

Review: Sofie De Caigny, Hülya Ertas, Bie Plevoets (eds.), As Found. Experiments in Preservation

Original

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#14 Spring 2024

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Cover image

The sundial on the Governor's Palace in Parma, designed by Lorenzo Ferrari (1829).
Graphic design by Manuela Raitano and Pavel Kuznetsov.

Ardeth #14

contents

- 5 **Note from the Director**
Ilaria Valente
- 11 **Timing, Spacing, Architecting**
The Editorial Board of "Ardeth"
- 27 **Taking Time for a Dialogue About Time**
Manuela Raitano, Pavel Kuznetsov
- 45 **Museum/Bówùguān. A Conversation with Liu Jiakun about Time Issues in Architecture in China**
Edited by Maurizio Meriggi
- 59 **Between Time and Style. A Conversation with Alice Roegholt on the Het Schip Museum and the "Courage to Look Forward"**
Edited by Francesca Frassoldati, Elena Guidetti
- 67 **Persistenza e vulnerabilità. Gli strati contemporanei nel patrimonio architettonico**
Camila Burgos Vargas
- 85 **Oltre la dicotomia tra autenticità e riproducibilità. Quali prospettive per i luoghi dell'eterotopia?**
Daniele Dabbene
- 107 **Behind That Locked Door: Archives Between Hoarding and Surveillance**
Filippo Balma
- 119 **Temporal-spatial Paradigms in Chinese Domestic Architecture**
Monica Naso, Michele Bonino
- 137 **The Pace of Change: The Diverging Development of Tossi's Built Environment and Living Community**
Trias Mahendarto
- 153 **Futures Digging Up Present: Towards the New General Regulatory Plan of Turin**
Valerio Della Scala
- 169 **Reading Mutations: An Urban Diagram of Time**
Rossella Gugliotta
- 179 **L'ombra come processo sottrattivo**
Antonello Marotta
- 191 **Ti con zero. La vita oltre la vita: catastilosi di una struttura modulare aperta**
Federica Morgia
- 207 **Reviews**
- Wim Wenders, Anselm - Das Rauschen der Zeit*
Alessandra Lancellotti
- Sofie De Caigny, Hülya Ertas, Bie Plevoets (eds.), As Found. Experiments in Preservation*
Paolo Bianco
- Paola Viganò, Il Giardino Biopolitico*
Zoé Marraffa
- Domenico Palombi, I Fori prima dei Fori. Storia urbana dei quartieri di Roma antica cancellati per la realizzazione dei Fori imperiali*
Cecilia Visconti

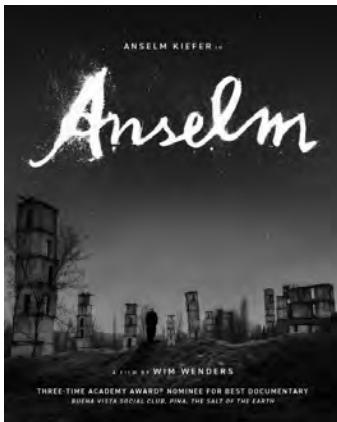
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Alessandra Lancellotti

Politecnico di Torino

Wim Wenders, *Anselm - Das Rauschen der Zeit*, Germany, 93' – 2023



In 1949, Theodor W. Adorno stated that after Auschwitz, no poetry, no art form, no creative statement was possible anymore. How can beauty be conceived after the fall of Hitler and the discovery of the massacres committed? In the tabula rasa in which the country lies after the war, in the land of great men of culture, but also the wretched home of Nazism, the fate of art becomes a central theme for German artists: this is the fate of the poet Paul Celan and the painter Anselm Kiefer.

Wim Wenders' documentary *Anselm* is dedicated to the civil commitment of Kiefer's work. The film was presented in 2023 at the Cannes Film Festival as a special screening, in the same edition in which Wenders also presented his fiction film *Perfect Days* in the main competition.

Anselm presents itself as a sensory journey to the places of Kiefer's artistic production and exhibitions, going all the way back to his childhood,

which took place in the ruins of World War II. The burden of time in the 20th century, the historical memory – individual and collective memory – are at the heart of Kiefer's work and Wenders' film.

Both Wenders and Kiefer were born in 1945, the year in which Celan wrote *Todesfuge*, the lyric that became the tragic symbol of the Holocaust. Celan is remembered as the Jewish poet who escaped extermination and was haunted by grief to the point of committing suicide at the age of 50. Twenty-five years after him, the young Kiefer ideally continues Celan's work and investigates with the figurative arts the dimension of pain, anger and the memory of the crimes committed by the fathers. Kiefer's work aspires to the poetic elaboration of grief initiated by Celan, confronting itself with the different mediums/media of the figurative arts.

