

**Of Mirrors and Ashes
and Beginning Again:**



" Cemetery of the ashes of thought
" Cemeterio p/ra q/ra cenara de pensamento



**A Note on Hejduk's
Instauration of Brunelleschi's
Experiment**



Piero della Francesca, *View of an Ideal City*, ca. 1450.
Previous: John Hejduk, *Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought* (perspective sketch), 1974–79.

In *The Origin of Perspective*, Hubert Damisch insists that Filippo Brunelleschi's invention of perspective requires repeated performances; that the continual return to Brunelleschi's founding experiment constitutes the very history of perspective theory.¹ Return and repetition are prompted, Damisch argues, because perspective as a mode of knowledge, in fact, preexists Brunelleschi's "original" demonstration. Damisch follows Erwin Panofsky in his understanding of perspective as a spatially embodied epistemology and a critical reflection on our relationship to architectural representation. To theorize the preexistence of the

perspective system, however—that is, to theorize perspective as anterior to Brunelleschi's discovery—Damisch must go beyond Panofsky's subject-centered Kantianism. To do so, he must take recourse to Jacques Lacan's categories of the symbolic and the imaginary, two of the three interrelated orders, which, along with the third—the real—organize the field of subject formation. In Damisch's account, Brunelleschi's hole-and-mirror machinery is isomorphic with Lacan's diagram of the gaze, and the gaze is understood as that which is prior to the view, always already "looking" at the spectator without itself being seen.



I will suggest here that John Hejduk's 1975 project Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought is a reenactment and an extension of Brunelleschi's experiment. Elaborating the Lacanian model, I will demonstrate that Hejduk, in his instauration of Brunelleschi's apparatus and operations, summons the real along with the symbolic and the imaginary. He thus moves the question of architectural representation from the epistemological to the ontological—that is, from architecture understood as representing or hosting a specific event of thinking to architecture as itself *being* the event of thought and thinking. For architecture as thought can become a question only when ways of being in the world can become a question, for which architecture then provides a place.²

The Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought was, in part, Hejduk's response to the call by the organizers of the 1975 Venice Biennale to raise awareness of the degraded state of Giudecca island—in particular, to the vacant Molino Stucky building—and “to bring them back to life.”³ Molino Stucky was a large pasta mill at the western end of Giudecca designed by Ernst Wullekopf in the late 19th century. It was closed in 1954 and in ruin when Hejduk made his proposal. Hejduk's project comprises the old mill, a field of closely spaced walls embedded with containers of ashes, and the previously designed Wall House 3. This is Hejduk's full description of the project:

The Molino Stucky Building's exteriors are painted black. The Molino Stucky Building's interiors are painted white. The long, extended walls of the Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought are black on one side and white on the other side. The top and end surfaces of the long extended

