

a house for de kooning's friend

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roger connah





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change communication,
change architecture.

for Nadezna and Nuria
chance playmates in Campo San Margherita

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 1

the freak and the fairy tale

opposite in their character and mission,
alike in their magnificence and energy,
they came from the North and from the South,
the glacier torrent and lava stream....

- John Ruskin
The Stones of Venice

in your dreams

How do you read a house or a city? Why do we speak of 'reading' a house or 'reading' architecture, as if both the house and architecture could be a book? Why do we now read it, deconstruct it as some might say, in order to tease out the suggested meanings and associations? What is this ease with which we desire to leave true meaning behind? And whichever words we choose, what invites us to experience places we may never have the chance of visiting. In the future when people

look at photographs of de Kooning's House located high up in an old brewery on Giudecca most will utter the words: "in your dreams!" Not easily defined, not easily read or analysed, this house for de Kooning's friend will be refuge, retreat and revelation. It will be a detective story where characters come and go, not in this case speaking of Michelangelo but of flight captains called Aldo Rossi or Carlo Scarpa. It will be a house of critical fictions designed by the unknown but most famous world architect; a house of rumours that become fact, a house of facts that become myths, and a house of myths that become theories, and all in a city that becomes all other cities. And it is a house of lives that become other lives, if but for a moment dreamt up by the scriptomaniac in us all.

Up on the grand floor, the one nicknamed 'pizza' where musical entertainments take place you will discover a stainless steel wall. It looks a lot like a contemporary prototype of something out of *The Lady of Shanghai*. The careful perforations, the punched holes that make up the whole, shimmer as tectonic icons of another world. Opening the stainless steel door on the right, the light comes on and the most elegant small yacht-size refrigerator will offer itself up to you. Inside, if you are lucky, a bottle of Trappist beer, or then a beer from Traquiar House, will be chilled. Suddenly

in someone else's waiting life you wonder why leisure invites respite from employment. Until you think again at this private language that will always hover between function and ornament. You wonder why, when you look down, the refrigerator is at forty five degrees to the door. Compelled to take this mystery on, it is not the sensuality of ornament that so interests you. It is the Chimay beer which offers such tender coolness to the hand and the forehead.

Hotel Diplomat, Strandvagen

I hadn't quite reached the Hotel Diplomat on Strandvagen in Central Stockholm but found myself preoccupied. The research on creative monsters in art from the 20th century was continuing slowly. Instability needed new paradigms, new critical patterns to be understood afresh. Most painters and artists I felt were fortunate in having someone, a wife, a partner, a husband, who could live with their own type of instability. Willem de Kooning? I didn't know much about his work but decided to include him, however innocently, in my imagination and ignorance of this world. He might just be the artist necessary to begin a re-invention of the century that had just passed. You know, the modern one, the one with so

much promise that it looks as if it will take this next century to achieve it.

I had not met de Kooning's friend then as I turned into the Hotel Diplomat for a breakfast meeting. He wasn't even called de Kooning's Friend. I had no picture of the person I was to meet. Trim if generously elderly, delicate if business-like, tolerant if impatient, how was I to identify the man who had commissioned this house in Venice? This was the second house. The first house had been in Eaton Place in London. After, I was also told, the 'very first house' which was lost in Chelsea. This was the house apparently so close to being built as to be published yet remained strangely un-built. A house designed with a wall for de Kooning's canvas *The Rosy Morning Dawn*.

I scanned the breakfasters. de Kooning's friend, I learnt later, had been sitting there all along, watching me go back and forth. By waiting until 10 minutes after 8, I eliminated those who came in late and began once more to scan the restaurant. Some at the bar were loudly discussing the day's conference proceedings. I passed the buffet and noticed a small, attired-in-black Cocteau-like figure sitting alone talking into a mobile telephone. It had to be de Kooning's friend.

de Kooning's friend

When and how life took its turn remains uncharted biography. Why and when did I call him de Kooning's Friend? Sometimes we can see our sidetracks coming. We often plan for this. We can see the reason why we deflect and are deflected. We address the invisible person sitting opposite us. We speak words which will never find their arrival. We belong to the community that no longer rests easily, or sleeps at night for fear that the market takes away that deal. This time, rumour has it the de Kooning painting is back in circulation.

You desired the house, so you dreamt it. But for how long? You told me all this but I now think you may have been lying. You flirt with art before architecture; then you flirt with architecture before engineering. It is called a random career. Then you are told to apply yourself, just as many of us have been told, by your father. There is no choice then. The intense unrest of a business life takes over. But for a while writing about art invites future dalliance. You make your escape in the late 50s with your grant to New York City where, in easier times, in a bar, you run into the American abstract expressionists: de Kooning, Klein, Rothko. Even Mrs Pollock: her husband had gone by then. They were the creative monsters essential to

turn the art world this way or that. Cliché it may be today but there was a time, then the late 1950s, when you actually could run into a group who were about to change the European art scene from their own control room, New York City.

You continue studying architecture but the city offers more than an alternative to a life already scripted by the family. Later in life close to laying your hands on Willem de Kooning's *The Rosy Morning Dawn* for 300,000 US dollars you panic knowing you need the money for the house in Chelsea designed by the world's most famous unknown architect. But by then business has taken you all over the world and nomadism becomes your way of life, coinciding with the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze who scripts that same scenario for all who will reach the 21st century.

Mid or Post-Shah Iran, late 1970s, it becomes harder and harder for you to decide. You meet up again with *The Architect in Iran*. But you still cannot decide. You know the big, round music room in Chelsea, four metres high, would be enough to take the de Kooning, a large work measuring 1.70m by 2.50m. Space and light are important of course as also are other *Urban Landscapes* by de Kooning. But this is the painting you have set your mind on. Once again you pull back,

the market is uncertain and the Chelsea house is never built. The painting is not bought. Within 6 months Amsterdam buys the painting for 600,000 US dollars and thereupon, in undue haste, the Tate Gallery very quickly triples that. And now, with the oval music room in Giudecca, the space and light and height in Venice, you begin dreaming you can buy the painting back again.

You've had regrets, you say to the stray Sufi opposite you in the Hotel Diplomat, but none to compare with missing the de Kooning painting. Art over technology, art over reputation, architecture in the age of mechanical reproduction; the beauty of life must succeed over all. Naturally, and you smile at this, you have become your own sleuth. And though no one will die in these texts, there is no such easy mystery as that. Art will win over technology and by the time the house is finished in Giudecca, the de Kooning may just be back on the wall. As if of course, having never arrived, the painting can have never left. I think you'd have to agree despite what your father told you. Life is all about being sidetracked. An ambition Joseph Brodsky found a matter of course here in Venice:

That's my ambition. If I get sidetracked,
it is because being sidetracked is literally
a matter of course here and echoes water.
What lies ahead, in other words, may amount not to a story
but to the flow of muddy water 'at the wrong time of year'.

Volare

How can we stay away from that journey of three days, move southward and avoid Anastasia, that city with concentric canals and kites? And yet our imagination will not let go, our hallucination believes only in what it can invent. When we travel we become the new pioneers, an extension of those islanders who always remain a people apart, wresting from refuge the luscious sadness of exile. The plane taking us out of Venice back to the Empty North was a small one, operated by a company called Volare. The gaggle of Americans was unmistakable. Well-groomed, casual and branded, brooksbrothers and 'police' sunglasses, they hung onto the straps on the shuttle from departure lounge to plane as if they knew the world would be attacked soon.

'It's the last biennale, man. I mean it. Too many videos, far too long, you walk all the way to Padua.' He had a Stormy Petrol raincoat slung over his shoulder. His hair was wire-spiked and undercoat-grey. 'Yeah and on gravel man, I mean gravel. You walk for hours.' The

others in the gaggle laughed and seemed to agree. At the same time their irritations desired more. 'I mean was that work thin or thin, man! For Chrissakes what's happened to art?' the Stormy Petrol said, determined to make his point. A portfolio-laden, diamond nose-studded, black-bodied and freshly shampooed artist butted in: "The styrofoam piece. I kind of liked that, man. Huge! Impressive! Awesome!" 'Yeah that wasn't bad, but the rest,' the Stormy Petrol replied, 'the rest all a re-hash, man. Seen it all before...oh man... I'm too old for all this. And I didn't even make the British party.'

They all laughed. Stormy Petrol was all in. One could only hope he would stick to his word and pack it in, for he looked as if he'd not survive another biennale. Yet you knew. You just knew. He'd be back in two years time. Venice could not leave his imagination. He would be seduced and Jan Morris would be right, 'in the imagination of the world, Venice would always be somewhere between a freak and a fairy tale.'

Good Morning, this is your
captain speaking

"Did you see the Russian artist? His career is all

fabricated. Man, it's all fabricated."

"Whose career isn't," Styrofoam replied. "It's brilliant!"

"Yeah, I know it's brilliant but it's all fabricated. It's exhausting, it's all gamed into infinity."

Gamed into infinity! Who was talking? We arrived at the plane with Volare emblazoned across it. We began embarkation up an enclosed aluminium shoot. You suddenly imagined how babies felt in one of those plastic surround baby buggies, zipped up by carers at the least sign of rain.

It had begun to rain. "Oh I do look forward to Zurich," Styrofoam said, "such a civilised airport!"

"Yes," Stormy Petrol said, "so lavish, yet so delightfully uneventful!"

For a moment none of them were sure whether this was the Volare flight, Zurich Airport, the Venice Biennale or Venice itself. Freak and fairy tale blurred. Were they talking of the parties, the art, the invisible cities and lives left behind in Venice? Or were they talking about their ordinary cities and lives ahead? And just as the party began negotiating the slippery aluminium steps up to the plane, you knew it, you knew one more word would have to be spoken, one more comment made, one more announcement that would be the last word. It was like a race until the previously silent sun-glassed gallerist with the folded

suit pack, the linen suit and the logoed body said it:

“You see, man. I blame Frank. Frank Gehry. Gehry’s taken the world for Chrissakes. He’s taken sculpture and made it architecture. And he’s taken architecture and made it sculpture. There’s too little left anymore for anyone else. On top of that, for Chrissakes, he’ll be designing the Harry Potter headquarters next!”

I made my way to Economy 19D, strapped myself in. The overhearing ended. Gossip and rumours ceased. I’d completed my trip to Giudecca. I’d lived briefly in the house for de kooning’s friend, deliciously exiled and dreaming how suitable it would be to house The Filofax Museum. The violent summer storm had attacked the city. The heavens had opened whilst I read about Guido Brunetti, the Venetian detective invented by Donna Leon. I began to think he may have some insight into the muddied new architecture that struggles to get built in Venice.

Just then the pilot came on: “Good morning, this is your captain speaking. My name is Aldo Rossi and I have the pleasure of flying you to Zurich.” Wasn’t Aldo Rossi responsible for the new Harry Potter building in New York? Hadn’t Aldo Rossi, the Italian architect, come closest to writing out his own scientific autobiographies into an architecture still to be built? Hadn’t architecture left the building? Wasn’t Aldo Rossi dead? Was it going to be that easy to leave true meaning behind?

the perfect naked mask

In 1952 Eric Bentley wrote an introduction to 'Naked Masks', a set of five plays by Luigi Pirandello which he had also translated from the Italian. He claimed, with some insight, that the literature of people like Ibsen, Shaw and Pirandello struggled to get out from under all the fashionable ideas about this literature. Pirandello suffered a 'fashionable rejection', his plays were short-circuited. The media was it seems just as suffocating and intolerable then as it is today. Pirandello's plays were trivialised by those who felt they consisted only of tiresome ideas. Few however were able to recount sufficiently what these ideas were, let alone why they were tiresome. Yet if Pirandello so needed rescuing from the very lack of ideas about his ideas, how much more so a contemporary architecture, forever shackled to the semantic notion of the 'modern', as it has turned the millennium?

To go by some of the fashionable ways of rejecting architecture, the architectural profession, practitioners and pundits alike, have failed to convince the public in general, and specific trades like builders and contractors, just what the merits of contemporary architecture might be. It is still possible to find whole swathes of people who understand nothing about the

way modern architecture might bring - to individuals, to families, to environments, cities and countries - a more efficient way of living. The struggle, and it is a real struggle, has been on for years to rescue contemporary architecture from the tiresome ideas about its own tiresome ideas.

Some years back, inside the old Dreher brewery on Giudecca, a Pirandello play was already on stage. The architect arrived and, afraid of heights, ordered his German assistant to take a ladder and put it up by the gable window and tell what he saw. Off into the precarious light and distance but so close as if it entered the space was Palladio's Redentore Church. Periscoped into the future of a Venice that must come closer to other parts of Venice on the Night of the Redentore, when the Giudecca canal is bridged, the architect had found de Kooning's perfect naked mask. Exile itself was suddenly, briefly, spectacularly, bridged.

Intervening with contemporary architecture in a city like Venice puts the architect in a critical position. Can architecture offer more than an ingenuous restoration of what Venice was once like? If the house for de Kooning's friend is to be a microcosm, it will also be a running commentary on the dilemmas

facing architects and planners in Venice today. As a house it is likely to become as famous and remain as unknown as its architect. Was Mary McCarthy right when she said ‘Venetian architecture, indeed, is stage architecture, caring little (up to Palladio) for principles and concerned mainly with effects’? Should not the solution be more than an ingenuous restoration of what Venice was once like, or of what Venice might be like if time denied its own decay? If Venice is a city that wishes to replicate its fabric to appear as it has always appeared, what choice the architect? The House for De Kooning’s Friend can be no conventional book, no conventional residence where the page is transgressed and space denuded. Simply the pages and the architecture must abut but never meet the denuded walls. Dropped into Venice by parachute, the architectural doctor and the scribbler respond to and comment on, the developing condition of a Venice.

the house-in-waiting

From Byzantium came sensuous luxury compelling taste to keep up with itself, including the ladies drying their hair on the altane. The clues will come from the imaginary shelves, the reading machines that will be

designed, the books each visitor will imagine writing. Indeed the clues for this architecture come from Ibn Khaldun's celebrated fourteenth century map. For Venice is the only Christian city marked, Jan Morris tells us, together with such places as Gog, Oman, Slinking Land, Waste Country, Soghd, Tughuzghuz and Empty In The North Because Of The Cold. Look carefully at the house in waiting, occupy every square metre of this house and you will find all these places, all these areas marked on the plan. You will also find the unknown, unpublished map of Venice inside the hermit crab. Talk of a Venice within, you will find that too!

Take the vaporetto 82 from Zattere to Palanca, get off and start walking along the Fondamenta San Eufemia toward Fondamenta San Biagio, pass Harry's Dolci set alfresco for a summer lunch. Continue along the water's edge until turning left into a gated entrance just before the neo-Gothic Molino Stucky mills. You are entering what was once the Dreher Brewery. You'd be happy to see the glamorama sets of tourist Venice left somewhere behind, for there are no gondolas risking such a passage. The more likely sight out in the Giudecca canal is a passing Caribbean liner or Minoan Lines moored for the day. After a day anywhere else in Venice, you'd surely be happy to

begin picking your way through back yards, renovated dwellings, rubbing up against a polished brick and black steel, for Venice has never ever been anything more than a work in progress. It cares not whether you are a visitor or not which is as it should be, the grand indifference of those that still live in this museum.

