturnal blanket for his urban performances, in mythical-political direction, or even as a material for the creation of meditative, metaphysical, reflective and immersive environments. For instance, *Interfiore*,<sup>4</sup> 1968, or the *Tomb of Geometry*, 1970, wonderfully photographed by Ugo Mulas, with those walls of glossy black laminate where the names of flat and solid geometric figures stood out. This was the tomb of the myth of the project, of

1. This is common in the whole art and design milieu: see *Why Do Architects Wear Black?*, ed. by Cordula Rau (Wien: Springer 2009).

2. See, *La nerezza del nero*, ed. by Eva Ogliotti and Ruggero Canova (Treviso: ZeL, 2013).

3. Oliva's *notturbino* plays with the Italian word *netturbino* (street cleaner), keeping its reference to the city (*urbe*) and changing its root *netto* (neat, clean) with *notte* (night).

4. Paolo Scheggi, *Interfiore*, Rome, May 1968, Galleria La Tartaruga. This work was reinstalled in the exhibition 'In Between: Dialogues of light', curated by Ilaria Bignotti and Federica Patti, in collaboration with the Scheggi Archive, Spazio Arte CUBO-Unipol, Bologna, 3 January-3 March 2018. Scheggi's environment dialogued there with that of a young French artist, Joanie Lemercier.

the rational and planned utopia of the sixties, to which Scheggi partook in, and which he now repudiated, in that new decade after the collapse of 1968. This was also a tomb of the 'Modern' white. A black tomb.

Scheggi is an artist of blackness. He constantly worked on it, and believed in its power as a non-colour to shape the aesthetic consciousness of the man of the late 20th century. Black was instrumental in Scheggi's work in order to make the word, its form, the thought turned into image, appear. To make the light of truth appear. He was a prophetic artist.

**GC** Scheggi's research on monochrome involved other colours. Do you think black played a special role for him?

**IB** Scheggi belongs to the post-war generation. He was born in Settignano in 1940 and died in Rome in 1971. The Renaissance belongs to him. He came from a family of artists: his grandfather was a sculptor and his mother a miniaturist. Scheggi was a product of his time: he dealt with the rethinking of the historical avant-gardes and started a reflection on monochrome, on the relationship between surface and depth, following the passage opened by Lucio Fontana (who closely followed the work of the younger artist since 1962). In his *Intersurfaces* – monochrome canvases formed by three levels pierced by ellipsoidal or regular geometric openings – black is a chromatic and conceptual choice: it reveals and hides the space play between the superimposed canvases, creates depressions and densities of obscure power, inviting the eye to go beyond the first layer of the image. Since 1968, black became a fundamental element of his work. He used it to overcome the concept of two-dimensional work and enter the space of life, of the city, of theatre. Scheggi wanted to revolutionize the world poetically. He was an artist who, since his early twenties, was aware that he would come to the end of his brief and intense life. Black was a constant presence, ultimate reflection, power of form, friendly mystery.

**GC** On the other hand, for many artists, darkness seems to be a way to get more attention.

**IB** It is no coincidence that in the late 1950s black was a protagonist: Lucio Fontana's cuts and holes violated the canvas, getting rid of the traditional easel painting and the pedestal sculpture, and opened a black breach for the post-spatial season, which is the main subject of my studies. It is the era of zeroing, of the

tabula rasa, of the work on objects placed in space and in the consciousness of man, shaped as gestures of a new world, split between dreaming the moon and fearing the atomic bomb. The intellectual-artist is at the centre of this debate, he carries the burden of recent history, believing in the utopia of an art that can consciously intervene in the world. Between the 1960s and '70s, everted, disseminated, expanded works, crossed by rhythms of signs, depressions and depths, welcome or create areas of light and shadow. They shaped black, and chose it as a monochrome for a conceptual and operative reduction. In this way, they acted in space where the time of life takes place.

**GC** Does this still make sense?

**IB** The analysis of the relationship between man and the cosmos is at the centre of the aesthetic reflections of many artists with whom I worked. From Paolo Scheggi to Arthur Duff, an artist of German descent who lived in some NATO bases and, after a long American residence, now lives in Vicenza. Duff works with black in two directions. He uses simple materials, such as ropes, with which he weaves works that are celestial fabrics, mindful of the galaxy classification system. The measure of infinity passes through the minimal gesture of making a knot. In this case, the black rope, woven with colourful fluorescent threads, becomes the material that shapes the concept. Duff also works a lot in the nocturnal or darkened space. He processes with sophisticated software texts and light codes projected in the sky or in the environment, often mixing childhood memories with narrating names. His luminous installations act as the alter ego of Cai Guo-Qiang's pyrotechnics ones. This extraordinary Chinese artist sets fire to the night, showing fantastic, celestial stairways that unite man and cosmos, or working out visionary explosions of colours and fumes in the sky, to give life to a dark and palin-genetic power. Duff uses led lights, Cai Guo-Qiang fire. Artifice and nature. Both visualize the fragments of consciousness of the contemporary man in the dark space of the night.

The light generated by black, as a manifestation of artistic thought, is also at the centre of the project 'Black: An Idea of Light', I curated at the Cortesi Gallery in London in 2015. I made a selection of artists, both post-war and contemporary, analysing how their choice of black brings out light as form and sign: from Scheggi to Jason Martin, from Morellet to Francesca Pasquali. I analysed their vision of black as a plastic material that welcomes, imbues and re-launches light.



↑  
Francesca  
Pasquali, *ScopaMI*,  
2016, broom  
bristles and metal  
frame, London,  
Tornabuoni Art  
Gallery. Courtesy  
Francesca Pasquali  
and Tornabuoni  
Art. All rights  
reserved.

**GC** Architects are more at ease handling materials than colours: white and/or black are 'natural' choices for us. For an artist, it is probably an intentional process.

5. Verbatim 'sweep me', but an Italian would understand it as 'screw me'.

**IB** Some artists use the black of night, of the repeating time of the life cycle, to reveal works of light, while others, such as Francesca Pasquali, work with black materials. Her early works fascinated me and I selected her for a prize of which I was a jury member. One of these, *Pulp*, is an assemblage of glossy and opaque neoprene and Lycra bodies stacked and overlapping to form a place to rest with your own body. Between the sense of abandonment and the promise of a hug. Francesca's work is coherent, dense. She constantly evolves and explores the reuse of industrial materials, the relationship with matter, the senses, the need to receive and give that translates in something to touch, live, inhabit. Francesca uses plastic, foam rubber, straws, bristles, rubber bands, balloons... She creates wefts that unfold in space, huge Penelope's shrouds that fill the eyes and invite to contact. *ScopaMI*<sup>5</sup> is another extraordinary installation. The artist paved the space of two galleries, first in 2011 and then five years later, at Tornabuoni Art London, with over forty-five square meters of black broom bristles, in their cylindrical shape, as they come out from the factory before their transformation into consumer objects. The floor of the environment, entirely covered with bristles, became an unstable plane on which you could walk but may stumble, hence had to move with caution: humble and dignified and, right from the title, peremptory and hungry for contact, her installation seems a fitting metaphor for the role of art today. It must satisfy and bend to the will of others. It is a carnal desire for possession and, in its being taken and enjoyed, it risks denial and oblivion once the fashion passes by. In fact, *ScopaMI* is an ephemeral installation subject to destruction: the bristles lose their compactness due to treading and the floor becomes shattered and dispersed, disintegrating and fraying. The artist takes the risk. The choice of black is therefore strategic as this non-colour exacerbates the presence of the work in space, and, at the same time, makes it lose its perimeters, its dimensions... It expands and concentrates.

**GC** Black tends to recede in the background, often bringing environmental noise to the fore.

**IB** At Marignana Arte in Venice, I recently inaugurated a one-man show by Mats Bergquist, a Swedish artist, entitled 'The darkness

→  
Mats Bergquist,  
Broken Monochrome,  
2018, encaustic  
on wood, 37 x 37  
cm. Photo Enrico  
Fiorese. Courtesy  
Mats Bergquist  
and Marignana  
Arte, Venezia. All  
rights reserved



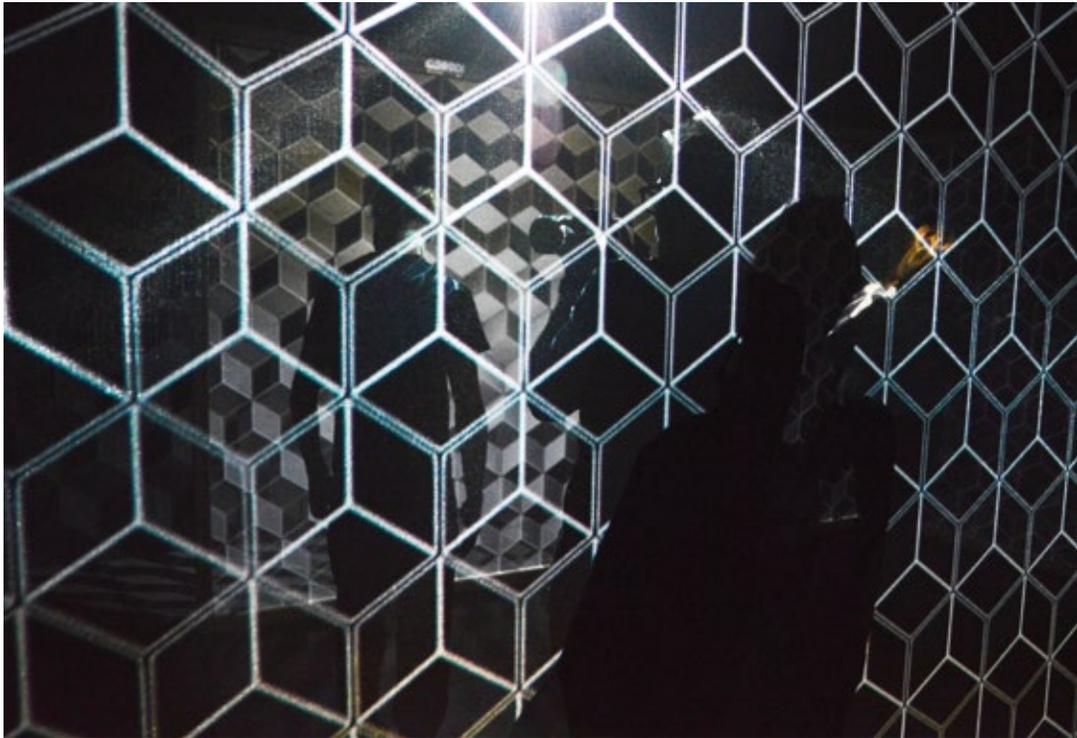
of light'. Bergquist works with both white and black. He elaborates works of great plastic power, playing on concave or convex surfaces, on monochrome and the relationship between glossy and opaque. Bergquist is an intellectual, imbued with poetry, cinema, literature. Through his work, he translates, and conveys to the public, the spiritual sense the man of the 21st century pursues through the journey of life from whatever cultural geography he may come. All of Bergquist's works are the visualization, always at the centre of our culture, of the mysterious relationship with the beyond, understood as destiny, god, desire. He shapes objects of rare beauty: iridescent ovals, lanceolate spatial sculptures, two-dimensional works that fragment and break geometrically, one interpenetrating the other. Working with different techniques, from encaustic painting to raku ware, Bergquist achieves infinite variations on black, reflecting on the power of the icon or producing primeval forms such as his cosmic eggs. Arranged in space, his works call us. They intensify the process of reflection and recognition between our body and the work, between our feeling and the life of the work. They demand a relationship.

- GC** Have you ever used obscurity as a form of disorientation or perceptual deception in the exhibitions you curated?
- IB** Dark walls bring out contrasts or relationships between the works: on black, they enter in relation with each other with particular significance – especially the works of the 1960s and '70s, monochromes featuring exact shapes, few elements. For instance, I relied on this device to highlight the language of Ivan Picelj – a Croatian artist less well known than other exponents of programmed and kinetic art. At the Cortesi Gallery in Lugano, I set up a *quadreria* on a black background, displaying his works densely mixed with those of other artists belonging to the New Tendency movement, all of small dimensions. The result was very powerful. I also used a black room for the exhibition on black as a place of light that I mentioned above, where black works sculpted the space in a dark and stunning game. Sometimes, the black box or a darkened environment is required by the work. This was the case for the reinstallation of Scheggi's *Interfiore I* curated at Spazio Arte CUBO in Bologna. It is formed by a number (about ninety, in the original version) of fluorescent yellow paint circles immersed and suspended at different heights in a darkened space illuminated by blacklight, with a Wood's lamp. It was first presented at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome in May 1968.

