A WORK BY JOHN HEJDUK
INTRODUCTION

John Hejduk

SEVEN MEMOS ON THE GEOMETRY OF PAIN

Wim van den Bergh
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"It is nothing . . . much," he said. "Nothing but . . . a tenth of second appearing. . . . Wait. . . . At certain moments my body is illuminated. . . . It is very curious. Suddenly I see into myself. . . . I can make out the depths of layers of my flesh; and I feel zones of pain. . . . rings, poles, plumes, of pain. Do you see these living forms, this geometry of my suffering? Some of these flashes are exactly like ideas. They make me understand—from here to there. . . . And yet they leave me uncertain. Uncertain is not the word. . . . When it is about to appear, I find in myself something confused or diffused. Areas that are . . . fuzzy occur inside me, wide spaces come into view. Then I choose a question from my memory, any problem at all. . . . I plunge into it. I count grains of sand. . . . and as long as I can see them. . . .—But increasing pain forces me to observe it. I think about it! I only await my cry. . . . and as soon as I have heard it—the object, the terrible object, getting smaller, and still smaller, vanishes from my inner sight.”

There are books that you somehow have the feeling are not books in the conventional sense of the word. Still, when you look up the word book in your dictionary—"a volume made up of written or printed pages fastened along one side and encased between protective covers"—they fit the definition. However, this definition refers first and foremost to the book as an object, a body; it defines the physicality of that object and also its mechanics, but not its specific discursive, spatiality, or better, its uni-cursality, direction, because that is what one usually associates with the concept called book in terms of space. A concept that, prompted by the spatio-mechanical principle of the artifact called book, one too easily relates to a kind of one-dimensional linearity, a uni-cursarial textual space with a beginning and an end.

The category of books that you have the feeling are not books in the conventional sense of the word tends to escape this directional linearity by means of constantly breaking and/or folding, multiplying the implied linearity of the discursive space. These books are like corpo-realities that one enters by probing, or sounding, because they do not really have a beginning or an end. They have a sort of dense space in which beginning and end are only implicit conditions, as in a labyrinth or a maze, spaces in which you can wander/wonder and in which you might get lost or, perhaps, find something. They are the kind of books that you constantly—out of necessity or pleasure—return to, that give you the specific feeling of owning a personal universe of knowledge, like possessing a pocket-sized infinity. It is these volumes—like dictionaries or manuals, notebooks or catalogs—amazing collections embodied in the spaces, the dense spaces, of those books—to which I am referring here. They embody the somehow private, safe, but still largely undiscovered spaces that one loves to nose around in, comparable to those spaces to which one constantly returns—like gardens or museums—to just have a


2. All definitions in this text are adapted from the Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language, International Edition (McGraw-Hill International Book Company, 1975). The intended effect of my etymological retracing is not to ground the word solidly, but to render it unstable, equivocal, wavering.

3. Discursive, from Medieval Latin discussivus, from Late Latin discursus, conversation, from Latin discurrere, to run back and forth, speak at length: dis-, in different directions, + currere, to run.

4. Uni-cursal, which means running in one direction, is the term used to distinguish the structures of the labyrinth and the maze. The modern understanding of the word labyrinth indicates a diagram in which an unbranched circuitous route, a uni-cursal path, leads inevitably, if at great length, to the center and then back out again. In contrast to the uni-cursal labyrinth, the word meze indicates a multi-cursal structure, which contains many points of choice between two or more paths, some of which dead end.

5. Multiply, from Middle English multipel, from Old French multiplicier, from Latin multiplicare, from multiplex, having many folds: multi-, many, + plex, fold.

6. Imply, from Middle English impelle, empleine, from Old French emplier, from Latin implicare, infold, involve, implicate: in-, in, + plicare, to fold.

7. Implicit, from Latin implicitus, earlier implicatus, involved, entangled, from the past participle of implicare, to involve, implicate.