From the 1960s, Kiefer began a series of artistic actions that he would call *Besetzungen* (occupations): photo-paintings in which Kiefer himself provocatively portrays a Nazi in military uniform and with his arm raised, in places that have historical significance for him. This personal revision of the Hitler period is for Kiefer the entrance to the abyss of history, a plunge into the chasm of Nazi horror and the assumption of the burden of post-war silence.

The work is a denunciation of the collective removal of the darkest chapter of the 20th century for the Germans. However, the publication of the photographs sparked significant controversy among artists and critics, ultimately leading to the closure of *Interfunktionen*. The journal had been founded in 1968 by Friedrich Heubach and, by 1975, was under the direction of art critic and historian Benjamin Buchloh, who decided to terminate its publication precisely when issue no. 12 provoked a scandal. The polemical debate is reconstructed in: Christine Mehring, *Continental Schrift: The Story of Interfunktionen*, "Artforum", vol. 42, n. 9, 2004, p. 179.

In the 1980s, Kiefer approached the monumental dimension: the work began to go beyond the two dimensions, moved out of the walls and began to invade space.

The climax of his research is represented by monumental works on an architectural scale, which he develops in his huge studios in France. The

latter are structures that incorporate the landscape and in which architecture, canvases and statues, created by the artist in the company of a large group of craftsmen, live. The three-dimensional effect that can be experienced when walking through these atelier-parks is conveyed by Wenders with the most technologically advanced expedient known to cinema: 3D. The director returns to use a technique he had already experimented with in *Pina* (2011), which has been perfected thanks to technological advances, more than a decade later. The use of 3D is not just a matter of aesthetics, but a functional choice to immerse the viewer in the space and allow him to approach Kiefer's work in an intimate way, as if invited to touch his works, to feel the physical density and the architectural emptiness of some of his works. The images are never just visual, but tactile: there are shots that almost make one feel the weight of the materials Kiefer uses (lead, wood, ash), and others that emphasise the vastness of the spaces. The spectacular character of the crossing is strongest when the spectators approach the many towers made of concrete and lead. It is impossible not to think of Celan's verse "ein Grab in den Wolken" (a grave in the clouds), which composes the poem *Todesfuge*. The most famous installation featuring these towers is the one made in Italy in 2004, as a permanent site-specific installation at the Hangar Bicocca in Milan. This work, titled *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, consists of towers that each weigh 90 tonnes and reach heights of up to 19 meters. Between the levels of these reinforced concrete towers, from floor to ceiling, are placed books and lead wedges that compress under the heavy load of the concrete. The work achieves several levels of symbolism. Firstly, lead holds significant alchemical value, as it is traditionally associated with melancholy. Secondly, the towers are the materialisation of the *Sefer Hechalot*, the *Book of Palaces/Sanctuaries*, dating back to the 5th-6th century AD. This text describes the symbolic journey of spiritual initiation for those seeking to draw closer to the presence of God. While the treatise aims to guide the Jewish people on their path to God, the towers themselves are in ruins, constructed of reinforced concrete that has been literally torn to shreds. These works represent a culmina-

tion of the artist's entire *oeuvre*, synthesizing his main themes in a new dimension outside of time. They explore the interpretation of ancient Jewish religion, depict the ruins of the West after the Second World War, and project visions into a possible future. The film allows for the coexistence of different time periods: the events following World War II, the collective consciousness that emerged in the second half of the 20th century, and the material and intangible legacy that persists into the new millennium. The protagonist's embodiment is also threefold: he exists as a man in the present, as an artist who conveys the suffering of his people, and as a child navigating through the devastation in a country that is being rebuilt. The film acts as a reflective interplay between Kiefer and Wenders, both witnesses to Germany's past and interpreters of its present.