Enter the large blue steel door next to the Nike trainers drying on the window sill. Climb up the scrubbed stairs, pass the renovated lofts and the studio where the Italian artist Plessy fabricates some of his electronic pieces. Go up even higher until reaching the flat roof. Cross the precarious gang planks and step down onto the fresh asphalted landscape until, in the far right corner, you discover a caged door. Passing through you enter what at first looks like a bamboo maze. Behind, if you are lucky, you'll discover a dematerialised house, a house in waiting. We now know the architect opted for an ingenious solution, analogous to that of a hermit crab.

the back of the envelope

This is, traditionally, the place where architects draw the first, inspired or uninspired, sketch of their project. Why envelopes? Perhaps architects have

always been in haste, never sending their scripted letters but stuffing the envelopes into their pockets. This allows reading later at a chance moment in the day. Perhaps in this way architects are unique, always in movement they are tourists to their own profession. So much of it is the trick of the line. The Architect recalls the English architect James Stirling showing him his thumbnail sketch of the Stuttgart Gallery during the late 1970s, in Teheran. Big Jim, as he was known, had just taken out an envelope from his inside pocket. And, true enough, there on the back of the envelope was a small sketch. Stirling, according to the architect, quickly put it back inside his pocket, a little huffy, with the words: "Alright then, I'll keep it for later!" Apparently Mrs Stirling had taken one look at it and said disparagingly: "Can't see anything in that!" Miffed, he stuffed it into his pocket. Stirling had shown one of those 'almost total' sketches some architects are capable of. The trick was undoubtedly in the line. The whole project would be teased out of this impossibly reduced gestalt. On the envelope Stirling had scribbled the Stuttgart Gallery of Art. As they say in the film world, it's just a chase scene after this!

The chase-scene is on, the mystery to be solved; the volume divided to create the elliptical drum. To support the music space, and above: the gallery waiting for the

de Kooning. So when will the architectural structure offer itself as a hand-crafted machine-like elliptical object, a drum inserted into the long basilica-like volume? When will the space be sliced at the golden mean by a structural steel wall? Theatrical prop and screen for the hidden theatre of our own lives? If not then on the back of envelopes, architects often work up their first ideas in movement, *en passant*. The architect and de Kooning's friend were walking along the Zattere to the vaporetto stop. They were about to attend a meeting with the local architect who would get the house through the necessary Venetian authorities.

'Well,' de Kooning's friend said, 'have you got any ideas yet?'

The Architect looked blank.

'Anything?' de Kooning's friend pushed. Both men walked, talked and - as often in Venice - did most of their work in this manner. The Architect had ideas for the house of course, who wouldn't in such a voluminous *ex-bierra* space! He had no time though, nothing was committed to paper.

'Surely,' de Kooning's friend pressed hard, 'you must have something, an inkling?' Inklings like sidetracks are part of the architect's metier. The Architect knew de Kooning's friend would not take 'No' for an answer. They stepped onto the vaporetto.

‘Anything?’

‘Well, yes, something floating around....but nothing definite,’ The Architect replied hoping a beautiful Venetian woman on the vaporetto would distract the two men.

‘But surely you must have something by now?’

‘Well, yes,’ The Architect stuttered and then stumbled on, ‘an ellipse...something like a carefully detailed ‘machine for living’...

‘And?’

‘Well... it’s a kind of circular, no, more of an elliptical space.’

‘How?’ de Kooning’s friend pressed.

‘You see, the heavy brick shell of the existing building wraps around it...’ The Architect swirled the drawings as the vaporetto took on the waters on the Dorsoduro and the passing water taxis. No one said this, but both men were thinking the same: the first skin of history is re-clothed by a contemporary skin. In between these skins, there are many residual spaces.

the wings of a dove

The Architect was forced to take the miniature Mont Blanc notebook from his pocket, a present from his wife. The vaporetto continued to take on its usual

water rhythm, a rhythm that goes through body and mind. The page was smaller than the back of most envelopes. This had an advantage to the architect. He need not lose his freedom and commit his inkling to greater scale.

‘Something like this, a kind of crab...’ The Architect drew continuous swirls whilst rocking to and fro, perching the notebook on the rail of the vaporetto. He was doodling as he said the word ‘elliptical’, just as the Volkswagen designer might have drawn a large oval form around and around followed by four small egg shapes to act as the lights. There it was, the Beetle!

‘What happens there?’ de Kooning’s friend pointed at the edge.

‘The entrance?’

‘And there?’ he pressed.

The Architect didn’t know but winged it, ‘Well, I guess we need to have the kitchen, services, sauna and guest bedroom underneath supporting the ...’ he searched for the words... ‘the performing space.’

‘Yes, the music room...and the gallery for the painting....how is it supported?’

‘I don’t know, by a cylindrical structure, a drum, a beam on edge, perhaps something like a boat, or a crab.’

‘And upstairs, a small mezzanine,’ de Kooning’s friend added with some excitement.

‘Perhaps, an altane type space, private, bed overlooking the campo, eye-spying Palladio’s Redentore, a place for a future crime, you know that sort of dreamed space...’ The Architect said. The vaporetto sidled in expertly and the two men arrived at their meeting. The door had hardly opened. The financiers, contractors and craftsmen were all waiting.

‘He’s got it,’ de Kooning’s friend exclaimed. ‘He’s got the whole thing, designed it, finished it. There in the notebook, like a crab. Can’t wait!’

The Architect winced. Another chase scene!

a serious backwater

The Architect and de Kooning’s friend wade through polythene and plastic. Bricks disintegrate, sack-cloth frays over the windows facing the Adriatic. Apart, slightly outside, on the skew, a dissident space in a dissident city, Giudecca is the exile of the Venice we remain hallucinated by, bored by and titillated by. Perched on the edge of the rookery, we are always the one flying over and out. Jewish? Not really, not quite, not always, as John Julius Norwich recounts “by the middle of the 13th century there was already a considerable Jewish population in the

city and its immediate neighbourhood - perhaps 3000 or more. Many lived at Mestre, on the mainland; others - particularly those who had mercantile dealings with Dalmatia - occupied the island of Spinalunga and were in fact responsible for its change of name to Giudecca. Apart from that, their principle occupations were, as everywhere in Europe, the lending of money - usury by Venetian citizens being forbidden in the Republic - and the practice of medicine; but apart from certain requirements as to residence there does not appear at this time to have been any legal restrictions in their activities - including the exercise of their religion - still less any active persecution...”

Excluded and excluding itself by its position, instead of entering as in Lahore from the walled city into the heart of hearts and then upwards into the kite flying rooftops, here Giudecca waits ultimately for Venice to catch up to its own exile. Venice may have evolved an amphibious society peculiar to herself, according to Jan Morris, but there are few if any ornate front doors opening upon water here. Instead The Architect and de Kooning’s friend enter the serious backwater of Venice’s lagoon, a Giudecca where merchants fronted the island in their palazzi whilst in the monasteries monks faced the wilder Adriatic in their desire for a silent life.

So crowded has Venice become, so clogged with day trippers arriving at the Piazzale de Roma that retreat is once more an option, refuge more than a choice, and Giudecca the island so conveniently placed across from the Zattere as to filter out the majority of visitors. For how long who knows, but this serious backwater can be considered lucky to avoid the ‘pitying, lofty and condescending’, suspicious of the travellers even from Dorsoduro. Giudecca triumphs in being necessarily conspiratorial in avoiding the freak and the fairy tale over there on that other mainland called Venice. The Architect knows the freak and the fairy tale only too well after Los Angeles. Retiring to bed on arrival at the Regina d’Inghilterra, Stendhal wrote in his journal in 1815: “When I came out again, at 11 o’clock, the first person I came across was Valdramin, who suggested a sea-bath in the middle of the Giudecca Canal; he had a little ladder attached to the side of his boat.” Certainly, if Stendhal is to be believed, you could have gone swimming, added to your health and surveyed freak and fairy tale at the same time.

Sans Souci

If I didn’t know any better as a scribbler myself, if I had a more suspicious mind, I’d consider the world’s

most famous unknown architect doing everything possible to avoid being researched, catalogued, even written about. The architecture would always need delaying, it could never be finished. Perhaps this is how it should be. Research removes the past in a way that is not always comfortable. Research clears away a little too many things, a little too neatly and then re-orders them. Research upsets the restlessness of our lives, the restlessness that gives them shape and structure. Yet the past too offers the chance strength and, one expects, some of the reasons for the direction life has taken.

I was just about to step onto the vaporetto from Zaccharia to go to Palanca on Giudecca to meet the architect when the phone went...we will meet instead at Zattere. Open to any sort of derailment in the day's plans, always in a perverse, triumphant way, I am happy to do this and arrive in Zattere in 15 minutes as agreed. I find no architect which is what I have come to expect. I instantly return to the detective novel I have with me. I read to discover once more how to read between the lines, for Venice is not quite where you think it is in Donna Leon's books, despite what it says on the book cover. Whilst reading, it is not difficult to imagine The Architect in this situation, as part of a detective novel, as part of an unknown,

unending intrigue, if not a crime. I look up from the book for a moment to see the architect in white linen suit disappear into a café, along with a briefcase-clutching impeccably dressed gentleman. I close the book. This is my cue.

At the bar I am introduced to Gianni, a contractor. “Without him” the architect says, “there would be no house for de Kooning’s friend.” Gianni smiles, “a house for de Kooning’s friend?” He is not given an answer. The Gucci, Armani and Lacoste left behind this day in preference for the only-Italian elegance of a casual sweater, “what will it be?” Gianni asks. “Macchiato!”

It doesn’t matter who you are, what you do, what you have to hide, in Venice everything appears conspiratorial. Like a gambler, even The Architect must learn the slight of hand. The authorities see to the casino, responsible for the creative law-bending that makes progress possible here. No discourse, no over-interpretation, no academic leanings to disguise our own ignorance of this small talent: what better than to see Venice as a hermit crab into which the architect slips the present? We crossed the Giudecca canal to Palanca. “And if after inventing a house you have to invent a detective?” Gianni asked. I recalled the beer I’d had after the macchiato. ‘Sans Souci!’ I

replied, 'Sans Souci!' Gianni laughed, 'after the beer founded in 1859?'

Sans Souci II

Jorge Luis Borges commented that man need not build a labyrinth when life already is one. The ability of architects to think in and through the labyrinth and come out somewhere the other side is beginning to have serious consequences. Even amongst those now at the media pinnacle of their metier, it is not too common to hear the architect announcing they have never really achieved the things they wanted to achieve. It is quite clear whatever the published world will claim, not all architects have achieved their best. Many architects have never achieved what they might have achieved had their luck been different. Indeed many architects possess visions of a world that is - at best - incomplete. This is misleading.

For every architect that can be named, for every Frank Gehry, Mario Botta, Norman Foster, Vittorio Gregotti or Santiago Calatrava there are any number of invisible, unknown would-be-famous architects. Some find it difficult to submit themselves to the confessional. Some are bored by a talent they cannot

achieve. Others like Carlo Scarpa, if we are to believe Bruno Zevi, renounced architecture for a rarer calling. Its subject matter is design, Zevi says, but the term 'designer' is so hackneyed that it can hardly be applied usefully to an artist of his calibre. Zevi goes even further into the architect's resistance; 'Scarpa had decided to withdraw from the commitment to architectural creativity in order to produce a masterly substitute for it.'

This is the slyness we so badly need. Many unnameable architects have indeed operated with a skill and judgment that can be compared to some of the more well known architects. Some have suffered ill luck. Some have chosen the anonymity of a wider profession, a wider collaborative engagement. Is this something to do with the lack of chance, the lack of will, energy, motivation or - like a good detective - being in the right place at the right time and stumbling on the alibi? Is this, such a mysterious talent? And though many of the world's architects have talent by the caterpillar load, the contract here for the unknown or invisible architect is between will and boredom. Will is the pitiable romance for architecture achievable, and boredom is the melancholy talent to avoid that achievement.

This sees architecture as a work-in-progress, discontinuous, transcending any individual design or built form. The house-in-waiting is the summa of lifelong concerns and a metaphor for architecture's unknown ambitions. In other words, contemporary architecture's own work in progress. In a world bored by the spectacles of the well published names, what then is this rarer calling for the architect? It is those masterly substitutes for architecture that must now interest us.

half fairy tale, half snare

Thomas Mann wrote in *Death in Venice*: "Farther on a dealer in antiquities cringed before his lair, inviting the passer by to enter and be duped. Yes, this is Venice, this the fair frailty that fawned and that betrayed, half fairy tale, half snare; the city in whose stagnating air the art of painting once put forth so lusty and growth and where musicians were moved to accords so weirdly lulling and lascivious. Our adventurer felt his senses wooed by this voluptuousness of sight and sound, tasted his secret knowledge that the city sickened and hid its sickness for love of gain, and bent an ever more unbridled leer on the gondola that glided on before him."

To know a little about the traveller may help us understand the dream commission: a young Swede who in the 1950s began to study architecture but soon realised that his talent - knack is surely too trivial for this 'art' of seeking beauty and the money necessary to achieve it - would ensure an unending restlessness. Exchange would necessitate an interest and secret knowledge in the finer things of life, for these reflect not any stability. Like money and commerce itself, they reflect a life on the move. Like the Jewish joke about the warehouse full of one-legged jeans, never but never open the warehouse and check the merchandise. The goods exist but for exchange, for commerce, for the movement of money only. He often thought he should have become a diplomat just as his father wanted. But where would he be then? Probably somewhere out in the Swedish archipelago, scribbling his life story, wondering why it was no longer possible to hug Franz Kafka. Whether de Kooning's friend was from Norway, Sweden, Finland or Denmark, anywhere in that Empty North, matters less than the lucidity and attention, often lascivious attention, required to detail life in dress, design and decor.

This then is de Kooning's friend, not the adventurer following the Thomas Mann description, but one necessarily invisible. One anonymous, even creatively

shy but an adventurer nevertheless who would do anything to re-purchase an original de Kooning sold in the 1970s to raise funds for a house that is never built. To re-purchase something that has since acquired an inflated value is the ultimate challenge to any financier and adventurer. It demands a knack that must go on improving even on its own excellence. To the extent that the de Kooning work will soon to be re-purchased, life in this house will always remain half fairy tale and half snare.

no-destination feeding station

It has got to be possible to dream a house, invent its stories, even its future crimes in a way we all understand, as if we were detectives over-staying our privileged lives. As if, artists in charge of our own experience, an imagination lies in wait for us in places we do not yet realise or places which do not exist. And just as all of us go in and out of meaning throughout the day, all of us - though we scarcely accept even recognise this - possess our own user's manual. The Armenian and the Sufi, both educated in architecture, late fathers both, lovers of the non-destination, had long ceased talking about architecture to adults. They were now being addressed as if we were still

infants, as if they hadn't read the right books, as if they should know better than draw and write the things they drew and wrote, as if they should know better than like the things they liked. The Architect and the Scriptomaniac, nomads hoping to die before they get old; but they don't, they go on like rock stars, diplomats and monks.

Life was too serious to remain that serious, the two men agreed. Growing old, tired of explaining why he did this or that, The Architect lacked interest in the analysis of hanging a glass and stainless steel stair that reminded someone of Palladio, and someone else of Le Corbusier. He denied not such associations, but they appeared interminable and ultimately fatiguing. Tired too of listening to adults claiming that actually the hung stair had no relation to Palladio and none at all to Le Corbusier; the main thing, That Architect would be told, was its void.

Unlocked open? The void? The emptiness of the North and the hedonism of the South. How conveniently this presents them with the ease of leaving true meaning, and how this so excited them. The void was more than exile; it was the equivalent of wrapping emptiness around an infinite dwelling, a labyrinth of unscripted stories with what amounted to a cycle track. The

pleasure of analysing architecture was full of grief; it could only be re-invented. Language had not only become a seduction for architecture in the 20th century, it suggested to some the paradigm that should not have arrived. And it had become even clearer that language alone cannot be the paradigm for conceiving, shaping, dreaming and altering architecture and our cities.

Philosophy, aesthetic theory, literary debates from the last twenty years had resulted in extraordinary claims for architectural communication. Mostly they failed. This seduction of philosophy has led to the redundancy of claims made through language. We all inhabited, dwelled within our own critical fictions. This was the paradox that could not, must not be beyond us anymore. We must now dream the houses we live in. Just as we build up pictures and stories about people we may or may not know, about a place we may or may not visit, we must remember how the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa travelled as extensively as Marco Polo. From the freeing confinement of his own apartment in Lisbon, without going any further, he invented and dreamed again the world. He locked his world into an open world.