8. Amusement, from Old French amuser, to cause to idle away time: a-, te, from Latin ad-, + muser, idle, muse, from Medieval Latin musere, to have a look, to visit, from muse, to ponder or meditate, consider reflectively, to wonder; Old French muser, to muse, to sniff around, from mus, snout.
look and a stroll, spaces simultaneously for learning and enjoying, spaces literally for amusement.⁶

And then there is this book,⁷ with its four hundred pages full of fascinating signs, this volume with its evocative title, this record of soundings into the nature of architecture, this astonishing collection of architectural thoughts, this Hejdukian body, echoing in its own personal way that category of dense spaces. There is this object, this body, the space contained in this book on architecture, and there is its subject, its title on the cover reading Soundings, beginning to build a puzzling relationship between and to each other. As subject and object, title and book, they are involved in a specific way with each other; they are the essential parts of an ingeniously designed mechanism, an artifice which is put into operation by the observer at the moment one starts to think about it. So the moment you start thinking about the poetic ambiguity of its title, you are part of this involvement, part of a kind of involving space. In the same way that the concept of the labyrinth is evoked by the complex involvement of matter and space, the involvement of this book and title with each other evokes ideas of space, the space of a book, of a volume at first, then the space of sounding, of depth and of density. But after going into the book itself you realize that the whole volume is somehow about this kind of involving space, the kind of intriguing architectural space that could only spring from John Hejduk's mind.

This involving space can be described only by an apparent paradox: dense space. Intuition, however, tends to invent words—often paradoxical ones—or choose specific words to circum-scribe that which one is not able to de-scribe.⁸ The moment you start thinking about these intuitive words they begin to create a fascinating logic of their own,⁹ they start weaving a text,⁹ folding a mental space, involving you in your own fascination. And it seems to me that is exactly what John Hejduk's work is about; in a sense it is the most beautiful and enjoyable form of teaching and learning one can imagine.

Like the subjects/objects in Hejduk's Masques, and the basic geometric forms that he employs as signs throughout this book, words also seem to possess a sort of secret life. On the one hand, there is their everyday practical usage, so that one thinks one knows them. But on the other hand, they seem to have a kind of private history, a life of their own which renders them ambivalent in a poetical way. Words often have more than one meaning; what is the relationship between these different meanings, and what is their involvement with each other? Take soundings: what, for instance, is the relationship between sounding as the act of probing, of measuring depth, and sounding as the act of emitting sound? According to the dictionary there is no relation, but according to one's intuition there is a space, or a dimension, in which they are involved with each other, the same dimension as that within which wandering and wondering, or sacred and secret, are involved with each other. So one starts to realize that one does not know the words at all, because within them there is another fascinating dimension, a poetic dimension. And the same holds true for the geometric forms that Hejduk brings to life in this book.

The first images one is confronted with are runes: the signs, so it seems, of a geometric language, a language about space and time. They are the most basic geometrical signs,⁰ or perhaps figures,¹ that can be imagined, like circle, square, triangle, cross, line, wave—figures that also appear in one's earliest education, or in psychological tests—that Hejduk starts to (re)read and (re)write throughout this book as representations of an architectural dimension, as generators of spaces,¹ as geometric forms, geometric ideas. Louis Kahn used the word form as that which inspires and precedes design, that which has no presence and whose existence is only in the mind. For Hejduk the forms that seem to
colonize this book, all those forms generated by reading extra dimensions in the circle, the square, the triangle, are not forms in the sense of shapes, but forms in the sense of ideas.\footnote{A}

In his earlier work Hejduk opened up an enormous field of new forms to the discipline of architecture, familiar forms that we carry in us but had not dared to use, because they are related to our earliest, our most genuine imagination. He proved that these new forms were just as architectural as those we were taught. Only a few great architects in the last hundred years have renewed and enriched the architectural discipline's vocabulary of forms, and Hejduk is certainly one of them. But like Kahn, Le Corbusier, and Mies, he also re-animates geometry as form, as idea.

In this book, even more than in his others, Hejduk proves to be a logothete, a founder of language, as Roland Barthes once wrote of Sade, Fourier, and Loyola.\footnote{B} He has the same practice of writing: the same sensual pleasure in classification, the same mania for anatomizing “the body of architecture,” the same enumerative obsession, the same image practice, the same erotic, imaginative fashioning of the social system. As Barthes wrote of these other authors, Hejduk's work is also not easily accessible. He makes pleasure, happiness, communication dependent on an unrelenting order, or a combinative. The language Hejduk creates is not linguistic, not a language of communication. It is a new language, a spatio-temporal language traversed by, or traversing, the language of architecture, but open only to what Barthes calls the semiological definition of text.

