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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.

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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.