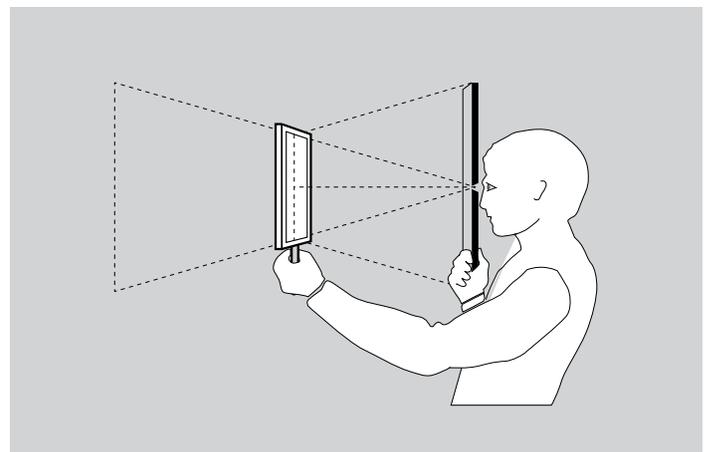
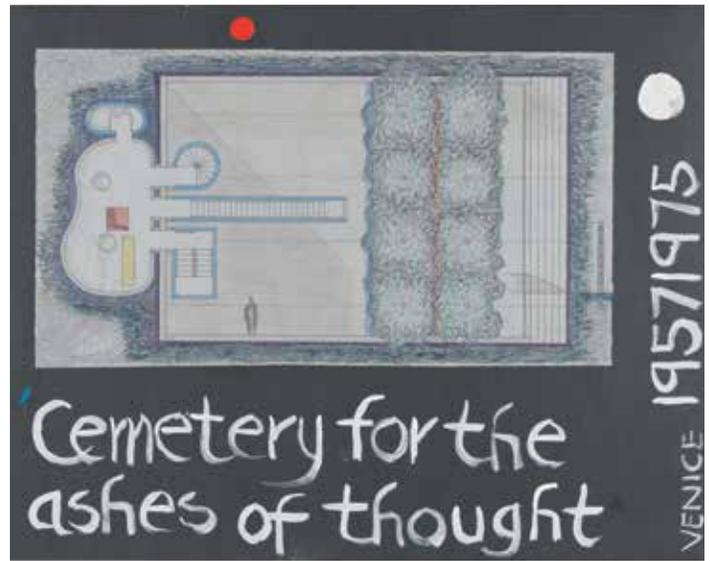


Diagram of Brunelleschi's Perspective Experiment

Looking toward the baptistery, the viewer holds the painted panel obversely to his or her face with one hand and holds a mirror in the other. The viewer looks through a hole in the painted panel to see the reflected image in the mirror. The reflected image matches exactly the view of the baptistery, thus demonstrating perspective's fidelity. On the other side of the mirror, as it were, is the vanishing point, virtual and unseen. Damisch writes, “Far from capturing the real directly, as cameras and telescopes can, the ‘view’ corresponds to a bracketing, to a veritable phenomenological reduction: within the brackets established by the panel and the mirror, the real was excluded, was outside the circuit.” Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 140.

walls are grey. Within the walls are one-foot square holes at eye level. Within each one-foot-square hole is placed a transparent cube containing ashes. Under each hole upon the wall there is a small bronze plaque indicating the title, and only the title of a work, such as *Remembrance of Things Past*, *The Counterfeiters*, *The Inferno*, *Paradise Lost*, *Moby Dick*, etc. Upon the interior of the walls of the Molino Stucky Building are small plaques with the names of the authors of the works: Proust, Gide, Dante, Milton, Melville, etc. In the lagoon on a man-made island is a small house for the sole habitation of one individual for a limited period of time. Only one individual for a set period of time may inhabit the house, no others will be permitted to stay on the island during its occupation. The lone individual looks across the lagoon to the Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought.⁴

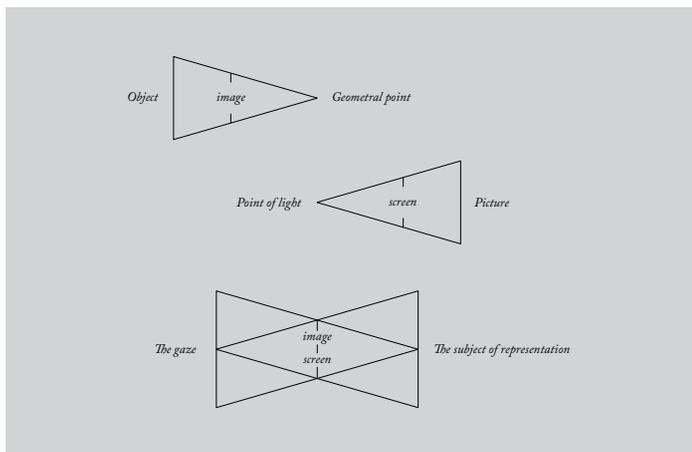
Like Brunelleschi's experiment, Hejduk's project fundamentally involves three parts: a found object (the Baptistery of San Giovanni for Brunelleschi, the mill for Hejduk); a registration plane through which the object is viewed; and a relay device. Brunelleschi's small painted panel contains a perspectival image, whereas Wall House 3 operates, it seems, as both viewer and a pictorial plane, both subject and object. Hejduk declares that "the little house was colored overlooking the monochromatic, systemic, European world"—but he also describes the frontal plane of Wall House 3 as a post-perspectival picture plane.⁵ As for Brunelleschi's mirror—the relay mechanism that, Damisch argues with reference to Lacan's mirror stage, effects the articulation of the symbolic and the imaginary—we might expect to find its analog here, too, in the vertical "image-screen" of Wall House 3. And yet, the reflexivity of Hejduk's project—the relay that constructs that zone or conceptual place that is anterior to both the symbolic and imaginary,



