

# Random and Provisional Notes on Drawing

Franco Purini

“Writing for me is drawing, joining up the lines in such a way that they become writing, or unjoining them in such a way that writing becomes drawing.” [Jean Cocteau]

In 1953, Maurizio Sacripanti published a book with not many pages, entitled *Il disegno puro e il disegno nell'architettura* (Pure Drawing and Architectural Drawing) which until a few decades ago, for the quality of its argumentations and for its clear and flowing writing, would be defined as “golden.” The Roman architect, who a few years later gained national and international fame with the competition project for the *Peugeot Skyscraper* in Buenos Aires, with its surprising innovative energy materialized in the invention of an extraordinary communicative machine, distinguished architectural drawing from that of painters and sculptors. The author of that book

certainly did not consider architectural drawing *impure*, but the distinction proposed meant that he considered it to be a non-autonomous tool, since its role was to display the elements of a building in their relationship with the whole. In the art of construction, however, limiting drawing to the mere illustration of design solutions is not possible, as is shown, in a positive contradiction, by the drawings produced by Maurizio Sacripanti's studio in which (and here I allow myself an autobiographical note) I worked for a few years when I was a student. For this reason, architectural drawing is *also* a tool, but first of all it is the space in which the idea of architecture reveals itself to its author and to those who will frequent the architecture that the drawing defines. Drawing makes us discover not only what appears to our eyes, but at the same time reveals to us what is unknown, indefinite, transitory.

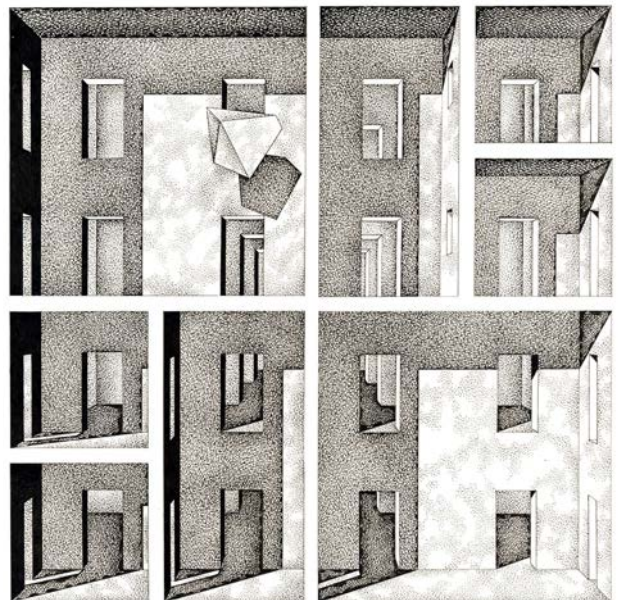
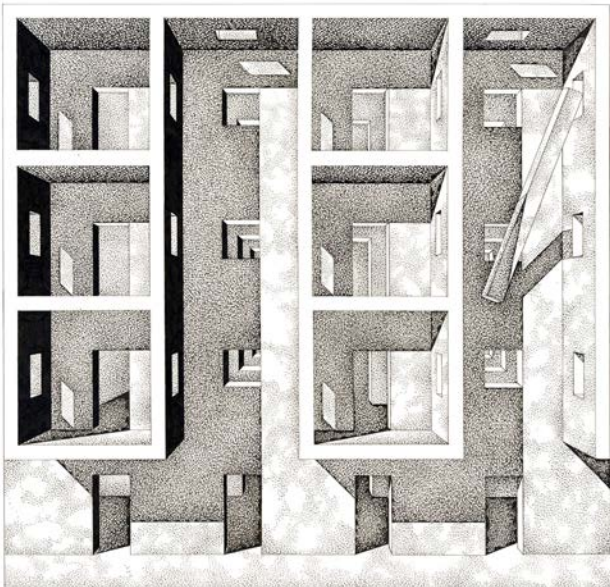
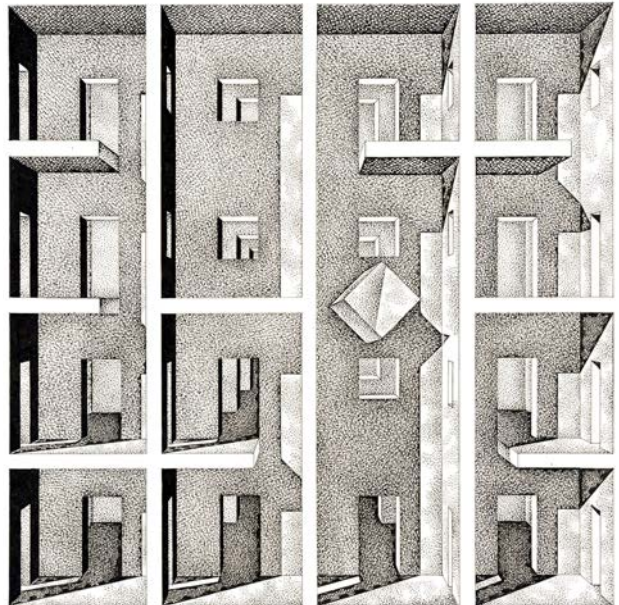
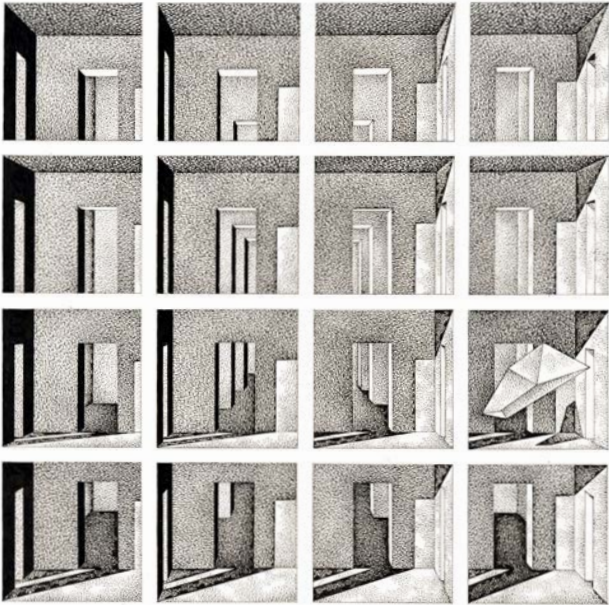
*Articolo a invito per inquadramento del tema del focus, non sottoposto a revisione anonima, pubblicato con responsabilità della direzione.*