Its 'Exhibition Theatre' housed a continuous happening where different artists had to set up their own environment in just one day in order to trigger a changeable and pressing aesthetic and emotional experience in the audience. *Interfiore* overcomes the two-dimensionality of the work on the wall, it enters the space of life, the temporality of experience: a seminal work that can 'happen' only in relation to the observer who becomes a conscious and free activator. Joanie Lemerancier, the artist I selected for the dialogue with Scheggi in the exhibition, worked on this environment: called to interpret his language, he composed an immersive ephemeral experience formed by dynamic projections of light, layered surfaces, reflecting or semi-transparent materials, following a rigorous geometric composition of space. A reboot resulting from the stylistic features typical of the French artist who addresses Spatialism and Op-Art masters by relying on up-to-date technologies.

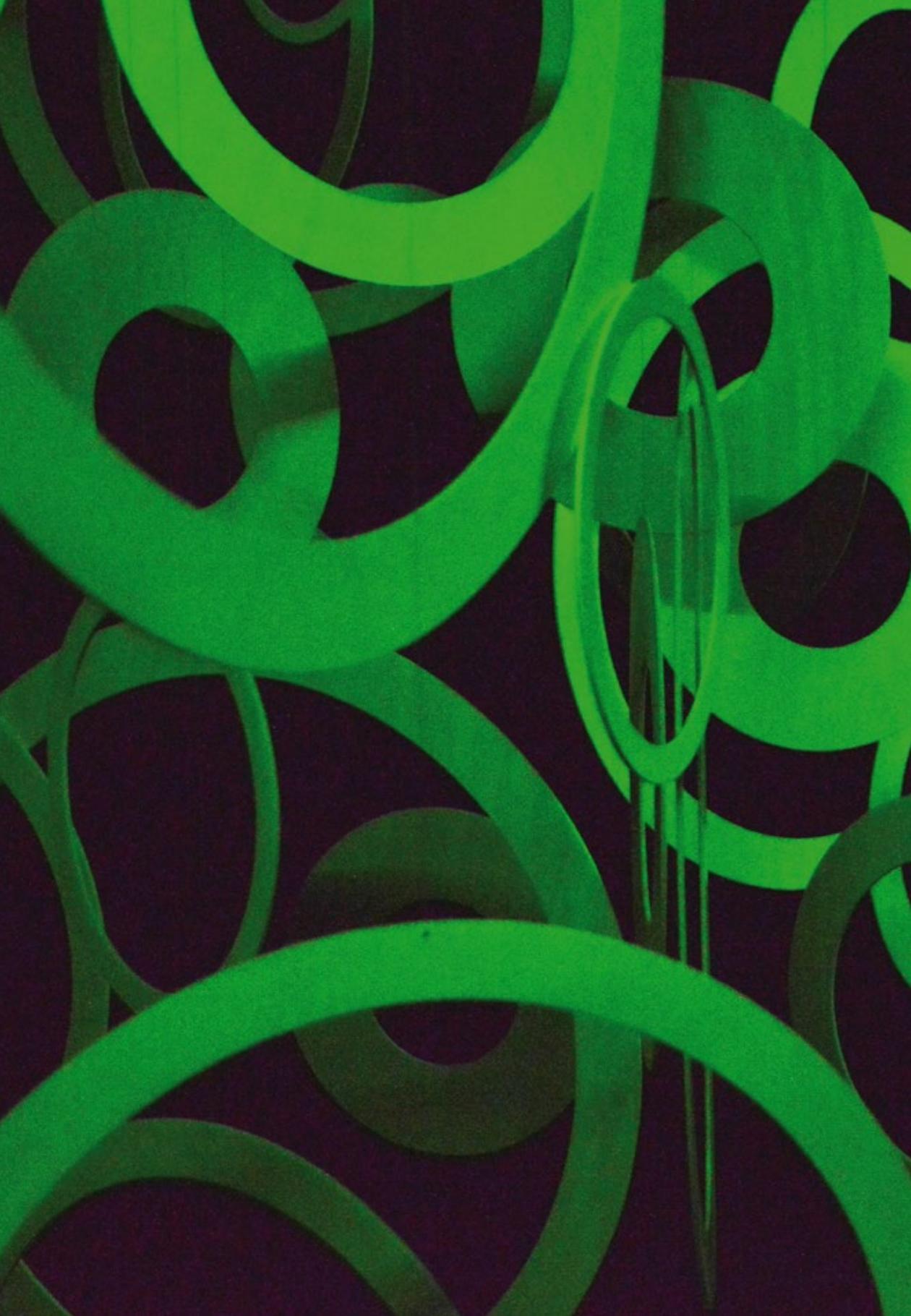
**GC** Therefore, there is a dialogue between symbolic blackness and sensorial darkness.

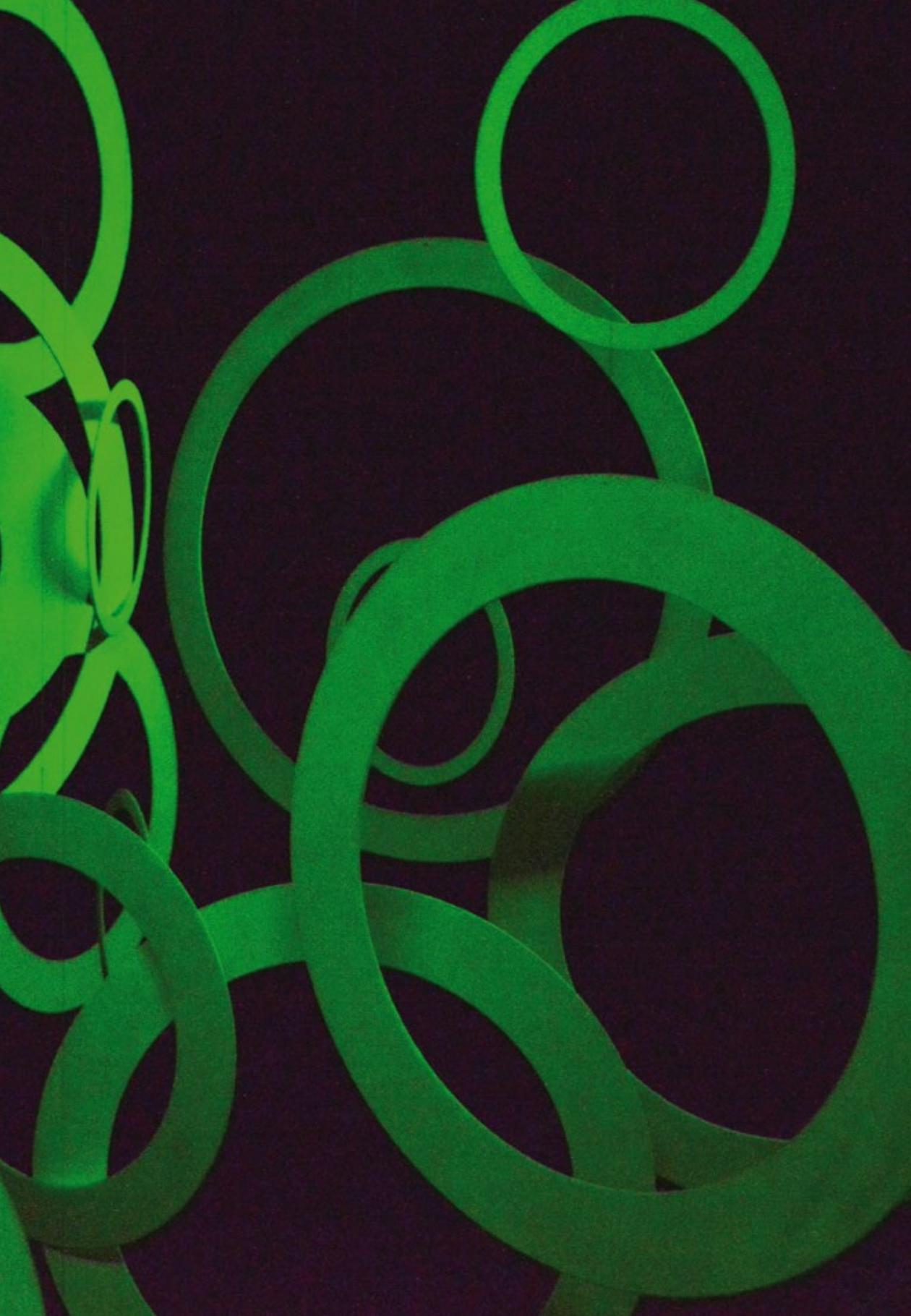
**IB** The artists I work with understand black both as a preferential medium for the manifestation of their thought and as an element shaping an object or an environment. Coherently with our times, it is ephemeral in its being (paradoxically) clear, it is resilient in its coming out as apparently peremptory: black does not build, it suggests; it does not solve, it questions; it does not say, it whispers. In different ways, times, languages.



Joanie Lemerrier,  
Plans, 2018,  
site specific  
installation,  
lights and video  
mapping, 400 x 300  
x 300 cm. Courtesy  
Joanie Lemerrier.  
All rights  
reserved.

Next page:  
Paolo Scheggi,  
Interfiore, 1968,  
fluo. yellow paint  
on wooden rings,  
Wood light, 400 x  
400 x 400 cm ca.  
Courtesy Paolo  
Scheggi / SIAE.







Asphalt core  
samples from  
different  
locations.  
Montreal, 2005.  
© CCA

# ASPHALT IS NOT BLACK

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*Mirko Zardini*

**GC** My first question is relating to your exhibition for the 2003 Triennale di Milano, 'Asfalto: Il Carattere Della Città' – how did you come up with the idea to address asphalt?

**MZ** I was interested in exploring the idea of the modern city from a different point of view, in terms of how a material can transform urban environments and the experience of the city. And I thought that asphalt could offer another starting point because of its banal, but hidden presence in the existing narrative of Modernity. There are a lot of different histories about infrastructure and engineering in the modern and contemporary city, but a material like asphalt was never considered an important part of these histories. Looking at this single material, you discover a longer narrative than might be expected. Although asphalt is often associated with the car, it was first used in the mid-19th century as a material for the pedestrian and for sidewalks. It was then adopted for the bicycle and only at the end of the 19th century, did it become associated with the car. When it was first used for the automobile and until the Second World War, asphalt enjoyed a very positive reception, so positive that it was considered a privileged material and used to pave historical squares and public spaces - the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome, for example.

Only after WWII, with increased use of the car and growth in traffic, did the role and perception of asphalt move from a positive one to a negative one. Already in the 1960s, there was a movement to de-pave the modern city. Gordon Cullen, for example, was known for his vision to substitute asphalt with cobblestone. More contemporary movements, like those in California, have initiated the de-paving of asphalt surfaces in order to re-introduce ideas of green space, the garden and orchard, and the 're-naturalization' of the ground of the city.

**GC** It is a story that concerns also an idea of cleanliness, and the use of asphalt as a new material for a more hygienic way of living: the bicycle is cleaner than the horse... Perhaps this idea of



↑  
'1973: Sorry, Out of Gas'.  
Installation view,  
Canadian Centre  
for Architecture,  
2007. © CCA.

de-paving, as well as the nostalgia for ancient ways of paving the roads in the city, are connected with a change in cultural relationships to hygiene.

**MZ** The success of asphalt was, according to some historians like Clay McShane, most applauded by civil engineers who embraced the material as the solution to ‘the problem of the city,’ deeply associated with issues of cleanliness, maintenance, and cost. Asphalt was much cheaper than other materials, and with its smooth surface, not only was cleaning much more efficient, but it was also possible to inscribe signage on the ground. Until that moment, signage was always vertical, and the idea of horizontal signage was facilitated by the presence of the asphalt. For engineers, the material was a solution to many problems.

**GC** You mentioned before asphalt’s hidden presence and one of the reasons why architecture is black today is probably a need to conceal itself. Do you think asphalt is still hidden, or has there been a coming-out for the material, and a recognition of its pervasive presence in cities?

**MZ** I think that, in general, there is a shift in ideas of the city and also of the architecture in which we live – to consider it more from an environmental point of view. When I say environment, I mean a consideration for a more complete context, but also an attention to different sensorial experiences – not only the visual one, but also sounds, smells, and tactile experiences. Much more attention is being paid to the materiality of these different sensorial experiences in a lot of contemporary architecture, and also in the design of open spaces. In this sense, de-paving movements demonstrate that asphalt – or the city’s surface – is now very present in public awareness and the experience of the city. But the problem with this question is that you associate asphalt with the idea of black, but asphalt is not black.

**GC** Of course. Black architecture too is never completely black, otherwise it wouldn’t be visible. It would behave as a visual ‘black hole’, like in some works of Anish Kapoor.

**MZ** So, let’s assume that asphalt is grey. What is interesting about this material is its heterogeneity, as a combination of sand, stones, and bitumen. There is more and more research to substitute bitumen with polymers or glues that can take on differ-

ent colours. Topotek was the first to use this kind of coloured surface, but a lot of work of this sort has been done elsewhere as well, using alternative chemical glues. In the case that these substitutes become too expensive, asphalt can be simply painted. But it is more and more common to see the surface of the city in colour. Think of the artificial landscapes that a lot of designers are doing now.

