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# TEMPLUM. THE ESOTERICISM OF THE WHITE CUBE

The hyper-rational need to frame chaos in a logical and final structure leads to 'extra-rational' paranoia (Gr. *para* – outside; *nous* – reason, sense). Consequently, rationalism entails an irrational bond, while the belief in the universal meaning assumes the traits of religious exaltation. A similar dynamic can be observed in the myriad conspiracy theories of today. One might even get the impression that the driving force behind these is not the desire to uncover the absolute truth, but the very act of conspiratorial theorising providing the parties involved therein with a dose of purely sensual pleasure. This aspect of the operation of human consciousness is aptly captured by the English phrase 'it makes sense', which brings together the sensible with the sensual in the space of a single word.

In a way, conspiracy thinking appears to reflect the *zeitgeist* of our times when an informational embarrassment of riches has emerged as a major problem. A surfeit of unprocessable data, just like the paucity thereof, engenders an interpretive void, and yet culture abhors a vacuum even more than nature does. The failure of an earthly utopia produces transcendental cravings; these, however, are given a most trivial and paranoid costume; hence, the conspiratorial fantasies about a mysterious authority controlling the complex machinery of reality. This kind of void demands to be filled, much like in the vision of Karel Čapek, who in his novel *The Absolute at Large* described the process of the 'precipitation' of mystical energy as a result of annihilating matter.

This metaphor evokes associations with the thought expressed by Karl R. Popper in his *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*: 'The conspiracy theory of society ... comes from abandoning God and then asking: «Who is in his place?»'<sup>1</sup>. It is no mere accident that these words served as a motto to a chapter of Umberto Eco's novel on the demiurgic powers of conspiracy theories, *Foucault's Pendulum*. In its pages, the paranoid structure is compared to a work of poetry; the Plan created by the protagonists 'is full of secrets, full of contradictions', meanwhile people 'have been told that God is mysterious, unfathomable, so to them incoherence is the closest thing to God. The farfetched is the closest thing to a miracle.'<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the reality of the Plan remains literally a matter of belief; as one of its author concludes: '[I]f you invent a plan and others carry it out, it's as if the Plan exists. At that point it does exist.'<sup>3</sup>

The key enabling one to create but also decipher the Plan is associative thinking: 'Any fact becomes important when it's connected to another. The connection changes the perspective; it leads you to think that every detail of the world, every voice, every word written or spoken has more than

1 U. Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, transl. by W. Weaver, New York: Ballantine Books, 1990, 511.

2 Ibid. 444.

3 Ibid. 513.

its literal meaning, that it tells us of a Secret. The rule is simple: Suspect, only suspect.<sup>4</sup> According to this principle, every component of the reality accessible to us (or, more specifically, a particular configuration of these elements) refers us directly to the 'secret' realm of hidden meanings. 'Suppose the automobile existed only to serve as metaphor of creation?'<sup>5</sup> hypothesises a character in Eco's book interpreting the drive shaft of a vehicle as a representation of the cabalistic Tree of the Sefirot. In another passage from the novel, the very human body is likened to the cosmological model, as its biological functions correspond directly to symbolic functions, an observation further corroborated by numerological correlations.<sup>6</sup>

The obsessive search for analogies and the identification of links between the most disparate phenomena reveals the 'metaphysical' drive. It is worth at this juncture to consider the etymology of the word 'religion'. Some interpreters, following Cicero, point to the Latin etymology of *relegere* (to read again), others, following Lactantius, refer to the word *religare* (to bind again). In this context, another 'reading' of reality aimed at binding what was loosened or even disintegrated would be religious in nature.

The lexical stem *leg-* (of the aforementioned *lego/legere*) indicates the action of collecting, reading, counting. It is to be found both in Latin and in Greek where it is etymologically linked to Logos which in this spirit may be interpreted as a collection, speech or an account. On a broader reading, Logos is also a proportion or a regularity, reflecting the rational order or indeed 'reason' of the world through which the divine power of creation manifests itself. It is for a reason that Logos, rendered in translation as 'the Word', appears in the opening verse of the Gospel of John as the very origin of all creation.

Significantly, the Greek Logos also means a project or a plan. A material cosmological model in the form of an architecturally conceived plan may thus be an emanation of an immaterial divine concept. Juan Eduardo Cirlot writes: 'The temple affords a particular and additional meaning to the generic symbolism of architectonic structures.'<sup>7</sup> Because of the lexical root *tem-* (to divide), the etymology of the Latin term denoting a temple – *templum* – refers us to the notion of the ancient sacred space, treated as a 'division of space' and 'the seat of secret revelation'. According to the ancient tradition, this seat was where 'Etruscan soothsayers made a division of the heavens by means of two straight lines intersecting at a point directly above the head'. According to Cirlot, it was

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 314.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 301–4.

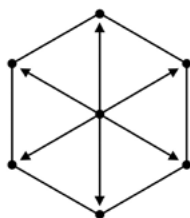
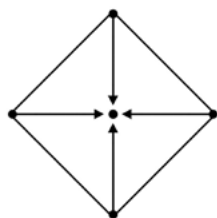
<sup>7</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, transl. by J. Sage, London: Routledge, 2001, 332–3.

‘a projection of the notion of the «Centre» [at the point of intersection], and the lines representing the two «directions» of the plane; the north-south line was called *cardo* and the east-west *decumanus*. Phenomena were interpreted according to their situation within this division of space.<sup>8</sup> The thus-constructed basic coordinate system evoked the idea of a quaternity or a square. In Cirlot’s view, it is ‘the four points of the compass, [that] are the sources of the order and the stability of the world’<sup>9</sup>

In line with the esoteric formula *Quod est superius est sicut quod inferius* (‘As above, so below’), from the tractate *Tabula Smaragdina*, not only the structuring of cosmos but also geometry – i.e., the act of ‘land measurement’ (Gr. γεωμετρία) – is a metaphysical procedure. The latter activity may be perceived both as an act of conventional partition of space and as a platform for philosophical activity on a total scale.

