

Towards a Deconstruction of Hylomorphism. *Imago-Magia* and Visionary Drawings. From Baroque Metonymy to Contemporary Polycentric Spaces

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Abstract

This paper proposes a reinterpretation of drawing and artistic practice that goes beyond the traditional hylomorphic paradigm, which interprets creative activity as the formal imposition of an active subject upon a passive material. From an ontogenetic and relational perspective, it introduces the notion of synaptic drawing as an interpretive model that describes the creative process as an event of connection, emergence, and co-constitution among the author, the material, and the context. In dialogue with Bruno's metaphysics of polycentricity, Michel Foucault's hermeneutics of the subject, and Walter F. Otto's anthropological theory, the text challenges the form/matter and active/passive dichotomies, highlighting how the work emerges from a dynamic process of interaction.

Through a theoretical exploration that weaves together philosophy, art history, and architectural theory, the text analyses perspectival devices as practices that generate subjectivity and meaning, from the crisis of linear perspective to the polycentric and unstable configurations of modernity and contemporaneity. Within this framework, visual and design examples –from the visionary architectures attributed to François de Nomé to the graphic experiments of Daniel Libeskind and the critical practices of Lebbeus Woods– demonstrate how space emerges as a relational field and the image is constituted in the tension between the visible and the invisible.

Synaptic drawing is thus understood as a practice that activates relationships, transforms the subject, and reconfigures reality. This gives rise to an aesthetic and epistemological paradigm in which the work takes shape as an event and an encounter, opening up to a polycentric and non-hierarchical conception of artistic practice, in which matter, author, and world mutually participate in the genesis of form.

Keywords: polycentrism, encounter, hylomorphism, reversal, anarchitecture.

The overthrow of the anthropocentric paradigm

The hylomorphic view, rooted in the Aristotelian conception of form and matter and embedded in a 'closed-world' and anthropocentric ontology, tends to conceive of drawing as the technical execution of a pre-existing idea, in which form –already realised at the mental level– shapes a material considered inert and malleable. From this perspective, the act of drawing is reduced to a mere operational application, obscuring both the transformative dimension of the act and the intrinsically relational nature of the process, in which subject, gesture, matter and form emerge reciprocally from the formative interaction.

We are, in fact, still bound to an anthropocentric ontology, in which the self is interpreted as the centre of a

shaping and technical action exerted upon inert matter. This is fundamentally a transposition of the Aristotelian model, according to which matter is in itself inert and formless, requiring the idea to determine itself and thus the bearer of ideas par excellence (*homo faber*) as well as his shaping hand.

This model was already challenged over five hundred years ago by the man who was the first to think through the 'open' and infinite universe in all its implications: Giordano Bruno. In an infinite world, there is neither an 'outside' nor a 'centre': it is like a sphere whose circumference is nowhere and whose centre is everywhere. This leads to the collapse of any ontological hierarchy: in such a universe,

every point is a centre and there is no longer strictly speaking an 'above' or a 'below'.

The polycentrism of Bruno's universe forms the cosmological backdrop within which Luigi Pareyson's theory of formativity can be coherently conceived [Pareyson 1988]. The dialectical reversal – "no longer is the moon the sky to us, but we to the moon" [Bruno 2007, p. 456] – also affects the relationship between subject and object in creation. It is no longer the subject who salvifically imparts form to matter; on the contrary, he is formed by the form that emerges in matter through his own activity.

Drawing on the thought of Giordano Bruno, this paper proposes a rethinking of the act of drawing, which embraces the aforementioned reversal of the traditional form/matter hierarchy: drawing is not interpreted as an authorial and 'triumphant' imposition of a form from the outside onto inert matter, but rather repeats in its making the circularity of a sphere whose circumference is nowhere and whose centre is everywhere [Bruno 2007b; Flash 2011]. Against this cosmological backdrop, the subject does not dominate matter, but is part of a process in which it is shaped by its own act of shaping, giving rise to an object that, in coming into being, always exceeds the design, without ever allowing itself to be entirely reduced to it. The object of artistic creation establishes a novelty that is both the active presence of matter –participating with resistances and suggestions– and the revelation of a meaning hidden even from the author and initiator of the creation.

Towards an anthropology of encounter

This paper proposes an interpretation of the drawing as a synapse, understood as a dynamic web of connections closely linked to the creative and operational elements of artistic practice, regarded as an ontogenetic event that generates a circular tension in which the artist and the work co-generate one another.

