
Interior Design

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1.

The following short essay or collage can be considered an account of how *Ricostruzione: Disertori/Libera: Toward a Historical Fable on Psychology and Architecture*, the project that Claudia Honecker and I are contributing to Manifesta 7, came about. It may also be seen as an attempt to establish certain links between ‘The Diagnostic Modern’ – a long-term research project rehearsing various intersections of modernist culture and the history of psychology that I am currently pursuing – and the conceptual framework provided by Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg for ‘The Soul’, the Trento section of Manifesta 7.

Let us therefore compare the system of the unconscious to a large entrance hall, in which the mental impulses jostle one another like separate individuals. Adjoining this entrance hall there is a second, narrower, room – a kind of drawing room – in which consciousness, too, resides. But on the threshold between these two rooms a watchman performs his function: he examines the different mental impulses, acts as a censor, and will not admit them into the drawing room if they displease him.¹

These other studies of man were restricted to the inspection of the mere tents and houses in which the real men dwelt. The psychological study of man would use direct access to the residents themselves. Indeed, not until psychologists had found and turned the key, could the other students of human thought and behaviour hope to do more than batter vainly on locked doors.²

Though the concepts of ‘Soul’ and ‘Europe’ – which resonate with each other, especially in the environment of Trento (see Franke and Peleg’s introductory essay in the exhibition guidebook) – may not always be addressed straightforwardly, they nevertheless subsist as heuristic momentum beneath the following musings.

*The individual soul is a dynamic effect in the corporeal matter, in particular the encephalic.*³

Quite necessarily, responding to a curatorial exposé by means of a specific visual and theoretical research creates a bond that can be limiting as well as enabling. On the one hand, the implicit task of “fitting” into a conceptual framework, making an adequate or relevant contribution within the confines of specific curatorial parameters, has obvious heuristic advantages. On the other hand, as much as one may deviate from the original ideas and interests in the course of a project, the particular theoretical, political and aesthetical concerns of the commissioning body have been always already inscribed in the process, from its very inception.

In addition to these determining factors provided by a given curatorial conceit, the tacit admonition to specifically relate one’s contribution to the geographical and social site of an exhibition in the Biennial format such as Manifesta can play a crucial role in shaping an artistic commission which in this particular case is not even provided by individuals who would comfortably consider themselves to be professional artists (instead we could opt for “researchers” and/or “media workers”).

*With standards more or less formalized, more or less explicit, comfort serves to structure daily life, to ritualize conduct, especially the attitudes and postures of the body in relation to furniture and objects intended for domestic use. It may be noted that comfort expresses, better than any other cultural contrivance, the ‘techniques of the body’ appropriate to modern bourgeois society. [...] Comfort, giving emphasis to the sense of the pleasure of private life, ratifies the central position of home as the place for social activity and contributes to the formation and consolidation of the modern nuclear family.*⁴

The relationship of the research and the resulting “piece” to a variety of contexts, not least to the implicit demands of “context sensibility” and “site specificity” raises all kind of concerns. Hence, the decision to focus on two historical figures from Trentino, Beppino Disertori and Adalberto Libera, was informed as much by the wish to establish a relationship to the city of Trento, its history, social reality and architecture, as by a certain sense of obedience and dutifulness, ensued by the ideological interpellation of Manifesta and the art biennial system as such.

Eventually, however, historical curiosity and the sheer *jouissance* of formal research prevailed, if only to stabilize the imaginary stage on which we operate and to prevent the disintegration of the project resulting from seemingly “excessive” self-reflexivity and institutional criticality.

2.

The theoretical neurobiologist, sociopsychologist and philosopher Beppino Disertori (1907–1992) was not only a professed antifascist (and, after the war, the long-time head of the Trentino Red Cross), but also a rare breed of intellectual who surveyed vast, ‘interdisciplinary’ areas of knowledge. The architect Adalberto Libera (1903–1963) was a major participant in the *razionalismo* movement in Italian architecture of the 1930s and 1940s. Today, Libera’s work is well documented and has been the subject of numerous publications and exhibitions; nonetheless his fame outside the world of architectural historians probably rests mainly on the Casa Malaparte, the eccentric Capri villa belonging to fascist writer Curzio Malaparte, conceived and built by Libera under difficult circumstances in the late 1930s. (The villa features prominently in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Mépris* [1963].) Disertori, however, seems to be almost forgotten beyond Trentino, even among psychologists; his books are out of print and rather hard to find in libraries or secondhand. I came across his name for the first time in the German translation of Renato Curcio’s *A viso aperto*, a book-length interview with Mario Scialoja published in 1993 (one year after Disertori’s death). Curcio, one of the founders of the Red Brigades in 1970, recalls the lively seminars in sociopsychology that Disertori held at the university of Trento in the 1960s and that made a lasting impression on him.