Grzegorz Sztabiński, quoting the findings of Wilhelm Worringer, points to the common origin of geometric art and religious spirituality. On such a view, the simple symbolic figures drawn by early man contrasted with the changeability of the world of nature and as such were endowed with the status of an indisputable foundation, bringing about the contact with the absolute.<sup>10</sup>

After the cosmological and geometrical spatial scheme is complemented by an upright axis designating the tensile line between the ‘top’ and the ‘bottom’, what we receive is a model akin to the Cartesian system of coordinates. In line with this intuition, Cirlot’s entry for ‘Space’ in his *Dictionary of Symbols* is illustrated with a simplified image of a cube which



provides a ‘schematic representation of the relations between the bottom, the left side and the back side, and the other way around’.<sup>11</sup>

The cubic form, corresponding to the Cartesian model of space, can also be interpreted as a metaphor akin to that of ‘the cube of space’, an occult idea popularised by Paul Foster Case. According to Case, the components of the cube – its three axes, the central point, six walls, and twelve edges – were to correspond to the twenty-two

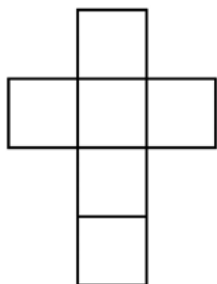
<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 307.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. Sztabiński, *Dlaczego geometria? Problemy współczesnej sztuki geometrycznej*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo UŁ, 2004, 12–13.

<sup>11</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, op. cit., 300–3. [Translator’s Note: The figure and the caption are missing in the English version of the *Dictionary*. The phrase above was translated from Polish].

letters of the Hebrew alphabet, for the origins of the cube of space can be traced to the proto-Kabbalistic text *Sefer Yetzirah*, describing the process of the world's creation. A surprisingly similar thought was expressed by Jay David Bolter in his book *Writing Space. Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, in which he defines the (spatial) character of the electronic text by comparing the alchemical and Kabbalistic codes to contemporary computer interfaces.<sup>12</sup>



Cirlot claims that in the Cartesian cubical model, 'space ... became a logical structure'. This thought is consistent with Gérard Genette's observation that 'all our language is woven out of space'.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Brian O'Doherty juxtaposes this ruthless logic with the principles of artistic circulation codified during the modernist era: 'We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the *space* first'.<sup>14</sup> This space is the 'archetypal' white cube: a form 'unshadowed, white, clean, artificial', and 'devoted to the technology of esthetics'.<sup>15</sup> O'Doherty further accen-

tuates 'the sacramental nature' of this kind of architecture by drawing an analogy with old temples: 'A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church'.<sup>16</sup>

The repetitiveness of this solution may bring to mind the initiation rite of reenactment performed by practitioners of the Royal Art, itself born of architecture. In the course of the said ritual, the candidate creates a drawing directly on the floor of the Masonic lodge. This is the aftermath of the requirements set for stonemasons and builders whose task it was to make a full-scale architectural plan at the exact spot where the building was to be erected. In the Masonic terminology originally, the plan delineated on the ground was already referred to as 'the lodge' – the point of these actions was to reconstruct the mythical Temple of Salomon, erected by Master Hiram Abiff. The edifice, according to Philo and Flavius

12 J.D. Bolter, *Writing Space. Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, London – Mahwah (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991, 91.

13 G. Genette, 'Przestrzeń i język', transl. to Polish by A.W. Labuda, *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 67/1 (1976): 231.

14 B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica – San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986, 14.

15 Ibid. 15.

16 Ibid. 14–16.

Josephus, was to be 'a figurative representation of the cosmos';<sup>17</sup> for many an architect over the centuries it was the 'superior archetype', subject to continuous reconstruction.<sup>18</sup>

Of particular importance in this context becomes both the reproduced structure and the very act of its replication. The essence of the site is defined not only by its material substance, but also by the trajectory of the energy flow between 'the concepts of space articulated through the artwork and the space we occupy'; according to O' Doherty, it is 'one of the basic and least understood forces in modernism.'<sup>19</sup>

The hermetic character (not to say – hermeticism) and obscurity of many processes occurring in the world of art are certain to contribute to it being steeped in an aura of mystery, which provides a fertile soil for conspiracy theories. Much like esoteric associations, the *artworld*, too, uses its own symbols, language, and tradition. André Rouillé made a direct comparison between the operation of the institutions of the world of art and that of 'a magic group' (which not only accepts but also practices the artistic 'magic') that accounts for the efficiency of the artist-magician.<sup>20</sup> In this context, the modernist white cube may be perceived almost as an alchemical retort enabling one to distil nascent meanings.

'The white cube', considered as a *templum* of sorts, proves set apart not only from the space of the *profanum*, but it also exists, as it were, out of time, in an incorporeal 'eternity of display': 'This eternity gives the gallery a limbolike status; one has to have died already to be there.'<sup>21</sup>

This sepulchral character of the art space was indicated by the American artist Robert Smithson, when he referred to the chapter 'The Scattered and Buried God' from Anton Ehrezweig's book *The Hidden Order of Art. A Study in Psychology of Artistic Imagination*, indicating the ambiguity of the word 'buried' (used by the author in reference to gods): 'There is an interaction between the dispersed, the scattered, the spread, and the contained. The artwork manifests itself within this tension.'<sup>22</sup> The gesture of 'burying' an artwork is closely related to the 'place-container that opens itself to take it in'; such a container for an artwork may take the form of 'a gallery – the white cube, in which it was contained, buried, constantly maintaining a relation with the exterior.'<sup>23</sup>

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17 J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, op. cit., 333.