This involves a return to pre-modern and pre-Cartesian models. As Foucault summarises in *Herméneutique du sujet* (The Hermeneutics of the Subject) [Foucault 2001], within the Western philosophical tradition we can distinguish two different ways of conceiving the conditions of access to truth. The first is what he calls the "Cartesian moment" [Foucault 2001, p. 15], considered representative of the modern age, according to which a subject endowed with sound rational capacity, if they cultivate their intelligence

through appropriate studies and apply it according to a suitable method, would by nature be capable of accessing the truth. The second model, which was predominant in Greco-Roman antiquity, posits instead that reason alone is not sufficient for a person to gain access to the truth. This is not because there is a lack of basic knowledge or a sound scientific method, but because an inner transformation is still required, to be achieved by turning one's attention inwards and through the constant exercise of ethical practice. The set of precepts and activities aimed at structuring this work on oneself, as well as the attempts made and the experiences gained, constitutes what Foucault calls 'spirituality'. This is an epistemological model that does not posit the static nature and centrality of the knowing subject, but rather sees knowledge emerging within a polycentric dialectical space, in which the subject knows to the extent that they are willing to be transformed, and allows themselves to be transformed by the encounter with the object of their own doing and knowing. There is thus a shift from an epistemology and an aesthetics founded on an anthropocentric paradigm to an epistemology and an aesthetics rooted in what we might call an anthropology of encounter, according to which the human being does not exist as an ontologically predefined entity or one that is autonomous from their own practices, but is generated through them, and it is through the process and forms of their doing that they reveal themselves to themselves, giving form to themselves. Mankind –and therefore the artist– has always presented itself to reflection as a being that is, in some way, unfinished, and thus open to processes of formation. The human being enters the world as the only creature lacking a definitive biological form. In Plato's myth of Protagoras, this condition is described as the result of an oversight by the titan Epimetheus who, having exhausted all natural gifts (wings, claws, fur) for the animals, leaves man "naked, barefoot and defenceless" [Plato 2000, p. 819]. However, it is precisely this nakedness that constitutes man's ontological openness, and sows within him artistic potential: not being chained to an instinct or a fixed function, man is compelled to invent himself. Art –and drawing– thus arise from this original lack; it is the technical and poetic supplement that allows an incomplete being to reach out, seeking its own determination in a dialogue with the world, through its own doing. This ontological openness of man was articulated by Pico della Mirandola in his famous *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, where man is described as a "chameleon" and "creator of himself". According to Pico's lesson, God does



Fig. 1. Monsù Desiderio, *Paesaggio architettonico con rovine*, 17th century, oil on canvas, 75 x 120 cm, St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum.



Fig. 2. Monsù Desiderio, Città immaginaria, sec. XVII., oil on canvas, 42 x 70 cm, Belgium, Pascal and Louise de Sadeleer Collection (2004).

not assign to Adam “neither a fixed abode, nor a distinct form, nor a particular prerogative”, but places him at the centre of the world so that he may explore its possibilities, and through his own actions and by his own free choice, may shape himself [Pico 1942, pp. 104-107]. Drawing is an exercise of this dignitas as autopoiesis, in which every line drawn on the paper is an act of self-formation.

Luigi Pareyson's aesthetics of formativity provides a solid foundation for this theoretical framework: the work does not derive from an entirely preordained plan, but is constituted in the very making of the process, in which the rules emerge operationally in the course of the productive act [Pareyson 1988]. This gives rise to a conception of artistic creation as dynamism in which the artist does not apply a form to inert matter, but engages with a material that 'responds', offering resistance and suggesting directions.

In this process, the artist does not remain unchanged, but transforms alongside the work: in this ceaseless interplay between the self and the work, the subject is revealed not as a static centre dominating the material, but as a process in the making, revealed to itself precisely by the presence of what it is creating.

This space of the self opening up to a necessary dialogue with the work is part of an 'anthropology of encounter,' which owes much to the theories of Walter Friedrich Otto, as set out in *Il Mito e il corpo umano e la danza* [Otto 1993; 2025]. For the German philologist, myth, ritual, dance and, in general, the most primordial cultural forms are not the result of the creative will of a subject already formed and self-aware in itself, but rather the response of man and his form to the encounter with being and the world, an encounter whose intensity is even compelling for man: as if seized by it, he becomes the channel through which names, words, gestures, songs, temples, ways of inhabiting and representing space come into being. Through this encounter, man is revealed to himself and initiated into a civilisation that thus unfolds, and he comes to inhabit it.

The hand is the organ through which humans come to know themselves. As Anaxagoras has already argued, humans are the wisest of animals, not because of some abstract intellectual superiority, but precisely because they possess the hand [Anaxagoras 2002]. This is the material synapse that connects their unfinished inner self to the outside world. Through the hand, human incompleteness ceases to be passivity and becomes activity. For Giordano Bruno too, the organ that defines human specificity is the hand, not the mind: it is in doing and in interaction with the object that the 'inner world' unfolds.

In this sense, the reversal effected by Bruno concerns not only anthropology, but implies a broader reconfiguration of the relationship between subject and world: no longer an ordering centre that imposes form, but rather a plurality of centres in relation, in which each point is at once active and receptive. The shift from an anthropocentric paradigm to a polycentric structure – which, in Bruno's cosmology, dissolves any hierarchy between centre and periphery – finds its counterpart in the pictorial representation of space. It is no coincidence that Bruno himself conceives of philosophy as a sort of 'internal painting', suggesting a continuity between cognitive and figurative processes.