Neither Disertori nor Libera, however, nor their ‘relation’ (which cannot be traced to any actual, personal encounters; to our knowledge, no historical or documentary evidence for such a relation exists) should become the subject of a biographical or scholarly treatment. From the beginning, our intention was to explore their lives and works with the central objective of creating trajectories between the various interests and issues that link the site of Manifesta 7, the curatorial project and our own theoretical and aesthetic preoccupations. In some sense, Disertori and Libera operate as avatars of our historical imagination, guides leading us through the thicket of the archive. Activating and recontextualising the biographies, writings and buildings of the two men also demanded a certain responsibility and tact. Though we have been granting ourselves license to use ar-

chival findings and historical knowledge freely and with a deliberate bent towards fictionalization, we likewise feel obliged not to distort any undisputed facts or forge new ones.

3.

One point of entry was the concept of interiority. As a spatial metaphor, it allows us to connect the topologies of architecture and the psyche. *The Sense of an Interior*, a book by queer theorist and literary critic Diana Fuss, became a major source of inspiration. Explaining her reasons for writing about four writers' (Emily Dickinson, Marcel Proust, Helen Keller and Sigmund Freud) sensual and psychic relations to the interiors of their homes, Fuss points out a characteristic blind spot or unwillingness among experts in architectural history and theory: 'Once a house is inhabited and its interior transformed by the detritus of everyday living, architectural scholars tend to lose interest in the life and activities of the dwelling, preferring to return to the less metaphoric and mutable ground of program and design'.⁵

This observation prompted a rush of ideas.

*[...] the most powerful obstacles to such an architectural reform as I have been suggesting are to be found in the psychology of the wage-earners themselves. However they may quarrel, people like the privacy of the 'home', and find in it a satisfaction to pride and possessiveness. [...] I believe that a private apartment with one's own furniture would suffice for people who were used to it. But it is always difficult to change intimate habits. The desire of women for independence, however, may lead gradually more and more to women earning their living outside the home, and this, in turn, may make such systems as we have been considering seem to them desirable. At present, feminism is still at an early stage of development among women of the wage-earning class, but it is likely to increase unless there is a Fascist reaction.*⁶

The project veered towards a methodology and a format that I tested for the first time on the occasion of an earlier curatorial project by Franke and Peleg at the Hebbel am Ufer theatre in Berlin. Like *Stumbling Block: The Spectacle of Aptitude* (2006), *Ricostruzione* is a short and elliptic video essay, mainly based on still images and a voiceover narrative.

4.

A collection of photographs, made by ourselves or drawn from books and archives, alongside scans of an assortment of various printed matter, form the basis for our short film that we present as part of an installation at the Trento venue of Manifesta 7. During the production and editing process, while the script was still developing, short clips taken from Italian neorealist movies found their way into the folders from which the “relevant” visual data were retrieved to be subsequently processed with Apple’s Final Cut Pro editing software.

Throughout a number of strategic and conceptual changes, the questions that Diana Fuss raises in her book on the interior remained pertinent to us. The ‘most critical bridge between the architectural and the psychological interior’, she claims, ‘is the human sensorium: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell [...] The senses allow the body to register exterior impressions and interiorize them’.⁷

The therapeutic ‘situation’ is a creative situation [...] And will one day be physiologically illuminated to show what happens between a patient in general and a therapist. The anticipation of being helped in a need or in an aspiration toward satisfaction is physiologically an analogous, probably an identical situation. An architect producing by proper means rapport with the clients’ aspirations and expressed or half-expressed need is actually acting very closely to the pattern of procedure of a psychiatrist. His analytical searchings and retrospections into infantile precedent, conditions, trauma lead to an understanding, supplementary to the empathy which so puzzlingly makes co-creativity an effective mutual attitude and a dynamic phenomenon of the most eminent social and cultural significance.⁸

In more than one aspect, this emphasis on the sensual and bodily constitution of interiority provided the connection to another figure who enters the film for a short moment while otherwise lingering in the backstage area: Richard J. Neutra, the U.S. architect of Austrian origin. Neutra moved to the United States in the 1920s to design and build a substantial number of predominantly private residences in California, and was one of the few architects and theoreticians of mid-century Modernism who explicitly dealt with the psychological and physiological dimensions of architecture. Sylvia Lavin, author of an insightful book on Neutra’s role in the ‘psychoanalytic culture’ of the postwar decades, identifies a reconfiguration of architectural thinking under the impact of contemporary ideas about affect,

psychology and neurology: ‘Reconceiving architecture as the production not of abstract space but of affective environments permitted the discipline to forge new if unorthodox forms of continuity. Thus the libidinal energy Neutra thought to exist equally in the human psyche and in the atmosphere could link architecture and mind through the zone of the window just as empathy could constitute a theoretical formulation in which aesthetic judgment and psychoanalytic technique found common ground’.⁹

As interesting as a focus on the window as physical (and metaphysical) threshold would have been, we instead opted for the balcony as a different though closely related instance of an architecturally designed interface separating (and suturing) the interior and the exterior.