18 Ibid.

19 B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube...*, op. cit., 38.

20 A. Rouillé, *Fotografia. Między dokumentem a sztuką współczesną*, transl. to Polish by O. Hedemann, Kraków: Universitas, 2007, 343.

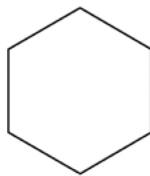
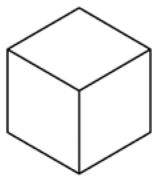
21 B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube...*, op. cit., 7.

22 A. Jełewska, *Ekotopie. Ekspansja technokultury*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2013, 137.

23 Ibid.

As an emblematic series of Smithson's works that visualises this issue, let us consider *Alogon* (1966), constituting, as its etymology suggests, the opposite of the Greek *logos* (earlier, having read L. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the artist evoked the notion of 'logical pictures', especially in terms of topography).<sup>24</sup> As intended by the author, what occurs here is 'a departure from logic, a departure from the *gestalt* [figure, appearance]', and the dominant sensation experienced by the spectator may become that of 'dedifferentiation'; using a sequence of modular cubes to create an illusion of movement, the artist strives to express 'the unpredictability of the structures that surround man'.<sup>25</sup>

Constructing his own 'negative' vocabulary (which includes the notions of *Alogon*, 'dedifferentiation', as well as 'nonsite'), Smithson sought to challenge the universal 'plan', constituting the system of art. In her book *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Miwon Kwon claims that the aspiration for the neo-avant-garde movement (which



Smithson belonged to) was 'to exceed the limitations related both to traditional media ... as well as their institutional setting'.

A shift in the relationship between an artwork and its site was seen as the key to implement these postulates. The resultant strategy of site-specific art was intended to strongly connect both the presence of a given object and spectators themselves with a specifically defined location. Kwon emphasises: 'the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context; the radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience; and the self-conscious desire to resist the forces of the capitalist market economy, which circulates art works as transportable and exchangeable commodity goods.'<sup>26</sup>

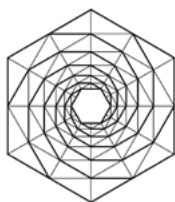
The way out of the Cartesian white cube is demonstrated in a work by Smithson that could serve as a metaphor for the endpoint of the history of modernism in art: *Spiral Jetty* – an iconic piece of land art constructed in 1970 on the shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. The key to understanding many aspects of *Spiral Jetty* is provided in a gallery

24 A. Nagel, *Medieval Modern. Art Out of Time*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2012, 116–17.

25 A. Jelevska, *Ekotopie...*, op. cit., 136.

26 M. Kwon, 'One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity', *October*, 80 (1997): 86; as cited in A. Jelevska, *Ekotopie...*, op. cit., 136.

object created earlier by Smithson, one he titled *Gyrostasis* (1968). In the words of Smithson himself, it is ‘an abstract three dimensional map that points to the *Spiral Jetty*. *Gyrostasis* is relational, and should not be considered as an isolated object.’<sup>27</sup> As the author explained in a short note to go with the work, the term ‘gyrostasis’ comes from a branch of physics that deals with analysing the rotation of bodies ‘and their tendency to maintain their equilibrium’. ‘When I made the sculpture I was thinking of mapping procedures that refer to the planet Earth. One could consider it as a crystallised fragment of a gyroscopic rotation.’<sup>28</sup> The spiral structure of *Gyrostasis*, emerging from a sequence of ever smaller triangles, also corresponds to Smithson’s undertaking from a year earlier: the project of a spiral pool, which could be observed from aboard the planes landing at Dallas Fort Worth Airport.<sup>29</sup> While working on both of these, Smithson made a geometric drawing illustrating the origin of the triangular modules he used; these resulted from subjecting a series of hexagons – inscribed in



one another and progressively smaller – to a rotation. A sequence of twelve hexagons (in a constant 30 degree rotation, which accounts for a full

360-degree rotation) produces a mandala-like vortex, the record of a hypnotic spiral movement.

Traditionally, number 6 (which proves dominant in this multiplicity of hexagonal forms) represents imperfection that requires a natural complement. This missing element to stabilise the entire system would be an illusory central point, ‘the core of condensation’ around which the geometric structure – somewhat reminiscent of a hexagonal ice crystal – unfolds. This intriguing aspect was identified by Johannes Kepler in his treatise ‘A New Year’s Gift or the Hexagonal Snowflake’ (1611), with the ambiguous term *nix* used therein interpretable not only as the Latin word for ‘snow’, but also as the German word for ‘nothing’.<sup>30</sup>

27 R. Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, J. Flam (ed.), Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, 136; as cited in A. Jelewska, *Ekotopie...*, op. cit., 131.

28 Ibid.

29 See R. Pico, ‘Aerial Art, the New Landscape of Robert Smithson’, *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism*, 43/2 (2019): 181–91.

30 See J. Kepleri, ‘Strena, seu de Nive Sexangula’, Francofurti Ad Moenum: G. Tambach, 1611, <https://galileo.ou.edu/exhibits/snowflake-or-six-angled-crystal> [accessed 01 Apr. 2022].