As Pavel Florensky and Erwin Panofsky have observed [Florensky 2020; Panofsky 1961], the linear perspective developed during the Renaissance corresponds to the emergence of an anthropocentric worldview; conversely, the so-called 'reverse perspective', characteristic of Russian icon painting, symbolically represents a polycentric space, in which the subject does not establish a privileged and ordering viewpoint with respect to the depicted objects.

In this vein, interpreting artistic practice through an 'anthropology of encounter' implies a similar reversal: it is no longer entities that are ontologically and epistemologically anchored to the subject, but the subject itself, revealed to itself through the encounter with the object [Colli 1969].

In the synaptic gesture of drawing, the hand does not merely execute a project conceived abstractly by the mind, but explores the material, learning from its resistances, from which it draws suggestions that transform the act into a cognitive process, opening up possibilities otherwise inaccessible to reflection alone.

In this context, the device of anamorphosis becomes the visible manifestation of this connection: a form that requires transformative engagement and a specific positioning, revealing how drawing is not a practice of domination over the world, but rather the site of a revelation mediated by the act of making.

Baroque metonymy:

Monsù Desiderio and the omniscient perspective

In a historical and conceptual parallel, Baroque metonymy, as observed in the works of Monsù Desiderio (pseudonym of Didier Barra and François de Nomé, c. 1593-1630) [Causa 1956], proposes a similar logic through a metonymic interplay between the part and

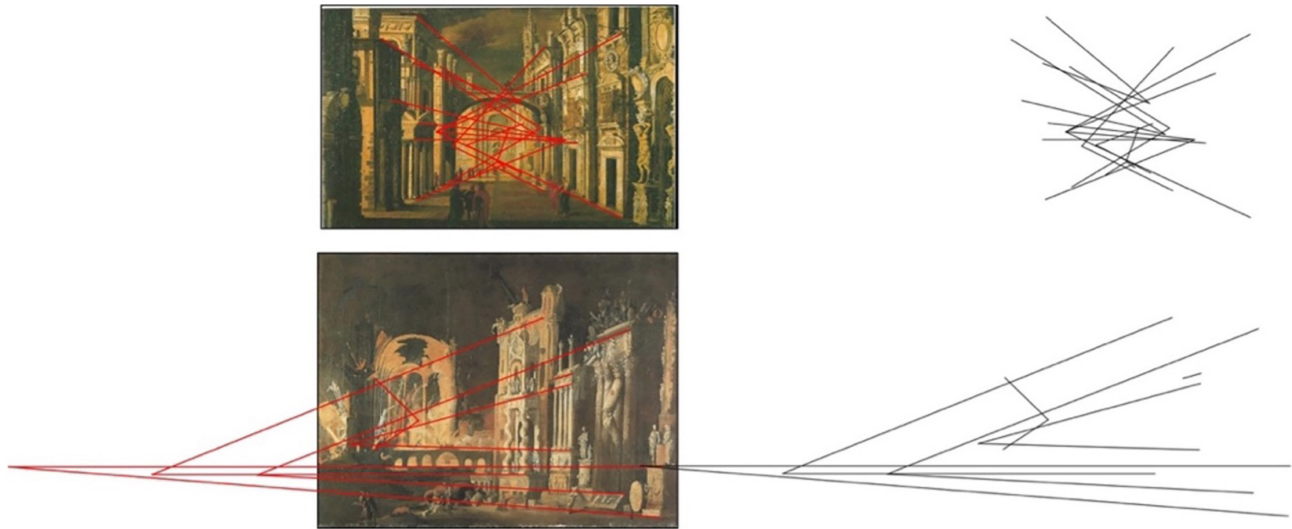


Fig. 3. Cesare Battelli, omniscient perspective diagrams based on two paintings by Monsù Desiderio, 2022.

the reference to the whole, and vice versa. This compositional strategy reflects the tension between the visible and the invisible characteristic of seventeenth-century art and architecture, producing images that condense within an apparently fragmented space, yet extend beyond perceptible physical limits [Shearman 1967]. Just as in the synaptic practice of contemporary drawing, Baroque metonymy also invites the observer to a participatory vision in which meaning is not imposed by the artist, but emerges as an 'interactive machine' between detail, structure and perception [Damish 1984].

Taken as a paradigm, Desiderio's architectural paintings –though not directly attributable to drawing in the strict sense– can be interpreted as a veritable visionary *Theatrum Mundi* of the 17th century [Sluys 1961]. In them, architecture and the play of light and shadow bear a strong resemblance both to the art of memory and to Bruno's conception of an infinite and omniscient universe; a thesis supported by rigorous analysis and perspective reconstructions of his paintings, as well as comparative studies of art and philosophy from the 15th to the 17th centuries [Battelli 2024; Klein 1975; Onfray 2010; Sapir 2008].

Halfway between 'the impossibility of ascent and the precipice', in an analogy with the metaphysics of Bruno and Pico della Mirandola, De Nomé's architectural scenarios lead to an amalgam of styles and references that are not always historically traceable [Battelli 2024]. Cities, fires or ruined architecture share a common denominator of vagueness towards an unknown evoked beyond doors, portals and columns; an unknown that remains invisible or impossible to fully recognise, as in *Architectural Landscape with Ruins* (fig. 1).