The Architect knew then, knows now: the house for de

Kooning's friend would at first be formless, it could have no destination like those Sushi bars in Tokyo Station. Those no-destination feeding stations where the plates of sushi circulate in front of your eyes and you choose what you wish, and pay by the number of small plates emptied. In this exercise The Architect and the Sufi were to sit at the café in the corner outside the Church, watching their two daughters as they played in Campo San Margherita Campo San Margarita. They danced together, explored new ideas and shapes, took new photographs of old subjects and re-framed their fathers' lives with fast fingers and digital alertness. They discovered new adventures for the two men. And in wanting to make a collection about scribblers, maniacs and monsters, about a hermit crab and a shell, about a house for de Kooning's friend, the two men knew the pages had to remain unlocked for them, half fairy tale, half snare.







 2

half fairy tale, half snare

The house might no longer be the product of a seasonal industry, exposed to the sun and the rain, but of a process of production controlled by the great rules of contemporary industrial organisation. The house or its elements might be prefabricated.

- Le Corbusier
The Modulor, 1946

Stratifications

The Architect had not heard of Georges Perec's book, *Life, a User's Manual*. But without knowing it, he took an instant liking to the opportunities and chance mystery it offered. He knew that the house for de Kooning's friend could be no ordinary house, no ordinary shell. In fact, like Perec's book, it would be a refuge. And from its refuge this required a house-in-

waiting, quietly tucked away at one end of Giudecca, next to the impressive ugliness of Molino Stucky. A hundred metres away from The Luigi Nono Archive, the house for de Kooning's friend would be entered via what can only be described as a permanent building site. For years now the windows next to this house have been flapping with polythene protection. The rooftop encountered looks more or less like the next place to hold a *ridotti*, or a 'rave' if raves ever become part of contemporary Venice. In fact, wrapped and unwrapped, the house for de Kooning's friend would be the sort of space that would be entered into the Venice Biennale as a work of partial destiny, as part of the growing new movement Transversalism, part of the Pulp Architecture everyone is talking about today.

The house for de Kooning's friend was no scramble to get a commission, nor was this a cut-price architectural project hastily turned out on time. The Architect had another option, another careful privilege which cannot be underestimated: collaboration. The architectural idea generated the necessary structural ingenuity. In collaboration with the engineer, the idea would develop further from the obvious tectonic differences offered between the circle and the ellipse. A hand-crafted, machine-like elliptical object - a boat or crab-

like ally - from timber and steel is inserted into the dead basilica-like volume measuring 14m by 12m with a height of 6m, touching no part of the walls. Sliced at the golden mean by a structural steel wall that divides the volume and supports a gallery above, the first skin of history - brick - is occupied by this machine.

Here we could speak of sedimentary action, layer upon layer. This is to echo the plain oval body, the keen head of the t(h)unny fish which can still be bought on Via Garibaldi. The 'crab', both structural prop and screen, becomes the elliptical 'machine for living', around which the lasciviously designed steel and glass staircase winds. Just as one climbs up and around those walls of death where motor cyclists eat the peach and still drive their machines, until both are horizontal to the earth. That feeling of being wrapped around by the volume whilst you yourself begin occupying the space just as the crab itself provides another shell. All the time, the thick heavy coat, the brick shell, wraps around a second, third, fourth historical skin. Stratifications might be a more appropriate term for the Venice strata read from this action. And in between crab and shell, there is yet another space, residual: an exiled life in the edge and on the edge.

Amanda's World of Hermit Crabs

A House for Hermit Crab is a children's fable written by Eric Carle. Based on the true habits of the hermit crab it goes on to equate the beauty of the marine environment with the inevitable challenges of growing up. At least this is what the publisher tells us. The gist of the story is that Hermit Crab keeps outgrowing the shells he occupies. A sea anemone arrives, a starfish drops in, a snail and a sea urchin are employed for cleaning and protection, a lantern fish passes by lighting up the place. More and more neighbours visit, clean and decorate his home; easing his existence we might say. Then the travellers arrive, marine refugees, the foreigners, and asylum seekers too. The book is about movement, unrest, nonlinearity if you like. Certainly it is about coming to rest. And contrary to what John Ruskin might have thought, constant change is not as alarming as the decay which began in Venice when that pestilence he called the Renaissance hit in the fifteenth century.

But architecture and the hermit crab? Go to any search engine and punch in the words 'hermit crab'. After a short time options appear, site listings, all indicating a bigger world order than might have been imagined from such beginnings: The Complete Hermit

Crab Guide; Hermit crabs and their crab-like allies; Amanda's World of Hermit Crabs; Scott's Hermit Crab Page; Vanessa's Crabarium. Though I am tempted by Vanessa's Crabarium and the promise of learning details of the hermit crab as pet, its food, bathing, handling, moulting patterns plus its shell-election, it is Amanda's World which draws me in: "My name is Amanda and I made this sight (sic) as a community service for the web two years ago. I have received numerous letters concerning hermit crab health and well being and while I love the fact that my page has been helpful somewhat, I do not feel that I have the knowledge needed to answer questions anymore. Please read what is on the sight (sic) and if you do not find answers here, please try a pet store or another sight (sic). Thank you."

Overwhelmed by Amanda's honesty I set about exploring the behaviour and classification of the hermit crab as possible clues to why and how The Architect opted for an ingenious architectural solution; slipping an architectural machine inside dead space. Clearly if most hermit crabs are scavengers on dead plant and animal matter, why then not an architectural structure, scavenging in an old brewery on the dissident island Giudecca, finding its shell, and adapting its existence within that shell? And like the house for hermit crab ready - as a house-in-waiting - to take visitors, opera singers, pianists, concert

goers, fictional detectives or those travellers carrying under their arm not a thin book, but a much heavier volume, for example, John Julius Norwich's 'History of Venice'.

machinations

"The crab is always as delightful as a grotesque, Mr. Ruskin writes in *The Stones of Venice*, for here we suppose the beast inside the shell; and he sustains his part in a lively manner among the signs of the zodiac, with the scorpion, or scattered upon sculptured shores, as beside the Bronze Bear of Florence. We shall find him in a basket at Venice, at the base of one of the Piazzetta shafts." Perhaps unfairly we use Ruskin when he agrees with us and discard his extremities. But surely we suspend our disagreements when we read his insights into the circle and the intimate dread of coming to perfect rest. Curves of limitation or support, we see this intimacy on monocles, eye pieces and spectacles, the circle distorts the face, closes off the mind.

"The cylindrical curve round the stem of a plant binds its fibres together, Ruskin asserts, while the 'ascent' of the stem is in lines of various curvature: so the curve

of the horizon and of the apparent heaven, of the rainbow, etc.: and though the reader might imagine that the circular orbit of any moving body or the curve described by a sling, was a curve of motion, he should observe that the circular character is given to the curve not by the motion, but by the confinement: the circle is the consequence not of the energy of the body, but of its being forbidden to leave the centre; and whenever the whirling of circular motion can be fully impressed on it we obtain instant balance and rest with respect to the centre of the circle.”

So rarely do the perfect round lenses suit the face pinched! And the monocle wearer comes with an eye grimace, permanently squinting in anguish. Instead the oval, the elliptical shape, extends and opens. It suggests the infinite. A curve of course is held there, but never quite coming to perfect rest it turns back on itself refusing any suggestion of intimacy. The oval is an expression of action, used in architecture it is a structural force inviting nothing as lucid, nothing as seductive as closure. Pick up a golf ball and an elliptically ‘rounded’ stone of similar size that has been thrashed by the sea. The stone is moved and moves around the hand in a different way to the golf ball. The eye even touches it differently; it cannot, must not, close on it as it does on the forbidding golf ball.

So as in Venice, would it not be a sin to construct a machine that forbids us to leave the centre. Everyone, including Venetians, have needed exile and escape in equal measure from the city itself. Contre Venise?

sampling

We are well aware that the unchanging, seductive success of Venice's theatre of exile and refuge discourages innovation in the very architecture that makes the 'images' of Venice possible. How long, we should ask, can Venice continue existing on its skilful implementation – a sampling of the past into the present? Sampling, if we can call it so, is also part of a life lived in many countries. We listen to ideas long before they are disseminated. We are influenced by the very existence of another. As a creative process 'sampling' can of course lead to increased vision as well as produce repetitive vocabulary. We are well aware that ideas about architecture picked up along the way, devices and details used earlier in an architects' practice, can all be re-appropriated.

We notice how architecture produces versions of other architecture seen elsewhere in the world. But not always! Why is it that the refined poetics, the

contemporary expressive works of engineers like Peter Rice or Santiago Calatrava or Italian architects like Renzo Piano and Maximiliano Fuksas do not come about easily in a city like Venice? Why cannot Venice entertain a building like The Spiral for the Victoria and Albert Museum in London with its seamless work of construction and architecture? And how do we read this loss to such a city? Without invention, without increasing the intolerance toward historic mummification and regulations, the scale of new buildings will remain absent.

This was hinted at - surprisingly perhaps - by the engineer Peter Rice in his book 'An Engineer Imagines' when he described the way he treated information: "I never read with abandon, maybe six or seven books a year. I read slowly, each book would fill my head, become absorbed and change me a little..." Without always absorbing information Rice sketched out his own curious but rather special, intuitive approach: "I suppose I read to watch the heroes dodge and manoeuvre their way through life. Information never interested me." Critically not creatively superficial, is this not a methodology close to 'sampling'? Watching the heroic unknown but famous architect dodge and manoeuvre their way through life? Does it not also sum up our way of negotiating Venice and its own history?

I too read the books on Venice to watch the other heroes and scribblers dodge and manoeuvre their way through the city. But the information that piles up is never quite as seductive as the small anecdote told by Jan Morris, Mary McCarthy, Henry James or Joseph Brodsky.

the Othello-Iago dilemma

Most of the world's best architects from the twentieth century worked up, re-thought and re-located ideas they stumbled across in their younger years. In order to build buildings of note and merit, architects often find themselves confirming recognisable images. A control over images can often be stronger than the desire to engineer inventively. Buildings are singularised, architecture is fragmented, urban vision diminished. Collaborative solutions are resisted. Contemporary sampling, treating architectural form and vocabulary as a disc jockey might sample music is much more common than architects admit. The corporate desire to build quickly invites the parasite, the scavenger; the rest of the world is a shell to be occupied. Squatted in!

It would be churlish though to reduce the relationship

between engineer and architect to a situation where architects get the good press and engineers exist in a depressed status. Rice hinted at the historical anonymity of the inventive engineer compared to the more profiled, creative and vulnerable architect: “I would distinguish the difference between the engineer and the architect by saying that the architect’s response is primarily creative, whereas the engineer’s is essentially inventive.” To some the very anonymity of the engineer has perhaps allowed a quieter innovation, as testified by the continuing fascination with the Crystal Palace, Kew Gardens, the Eiffel Tower (itself named after the engineer Gustave Eiffel!), Ironbridge, the Forth Bridge and aeroplanes like the Jumbo, Airbus and Concorde.

Misleadingly engineers are announced as the dull ones, those imperfect beings unable to make sense of, stretch, or rein in, the architect’s imagination. Rice considered engineers to be affected by the general, rather low expectancy society places on them. Engineers respond to a dullness, a pragmatic that encourages thinking that inhibits invention. This is the public understanding of engineers. Linking an inhibitive creativity in architecture with W.H.Auden’s essay ‘The Joker in the Pack’, Rice described this ‘dullness’ as the Iago mentality. According to Auden,

Iago uses sensible arguments to destroy Othello's romantic idyll. It's only a chase scene after this too! Rice sees his chance. Science similarly destroys our romantic and artistic creativity. Always having to pass the rational test, if not holding back, the engineer then becomes this voice of reason undermining a creative innovative role. Was Rice correct? Does the engineer possess an innate destructive weakness, playing Iago to the architect (or even to another engineer)? Can architectural thrill be held back by this destructive burden?

Outlining the redemptive scenario of the engineer, a scenario that would have a profound effect on future engineering challenge including the steel industry, the engineer develops his argument: "The building industry has an enormous investment in the status quo and like Iago, will use every argument to demonstrate that other choices are irrational and not very sensible. Only the engineer can withstand these arguments, demonstrate the wrongness of the position of industry and demolish its arguments. In this scenario, the engineer becomes critical and can save his soul." Do not architects suffer, as engineers do, because they are either misunderstood or given scant treatment by the media? The Othello-Iago dilemma is an accurate one. Must we not suggest this to Venice? Surely it cannot

resist this idea - that engineers might not only save their own souls, but save ours too! Or then Venice will remain odd and oddly carnivalesque, decaying further, flakily nostalgic, defying Ruskin.

an exiled life

‘Honesty’ is no privilege of the past. Venice watches over the inhabitant of the house for de Kooning’s friend as much as the inhabitant watches over Venice. This is the liminal space taking the visitor from one world to another. Slipping in and out of the drum, the visitor passes from the private house interior to the outer Venetian garden, or the campo. From there the archipelago is glimpsed, or then Dorsoduro, San Marco and Palladio’s Redentore. On one side the recognisable Venetian palazzi on the Zattere. From the other side the misty, narrow horizons of the outer lagoon islands, the odd tanker slipping past the Lido and Alberoni and on. Here Venice is always present, watching over the visitor as much as the visitor watches Venice. Perhaps only in such privacy can material and engineering invention be so tantalisingly integrated.

What is that critical relationship between the engineer and architect? If the engineer’s identity

has historically been diminished, underplayed even in a small way, the question we are forced to ask is whether this holds back a more inventive, even fantastic potential in architecture? Not so here. We can attempt to sketch out the architect's work with the engineer. They would both agree that the structure we see is the structure we think should be there. This is not necessarily the structure we invite to become poetry. Though 'structure is the building itself', as the architect Mies van der Rohe claimed, structures today can be as unrecognisable as the slang that outpaces us and never reaches our dictionaries. If so, there may soon be no recognisable triumph between architecture and construction, engineer and architect. What might bring about such revolutionary turn? What are the 'final' provisional limitations in contemporary architecture that need so resisting by Venice?

To offset an era with an ambiguous desire for instant images, to see contemporary architecture expressed forcibly and honestly, probably requires the engineer be allowed more capacity to invent solutions along with the architect. Disciplined and divergent such a talent collides, an engineered tension becomes, as in the house for de Kooning's friend, so thoroughly architecture!

the public understanding of architecture

There is an immense fear of being contemporary. Architects have singularly failed as a profession to convince even those contractors that build for them the advantages of structures and material that architects themselves take for granted. If steel and glass are still associated professionally with all that is 'cool', with the correctness of material, honesty and the lost ideals of the 'modern movement in architecture', to the public this is still part of all those high-tech confusions. Unless of course it is a pair of trainers, an eau de toilette for men, or a restaurant name. The public understanding of contemporary architecture is as low now as it may have been for most of the 20th century. We speak of being modern and most people are still to get there, resisting anything that looks 'modern'. At a time when running shoes and sport wear, the eau de toilette or après rasage can all conceivably be branded 'High-Tech', packaged in Titanium we must acknowledge the slipperiness of desire. The phenomenologists amongst us would be fools not to recognise the advantages. The more the taste for steel alters the more confusion about high-tech shifts to alternative technology.

By nature of its manufacturing process, its pouring, rolling, milling and finishing, steel is necessarily a controlled material, enabling the architect to utilise it to the extent of achieving those lascivious details. Partner this with some exquisite worrying and the artificial rusting qualities of steel appeal precisely because the 'deterioration' is pictorial. Its representation can be predicted, picked off as it will be in the house for de Kooning's friend brilliantly against the brewery brickwork. To an architect it may be an acquired taste, to an engineer 'rusting' may just be a trick of chemistry but we must remember: to the public this is still the reminder of how steel ages, unlike timber, with awkwardness if not ugliness.