Agnieszka Jelevska observes that this is how Robert Smithson 'understood the essence of matter: a dynamic structure that forms according to specific shapes; internally, however, it is indeterminate and chaotic. Freezing a rotation, turning a process into something static, crystallised, means the willingness to demonstrate the interior and the exterior simultaneously.'<sup>31</sup> Smithson's drawing reminds one of a meticulously woven web, but one devoid of an arachnoid Gorgon Medusa lurking at the centre; in its stead, a hypnotic void emerges to open before the viewer an endless perspective of 'the consuming whirlwind'. The ambiguity of such forms was indicated by Cirlot. In his view, a cobweb, '[b]ecause of its spiral shape, ... also embraces the idea of creation and development – of the wheel and its centre. But in this case death and destruction lurk at the centre ... It is probably a symbol of the negative aspect of the universe, representing the Gnostic view that evil is not only on the periphery of the Wheel of Transformations but in its very centre, that is, in its Origin.'<sup>32</sup>

Elsewhere, Cirlot identifies the connection between the whirlwind and the cubical model of space: 'Characterised by spiral or helicoid movement, this symbol expresses the dynamism of the three-dimensional cross – that is, of space itself. It is, therefore, symbolic of universal evolution.'<sup>33</sup> This symbolic intertwining of the spiral and the cube challenges the traditional interpretation of Denis the Carthusian, according to whom, 'cubic objects are not capable of rotation as are spheres, and ... therefore they represent stability.'<sup>34</sup> A similar phenomenon was considered by Smithson in a 1972 essay, where he claimed that 'each cubic salt crystal echoes the *Spiral Jetty* in terms of the crystal's molecular lattice. Growth in a crystal advances around a dislocation point, in the manner of a screw.'<sup>35</sup> At this juncture, the artist refers to the so-called screw dislocation, resulting from damage to the lattice of a crystal that leads to the emergence of screw-like structures. The trajectory of entropy discussed here corresponds to the metaphorical retrograde motion designed by the author of the *Spiral Jetty*, who commented on this phenomenon thus: 'Chemically speaking, our blood is analogous in composition to the primordial seas. Following the spiral steps we return to our origins, back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean.'<sup>36</sup>

According to Jelevska, in Smithson's 'psycho-geological' view, 'thinking is subject to spatialisation, it gives dynamic to man's stance towards his

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31 A. Jelevska, *Ekotopie...*, op. cit., 152.

32 J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, op. cit., 51.

33 Ibid. 372.

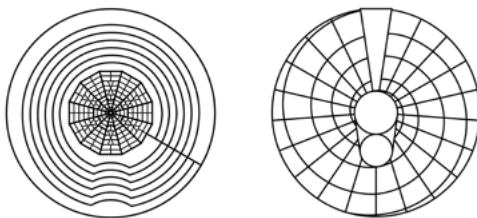
34 Ibid. 74.

35 R. Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, op. cit., 147; as cited in A. Jelevska, *Ekotopie...*, op. cit., 150.

36 Ibid. 148; as cited in A. Jelevska, *Ekotopie...*, op. cit., 151.

surrounding', while the human mind, in line with the entirety of earthly transformations, 'returns as a fragment of space'.<sup>37</sup> In this observation, one may sense the Hermetic dialectic in the spirit of *The Kybalion*, the famous esoteric text that claimed, among others, that 'the universe is mental'. Directly related thereto is the 'mental' nature of the Hermetic transmutation, subject to which – 'as well as metals and elements' – is also the mind.<sup>38</sup>

If we consider the trajectory outlined by Smithson as a way out ('to relocate meaning'), in Kwon's phrasing, of the artistic 'Cartesian model' (symbolised by the emblematic white cube), we should pose the question: could we use analogous visual metaphors to describe the circulation of 'the forces of the capitalist market economy' that define the shape of the contemporary system of art? Much like in Smithson's work, the metaphoric image-module may be given the form of a spiral, which in the case of many icons of modernist art has the function of a plan, not only logically but also architecturally speaking. Among concepts of this type, two buildings-symbols are worth particular attention: Vladimir Tatlin's unrealised project of the *Monument to the Third International* (1919), and The Guggenheim, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, which opened in 1959. The dates related to the two icons of the twentieth century architecture coincide with the caesurae marking the beginning and the end of the expansion of the great avant-garde, from the rebellion of the pioneering period all the way to the time of reflection on and the musealisation of modernist experiments. The virtual monument to the communist doctrine of collectivisation created in the East and the quintessence of Western capitalism commemorating a private patron are in fact two manifestations of the same desire, emphatically expressed by Hilla von Rebay, the first Director of the Guggenheim Museum: 'I need a temple for



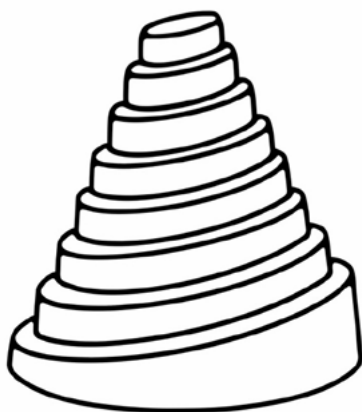
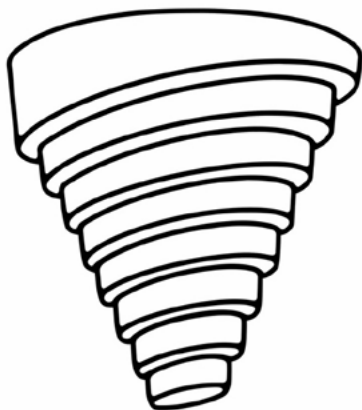
the spirit, a monument!'<sup>39</sup> The form of both buildings, based on primary geometric shapes, is surprisingly alike: Solomon Guggenheim's 'temple' essentially con-

stitutes the reverse of Tatlin's structure. The Soviet Tower of Babel ascends in a spiral movement, whereas the New York ziggurat narrows down towards its base according to an identical trajectory, the fact that – in the eyes of the crit-

<sup>37</sup> A. Jelewska, *Ekotopie...*, op. cit., 132.

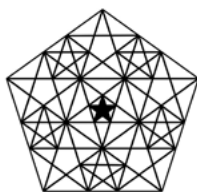
<sup>38</sup> See *The Kybalion. A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece, by Three Initiates*, Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1912, <https://gutenberg.org/cache/epub/14209/pg14209.html> [accessed 01 Apr. 2022].