Hejduk is a text-operator, a formulator, and like Sade, Fourier, and Loyola, he is the inventor of a way of writing, thus generating an extra spatio-temporal dimension, a dimension that has always existed in architecture, but that has to be discovered over and over again to stay alive. This means that he creates, he writes signs by reading signs. Within the space of architecture, Hejduk discovers and brings to life an extra dimension, a poetic dimension. In his work he liberates the spatio-temporal language of architecture from its solid referential powers by isolating it, by revealing it, and most important, by taking pleasure in it.

As a founder of a language, Hejduk, as well as Sade, Fourier, and Loyola, has performed the same operations. The first, as Barthes has listed, is self-isolation. The new language must arise from a material vacuum; one must separate it from the other common, idle, outmoded language, whose noise might hinder it. It is a retreat into an unaccustomed time/space. In fact, it is a constant cultivation of the imagination that takes place in Hejduk's work by excluding the imaginary. Or in other words, his imagination is the energy that enables the fabrication of a language.

The second operation Barthes lists is articulation. There is no language without distinct signs, no language unless these signs are reprinted in a combinative. And that is what Hejduk does: he deduces, combines, arranges, he endlessly produces rules of assemblage. Whoever reads this book sees immediately that its material is constantly subjected to a meticulous and quasi-obessive differentiation, or more exactly, that the material is this differentiation itself. Everything is real, immediate, divided, subdivided, separated, classified, numbered, accompanied by remarks, thoughts, meditations, measurements, materials. This simple operation, which myth attributes to the creator of a world, separating day from night, man from woman, the elements from the species, divides or better distinguishes everything in Hejduk's work.

The third operation is ordering, not merely the arrangement of elementary signs, but the subjection of the larger sequence to a higher order, in this case that of the idea, the form. This new discourse has a director; to inspire, but not to regiment, whether a title or an imagined program, an institution or an density, another substantiality, like a liquid, a gas, or just abstract space (with zero density). Or, volume indicates “the amplitude or loudness of sound,” its density in space or ability to penetrate space.

Thus the idea of the book as a body, or as a volume, starts to interweave with an idea of space, and with ideas of density and sound, creating a logic of their own. But the other words also start to take their positions in the text. Astonishing. If one looks at this word as such—and one knows it means to fill with sudden wonder or amazement—seems to refer to an idea of “a-astonishing,” a turning into stone. The word, however, comes from the Vulgar Latin externare, to strike with thunder, to stun; from Latin ex-, out of, by means of, + tonare, to thunder. And there is also the idea of echoing, resounding, which starts to fold itself into the textual fabric of intuitive words.

17. Text throughout this essay is understood not only as written text, but in general text as a weaving, a weaving of thoughts that can be expressed in words as well as in images. Text, from Medieval Latin textus, scriptural text, from Latin textus, literary composition, woven thing, from texere, to weave, from Indo-Germanic root tela, to weave, also to fabricate, especially with an ax, also to make wicker or wattle fabric for (mu-d-covered) house walls; Latin texere, to weave, fabricate. Latin tela, web, net, warp of fabric; tex-as, woven, maker of wattle for house walls, builder; Greek tekton, carpenter, builder, archi-tektron, artificer, architect; tekna, craft (of weaving or fabricating); Greek tekhnhe, art, craft, skill.

18. Employing, from Middle English emploien, from Old French employer, empiere, from Latin implicare, to infold, involve: in-, in, + plicare, to fold.

19. Sounding, as measuring depth, as probing, from Middle English sounden, from Old French sonder, from sonde, a sounding line, probably from Old English sund, sea, from the Indo-Germanic root swem, to move, to stir, to swim.

20. Sounding, as emitting sound, from Middle English son, sound, from Old French son, from Latin
invented subject. The logothesis does not satisfy itself with the constitution of a kind of ritual or style, because the language founder would be nothing more than the author of a system. To embed a new language, a fourth operation is required: theatricalization, not the decoration of the depiction, the design of a setting for representation, but to make the language boundless, to produce text. So every logothete is a kind of scenographer: one who loses oneself in the devised framework and who arranges ad infinitum.