John Hejduk, Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought (drawing), 1974.



Luca Campigotto, the Molino Stucky building in ruins, Venice, 2013.



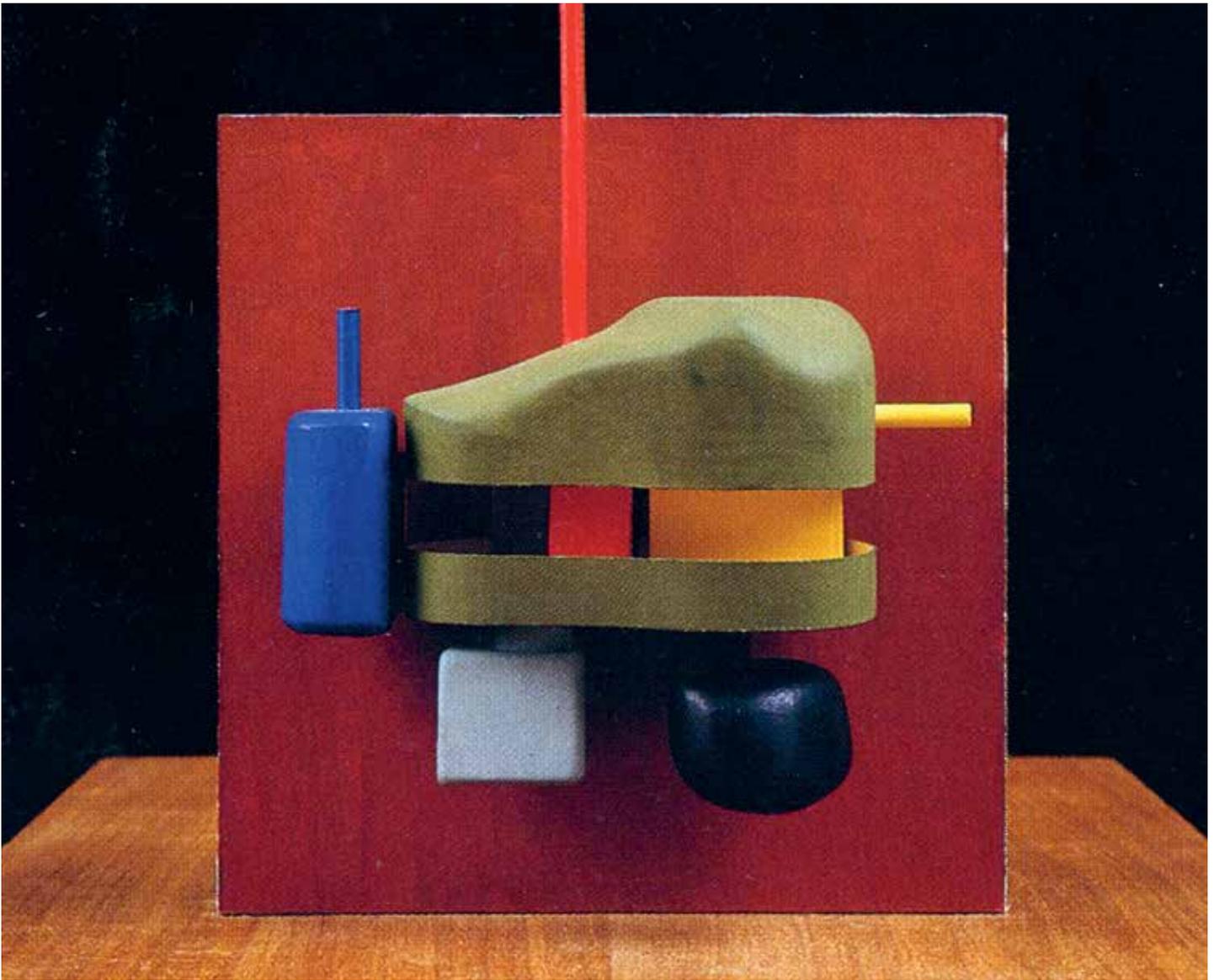
Jacques Lacan, Diagram of the Gaze, from Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis