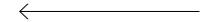
Asphalt can also be transparent. The grey of asphalt can be substituted with an invisible binding agent between different aggregates so that even if the artificial layer is there, what is visible is a consolidated ground. While offering the same qualities as asphalt, this kind of pavement is visually non-intrusive.

If we are speaking of the different intentions behind other kinds of materiality, we could anticipate that colour and a variety of treatments could add value to the asphalt surface that is no longer dedicated to the car, but reconquered for the pedestrian and the cyclist. Such a re-evaluation of asphalt for the pedestrian returns us to the origin of the experiment, especially in Paris, when bitumen and then asphalt was first introduced for sidewalks. At the time, this was an incredible success, when suddenly the mud and the irregularity of stone could be substituted with a wonderful, smooth surface that facilitated a new ease of movement. So asphalt has returned to its origin, but this time it can be coloured.

- GC** So do you think the flâneur was a by-product of asphalt?
- MZ** Well – yes. From my point of view, I associate the flâneur with asphalt.
- GC** While you were talking about asphalt and the shift from the blackness of bitumen to more transparent glues, I was thinking about the movement of black matter from the horizontality of the plan to the verticality of the building, because asphalt was used for both the paving of roads and for the waterproofing of roofs.
- MZ** Yes, from an engineering perspective, visions for the mid-century city insisted on a perfect, clean, impermeable, easy-to-maintain, and not too expensive urban surface; so from a horizontal, or satellite view of the world, all the roofs and all the ground-level surfaces would have reinforced a – I won't say black, but grey – asphalt utopia, fulfilling hygienic, standardized, and efficient ideals. In trade catalogues of the 18th, 19th and ear-



'Asfalto: Il carattere della città'. Installation view, Triennale di Milano, 2003. © Giovanni Chiaramonte.



'Sense of the City'. Installation view, Canadian Centre for Architecture 2005. © CCA.

ly 20th century, streets, squares, and roofs were shown covered with asphalt – a perfect, seamless, and grey material.

**GC** The Modern approach to white paint had a similar role in cleaning, connecting things, and hiding all the architectural tectonic tricks, like a sort of smoothing of the surface.

**MZ** There was a text by Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*,<sup>1</sup> in which he introduced a 'Law of Ripolin' that advocated for white as a kind of productive morality. I think this text was published in 1925, and in 1926 there was also a book published by an engineer, Pedro Juan Manuel Larrañaga,<sup>2</sup> that made a similar attempt to associate asphalt with ideas of morality, democracy, and an improved civilization. So in a span of two years, two materials of opposite shades – white paint and grey asphalt – were claimed by architects and engineers for the same purpose, relating them to modern ways of living.

**GC** Among your exhibitions, 'Sense of the City' was closely connected with the issue of materiality and experience of other senses beyond the visual you were speaking about before.

**MZ** Yes, there were some reviews of this exhibition that were very smart. One, written by Cristina Bianchetti,<sup>3</sup> understood that the exhibition was an effort to explore the urban environment as a place of experience and not only as a place of production – a radical shift away from the Modern idea of urban environments. Although clearly we still recognize the city as a centre of production, the exhibition sought to underline how our perception of the contemporary city is increasingly related to the different experiences that we have. This is not a new idea for architecture – Steen Eiler Rasmussen, for example, published his book *Experiencing Architecture*<sup>4</sup> in the 1960s – but the idea of experience was a way to dismantle a certain conceptualization of architecture and the city in purely visual terms. By introducing new perspectives, it is possible, in my opinion, to provoke totally different ideas of architecture and the urban. And that was what the exhibition tried to do – to produce some tools to re-frame the way we think about architecture and the city.

These notions of experience are also related to the idea of the interior. Today, we see an interiorization and domestication of outdoor space and an increase in the public character of interior spaces. So the distinction between the experience of public and private spaces is becoming increasingly blurry.

**GC** I would like to further explore your perspective as a curator and also as Director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA); you have both a deep understanding of history because the CCA is a museum with many archives, and also a panoramic approach, because you produce exhibitions reflective of the contemporary context. From this viewpoint, do you have the sensation that the idea of black is a real trend or is it only my obsession?

**MZ** I respect obsession a lot. Without it, it is impossible to go anywhere. You have an obsession with black and I have an obsession with grey.

I was interested in the grey and dirty exterior suggested by Dustyrelief F/B-mu, a proposal by François Roche for a new museum in Bangkok whose envelope was designed to accumulate dust and airborne pollution. There is significant, recent interest in the black exterior as well – far greater than an interest in colour. For some architects, like the Montreal-based Saucier+Perrotte, black has become a kind of trademark.

But there is also an ongoing discussion of black in relation to the production of architecture, for example, in respect to the digital screen. Mark Wigley investigated the appearance of the black screen in *When is the Digital in Architecture?*<sup>25</sup> – a collection of discussions, seminars, and texts that was part of the CCA project, or obsession, with the digital.

**GC** So now the background that we draw on is black.

**MZ** Mark Wigley argues that the black screen that appeared in the MIT laboratories in the mid-1950s was anticipated by white on black drawings by architects like Ivan Leonidov in the 1920s, and as far back as the blueprint, invented in 1842. So architects really started to first use the black background in traditional drawings on paper. And of course Wigley associates the black screen with the photographic reversal and the flip of an architectural drawing to its negative in the publication process.

**GC** In another interview for this issue, Eduardo Arroyo recalls the discussions around the use of black during his time at OMA in the 1990s.

**MZ** There were many architects that were drawing with white on black, Cedric Price, for example, whose archive is at CCA. But Mark Wigley makes the case that Leonidov was a major predecessor of this.

1. Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Crès, 1925), Eng. ed. *The Decorative Art of Today*, transl. by James Dunnett (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

2. Pedro Juan Manuel Larrañaga, *Successful Asphalt Paving: A Description of Up-to-date Methods, Recipes & Theories, with Examples and Practical Hints, for Road Authorities, Contractors, and Advanced Students* (London: Richard Clay & Sons, 1926).

3. Cristina Bianchetti, 'A prospect for the city', *Domusweb* (09 May 2006), <<https://www.domusweb.it/en/reviews/2006/05/09/a-prospect-for-the-city.html>> [accessed 13 June 2018].

4. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962).

5. *When is the Digital in Architecture?*, ed. by Andrew Goodhouse (Berlin: Sternberg Press; Montreal: CCA, 2017).

The idea of writing with white pen on black paper and light on a black screen can be extended to the urban environment as well. The conceptualization of the night in Modern architecture was a kind of background over which architects could experiment with light as a form of writing. But it was not only the writing itself that makes this transition interesting, it was the darkness of the city as a background and a canvas that also produced a new definition of the urban environment. In this sense, we can also take into consideration the black box as an interior space for film, an extension of the black screen and an ideal environment in which to perceive, not only a drawing, but also video, new media, and different representations of architecture produced using digital tools.

So the black box is a small counterpoint to the Modern canon of the white interior. But the idea of black as a background and blank surface is a different discussion from the idea of black as the colour of building. Some of the arguments that you made in your 2013 essay 'Black Boxes,'<sup>6</sup> for example that black architecture can be understood as a contemporary extension of Mies' projects in North America, embed black with an entirely different meaning, one of maintenance and preservation.

**GC** Black can perform in very different ways according to different intentions and situations. But the idea of the black box as a background for scripting or drawing with light is very interesting. As you said, it could be considered a process of internalization of public space and also an extension of the night. I remember the Venturis spoke of the darkness of the casinos in Las Vegas as a way to extend the night in the interior, to suspend the rhythm of the day, and keep customers gambling.

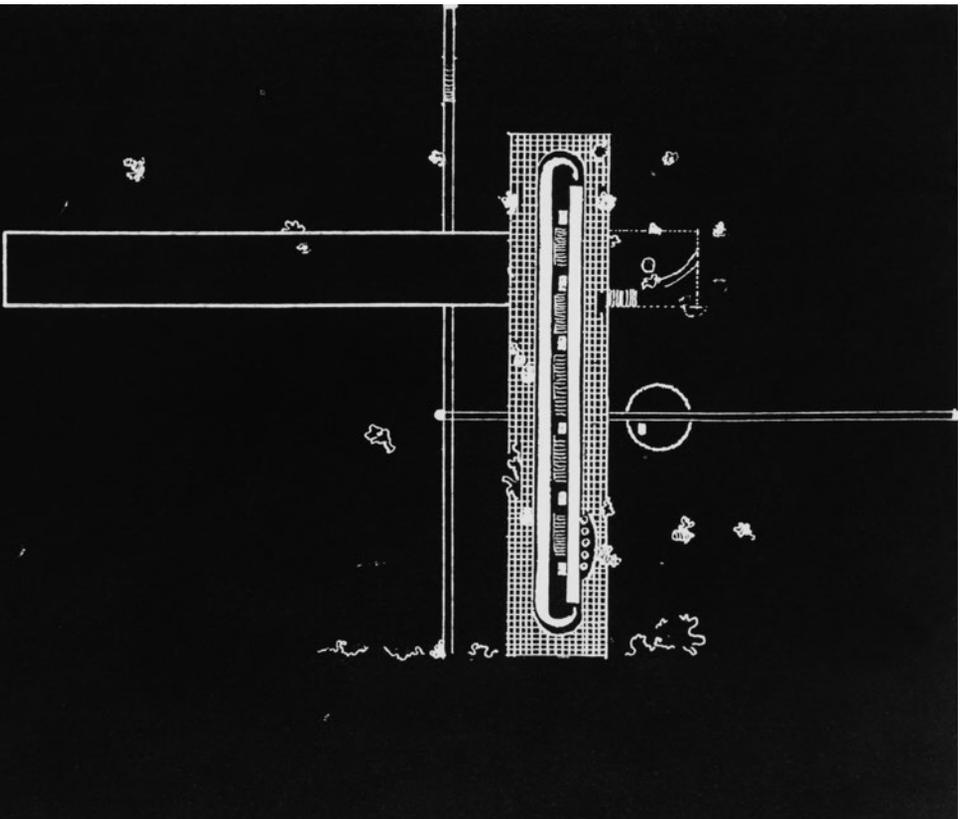
**MZ** The extension of the night in the context of the casino is also interesting; Jonathan Crary's book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*,<sup>7</sup> described the disappearance of the 24-hour sleep cycle and the introduction of a 24-hour work cycle. Black can be associated with ideas of permanence and in this case, permanent work and permanent exploitation; or, in the case of Las Vegas casinos, permanent entertainment, which also exists with film, video games, whatever.

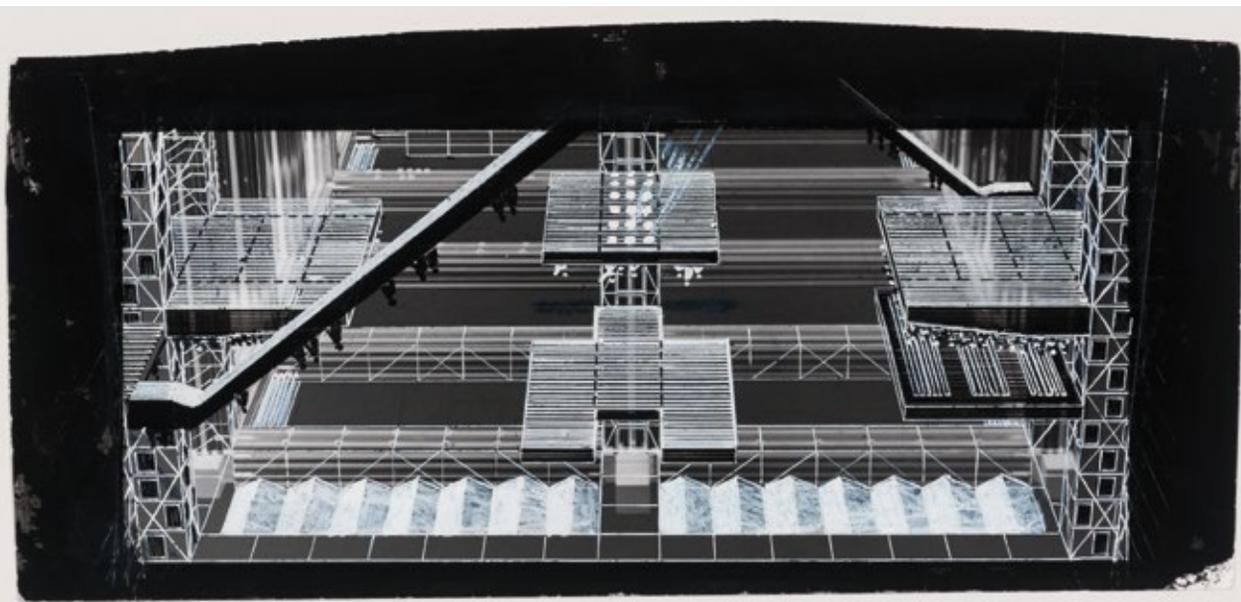
**GC** Another subject you have addressed in your research and exhibitions is the issue of degradation and the dirt, decay, and combustion that contaminate the whiteness of the modern surface and transform a building, or its cladding, throughout its life. This

6. Giovanni Corbellini, 'Scatole nere/Black Boxes', *Paesaggio urbano*, 5-6 bis (2013), pp. 6-23.

7. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London, New York: Verso, 2013).