<sup>39</sup> See N. Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 299.



ics – evokes associations with the architecture of Dante’s infernal circles (the broad ‘bottom’ which due to inversion serves as the ceiling is crowned with a hexagonal, twelve-section skylight). Indeed, the two architects use the same lexicon of forms, applying all conceivable combinations of circles, squares, triangles and spirals; all of it to revive the concept of *architecture parlante*, dating back to the French Revolution era.

Tatlin’s monument can be read as a symbol of the dialectical negation, standing in opposition to the ‘positive’ dogmatism emanating, in a sense, from the Guggenheim Museum/mausoleum. The narrative nature of the political revolution is expressed in the invigorating coupling of destructive and creative energy, which enables a temporary opening of unconstrained critical thinking. This tension is the source of the dynamic of the entire system founded on continuous circulation of energy (including that of economic and symbolic capital). Both in the formal and in the ideological aspect, the two monuments are opposite to one another not only due to the reversal of the spiral tower form and the juxtaposition of a closed form (in the case of the massive walls of Wright’s museum) with an open one (in the case of Tatlin’s openwork structure), but also due to the presence/absence of a factor related to movement. While the dynamic of the winding ramp in the static Guggenheim Museum has primarily the nature of an optical illusion, the *Monument to the Third International* was designed as a structure subject to constant (and absolutely literal) rotation. Reflecting the architect’s assumptions, the fixed steel frame of the external scaffolding was to house the seat of the Comintern, fitted within four mobile solids made of glass: a rectangular cuboid, a pyramid, a cylinder, and a hemisphere. Each of these modules was envisaged as rotating around its own axis at a different speed. In this way, the monument would serve as a gigantic contraption for splitting time into intervals, and hence, for recording the ‘revolutions of the heavenly spheres’, much like in another project representing *architecture parlante* – Étienne-Louis Boullée’s Cenotaph for Isaac Newton, incidentally also never realised.

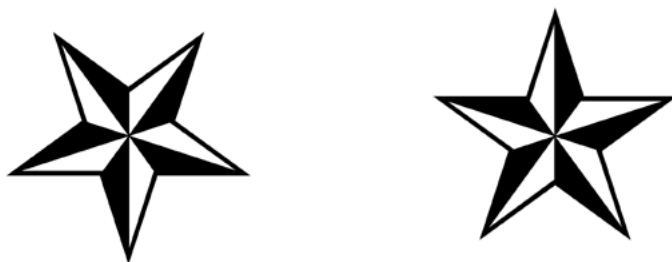


Besides a spiral tower, another symbol enabling one to visualise the aforementioned inversion is a five-pointed star, which – depending on the context – may evoke

associations with both Soviet collectivism and the cult of individuality, as manifested in the American ‘star system’. This form is naturally linked to a pentagram, an abstract emanation of the golden ratio, defining the canon of the human body (and the architectural formula stemming therefrom),

with a navel at its centre. The visual representation of this correlation was created already by Agrippa von Nettesheim, who inscribed the image of a man with outstretched limbs into a five-pointed star.

The metaphorical meaning of quinary structures is accounted for by Cirlot, who points out that 'the number five symbolises man after the fall, but, once applied to this order of earthly things, it signifies health and love. Esoteric thinking sees this not as the effect but, in fact, as the cause of man's five extremities with the number five inscribed also on each hand and foot.'<sup>40</sup> A five-pointed star is also an expression of man's universalist desire. In a microcosmic sense, it evokes associations with the five-fingered hand of a labourer, while in macrocosmic terms, it is a representation of 'the green star of Esperantists as well as in the blazing star of Freemasons, derived from the Pythagorean pentacle. In its primary position, the form constitutes a positively valued 'mystical centre', whereas turned upside-down it assumes infernal connotations.

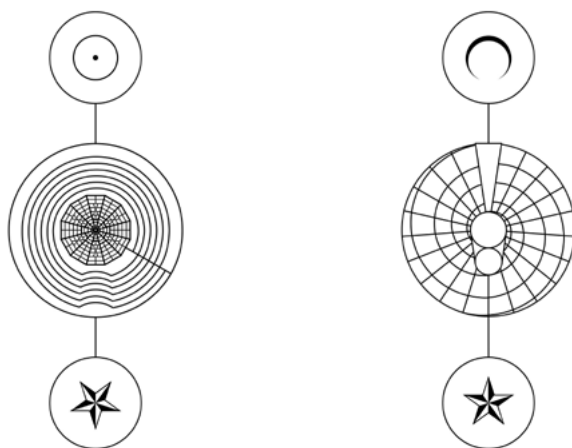


In the context of a consideration on the mechanisms of symbolic inversion, particularly on the slightly paradoxical idea of a revolutionary monument, worth highlighting is the etymology of the Latin term *revolutio*, which means 'a turn around', 'a return' or the said 'inversion'. The notions of a turn and reflection (as well as that of inversion, associated with the latter) may be used for defining the elementary tensions that organise the structure of a broader field in which this exception functions; in fact, it confirms, be that by negation, the set of rules that constitute it.

The axes structuring this system of correspondence and opposition may be defined as: up and down (the relation between the immaterial superstructure and the material base), right and left (the opposition between the conservative and the progressive political and economic models), as well as forward and backward (*avant-garde* vs. *arrière-garde*). A derivative of the spatial system presented here – akin to the aforementioned Cartesian system – is the geographical division performed along the West–East and North–South axes.

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40 J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, op. cit., 270.