It should be emphasised that De Nomé's 'pan-architecture' does not constitute a nostalgic relationship with the past, nor the memory encapsulated in the fragment, nor indeed a taxonomic compilation of ancient glories. The fragment sheds its documentary function to become a pure play of light and shadow, in an organic reproduction that takes place through the dissolution and subsequent recombination of matter. It is precisely this combination of 'death and life' that constitutes the essence of his architectural inventions, which renounce the static nature of stone to become *chiaroscuro*, translated into a space in perpetual evolution and made up of temporal overlaps. Architecture ceases to be a static backdrop to become a pulsating

organism, where ruin is not the end goal, but the point of transition towards a new, unsettling chromatic and spatial metamorphosis [Battelli 2024].

In the artist's paintings, particularly those dating from around 1620, the light source emerges from behind dark columns or architectural masses in shadow, creating a diffuse continuum, an intermediate space where shadow and light interpenetrate. The 'point' of maximum brightness and maximum darkness generates the entire composition, as can be seen in *The Burning of Troy* or in his imaginary cities. The streets lack defined solidity but appear fluid, hazy, unstable (fig. 2). This suspended space is a place where the *Imaginatio* (understood as a form of knowledge of the nature of the whole) operates as a creative force, transforming the act of painting into an ontological experience [Yates 2010].

In De Nomé's work, architecture becomes the setting for a multi-referential blend in which proportions are respected only in appearance, and the human figure appears miniaturised to the point of vanishing. This reduction in scale effectively anticipates that sense of the sublime which would become characteristic of Romantic painting – think of the works of Turner or Friedrich – in which the relationship between man and the infinite plays out precisely through this disproportion, where the subject is no longer the centre of the action, but an infinitesimal point within a spatiality that overwhelms and transcends him. This eclipse of anthropocentrism corresponds to the collapse of unilateral spatial construction. Perspective has no single vanishing point or privileged observer. Horizons multiply, creating disorientation and openness according to an omnicentric principle: every element relates to the others without an absolute centre, and every architectural form refers to its own vanishing point. The horizon thus becomes a cloud of possibilities, a veritable constellation of points (fig. 3).

Bruno's metaphysics, De Nomé's visionary spatiality, portals as thresholds and the multiplication of vanishing points foreshadow certain principles that we find in contemporary drawing practices. Bruno's concept of the infinite universe, where every 'vanishing point' meets its own centre, finds a close parallel in the drawings of Daniel Libeskind, in the musical compositions of John Cage, and in experimental polycentric drawings such as those by Lebbeus Woods or Perry Kulper; regarded as some of the most paradigmatic figures of contemporary polycentric representation. Ultimately, Bruno's lesson resonates in the contemporary world not only from a philosophical perspective, but also

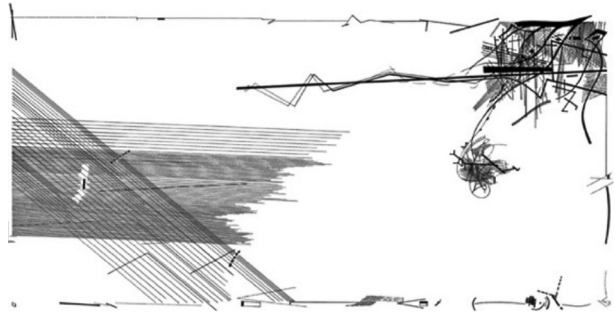
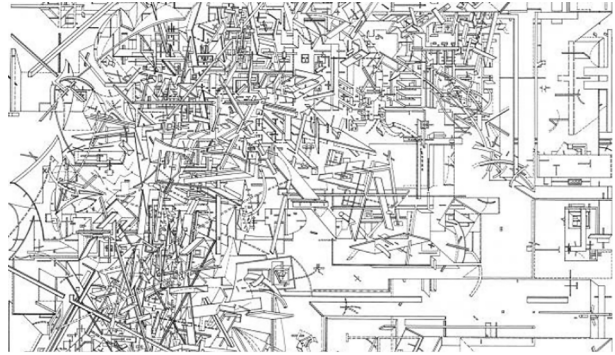


Fig. 4. Daniel Libeskind, *Artic Flowers*, 1975 (Libeskind 1991, p. 17).

Fig. 5. Daniel Libeskind, *Chamberworks*, 1983 (Libeskind 1991, p. 124).

as a basis for a design reflection that does not act by saturating an inert space, but takes the form of a dynamic interface capable of integrating the intrinsic complexity of the 'infinite' universe.

Daniel Libeskind, for example, in the series *Micromegas*, *Artic flowers* and *Chamber works* (fig. 4), develops a space no longer dominated by a single vanishing point or a stable centre. We are faced with a sort of 'radiography' of space composed solely of relationships, in an *an-architectural* narrative that extends beyond the physical limits of representation. The geometric fragments in a non-Euclidean space are arranged according to a tensor structure, generating multiple paths and perspectives [Libeskind 1991]. Each element acquires meaning within the network of interactions with the others, as in an open field of forces.