*Modern man strives for communal sport, communal life; in addition, he desires a silent balcony, a silent room for himself.*¹⁰

Walking through the streets of Trento we ‘collected’ balconies and loggias with the camera. Partly instigated by the sight of balconies at Libera’s first commission after the war — the INA-Casa apartment building on via Galilei and piazza Venezia, finished in 1949 — the peculiar semiotics and psychology of this architectural feature emerged as a crucial topic within the project.

*Home in the evening after the love affair ended at dawn, talking with a woman friend who has dropped in, Vittoria gets a phone call from a neighbor she hardly knows, a colonial woman from Kenya. She and her friend go over to a window from which they, and we with them, can see the neighbor at her balcony across the dark street; cut to a distant, haunting point-of-view shot, unmoored, unbracketed by any shots of the observer, from the neighbor’s inferred perspective: the point of view of a stranger on Vittoria and her friend, now diminutive silhouettes at the lit window amid the darkness. From the window they subjectively look out at the world, and now the world, as subjectively, looks back at them. The effect is of our suddenly seeing ourselves as the world distantly sees us.*¹¹

At some point, the symbolic function of the balcony in the fascist spectacle of power emerged in our discussion. We learned that the term *arengario* for a balcony upon which the speaker stood to address the crowds derives from the medieval *arengo* or assembly of all citizens. But with fascism and in particular with the *case*

del fascio that mushroomed all over Italy in the 1930s and 1940s, this traditional meaning changed and the power of the commune was transferred onto Mussolini and the fascist state.

There are balconies from which it has always been fun to watch the busy goings and doings in the streets and then there are balconies which the powerful or power-seeking preferred for their speeches to the people in an effort towards or away from the good or evil.

The balcony removes us from the sheltering walls of the house, it lifts us above the supporting width of the floor, and it broadens the view and the mind. We feel safe and secure in the room of access to the outwardly extended balcony, but there is already the element of transition where the indoors blends into the out-of-doors.

Balconies are more than just charming architectural details of houses; they are important links between the in- and the out-of-doors, between the wide open and the enclosed space which is only the shell for the human activity and life, and thus they are the links between introspection and shelter and broad-minded acceptance of environmental influences.¹²

As if to underscore the contrast between this political use of the balcony as a stage for fascist histrionics and the civil (and civilised) idea of the balcony as a zone of recreation and family life in the postwar modernism of the reconstruction, some of the balconies of Libera's building face the *arengario* of the former *casa del fascio* on the Piazza Venezia (or Largo porta Nuova) in the centre of Trento. The fascist headquarters had been built by another architect from Trentino, Giovanni Lorenzi, in the late 1930s. Around the same time, Lorenzi also designed and supervised the construction of his Erich Mendelsohn-inspired Grande Albergo Trento (today known as Grand Hotel Trento) at Piazza Dante. And not only did Lorenzi work as a construction supervisor for Libera's Via Galilei apartment building after the war, Libera also built his Palazzo della Regione in the late 1950s and early 1960s right beside Lorenzi's hotel, where he once again had to respond aesthetically to an urban and architectural situation largely determined by a preexisting building by his slightly elder colleague.

5.

Around the time the construction of the Palazzo della Regione reached its completion, which was also the time of Libera's death (1963), Beppino Disertori moved into a newly built condominium at number 32, Via Petrarca, a street that leads directly to the palazzo. Disertori stayed in the apartment, where he both lived and worked, until the late 1980s. Interestingly enough, and providing still another link to our involvement with this exhibition as whole, the temporary Manifesta 7 Trento office (working under the conceptual heading of "The Soul") was located in exactly the same building where Disertori, the author of a comprehensive book on the soul (*De Anima*, 1959), had lived.