Paolo Bianco
Politecnico di Torino
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As Found. Experiments in Preservation is the catalogue of the exhibition *As Found*, held at the *De Singel* art centre in Antwerp, from September 2023 to March 2024. Curated by Sofie De Caigny, Hülya Ertas and Bie Plevoets, the exhibition is part of a broader program initiated by the Flanders Architecture Institute to promote the built heritage as both a design and a cultural resource. In a context such as Flanders, characterized by high building density, the issue of reuse takes on multiple dimensions, not only as an answer to ecological and economic demands but also as a structured reflection on the identity of places and communities. The volume does more than document the exhibition: it delves into its theoretical framework and highlights the concept of the so-called "as found," a design approach that views architecture as a time machine, in which the various stages of a building's life can overlap or alternate instead of following a rigid chronological order. The volume structure mirrors the exhibition layout: seven exemplary projects in Flanders and Brussels, each associated with a key spatial term: *Ensemble, Void, Reconfigura-*

tion, Inside Out, Traces, Mirror, and Nuances. Each topic is complemented by a critical essay and a visual essay aimed at setting up a dialogue between the selected works and international examples drawn from different historical periods. This move broadens the discourse beyond the Flemish context and offers not only a transnational but also a diachronic view of reuse. Among the contributions, Jonathan Hill describes architecture as "the art of remembering and forgetting" (p. 44), emphasizing the fluid nature of voids and ruins. On the other hand, Sally Stone examines the concept of *spolia* (p. 62), understood as the practice of dismantling and reintroducing architectural fragments into new contexts, redefining their historical and cultural meanings. Koenraad Van Cleempoel argues the necessity of "embracing traces" (p. 101) from a design perspective, suggesting that each pre-existing element constitutes a narrative possibility rather than an obstacle. The seven key themes offer a flexible interpretative framework for classifying and, at the same time, interrelating very different interventions. For instance, the notion of *void* refers to an unfinished space that, according to Hill, presents an opportunity to reconsider the relationship among construction, ruin, and memory, prompting reflection on the temporality of an architectural work. Likewise, the idea of *inside out* underscores the tension between exterior and interior, reopening the debate on "façadism" (p. 82) and urban porosity. In the final section of the book, the curators include the transcript of a round table among various actors in preservation and reuse to explore the theoretical implications and operational challenges of intervening in existing buildings. From this discussion, it emerges how the authorship of the project is being reassessed, with the architect becoming an intermediary between what already exists and the community that uses it, and how, today, almost every building could be considered heritage, and this broader outlook legitimises transformation interventions and encourages greater attention to the spirit of the place. In the book, built heritage is not a static entity but a continuously evolving palimpsest, onto which contemporary interventions layer additional meanings. The volume highlights the growing importance of an attitude

that rejects the *tabula rasa* in favour of a “reservoir of possibilities” (p. 103) that places inherited traces at the centre. This paradigm stands out in the present, shaped by post-industrial and postmodern challenges, in which the concept of *tabula scripta* (p. 103), a written tablet perpetually open to modifications, takes precedence over the idea of a newly built space, disconnected from temporal stratifications. The publication positions itself within the interdisciplinary debate on transforming the built heritage, showing how reuse and adaptation projects can provide strategic responses to contemporary challenges. The book highlights operational models capable of unlocking the potential of existing structures, from resource reuse to the construction of a collective identity to the coexistence of multiple temporal layers. This focus on historical stratification finds a key reference in the un-dialogue between John Ruskin, who celebrated the narrative potential of the existing building through the aesthetics of ruin and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, promoter of interpretive restoration. The book underscores the need to regard every intervention as an act that reshapes a place’s memory and reconfigures its prospects: preservation thus moves beyond static protection to become a design approach capable of fostering urban diversity and enhancing quality of life. It also recalls that, already in the 1960s, Jane Jacobs stressed the importance of functional and temporal diversity in buildings, and that, a few decades later, Richard Sennett argued the most livable and sustainable cities are those that can be continuously “repaired.” As further evidence that the *as found* paradigm resurfaces repeatedly in design history, Koenraad Van Clempoel’s contribution offers a brief yet incisive survey of its best-known post-war forms. The discussion opens with the concept of *weiterbauen* (p. 101), literally “building in continuity,” which urges architects to carry the work forward from the point where the past broke off, engaging in a critical dialogue that adds new layers of meaning. Along this trajectory is positioned Hans Döllgast’s *schöpferische wiederherstellung*, which treats restoration as an act of invention, Carlo Scarpa’s *restauro critico*, which transforms the building site into a laboratory where different epochs confront one another and Lina Bo

Bardi’s *historical present*, which regards heritage as living matter. Threading through these positions is Colin Rowe’s insight, expressed in a letter to Louis Kahn, that “architecture is an organism that grows over time.” In this discussion, the Flemish case becomes a privileged viewpoint for understanding the role of time in architecture: past, present, and future coexist in a continuum, rendering every design action an exercise in careful negotiation. *As Found. Experiments in Preservation* offers a multifaceted set of perspectives in which historians, theorists and designers contribute to constructing a debate on experimental reuse. The key projects and international case studies are valuable research tools for understanding the role of time, memory, and transformation in architectural practice. Accordingly, *As found* becomes an operational and theoretical paradigm of great importance, revealing how heritage can become a living and generative resource for shaping the present and looking toward the future.