In this case, the architectural design does not stem from a rigid link to the object; on the contrary, the emerging image is not conceived as being linked to its referent in the same way that a sign is linked to a written meaning. The notion of detachment (understood as detachment from a specifically architectural referent) thus becomes fundamental to understanding 'non-architecture' (anarchitecture) in the Polish architect's work. The possibility of reading his drawings as a form of writing places at the centre the reader's freedom to name the co-things without any specific reference. In his later works, Libeskind eliminates the essential nature of the sign as a vehicle in favour of 'another seriality', in which the drawing deliberately becomes writing. Devoid of traditional representational purposes, it takes the form neither of a detached freehand sketch nor of a narrative of a habitable architectural space. As Peter Eisemann points out, Libeskind's drawings become a non-referential structure without boundaries between beginning and end, taking the form of traces of a process's trajectory [Libeskind 1991].

They are not a random collection of lines, nor are they a precise set of lines that conform to the repetition of a recognisable image; in other words, they are neither one nor the other. They are something else, and it is precisely this otherness that defines them as lying outside the boundaries of architectural tradition, transforming them into a 'non-architecture' and adopting a set of constantly evolving perspectives [Libeskind 1991; Vvas 2015] (fig. 5).

John Cage applies a similar principle to music, often accompanied by drawings and graphic notations, in which the creative gesture does not determine a fixed result, but generates events and relationships. In his graphic scores, such

as *Fontana Mix* (1958) or *Aria* (1958), Cage uses symbols, lines and open forms that do not indicate a rigid sequence of sounds, but offer the performer a map of possibilities, a set of potential paths to explore [Cage 1958; 1960]. Each performance becomes unique, determined by the interaction between musician, instruments and context, where the work is not fixed at the moment of composition but opens up to the flow of shared experience (fig. 6).

Similarly, in his graphic scores, Cage explores the visual dimension of the score, where the arrangement of lines, dots and symbols on the page functions as an open field of forces, within which the reader-performer interprets, decides and discovers, transforming the notation into a sonic and spatial event. The creative act thus becomes a shared experience between artist and material, between subject and object, between form and sound, embodying a sort of 'Brunian multiversality' observed in Baroque painting in general and specifically in François De Nomé.

Alongside Libeskind, Lebbeus Woods proposes visionary architectures and conceptual drawings in which the fragmentation of space, the superimposition of levels (both physical and conceptual) and the multiplication of centres produce unstable and open scenarios, destined to transform both the subject's experience and the sense of *locus*, understood as a dynamic and interactive space. In his works, architecture becomes a relational event, a form of anarchitecture in which objects are no longer static and absolute, but active in the process of transformation.

Taking as an example the drawings for the reconstruction of Sarajevo (*War and Architecture* 1993) (fig. 7), Woods begins with an initial reflection on three fundamental principles of post-war reconstruction: a return to normality, a *tabula rasa*, and the creative use of existing material capable of transforming damaged remains into new spaces, whilst respecting the memory of the destroyed forms and the scars as signs of history [Woods 1996].

The drawings of new urban spaces neither celebrate nor commemorate destruction, but accept what has been lost and gained. The irregular tears in the structures, created by explosions and fires, are unique in their history and meaning, and from them emerge new ways of thinking, living and configuring space. From these conditions arises a heterarchical community, which excludes the hierarchies of organised violence. We also find this paradigm in the design of the World Trade Center tower in New York, conceived as an uninterrupted architectural growth: an active memory of violence that transforms into a symbol of resilience and