Disertori's reasons for moving to Via Petrarca might have been completely contingent in nature, but considering his biography, it is nevertheless striking that he chose to move into a house in the immediate vicinity of Libera's then brand new Palazzo della Regione, a multifunctional complex designed to host the various executive and legal bodies of the government of the two autonomous regions of Alto Adige (South Tyrol) and Trentino. Libera's awkwardly modernist building might be considered an allegory of the postwar political system. Though it obviously serves the purposes of governing the autonomous regions, it might as well be perceived as an attempt to embody the idea of a supranational Europe — a Europe of the Regions. (The 'Manifesto of the Trentino Socialist Movement' was published clandestinely in February 1944, penned by resistance fighters, Giannantonio Mancini among them. The manifesto states that 'Only an international state will free the nations from nationalism and will defeat the infernal theories of *Lebensraum*, will raise Europe above the crisis to an era of peace and reconstruction'.)¹³

Disertori (who, due to a polio infection in his childhood, was physically afflicted throughout his life) conspired against the fascists on various fronts. His oppositional stance towards the regime foreclosed any practice as a neuropsychiatrist in state institutions during the 1930s and 1940s. Disertori's role in the antifascist underground of Trento would be an interesting topic in itself. For instance, Disertori's father's bookshop, the Libreria Disertori in Via Diaz in Trento (still in business today), was a place where resistance activists gathered in secret. (A monograph on the history of this bookshop is allegedly in preparation.)

In summer 1943, when the Germans occupied Trentino after allied forces invaded southern Italy, Disertori escaped to Switzerland. Exiled, he continued to pursue the cause of a new age of humanity and peace. Together with his friend and role model Mancini, he committed himself to the idea of a democratic republic.

This visionary state was modelled after the political ideas of *Risorgimento* thinker Giuseppe Mazzini and based, among other things, on the geopolitical principle of decentralization. In 1944, Disertori wrote: ‘Through decentralization, and by respecting the legitimate autonomy of communes and regions, the authentic Italian democracy, educator of citizens, will finally be born’.¹⁴ The federal, supranational character of postwar Europe was a central concern of the self-proclaimed socialists. The very fact that the Palazzo della Regione had been designed and built by Libera, the same Libera who had authored the monumental Palazzo dei Congressi (1938–1954) in the EUR quarter in Rome and who designed the triumphal arc for the fascist exposition in Rome in 1942 (never realised due to the war), could well have been deeply irritating for someone who had invested so much of his political and intellectual energy in overcoming Fascism.

*To educate a child, to reform a delinquent, to cure a hysteric, to raise a baby, to administer an army, to run a factory — it is not so much that these activities entail the utilisation of psychological theories and techniques, than that there is a constitutive relation between the character of what will count as an adequate psychological theory or argument, and the processes by which a kind of psychological visibility may be accorded to these domains. The conduct of persons becomes remarkable and intelligible when, as it were, displayed upon a psychological screen, reality becomes ordered according to a psychological taxonomy, abilities, personalities, attitudes and the like become central to the deliberations and calculations of social authorities and psychological theorists alike.*¹⁵

6.

Disertori and Libera contributed, if reluctantly and in very different ways, to a common task, which might be called, tentatively, the shaping of a subject of (and for) reconstruction. While writing this essay, I stumbled upon an obliquely related remark by art historian Rosalind Krauss, in the final paragraph of an article on Giovanni Anselmo that she contributed to a special issue of the journal *October* on postwar Italian art: ‘In its attempt to shore up democratic forms of government, the Marshall Plan was meant to reinstate the Enlightenment subject as the basis of

European experience. The perceptual apparatus of the centred human subject was being purchased by American largesse. The subject who consumes'.¹⁶

Both Libera and Disertori were involved in the project of reinstating a European subjectivity shaped by the institutions of democratic reeducation and the training grounds of Fordist rationality, though their individual interests and passions were hardly in sync with the Americanization of Italy. In Libera's view, the imperatives of efficiency that organized the postwar reconstruction in Europe had fatal repercussions within the architectural profession itself. In his autobiographical essay *La mia esperienza d'architetto*, published in 1960, three years before his death, Libera tried to place himself and his practice in the postfascist environment of the 1950s, where he spent many years coordinating the vast INA-Casa social housing programme. Here, he laments the demise of the architect's practice under the pressure to conform to the laws of quantity and costs, while being forced to repudiate all sense of art. 'Once a house could be at the same time building and art, technical and artistic; today the house, one might say, the decimetre, belongs to the industry. Freedom manifests itself by hectometre and kilometre, i.e. on the level of urban planning. It is only a matter of payment, of catering to those interests'.¹⁷ The 'industry' and 'interests' that Libera targeted were 'American'. The new building types and the new cities in postwar Italy that reminded him of the new cities in India and South America were 'manufactured in America', *fabbricando in America*.¹⁸ Libera regretted the devaluation of art in favour of a mentality of planning and building 'new cities' (as well as, by implication, new citizens), and he called for the 'serenità dell'anima'.¹⁹ But he had also taken early precautions for a general surrender to the imperatives of efficiency when he sat down to write and draw his treatise on architectural standards and norms in the final years of the war.