As a symbolic representation of a structure based on a binary opposition one may consider the twin pillars of Jachin and Boaz, featured in esoteric iconography, the two columns that, according to the old Testament, were to be found on the porch of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Jachin ('Yahweh established', on the right) is associated with patriarchy, symbolised by the Sun, whereas Boaz ('in Him strength', on the left) is linked to matriarchy and falls within the sphere of lunar influence. Simplifying slightly, Jachin is the element of static positivity within this system, Boaz, on the other hand, of dynamic negativity. The winding stairs situated between the two columns (present in Freemason iconography) may be considered as an undulating 'theological ladder' or the 'path to enlightenment', which allows one to find proper balance between the zones of influence of contradictory forces.

At this juncture, it is worth referring to an analogous representation within the field of the exact sciences – namely, a project of a commemorative medallion (or a coin) designed by Georg Wilhelm Leibniz, in which operations based on the application of the binary system were equated to the demiurgic act of creation. The fact that all numbers stem from zero and one finds an analogy in the 'creation of everything from nothing' by an omnipotent divine being. In line with the Pythagorean doctrine that 'everything is number', Leibniz interpreted the process of genesis in mathematical terms: if naught is nothingness, then one – the One in fact – must

be God Himself, the source of all things. The iconography of Leibniz's project, corresponding to these concepts, at the same time calls to mind esoteric symbolism of the twin pillars, expressing the opposition between the positive (the Sun) and negative (the Moon) principle.



Furthermore, there is an analogy to the transcendental space in certain geographic coordinates. In early iconography, the two columns of Jachin and Boaz were also associated with a metaphorical representation of the Pillars of Hercules (flanking the entrance to the Strait of Gibraltar), constituting the gate to the New World, usually accompanied by the Latin phrase *plus ultra* (further beyond). The popular depiction of the columns



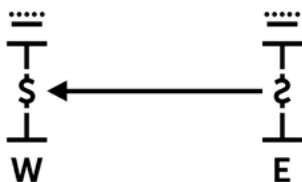
was often complemented in the centre by a pair of overlapping circles representing the Eastern and Western part of the globe. Both the capitals of the columns and the simplified map were topped with a symbolic crown, expressing the idea of earthly power encompassing the world.

In the early modern period, the motif of the Pillars of Hercules would often emerge as a refrain, so to speak, in numismatic iconography (evoking economic capital), and in heraldic iconography (indicating symbolic capital). The dollars in circulation in the transatlantic sphere of influence of the Spanish Monarchy were often adorned with images of the pillars interwoven with a ribbon bearing an inscription. Over the centuries, this form became greatly simplified, gradually evolving into the symbol reminiscent of a typographic mark we know from the current banknotes: the letter S crossed with a single or a pair of vertical lines.



In the case of heraldic imagery, the binary division into the right and left side led to ambiguity due to the fact that in heraldry the terms 'left' (Lat. *sinister*), and 'right' (Lat. *dexter*) must be indicated not from the point of view of the observer but always that of the shield bearer.

Furthermore, the Pillars of Hercules constituted a symbolic 'gate of the setting Sun', related to the solar trajectory, leading from the East to the West. The metaphorical route to the New Atlantis (as described by Francis



Bacon) also indicates the trajectory of the journeys undertaken by artistic migrants who left Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, contributing to the polarity reversal within the global artworld in favour of America. Among them, there were such significant artists as Marcel Duchamp and Markus Rothkowitz (Mark Rothko).

In this perspective, the Ocean unfolding beyond the Pillars of Hercules becomes a transit space, symbolising the ‘dynamic forces’<sup>41</sup> and coalescing the two coexisting realities; indeed, the checkered floor placed between the Masonic pillars of Jachin and Boaz fulfils a similar symbolic function. The floor of a Freemasons lodge, made of black and white square modules, expresses the dualistic juxtaposition of the two orders: matter and spirit. In the case of heraldic lozenge (a kind of rhomboid checkered pattern) this dynamic is further intensified.

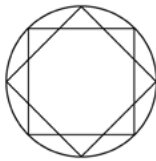
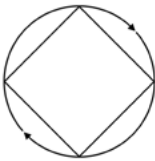
Meanwhile, in the context of avant-garde art, the motif may evoke associations with the attitude of Marcel Duchamp, who (at least declaratively) at some point abandoned his artistic career to pursue that of a chess



player. Thus, Duchamp’s chessboard represents the playing field that opens to incompatible areas of activity. It is, essentially, the space of negotiation and experimentation, in which the Cartesian order of ‘the white cube’ is subject to transformations by virtue of uncontrollable rolls of dice, introducing into the system an aleatory (Lat. *alea* – a die) dynamic.

Cirlot links the meaning of chequers (symbolising the notions of combination and chance) with ‘the effort to control irrational impulses by containing them within a given order’, and recognises analogous implications in the case of symbolism related to octagon: ‘All octagonal forms are symbols of the reason and the intellect, but not of the spirit, because the latter is content *par excellence*, whereas the rational never manages to be more than a system of apprehending things, that is, a container.’<sup>42</sup> According to this interpretation, the octagon expresses the archaic opposition of two cosmic shapes: the square and the circle. The former is evocative of the earthly sphere of the material, the latter of metaphysically understood heaven. The

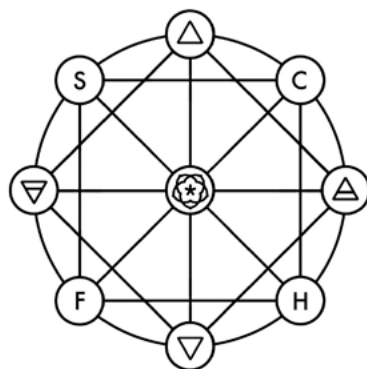
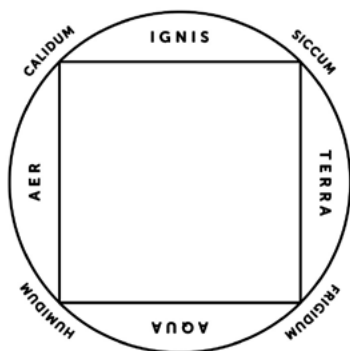
octagonal synthesis of the two geometric shapes triggers associations with the archaic concept of squaring the circle (or circling the square) within which the universal fusion of the pair of opposites occurs. It is worth bearing in mind that the traditional reading associates the number with the idea of perfection.