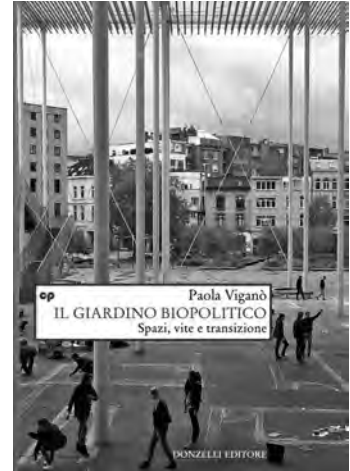
Zoé Marraffa

Politecnico di Torino

Paola Viganò, *Il Giardino*

biopolitico. Spazi, vite e transizione, Donzelli, 2023, 272 pp.

Paperback € 35,00 – ISBN 978-88-5522-478-9



In an urgent moment of ecological transition, where life is captured and separated into *bios* and *zoé*, how can architects and urban planners restore in the project a united form of life which is not merely object but acting subject? In a transversal inquiry which spaces through architectural theory, urbanism, and political philosophy, a necessity to consider the emancipatory potentialities of biopolitics emerges. Thus, the biopolitical garden as a space of resistance, experimentation, and transformation is proposed as the new axiom for designers to structure projects where even the notion of space is infused with life and agency. *Il Giardino Biopolitico* by Paola Viganò places this question at the core of a profound reflection on public space. Speaking of space in relation to the deep crisis of the urban and of urbanization already implies a critical stance – a stance that reclaims the role of space in building new relations between life and power. These two dimensions – life and power – form the conceptual backbone of the book, which offers a powerful and original lens through which to reconsider the relationship between spatial design and the living.

Looking back at modern and early modern architectural theories and practices, the “problem of space” is analyzed into three modes, each with its own conceptions of freedom, aesthetic, and continuity. Firstly, the “functional space,” where rationalism and the machine dominate; then, a “spazio natura” (p. 19) which explores nature as form of dwelling, as expressed by Aalto’s “forest town” Sunila; lastly, the “social space,” focused on integrated structures thought to support new forms of cohabitation proposed by projects such as New Babylon. These three categories represent a rupture with the nineteenth-century city and provide critical tools for understanding today’s urban crisis – not only in its material aspects but also in its social and ecological dimensions.

From this proposed archive, a common trait can be identified: space is not only the background against which power and life act, but it actively determines the conditions of possibility and emancipation of life; space “acts and reacts, [...] on life, on bodies, on emotions and relations, including those of power” (p. 102), therefore space is not only a passive element which enables or hinders certain practices, but is an active agent in processes of individuation and subjectivation.

In this context, the concept of positive biopolitics is introduced, following Roberto Esposito’s new, affirmative reading in contrast with Foucault’s disciplinary conception. The biopolitical project of space does not only protect life but determines the conditions for its emancipation; this theoretical moment is essential to understanding the book’s intent, which is that of overcoming a traditional practice of urban project as a simple response to material needs, in order to replace life - in all its forms - at its center.

Viganò then presents some of her recent projects and introduces the idea of biopolitical gardens (“giardino biopolitico”), accurately placing them into their geographical, economic, and social territories. Among the analyzed cases, Peterbos, with its morphological, topological and social challenges (one of the largest social housing estates in the Brussels-Capital Region), the decline of Appalachia (a geographical region located in the central and southern sections of the Appalachian Mountains in the eastern United States, related to coal mining and production), a soil project for Rennes.

All examples illustrate how the biopolitical garden, as a positive and active force, can translate concrete and innovative practices to transform space in a social and ecological way.

While the idea of garden is traditionally associated with ideas of care, and responsibility, thought of as a space to cultivate man “separating it accurately from that which is hurtful, to protect him his purity and safety” (p. 249), Viganò proposes a new meaning where “coexistence, ambivalence, ambiguity, heterogeneity, blendedness, constitute... the focus of a project of coexistence” (p. 249). Therefore, the biopolitical garden is the answer to two main questions, which arise from the heritage of modernity: which aspects of the urbanistic theory of the XX century can still be recovered? And how can the project urgent matters of the ecological and social transition? This project consists not only of a renewed attention to consuming and polluting, but it is also “a new reflection on existence, on the life we have in common, on the forms of life, and their agent spaces” (p. 253), and it is inevitably biopolitical. There is a substantial shift in perspective, according to which design becomes ontological, as Arturo Escobar states.