Continuing this premise, architectural drawing has for me an evident artistic dimension, which takes on different gradations according to the type of graphic expression. This dimension is greatest in the impressions from real life, translated into extraordinary images, of Le Corbusier; of Louis Khan, in particular the drawings made with wax crayons including a few masterpieces regarding the Acropolis of Athens; of John Ruskin, especially the studies of the Gothic capitals of the Doge's Palace in Venice. The same artistic intensity characterizes the famous sketches by Erich Mendelsohn, with their enthralling spatial dynamics; by Álvaro Siza, with their rapid and concise strokes; by Giovanni Michelucci, poetic, neo-expressionist tangled lines. In project documents, such as plans, sections, details, the artistic content is moderate, increasing with the perspective or axonometric views, recalling, in this case, those of Alberto Sartoris. The value of architectural drawings as works of art again reaches its maximum level with *theoretical drawings*, that is, those visions that propose new thematic dimensions nourished by various forms of utopias and by an idealizing intent, as in the tables of Antonio Sant'Elia. To avoid interpretative misunderstandings, it should be made clear that theoretical drawing cannot be didactic or simply narrative. It is always complex, hermetic, rational but at the same time imaginary, at times including irrational elements, in other cases stratified in several thematic, even contrasting, levels. *Drawn architecture*, as it has been called since the 1970s, which in my opinion is only this last graphic exercise among those I have mentioned, is thus a *scientific* and at the same time *poetic* drawing, a drawing that tends towards a formal absoluteness associated with the logicity of a theorem. Finally, it cannot be forgotten that even surveys, as is made evident in Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of Imola and other territories, or in Palladio's studies of Roman baths, can produce drawings of considerable expressive intensity.