The top figure can be understood to articulate Brunelleschi's perspective cone. The "geometral point" is constituted by the straight lines of perspective and marks the location of the viewing hole, while the "image" designates the picture plane and the panel on which the image of the baptistery is painted. The middle figure inverts the cone and shows a "point of light" that perhaps coincides with perspective's vanishing point, which in the final figure becomes the position of Lacan's "gaze." The alterity of the gaze ("the presence of others as such") belongs to Lacan's symbolic order, while its light partakes of what he calls the real. There is an interrupting "screen" in this projected light—opaque rather than transparent. Lacan insists that the subject who occupies the site of the "picture" is mapped by shapes predetermined by the screen, just as the mirror stage is an imaginary corporeal and psychological mapping. Lacan calls the coincidence of the two planes in the final figure the "image-screen." The image-screen and the gaze give us the imaginary-symbolic system which forms subjects.

which Lacan designates as the real—is in fact the minimal though still primary intervention on the site: the array of walls containing the ashes of thought. For it is in the walls that we find the "holes at eye level," analogs of the viewing hole in Brunelleschi's panel, the geometral point in the diagram that links the subject of representation, via the mirror, to the vanishing point of the gaze. The hole is "the constitutive given of the experiment," according to Damisch, "the act organizing it as such, the invention."⁶ In the holes of Hejduk's walls, we find the constitutive given of his project, the ashes. To understand the ashes' role as a relay mechanism, we must first elaborate the symbolic and imaginary orders as constructed by the Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought.

Thought always begins from a position within the symbolic order. Hejduk's project distinguishes the site of symbolic construction as the old Molino Stucky building, denizen of "the monochromatic, systemic, European world," and of Venice in particular. He writes:

Since 1974 Venice has preoccupied the nature of my work. It is a forum of my inner arguments. The thoughts have to do with Europe and America; abstraction



John Hejduk, Wall House 3 (model), 1974.