<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 241.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 45.





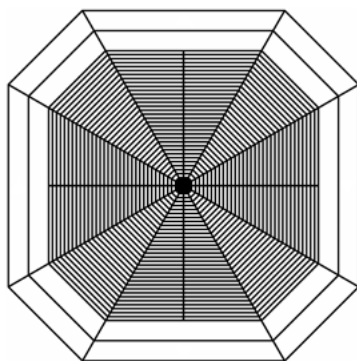
We discover squaring the circle as a metaphoric structure reflecting the circulation of the elements both in the alchemical treatise of Michael Maier *De Circulo Physico, Quadrato* (1616),<sup>43</sup> as well as in the scientific work *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria* (1666) by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, which features the combinatorial fusion of opposites: earth (*terra*) and air (*aer*), fire (*ignis*) and water (*aqua*), warmth (*caliditas*) and coolth (*frigiditas*), dryness (*siccitas*) and humidity (*humiditas*).<sup>44</sup>

This symbolic, octagonal network of tensions can be found in the architectural plan of one of the most significant icons of twentieth-century art, the non-denominational chapel of the University of St Thomas in Houston which houses the works of Mark Rothko. In this instance, the octagonal base of the building is extended into the sacred form of the cross. An octagonal structure is also featured in the design of a modern skylight situated in the central section of the ceiling.<sup>45</sup> It has the shape of a pyramid divided into 33 ‘rungs’ (including the pinnacle of the pyramid). The base here is a non-regular octagon (or a square with four cut corners) whose area was divided into 12 triangles.

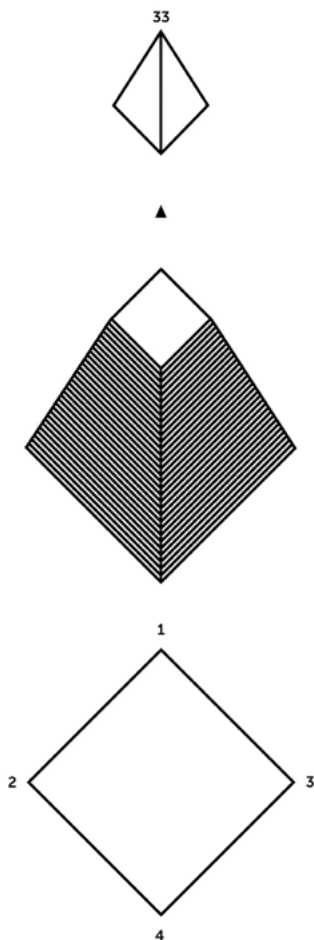
43 M. Maier, *De Circulo Physico, Quadrato: Hoc est, de Auro ejusque virtute medicinali, sub duro cortice instar nuclei latente, an et qualis inde petenda sit tractatus haut inutilis*, Oppenheim: Typis Hieronymi Galleri, 1616, [https://openlibrary.org/books/OL24489573M/De\\_circulo\\_physico\\_quadrato\\_hoc\\_est\\_auro](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL24489573M/De_circulo_physico_quadrato_hoc_est_auro) [accessed 01 Apr. 2022].

44 G.W. Leibniz, *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria, in Qua, Ex Arithmeticae Fundamentis*, Leipzig: J.S. Fickius et J.P. Seuboldus, 1666, <https://archive.org/details/ita-bnc-mag-00000844-001> [accessed 01 Apr. 2022].

45 G.F. Shapiro, ‘Restoring the Rothko Chapel Skylight to Achieve the Artist’s Vision’, *Architect* (2021), 25 May, [https://www.architectmagazine.com/technology/architectural-detail/restoring-the-rothko-chapel-skylight-to-achieve-the-artists-vision\\_o](https://www.architectmagazine.com/technology/architectural-detail/restoring-the-rothko-chapel-skylight-to-achieve-the-artists-vision_o) [accessed 01 Apr. 2022].



The combination of a quadripartite structure with a thirty-three-runged one may evoke associations with John Cage's famous work 4'33", the title of which – according to conspiracy theories – was read as a homophone, meaning the mystical dedication 'for 33'.



The Rothko Chapel fulfils the religious aspirations of modernism by establishing timeless and ecumenical space for contemplation. What appears to occur here is a synthesis – and at the same time an alleviation – of the tensions constituting the avant-garde plan for a revolution in the art world. The official *credo* of the chapel's curators emphasises this aspect: 'The Rothko Chapel is a spiritual space, a forum for world leaders, a place for solitude and gathering. It's an epicenter for civil rights activists, a quiet disruption, a stillness that moves.'<sup>46</sup>

Recognising the analogies between the Rothko Chapel and a baptistery, one may come to consider it as a turning point of sorts, a new beginning that defines a path alternative to the previously adopted coordinates. Paradoxically, a step ahead may at once turn out to be a step back. This was indicated by Alexander Nagel who in his book *Medieval Modern* identified a 'deeper organising principle',<sup>47</sup> bringing closer together the activity of twentieth-century artists and 'premodern site-specific art'. Nagel credits the Dia Art foundation, established in 1974, with having played a special role in the process of setting up this transhistorical bridge, for he sees the institution as 'one of the most innovative and successful responses to the new solutions',<sup>48</sup> resulting from the challenge put to the traditional museum-style forms of exhibition and customary practices of purchasing and collecting art. One of the creators of the foundation, Heiner Friedrich, 'pointed to a medieval chapel as a model for the new kind of patronage and exhibition system, required by modern art'.<sup>49</sup> As two relevant instances of site-specific works, which served as reference points for Friedrich, Nagel indicated the very Rothko Chapel and the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, decorated by Giotto.<sup>50</sup>

Trying to define the importance of the medieval form of a chapel for twentieth-century artists, Nagel focuses on the aspect of a radical intervention in the 'spatiotemporal coordinates of a lived experience', an intervention that marks 'the first step in a multilayered (allegorical, tropological, anagogic) reading of a sacred text.' In this view, chapels amounted to experimental space, and participation in such experiments may have been spiritually challenging. The acknowledgement of this interdependence may help, writes Nagel, 'defamiliarise' both the medieval and contemporary undertakings of this kind.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Rothko Chapel*, <http://rothkochapel.org/learn/about> [accessed 01 Apr. 2022].