Drawing is an activity indispensable for understanding the world, for remembering and transforming it. If this awareness is widespread among painters, sculptors, architects and more generally among those working in the vast field of the visual arts, it is not equally shared, as instead it should be, by intellectuals and, in general, in every other sector of society, even though there are many people at every cultural level who love drawing as a complementary practice to the one chosen as primary. Many think that a photograph or a description in words is sufficient to allow us to understand the morphology of the elements comprising the scenario of our existence, from landscapes to everyday objects, from

cities and buildings, from the whole environment to its single details, while, in fact, a photographic image is not sufficient for getting a fairly accurate idea of reality. To know what a tree is, there is no other way than to draw it, discovering its architecture, that is, how the trunk is anchored by its roots, how branches grow from it, how a leaf is structured, in short, how the tree configures itself as an entity in which all the parts constitute a unitary organism. The same can be done for a rock, for water, recalling Leonardo's studies, for a mountain, as in the famous drawings of Mont Blanc by Eugene Viollet-Le Duc or for the Moon, which Galileo Galilei represented in extraordinary watercolors, reproduced by Ludovico Cardi, known as Il Cigoli, in the Pauline Chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Even the construction of a building is better understood if someone has drawn it at an intermediate stage of its realization. In fact, one would not be able to grasp the surprising coincidence between the ruins of the Roman baths and St. Peter's Basilica in construction without the extraordinary drawings from life by Maerten Van Heemskerck, just as, in reverse, we are able to prefigure the condition of a building in ruin, as in the representation of the Bank of England designed Sir John Soane in the drawing by his collaborator Joseph Michel Gandy and in the graphic description of the reinforced concrete skeleton of August Perret's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, a conceptual ruin that clarifies the relationship in that work between tectonics and architecture.