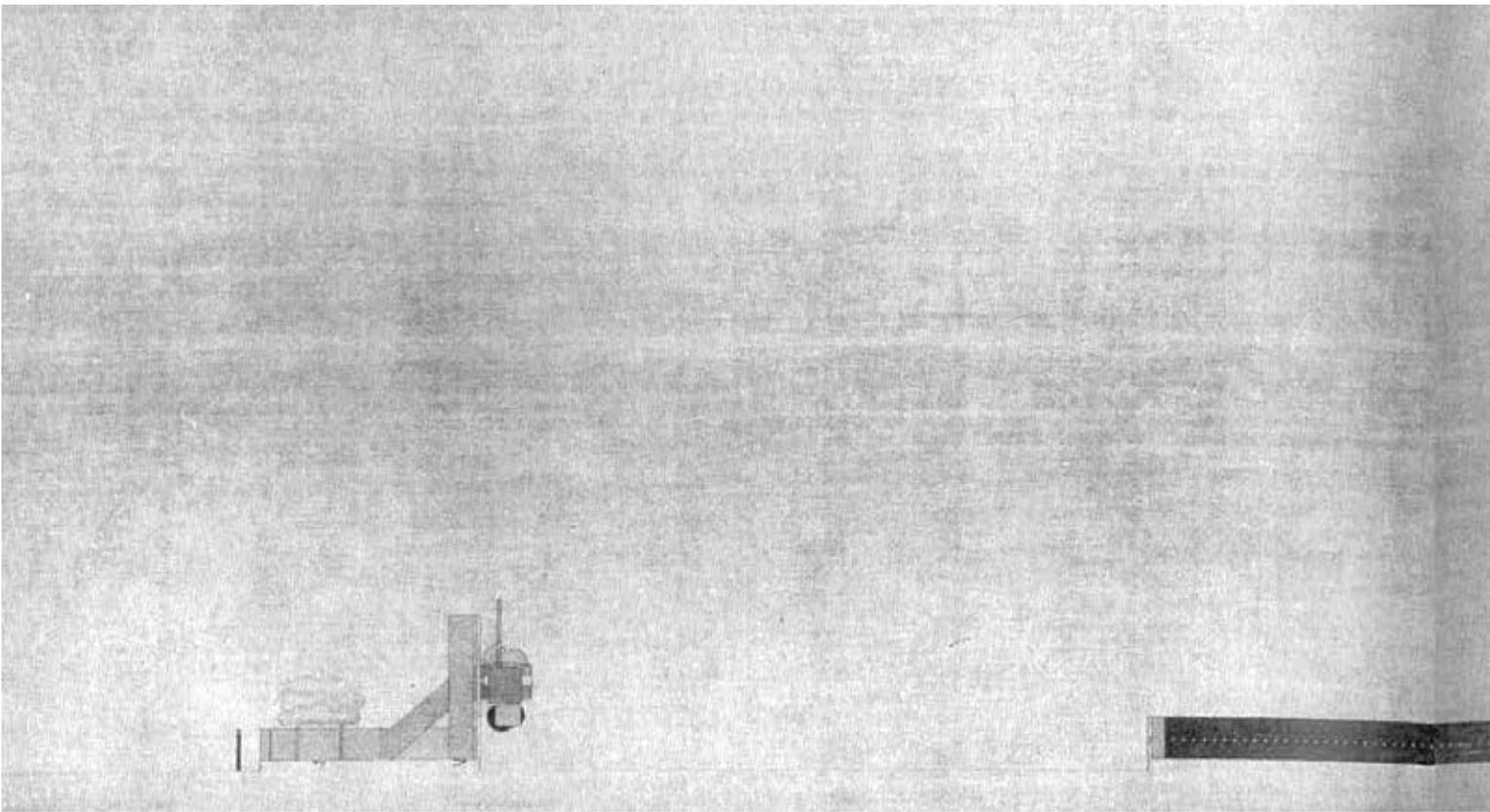
and historicism; the individual and the collective; freedom and totalitarianism; the colors black, white, grey; silence and speech; the literal and the ambiguous; narrative and poetry; the observer and the observed.⁷

Europe and Venice are for Hejduk part of the symbolic authority that controls and legitimates all cultural production.⁸ The names of authors distributed on the mill's wall are components of the same cultural archive. Lacan closely associates the proper name with the letter. In the Lacanian system, the letter is a material trace of the real within the domain of the symbolic. In Hejduk's project, the subject of thought finds its place in the symbolic order by being named. The names as differential elements are spatialized, inscribed in the architecture of Molino Stucky, thereby creating the symbolic conditions of thought. Hejduk makes no attempt to represent thought through visual metaphor. Rather the system of spatialized names suggests that architecture is a place where thought can be authorized by naming—the possibility of thought, the differentiation necessary for thought, the entirety of thought.