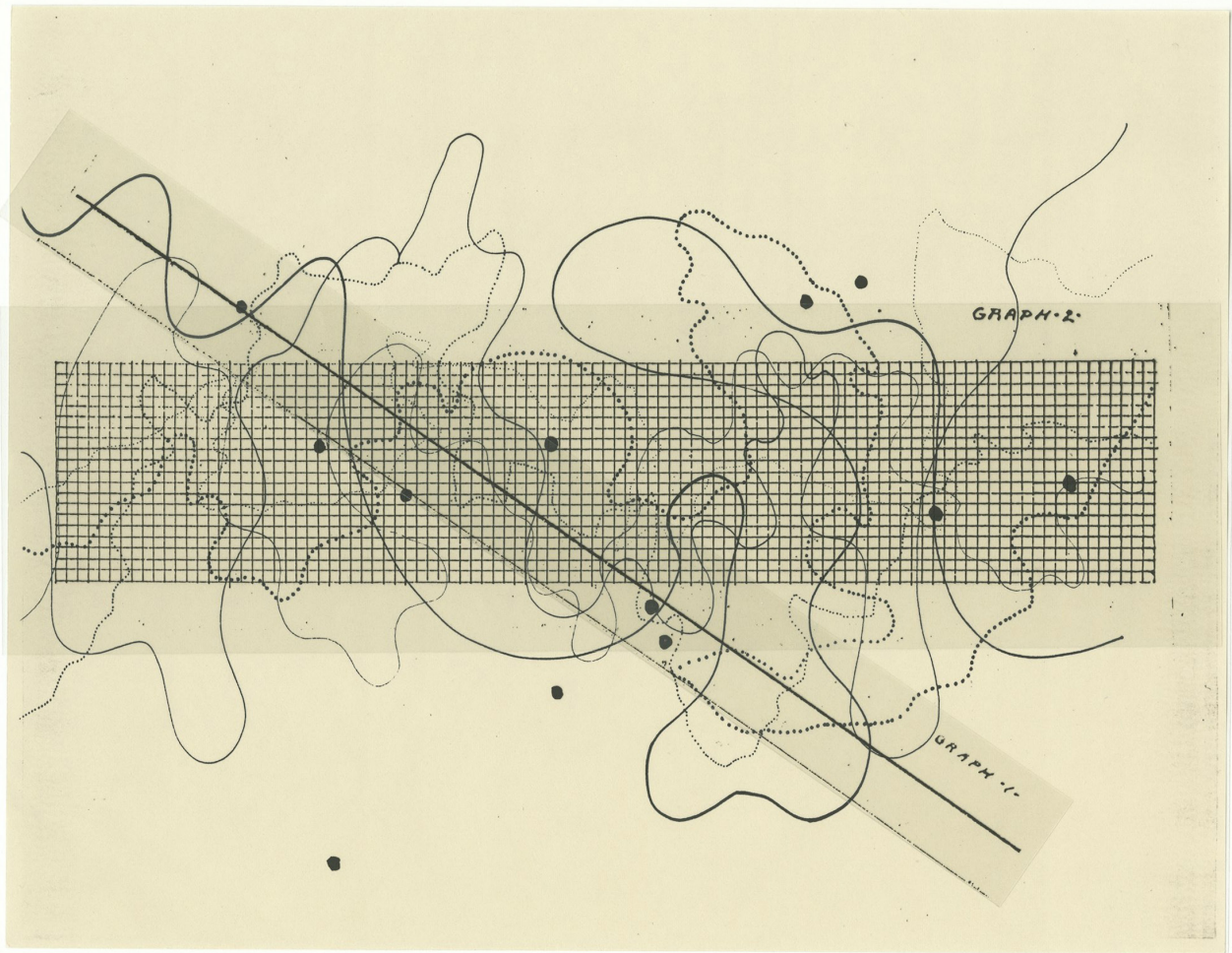


Fig. 6 John Cage, *Fontana Mix*, 1958. Graphic score (pencil and ink on paper and transparent film). New York: Edition Peters (source: <<https://www.walkerart.org/collections/artwork/fontana-mix-material-for-tape-music-of-that-title/>>).