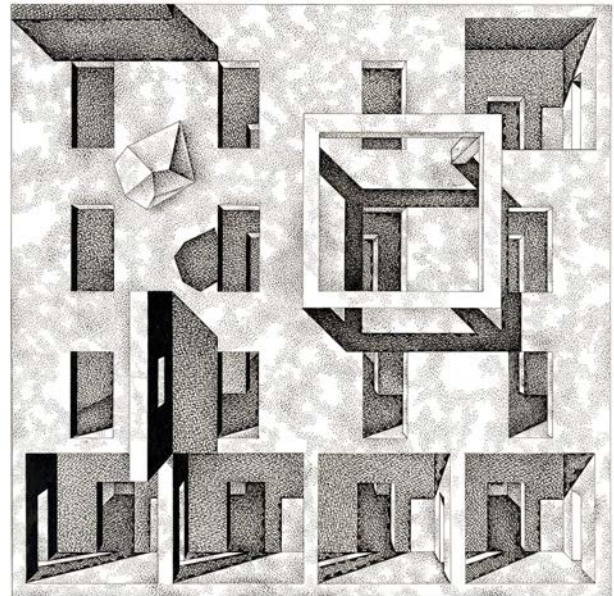
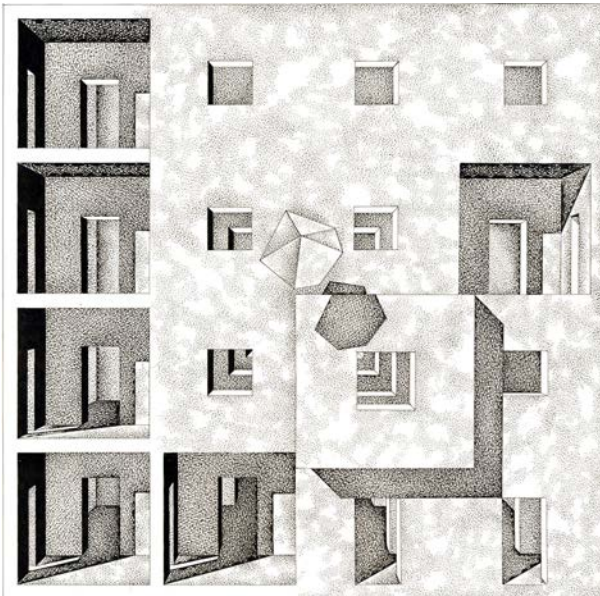
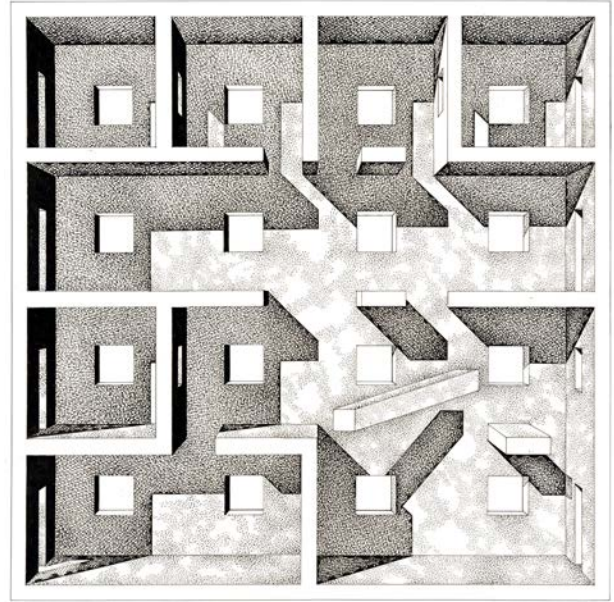
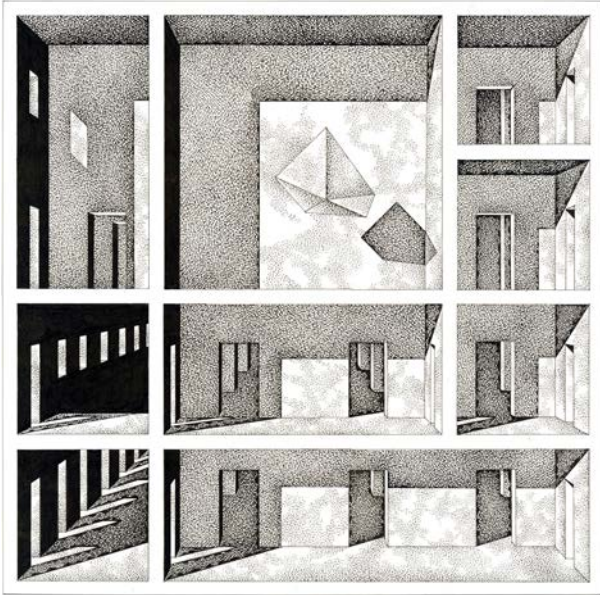
After these introductory considerations, to which I add the original coincidence of drawing and writing, as well as the propitiatory, mnemonic and nominal sense of drawing, which designates things, and in a certain sense *creates* them, I believe it is necessary to clarify what the areas of drawing are in their broadest sense. Drawing regards what exists, but also what does not exist but could exist. Furthermore, one can draw what has never existed and could never exist. Finally, one can also represent what exists by projecting it into the future. The imagery of each one of us originates from our becoming aware of the world, of its concreteness, on which to graft an inventive work that transports and transforms the real world into a metamorphic, evolutionary, erratic domain between different temporalities. Through drawing, this imagery, as is the case for us architects, is polarized in complex thematic nuclei, giving life to a *labyrinth* in which the paths overlap and intertwine in knots that are often difficult or impossible to unravel. Proceeding in this rapid excursus into the theme of drawing, the dimension of time



appears in three ways. The first is the time in which a drawing is thought out and realized, a time that always leaves traces that allow us to relive it. Moreover, there is the time that was necessary to conceive and execute a graphic work, from a landscape study to a perspective section, an objective time that goes from the instant of a sketch to whole days for a complex perspective view, but a time experienced subjectively by the author of the drawing, who can consider it either long or short. Moreover, the time of a drawing is the time necessary for the observer to read it. Another one is the time represented in the graphic composition, which can be the past, the present or the future, as in the famous table by Joseph Michel Gandy mentioned earlier. Finally, circulating in every drawing of any age, is the estranged and unreal time of dreams mixed with the functional time of doing.