From a formal point of view, *Il giardino biopolitico* is not a simple theoretical essay, nor a portfolio of Viganò’s projects. It is structured in a way which reflects the complexity of the discussed themes, with a language which combines theoretical precision and graphic experimentation. Many pictures are included, from technical drawings to conceptual diagrams, which contribute to create an engaging atmosphere, in spite of the density of the contents.

In conclusion, *Il giardino biopolitico* offers an original and stimulating addition to the field of contemporary urban studies, proposing an innovative reading of public space where resistance and transformation take place. Through an approach which manages to weave theory and practice, Viganò invites the reader to rethink and reevaluate the role of open space in the project of cities of the future, placing it at the center of the strategies of ecological adaptation and transition. This book is addressed not only to urbanists, architects and researchers of social sciences, but also to whoever may be interested to explore new modes of interactions between space, nature and society.

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Domenico Palombi, *I Fori prima dei Fori. Storia urbana dei quartieri di Roma antica cancellati per la realizzazione dei Fori imperiali*, Espera Edizioni, 2016, 380 pp. Paperback: € 49,00 - ISBN 9788894158298



The semiotic power of the forensic squares and urban layering of ancient Rome is a heritage that is being renewed in the present. Following radical modern transformations – such as demolitions and excavations – reconstructing the forms and meanings of a part of the city like the Imperial Forums may seem daring. In his 2016 edited volume, *I Fori prima dei Fori. Storia urbana dei quartieri di Roma antica cancellati per la realizzazione dei Fori imperiali* (translated by the author as: “Forums before Forums. Urban history of the districts of ancient Rome erased for the construction of the Imperial Forums”), archaeologist and university educator Domenico Palombi attempts this reconstruction. He meticulously revisits the *symbolic capital* as well as the topographical layout, place names, monumental and infra-structural components, and urban stratification of the city’s districts that existed in this central civic sector, which were erased during the early imperial period to make way for the grand monumental expressions of the

Capital of the Empire. Palombi's reconstruction is a critical review of the historiographical path that traces the evolution of Rome. It begins with the archaic city, progresses through the city's reconstruction and infrastructural expansion during the Republican era, and culminates in the comprehensive redesign of the central area initiated by Emperor Augustus. Such a redesign stage is when the Forums became "the new stage of the imperial family" (p. 32).

The author employs a circumstantial-combinatorial method to compile a comprehensive collection of materials, both tangible and intangible. This includes archaeological remains, morphological studies, viable buildings, and monumental structures, as well as immaterial sources like toponymy, urban boundaries, social events and practices, and historical figures. Together, these elements reconstruct a cohesive image of the city, attributing not only formal characteristics but also aspects of its identity. For instance, the traditional depiction of Rome, spread across the seven hills, can be traced back to the antiquarian poetry of Varro. In his work *The Latin Language*, 5th book, Varro establishes the literary canon of the seven hills concerning the religious feast of Septimontium, framed within the context of the Four Servian Regions. Celebrated on December 11th by eight territorial communities, this event inspires the poet, who employs etymology to grant a territorial significance to the city. This symbolic interpretation is also ingrained in the topographical memory of Rome by Emperor Augustus, whose constitutional, political, and administrative reforms will lead to a comprehensive redesign of the *spatium Urbis*. This redesign is structured into XIV Regions, following the Pythagorean septenary scheme. Despite various interpretative perspectives, the referenced testimonies shape the framework of urban space and support the reliability of the data, ultimately becoming part of the "landscape" (p. 187).

The historical reconstruction of the urban and architectural reality of the *Forums before Forums* attempts to decode the polysemic and heterogeneous signs that populate this space and to establish the proper relationship between symbolic interpretation and reality. The historical sources, therefore, articulate the narrative

without forcibly aspiring to a definitive and programmatic reconstruction of the context; instead, they help the readers consider the limits of the interpretation of some partial or even occasional data of such a complex reality.

Why was the area of the Forums chosen as the site of the new monumental scenario of Rome? What motivations explain the long process of resemantization that invested this locus *extra moenia*?