Yet it is this awkwardness that The Architect must take on, whether using leather, sailcloth, aeroplastic, timber, steel or glass. Timber of course always has the edge over steel; soft, paternal, and tactile. Points ahead of steel in the taste war! But is not steel, surprisingly, catching up? The trend for transparent plastic containers, from the kitchen and bedroom through to the schoolroom or workplace, echoes the contemporary trend for a metallic finish. The more stainless steel objects reach cult status, the more simple things like a Filofax or a personal

computer can be wrapped up in thinning steel, metallicized plastic or Titanium.

We must also separate - as in architecture too - the desire to label something 'high-tech' and the actual innovation, intelligence, alternative thinking and production which goes into making something, even a loft space in Giudecca, an example of high-technology. It is our task as phenomenologists about to dream the house from the past, to distinguish some of the gentler, worrying of details and solutions. The subtle mix of material and light, the assemblage of layers upon layer is no alibi here for 'high-tech'. This is not a kind of 'short text messaging' system sent across architecture by using steel and contemporary accessories. Aware of the delusions in such thinking, The Architect of course has no option but to take misunderstanding as a challenge. Along with the naked mask is the blind scenario.

the death of faith

If talk of a lost history, a lost avant-garde in Venice might have been serious some years ago why does it appear less so now? The few works of the Italian architect Carlo Scarpa are dotted around the city,

hard to stumble across, hard to bring to the attention of anyone but architects themselves. The reputed Olivetti showroom on the San Marco piazza is now a travel emporium. The entrance to the Philosophy Department of the University is daubed with slogans, stained with forgetting. Always elegant, in Venice even the forgetting is difficult to remember, so seamlessly does age trick the eye.

The BBC Open University runs a course on modern architecture under the title 'From Here to Modernity'. The coda is left off: and back again? We now know, though harsh on all of us who thought we might have been different; that the avant-garde can be progressive even revolutionary at one moment, then reactionary and anachronistic at another. Thus it can go both backwards and forwards. Is this not why contemporary architectural interventions struggle to find a place in a Venice dressed up for carnival nostalgia?

The detective novelist Donna Leon is possibly a useful, more general, guide. She has her detective Guido Brunetti find little of value in any of the modern additions: "As Brunetti walked up the Riva Degli Schiavoni, Sansovino's library came into sight in the distance, and as it always did its architectural unruliness gladdened his heart. The great burden of

the Serene Republic has had only manpower at their disposition: rafts, ropes, and pulleys, yet they had managed to create a miracle like that. He thought of some of the horrid buildings with which modern Venetians had defaced their city: the Bauer Grunwald Hotel, the Banca Cattolia, the train station and he mourned, not for the first time, the act of human greed.”

Do we share the detective’s darkness? Possibly, if we search no further and we accept the fabric of the city is always but always in the past, and past repair. But no architect, dimwit or genius, can accept that. They must always seek to intervene within history with something that does not always resemble familiarity. The Piazza San Marco is not the only place to lift the gloom though having fought tourists for decades it is as well to leave this journey until the hours of darkness and dampness drive others inside. Only then is there a new magic which can but recall history itself.

Music floats out of Florian’s whilst we follow Brunetti’s noonday demon as he makes his way toward Zaccharia, to Giudecca we suspect: “He came down off the last bridge and then out into the Piazza, and all gloom fled, driven by the power of a beauty

that only man could create. The spring wind played with the enormous flags flying in front of the basilica, and Brunetti smiled to see how much more imposing was the cross of San Marco, raging across his scarlet field, than were the three parallel bars of Italy.” Even writers as impressively economic and as existentially challenged by Venice as Joseph Brodsky might not thank you for such interventions.

Brodsky has his own view of the architect; less of a genius, more of a dimwit. To Brodsky that “scumbag of an architect, of that ghastly post-war persuasion... has done more harm to the European skyline than any luftwaffe.” Brodsky might just as well have been scripting Brunetti’s melancholia as he irresistibly hits out once more at the architect-cretin: “he defiled a couple of wonderful campi with his edifices, one of which was naturally a bank.” We know the outcome. Brodsky is so enraged, his lust for the cretin’s wife insatiable, that “for that structure (as they called it in those days) alone...he should be cuckolded.” Not much reverse hope there for the magnificent amongst the dimwits of modern architects. From here to Modernity and back again?

think Solaris

Architecture in Venice seems to offer no expressive potential; its special plasticity is generally discarded in favour of the mute. In an age struggling with novatio, with the bardo, with provisionality, there may no longer be any unity, coherence and ultimately conclusion worth making about architecture. Instead when we see the mass of structure and support offering us new images - a huge visiting space station - we think Solaris. Off to the left towards Mestre, the aesthetics of the oil rig where presence, weight, solidity, horizontality and danger are all on offer, along with a new insubstantiality. Here that enviable randomness all one's own, where lightness is weight and weight lightness. Echoing Ruskin's observation in *The Stones of Venice*, the two contrary kinds of superimposition - weight on lightness, and of lightness on weight.

This superimposition of weight on weight, or lightness on lightness, is - and we know what Ruskin means looking at any view in Venice - nearly always wrong. There is always a tension brought on by ourselves as we perceive an architecture that challenges us, just as some of the larger twisted computer-aided projects no longer give off an image of hierarchy, a system of thinness or thickness, support or scaffold. "The watery city receives dry

inspection, as though it were a myth for the credulous - poets and honeymooners.” Mary McCarthy may be right. The rationalist mind has probably always had its doubts about Venice. But is there not in the hidden carnival of Venice an avant-garde role for architecture? Or is there, in the reluctance to take on ‘modernity’, the inhibition of inventiveness and creativity?

Since Napoleon’s arrival, Jan Morris informs us, despite moments of heroism and sacrifice, Venice has been chiefly a museum, through whose clicking turnstiles the armies of tourism endlessly pass. As the rationalist mind may go on doubting, so Venice will remain, offering the dream of selflessness which at a certain age means loaned poetry or Buddhist-like calm or at another age, the comfort of the small Browning in the deep pocket of an overcoat. One has to wonder whether, like anguished detectives, Ruskin, Rice, Morris or Brodsky all reasonably slept tight in Venice. It may appear unkind to warn here of an impending deradicalism yet we must. What is this attempt to celebrate modernity and invention in this hermit crab, this ‘machine for living’ whilst outside we feel so little moves? Is this not a safe provocation for architecture brought on by the curmudgeons of the last two decades of the 20th Century?

Novelists and princes asking nothing from architecture but a gentle mime, not even the contest of bystanderhood? Is complacency nothing if not a wound for such a 'modern' rupture? In a period of acute safety and acute uncertainty, when investment needs immediate returns, architectural risks are so often ruled out by calculation and lack of vision. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao can be applauded for its grand use of 'cheap' available titanium from Russia, whilst other societies themselves leak out serious metals into the environment. How then does architecture go beyond a desire to accept official, professional vision and horizon? In an opportunistic era, is there an essential resistance to the city itself? What is it about anything modern or contemporary that seems not to fit this city?

the south where death by feverish
hedonism is still possible

We sit in a contemporary emptiness ironically filled by our own anxious need for experience whether we come from The Empty North because of the Cold or The South Where Death by Feverish Hedonism is Still Possible. We are thankfully alone in much of the best unrecognised world architecture. Is it not possible

that this metaphor of the hermit crab locked onto the renovated brewery interior secretly intervenes in a Venice that will always reject it? Progress by reluctance suggests we must close all the schools of architecture and begin again. Nothing of the last century stuck. Architecture henceforth will need disguise but not a disguise in any obvious sense. It needs the perfect naked mask.

This hermit crab suggests traces of architecture in progress. It will be an architecture that will no longer be 'span' or structure, flight or permanence. Just as the provisional asks of architecture, images of anti-gravity, images of the liquidity of our world, it is also inviting the architect to attend to a critical task. The innovative use of structure not only stretches our own visual discomfort, the perception of the interior offers something more real, more tactile. Here without needing to analyse we are offered a display, just as Venice itself is a display. Here, essential tensions and little hierarchies spar and cancel themselves out.

In the house for de Kooning's friend: the delicately positioned antique furniture, the gigantic speakers, the Aalto vase or the Saarinen chair serve well to disguise, but thinly, the space itself. We sink back into Venice in the very emptiness that contains it and us. We are

against Venice at the moment we are at our weakest. "I know not whether it is because San Giorgio is so grandly conspicuous...but for many persons the whole place has a kind of suggestion of rosiness." Henry James considers the colour of the Venetian concert, a faint, shimmering, airy even, watery pink. "There is indeed a great deal of very evident brickwork, which is ever fresh or loud in colour, but - James hints wider - always burnt out, as it were, always exquisitely mild." How we wish the burnt out condition takes over and we are allowed the shimmering that can take us so easily under the surface, that can bring on the mildness of Venice's beauty whilst underneath new teeth must be cut, new intolerance and law-bending scripted until it burns out even the detectives responsible to solve the crimes of this invisible city.

There is no question about it. We must convene a meeting in the South where death by feverish hedonism is still possible: a meeting in the house for de Kooning's friend of the relevant detectives who could bring to this city, the urgency of other cities. Those detectives able to add the darkness on its lightness thereby add to the very evident life that is always under the water's surface. Thereupon we might sniff more than those little mental pictures which delight the poet in us all. We might upset the city with the dynamics of the

contemporary: beginning, of course, with a small ‘c’ and a diary entry.

a diary entry

The diary of a nobody? Impossible? Of course, nobody is really a nobody but we know what we mean. Unusually warm in Venice for the time of year, 23 Celsius, after a shower in the red room, spent the morning in the house shrugging off migraine and world anxiety. The malady of grief once more! So persistent is this benign sadness, such is the immense comfort and luxury of bystander-hood offered by the shell. It has always been impossible to avoid the melancholia that chosen leisure brings. The USA has decided to attack Afghanistan, the first in a continuing war on terrorism. I am reminded of our trip up the Khyber Pass last year, riding in the back of the jeep with the security guards who thrust a Kalashnikov into my lap. “Just in case,” they said, “snipers, up there!” There was laughter between their stained teeth. We reached the border with Afghanistan without problems. There we took tea with the border police. The guards then upon my question demonstrated the virtues of the Kalashnikov against the Chinese AK47. Now here in Venice, the unreality cancels out previous life. Had

I ever really been to Peshawar, Landi Kotal or can the imaginary geography of this house stand in for the world lost? I tried those recommended exercises to get rid of the intense pain at the seat of the neck. Helped momentarily! After drying, I dressed in white kurta pyjamas, the marble coolly pleasant on the feet. Took breakfast in the 'campo' after stealing a look across at the Redentore; misty, blurred, magic sight, all Brodkey's words come to mind. Stole some original crisp bread from the kitchen and prepared it with apricot conserve and espresso. If unreality cancels our previous life, then this house for de Kooning's friend makes it difficult to know which century we belong to. I catch myself looking through the bamboo maze across to Dorsoduro. If it weren't for the huge Minoan liners that block out the view, you could imagine Stendhal taking a swim from the rope ladder thrown over the side of Valdramin's boat. Late morning, winter sun up as far as it could and would, went out to sun bathe on the terrace, taking one of the huge, Harrods-stitched W-monogrammed, thick white towels. Books, second or third espresso, radio. Delicious! Thought of the 'W' as opposed to the double 'V'; another misreading from the last century? Couldn't understand why W was becoming more and more significant in this house. Watched the lizards crawl from the undergrowth, freeze, then shoot away from my outstretched hand across the glass bridge. Dreaming of secretly occupying this house, or then

an 'equal possession'? Read the final paragraph of Norwich's History and the opening paragraph of the same writer's Traveller's Companion. As usual this little parenthetical structure took its place in the greater scheme of things; that little re-ordering so necessary each day. Thought of stealing both books but didn't. Decided, with no food in the fridge and only Chimay beer upstairs, to fast until evening when a visit to the Sardinian Restaurant L'Incontro off San Margherita would offer up once more its delicate hors d'oeuvre of shredded horse.

Resisted walking along the Fondamenta to the Redentore - *gusu incontra sua madre* - with the intention of writing a rough guide; instead, wanted to profit from the extraordinary temperature. Read, dozed, dreamed and idled. Whilst reading Brodkey's *My Venice*, thought about what Roland Barthes said in *The Grain of the Voice* about adjectives: 'And not only are we unable to conceive of ourselves through adjectives, we cannot even authenticate the adjectives applied to us by others: they leave us mute; for us they are critical fictions.' Is this house or are we the critical fictions we make up for others to authenticate? Beyond the lagoon, beyond this soggy set of islands, the war goes on in Afghanistan but still you'd never have guessed. Venice, anywhere in Venice, has that

advantage of being muffled, distancing you whenever you require it from the activities that shame the world elsewhere. However I did succumb to listening to the BBC World Service at least twice, until I realised those versions were repetitions of the news I had heard last night after arriving home late after dinner in Dorsoduro.

Recalled passing Harry's Dolci and wondering whether this time I'd eat there! On the vaporetto stop, San Basilio, a woman dressed as elegantly as A. would have been has she been in Venice. Found myself wishing she were here, that life went backwards, as the vaporetto switched off its engine in the middle of the Giudecca Canal, facing the Redentore, for just one night.....La salvezza del signore e' per tutti i popoli.. Fitting into no real acceptable category the house for de Kooning's friend will be New York loft, Swedish archipelago moderne, London art gallery void and dematerialised Los Angeles restaurant. Are you so sure it had been built already? The exterior must look as sober, as indifferent as the interior is radical. All detailed to avoid any real contact with the existing 'container', with Venice!

Impossibles Ltd.

The Architect acts like a casting studio, interviewing and assessing the craftsmen possible, those from within Giudecca, others from the Veneto region. The Architect often seeks solutions, senses details, looks for objects that appear at first impossible. Asked what is desired, there comes but a quiet grunt. It is impossible until it is found, and once found it is unmentionable. The search for a new retractable ceramic tipped pen that may slip inside a miniature Mont Blanc body caused the architect endless trips on the top of double-decker bus in London seeking the outlet or shop that might sell it. A student friend from the Architectural Association School in London, after chancing upon the sign - Impossibles Ltd., - suggested The Architect hijack the name and turn it into something unique. This goes too for the search for the necessary marine craft, the tactility of crushed brick, marmorini and the plywood box beams skulled into a machine found nearby in the Giudecca workshops. Today this is called sourcing. Today there are search engines. Punch in the words 'ceramic-tipped', 'pen', 'titanium' and wait for the index to appear. A loss of fun, this no longer qualifies for Impossibles Ltd.

They had just come out of the bookshop near Campo San Stefano, and headed down one of the calli that you can only negotiate those coming the other way by turning sideways. A woman passed, once more so intolerably close as only Venice offers. Suddenly, face and hair like a countess she cries out. The little exclamation was as neat and pert as she was dressed. Her shopping bags, freshly crisp were obviously bought that morning in Paris. She knew the architect. You didn't call! The Architect winced with elegance that could only turn into a delicate apology Ah, no...I wanted to but... The voice trailed off, people pass, scusi, permesso, scusi, once more thrusting us closer than intimacy allows. The countess smiled. Remember..the last time over fragolini. We were going to open a shop. Impossible Ltd. We still can! And with that, the hand left to dangle its own goodbye as the countess disappeared down the calle, sucked into a perspective that was soon drowned by a gaggle of Japanese tourists. We still can, she shouted and the laughter turned neck-hair upwards, curled paper only freshly glued, and hung in that canyon until way into the night.