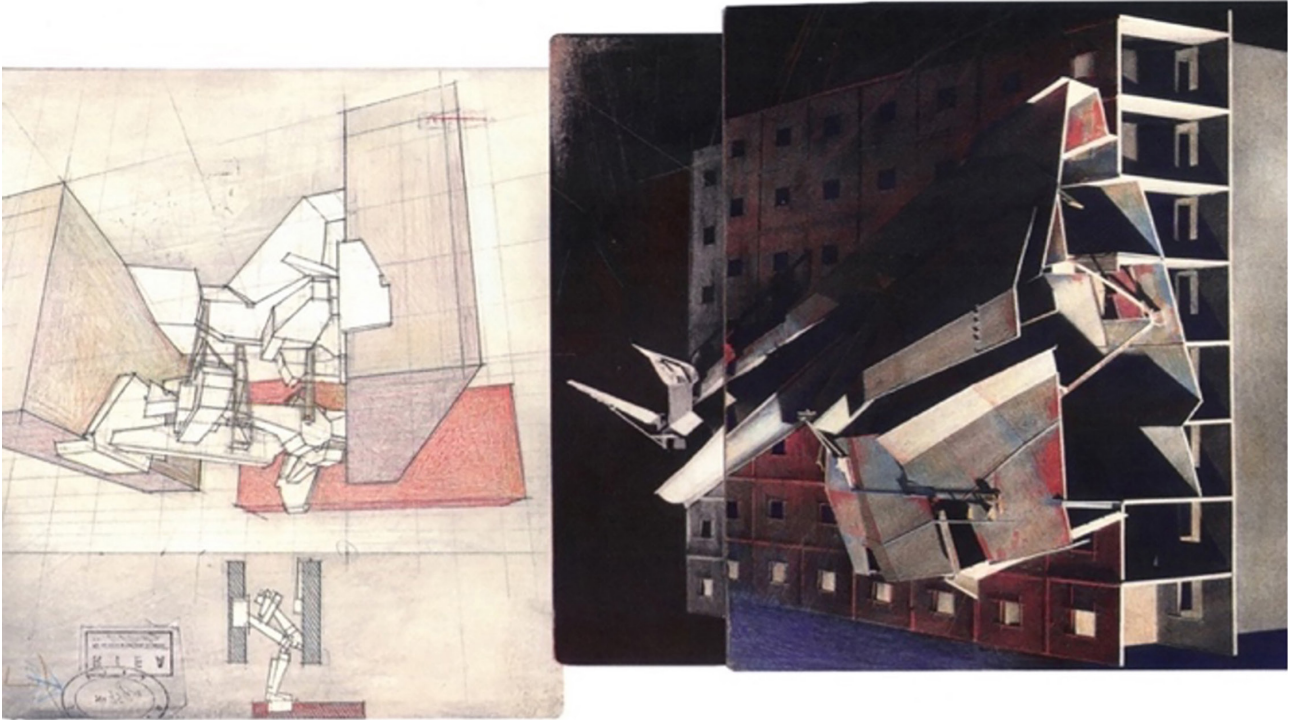


Fig. 7. Lebbeus Woods, War and Architecture. Disegno, 1993 (source: Lebbeus Woods Blog: <<https://lebbeuswoods.wordpress.com/>>).

regeneration (fig. 8). Here, the project is not a simple reconstruction, but an act of 'reincarnation' of matter.

In all these cases, the drawings – with Woods's particular preference for the use of the pamphlet – do not merely refer back to the text but, together with it, constitute a unique form of reflection designed to give shape and rationale to a radical reconstruction of architectural foundations on an ethical basis. Architecture is a living organism that experiments with itself time and again in ever-changing forms, undergoing continuous reincarnations [Quici 2013] (fig. 8).

Perry Kulper's work follows this same line of thought, further radicalising the co-generative nature of drawing. In his strategic drawings and composite drawings, the drawing is neither a representation nor a foreshadowing of a completed architecture, but an open cognitive device, capable of activating relationships between images, texts, diagrams, narrative fragments and heterogeneous references [Chard, Kulper 2013]. Space emerges as a field of possibilities in which there are no stable centres nor perspectival hierarchies, but a constellation of graphic events that coexist in a state of permanent tension (fig. 9). The sheet becomes an operational threshold, a contemporary theatrum mundi in which the observer is called upon to actively construct meaning, continuing, in a meta-design sense, that visionary and relational spatiality which stretches from the Baroque tradition.

This highlights a common thread in which the creative act is no longer conceived as the mere imposition of pre-existing forms, but as a dynamic and transformative process, in which the subject does not dominate, but allows themselves to be permeated by the experience of their own making. Form is neither static nor predetermined, but – as the result of a vision in constant flux and therefore never fully realised – manifests itself as a living entity, open to multiple relationships, capable of reacting, expanding and altering the very perception of space and time [Focillon 2018]. The work thus becomes a field of interactions, in which every gesture, line or volume produces reciprocal effects between creator and material, generating a network of open, non-hierarchical connections. Space has no privileged centre, but emerges as an overlapping of horizons and thresholds where every point is simultaneously origin and destination. Here the work takes shape as an ontological event: a place of transformation in which the subject reveals itself to itself through form. The continuity between Desiderio, Bruno, Otto and contemporary artistic and architectural practices lies precisely in this 'shared creation',

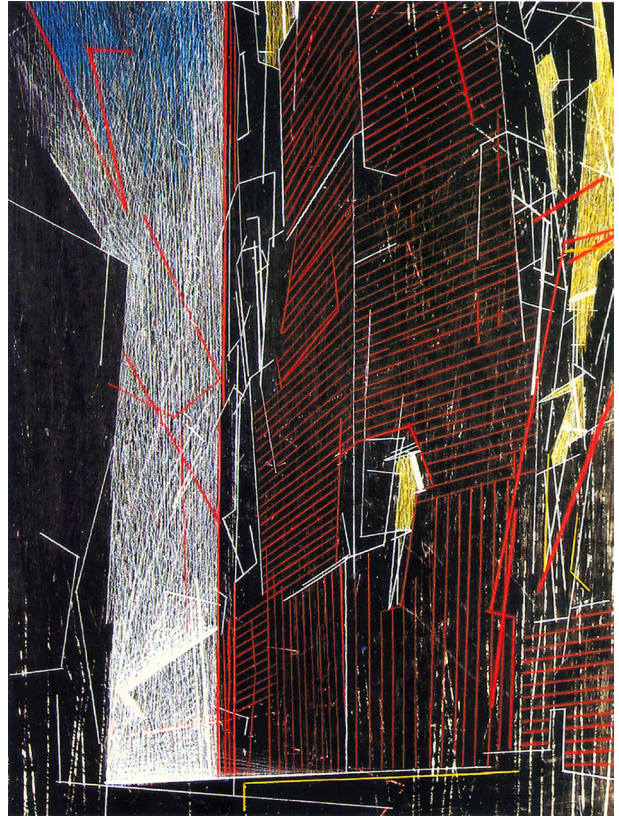


Fig. 8. Lebbeus Woods, *Locus of ascent*, 2009 (source: Lebbeus Woods Blog: <<https://lebbeuswoods.wordpress.com/>>).