In his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino indicates four types of multiplicit texts. There is the unified text, written as the expression of a single voice, revealing itself open to interpretation on several levels. Then there is the manifold text, replacing the singularity of a thinking "I" with a multiplicity of subjects, voices, and views of the world. There is the type of text that, in the attempt to contain everything possible, does not manage to take on a definite form, and so remains open by its very nature. And there is the type of text that corresponds to nonsystematic thought, proceeding by aphorism, by sudden, discontinuous flashes of light. Hejduk's text here, his weaving of thoughts in this book, seems to incorporate all four, thus subverting the language of architecture. As Barthes would say, the ultimate subversion does not necessarily consist of saying that which shocks public opinion, but of inventing a paradoxical discourse. Invention and not provocation is a revolutionary act, and it can be accomplished only by setting up a new language. So Hejduk's greatness lies not in provocation or radicalism, but in the invention of a vast discourse founded in its own repetitions, showing us the vanishing points of our discipline.

There is another important aspect of Hejduk's work that should be addressed, and that is its specific way of *in-rolling to e-volve*. Asked to write an essay for this book, I realized that simultaneously I was confronted with and involved in—which for an architect is an intriguing spatial condition. In other words, it was the condition of *aporia* present in the simultaneous affirmation of writing about, and in, this book that puzzled me. In contemplating the apparent paradox of in-volvement, one also recognizes the problem of objectivity. This is the condition—in spatio-visual terms—of the mirror in the mirror, of the external view being folded back into the image itself. It is the problem that observation intervenes in some way to modify the phenomenon being observed. It is a problem that can not only be compared with the concept of a book's preface, but also seems to be somehow resolved by examining whether this book is a book in the conventional sense of the word. This is a concept of the preface that conforms the book, the conventional preface, that in its reflection of the book aims for consistency, that in terms of objectivity only folds the book itself back into the book. Such a preface is expected to describe the scope, intentions, and background of a text, and to justify its construction. Paradoxically, a preface can only be written afterwards; it reverses the order of beginning and end, developing from back to front. It literally de-velops, it un-folds or un-rolls the plan of the text. It implies, like Ariadne's thread, the labyrinthine complexity of the text, but also explains this text-labyrinth by beginning at the end. Such a preface is like the plan of the labyrinth that one is given as a key at the beginning of a journey, in this case through the text, a journey whose goal is a kind of discursive transcendence, a mental initiation, a spiritual development. Although the preface cannot replace the mental space of the actual text, just as the complex plan of the labyrinth cannot replace its amazing space, it always somewhat dis-enchants the original complications of the text. Such a preface is an implicit version of the actual text—a text whose reality itself is a complex folding, a weaving of discursive lines of thought—that is folded back into the text while tracing its consistency. It simultaneously makes this consistency explicit for the reader right from the start.

"Reading texts and not books," Barthes writes, "turning upon them a chiaro-voce not aimed at discovering their secret, their 'contents,' their philosophy, but merely their happiness of writing. I can hope to release Sade, Fourier, and Loyola from their bonds (sadism, utopia, religion)."
What about, however, these books that one has the feeling are not books in the usual sense of the word? What, one might ask, is the nature, in terms of its objectivity, of a preface—to, for instance, a dictionary, if one can speak of such a thing as a preface to a dictionary? Dictionaries, like other examples of this category of books, do not really have a beginning, end, or main line; they have many possible ones. Their textual space is not uni-cursal, but multi-cursal, and a preface here can never be more than a set of rules that one is given, the rules according to which the book is structured and according to which it functions, but rules that do not have any meaning outside of themselves, as they only simulate an objectivity to ensure communication, to enable reading the same book with others. This also means that the rules may be changed at will without destroying the relative objectivity of the book. So what we would be dealing with here is the kind of pre-face that in its reflection not only conforms but performs the book, the sort that aims for persistency and not just consistency.