Ivan Leonidov. Tsentrosoyuz Building, Moscow, photograph of a plan for the competition, 1929-1930. Gelatin silver print, 18 x 13.1 cm. Canadian Centre for Architecture PH1989:0012:045.





Cedric Price. Fun  
Palace, worm's-  
eye interior  
perspective,  
c. 1964. Black  
and white ink  
over photostat,  
19.1 x 8.7 cm.  
Cedric Price  
fonds (AP144),  
Canadian Centre  
for Architecture  
DR1995:0188:519.  
© CCA

is a counter-history of the modern hygienic city that we spoke of before.

8. Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (London: Architectural Press, 1969).

**MZ** This idea of pollution has been addressed by David Gissen, Françoise Roche, and many others. There are two facets of this work: the conceptual value associated with rethinking ideas of contamination and hygiene, and the engineered solutions that reduce pollution and address other specific environmental issues. Both areas of research consider the transformation of the building important for the creation of new, or different environments. But to really consider a counter-history of the modern hygienic city, we have to think beyond a problem of darkness versus lightness, dirt versus cleanliness. I think the building must be positioned in the context of a larger environment, as part of a system of tools that deal with new environmental conditions. This is a kind of extension of the ideas of Reyner Banham in his book, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*,<sup>8</sup> that considered the role of the mechanical engineer as the basis for contemporary architecture.

**GC** Do you know the pavilion by Asif Khan for this year's Winter Olympics in South Korea? He used a sprayable form of Vantablack – a material that absorbs light using nano-technology and achieves the blackest black through the particular form of the surface. It is a different formulation of the Vantablack S-VIS exclusively licensed to Anish Kapoor's studio for artistic use.

**MZ** Is this the stealth military approach applied to building?

**GC** In a way – though warfare mostly looks for an invisibility to radio and micro-wave frequencies. The pavilion is a very strange building, with optic fibres that create points of light, like a dark sky with stars. Also the 'selfie building' at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi was of Asif Khan. Perhaps there is no connection, but it is interesting that the same designer who concealed the black pavilion addressed before the exposition of the self.

**MZ** The concept behind the Korean pavilion is interesting. In a certain way, it is introducing another idea of performance. And contemporary discussions on how architecture relates to environmental issues often introduce the building as a kind of performance with the capacity to make invisible phenomena like pollution and contamination visible, leading us to question the general attitudes we have towards environment.



# THE TASTE OF DARKNESS

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*Kamiel Klaasse - NL Architects*

**GC** Let's start with WOS 8, which I love particularly also because I published it at the beginning of my activity as a critic.

**KK** I remember showing the building to Rem Koolhaas. He liked it a lot and said: 'It is a great start, and it is going to be very hard to top this in your further career.' I guess he was right. Perhaps, it is still our most exciting and radical piece. The basketball window is a rare mind fuck.

**GC** It was an uncommon theme indeed: a station for the heating network, almost without openings. More a tomb than a house... Is it still working?

**KK** I've not been there for a while. It is falling apart. It was meant to become part of the public domain of a planned neighbourhood that, because of some issues with the highway nearby, has not been built yet. WOS 8 is sitting idle in the back of a farm and this absence of public use kind of killed it.

**GC** However, the portion visible on Street View seems in quite good shape. How did people react back then?

**KK** Opinions were wildly divergent. The occasional architectural tourist enjoyed the building. One neighbour was happy because he sold the ground, but the one next door claimed the value of his property decreased. He reportedly chased some fans with a pitchfork. This guy once asked me why we didn't build a traditional farm to hide the project.

**GC** Something like MVRDV's glass farm in Schijndel?

**KK** Sort of. But a traditional shape, however appealing, would have meant an automatic increase of volume and the zoning law didn't allow to make the building any bigger. We had to squeeze the envelope around the machinery so that there was no space left

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←  
NL Architects,  
WOS 8, Heat  
Transfer Station,  
Utrecht, 1997-  
98. Photo Daria  
Scagliola.



NL Architects,  
WOS 8, Heat  
Transfer Station,  
Utrecht, 1997-98.

in between the necessary interior space and the envelope. We couldn't make the pitched roof that the neighbour would have preferred. In retrospect, it would have been a funny idea as well putting these high tech installations within a fake barn: typical for the current timeframe, defined by increasing conservatism

**GC** We are getting older in Europe and conservatism is a side effect of an aging community.

**KK** You might be right. In the mid-1990s, when we were doing this project, baby boomers were still young. WOS 8 was a manifestation of a certain optimism and energy.

**GC** How did you come up with a black solution?

**KK** We considered giving the building our favourite colour: *grachten groen*, canal green, which is actually almost black. Many window frames in the Netherlands are painted in this colour so that the windows look as big as possible. Most of the glass you see from outside appears dark, unless there is a very light space behind it that makes the glass transparent. There is a beautiful similarity between *grachten groen* and the perceived colour of the glass in many light conditions. It is a fantastic colour because you never know if it is black or not. There is something both practical and mysterious in its darkness.

**GC** So you wanted to get both.

**KK** The WOS 8 could have been orange, blue, yellow... The sprayed polyurethane we used there is available in almost endless hues. The colour choice really became a question. How to decide? After long consideration, we arrived at an idea that is actually quite similar to the one of the angry neighbour we were talking about before, in the sense that we took inspiration from a local feature, only we took silage, an agricultural practice, as our starting point. Silage is the fodder farmers use to feed their cows in the winter. They obtain it by piling up the still wet grass. Then they cover it with black plastic sheets, often secured with car tyres. These black heaps are quite large, more or less the size of a barn. At the time, you could see them everywhere. We found their aesthetics very intriguing. We saw a possible poetical relationship with this vernacular, albeit contemporary, feature of the Dutch landscape, and we felt it was fitting.

- GC** And what about the problem of vandalism? I remember your first proposal was named after Loos' *Ornament und Vebrechen*.
- KK** There was an immense pressure on the project because it was the first building to be completed: WOS 8 had to provide the new residential area with warm water. This pressure was a blessing because there was no time to rethink the project. We were approached by the client even before the definitive site was chosen. So, we started without a specific context, although it was clear that vandalism was a relevant issue.
- GC** Therefore the barbed wire nest you first proposed was because of a not yet specified location.
- KK** We turned the impending destruction of this type of isolated, uninhabited building, without the perceived control provided by urban density into a theme. Could we deploy the armour used to protect property as a design tool? In a way, we pushed the security obsession to distil beauty.  
However, as soon as we received the actual site and requirements, that idea appeared less logical. Instead of harnessing the building, we sought to address youth culture, wrapping the building with a playful interface: the one and only window is a transparent basketball backboard and climbing grips invite you to climb one of the walls. It was the opposite strategy to deal with the same problem. Hopefully, the blackness added 'coolness' to the building (even though it accumulates warmth...).
- GC** Probably this same feature accelerates the process of fermentation of the grass under the black plastic sheets. Are there similar techniques in the traditional rural architecture there? Black wooden barns or other examples?
- KK** This technique is relatively recent, let's say fifty years, and results from the availability of plastic. However, in our countryside even wooden architecture is often black. I grew up in a farm and this experience is still a source of inspiration for me. As a kid, I used to make a buck in the summer by painting the wooden stables with Carbolineum. It was a super poisonous oily mixture of coal tar, I guess forbidden by now – we had burn marks everywhere – but it made buildings very beautiful. Somehow, the fact that it hurt and burned sparked a sense of admiration and I am still incredibly fond of those old barns.  
The blackness of WOS 8 could be traced back to that kind of

imagery, but also to other sources of inspiration. For instance, the black wooden floor filmed by Tarkovsky in *The Mirror*: a beautiful texture that reacted magnificently to light. It is a perfect example of the reflectiveness of this colour. We looked for this kind of effect in the WOS 8, with its seamless, waterproof, polyurethane finish. When it gets wet, it is engulfed by glossy, dazzling streaks of water. A super-interesting aspect of black is that it shifts from absorbing to reflecting according to humidity.

**GC** Yes, it is visually powerful. However, another very compelling feature of your project was the introduction, through that idea of relationship with the youth culture, of a tactile interaction, which adds a further layer to the mostly visual architectural aesthetics. I remember that those climbing holds are arranged in order to write something in braille on the wall. Blindness and blackness seem to reinforce each other, inviting to literally getting in touch with the building and its narrative.

**KK** The climbing grips added a new dimension to architecture, an inescapable tactility. The tactility of this object was so strong that the kids couldn't resist to caressing, hugging, even licking it. Some children saw in it a humongous *dropje*, a liquorice candy very popular among the Dutch. We grew up eating this black stuff, which nobody in his right mind would associate with an edible substance.

**GC** Black can trigger threatening sensations but mixes them with the promise of delicious rewards (as was the case with Carbolineum). This reminds me that character with huge boobs wearing a sort of thick black diving suit you used as an icon to support your project. Was the WOS 8 seamless envelope and its curvy shape also intended as an erotic message?

**KK** It is exactly what we tried to represent. The quite amazing quality of polyurethane is that it can be applied to virtually all shapes. It allows to get rid of the usual architectural details, either intended to cope with the weather or the building tectonics. This means the possibility to get an object completely detached from previous typologies, from the normal expectations associated with a building. Something like a blank blackboard on which any observer could project his or her own sensations, experiences, obsessions. Smooth surface, holes, wet streaks, curved angles and play facilities were aimed as inviting, empathic features for a closer relationship.

NL Architects,  
Temporary Train  
Station, Barneveld  
Noord, 2011-13.  
Photo Andreas  
Secci.



- GC** Did you use some of these black tools, devices and effects in other occasions?
- KK** We have explored blackness a couple of times since WOS 8. One of these projects is a small temporary railway station in a village called Barneveld. It was part of a public campaign called 'Prettig Wachten', meant to make waiting for the train more comfortable. It is a small structure; more a bus stop than a station. Since it was intended as temporary, we built it from shipping containers. We took the liberty to propose a strong gesture, to increase visibility. The building forms an asymmetrical black cross, with transparent rooms under its horizontal arms made of three 20 ft containers. The fourth one, flipped to an upright position, contains a 40 ft high lavatory inside. It became a clock tower including a wind vane on top. Since Barneveld is the 'capital of eggs' the customary cock of the weathervane was replaced with a female chicken. The blackness reinforces the strong gesture and the graphic power of the building.
- GC** Did they remove it?
- KK** It is still there. You know, many temporary buildings become permanent.  
Another black project of ours is the renovation of the gatehouse that controls the access to an industrial park in Arnhem. It is quite a beautiful area, along the river, completely closed by a fence. This sort of compounds of warehouses and production facilities are often subject to theft, especially at night, when almost nobody is there.
- GC** So, there's again the security issue at stake.
- KK** Definitely. This park accommodates all kinds of sustainable technologies. A company investigates improvements for solar panels, another works on impregnating wood...
- GC** With Carbolineum?
- KK** (Laughs) with something more healthy, hopefully... However, there was one main entrance: a small, you might call hideous, structure. What sparked the change wasn't the fact that the building was not that attractive, but the need to have an extra lane for the trucks to enter the compound. Traffic jams piled up in front of the gate.

It was not possible to just remove the existing building and replace it with something new because the upper floor was full of servers, switch panels and installations: the whole communication wiring between inside and outside the compound was interconnected here. Cutting this connection would have meant to jeopardize the operation of the entire compound. It had to keep running, also during the renovation. It was a 'black box', in the sense it mysteriously managed inputs and outputs, which after renovation became a literal black box...

**GC** It sounds appropriate.

**KK** We had a super intelligent client, who is also an architect. Eventually he decided to follow his father's steps, a big developer and landowner, and now he is doing incredible projects. We worked closely together on the solution of slicing off part of the existing building, to get the needed extra space for trucks, re-composing the new volume starting from its metal frame. Below the black box lies a fully glazed reception area with an unimpeded view in every direction. We could create a half climate for the waiting area and as such could use single glass. This makes the lobby exceptionally transparent. Boosting the contrast between top and bottom.