From The Crillon in Paris, de Kooning's friend calls and leaves a message on the architect's mobile: 'You must see the hinge here in the Crillon. This is the hinge needed. There is a ticket in the airport for you. This

room is reserved for you this evening. I will be in Budapest.’

the architect as hermit crab

According to the architect’s friend, Big Jim Stirling, The Architect was - at the time he said it - the most gifted, the most famous unknown architect practising in the world. Of course it’s rather a large claim but it suits both the character that made it whilst it deserves deeper scrutiny. The Architect, an Armenian with exile and unrest in his blood, has occupied three cities in a way a hermit crab might have elected changing shells: London, Los Angeles and Venice. Investigating the elusive architect, we come across rather impressive but relatively unknown early work. Educated in London at the Architectural Association he seemed to have had that enviable gift of delaying his own talent. After graduation, after working as an architect and teacher at his old school, he opted for an entrepreneurial stint as a restaurateur. This proved disastrous considering the architect’s favourite pastime of sitting with customers and opening the restaurant all night long for the heady, eternal days of festivity and chat. It was after all the 1960s!

A talented photographer it was after publishing his

images on Finnish Jugendstil architecture that he had an unfortunate accident to one of his eyes. On a whim, impelled by restlessness, the architect decided to leave the UK for Los Angeles. He did so and, if we are to believe him, destroyed his archive at the same time. Hence to research any of the early work is somewhat of a detective story. In the city of the angels The Architect began all over again, combining his teaching with practising, carrying out private houses and an award winning airport scheme, until chance once more took him on a teaching trip with his students to Venice. This precipitated a move from Los Angeles to Venice and, if we are to believe him once more, further loss of records and archives.

In the grounds of an Armenian Monastery, Palazzo Zenobio in Dorsoduro, The Architect set up an Experimental Research Centre into Architecture and Urban Space. He named it The Zenobio Institute and proceeded to invite world names to ambitious and refined seminars. Since then the architect has been in joint partnership combining architecture and engineering, restoration and intervention, urban design and private housing, eating and wine-tasting. The Architect would probably have to agree: architects cleverer than their own buildings should go into another line of work. Law, for example!

an alternative life so far

Do we need to know where and when someone was born in order to plan our understanding of the life so far? The course of one's life - curriculum vitae - may not actually consist of events, qualifications and merits that are seen as relevant to any job application. The architect studied at the Architectural Association in London after being advised by one of his teachers that this was the only school for him. Then whoosh, funtoosh, six years disappears without us knowing how and why education is upon us, inviting us this way and that. Thereupon, like de Kooning's friend too, the direction education has already predisposed invites a reluctance to serve in a predictable manner a profession so involved in the heroic. Diplomat, architect, engineer or banker? Architecture in the late fifties and early sixties was still full of the modern promise, what the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz described as the 'modern tune'.

Upon graduation he stuttered into work as a young architect for Douglas Stephen in London. As head of a large, thriving practice Stephen had been commissioned to complete a book on new British architecture. Unable to complete this commission he asked another young colleague called Frampton to

work with the young architect and carry it out. The result was “British Buildings” published by A.C. Black. A keen photographer, The Architect then slipped into the role of Jim Stirling’s photographer undoubtedly for the single dramatic image captured one dawn outside the Leicester University Building. Up with the lark and arriving in Leicester by chance when the light offered one of those reflex camera moments, he knew such a photograph could never be repeated. Jim Stirling knew this too and would proceed to appoint him as Court Photographer. Later, after suffering a drawing board accident which led to the loss of an eye, The Architect would have to telephone Stirling and relinquish the commission to photograph his Stuttgart Gallery. Stirling himself would be in hospital with a hernia.

maison de verre

Back during those heady Kings Road and Soho days, the dreams of Impossibles Ltd., The Architect soon found himself involved in measuring and drawing the “Maison de Verre” in Paris. The Maison de Verre drawings, all done by hand, all painstakingly accurate were to be accompanied by a text by a young critic called Frampton and published in a French edition.

Days of wetting hair and being modern, these measured drawings suddenly went missing. They idled for a long time at a French publisher. No move was made, nothing was to be done, the drawings it was thought had been lost. The architect decided to retrieve the drawings and came up with a canny plot. He called one of his friends who, at the time, owned a good number of Harley Davidsons (at least three, we are told!).

Tattooed and threatening, long before such characters from public school would offer the disruptive model for Joe Strummer and the rest of the punk era in the 1970s, the architect offered to pay his friend Rupert Tinkerton-Davies the huge sum of 100 pounds. He was to take his bike over to Paris, and encamp in the publisher's office until the drawings were returned. In the deal he was to wear his greasiest leathers, keep his hair unwashed and matted, and reveal when necessary the terrifying tattoo on both of his arms. Rupert took up the commission, the terror worked and the drawings were brought back to London. In Rupert's 'life so far' he now runs a Bentley but has never been to the house for de Kooning's friend.

Anything from Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke* would do to capture London's early sixties: "Quickly I

straightened my tie, wetted my hair, and combed it to show the parting, for I felt that a straight line across the skull was not without importance in the circumstances; heaven knows why, but it was modern.” By then The Architect was perfecting the art of the sidetrack, whereby activities like photography, cooking, wine tasting all played their own role in delaying the type of life he might lead, the type of architecture he might design. The Architect established his own practice in 1967. What more do we need to know?

the hermit warriors

The paralysis hits those who feel nothing for the press interview, for the cocktail advertisement of a job well done. They, the hermit warriors are shy, crawl back into the shell that someone else has left lying for them. Or, if they are lucky, re-arranged for them! You see, if this were a police enquiry, if it were treated with the same relevance and cynicism, we'd be forced to note that hermit crabs have no shells of their own. Instead they take over second hand worlds, vacated shells of an appropriate size, vacated cities and vacated lives. Only each individual knows the appropriate size, stays in their first life a touch longer than necessary, allowing some room for growth.

Large species of hermit crabs are, like Venice the city, known to have room mates. A rag worm for example. And on the outside, attached, parasite-like, some crabs encourage anemones to live on their shells. Their long stinging tentacles allow them to perch there waiting. Happily enough they offer protection to the crab from any predators. Threatened by an attack on many fronts, an octopus for example, the crab will encourage the anemones to move to the lip of the shell to ensure further protection. This is how you intervene or penetrate another's life. You are invited into the house, the house of a millionaire who, in order to build such a house, must work continually, never really having time for the house. Instead, hermit-crab, you take over the place however briefly and scribble furiously, at will, in fragments. After writing, the poet from the Empty North has said, the most difficult thing is the reading.

But right now you desire only to read, work and enjoy the hard won spoils. You have disappointed so many, dropped in and out of lives blemished by your soul. In the house, you are recommended then to make a space no one else can occupy. Once more you are attracted to a life you need no longer share. And then making for that space, you would kill for this book to be read between 8 and 9 in the morning, left-hand espresso-

held, right-hand book-balanced on the small steps in the misty morning, as immense cruise ships cross the Giudecca Canal, eclipsing sight. Painting Venice black, grey and light again; and the bells, tolling for the South where death by feverish hedonism is still possible. Always the bells tolling!

when the windows go dark

Architecture shares its pleasure, bliss, at times, with bibliotherapy. How and why should we expect words to offer us the experience in the house for de Kooning's friend? Surely all the words spent on contemporary architecture succeed only in cancelling out previous insights. Because of this we are allowed to go ahead, invent new stories, accepting we have no standard by which to compare our experiences. Is this not true for a city like Venice? Is not Venice as useful as the monk? In a materialistic culture fundamentally irreligious, Thomas Merton suggests in *The Silent Life* that the monk is incomprehensible because he 'produces nothing'. The Architect agrees. Literature, more specifically poetry, is as much a part of architectural criticism and analysis as any critique grounded in sociology, mathematics, philosophy or the fine arts. Hallucinatory or not, is there any reason to change this?

Of course too much writing frames the critical, selects and then massages the ego. Can we be braver than this? Can we accept the nonsense, forego critical niceties and abandon all pretence? Are not rumours the gossip of architecture, distracting us, sidetracking us? Like Joseph Brodsky, whose book on Venice 'Watermark' is one long meandering sidetrack, could we present a series of sidetracks rather than any analysis of this house? 'What lies ahead, in other words, may amount not to a story but to the flow of muddy water 'at the wrong time of year'.

What then of reading? Why should this house not offer up the pleasures of reading while we too offer up to the house the pleasures gained from other worlds? Imagine all the books left here by visitors as the imaginary library of the house for de Kooning's friend begins to grow. Imagine the sites, the various shelves, the carrels waiting to be occupied: niches, alcoves, corners, all places where it is necessary to take a book. Relieved from trying to read on a vaporetto wedged in between Biennale visitors en route to the next cocktail party, the library awaits.

Some who have been to Venice experience, it has been said, something similar to that in Benares on the Ganges. Their departure is always tinged with

regret. In these cities, they spend years editing out the factories, the sweatshops, the unemployed, the redundant, the addicts and the homeless. Always the nastiness of a history betrayed. As if, just as in books - and only certain ones at that - it is possible to skip some parts and only dwell in others. If, to go with Harold Brodkey, it is the point of the critic to demonstrate mastery of the contemporary moment, then how sadly we feel this failure. Just as condescension flows from the critics to the writers, we think of yet another death in Venice.

If we were to do it, could we choose to do it so? Could breath slowly give itself up, there on the altane facing the Redentore, this time shrouded and as unclear as the fog makes it? When I think of Venice and Benares, like Joseph Brodsky, I have no idea which century it really is anymore. "At this point, for me," Brodsky writes, "the window had gone dark. King Fog rode into the piazza, reined in his stallion, and started to unfurl his white turban. His buskins were wet, so was his charivari; his cloak was studded with the dim, myopic jewels of burning lamps. He was dressed that way because he hadn't any idea what century it was, let alone which year. But, then being fog, how could he?"

bibliotherapy

So much of what we write and scribble is nonsense. We have become scriptomaniacs. So much of what has been written about architecture is nonsense and, over the years, I too have added to this. But is not Thomas Bernhard correct, “everything we say is nonsense, no matter what we say it is nonsense and our entire life is a catalogue of this nonsense”? Envisage then if you will an entire tome written in one speaking, unspoken voice, a tome all about architecture and The House for De Kooning’s Friend; a tome with no divisions, no paragraphs, no easy reading breaks, and only the chance pause, a sign or two which would allow us occasionally to come up for air. Or to be more optimistic, a sign or two which would allow us to read those signs and translate them into relevant systems for ourselves. Systems that are not always languages, but systems that make of our own nonsense the relevance of a century, the relevance of grief, the relevance of a life lived. Contrary to what some may think, this slim but unending volume on architecture would not increase the public misunderstanding about contemporary architecture. It would, though, in all likelihood serve to indicate how much of our lives have been spent in the necessity of misunderstanding. It might then not be such a thin book!

The imagination is still powerful whatever history says. The imagination will always succeed in making more of what is already there. Whether you reject this as a traveller or pursue this, it is your own choice. The library in the House for de Kooning's Friend yet to be created certainly needs attention. For this purpose I have searched all the books in The Hotel Architecture for some help in this. Surely new passages could be found written on Venice, even on Giudecca, just as we attempt to find new backwaters in this the loneliest city. That of course is the easy part, where true meaning takes flight so quickly, so urgently. Taking down a book on 'The Silent Life' from the Thomas Merton Room, or then Harold Brodkey's story of his own death, 'This Wild Darkness', I have full confidence that one or the other will be of use in the house. But why do I do this? Is it because in our self-involvement we so often want to mime the experience of others, others more of a 'somebody' than ourselves? And do we not imagine, in such a house, that architecture can bring to the solitary something contrary to the known phrase, a new lease of death!

the thin books

The gaps that the architect designs, the gaps through

which he invites the guest or visitor to see a Venice beyond the campo and the piazza, the gaps that allow the same visitor to observe the islands outlying in the Adriatic or then the intimate traffic of the lagoon, these are the gaps that will become the library. Safely exiled from the fishing lagoon, the visitor to the House for de Kooning's Friend will have the need for small library machines. These will be miniature shelves, miniature libraries, carefully designed to prop up a maximum of a dozen or so volumes. The effectiveness of these architectural machines will of course depend on the thickness of the books. It is likely that the architect can invent these and provide drawings which would give some idea of how these will take shape.

To aid The Architect I have sketched one of these miniature sections called The Thin Books. None of these books measure - in spine-width - more than 10 mm. Combined, they are graspable in one left-hand. Up there then, on one of the nearest voids in The House, a void through which the city is viewed, The Architect is already designing the first architectural machine to house the ten thin books grasped in my left hand. The order too is essential to the way the books nestle in the hand, the way their spines, once more perfect binding, react to each other. Nestling always as pairs or trios, for books can always be bookends, the ten books awaiting

a home are as follows: a volume of R. S. Thomas' poetry, the Everyman edition sits alongside Gaston Bachelard's 'The Psychoanalysis of Fire' which abuts E.M.Cioran's 'On the Heights of Despair'. There is an ever so slight pause there. 'The Theatre and Its Double' by Antonin Artaud must touch Samuel Beckett's 'Texts for Nothing' before hitting up against William Gass's blue-covered version of his philosophical enquiry 'On Being Blue'. Four books close this little miniature literature machine: Thomas Merton's volume on 'The Wisdom of the Desert', Edmund Leach's 'Culture and Communication' and Sybille Lacan's slim marvel about her father 'Un Père' are finally book-ended by Thomas Bernhard's remarkable book 'The Loser'. The challenge to the visitor to The House for De Kooning's Friend is on. Everything that can be said about this house, about Venice, about world architecture, about life will actually, must actually, be found in these ten small volumes.

Brodkey, bystanderhood and another lease of death

Which in fact Venice was for Harold Brodkey! From these shelves in The House we must imagine lines left lying around, the good ones, those gifts of time from

authors here before. "I am dying...Venice is dying... the century is dying" and so it did for Harold Brodkey. Just as we turn, so Brodkey turned, resentfully unwell, seeking a place to allow the corpse to go on dying; from the brilliant sunlight and the restless water of the Grand Canal, into the shadow of a smaller canal leading to the Giudecca. There too, the last time I was in Venice, the world - or the part of the world that was Amerika - was at war with terrorism. But as I searched the gazettino, I could find no news of this. It was impossible once more to rescue the 'k' from Amerika and put it back where it belonged, in literature. The world appeared to have stopped reading and in the place of another's death, we so desire the beauty to visit us however briefly, just as the skull under the foot of Christ in the Redentore agonises at our attempt to photograph it. Only Venice itself survives as a corpse and keeps on dying, to repeat Jorge Semprun's memorable phrase, continuing to defeat us all.

Pro or contra, are we then to lie in our own books as we do so cleverly in life? The overwhelming powerful thrust of bourgeois life is to lie, to hide things, Brodkey reminds us in another lease of death. He could have been ensconced up there on the altane in the house for de Kooning's friend, he could have found his church and seen the loss of true meaning fade in front of his

own eyes. “If so much of what is hidden is chosen arbitrarily, family to family, person to person, then what is revealed is done with the same desire to defeat us.” It is the talent of bystanderhood which sees to it that we exist, in relation to some events in our life, always enigmatic, always postponed. ‘My head in its bell of rigid bone was changing in hot, whited bystanderhood,’ Brodkey writes in *Profane Friendship*. It is ‘a moral posture, an emotional fastidiousness’ which draws us into the life and death of others; it is often so little that we fail to recognise the signs.