<sup>47</sup> A. Nagel, *Medieval Modern...*, op. cit., 155. [Translator's Note: Having been unable to find the English version of the book, I had to resort to retranslating the passages cited from Polish; hence, the incongruities with the original].

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 155.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 97–8.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 98–100.

*The lexical stem leg- (of the aforementioned lego/legere) indicates the action of collecting, reading, counting. It is to be found both in Latin and in Greek where it is etymologically linked to Logos which in this spirit may be interpreted as a collection, speech or an account. On a broader reading, Logos is also a proportion or a regularity, reflecting the rational order or indeed 'reason' of the world through which the divine power of creation manifests itself. It is for a reason that Logos, rendered in translation as 'the Word', appears in the opening verse of the Gospel of John as the very origin of all creation.*

Nagel uses the analogy with medieval religious art also in his treatment of the ready-made concept: 'Before bourgeois art, as Duchamp said, art «was either literary or religious: it all served the mind». Relics are physical things, but they are also notional objects. Their status is simultaneously higher and lower than that of painting ... Both in the case of ready-mades and relics, an ordinary object, indistinguishable among many others, is singled out as something extraordinary ... Relics were never consecrated, but rather recognised; their power lay in the histories related to them.'<sup>52</sup>

The reference to the form of a reliquary and to chapels as spaces that house relics (such as Rome's Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem reputed to have soil from the Holy Land, to mention just one) emerges as a major point of reference in the case of Robert Smithson's theory of nonsites. The fundamental procedure here is that of 'topographic destabilisation'<sup>53</sup>, an integral part of medieval practice. As Nagel writes, 'the structural model for nonsites may just as well have been a topographic reliquary of a sacred site'; meanwhile in the case of no religious references, these archaic forms of religious art served as 'logical models'.<sup>54</sup>

The argument on the medieval character of avant-garde art developed by Nagel enables us to situate within a single lineage such artists as Rothko, Duchamp, and Smithson. Importantly, the strategies of the patrons of twentieth-century art, regardless of whether or not applied knowingly, correspond to the models buried deep in the past. This makes it possible to notice that the logical structure described above is reversible, and that the lines of tensions stretched between the opposite poles mark bidirectional trajectories of energy flow.

At this juncture, it is worth to mention the remark made by Grzegorz Sztabiński, who – while addressing the issue of spirituality in modern art – stated the impossibility of reopening 'a backward route' to holistic systems. At the same time, he emphasised that 'historical references prove useful, though not as holistic systems that can only be accepted or rejected, but as a «thicket of symbols» that we can reflect upon, taking into considerations how its components affect our sensitivity. One may have a similar attitude towards nature, focusing not on the publicly accessible spheres of its meaning, but instead seeking to ground selected phenomena in the individual articulation of their meaning.'<sup>55</sup>

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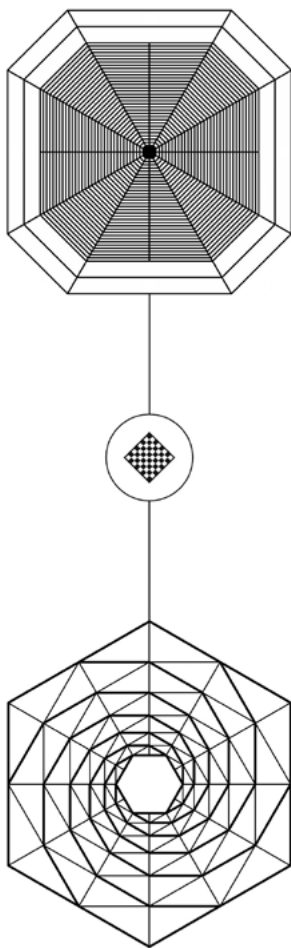
<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 236–8.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 132.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 129–130.

<sup>55</sup> G. Sztabiński, 'Poza estetyzacją. Problem duchowości w sztuce współczesnej', *Sacrum et Decorum. Materiały i Studia z Historii Sztuki Sakralnej*, 2 (2009): 129.

At the heart of this diagrammatic structure is the process of constant circulation, which makes it akin to a living organism – its vascular system filled with archetypal magma of metaphors similar to ‘blood’ whose composition is reminiscent of that in the primordial seas, as described by Smithson. The biological analogy enables us to observe that the discussed Plan expresses not only oppositions, but also the relations between its nodal points. To return to the aforementioned esoteric dictum: ‘As above, so below’. Thus, hierogamy – the mythical marriage of heaven and earth – is completed.



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### Abstract:

The paper situates iconic works of avant-garde art, as well as its typical founding myths (such as that of the white cube of the gallery hall) in the context of esoteric symbolism, presenting the heritage of the twentieth-century art as a direct continuation of much earlier cultural phenomena. Combining into a coherent whole textual and visual components, the author uses in practice the unconventional methods of knowledge production available in the field of contemporary art..

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### Keywords:

**artistic research, avant-garde, esotericism, geometry, conspiracy theories, white cube**

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