**GC** Yes, you can see through it. Therefore, no *grachten groen* but white for everything at the ground floor... What about the black matter above? It seems both matt and glossy.

**KK** When I was studying in Delft, I did a project about reflective materials. I came across so-called retro-reflective sheeting used for traffic signs. Many years later, this traffic-related material turned out to be very appropriate for the gatehouse.

Of course this sheeting is available in blue, red, white and yellow, but, counterintuitively, 3M also produces it in black. Which is weird. The decision was soon taken. It wasn't just a representational connection with the 'black box' above; we tried to pursue a sense of neutrality, a form of industrial rationality, modesty, inconspicuousness. At the same time, the material has two personalities, it is at the same time radiant, joyful. The foil is engineered to be reflective. It throws back light in exactly the same direction as the light source. This establishes what I like to call an intimate relation; the experience is profoundly personal, individual. When an approaching truck driver switches on those big lights they usually are equipped with, the building sudden-

ly becomes silver, although only the driver (or someone in the same light path) can perceive this effect. Blinkers will make the building vibrate in orange. If you leave the compound, you see the gatehouse in the rear mirror becoming green or red according to the traffic light. It is totally fascinating that a black object can do this. The paradox of being black and reflective is beautiful.



NL Architects,  
Porters Lodge,  
Industriepark  
Kleefse Waard,  
Arnhem 2010-11.  
Photo Jeroen  
Musch.

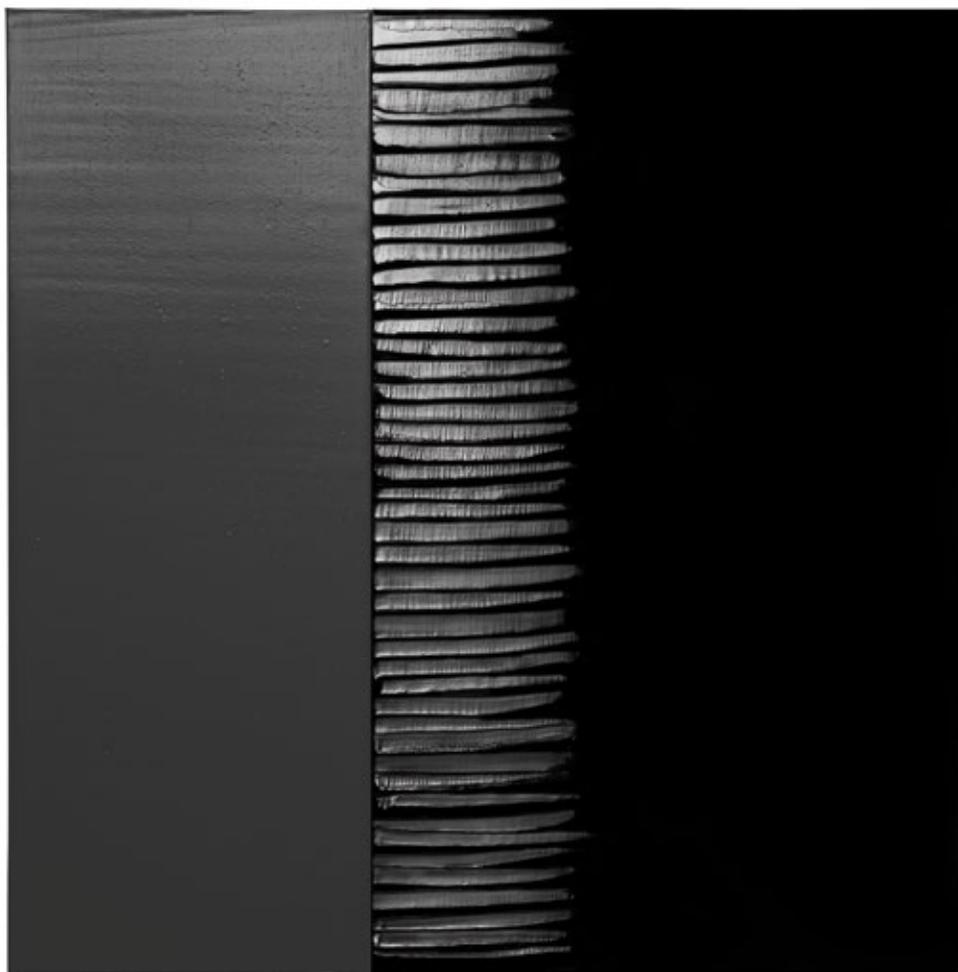
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NL Architects,  
Porters Lodge,  
Industriepark  
Kleefse Waard,  
Arnhem 2010-11.  
Photo Ralph  
Kamena.



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Pierre Soulages,  
Peinture, 202  
x 202 cm, 13  
septembre 2013,  
2013. Acrylic on  
canvas. 202 x  
202 cm. Private  
collection.

# OUTRENOIR

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Pierre Soulages<sup>1</sup>

**GC** I find your pictorial attitude quite architectural, where does it come from?

**PS** It is something lost in the fog of childhood. Quite simply, I liked to paint, dip my brush in an inkwell and then put it on a school notebook. I certainly felt a certain pleasure. The desire to make it my main activity arose when I was twelve, visiting the Romanesque Abbey of Conques. Faced with the shock and the emotion that space produced on me, I realized that what mattered in life was art.<sup>2</sup>

In the beginning, I really liked to draw the leafless trees in winter. The way they would write space, so to speak. It all comes from there. From that sort of abstract sculptures. I've always looked for the presence of the works or the objects that were in front me. In my current works, that presence is even more obvious, you see reflections of it. The light changes, at Conques for instance where, from dawn to dusk, the stained glass windows are never the same.<sup>3</sup> Same goes for my 'black' paintings. If you move, they're not quite the same anymore. When you look at them, their presence lies in the moment of your contemplation. In that very moment. The relation to space is different. The very space of the canvas is in front of the light that comes towards you from the canvas, and the person who's looking at it is also in that space.<sup>4</sup>

**GC** So it is a matter of light in space-time...

**PS** In all my paintings since 1979, the light comes from the painting in front of the observer who is no longer in front but in the space of the canvas. The bigger the format, the more obvious this effect.<sup>5</sup> In the case of a line that unfolds, there is a beginning and an end – a duration – 'something' that flows. In my work, all the forms, the painted traces organized on the canvas, are delivered at once, the time is not the same, there is no longer a duration. There is a motionless time, there is no more flow, succession;

1. Note of the editor: what follows is a collection of excerpts from some published Pierre Soulages' interviews, which I treated as answers to my retroactive questions. English translations from the French publications are mine. G.C.

2. Pierre Soulages, 'Les couleurs du noir', int. by Olivier Pauli, *Soulages*, exp. catalogue (Lausanne: Galerie Alice Pauli, 1990), in *Soulages XXIe Siècle*, ed. by Éric Chassey and Sylvie Ramond (Hazan: Paris 2012), p. 154.

3. In 1986, Pierre Soulages was commissioned by the French Government to realize 104 stained glass windows for the Conques Abbey. The work was completed in April 1994.

4. Pierre Soulages, 'Pierre Soulages and the Aveyron', *Artdaily* (2014), <<http://artdaily.com/news/70470/Pierre-Soulages-and-the-Aveyron-Interview-with-Pierre-Soulages#.WxjvdyC-lhE>> [accessed 18 May 2018].

it is a completely different attitude towards time; a completely different way of involving time into the pictorial space. I could even say that it is a pictorial time woven with a pictorial space: a problem that was at the heart of my preoccupations – without having knowledge of it. More precisely, this problem is the result of my way of working and of the pictures as they are when I leave them to the viewer.<sup>6</sup>

**GC** This reminds me of the very different attitude of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, actually produced through the superimposition of many layers of different colours: they become 'visible' after a relatively long time of visual adaptation; let's say ten minutes or more... What is the role of your *outrenoir*, or ultrablack, in the sudden appearance you are looking for?

**PS** *Outrenoir* means 'beyond the black', light reflected, transmuted by black. *Outrenoir*: black that, ceasing to be as such, becomes transmitter of clarity, secret light. *Outrenoir*: a mental field other than that of simple black. I tried to analyse the poetics specific to my painting practice and its relationship to space and time: there is an instantaneous vision for each point of view. If we change it, there is the dissolution of the first vision, erasure, and appearance of another one. The canvas is present as soon as it is seen. It is not at a distance in time, as the one implied by representative and gestural paintings, which refer to the moment of the gesture or of what they represent. Under a natural light, the clarity coming from black evolves with that which marks, in immobility, the flow of time.<sup>7</sup>

**GC** You often remembered that this came to you as a sort of epiphany.

**PS** One day in 1979, I realized that the light reflected by the painting was coming towards me. Therefore, I thought, 'What's going on?' The painting space is no longer behind it, as they wanted to do with perspective. If it is not even on the surface – as conceived by the Byzantines, whom however I prefer to those who followed – it is here now in front of the canvas, since what I see is the light that comes from the painting towards me. The space is in front, and I am inside, in the space of the painting.<sup>8</sup>

I was here in this studio working on a painting for hours and there was black paint everywhere. I was exhausted, and I couldn't understand why I had worked for so long on something I didn't like. I thought it must be a bad painting because it wasn't turning out like the others. I went to sleep for an hour, and when

I woke up and looked at it again, I thought: 'I don't paint with black anymore. I paint with the light reflected off the black surface.' This realization touched me, so I continued to make more of these paintings. The Centre Pompidou invited me to do an exhibition of this new series, which people started calling *noir lumière*, or 'black light'. I didn't like this name because it suggests an optical effect. I made these because I found that the light reflected by the black surface elicits certain emotions in me. These aren't monochromes. The fact that light can come from the color, which is supposedly the absence of light is already quite moving, and it is interesting to see how this happens. I realized I needed to find a word that could convey the mental field opened up by these paintings. That is when I invented the word *outrenoir*. *Outrenoir* doesn't exist in English; the closest is 'beyond black'. In French, you say 'outr-Manche', 'beyond the Channel', to mean England or 'outr-Rhin', 'beyond the Rhine', to mean Germany. In other words, 'beyond black' is a different country from black.<sup>9</sup>

**GC** However, black has been the main colour of your palette since the beginnings.

**PS** I've always been interested in what I didn't know. I still am. This is what led me to the *outrenoir*, a light reflected by different layers or black. Black is the original colour of painting. For centuries, the cavemen, in their black pitch caves, would paint with black. Black is also the colour of our origin. Before we were born, weren't we plunged in darkness? I was once told that, as a child, I would plunge my brush in the inkwell to draw long black lines on white paper. 'What are you doing?', they would ask. I would answer: 'Snow'. That didn't go unnoticed. Perhaps I was trying, by contrast, to make the paper whiter than it really was by confronting it to black colour. My taste for black dates back to my childhood. Contrary to most people, I could not see any particular symbolism to it. Black is often the colour of mourning. It is a shortsighted and codified way to consider it. Black was also the colour of the gowns and religious habits of Benedictine nuns. All at once austerity, feast, anarchy, rebellion and authority. Whenever I had the chance, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, I would dress in black. My mother was absolutely shocked. She said to me: 'You're mourning me already!'<sup>10</sup>

**GC** Getting rid of symbols is part of our being modern but it requires an open attitude.

5. Pierre Soulages, 'A propos de la Peinture 293 x 324 cm, 19 décembre 1995, polyptyque, collection de l'artiste', 'Les éclats du noir', int. by Pierre Encrevé, *Beaux Arts Magazine* (March 1996), in *Soulages XXIe Siècle*, p. 160.

6. Pierre Soulages, 'L'aventure de l'art moderne', int. by André Parinaud (Paris: Galerie Jardin des Arts, 1975), in *Soulages XXIe Siècle*, p. 143.

7. Pierre Soulages, 'Les éclats du noir', p. 159.

8. Pierre Soulages, 'Soulages le réfractaire', int. by Jacques-Alain Miller, with Pierre Encrevé and Nathalie Georges-Lambrichs, *La Cause freudienne*, 75 (2010), in *Soulages XXIe Siècle*, p. 167.

9. Pierre Soulages, int. by Zoe Stillpass, *Interview Magazine* (7 May 2014), <<https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/pierre-soulages>> [accessed 18 May 2018].

10. 'Pierre Soulages and the Aveyron'.



**PS** If one finds that these paintings are just black, it is because one does not look at them with the eyes, but with what one has in the head.<sup>11</sup> We keep on calling it black; in fact, something else is in action, to the point that I could say that my tool is not black, but light. Thus employed, black is not just monochrome, it is also the opposite. The words that designate colours are limiting – they are abstractions, in the true sense of the word. In painting, colour, whether it is yellow, red, blue, or black, is something that concretely relates not just to its shape and size, but also to a set that constitutes the qualities of that colour. It is transparent or opaque, or both according to its position; it is bright or matt; smooth or granular; fibrous, etc. And it appears to us at the same time only as black. It looks abstracted from all its physiognomic qualities, which are inseparable in the perception one has and in the emotion it triggers.<sup>12</sup>

**GC** Your attention to the painting materiality, to its actual ‘thingness’, sounds pretty architectural.

**PS** My aesthetic choices have ethical equivalents, interacting with the world and things. I feel closer to stone, wood and rust than nickel or lacquer. I’m more into clay than chrome.