For an architect, drawing is the true *seeing*, that is to say, the knowing how to decipher the world by going beyond the more accidental *looking*, that is, simple observation, and the assimilation in one's memory of what the eyes have elaborated, going beyond these functions to reach the intuition of the formative laws that organize the world itself, conferring identity to its whole and to its parts, allowing, at the same time, to preserve in the mind, through an appropriate codification, what has been acquired. In this *seeing*, analytical capacity is associated with the synthetic capacity by which things achieve a clear and lasting status. This interpretation takes form as our identifying with the elements of the world and at the same time in our detaching ourselves from them by placing an adequate critical distance between them and what has been the object of our vision. In fact, identification proceeds from the senses and, subsequently, from the intellect and the spirit, but all this would be abstract without an action of *detachment*—the critical distance just mentioned—which allows us to evaluate the visible with greater objectivity without involving emotion and producing transcendences. Realism and metaphysics must therefore come together to make seeing more profound and operative. To identification and detachment, we must then add the tendency toward an evolutionary, and therefore positively unstable, conception of reality. Moreover, drawing must be able, obviously in different ways depending on who is practicing it, to suggest the finite and the infinite, that is to say, the finite essence of things and their sharing an unlimited range of meanings, morphological parallels, and dimensional comparisons.

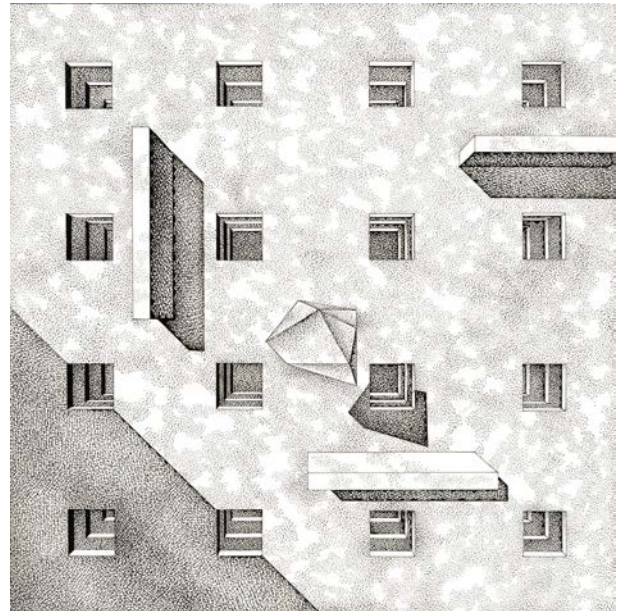
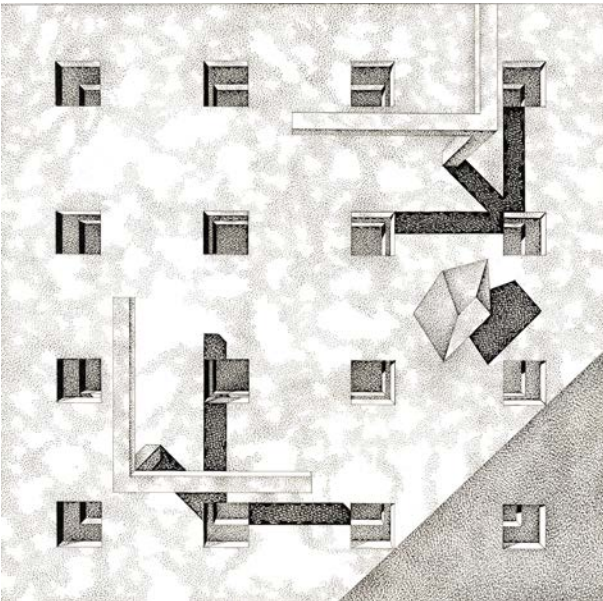
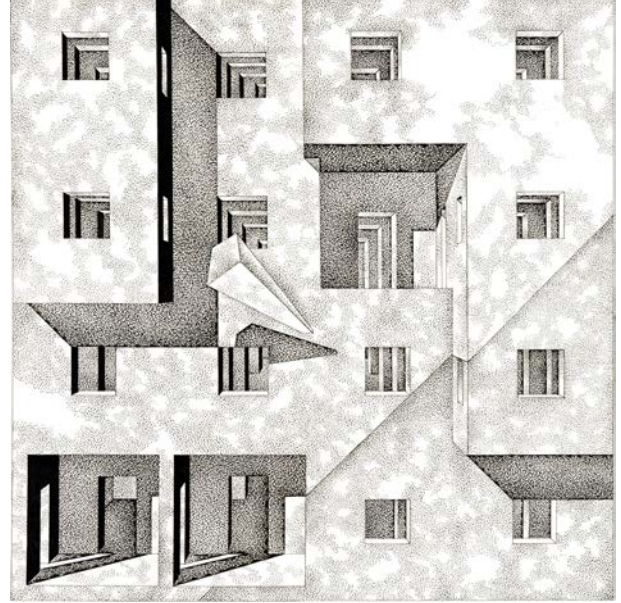
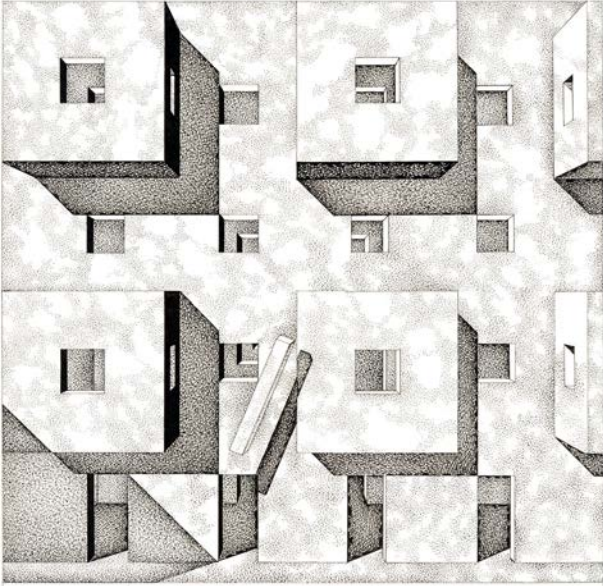
A free-hand drawing finds in the stroke the unrepeatable identity of the person who has drawn it. This stroke is in fact *unique*. It may resemble similar strokes but cannot be equal to another. In short, every drawing is made of totally autographic strokes. There is a signature even in digital drawing, which can coincide with the hand-drawn one if you use a pen with a graphics tablet, but in the best cases, in which you do not want to adopt an overly homologated