

Oblique Foundations. Filigree Futures by Pomona Zipser

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Ora le fondamenta di tutti gli edifici si fanno di fortissimi pali di quercia o di rovere, che dura eternamente sotto acqua [...]. Questi fitti per forza nel terreno, et poi fermati con grosse traverse, et ripieni fra palo et palo con diversi cementi et rottami di sassi, fanno per coagulazione et presa loro fondamenta così stabili et ferme.

—Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* (Venice: Giacomo Sansovino, 1581), 140.

The foundations of all the buildings are now made of strong poles of oak or durmast, which endures eternally under water [...]. These are forced into the ground, and then secured with large crosspieces, and filled between pole and pole with various cements and fragments of stones, coagulating and condensing into stable, firm foundations.

Anchors and Destinations

The suggestion of a diptych introduces the exhibition *Ponteggi narrativi*. Two constructions stand out in the two rooms that form the entrance to the Arsenale Institute for Politics of Representation. They are two spatial possibilities or, at first glance, a crossroads: to fence or to support? What appears to be a fence—the perimeter of a phantom interior, an assemblage of rooms in absence, the foundations of a house to come—is at the same time a labyrinthine line that leads the gaze down a path that tends toward the gravity of the center only to turn back on itself in Sisyphean repetition. What seems to hold up—perhaps a crooked scaffold, an outsized prosthesis, or a bloody thorn stuck in the body of the Forgia Marinarezza—is instead wedged, trapped between the floor of the sky and the top of the abyss. Antipodal is their response to the forces of nature. If the *house or way* (“Haus oder Weg”) seeks a low center of gravity, the opposite occurs in the rust-red sculpture (“O.T.”) that rises into the space in front of it. Ambivalent is their task. *Inhabiting* and *crossing* are two paradigms of architecture’s program that the works make opaque, suggesting new tangential visions. Blurring the boundaries between a house, the floor plan of a house, and the extruded imprint of a parkour with no destination or way out, “Haus oder Weg” is both architecture and a blueprint for impossible architectures. Whether the slender and dangerously sharp silhouettes that circumscribe its inner space are moved by a centripetal or centrifugal force—which pulls us back out every time we attempt to reach the fulcrum—is a further bifurcation of the realm of possibilities. In this construction, the battle with the earth’s gravity still seems open to negotiation; the sculpture is not anchored to the ground, but rests solidly on it. The counterforces of the pieces reaching upward speak of the possibility of levitation; contracting at the joints, they seek roots in the weight of a matter whose mass is minimal. Sometimes the work appears to be a skeletal figuration, a strange animal crawling along the floor, whose bodily attributes are denied by the geometries that transform it into a utensil; only its bones are still recognizable, carved, pointed, worked to become weapons in a struggle to conquer space. Inside its footprint, the echoes of other figures (tiny individuals holding up its corners? Beings wielding tools for the evolution of technology from bone to spaceship?) are mirages—possible but not necessary. Moved by an opposite tension, “O.T.” establishes a dialogue between floor and ceiling as an experiment in grasping and measuring the interior spatiality of the architecture that hosts it. With the precision of a dancer, the defiance of a stilt walker, the tensioning of a catapult, it seems about to push open the lid of the room. A miniature of the same work will appear later to manifest the ambiguity, peculiar to architecture, between design and realization, maquette and 1:1 scale work. The white enigma of the house-path and the red austerity of the quasi-body/quasi-siege machine are thus both commentaries on the statics of constructions, and serve as curtains opening to a complex and dense horizon of ways of appropriating space.