Outside the Stucky building is the realm of the imaginary, where light might have drawn the array of walls

across the site (as later, in Hejduk's 1998 Chapel, Wedding of the Moon and the Sun, where the sun's light would blast an opening in the chapel, backlighting a crucifix suspended in a picture plane, precisely constructing Lacan's diagram of the gaze). Light would appear as both a generative and a destructive force in much of Hejduk's later work that the cemetery project inaugurates. For Lacan, too, light is the medium of optical desire. The subject is not simply the point of convergence of light from an object, as in linear perspective. Rather the subject is also mapped by the light that emanates from the point of the gaze. "The essence of the relation between appearance and being [...] is not in the straight line [of linear perspective], but in the point of light—the point of irradiation, the play of light, fire, the source from which reflections pour forth."⁹ And if the closely spaced, repetitive walls recall the ossuaries of Rossi's Cemetery of San Cataldo, the light they receive are reminiscent of a passage from Rossi's commentary on Étienne-Louis Boullée:

Is the light that creates shadows perhaps not the same light that consumes matter, giving us a more authentic picture of what artists wanted to offer us? For this, more than because it is personal and collective at



John Hejduk, Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought (elevation showing the Molino Stucky building to the right, Wall House 3 in the lagoon to the left, and the walls with holes for ashes in the center), 1975.

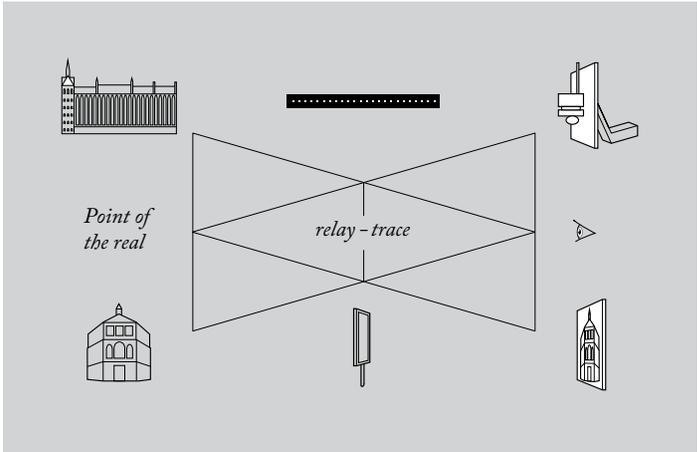
once, architecture is the most important of the arts and sciences, for its cycle is natural, like the cycle of man, but it is what remains of man.¹⁰

Ashes to ashes—the consumption of matter is primary in the Cemetery for Ashes of Thought, and sunlight (as much as fire) may be the force that has consumed the books. The lucent walls (“black on one side and white on the other”) are not surfaces for projection but mere shadow casters and scaffolds for the “holes at eye level” containing the ashes, presumably of disintegrated texts (Hejduk does not specify the origin of the ashes). From lines to light—as thought must be positioned in the symbolic (the names of the fathers engraved on plaques on the white-painted factory walls), so, too, is it necessary that thought’s absence be marked in the imaginary; a mark must exist in order for difference and sense to exist. The ashes, like Brunelleschi’s mirror, are the mark of difference, more original than the origin; but the ashes are not an entity or a unit, really, but a kind of materiality without matter, a *trace*—of light, of books, of thought itself.