When I did my etchings, corroding copper, I was thinking that, in the end, corrosion is time trapped by matter. When you erode copper with acid, you do, in ten minutes, what would take centuries for Nature to do.<sup>13</sup>

When I make a painting, I give it a title: a date, a list of the materials, and the dimensions. The young artists of the 1960s – when they saw the titles of my paintings – felt they were very literal and therefore different from those of other American or French artists. These 1960s young intellectual artists were Maoists. They wanted to embrace me as their friend. So I met them, and said: ‘You confuse materiality and reality.’ I am a realist, but my reality is not only a material one. Reality is the triple relationship between the perceiver, the painting, and the artist.<sup>14</sup>

**GC** The ‘truth’ of materials is something architects often deal with, both from a Loosian point of view, concerning a sort of ethics of the object, and as a search for an interactive connection with a wider reality. Does black display any particular potential in this sense?

**PS** When you remove yourself from the blackness, you see the light from it.<sup>15</sup>

11. Pierre Soulages, ‘Les éclats du noir’, p. 159.

12. Pierre Soulages, ‘Les couleurs du noir’, p. 154.

13. ‘Pierre Soulages and the Aveyron’.

14. Pierre Soulages, int. by Robert C. Morgan, *The Brooklyn Rail* (10 December 2005), <<https://brooklynrail.org/2005/12/art/n-conversation-pierre-soulages-with-robe>> [accessed 18 May 2018].

15. Ibid.

←  
Pierre Soulages,  
Peinture,  
184 x 130 cm, 15  
mai 2016, 2016.  
Acrylic on canvas.  
184 x 130 cm.  
Courtesy Perrotin.

All colours belong to this practice of black. Take my *Peinture 222 x 157 cm, 15 janvier 1990*: at this moment, I see it gilded with warm sparkles. On the right, it becomes blue, because it captures a certain light in a certain way. The paintings I make this way with black only live through the light they receive.

I have a studio in the South attached to my house. From time to time, we take a canvas and hang it where we live. For a long time, there was an ochre, yellow, black, grey and white painting on the wall. Whatever the light of day, we could always say that it was an ochre, a grey, a white and a black. Now, there is one of these 'black' canvases. Some mornings it is grey, silver. At other times, capturing the reflections of the sea, it is blue. At other times, it takes coppery brown tones; in fact, it is always in tune with the light it receives.<sup>16</sup>

**GC** In a way, your work thrives upon contextual relations. It is no more a matter of getting one to the right interpretation, but of taking advantage of the unpredictable interaction in time between the work, the observer and the environment. Even if your paintings look great on the pages of books or on the screen, nothing can replace the experience of being in front of one of them.

**PS** Photography reduces the multiplicity of time to the unity of the instant. It 'flattens' on the canvas the space that light creates in front of the painting and, not being able to restore the brightness or the fluidity of the light reflected by black, it translates the reflections by different greys. This is how the reproduction of these paintings sadly cast back them to a classical conception of painting.<sup>17</sup>

In the classic conception of painting, reflections are considered parasitic to the vision, so that usual presentations strive to eliminate them. Here, on the contrary, not only is the reflection taken into account, but it is an integral part of the work: it incorporates the light the painting receives – a changing light if it is natural – and restores it with its colour transmuted by black.<sup>18</sup>

**GC** This takes us to the issue of control. Do you 'design' your paintings?

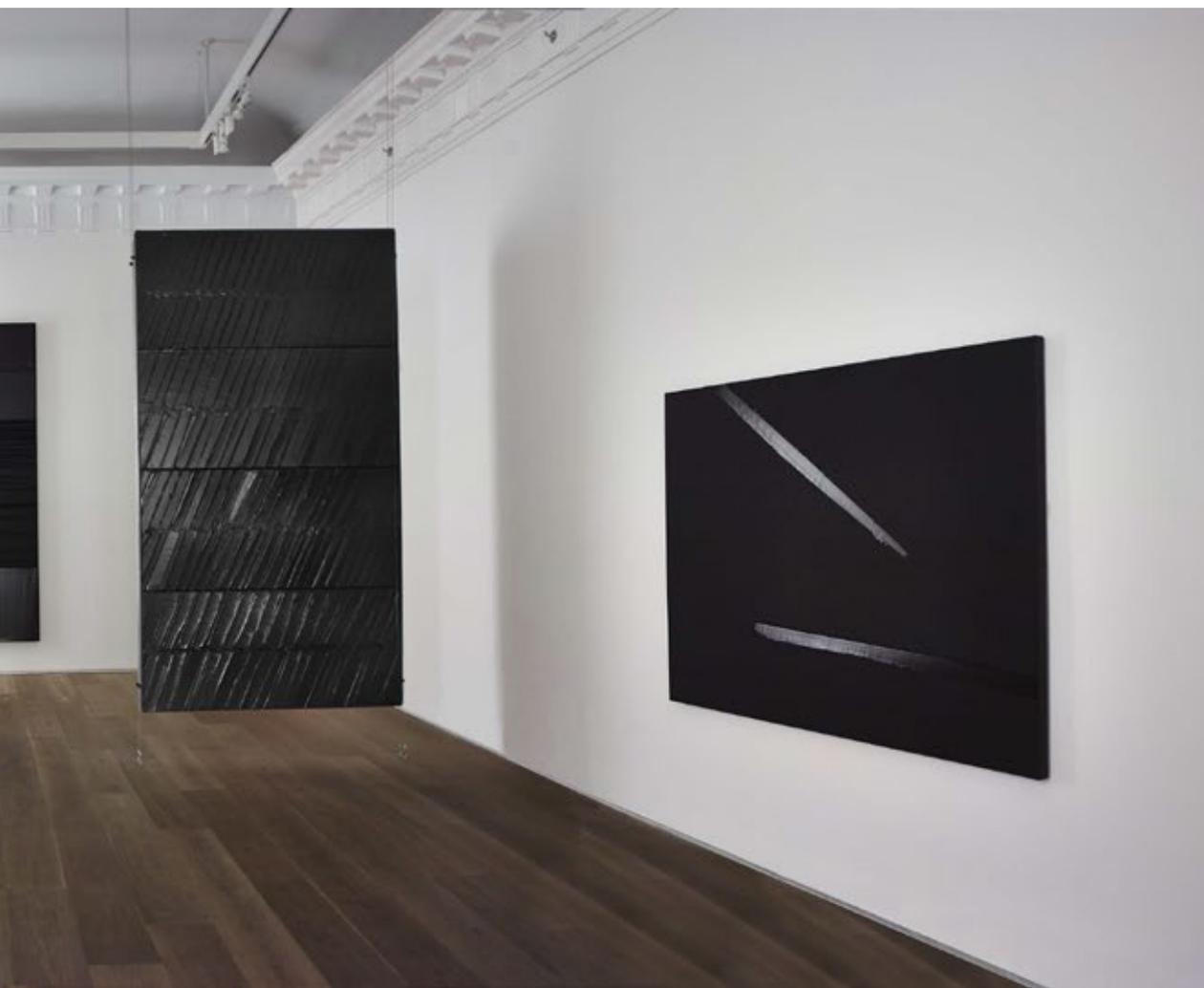
**PS** What I'm doing teaches me what I'm looking for, but at the moment I only discover it vaguely or in part.<sup>19</sup> Chance and accidental occurrences, if we pay attention, conceal, propose, suggest what we would never have imagined. They intervene in the gen-

Pierre Soulages,  
Peinture 324 x  
362 cm, 1986,  
Polyptyque H,  
1986. Oil on  
canvas. 324 x 362  
cm (324 x 90.5 cm  
(x4)). Courtesy  
Perrotin.



Exhibition at the  
Perrotin Gallery,  
New York, 2014.





esis of paintings as I conceive it. They make us act differently, organize, gather, as Nietzsche says, ‘fragment, enigma, horrible chance.’<sup>20</sup>

**GC** And when it comes to displaying your works in a gallery or for an exhibition, how do you decide their position and relationship with the space?

**PS** I always liked paintings to be walls rather than windows. When we see a painting on a wall, it’s a window, so I often put my paintings in the middle of the space to make a wall. A window looks outside, but a painting should do the opposite – it should look inside of us. When I put them in the middle of the room, I attach the paintings at the top to the ceiling and on the bottom to the floor. I prefer this to just hanging them from the ceiling because it creates a place in a space, like a wall.<sup>21</sup>

**GC** It seems to me you are looking for a sort of ground/ground ratio, even though you explored and still explore blackness versus white both in your paintings and in some settings of the *outrenoir* series.

**PS** Sometimes I come back to black and white and use light as a contrast. My painting rests on the light that stems either from the contrast or from its reflection, but not from anything: the light coming from black – the colour that is the greatest absence of light.<sup>22</sup>

I choose neither black nor white but two types of pictorial light pushed to the extreme: that arising from the black-white contrast and the more secret one emanating from the different surface states of black.<sup>23</sup>

**GC** The *Outrenoir* paintings in your museum in Rodez – designed by RCR Architectes, Aranda Pigem Villalta, 2014 – are displayed in pretty dark rooms made of black steel. I remember a total black room that made a deep impression on me the first time I came across your work in the exhibition at the Beaubourg in 2009.

**PS** The idea of the black room is mine. The first time, it was a comical moment indeed: the Museum of Münster, in Germany, purchased a large painting of mine. They told me: ‘Usually, when we buy a big painting, we show it to the public because it is an expense for the city. We put the painting we just bought in a room with nothing else in it. Anyone who passes by can see it.

We are going to hang it there, how do you want to hang it?' I said, 'First of all, where are the doors? – They are along a wall. – So not on that wall: in front of it. – That's what we usually do. Then, where do you want to hang it? – In the middle. I would like anyway, given what I do, to feel that it is a thing.' I tell them that you should therefore detach the painting from the wall. 'But how? – Well, either on cables or on gallews! Whatever is easier for you. – The simplest way would be cables. What colour do you want the walls? – Paint them black. – Yes, ok, but the walls? – The ceiling and the floor too, and the two side walls too. – Oh! The two side walls too? – Yes, yes, black. – Very good, and what about the lighting? – No lighting. – No lighting?! – No lighting, but I did not tell you to paint black the wall along which the people pass, this one, leave it clear. Leave it blank and light this wall only.' It was a try, an attempt, but I knew it had to work. It was very good, so good that the people passing by said, 'Of course, it's not about black, it is about light.'<sup>24</sup>

16. Pierre Soulages, 'Les couleurs du noir', p. 154.

17. Pierre Soulages, 'Les éclats du noir', p. 159.

18. Pierre Soulages, 'A propos de la Peinture 162 x 127 cm, 14 avril 1979, huile sur toile, collection particulière', 'Les éclats du noir', p. 160.

19. Pierre Soulages, 'Les éclats du noir', p. 158.

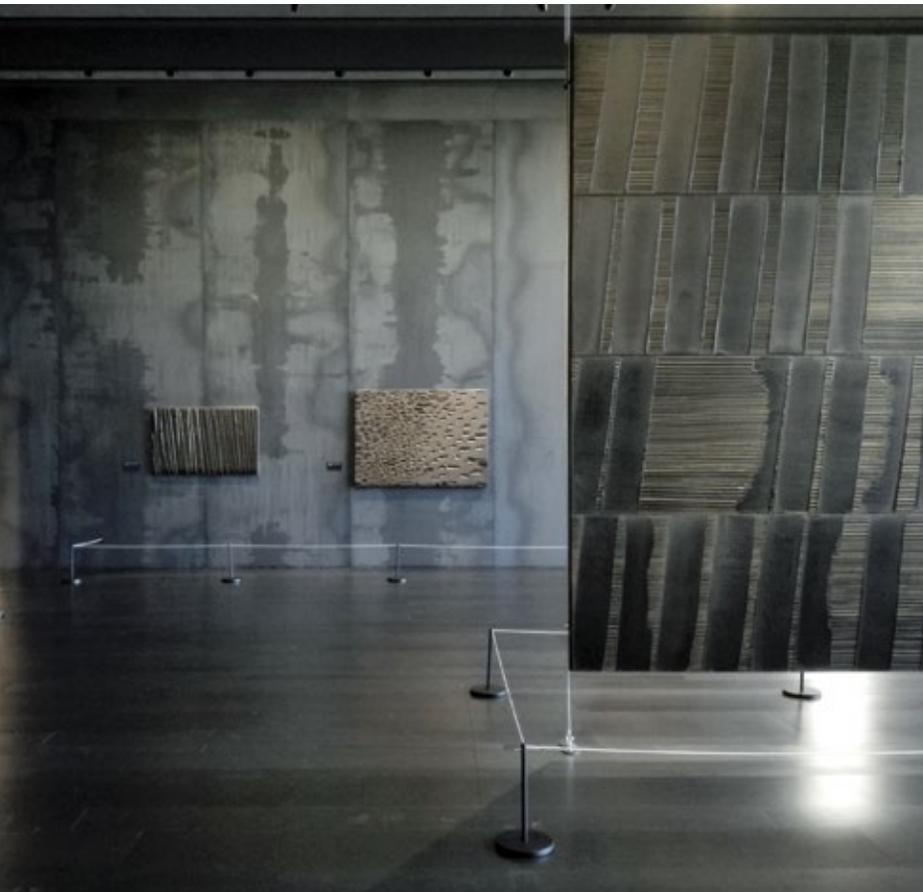
20. Pierre Soulages, 'Les couleurs du noir', p. 156.