Oblique is the mode intrinsic to a sequence of linear sculptures that lean between wall and floor, introducing unexpected diagonals into the orthogonality of the structure that houses them. Through the transcending of Euclidean space, this sequence of works—made of wood, paper, and bronze—seem to construct a series, where collage and sculpture merge and join forces in their battle against or for the elements of architecture. These linearly taut assemblages of materials seem to configure a paradoxical tectonics in which “buttress” and “monument” reverse their poles, switching roles and weights. Subject to the laws of gravity, a *line out of the wall* (Strich aus der Wand), a *high chop* (“Hoher Haken”), and two female entities *hanging at the wall*

("Hängende an der Wand") and *standing at the wall* ("Stehende an der Wand") become flamingos and rifles, crossbows or support spurs that explore space, making it active. While these structures barely touch the supporting surfaces, others cantilever, suspended like a pendulum swinging from a point or an arrow that reaches out toward an invisible target. New directions emerge from the bodies that traverse the space or are traversed by it, building a *community* of sculptures that hold or are held, fall without swaying.

Filigreed is the modality of yet another impossible tectonics, which emerges even in the absence of a three-dimensional dimension proper. The dominance of wood that distinguishes the sculptures is matched by that of paper, which folds the forms into panoramic scenarios or stretches them into flat graphs, confirming an ever-constant tension between Cartesian coordinates. In the *scissor-cut* series ("Scherenschnitt"), the process of growth of forms—in a tragic-mystical sense—is almost opposite to that of the sculptural constructions. While the pieces of wood build interconnections, making order out of inherited fragments, on paper the gesture is structuring, differentiating, folding, doming, raising, projecting into space minimal movements that trigger shifts of meaning. Both mediums, however, tend toward the search for infinity. Within the confines of paper spaces, rediscovered as a cutting material, expansive urban scenes open out—horizons that extend as far as the eye can see, or sequences of parts of a whole that is not there, projected toward potentially endless growth or dissolution. The material seems to suggest a leap in scale, introducing possible geologies into the thin space of a sheet. Attacking the architecture of the paper with tiny blades, cuts, etchings, delicate scratches, and minute elevations, the integrity of matter is challenged as reality and as representation. Here the figurative dominates, as in the landscape *on the river* ("Am Fluß"), where the flat interlockings of a multitude of cuts in the surface of the paper show a flowing current and swaying rushes in the foreground, and the orography of a windswept land in the background. To the long shadows of the opening constructions, the quasi-bidimensional works respond with slivers of shade. They all display a sharp process that works on the distance and proximity between background and figures; a process which is controlled or ephemeral, drawing shadows in space that are changing and cyclical, never identical, sometimes perceptible only in certain light conditions or *in the dark* ("Im Dunkeln")—breaking away from the wall to open a window on obscurity.

In this *field* of forms and figures, the elements that define space—the wall, the ceiling, the floor—seem to be irreversibly altered. Motionless bodies become dance partners. The taboo of the steady structure, locus of protection, falls. Architecture is exposed, the laws of statics falter and with them the notions of verticality and horizontality. In this antistatic tectonics, Pomona Zipser's works are both anchors and destinations.

Remnants Return

Beyond gravity, matter. The result is a grammar of remnants that return. Each work is a constructed continuum and at the same time a celebration of the pieces, stories, and specters that formed and transformed lost objects into radical resignifications. Dismantling the alliance between linear time and the idea of the new that might turn everything into debris, the return of the remains saves the corporeality of spaces. In the filigree of Pomona Zipser's linear sculptures, salvage subverts the notion of use into a hymn of praise to the unusable. Improvisation and design, fury and control collaborate in search of balance. Transcending the material itself, the new assemblages of wood, metal, hemp, and paper reveal artisanal origins in the manipulation of components laden with the events they hosted but emptied of any "original" meaning. Like the steel hedgehogs that haunt Omaha Beach, these artillery weapons or mechanical gears silently celebrate the process of accumulation; in this additive, expansive, information-overloaded process, they act, once again, like architectural constructions.