In *The House for de Kooning’s Friend*, I follow Brodkey’s attachment, the shyness and slyness of his illness leading once more to Venice at the start of his second year as an Aids patient. The illness attempts to bring out the power of the adjective, just as we know Venice will survive the death of someone who wishes to be more important than they really are. ‘The light is assertive, a word I find uncomfortable, sharp-edged, grating, there is more coughing in the city than normal.’ Brodkey dying, reminds us of our struggles, of how a city can make from our best intentions, inadequacy. It is also that constant struggle to let go of the pathetic validity we wish to give some of our dearly-held ideas... Venice...that structure of appearances without a secret reality? Of course, Brodkey convinces himself rather

than the reader, it still has its secrets, but they are like our own minor ones. Hot whited bystanderhood! How we can live in a line, in the life of another, in a city so abused, loaning meaning from it for the length of our stay! How do we become the B-Team?

the B team

Brodsky, Brodkey, Beckett, Boltanski, Beuys, Borges, Bond, Brecht, Bloch, Broch, Baudrillard, Barthes, Barth, Buber, Brautigan, Bellow, Bellini, Bataille, Butor, Busi, Buzatti, Brodsky, Bordat, Boucrot, Beckermann, Bergman, Bloom, Blanchot, Banks, Berger, Blonski, Baird, Berman, Bunuel, Barnes, Bachelard, Baker, Bullock, Breton, Baudelaire, Bewes, Berry, Bhaskar, Bunge, Beder, Boyle, Benjamin, Berlin, Buk, Bateson, Bartok, Barrault, Barragan, Balthus, Balla, Brod, Behrens, Bell, Benjamin, Benveniste, Bernanos, Barbage, Babel, Bardot, Boccioni, Baxter, Bazin, Beauvoir, Berg, Bergson, Berio, Bernal, Bresson, Berryman, Besant, Bishop, Bohr, Boll, Bomberg, Bonnard, Boulez, Bourdieu, Boyd, Brancusi, Brando, Braque, Braudel, Brueur, Brook, Brubeck, Brown, Bruner, Bukharin, Bulgarov, Burke, Burroughs, Brahms, Britten, Bava, Burch, Bouvier, Bouvard, Bontzek, Bazin, Belazs, Bergas,

Baudrot, Bounore, Barthelme, Bonnet, Berzour,
 Bacall, Bogart, Bene, Beguin, Berard, Baty, Benoit,
 Berard, Bernhardt, Bory, Bely Bougeois, Bourdeaux,
 Barbellion

.....
I imagine writing numerous
 other books showing this city in another way and
 yet I would still return to Brodsky or Brodkey. What
 coincidence in this similarity, the B team? Why this
 attention, the stubbornness to follow a sidetrack and
 make of someone else's experience the hermit city
 of quite another sentiment? In the last decade of
 the 20th Century The Architect proposed a seminar
 of film and the city at The Zenobio Institute. He'd
 planned to speak - unsteadily - about the poetics of
 unrest, knowing too well that whenever the visitor
 visited Venice it was the constant undulation, the
 water beneath and all around that accompanied him
 to sleep. It would never happen.

We realise, not always to our advantage, we come down
 when we lean heavily on others, those who have seen
 and felt unrest first, in their bodies, in their minds.
 It was as if my own bystander-hood had become the
 reason to remain moving. It was as if Venice teaches
 how unrest is the commerce that keeps Venice
 contemporary and ignores our boredom, our rage. "I

cannot recall a conversation in Venice that did not start with the topic of Venice.” Brodkey was right, but just as Venice may go on dying as someone else’s exquisite corpse, do I not wish to do the same, clinging onto the elaboration of my own self? Is not this another lease of death, helping us lie to ourselves that this is wisdom, the simplicity reached by virtue of getting to this age? For us, for Brodkey, for Brodsky, for the rest of the B team, locked within self-involvement, the only option surely is to write and thus think differently. ”Some kinds of frivolity, like some kinds of selfish insistence, have an earnestness, a hidden skeleton of grace. I do not understand this.” Nor me, Harold!

the book so far

“There is no doubt about it,” The Architect says, “that’s why it feels so familiar, this house, this dream, the crab, Hogwarts, the school of wizardry in Harry Potter. Prep-school in Buckinghamshire was like this. Brings me nearer my own daughter!” Why is it not possible, we think together as we look toward San Marco and Paganelli’s, to write a book about a house that is as educational, whimsical, unstructured as it may be entertaining, as light as it is serious, as visual as it is verbal, as possible as it is impossible? The Architect

and the Sufi agree once more, the public understanding of architecture has suffered. Do we not organise our stories to fit in with our travels, with all those stories of the world we meet when away from home? Then, tired, excited, rejuvenated or just irritated, we all come down, home again. Why, they asked as they noted once more the orange awnings near Paganelli's, do we get tired of all those professional meetings but find ourselves still attending them? Have we not grown up? Are we not able to let go?

They took the vaporetto once more and scoured for bookshops around San Stefano. In and out, asking for anything for children on architecture or building. They found so few, but one which offered the world. Its structure was simple. Using famous buildings like the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Houses of Parliament in London, and Habitat at the Expo '67 in Montreal, it attempted a history of architecture. Sketchy child-like drawings became childish drawings. Fussed crayon and smudged worlds! As if crayon suddenly familiarises us, taking us back to a time of wizardry, taking the child back into nostalgia and re-dressing it. Invited to read and accept the index prepared for them, this was a re-packaged, known world. This was a world of architecture already agreed on - and by - mostly architects themselves.

That a child of 6 uses the line, the edge of a pen, the glitter pen or a jell-o roll pen with added effluent with more subtlety than these re-imagined crayoned versions of the world's buildings is hardly acknowledged. That the six year old child can photograph the building, choose its own frame, scan it, edit out and re-imagine a world already questioned is also ignored. Instead, the child is invited into a model of an encyclopaedia. Not only decided for them, this was a history as ambiguous to the grown ups as it is patronising to the smudged world of the children. Not a book like this that can be occupied, swerved from, sidetracked and hijacked just as the house itself can. A House for de Kooning's Friend, the Sufi says to the architect, must be a book to be read on a vaporetto next to the Venetian in dark glasses, gloved hands, radio up to his ears listening to the latest score between Juva and Lazio.

Venice, the first wallpaper!

Just as we arrange our own narratives to fit our schemes of history, just as we arrange the stories to fit the countries we do not feel at home in, we arrange the sanctuaries and future crimes that offer exile in this unknown world. Did you become de Kooning's friend? What then was de Kooning like: monstrous, creative?

What is this psychology of modesty that chooses your direction in life? Why this engaged dispassion as the world forces you to choose the directions you wish not to take in life?

In one of the reading machines the architect designs, de Kooning's friend will discover a small book on a little known but well-respected Pakistani painter. A Sufi in all but the life murdered. The name in gold on the cover of the book: Zahoor ul Akhlaq. It will force the visitor to consider the coincidence that de Kooning begins to have for this manual, for this house. And the black paintings of Akhlaq will also force the visitor to forego the usual dismal interpretations of black and blank canvases and come up with their own. It will also demonstrate what little knowledge we use in order to move ourselves, that fraction further, making us unreachable to others. The artist was murdered in 1999. The crime has never been explained.

A house-in-waiting then: a book, a collection of tissue paper, a user's guide, willing to be read in any number of ways, it invites the visitor to forget the stage set. Preferably, years gone by, when this house is more known, it will be remembered for its entry along a narrow space in Giudecca. Once an old brewery, the raffish entry recalling the renovation behind, you

went on wooden steps, across an open roof, window boarded up with thick industrial polythene until you entered the guillotine gate, a gate that forced you to look upwards. There began a world you thought you would recognise, a world identifiable in the types of magazines that like to do these things, Casa Mia, Casa Mozart, Casa Wagner. There began the black bamboo maze, a place in which you would once secretly make love, speak of Methodism whilst all around Venice rocked beneath you and her. And The Architect's deft desire to conceal the fantasy and detail behind the wallpaper of beautiful things that surrounded it? Venice then, the first wallpaper!







 3

the ease of leaving true meaning behind

She was pre-eminently an adapter rather than an innovator. Her vocation was commerce; her countryside was the sea; her tastes were voluptuous; her function was that of a bridge between east and west; her obsession was political stability; her consolation, when she needed it, was self-indulgence.

- Jan Morris

empty in the North because
of the cold

Where some can reside in the lobbies of the world's hotels, the lobbies of Venice are out there in each and every campo, in each and every 'core', 'calle' and 'piazza'. Where some see pastiche, others see the coding that identifies their own journey, just as products begin to code the very lives we reject. The Architect is offered up to us as reluctant hero not, as

the magazines wish to write, that failure to promote anything but the paradox of self-promotion in this, a self-promotional world. As tourists we learn the rules of half a city, half a life and are left to invent the rest. When we read Donna Leon's detective novels featuring the Venetian detective Guido Brunetti, we read not for the crimes. These seem not of the real Venice but the city of the outsider. True the novels do give us the tantalising idea of half a city, half a life; but the detective we feel should give us more. We then try and fill in the rest. More of Brunetti's cries, Brunetti's anxieties, Brunetti's favourite bar, Brunetti's view on adultery, pollution, Islam, the tourist, Brunetti on contemporary architecture, Mickey Mouse and Frank Gehry. Less dialogue perhaps, more darkness, is this not what we require from such a story, such a city? Knowledge of the future crimes: more solitude, more exile, more melancholy even from which the true lightness and nostalgia of Venice founts! Is this not what the good detective story does? It lends redundancy to the clues necessary for the crime to be solved. It invites us to imagine the route from which resolution might spring. If so, are we in the right city to observe this? A city based on misfortune, a city of unfulfilled contracts and intense snobbery, strengthened by narrow horizons and, according to Mr Ruskin, declining ever since 1407. How do you sleep at

night, Messrs Rebus, Morse, Zen, Brunetti? Answer: they don't! Could it not be the same for architects?

no time to hug Kafka

Remember if de Kooning's friend had not met de Kooning, where might he be now? Would this house ever need to exist? There is no mistaking the introspective melancholia, the aching ennui associated with the brief, brilliant burning of the archipelago light. You can certainly sit in the lost room in the house facing the Adriatic, close the eyes and wake up overlooking the Swedish archipelago outside Stockholm. Anyone who has seen the film *No Time to Hug Kafka* will recognise the characteristics of this lost room. A room lined with books all bound in black leather, just as those in the film belonging to the Swedish diplomat who once wanted to go to New York City and study art. Instead, he took his father's advice.

No Time to Hug Kafka is a film about this Swedish diplomat's obsession with death. The diplomat sits scribbling into his endless journals, hallucinating his own involvement in the murder of the Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme. He cannot explain why he was in the same place at the same time or why, after a

visit to India where he was the Swedish Ambassador, he ended up taking Palme's raincoat instead of his own. "I am not obsessed by death. I just happen to think about it all the time" he says as the film opens the night of the murder. His voice continues in a distinguished manner of disquiet: "we can now kill ourselves humanely, unknowingly, accidentally, by the very same instrument that we can use to write out our lives, to scribble our memoirs, our reminiscences, our own history, the history of others, the history of our own nation and the history of the nations of others."

By means of a computer, a modem, a Keep-U-Alive or Play-Dead Self-deliverance software programme, the aging diplomat actually keeps himself alive in this lost room. What age is this, the diplomat asks, when there is just no time to hug Kafka? The balance of terror familiar in the Twentieth Century has, in this new immortal century become private. All of us possess the balance of terror in our own lives. No one else need be consulted anymore about our life and our death. We make our own decisions. It is in sight of the Swedish archipelago, dreaming of the Greek island Spinalonga, that the Swedish diplomat administers the necessary dosage he needs to keep him alive when prompted by the computer. This new century could prove to have

its advantages if we are able to take them. It could, just could, leave us memory free, he muses. His scribblings have become detailed scenarios. “We will then be unable to determine what happened the week before and what will be the due date to leave this earth. We used to be able to hug Kafka,” he speaks whilst the camera ranges through the lost black notebooks that line his study. “Now, keeping ourselves alive, we don’t beat death, we just score a few more points. Traces of our past, by the advances in forensic science and DNA tracing can occur in places we never imagined. Other people and objects can carry our presence to places we have never been. We can be re-scripted back in history, immortal and charged with committing acts we have never committed. Potentially, anyone can now be traced back to be responsible for a murder, a crime, a death. I,” the diplomat pauses, “can even have been responsible for the murder of the Swedish prime-minister.”

scriptomaniacs

If the 20th Century was an era of huge advances in communications and information, we have seen it partnered by the same advances in ignorance and stupidity. A century in which we talked too much,

we wrote too much, published too many books and we spoke too loosely. Are we not all potential scribblers, scriptomaniacs of our own lives: from Kafka to Kundera to the taxi driver, from Gorbachov to Glenn Gould, from the diplomat to the piano tuner? Whether the diplomat realises that he can kill himself by the same act which administers medicine we are never quite sure. But one thing is certain and the film brilliantly shows this. By email, web camera and the Internet, he is able not only to inform those he wishes to know about his death, but he is able to tell them the precise moment. He plans and forewarns even his closest friends without them being able to do anything about it. The film opens and closes in this secret room. The diplomat, now an old man sits in front of his computer. He is a self-confessed scriptomaniac.

We get the hint of a cabin, with a wild landscape outside; sea and rock. It is the Adriatic though and not Swedish archipelago. The camera finds his hands and settles on them, slightly quivering. He has to make a decision. The film cuts to the computer screen which presents a question: DO YOU WANT TO CONTINUE? The diplomat's right hand moves slowly operating the wireless mouse. The cursor hovers over the NO key. It moves away to find the YES key. He depresses the mouse unintentionally, ever so slowly. In the

darkness of the fade, a voice narrates with a mocking wit, in and out of humour: “We speak too much. We talk too loosely. We write too much.” But computers now sense the hovering finger. Nothing like a touch, a human touch, is necessary to register assent. The diplomat dies, the secret room survives. There is a de Kooning on the wall behind his head.

game strategies

The crime in our unformed thoughts trails us, we weep even if we do not want to. Brevity in our residence, in hotel rooms or guest houses, in the house for de Kooning’s friend, requires us to develop clearly, within a wide range of options, a special discipline. This is a discipline not only to arrive at a concept but to understand how our thinking moves as we develop that concept. Visitors, guests and students to this house for de Kooning’s friend must discover the necessity to dissolve or transform their thinking into a coherence that suggests itself. Trimming, redefining and reformulating thinking is as necessary as the licence we take to expand into unknown areas. The guest or visitor to the house is invited into the game set up by the owner. Located all around are books of differing significance to the labyrinth the visitor

is briefly negotiating, and to the Venice beyond the terraces of the Giudecca neighbourhood. This is a game that has moved on from that of the late 20th Century, where the redeemer was the reader and the writer was nowhere to be seen. Here the writers return, all scriptomaniacs heavily involved in the books they have written, dwelling inside the books of others, all denying their part in the dictatorships and future crimes. Clues to this game are everywhere to be found but subtly muted, layered within the labyrinth itself. Amongst the literary souls that float here inside the house for de Kooning's friend: Fernando Pessoa, Witold Gombrowicz, Georges Perec, Malcolm Lowry and others find their place in the shell that was once 'Modernism'.

The cultural logic of what we used to sweetly call 'modernism' has retreated to the museums and architecture is now approached as a game. Stripping itself of pretentiousness, architecture has begun to stimulate the wrong imagination. We speak of radical re-thinking, re-assessments of the lost world. We speak of the edge of things, boundaries and transgression teaching us something about ourselves which should be left to fiction. The professional bodies that could take the first step in a Rabelaisian discontinuity often don't. For example located somewhere in The House

is a paperback volume of Italo Calvino's Six Memos for the Next Millennium. The visitor need search for this volume for its location is not obvious. On its cover, in black and white, a shell!

where we now sit!

Just before he died Italo Calvino was working on a series of texts for the Charles Eliot Norton lectures in 1984 which he titled 'Six Memos for The Next Millennium'. Amongst the memos Calvino discussed were lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity. Apparently Calvino got as far as the fifth memo leaving only notes for the sixth. The word 'consistency' was written faintly in Calvino's own hand. 'Consistency' might have only been a sketch for the sixth memo but if indeed the sixth memo was 'consistency', what would we make of it in the light of the previous five memos? And if the missing memo wasn't to be 'consistency', what would we invent as the final memo to help us through our journey? "Who are we, who is each of us," Calvino asks, "if not a continuation of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Even life is an encyclopaedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly

shuffled and recorded in every way conceivable.”