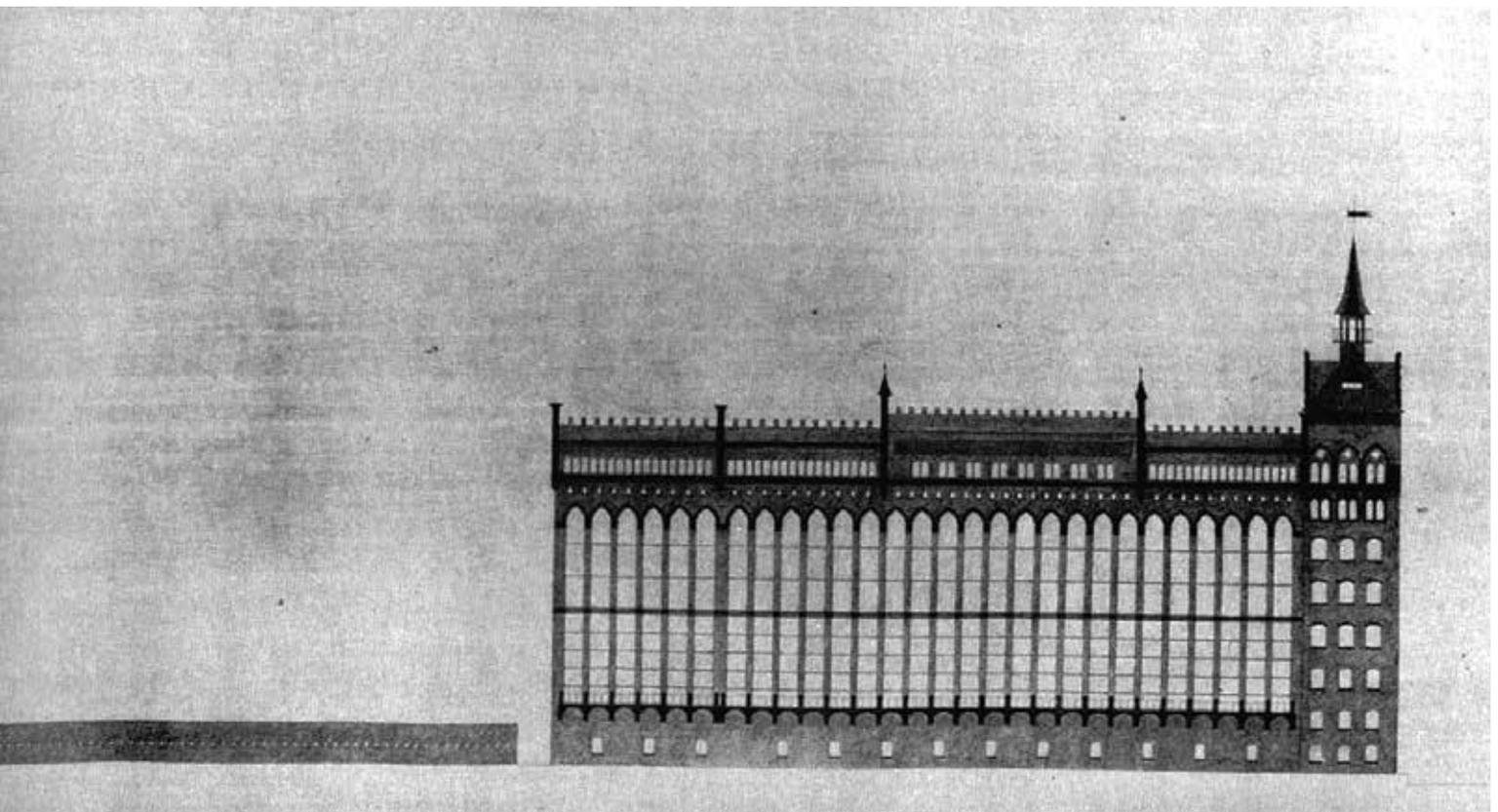
There is therefore a ratio of symbolic to imaginary that binds the projects of Brunelleschi and Hejduk: Venice’s Molino Stucky building relates to the Baptistery of San Giovanni in the same way that Hejduk’s array of walls with ashes relates to Brunelleschi’s constitutive mirror. The former are sites of the gaze, though each in a different way: the baptistery contains the position of the vanishing point, perspective’s Other from which the gaze is projected back to the viewer; in Molino Stucky, the spatialized names construct the symbolic gaze, opposite the imaginary eye of

the lone viewer in Wall House 3. Following Lacan’s diagram, the plane of the subject of representation—Brunelleschi’s painted panel, Hejduk’s Wall House 3—is at the geometral point. In the interval between the gaze and the viewpoint is the image-screen, the mechanism of relay, the function performed by Brunelleschi’s mirror and Hejduk’s field of ash-filled walls. A vertical surface of replication, a mirror or reduplicated wall, is the figure of the imaginary and the material support of both Brunelleschi’s phantasm and Hejduk’s ashes—*objets petit a*, the objects-cause of architectural desire.