This book is a kind of many-folded space, a labyrinth, or a maze, as a metaphor for learning. It is an exercise in generating dimensions, both physical and metaphorical. Like the idea of the labyrinth, this book cannot be reduced to its essence; it already is that. It in-volves you to e-volve, just like the labyrinth.

What is the labyrinth, what is its essential dimension? Is it the zero-dimensional point of the implied center or entrance/exit? But that is just the beginning/end of the labyrinth if it is thought of as an implied one-dimensional line, a continuous guideline like Ariadne’s thread, a line that weaves an implied two-dimensional fabric: the complex pattern or plan of the labyrinth. That, however, is just the implication which involves space and material with each other to form the amazing three-dimensional space of the labyrinth. But its circuitous form only functions as a spatial delay of time, thus implying the four-dimensional time/space experience of a labyrinth, a time/space experience in which chance opens up five-dimensional time/space as an implied dimension of the spirit. A dimension of possible thought in which time/space is no longer determined, it has become the anytime/anywhere, which is identical to the power of imagination, the power of the spirit of the labyrinth’s artificer. There is not one essential dimension in the concept of the labyrinth, but the idea itself.

Let us come back to the problem of objectivity. The Italian writer Carlo Emilio Gadda once wrote “To know is to insert something into what is real, and hence to distort reality,” thus subverting the evident relation between objectivity and knowledge. Gadda is, as Italo Calvino wrote in his Six Memos for the Next Millennium, one of the writers who deal with the contemporary novel as an encyclopedia, as a method of knowledge, as a network of connections between the events, people, and objects in the world. He views the world as a system of systems, in which each system conditions the others and is conditioned by them: the world as dense space. The fact that every system is part of every system means that the world itself is simultaneously about and in. What Gadda is pointing out here is the existence of an other kind of in-volvement, one that ridicules the problem of objectivity. It is an in-volvement that in its reflection does not look for con-sistency, that does not literally fold inward to con-form, but an in-volvement that simultaneously e-volves, one that requires per-sistency, one that per-forms. It is exactly this concept of in-volvement to e-volve, this demand to take part or stay out, that is at the heart of John Hejduk’s work. This is his persistent way to continually show us the blind spots of the discipline of architecture.

This specific kind of in-volvement that Hejduk’s work demands might also be the reason why the particular objective view from the outside, which some critics and theorists prefer to take when confronted, is refused. In a certain
way, Hejduk’s work ridicules this objective view, as there is no absolute meaning to it, no objective outside.

According to Calvino, what tends to emerge from the great novels of the twentieth century—and one can draw an analogy here with the great œuvres of twentieth-century architecture—is the idea of an open encyclopedia, because today we can no longer think in terms of a totality that is not potential, conjectural, and manifold. Hejduk’s work here might be compared to that idea: it also is a kind of open encyclopedia, another of those dense spaces that one enters by simply probing it, by sounding it and at the same moment letting it sound, or better, an open dictionary. And even if the overall design has been minutely planned, what matters is not the enclosure of the work within a harmonious figure, but the centrifugal force produced by it.

Hejduk’s passion for knowledge also demands that everything should be precisely named, described, and located in space and time. In other words, like writing a dictionary or an encyclopedia, it demands persistency on the part of the writer, an eternal persistency, because “to know is to insert something into what is real, and hence to distort reality.” But the body of knowledge that is the result of this passion demands persistency not only of the writer, but also of the reader. The reader is necessarily involved in the text in such a way as to activate it. The reader has to animate the body of the text, must actually weave or de-velop it, and must be in-volved in this book. Like Paul Valéry’s Monsieur Teste, the reader has to feel this geometry of pain, these living forms that are exactly like ideas. In a certain way, the reader has to practice, like Hejduk, a way of writing, because the text is built up as a multi-cur-sal structure that does not imply a logical sequence or a hierarchy, a beginning or an end. It is a complex network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple, ramified conclusions.

“Every means and every weapon is valid to save oneself from death and time. If a straight line is the shortest distance between two fated and inevitable points, digressions will lengthen it; and if these digressions become so complex, so tangled and tortuous, so rapid as to hide their own tracks, who knows—perhaps death may not find us, perhaps time will lose its way, and perhaps we ourselves can remain concealed in our shifting hiding places.”
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