21. Pierre Soulages, int. by Zoe Stillpass.

22. Pierre Soulages, 'Soulages le réfractaire', p. 173.

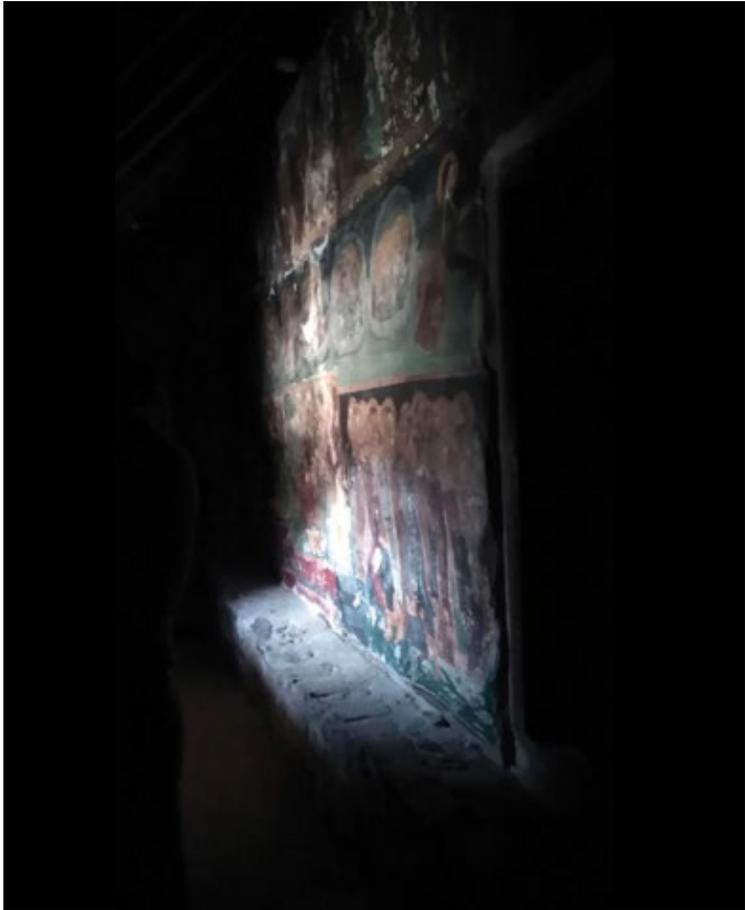
23. Pierre Soulages, 'Les éclats du noir', p. 158.

24. Pierre Soulages, 'Soulages le réfractaire', p. 179.



←  
RCR Architectes,  
Museum Soulages,  
Rodez, 2014,  
interior view.

→  
Panagia Asinou  
Church, Nikitary,  
Cyprus, 11th-12th  
century.



# BLACKLIST

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Giovanni Corbellini, Valerio Paolo Mosco

**GC** This final conversation should work as an editorial, or better as a dialogue that brings together the presentations of this issue of *Viceversa* by me, the editor in charge, and you, the editor in chief.

**VPM** Why did you choose this discursive form?

**GC** For many reasons: it is agile, friendly, often anecdotal and personal, and therefore liable to providing insights that, in the inevitably highly monitored form of the essay, are unlikely to surface. In addition, right now black is a very popular issue that thrives in the architectural practice apparently without a theory to support its reasons. There are neither manifestoes nor critical positions, so nobody can pretend to be an expert. Therefore, I invited some interesting people to discuss their black experiences with me and the dialogic form allowed us to explore issues or arguments on which we had not yet reflected in particular. It's a true research endeavour, even though its outcomes are hard to classify or assess within the parameters of academic evaluation.

**VPM** In fact, although many black projects and realizations came out recently, this cannot be considered as an exclusive character of the contemporary. Works of all times come to my mind, from prehistorical caves to the masters of the Modern.

**GC** Of course. However, this phenomenon is so evident today that a famous webzine has started to tag many black houses proposed for publication in a special category,<sup>1</sup> and last year an important publisher released a coffee-table book dedicated to dark architecture.<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of an ideology, this quantity is even more surprising and, as such, deserves to be investigated. The connection between mode and modern outpaces the common etymology and can capture the mood of a certain period beyond the intentions of individual protagonists.

1. Dezeen, started its 'Black Houses Archives' in 2013: 'we've noticed a lot of black cropping up in architecture and design lately, so we've created an archive of all the black houses on Dezeen.' <<http://www.dezeen.com/tag/black-houses/>>.

2. *Black: Architecture in Monochrome*, ed. by Stella Paul (London, New York: Phaidon, 2017).

**VPM** It is a theme that carries some correspondences and outlines a sort of genome of personal taste. Nevertheless, I still think these vast iconographic themes are independent of the historical moment. For example, it is something one could detect in some Impressionists, when black was that of cast iron. My own genome of black, however, starts from an essential distinction. There is a sensorial aseptic black: the one, to be clear, of industrial design...

**GC** Do you mean the 'matte-black' framed by Deyan Sudjic (that of 1970s Braun products and the likes)?<sup>3</sup>

**VPM** Yes. This is a black that mirrors, as such uninteresting for me. But there is also another black, which I would call 'septic', a black that smells of wood and pitch, the black of Venetian boatyards. It stinks, it is broken, it is not absolute, it absorbs, it does not reflect light. At the same time it frames, it becomes a background, while that 'design' black aspires to become a figure.

**GC** It is an issue, that of black in the figure/ground ratio, that has surfaced time and again in these conversations. It rather depends on how you look at it and on the ideologies that guide your way of seeing. Your hint at the Impressionists is pertinent in this sense, precisely because they broke the symbolic bond between what is represented and the meaning of the work, which is an investigation about the variation of light and colour relationships independent of the fact that what is painted is the Cathedral of Rouen or London in the fog.

**VPM** I think more of Manet and his *Olympia*: one of the few Impressionists who used black (others painted shadow as another shade of colour). His black has a grain inscribed in a lived experience. It is the black of certain American floors, like those of the most beautiful houses in Chicago: polished and worn out by treading. In contrast to the creamy white of walls, it holds space together. Black draws it, almost closes it.

**GC** At the same time, it also dematerializes space: when a room is too small, painting it black makes its borders imperceptible, giving the impression of larger dimensions. Of course, according to your approach, it's more a 'design' trick than great architecture. However, the cynical and amoral side of design is also its strength: looking for 'whatever works' gives this

attitude a potential unattainable for architects, always mindful of their place in history.

3. Actually, Deyan Sudjic, *The Language of Things* (London: Penguin, 2009), recalls his purchase of a black MacBook, p. 15.

**VPM** I feel better on the other side. Every form of art is an implicit criticism, while design tends to emphasize the existing. It is always in real time, rootless, technically kitsch, which is not an automatically negative judgment. I find that 'septic' black is an anti-kitsch device. In some ways, it's something different from the Nordic black that is coming out now: I think of Tham & Videgård's work, for example.

**GC** Although in their case, it also comes from local traditions: black bricks, walls blackened by the soot of coal in the cities, impregnating wood with black stuff...

**VPM** I feel more attracted to the interiors of Byzantine churches, which are very dark due to a lack of light. This precious light produces surprising apparitions – very close, unlike our larger churches where the frescoes are so distant. When you enter their almost complete darkness coming from open spaces lit by a blinding sun, these figures slowly emerge while your eyes adapt. It is an intimate, enveloping, mysterious black. 'Design' architecture cannot recreate this sensorial experience: it produces objects for immediate visual consumption.

**GC** But this is about darkness rather than blackness. In one of these conversations, Eduardo Arroyo clearly marked the difference between an intentional black and a black triggered by the absence of light.

**VPM** It doesn't seem like such a substantial difference to me, at least looking at the effects. *Olympia*, for example, is a magical painting for how it works with different shades of black and how they gradually reveal themselves in the time of vision: just like in Byzantine churches.

In Berlin, John Pawson has renovated a Nazi bunker to set up an art gallery, the Feuerle Collection, by emphasizing this condition of gradual sensory interaction with darkness and space through a 'scripted' experience. They make you wait in a narrow, high-ceilinged, dimly lit room, until a kind of priestess of minimalist and oriental aesthetics arrives and leads the visitors into another completely dark room where they listen to John Cage's music for a while. Then you go down a ramp and arrive in a hypostyle hall of dark concrete, again dimly-lit, with black

and transparent showcases that display golden Khmer art (along with something by Anish Kapoor, some erotic photographs, and more). Though this ritual is rather annoying, its narrative content intensifies the experience of interacting with the artworks; and darkness is one of its main devices.

**GC** This narrative feature of darkness sounds interesting also in comparison with the visual instantaneity sought by Pierre Soulages in his black paintings.

**VPM** Yes, but there are essential differences between the arts. In architecture, darkness plays a fundamental role. In *Architettura in luce*,<sup>4</sup> Bruno Zevi describes the dark cavities of catacombs, of the gallery in Hagia Sophia, of the flickering walls of Romanesque architecture, of their role in constructing space. According to Zevi, light must be modulated, dramatized: shadows are key to spatial construction. A question that returns in another text of his dedicated to Michelucci's Highway Church and that is again associated with the temporal component we were talking about earlier. It is the modernist *promenade architecturale* exemplified by the dark path that goes beneath the church and leads to the chapels at La Tourette. But we also find it in Borromini: the Falconieri crypt in San Giovanni dei Fiorentini is accessed through a narrow, dark staircase. A similar coexistence of compression and darkness also works in many houses by Wright, with their low, oppressive ceilings that prepare to the sudden opening of wider spaces.

**GC** In fact – as resulting from some of the conversations collected here – this idea of light and darkness tends to be more Mediterranean, while a material or ideological blackness thrives beyond the Alps. By the way, that is why we chose a black paper for the cover with the graphic designers. We thought that working with both matter and shadow would be closer to this issue's topic and a way to achieve a sort of synthesis.

**VPM** Yes, it may be that a mysterious obscurity is more Catholic than the 'truth' of the Protestant black, with all the possible exceptions that art and architecture can offer to disprove these generalizations.  
Did you discover anything else?

**GC** Many things, which are here available to the reader. In general terms and in comparison to my previous explorations,<sup>5</sup> I found a more complex, ambiguous and protean black that reacts to en-

vironmental conditions in the most different ways and conveys conflicting intentions of presence and absence. This multiplicity of black reverberates in the highly differentiated range of personal and disciplinary voices and points of view unfolding in the various interviews.

4. Bruno Zevi, *Architettura in luce* (Venice, Rome: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1960).

5. Giovanni Corbellini, 'Scatole nere/Black Boxes', *Paesaggio urbano*, 5-6 bis (2013), pp. 6-23.

**VPM** You invited a very heterogeneous group of people.

**GC** On the one hand, black is a transversal theme that pressingly asks for this multiple gaze. On the other hand, disciplinary boundaries are progressively losing sense and effectiveness: many interesting figures including some present in this issue of *Viceversa* express mixed, productively impure attitudes. Here, readers can meet operating architects, writers-architects, artists trained in design or who express a particular spatial sensitivity, curators of fashion, art and architecture, archives directors, historians, critics, teachers... Many of us play or played a number of these roles. I also tried to mix generations and backgrounds, attitudes and obsessions, shibboleths and expertise. I hope I have put together a nice blacklist!

## BIOGRAPHIES

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**EDUARDO ARROYO** obtained his PhD and Master in Architecture and Urbanism at the ETSAM in Madrid. Since then he has taught and lectured around the world. In 1989, he founded NO.MAD in Amsterdam. Since 1996, the office has been mainly based in Madrid. His work has received a number of awards and has been published and exhibited in many countries. His best known works include the Lasasarre Stadium and the Plaza del Desierto in Barakaldo, the Sondika Nursery, the Levene House and the Zafra-Uceda House in Madrid, the Arquia Bank in Bilbao and the University of Economics EXAC in Vienna. The office's activity is illustrated in the book *Create!* (Actar, 2014) that describes its combination of precision, chance and necessity constantly in search of the unknown.