On a different terrain and with quite different intentions, Disertori tried to apply to the social and political situation of the reconstruction years a set of ideas and beliefs that he had been developing since the late 1920s. Decidedly antimechanist and neovitalist, his approach had been comprehensively presented for the first time in his *Libro della vita*, written in Swiss exile and published by Mondadori in 1947. Disertori argued for the centrality of Henri Bergson, Hans Driesch and other vitalist thinkers with their theories of *élan vital* and the entelechic necessity of 'life's' processes. Against the functionalism and mechanism of competing schools of (neuro)biology, he advocated an elaboration of the psychosomatic relations in the human brain, taking into account both the metaphysics of the 'inner light' (*luce l'intero quadro*) and the sciences of neuro- and psychobiology.²⁰ Disertori's brand of metaphysical neovitalism, his ventures into parapsychology and hypnosis, his ideas of

the ‘individuality of the soul’ and his detailed analysis of the neurosis of the subject in postwar mass civilization are still to be rediscovered — as a tacit critique of the subjectivity of the Marshall plan and as a contribution to other, physiologically- and metaphysically-based soul-searching projects of the postwar decades. ‘A parking place is where someone else has parked his car’, Richard Neutra wrote in 1957; ‘There is no anchorage for the soul, because we have lost the feel, pay no heed, and continuously ignore all valid current data: how our million sense receptors — no longer five senses as for Palladio — take on in the world’.²¹

This essay was published in the companion book of Manifesta 7 in the section “The Soul, or, Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls”

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vol. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953–74), vol. 16, 295; quoted in Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (London: Routledge, 2004), 6.
2. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), 320.
3. Beppino Disertori, *De Anima. Saggio della psicologia teoretica* (Milan: Edizioni di comunità, 1959), 440 [transl. by the author]
4. Tomas Maldonado, “The Idea of Comfort,” *Design Issues* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1991), 36.
5. Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior*, 3.
6. Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935), 59–60.
7. Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior*, 17.
8. Richard Neutra, “Ideas” (dated September 24, 1953), Neutra Archive, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA; quoted in Sylvia Lavin, *Form Follows Libido: Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 49.
9. Lavin, *Form Follows Libido*, 115.
10. Otto Neurath, “Kommunaler Wohnungsbau in Wien,” *Die Form* 6, no. 3 (1931), 110 [transl. by the author].
11. Gilberto Perez, “The Point of View of a Stranger: An Essay on Antonioni’s Eclipse,” *The Hudson Review* 44, no. 2 (Summer 1991), 248.
12. Franz Schuster, *Balkone. Balconies. Balcons. Balkone, Laubengänge und Terrassen aus aller Welt* (Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann, 1962), 7.
13. Giannantonio Mancini, “Manifesto programma del Movimento Socialista Trentino. Febbraio 1944,” in *Giannantonio Mancini: 14 dicembre 1901–6 luglio 1944*, ed. Beppino Disertori (Trento: TEMI, 1946), 78 [transl. by the author].
14. Beppino Disertori, “L’apostolato di Giannantonio Mancini” (1944), in *Giannantonio Mancini*, 15 [transl. by the author].
15. Nikolas Rose, *Power and Subjectivity: Critical History and Psychology*, <http://www.academyanalyticarts.org/rose1.htm>.
16. Rosalind Krauss, “Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome,” *October* 124 (Spring 2008), 136.
17. “Una volta una casa poteva essere contemporaneamente edilizia ed arte, cioè tecnica ed arte; oggi la casa, il decametro, diciamo così, appartiene all’industria. La libertà, invece, si manifesta sull’ettometro e sul chilometro, cioè sul piano urbanistico. Bisogna solamente arrivare a cambiare, a spostare questi interessi.” Adalberto Libera, “La mia esperienza di architetto,” *La casa* 6 (1960); quoted in *Adalberto Libera nel Dopoguerra*, ed. Alessandro Fassio (Sassari: Carlo Delfino, 2004), 298 [transl. by the author].

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 299.

20. See Beppino Disertori, *Il libro della vita* (Milan: Mondadori, 1947), 358 [transl. by the author].

21. Richard Neutra, "Notes to the Young Architect," *Perspecta* 4 (1957), 53.