Palombi traces the core of the urban transformation of the area in the identification of the Emperor with the urban space. The aim of the *Princeps*, shared by all subsequent emperors, was indeed to establish a privileged relationship between *Power and Urbs*, with the consequent displacement of the monumental setting according to the new places of power, and also of the mythical scenery. The lack of attractive and qualifying elements in the landscape of the Forums favoured the characterisation of the space with cultural and ideological contents linked to the regime. The Palatine, on the other hand, was given a symbolic function, anchored in the memory of Rome's origins and its founder Romulus, identifying the four cornerstones of the *Pomerium* in the *Forum Boarium*, the *Porta Capena*, the *Meta Sudans*, and the *Roman Forum*. Although the ease with which buildings' replacement began with Caesar may seem unusual, according to the author, the process of building the Forum must be understood in the literal sense of metamorphosis, without implying the oblivion of the memory of venerable places and events.

The raising of the Forums transformed the city's essential orographic, hydrographic, and infrastructural elements. Just think of the gutting of the "saddle between the Capitoline and the Quirinal hills" and the obliteration of the walls along the crest of the promontory, offset by the *piaculum* of Trajan's Column, or the gradual erasure of the Velia. Against the principles of the inviolability of the *res sacrae* and despite such levellings, the identity between some topographical signs and the toponymic structure of the city, between the street grid and the shape of the sewers conduits of the Republican age (*Cloaca Maxima*), remains a recurring principle in the text for the reconstruction of the urban landscape under consideration.

Some significant elements of the space have survived in the form of social, ritual, or aggregative practices; others populate the contemporary landscape through archaeological remains of extreme symbolic value. This is evidenced by the preservation of the preexisting religious landscape, rich in votive sites and ceremonies, including the cult of Vulcan, the god of metallurgy, to whom we owe the manufacture of the sacred trumpets used in the military and commemorated in *Tubilustrium*, the festival of the purification of trumpets and weapons dedicated to Mars. The warlike connotations of the liturgies held in the forensic squares, such as the cult of Mars in the Forum of Hadrian or the cult of Minerva in the Transitory Forum, confirm the permanence of an archaic tradition guardian of the city's history. Not only that, but five of the ten place names in the areas of Rome occupied by the Forums have survived and are "considered witnesses to the original character of the natural landscape" (p. 200), such as the axis of the *Argiletum*, whose name would derive from the nature of the clay soil.

In this slow operation of reconstruction, the research becomes a tale of destructive actions aimed at designing new writings through operational strategies of selection and renewal of tradition. According to the author, this process provided an opportunity to rewrite and hand down, even today, that dense "landscape of memory" (p. 199) that we call the Imperial Forums.

Graphics

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In the realm of hard sciences, time is seen as moving forward towards the future, providing a framework for navigating the entropy and disorder of systems. Time is seen subjectively in the humanities, as Bergson describes it in terms of recursive cycles exposed via sentient experience. From both angles, humanity is inevitably susceptible to time; either they die from entropic dispersion or depersonalizing repetition.

Much like science, myth reminds us that time ultimately devours life. But it also points to a possible escape: though Cronus eats his offspring, except for the youngest one, Zeus, who is saved by a stratagem “devised” by his mother Rhea – that is, replacing the baby with a stone. The image of the father suppressing the next generation is then replaced by the myth of the future emerging from the past, when all children are regurgitated by means of another of Zeus’ tricks. Thus, the myth implies that intellect (the trick) and intellectual works (the stones) can transcend time: if human beings cannot endure their extreme transience, they can endure the lesser transience of their “constructions” in time. Born to last either physically or as collective memory, the very essence of architecture engages in a (titanic) survival endeavour. Yet, in an era anchored to the myths of perennial youth, shall we also allow the right to be forgotten?

Contributions to #14:

Liu Jiajun
Maurizio Meriggi
Alice Roegholt
Camila Burgos Vargas
Daniele Dabbene
Filippo Balma
Monica Naso
Michele Boniño
Trias Mahendarto
Valerio Della Scala
Rossella Gugliotta
Antonello Marotta
Federica Morgia

Reviews:

Anselm - Das Rauschen der Zeit
a movie directed by Wim Wenders

As Found. Experiments in Preservation
a book edited by Sofie De Caigny, Hulya Ertaş, Bie Plevoets

Il Giardino Biopolitico
a book by Paola Viganò

*I Fori prima dei Fori. Storia urbana
dei quartieri di Roma antica cancellati
per la realizzazione dei Fori imperiali*
a book by Domenico Palombi