**ILARIA BIGNOTTI** (1979), PhD in Theories and History of Art, is an art historian, curator and art critic. She is Scientific Coordinator at the Paolo Scheggi Archive in Milan, Scientific Director at the Francesca Pasquali Archive, Bologna, Scientific Curator and Special Projects Manager at the Antonio Scaccabarozzi Archive in Milan and Scientific Curator at the Mariella Bettineschi Archive in Bergamo. As a curator, art critic, and art consultant she collaborates with public Museums and Institutions in Italy and abroad. Her research focuses on post-war European art, namely Spatialism, Object-painting, programmed and kinetic art.

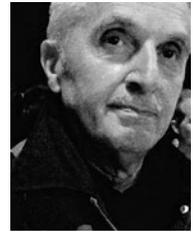


**GIOVANNI CORBELLINI** (1959) is an architect, PhD at IUAV in Venice, and critic of contemporary architecture. Full Professor at the Polytechnic of Turin and faculty of the international PhD program 'Villard de Honnecourt', he taught in Venice, Ferrara, Milan, and Trieste. His latest books are: *Ex libris. 16 parole chiave dell'architettura contemporanea* (2007, republished by LetteraVentidue, 2015), *Bioreboot. The architecture of R&S(e)n* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), *Dr. Corbellini's Pills* (LetteraVentidue, 2016, French edition 2012, Italian edition 2010), *Housing is Back in Town* (LetteraVentidue, 2012), *Lo spazio dicibile. Architettura e narrativa* (LetteraVentidue, 2016), *Recycled Theory: Illustrated Dictionary* (ed. with S. Marini, Quodlibet, 2016), *Telling Spaces* (LetteraVentidue, 2018).

**MARIA LUISA FRISA** is a critic and curator, Full Professor at Iuav University of Venice where she is director of the BA in Fashion Design and Multimedia Arts. Her recent publications include *Le forme della moda* (Il Mulino, 2015). She curated the exhibition and related catalogue *Bellissima: Italy and High Fashion 1945-1968* (Rome, MAXXI, 2014-15, Brussels, BOZAR, 2015; Monza, Villa Reale, 2015-16; Fort Lauderdale, NSU Art Museum, 2016). She edited the book *Desire and Discipline: Designing Fashion at Iuav* (Marsilio, 2015) and is a columnist for *D-La Repubblica* magazine. Her latest project is the exhibition and related catalogue *Italiana: L'Italia vista dalla moda 1971-2001* (Milan, Palazzo Reale, February-May 2018).



**MARIO LUPANO** is a historian and critic of contemporary architecture, Full Professor at Iuav University of Venice. He studied the relationship between modernism, architecture and fascism, focusing on Marcello Piacentini. He taught at the University of Bologna (1996-2008) investigating the circularity between design, art and curatorial procedures, and contributing to establish educational and research areas on fashion. He curated a number of exhibitions including *Atlante. Casa collettiva e abitare moderno 1930-1980* (11th International Architecture Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2008) and *Aldo Andreani Architetto* (Mantua, 2015-16). His editorial projects focus on a critical process carried out through the assembly of images and texts of various kinds (*Total Living*, 2002; *Fashion at the Time of Fascism*, 2009; *LO-FI: Architecture as Curatorial Practice*, 2010). He recently edited the volume *What Ever Happened to Italian Architecture?*, a collection of writings by Francesco Garofalo (Marsilio, 2016).

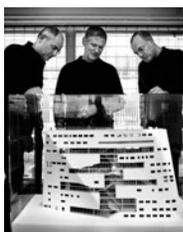


**SARA MARINI** is an architect, PhD, and Associate Professor at Iuav University of Venice. She is co-director with Alberto Bertagna of the book series 'City and Landscape. In Theory' (Quodlibet) and 'Carte blanche' (Bruno). Her main publications are: *Sull'autore* (Quodlibet, 2017), *Venice. 2nd Document* (with A. Bertagna, Bruno, 2017), *Le concert. Pink Floyd à Venise* (with L.C. Szacka, S. Lorrain, B2, 2017), *Recycled Theory: Illustrated Dictionary* (edited with G. Corbellini, Quodlibet, 2016), *Nuove terre* (Quodlibet 2010), *Architettura parassita* (Quodlibet, 2008).





**VALERIO PAOLO MOSCO** (Rome, 1964) wrote *Architettura italiana dal postmoderno ad oggi* (Skira, 2017); *Perché l'architettura italiana ora* (ArE, 2017); *L'ultima cattedrale* (Sagep, 2015); *Ensamble Studio* (EdilStampa, 2012); *Naked architecture* (Skira, 2012); *Sessant'anni di ingegneria italiana* (EdilStampa, 2010); *Steven Holl* (Motta, 2010); *Un-Volumetric Architecture: Atlas of Public Spaces*, with Aldo Aymonino (Skira, 2006). He currently teaches at the Iuav University in Venice, the University of Navarra in Pamplona and the Cornell University's Italian Program in Rome. He taught at the IIT (Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago), at the Faculty of architecture in Ferrara and at the University of engineering in Brescia. Valerio Paolo Mosco is editor in chief of the magazine *Viceversa*.



**NL ARCHITECTS** is an Amsterdam-based office. The three principals, Pieter Bannenberg, Walter van Dijk and Kamiel Klaasse, officially opened the practice in January 1997 but had worked together since the early nineties. All were educated at the Technical University in Delft. NL Architects aspires to catalyse urban life. The office is constantly striving to find alternatives for the way we live and work. How can we intensify human interaction?

We understand architecture as the speculative process of investigating, revealing and reconfiguring the wonderful complexities of the world we live in. How can we transform, twist, bend, stack, stretch, enhance or reassemble the components that constitute our environment into new and better configurations?

Often the projects focus on ordinary aspects of everyday life, including the unappreciated or negative, that are enhanced or twisted in order to bring out the unexpected potential of the things that surround us.



**ANTONIO RAVALLI** is an architect who graduated from the University of Florence in 1988. He lives and works in Ferrara where he has run his own architectural practice since 1989. His design approach engages with contemporary space, declined with a careful choice and use of materials that challenges traditional and experimental attitudes. Professional, research and teaching activities are closely connected in his work, from the beginning focused on the relationship between art and architecture, between figures, objects and places. As a visiting professor, he has taught architectural design at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Ferrara, while he often teaches studios and workshops in other schools both in Italy and abroad.

**RUDY RICCIOTTI** has designed several remarkable buildings including the MuCEM in Marseille, the Louvre's new wing to host its Islamic art collection in Paris, the Jean-Bouin Stadium in Paris, the Jean Cocteau Museum in Menton, the Bridge of the Republic in Montpellier, the International Centre of Art and Culture in Liège, the Philharmonic Nikolaïsaal in Potsdam, 'Les Arts Gstaad', and the Footbridge of Peace in Seoul. He was awarded the Grand Prix National d'Architecture in 2006 and the Médaille d'or de la Fondation de l'Académie d'Architecture in 2013. He authored several books including *Mémorial du Camp de Rivesaltes* (Archibooks, 2016), *Le béton en garde à vue* (Lemieux, 2015), *Rudy Ricciotti, en vain* (Jannink, 2014), *Conversations imaginaires 'ou pas' avec Rudy Ricciotti* (Éditions un autre Reg'Art, 2014), *L'architecture est un sport de combat* (Textuel, 2013), *La HQE® brille comme ses initiales sur la chevalière au doigt* (Le Gac Press, Collection 'écrits', 2013).



**MUSTAFA SABBAGH** (Amman, Jordan, 1961) lives and works in Italy. His artworks have been featured in several publications and monographs as well as several permanent contemporary art collections. In 2013, Sky Arte HD's series Photographers nominated him as one of the eight most significant artists of the contemporary Italian scene, while in 2017, Rai5's international documentary *The sense of Beauty* indicated him as the privileged proponent of the dark side of beauty. After his first retrospective 'XI Commandment: You shall not forget' (2016), he received the honorary citizenship from the City of Palermo. Art historian Peter Weiermair has acknowledged him as one of the one hundred most influential photographers in the world.



**PIERRE SOULAGES** (1919) is a French painter and printmaker and a major figure in the postwar abstract movement. After moving to Paris in 1946, he began using walnut stain to make gestural abstract paintings on paper and, by the 1950s, had begun using oil on canvas. Along with Hans Hartung, Georges Mathieu, Serge Poliakoff, and Jean-Paul Riopelle, Soulages is considered one of the major figures of post-war European abstraction, although he resisted attempts to link him with Art Informel or its American relative Abstract Expressionism. One of Soulages' main preoccupations has been the interaction of light and reflection on black paint. In the *Outrenoir* (Beyond Black) series, he alternates areas of matte and gloss black paint, interrupting the smooth surfaces with ridges, scores, and gashes.



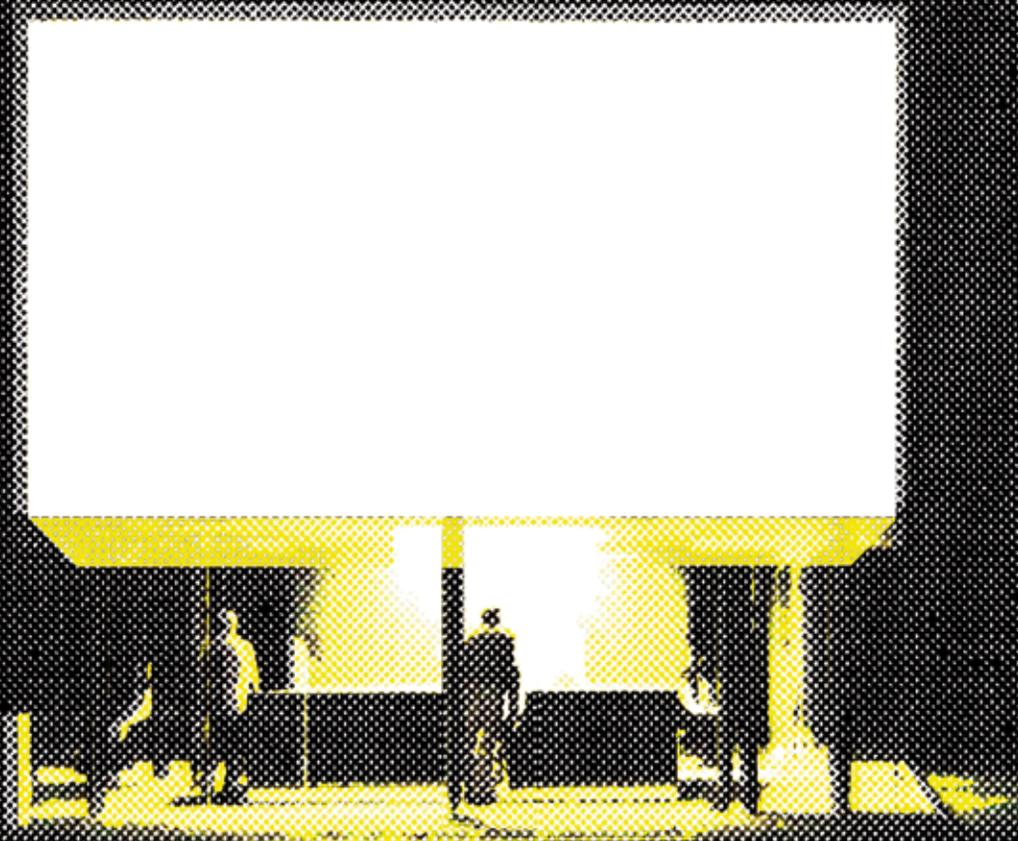
**MIRKO ZARDINI**, is an architect, author and curator. Since 2005, he has been Director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture. His research engages with contemporary architecture by questioning and re-examining assumptions on which architects operate today. 'It's All Happening so Fast', his most recent exhibition and publication, is a reflection on the often conflicting ideas about human relationships to the environment. Zardini was editor for *Casabella* from 1983 to 1988 and for *Lotus International* from 1988 to 1999. He has taught design and theory at architecture schools in Europe and the United States, including Harvard University GSD, Princeton University SoA, and Swiss Federal Polytechnic University in Zurich (ETH) and Lausanne (EPFL).



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Why black is more and more the new black?  
This issue of *Viceversa* investigates the gap  
between the huge mass of dark proposals in the  
recent architectural production and the lack of  
theoretical positions aimed to support them.  
Ten conversations with architects, artists,  
critics, curators, historians from the various  
fields of arts and design try to shed some light  
on this obscure matter.

# A2ЯEVEOIV

Eduardo Arroyo  
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