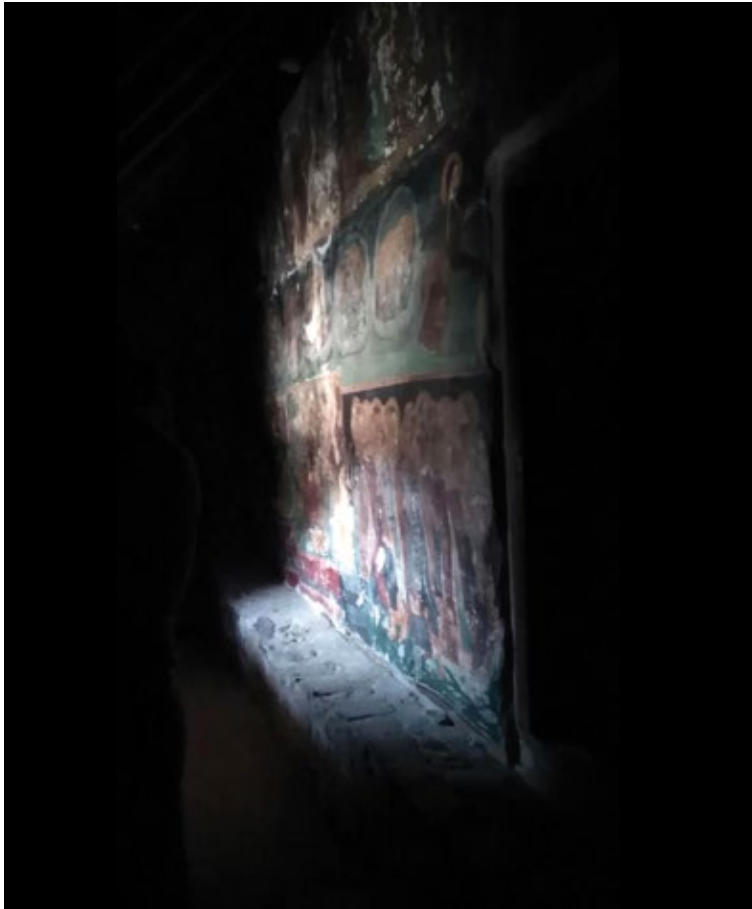


→  
Panagia Asinou  
Church, Nikitary,  
Cyprus, 11th-12th  
century.



# 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!