In building these resurrections, Pomona Zipser works at the joints. The whole is sprinkled with a system of ropes and knots, nails, screws, carpenter's joints that materialize extreme gestures, at once primitive and perfect. Sometimes the mass of these tangles is magnified, exaggerated, jutting out. Nailing, screwing, fixing are actions that heighten the polarizations between density and diversity, revealing the pulsations inherent in the tensions of the details, and with them the turbulence—intimate and technical—that agitates the medium during the process. What we see, then, is only the pointed end of dense and articulated constructions that fuse into unitary ensembles precise and fluid transitions from one piece to another. They are familiar forms that become alienating, or residues of a whole that is no more but gathers a complex internal life, sometimes embodying domestic fragments (the foot of a table, the headboard of a bed) or thematizing parts—and discourses—of architecture.

Shoring up the world with slender foundations are thus the pasts of the objects that once populated our everyday spaces. Between the power of the machine and the acceptance of the interruption of its operation, Pomona Zipser's work transcends all ideas (and rhetoric) of ecology and recycling, providing rather a fundamental paradigm shift in the understanding of the artificial environment and its incessant modifications.

Not a redemption of the categories of the dilapidated and abandoned, but rather a suspension and transfiguration of the essential coordinates that lie within the limited reality of the world. The actions directed onto the abandoned bodies extract specters that restore their physical consistency through uncomfortable and dialectical situations. In this process of resignification, the colors collaborate with the joints to envelop unitary constructions—from the violence of red to the light and dark extremes, which use white to model plastic configurations and black to impose the disappearance of mass, allowing the individual parts to emerge in their graphic quality like the ink marks of two-dimensional works. Not only the work, but also the subject that approaches it is transported by the force of the movement that the pieces, joints, and colors generate. The space is transformed, is in perpetual metamorphosis, and invites one to do the same.

In the construction of a narrative always pregnant with its opposite, titles are holds or pitfalls. Between research and accident, they are perhaps yet another way of resurrecting the pieces into new unitary yet ambiguous bodies. Sometimes they speak of “acts” in space, of the work’s interactions with the elements of architecture, such as an assemblage *wedged under the ceiling* (“Unter die Decke geklemmt”) or tangles coming *out of the wall* (“Aus der Wand”), sometimes with the violence of color (“Rot aus der Wand”) like slingshots ready to launch, reaching out to strike, or shields to protect. At other times their focus is on position, universalizing their reach to reflect on the *distance traveled* (“Zurückgelegter Weg”), on the dynamics it establishes with *proximity* (“Zwischen Nähe und Ferne”), on the action that gives life to the static nature of a type by alternating its masses as when *in the castle the windows open* (“Im Schloß öffnen sich die Fenster”), or again on the possibilities of the conflict between forces and counterforces that allows a body to be *hung with counterweight* (“Hängende mit Gegengewicht”). In some cases, the positions are marked by the movement of the subjects in space, such as in the precise proxemics of an *offspring behind, madness in front* (“Hinten Nachwuchs, vorne Wahnsinn”). In others, the titles draw intermediate landscapes, insisting on the silhouette *between seas and mountains* (“Zwischen Bergen und Meeren”), or foreshadowing drifts for a gondolier *on the high seas* (“Auf hoher See”). Some are objects, animate or inanimate but absolutely urban as *bridge* (“Brücke”) or *door* (“Tor”)—recalling Georg Simmel’s archetypes. In some cases it is pathos that is celebrated through the spatialization of feelings, such as the “Longing for Someone Who’s Walking through the Mountains”, which becomes a landscape of dunes and ditches, as red as the rock of a canyon, reaching in other cases the figurative through which *to cross through the fan is creepy* (“Gar schaurig ist’s über’s Moor zu gehen”, quoting the first verse of the ballad “Der Knabe im Moor” by Annette von Droste-Hülshoff). Yet again, others are enigmas of space—for *a time a way* (“Für eine gewisse Zeit ein Weg”) an impossible bridge, without ends, with the center of gravity where in a bridge we would expect emptiness—or of the body, which makes one wonder *how I am behaving* (“Wie es um mich steht”). The titles thus make the struggle, the trudging through the bush, a tangible narrative. Sometimes they are surrealist deceptions, or enactments of the mythical and the literary, of events serious or nostalgic, dramatic or ironic, sometimes absurd or comic, even *ridiculous* (“Ridiküle,” with its many modes of positioning), to provide non-binding instructions for Pomona Zipser’s narrative machines.