Recalling the thread Calvino begins to unwind in his memos using literature as an existential function, our thread is to unwind the architecture of this house similarly. In amongst all the logics of dissolution and reunion, we couldn't begin better than with the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of current living and architecture. But that was just a beginning. That was the first memo. And we still want the sixth. As an architectural project we might construct words or time, or then leave words and time well alone. It is entirely possible that an open interdisciplinary workshop called the Missing Memo would have been on the agenda of The Zenobio Institute, Venice during the mid- 1990s. It might now have to be done at the newly founded Zetaville Institute for Partial Architectures.

The first five memos would be taken as given. To make of Calvino's 'absence', the search would be on for the lost 'sixth' memo. Each student would have had the liberty to agree with Calvino and interpret 'consistency' in their own way, or then take the opportunity to disagree and invent their own 'sixth' memo. Essential to the understanding of The House for de Kooning's Friend, this is the game we are

invited to play. Assessment is ongoing, occupying the space is unending and the house becomes a theatre workshop.

the blind scenario

Venice presents us with the obvious carnival each time it opens up to the world. In 1995, before the dream, it was a city where it seemed more than natural to celebrate and play across two events with equal possession if not equal value: art and ice hockey. In that year Finland won the World Ice Hockey championship at about the time the Biennale in Venice was preparing for its centennial. De Glider In was a Swedish phrase used by the Finns during the championship. When the puck entered the net, you could not fail to recognise the smoothness, the ease with which the player stroked the puck into the net with the utmost finesse. It glides in. A work of art really! The role of the Venice Biennale in the life of an artist could be compared to an Olympic appearance if not an Ice Hockey World Championship Winner's medal.

The phrase work of art went with work for art. Besides the 'works of art' being prepared and transported to

Venice from all over the world, countless works for art were going on within the city: hedge trimming, pipe repairing, insect killing and boat painting. At the same time heroes were preparing themselves elsewhere. To make a deal with an international communications company, the curator of the Empty in the North because of the Cold Art show in Venice had to be able to discuss ice hockey as well as art. The object of this deal was the use of five mobile phones. In American English there is a phrase: To talk a good game! Whilst artists and architects need to talk a good game for their art, the ice hockey players needed to play that 'good' game. De Glider in - and they all did, including the curator who received five mobile phones for use during the Biennale.

To suit this city, it is necessary to think of a Blind Scenario. This was a scenario to keep a conversation which hasn't yet started going. Or as Wittgenstein put it: "what can be shown, cannot be said." Suddenly the letter W assumed some mysterious significance. By interweaving the space and the art works, the photographs with the shadowless light of Scandinavia, we were presented with the Empty North in the heart of the Venice Biennale. This was nightland and reluctance, Paradiso. This was also the labour of words as Joseph Brodsky described it in Watermark:

“For here yourself is the last thing you care to see.” This naturally moves up effortlessly - de glider in! - to the ‘labour of the elbow’, the art of packing, the art of concealing. Words and art work wrapped up for the journey to Venice. For this it would be necessary to follow the arrival of the packing crates to Piazzale de Roma and remember R.L.Stevenson: “to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.”

Whilst we do this, we chance upon the ‘labour of the tail’ after a visit to the Venice Aquarium. The soundless, not noiseless space replicates the versions of the North which the architect would design in the Garden. A retreat from the word, soundless but not noiseless, something John Cage told us about. Is it the weather that’s wrong or our calendars? The Blind Scenario completes itself by the ‘labour of the tongue’ as outlined by Brodsky: “There is something in me, I suppose, that always respects the physical side of human utterance, regardless of the context; the very movement of someone’s lips is more essential than what moves them.” At the opening in the Pavilion of The Empty North, the works of art are revealed, sited and prepared as in an aquarium. Everything is written in the white spaces between one lost letter and the next; the perfect cocktail, perfect timing; perfect tongue wagging. But early morning it’s refuse

disposal time in Venice. Imagine the labour. Imagine removing building rubble by wheelbarrow on the Riva Degli Schiavoni in the rain. Constant fugue, constant movement, constant ice hockey moves. The winning goal: de glider in. Robert Louis Stevenson was right again: “the true success is to labour.”

the honorary Venetian

In an instant mood of introspection, the suggestion of the gruesome, law-bending underworld of Venice, The House for de Kooning’s Friend begins to take on its own life. The detectives gather, tired of the fiction they cannot control; the existential anguish of Guido Brunetti, detective, matches that of Inspector Morse, Aurelio Zen, John Rebus or other, even blacker, detectives. Is it possible, Brunetti thought, as he passed San Basilio and made his way along the Zattere to the only supermarket open on a Sunday, that he existed in a more cinematic way than other fictional detectives? This worried him as far as the supermarket entrance when his mind turned to getting a shopping basket. He refused to take the trolley with those ridiculous plastic cards. He only wanted some fresh pesto!

Influenced by non-fiction, Brunetti had left the

Questura and passing San Lorenzo Church wondered why a group of Swedish artists, all women, going by the name of rocket.com would use the grandly dismal colossus as part of their art project. He tried desperately to keep up with the art in a city that was continually doing its best to marginalise him. His daughter was threatening to study architecture and he wasn't sure how to react. He'd have to consult his old friend the Armenian architect. His son was threatening to move to Cuba. What, he shrieked, had brought that on? Brunetti was troubled. He would have liked to think more of this when he was interrupted by a gaggle of Japanese tourists. He was forced to play the game his young son used to call Formula One. It consisted of threading - at considerably high speed - through tourists in the small calli of Venice. Without, that is, touching any one of them. Delicate, taking much skill, his hips however could no longer swerve that skilfully. He found himself too often apologising to a low-bowing Japanese woman.

But he made it out into the open. Suddenly the feeling gutted him once more. What if as a character he had been given a loathing for his own city? He found himself wishing he could be sent to Stockholm or Riga, anywhere to get away from this museum. He wished he could be in places where his loathing would

not be recognised, places where the suspicion he had about Venice would really become a past he could leave behind. Instead, alone in the refuge he had built for himself in the family and city, he was suspended between the two. Worst of all, his wife Paola, had recently discovered the Yale School of Distorted Literature. She was intent on misreading everything he shared with her. It made for uncomfortable *insalata*!

Who needs the scribblers and scriptomaniacs that have created us? Brunetti wiped the sweat off his brow and thought of those fireflies used as lights on the end of a shoe. Where had he read that story? He reached the San Basilio vaporetto stop. He was on his way to Giudecca. The man they called de Kooning's friend was holding a concert in the house and might be able to help him. He was also in that fortunate position for a detective: he had no case. However a detective with no case was not so fortunate for the best selling author needing to write another book. Could he help out? Could he not invent the crime about to happen? Brunetti smiled as he drank a quick *corretto*. Waiting at the vaporetto stop, he caught sight of the figure of a woman. Dressed in slinky black, he froze. His mind went back to an old Swedish flame he'd once known, the woman who wanted him to leave everything in Venice and go and live in Stockholm. His wife Paola

knew nothing of her. If she had, he laughed, she would have misread the situation. He boarded the vaporetto and looked over from the choppy water to de Kooning's house high up there on Giudecca. He could only make out the bamboo, now overgrown. Was that where the crime would occur?

Duchamps to ourselves

What does the guest to the house know of de Kooning? Brunetti thinks on board the vaporetto. Despite half a century's research into art and architecture, despite the openness of all libraries, not a lot! Would we not be better consulting a deeper authority, one whose words are not quite as mimed as our own? De Kooning's friend had also become mystified. Was it such a miscalculation on the part of the visitor to address him de Kooning's friend? Not to mention if de Kooning happened to be still alive. The sophistication was lost. We could never return to the origin of the word; the characters had become corrupted. Was he now a character in search of the author, or the detective? Who was to explain this turn of events?

For this purpose de Kooning's friend resorted to one of the concealed reading machines in the house and

found a book on Abstract Expressionism. In it Charles Hanson confirmed the coincidence that is becoming this house about to become a crab. He began with a statement by Ad Reinhardt: “What about the reality of the everyday world and the reality of the painting? They are not the same reality. Where is this creative thing that you have struggled to get and where did it come from? What reference and value does it have outside of a painting itself?” Though the words are Reinhardt’s they could also have come from the Pakistani painter, Akhlaq. de Kooning’s friend started to understand just what was happening to his house. Guido Brunetti had just invented the crime about to happen. Before putting the book back into the machine, de Kooning’s friend was struck by a passage written by de Kooning himself: “and there is that one-man art movement Marcel Duchamp – for me a truly modern movement because it implies that each artist can do what he thinks he ought to – a movement for each person and open for everybody.” True, de Kooning’s friend thinks, but is this not why art has reached the impasse that becomes its own waste? To climb inside oneself forever and to go on expressing it will make of all art the blindness that sophistication so easily trembles in front of, and yet yearns for.

In 1993 the House for de Kooning’s Friend was not

even a womb space. On the Lido in Venice a huge poster showed Marcel Duchamp looking out across the sands. The Duchamp Retrospective was bringing mimicry to the Biennale, whilst video art was about to waste its own decade. de Kooning's friend knew that in the 1950s coincidences would mount. The only true modern movement could be given a name and indeed was. We were all potentially artists. Collectors of the dissimilar, serial worriers about our own insignificance, all of us pausing before the plaque went up on the wall. We lived here. We loved here. We died here. We will return here. We will repeat here. Duchamps to ourselves!

four characters unhappy with their authors

It may appear when looking over histories of architecture that architects have known why and how they do the things they do. That we actually believe this is our folly. But that we imagine no wastage, no residue, nothing redundant in this process some see as creative, only goes some way to explain why there is still such a public misunderstanding about architecture. The detective story surely serves us better. It was Le Corbusier the Swiss clockmaker,

whom the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto nicknamed Owl-glasses, who appears to have taken the brunt of the blame for this, fond as he was of any machine for living. This looks like a travesty. For the 'machine' Owl-glasses referred to was a clear, well-oiled set of gears, places, activities, and a life that offered contemporary man the art of detection. The most famous book by Owl-glasses was called *The Modulor: a Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally applicable to Architecture and Mechanics*. A machine for reading, it was a user's manual as well as a detective story. In the hand the small book was sympathetic, suitable certainly for reading on the vaporetto, easily folded on its spine without 'pain'; carried nicely rolled if necessary; useful 'tile' module for repetitive window display and slipped into attache cases with ease and space for the lunettes et stylo.

The watchmaker-architect 'Owl-glasses', according to Alvar Aalto, always knew architecture was closer to the detective story than anything else he grafted onto it. And he also knew the future crime: how some authors would make a case for architecture by way of fashionable disciplines like film, photography, scribbling and philosophy. In truth the clockmaker knew all along. These other disciplines would only deflect the obvious mystery in it all. Brunetti had done

some reading of his own; outside their starring role in novels, characters can do that. You know I have the feeling that Owl-glasses was right, at least in this case, Brunetti murmured as he looked over at de Kooning's friend's house. A house is also a palace. Of course he meant a house not only fulfilling all its practical functions but going beyond strict utilitarianism. He didn't forget the impractical functions in order to attain the dignity of a palace and neither has the Armenian.

Grandeur, Owl-glasses said, being a matter intention and not of size. Here Brunetti agreed. Like a detective he knew how once more to listen to The Architect: "one more explanation is needed before we proceed with our task: it must be demonstrated that the necessity for a new visual measure has become really imperative only in recent years, when high-speed means of communication have worked a profound change in the relations between men and peoples." The vaporetto came to a skilful stop, manoeuvred beautifully into Palanca by a gloved-sun-glassed young goddess. A young girl looking a lot like Sophia Loren got off at the same time and followed him.

to dream the house

Or perhaps all the detectives have got the future crimes wrong and Gaston Bachelard was right: all we have to do is dream the house. A banker may be found in Mestre, dressed in woman's clothes, red carnival shoes, legs roughly shaved, and face beaten until unrecognisable. But in our case the situation is this: there exists a traveller we shall call de Kooning's friend after a stray comment in the Hotel Diplomat in Stockholm. He happens to be a man in constant movement. Like the commerce he is involved in, like the electronics world he helps shape, his is necessarily a nomadic life. In this way we should speak of life as a machine, not the house as a machine. The latter is an idea which has obviously led to a total misunderstanding of modern architecture in the 20th century.

This traveller will have a house designed for him in Venice by the most famous unknown architect. Was not the Sufi thinker writing a plot for a detective story to take place in the house? A Palladian alteration, colonnaded, campo side-wings, lower offices, services, the granary, the guest house, the piano nobile, the deck of the luxury yacht raised over the store-rooms echoing a warehouse of the palazzi on the Dorsoduro, with the altane perched above affording a view over

the campo, over Venice itself? Was not this dream-house the scene of a future crime?

But another scenario presents itself. From where it came and what authority it holds we cannot say. The dream-house is the perfect location for a meeting between four of the world's most popular detectives: Guido Brunetti, John Rebus, Aurelio Zen and Hiro Protagonist. In fact Brunetti is already on his way there. The initiative for the meeting came from Brunetti who knew both the Armenian architect and de Kooning's friend personally. Brunetti also knew the latter was an avid reader of crime fiction. The idea spread like a virus and suddenly on their computers the message appeared: A meeting in Venice to discuss the implications of being given characteristics and personalities in fiction which betray our real existence. In your dreams, Hiro replied. In whose dreams? Rebus answered. In my mother's, Zen concluded.

The meeting was easy to organise. In this, non-fiction is as expedient as fiction. All of these detectives agreed with red-faced embarrassment at the way their personalities have been left lying around, wedged between this or that page. Rebus was tickled with the idea of getting to Venice; anything to get out of Edinburgh, leave his partner for a week without of

course having to say where he'd gone. And it was more than welcome to Hiro Protagonist who was particularly miffed at being involved in a world that contained such awful words as 'surbclave' and 'pooned'. The house for de Kooning's friend would become the welcome retreat for detectives tired of being Captain Kirk, tired of surfing a metaverse which was as grotendous as the black sun that plagued all of them. Existence – or as John Rebus would say – the lack of it, was what brought them together. Rebus would take on Zen, and Protagonist would take on Brunetti.

In fact Hiro was particularly keen on questioning Guido about what it was like living with a Professor of Misreading who was continuously flirting on the threshold of sense. Protagonist will of course want to hack into this book, hijack it and take it elsewhere. Forget real presences for the moment, perhaps we must accept his contemporary impatience and rise to the challenge. Especially when he so adamantly declaims that the future is woman. The other detectives would agree. The gargoyle is correct. A woman of one's own! More power to the gargoyle!

non-sequiturs

Non sequiturs always nibble on the edge of The Architect's mind. Like detectives, non sequiturs are the sidetracks that give them their leads and the distortion which brings them closer to the existence they try to improve. And to be sure there is always one crime to be going on with in their minds. Even if it had not happened yet, the detectives knew it would happen. Irretrievably, their thinking was an act of rehearsal. Authors, writers, scribblers all might not think so, but to solve at least four crimes in the space of 200 pages, John Rebus would agree, was being overworked in the narrative. Brunetti went quiet. He'd looked out toward Dorsoduro from the three large windows in the house. Really, he'd had it easy. One, possibly two murders, he might be asked to solve in Venice or Mestre. But his author always left room for a decent fragolini, some speck, a glass of prosecco. "But I wish the author would just let me stroke the cheek of another woman and accept my guilt," Brunetti turned surprisingly, "don't you think I come off a little too clean?"

Zen knew the dilemma and also remained quiet. He made a mental note which said: reminder for later. Why should he complain? This is Venice and not Rome after all. Zen was thinking of the French writer

and philosopher Sartre. He was convinced Sartre should have written detective stories. In fact he had a lot to thank the French existentialist for. Afflicted by an unnamed sickness during his schooldays, he still wondered how he had survived. He'd never told his mother about it. But there were some months, around the age of fifteen, when he had to go around tapping things three times. It began with trees, or a manhole cover. Then it became anything the eye caught. It meant retracing one's steps and having to repeat it, for fear of not being able to continue. He'd run his finger along a wall, touch the handle on a bus and check a lock, all three times. He was, he then realised, close to madness.