language, it is usually the result of evident "personal intuitions" that lead to a recognizable style. In it, however, you will never find the *energy of the hand*, that way of giving cognitive-artistic qualities to a stroke that is inimitable. A quality that is always the result of an *obsession*, that is, a constant tendency towards an end within an anxiety made up of certainties and doubts, of decisive decisions and prolonged hesitations, of accelerations and decelerations, of surenesses and second thoughts during the realization of an artwork. Obsession must undoubtedly be experienced, with all that it entails, but it must also be controlled, kept at bay, so to speak, otherwise what it produces can be confused, unclear, random or repetitive. In the stroke, finally, there is always magic and mystery, because there is something in it that is unknown even to whoever draws it. Sometimes the stroke is actually faster than our thoughts and for this reason it seems to be drawn by our *double*. This provokes a certain bewilderment in us as well as a persistent sense of alienation, as though we were seeing the drawn stroke in its reality for the first time. It should also be kept in mind that those who draw do so within a *historicity of drawing* materialized in a series of conventions that must be accepted if what has been done is to be understood. At the same time, however, it is also necessary that the draftsman has created his own precise and unmistakable graphic language, often the result of inventions that can be extreme. Hence the contradiction between making oneself understood and the singularity, even hermetic, of a personal graphic lexicon. In this regard, studying Giovanni Battista Piranesi's engravings can teach us much about the way in which one can approach this conflictual duality. His figurative, fantastic, excessive, transgressive, extreme world is immediately identifiable through the modes of perspective representation, but this mode representative of space is troubled by a poetic sense of disproportion, by a multiple light, by a perturbing vein of tragicity. The form, the dynamic unity of the form and of its components, the measure of the form, its structure, its explicit and implicit meaning are the contexts in which drawing acts as a place revelatory of the real or the imaginary world, or as a plan for transformation, or both.