Anticipatory Acts of Architecture

At the bottom of the exhibition space, a third body seems to suggest a possible answer to the enigma of oblique foundations. A magical apparition, also two-faced, is the impossible synthesis between exposed, pointed fragility and constructive, solid armaments—*fish is full* (“Fisch ist voll”). The pike is a submarine ready for attack or a trench in which to find refuge. Here is embodied the title of the exhibition—*Ponteggi narrativi*—and the possibility for Pomona Zipser’s assemblages to be architectures and, at the same time, anticipations.

Crystallized in the title and in the perfection of the composition that has achieved its balance, each work is both a special stage in the production process that marked its forms and a time capsule that contains echoes of possible future uses and tasks. The grammar of the relic is thus perhaps an *ideal of the broken-down* à la Alfred Sohn Rethel. If “Das Ideal des Kaputten” is for the philosopher of the Frankfurt School that which, damaged beyond the point of use, precisely by virtue of this supervening dysfunctionality lends itself to multiple recombinations into new uses and new meanings, then the split and fractured pieces of wood and sheets of paper might as well be the embodiment of planning-and-accident as the double-headed Janus guiding the survival of machines to their constant reinvention and, therefore, towards the incessant rebirth of the cities that built them. Singing an ode to the many ways of shattering something, Pomona Zipser’s skeletal structures-weapons-tools-bodies in tension seem to act as frameworks for the many possible “afterlives” of architecture. They are fundamental gestures, acts in which construction and skin, structure and surface meet in a symphony of moves that erect extreme spatial compositions not *after* delimiting a space, but rather *after* laying the first “stone.” Ambiguity and absurdity make these acts of architecture “perfect.”

Exiting the Forgia Marinarezza and facing Venice, Pomona Zipser's works appear as one large installation—the staging of signs as archaic as the city in the lagoon itself. These structures, built in wood and paper, assembled with ropes, knots, nails, and screws, become a reflection of reality, endowed with agency. They are pulsating constructions, assemblages recalling the *briccole* that punctuate the waters of the Serenissima—one of its most enduring architectural tropes—to remind us that below, in the abysses of the lagoon, a dense forest of upturned trees lies on its foundations and allows the muddy substrate to support the city. In the swirl of mystery, in the fight against the forces of nature and gravity, the mighty, slender signs toggle between sinking and floating. Like tightrope walkers, they challenge the impossibility of any secure foothold. These architectures of assembled remnants, returned to a second life in oscillating equilibrium, are the extreme construction of a synecdoche, foundations of absent edifices or of a city of ambiguous presences. They are an affinity that is at once an anticipation of what things fear or wish to be.

Powerful flows of energy, as radical as gravity and light, radiate from these constructions. Together they become a unique composition to be crossed like a landscape of stalactites and stalagmites, high and deep reliefs to move between intense sun and advancing darkness, or imperceptible valleys to observe in parallax. Built in the radical absence of actual construction drawings or sketches anticipating their evolutions, Pomona Zipser's works might also suggest the potentialities of thought and effort as means to open up for architecture a great possibility—a kaleidoscope of possible futures suspended in the allocations of nomadic parts, in the assemblies of swords and harpoons that induce enchantment and terror, in the whole as in the detail, in a continual battle with the laws of statics that seeks negotiation or resistance.

In the Venice to which Pomona Zipser returns once again—a trip with the Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes in 1979 had set the stage for another travel grant in 1986, which led to her first solo exhibition at Paradiso Perduto in 1987, anticipating her participation to the 1990 Art Biennale with “Ambiente Berlin”—her *narrative scaffoldings* seem to exhort us to *vivre à l'oblique*, overturning the coordinates that regulate space into filigree arcs of tension, foundations for futures.