The analogous distribution of the domains of the symbolic and the imaginary notwithstanding, as Hejduk



Modification of Lacan’s diagram of the gaze showing the analogous functions of Brunelleschi’s mirror and Hejduk’s ashes. Whereas Brunelleschi’s brackets established by the panel and the mirror exclude the real, Hejduk’s ashes are arche-traces of the real and of thought itself.



moves his common project with Brunelleschi away from architecture as a visual representation of thought in perspective (an embodiment or metaphor for thought), toward architecture as a real condition of thought, he also hints at a different relationship with the Lacanian real, beyond the symbolic and imaginary. The hint of the real (for the real can never be shown directly) has to do again with the ashes. The ashes are not the mere remains of the particular thoughts once manifest in books (if, in fact, they are ashes of books). As *trace*, the ashes mark the event of disinscription of the world and the condition of possibility for reinscription in the future. While the system of names establishes the symbolic structure of thought, the system of ashes points to the pre-symbolic real. But the ashes are not an origin, they are anterior to origins—they erase origins in favor of beginnings and performatives. Here, Jacques Derrida's concept of the trace is helpful, for it coincides (remarkably, productively) with Lacan's order of the real:

The trace is not only the disappearance of origin [...] it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme which would derive it from a presence or from an originary non-trace and which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace.¹¹

And later, "I would prefer something which is neither present nor absent: I would prefer *ashes* as the better paradigm for

what I call the trace—something which erases itself totally, radically, while presenting itself."¹² For Hejduk, the ashes are arche-thought, they create a place of possibility for thought—they are not an origin but the occulted origin of the origin, and therefore, they are situated in what Lacan designates as the real. The ashes trace the real—the real of language, of memory, of thought.

¹ "A 'history of perspective' has no meaning except as it relates to the movement, constitutive of the paradigm as such, that continuously prompts a return to its own origins, logical as well as historical, and perhaps even mythic. If there is any aspect of perspective that is worth examining yet again, it is this movement, always resumed and always resumable, because always obstructed and of necessity destined to failure, there being no origin save one that is an *invention*, in all senses of the word." Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 47. For Damisch, the perspective system preexists any actual use of it; therefore the issue of its origin becomes problematic.

² The event I am thinking of here is Martin Heidegger's *das Aufstellen einer Welt* ("to set up a world"), an erecting or placing of a world meant in an ontological sense, not a factual or ontic one. See Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 22.

³ See Carlo Ripa di Meana and Christian Boltanski, et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky: environmedia, partecipazioni libere (A Propos of Molino Stucky: Environmedia, Free Contributions)* (Venice: Alferi, 1975), 5.

⁴ John Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa*, ed. Kim Shkaphich (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁶ Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 127.

⁷ Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa*, 83.

⁸ "What I am doing is I am the questionnaire upon the question. I am the interrogation upon the interrogator. So when Rossi and all those things in Europe are going on, the totalitarian stuff which has to do with deep political and social meanings, then I answer it with the Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought. People did see that, but baby, nobody talks about that project. The Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought was one man's confrontation with that whole European condition." *Ibid.*, 130.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, "The Line and the Light," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 94.

¹⁰ Aldo Rossi, "Introduzione a Boullée," in *Scritti scelti sull'architettura e la città 1956-1972* (Milan: Città Studi, 1991), 360; my translation. Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought is, *inter alia*, a direct response to Rossi's project for the Cemetery of San Cataldo, which Hejduk first saw at an exhibition in Zurich in 1973.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 61.

¹² Jacques Derrida, "On Reading Heidegger: An Outline of Remarks to the Essex Colloquium," *Research in Phenomenology* 17 (1987): 177.

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