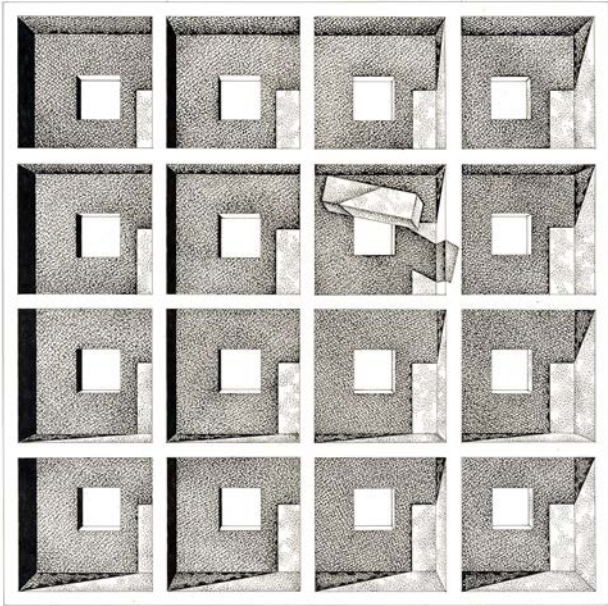


In free-hand drawing, coordination between the mind and the hand is simultaneous and creative, as Henry Focillon recalls, while in digital drawing, this synchronicity is absent. In this, the stroke does not exist, while there is a range of autographic spaces regarding the way the framing, the viewpoint, the colors, the shadows, the iconic tonalities are chosen. The lack of the absolute singularity of the stroke cannot be compensated for by the complex and certainly identifiable character of a computer drawing, despite the indications of William J. Mitchell. This absence, in other words, does not find an alternative in the subjective use of the codes of digital representation, but remains suspended in the architecture, like a question that has no answer. It should be added that coordination between the mind and the hand translates into an existential continuity that gives the creative process its own remarkable naturalness as a tangible expression of a necessity of life, that of seeing the world in its possible transformations in harmony with the contemporary *seeing* in its concrete and ideal aspects.

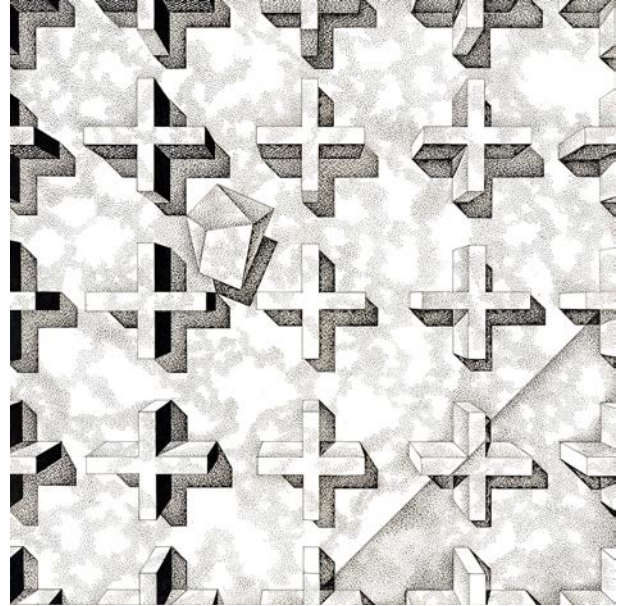
It is my opinion that in its realization, a drawing encounters a number of oppositions. Among these I believe that the main ones are those of staticity and dynamism, order and disorder; uniqueness and multiplicity, brightness and darkness, analyticity and conciseness, simplicity and complexity, wholeness and fragmentation, openness and closure, completeness and incompleteness. In reality, these oppositions do not exclude one another. They end up, in fact, by integrating themselves into the drawing, producing a constellation of contradictory duplicities that reflect and represent those that we encounter in our existence. Also in this case, the problem of how to govern the co-presence of different tonalities in the same *graphic discourse* arises. It must, in fact, be controlled, as we must do with obsession, in order to give a logical consequence to what is intrinsically illogical. It must also be recognized that the oppositions listed are found in the cosmos, as well as in the microcosm, in our planet as well as in its parts, even in our own thoughts, divided throughout the trajectory of our entire lives between the idea of immortality and that of immanent transience. Every drawing, whatever its quality, is the story of the mysterious coexistence of the contradictions evoked, and of many more. It is a testimony that each draftsman leaves of his vision of the world, of his character; of his imagery, of his ambitions, of his successes. If architecture, according to Edoardo Persico, is the "substance of things hoped for," this substance is announced by the drawing that will then accompany it on its arduous journey until this hope is fulfilled.