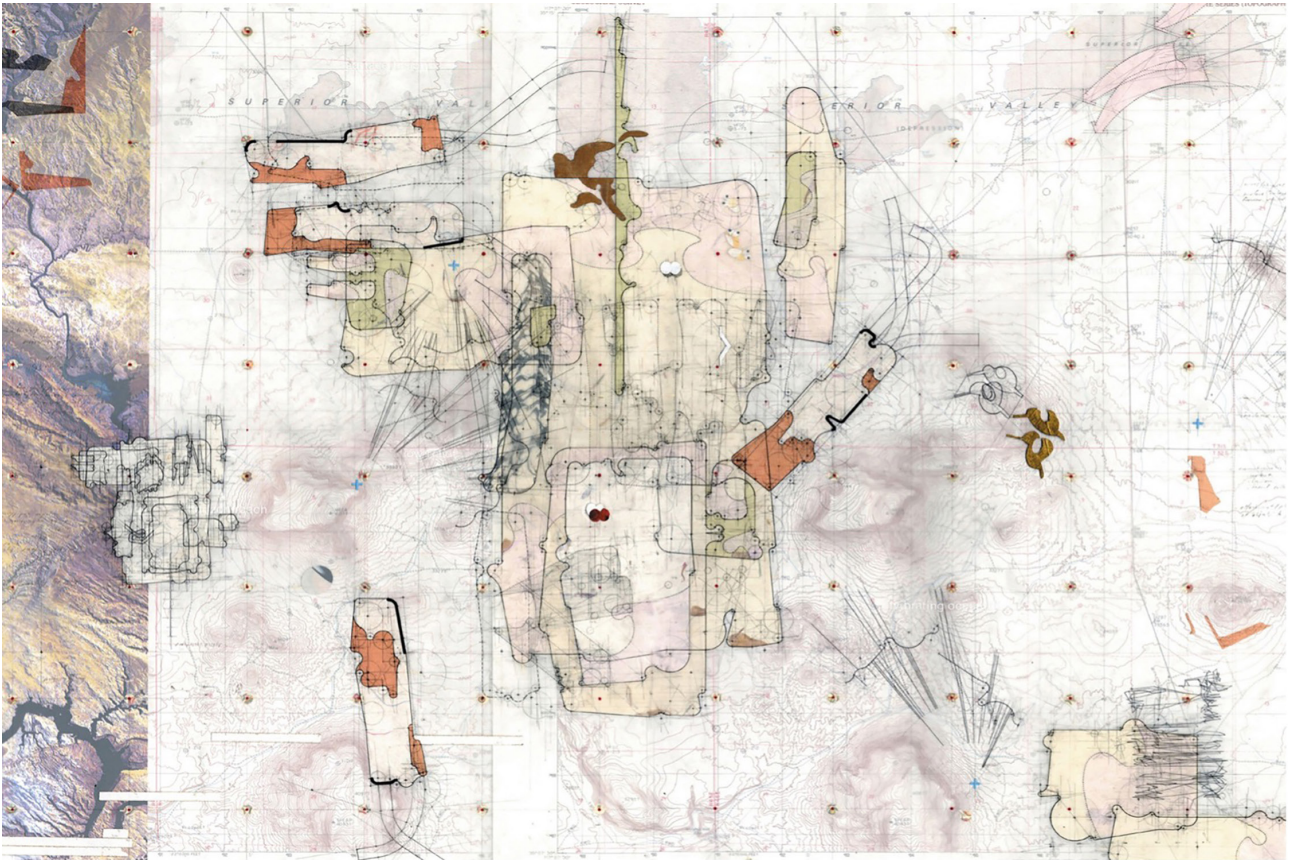


Fig. 9. Perry Kulper, *Fast Twitch: Desert Dwelling, v.01*, Site Drawing, 2004 (Image courtesy of the author).

where meaning is not predetermined, but springs from interaction and the infinite openness of the act of making.

Conclusions

The deconstruction of hylomorphism does not lead to a negation of form but to its restoration as a relational event. Drawing, freed from the notion of being a mere graphic translation of a pre-existing concept, reveals itself as a site of mutual transformation where the hand of the artist or artists does not impose a form upon matter, but enters a field of forces in which matter, gesture and imagination cooperate. From Bruno's cosmology of the infinite to Baroque metonymy and the apocalyptic abstractions of Monsù Desiderio, right through to contemporary polycentric drawings, an alternative genealogy of representation emerges, no longer centred on a sovereign viewpoint, but articulated

as a dynamic constellation of thresholds and relationships. From this perspective, the work is not a closed object, but rather an open device that calls for participation and a willingness to transform.

The shift from an anthropocentric aesthetic to an anthropology of encounter implies a redefinition of knowledge itself, in which knowing entails no form of domination, but rather a letting oneself be shaped by the encounter with what emerges. Drawing thus becomes both a spiritual and cognitive practice, a synapse between the visible and the invisible, between project and excess, between intention and revelation.

In an age marked by the crisis of centrality and the proliferation of horizons, the polycentric paradigm offers not only a framework for interpreting contemporary artistic practices, but also an ontological model in a universe where every point can be a centre, and where meaning arises from interaction, not from imposition.

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