Zen was looking across at the other characters and wondered if they'd ever done that. Worrying, he'd agonised over this tendency to go back and touch something three times, return and return again. Fifteen years old, reading Sartre's 'Nausea' had saved him. Aurelio Zen would not have been Aurelio Zen without it, it allowed him to pass to the next stage, voluntary blindness. Zen used to tell his schoolmates that he'd gone blind and asked for help. It was a way he claimed to reach 'insight'. His school friends thought he was loopy but it allowed him to get past all those things, all those objects that his eye would catch and

he would have to touch. The other three looked at Zen as if he was out of his tree. It took some time before any one of them spoke. It was Rebus. "Look out there. You'd have no idea that war has become a permanent condition, the permanent future crime, would you?" The others stared at Rebus. What had brought this on? "Dead souls, that's what we are. And you know why?" The others stared knowing that they were about to be told. "Bystanderhood! That's it, bystanderhood. It has become the only act possible for those of us who are unable to take stances any longer."

Hiro felt different. He looked around and then said: "Forget it. After the scribblers that write us, after everything we allow them to invent for us, the only talent left us is misreading. To misread everything! For example, I myself use French in this way. I constantly misread it. I know what you are thinking. But it allows me to remain in control of a world that has long since escaped my grasp." The other three nodded. This they were in agreement with. Events, they knew, had long occurred beyond and outside the exile of reading. And who were they: characters about to commit a career suicide and re-script their own lives? They could see it in front of them; they were blinded by the insight of others no longer reaching them. They were inside the shell. A House for de Kooning's Friend was to be what

Venice is, Venice was, and Venice will become. It had to be achieved without over-explaining to the adults who were to make it possible. If Venice is, according to John Julius Norwich, a funk-hole, then this House for de Kooning's Friend had to be that funk-hole also. Perhaps, the four detectives agreed, the most contemporary funk-hole that exists in Venice!

work in progress

It was important to intervene before these characters started to take over. Scripting came too easily today. A loss of meaning eased into the comfort of insanity. Invited along to the BBC for one of their 'five to ten in the morning' 5-minute radio programmes called 'work-in-progress' I decide to tell them how the book is going. The House for de Kooning's Friend is coming along nicely. The various puzzles can be seen as memos. I went on to recount how they were written out from the longhand in the linen-bound grey notebook. The goal was about 50 or so texts before Christmas, most about one page long. Fortune cookie texts, they asked. No, more like those scripts that have forced their way out of the skulls of dreamers sent to torment us with their skill.

The interviewer didn't seem to understand anything but the red recording light remained on. We were going out live. I was, of course, reluctant to show any of these tormented texts. This reluctance is mainly, I tell them, because of the bad experiences I have had. Asked for ideas in their unformed state, decisions are too often made on the basis of such tentative sketches. It is difficult to admit to uncertainty and make an art from it. I now show no one these first drafts, I tell them not really believing in it myself. Yet I know as soon as the second ten of these tormented texts are scribbled, the whole twenty will be revised in relation to the future crimes invented. Future crimes? the interviewer asked. I chose to ignore the question using that little niggle of a Dostoevskian cough I have developed. Noticing the red light flashing indicating the last 10 seconds, the interviewer asked if I have invented this architect. I fudge the issue. Cleverly, or so I thought!

Five minutes isn't of course very long, not long enough to say anything important. I work a lot with accidents and sidetracks, I told the producer. Non sequiturs, that sort of thing! I actually froze in front of the microphone and, panicked by the red recording light, I stuttered into a small digression about a sign I had seen recently on some meat in a supermarket. 'Random

Price' was stickered all over the meat. I wondered what a random price could be. Was it a price used to sell the meat off? Or was it a price used on other meat deliberately disorientating buyers? Couldn't books have loose pages and random prices? Or were they randomly priced already? The sidetrack lasted for half a minute and I felt I was getting through. Then I had to go on and claim that it was those accidents and sidetracks which could always lead to new worlds, new writing that may not otherwise have emerged. This, I said, almost apologetically, was what I was interested in.

Harry's Dolci

Last week for instance, I told them, I had been leaving Venice knowing I had to do a small interview on return. Leaving the Fondamenta San Eufemia along from the house for de Kooning's friend I had picked up a stray order pad lying on the ground in the grass somewhere near Harry's Dolci. On it were the words 'Harry's Bar'. It might, I thought at the time, have belonged to Bruno who had greeted us as we passed last week. But Bruno would not be the one taking orders. Bruno was the one pulling back the chair, seating you, aligning you to face the canal. It

was an accident. I put the pad in my pocket, knowing not where it might lead. I didn't think of the crime then.

Having nothing else to say and seeing the producer's pained expression, I continued with another story. In the Marco Polo airport, I had bought a Guardian newspaper, ordered a gin and tonic on the plane, followed by a cognac and coffee. I had been returning from a meeting at the house for de Kooning's friend with four detectives, so I decided to tell the listeners a little about these detectives and why they were there. They feel lost, I explained, unable to change the lives they have been given. There is panic in the world. War, it seems, is urgent and permanent. We can but look, stranded, bystanders in a world worsening by the day. Detectives around the world were alarmed.

The plane approached Dusseldorf and went into a dive. There was a gasp from the passengers but the heart was once more flying and the world's problems were absorbed, struggled against and still made poetry of; a type only each individual can answer. The arrival at Dusseldorf stopped all that. A security question, a bomb scare, a terrorist alert and the queues tailed back past the check-in counters. There was anger and bewilderment in the air. Everyone there had

also become bystanders to events that happened elsewhere.

In Dusseldorf Airport I sat down, I speak rather slowly, and used the time to write out this work-in-progress which is now being broadcasted. The House for de Kooning's Friend will soon be complete. Then it is time for the accident, the sidetrack and the order pad from Harry's Bar. The red recording light blinked, then faded. I really had the feeling that I had invented everything, so unreal was the interview. It seems now only the house is real, everything else is invented.

St Perec

Can a house be a missing memo, can the city be a puzzle, can the map be wrong, can architecture be a text, I can hear the detectives saying. They were no more equipped to answer these questions than I was. It obviously depended on many things, not least whether they set out with the intention to read a house, a city or architecture as a text. However one thing was certain. If architecture was to be read, it was obvious it could then be as ambiguous or as clear as the reader would like to make it. The detectives agreed. They'd finished all the Trappist beer in the mini-refrigerator.

Brunetti turned and as I was leaving said, “Why didn’t you think of Georges Perec’s book *La Vie mode D’Emploi*? Surely that would have been the best way to describe this dream?” Brunetti’s insight was acute though. It was to another book of Perec’s that I wished to draw parallels. In ‘W- or the memory of childhood’, the French scriptomaniac uses two stories which do not simply alternate, but are inextricably bound up with each other. One of the stories is entirely imaginary, fiction I suppose you could call it. This story writes itself, invents The Architect, invents the client and owner of the house, de Kooning’s friend, invents the team of skilled craftsmen and workers mostly from the Veneto region of Italy and then dreams the house. Fragments, gaps, the lapses that make up one tale also make up the architecture of the house. From a sidetrack, we launch into something else entirely, just as many of the great architects have done in their work. This is the other story, the crime of writing that is always unfinished. The consequences of this may be obvious but worth repeating. What might have begun as a tale about a contemporary palazzo, a freak hole on Giudecca lacking exploit, intrigue and mystery could but end up, by the way writing and architecture come together, as an intrigue fitting the un-acted crime. Perec speaks in his novel, the double V, of a fragile overlapping. Likewise the story of de Kooning’s house

and its architecture is suspended on its unidentifiable expectations. These points of suspension make up the house. The broken threads of architecture and the spidership of the calligraphic scribbles are caught in one. If it is possible to withdraw into an exile of reading and architecture and turn this into life itself, then what would our dwelling offer us? A hermit crab's paradise of course! But where might architecture stop and the instant monitoring of our own self inside this shell of a dream house take over? The French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard could turn our head once more on this, and allow us to read every corner, nook, cranny, table and shell. Even the mini-refrigerator more at home on a yacht, titled at 45 degrees.

Where and how do we begin with the obsessions that we bring we cannot say. If not commerce and business, do not architecture, writing and piano playing keep away the edge of insanity that exile always continues to tempt? Bachelard's answer was to dream and dream well, leaving science and the phenomenologist alone in the corner. Perhaps, if we did this in *The House for de Kooning's Friend*, we would begin anew and explain our withdrawal in the world. We might at the same time gain a better understanding of how we can turn back both a cathedral and a cave into the perfect hermitage. On the large glass, some clues to the misreading of the world.

the large glass

The large glass on its handsome wheels in the centre of the piano nobile acts as a portable library. On it are arranged various volumes that have either just entered the house or then have remained there as if in a holding position before leaving for another position in the shelves. The books we can see at present in various piles cover diverse subjects and are dusted regularly by a young girl who looks a lot like a teenage Sophia Loren. The small mountains of books which we can identify are a set of the Jean-Paul Sartre trilogy, 'Roads to Freedom', in their 'Picasso' Penguin Modern Classic version. Some may well remember those covers using Picasso's three monstrously creative works: Guernica, Peace and The War. Under these books, almost buried, lies a copy of Sartre's 'Nausea'. This is a book originally, we understand, entitled Melancholia until Maurice Nadeau changed it. Here the cover is less coy using as it does Salvador Dali's painting of 'The Triangular House'. No de Kooning in sight!

Another pile we can identify is on football. The autobiographies of Stanley Matthews, Alex Ferguson, John Barnes all lie above a biography of Camus. There is no sign however of 'The Goalie's Anxiety of the Penalty Kick' which I take as a melancholy sign.

Elsewhere, somewhat hidden, we discover a biography of Raymond Chandler topped by a hardback version of the combined John Lennon's 'In his own write' and 'A Spaniard in the Works'. Located next to John Lennon we see a single copy of 'House of Leaves' by Mark Z. Danielewski, a copy of 'Los Angeles' by Reynar Banham, along with a slide box.

The large books that occupy the central part of the glass table feature at least three on the Venetian artist Plessy. This is no accident as Plessy himself has a workshop and studio below this house in this same imaginary building, though of course Plessy being a real artist cannot imagine he is living in an imaginary building on Giudecca. I make a note to tell de Kooning's friend to talk about this with Plessy the next time they hold one of their soirees. More paperbacks perch as if they are recent visitors and are undecided about staying. James Kelman's 'Untranslated Accounts', Donna Leon's 'Aqua Alta' and Simon Winchester's 'The Surgeon of Crowthorne' all look about to fly.

The crime is revealed. Would not re-reading offer us the economy and necessary clues as to how we could select the books that will furnish The House for de Kooning's Friend? The house exhausted, tired of the paradoxes invented for its own existence, has only one

comment on this. It is entirely possible that we must stop with books, all books, in the sense that we must now devote our life to greater economy. Where to seek traces of the history you think is now left in Giudecca? And just what remains in a house invented to exist in exile? A start of course has been made in these fictions but it is at present tentative. However if you agree, everything we script, and script manically would need to be re-written, and then re-ordered immediately with, of course, a bookmark called Miracle and the necessary smelling pages held in front of the nose to awaken weary travellers. It has come to the time for departure. Your visit is over. And you know where to put the key as you close the guillotine gate and leave the bamboo love-field behind.

the book that never was

In what ways do cities and environments, houses and piazzas encourage reading? Is it possible that here in The House for de Kooning's Friend spaces will only come alive through the act of reading? By taking up a stray volume from the imaginary shelves, from the reading machines, the dream house becomes the library of forgetting. And yet, why would all this need to be contained in yet another book, a book about a

famous but unknown architect and an unknown and admirably modest intervention in Venice's island of exiled money-lenders? And not only that but a book that includes memos that refuse any ordered perspective; a book that refuses to edit out rumour and bring in analysis of other books defying somewhat foolishly both the architectural volume and the travel memoir. Need there be a defence for such an unbounded approach?

The visitor is of course invited to occupy the house secretly - just as one would be invited to occupy a book, any book, this book - possible as it is to turn back, turn forward, go on, stop, pick up any page, sidetrack, pause and exit, or merely drift. But the question returns to haunt us. Is it really possible to announce that some books more than others belong in such a house? And what is belonging in this case? Fitting the proportions and the voids? Or books allowing the shelves to be deliciously camouflaged like playwrights contradicting themselves in performances that are but their own lives turned over again and again like manure? Whichever way we approach this, there is no doubt that some books belong to this house. The only problem is to determine which. If it is the machinery of Georges Perec's work which we liken to the architecture of this house, this is not to say that

only St. Perec's books would fit these shelves.

Perhaps Petrarch is our clue. According to Mrs Dobson, Francis Petrarch always took his books along, making travel incommodious and expensive. His library had to be carried by any number of horses. It was only after being in Venice that he decided to offer these books to a religious order. I will henceforth attempt the same and though my deposits are more modest and resist any idea of a great library, I do believe The House for de Kooning's Friend would slowly acquire an intimate library like none other in Venice. And if we are to follow Petrarch's example and leave our books to this church on our death, it is surely fitting we announce that we have found the small chiesa that Harold Brodkey was looking to endow. Surely there is no fitting place than this house to become the Church of St. Death and the Ease of Leaving True Meaning Behind.

the art of thinking well in the house
for de Kooning's friend

Usually it is on board, seated on the grand flight, within the space of the first gin and tonic with the bubbles

still rising at 30,000 feet that the scribblers begin to think more clearly, quickly and inspirationally. How long it will last they never know but ideas flood out. The Sufi begins to fly. Manchester, Stockholm, Zurich, Rome, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Vienna, Graz, Maribor, Warsaw, Gdansk, St Petersburg. The flight time, the space of thinking between these cities, becomes the pace of thinking that will never write out one's life before another book appears. The Sufi searches for Ibn Kaldun's map. Other authors have begun to complete schemes for a new book, a follow-up, in the space it takes to imagine death.

This time there is no time, the maniac, the monster, is leaving. The art of thinking well as he turns back to look at *The House for De Kooning's Friend* means thinking elliptically! All thoughts come back, but not quite around, to Venice. That is why the ellipse is more useful than the circle. The sense of slight distortion is all it takes to introduce vitality. Everything this scriptomaniac will do, over the coming months will go through Venice. An invisible city or not, it will always be present. The corpse will go on dying. It will write the coincidences, it will force sophistication, it will invite all forms of pretence and romance until, exhausted, the pen is rested on the little table that connects everything to this screen. And the finger

hovers over the commands: Yes or No.

As Mrs McCarthy observes, “the rationalist mind has always had its doubts about Venice. The watery city receives a dry inspection, as though it were a myth for the credulous – poets and honeymooners.” Must the maniacs not retain their doubt and avoid dry inspection, when in fact their faculties provide yet another myth for the credulous? If we are to believe Mrs McCarthy, it is the incessant changes of modern Florence that keep the city ahead of the monsters; they are unable to do justice to a city so mythical. How true is this for Venice? Other scriptwriters have told us endlessly; whether it is McCarthy or Morris, no better observations of Venice exist. They see through these observations until they can do nothing more than mime their own experiences. To reword Mrs McCarthy, some of these maniacs are always ahead of others choosing neither to keep ahead nor to lag behind. Instead they opt for the characteristic that best describes Venice itself, unrest. And impatient to move, always in the ellipse we call *The House for de Kooning’s Friend*, the Powerbook on the lacquered Chinese table will be closed, the notebook left ajar and someone else, the visitor to the house for de Kooning’s friend will take over. The scriptomaniac in us all will die; in the new century with the future crimes set out

before us, there will no longer be any time to hug Kafka. Architecture, the house, the shell, the hermit crab and the architect have all left the building just as Venice survives everything that has ever been scribbled about it.

a house for de kooning's friend

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Vertigo Press, Ottawa

The Vertigo Anti-Library

Book 1 Architecture Degree Zero

Book 2 Pulp Architecture

Book 3 The House for de Kooning's Friend

design: **Cedric Boulet**



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