I would like to conclude these notes with a wish consisting of thinking that in the near future free-hand and digital drawing will reach a profitable and lasting alliance. An alliance that today I cannot predict either in its outcomes or in its modalities, but by means of which I am convinced that in respecting the two areas of graphic thought, manual and digital, more moments of theoretical convergence and operational coexistence can be found. The simultaneity between mind and hand, preceded by the irreplaceable interpretative potential of drawing from real life, which in my opinion needs to be reintroduced into our faculties as soon as possible, will continue to illuminate the architect's creative path from the point of view of the infinite availability of data that the virtual universe can suggest, together with its surprising aptitude in making the real seem truer; of revealing an architectural work to us in its hyper-realistic appearance. Obviously the conception of Giorgio Vasari, founder in 1563 of the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno, a theorist of drawing as the very foundation of the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, a conception later taken up by Federico Zuccari, to whom we owe the institution thirty years later of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, has over time been misconstrued, opposed, misunderstood. All this following the Romantic revolution, the emergencies produced by the industrial revolution and the theoretical activity of Walter Gropius. In the Bauhaus, founded a century ago, there was a conflict between two opposing concepts, Gropiusian materialism, realized in *functionalism*, and the spiritualism of artists such as Paul Klee, Joannes Itten, Joseph Albers. Functionalism disregarded the expressive values of construction to the advantage of its performance aspects and its social role. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day, the conception of architecture as "art," in fact, has been explicitly reduced, if not actually abandoned, in favor of the primacy of technique and function. In a sort of rapid *laicization*, architecture has lost much of its content and its main purpose, that of expressing in its full breadth the sense of habitation, a purpose replaced by the celebration of its more practical, constructive, utilitarian and environmental aspects. Technique has become *technology*, becoming an end and no longer a tool, functionalism has marginalized the Vitruvian *venustas*, the memory of the architecture of the past has been set aside, places have been abandoned giving rise to a general "atopy" and *non-places*. The artistic value of architecture has been nearly eliminated, translating it into the mediatic efficiency of the image, as well as the incorporation into the image of figura-





Franco Purini, Drawings from the series "Esercizi di claustrofobia", 2018.



tive art solutions, forgetting that the aesthetic dimension of construction is recognized in establishing a necessary, coherent and deep connection between the building and its context, in taking into account and expressing the relationships between space and structure, in transforming the relationship between the visibility of the building and its ability to blend harmoniously with the built environment of cities in an expressive theme. All this while at the same time refraining from imposing the formal identity of architecture, without clamor; but making it emerge with admirable measure, as in the works of Palladio.

I have no doubt that, despite this eclipse of the true beauty of architecture, drawing, which is its generating expression, cannot be considered obsolete or secondary. As instead it is in the opinion of some architects, among them the great Bruno Zevi, contradictorily an enthusiastic

advocate of *visual design*, the same thing as drawing in the Anglo-Saxon context. It should be our task to recognize this persistence but at the same time redefine the role of drawing in the arts, especially in our profession. Drawing is knowledge, invention, energy, revelation and affirmation of beauty, as well as *the truest essence of seeing*. In short, drawing is none other than "the life of forms," to paraphrase the title of a book by the great French essayist Henri Focillon, who has already appeared in these notes. Drawing is the outcome of a human aptitude that originates as an intellectual, artistic, and spiritual entity through which one acquires the awareness of being part of a world whose vision always coincides, for each individual, with the desire to bring it ever closer to us, to recognize it more and more as the reason and the essence of our human condition.

#### Author

Franco Purini, Sapienza University of Roma, franco.purini@virgilio.it