

Unfolding Pavilion Բլիճիկ օվ Շօլիճիկ



Unfolding Pavilion : Rituals of Solitude

In the summer of 2020, a group of twelve architects and scholars spent one week of residency locked inside an abandoned house built on a small island in the Venetian lagoon. One per room. Each room was equipped with only one piece of furniture, which they couldn't choose.

The house was an almost exact replica of what - at least until recently - was believed to be an unrealised project by John Hejduk: the House for the Inhabitant who Refused to Participate.

The curators of the *Unfolding Pavilion* came to know about the house by pure chance, and decided to organise an exhibition inside of its spaces. An agreement was made with the current owners of the island, who were about to demolish the house in order to build a luxury glamping facility in its stead: the house could be temporarily occupied for artistic purposes, but no images of the event were to be published before the demolition took place. It is so that, in the summer of 2020, twelve architects and scholars were invited to spend one week of residency locked inside the replica of John Hejduk's house. One per room. Each room equipped with only one piece of furniture, which they couldn't choose. The outcome of the one-week residency were twelve site-specific works dealing with issues of privacy, domesticity and isolation.

Unfortunately, the house was demolished in December 2020.

Titled *Rituals of Solitude*, the 2021 edition of the *Unfolding Pavilion* and its digital counterpart, the website www.ritualsofsolitude.com, are the first documentation of the installations made by the twelve contributors during their one-week residency.

The Incredible and Sad Tale of a Lonely Contessa and Her Wall House

Contessa Luisa Albertina di Tesserata was the owner of a little private island in the Venetian lagoon.

Her family used to own shipyards in Pesaro and Catollica, and their fleet of cargo boats was envied by many. However, most of her family fortune had dried out because of a century-long series of mishaps and an endemic lack of management skills. She was the last of her line, having lost both her parents and only brother to the Spanish Flu.

In 1930 she had met Count J.B. d'Haussonville on the island of Lido, at a party organized by a famous British sculptress. The Count was an impoverished French aristocrat with no money, poor health, but a contagious passion for the arts. They married the next week.

The couple needed money, so at first they worked as aristocrats to hire. After being paid to attend the opening of several second-rate Ligurian casinos, they grew into a fascination with blackjack and became professional gamblers. The *Contessa*, naturally gifted with the capability to perform complex mathematical computation, had finally found a way to use her birth talent: she counted the cards with extreme ease. Very careful not to raise suspicion, they took great care in losing endless rounds before making the lucky bet that in the end won the table.

The couple spent the following years between Monaco and Paris. Having become intimates of the Parisian avant garde, they almost naturally developed

into compulsory art collectors. All their gambling profits went into buying *oeuvres* by Brancusi, Duchamp, Picabia or Hans Arp.

Their crumpling Venetian little villa received little care. Each decaying room of the compound was consecrated for exhibiting just one artwork, be it a post-card-sized photograph by Man Ray or a half-finished, unsigned painting by Giacometti.

The couple lived in the single room that still had a functioning fireplace and all the glass in the windows.

Their few servants lived in little tents, scattered among the vegetable garden.

It was not the black mold of the rotten floors, but a new experimental chemical varnish in one of the artworks, that poisoned and prematurely killed J.B.

The Countess became a heavy drinker after the loss of her loved one, spending the next 6 years in solitude, just listening on the gramophone to Anton Webern's twelve-tone *Piano Variations*, while consuming homemade absinthe of a very dubious quality. World War II passed by as if it never happened.

After the death of the Count, no visitor was allowed to the island. The Countess never replied to any letter or telegram. No-one could assess the state and the size of her art collection. Despite missing any hard proof, her private collection was inflated to mythical status among the post-war art connoisseurs.

It was only in the mid 50s that a strange woman, nicely dressed but obviously intoxicated, appeared at a casino in Nice, with one small Mondrian painting tucked under her arm. She deposited the artwork for chips and by early morning managed to win a little fortune. The next day, she booked a one-way flight ticket to the US. The Countess was back!

She never remarried. The next decades were spent between Nevada and New York. She lived very frugally. Everything she earned in the Vegas casinos was spent on buying art and opiates.

Once every two years she returned to Venezia. Her only two surviving servants cried every time the half-conscious *Contessa* made her appearance to the island,

on a *trabaccolo* filled with increasingly-large wooden crates. The crates were never opened and kept piling up in the inner court of the house; the little villa just had no more artwork-free rooms.

The Countess day-dreamed of building a new house on the island.

Each week, after watching *The Hollywood Squares* on NBC, she felt this powerful urge to dwell inside of a structure similar to the scenography of that TV show.

A simple, modern construction with many small rooms, where she could live next to her most beloved artworks; and many large windows, so that she could always see the serliana of the old *stanza* where she and her husband enjoyed the most precious times of their lives.

She even asked a powerful architecture curator (and fellow gambler) to recommend her a shortlist of architects fit to the task. She entertained long telephone talks with two of the suggested designers - one, a rigid German guy teaching at Cornell, stopped answering her calls after weeks of exasperating conversations that didn't lead anywhere. The other, a more affable poet-architect with almost no building experience, sent her a few notebooks with sketches and some beautiful watercolor renderings, but didn't manage to provide a budget quota.

The Countess failed to appear at all the meetings they had set and, eventually, their conversation also dried off.

Having lost her gambling discipline because of the decades-long abuse of spirits and narcotics, the Countess began to accumulate serious debt. By the 70s she was already on the major casinos' blacklist on the count of counting cards. Foreign executors, teamed up with local carabinieri, started to arrive at the island to load the crates containing *Contessa's* artworks (on the same cargo boat that brought them in the first place).

The servants were happy to exchange cordialities with the non-islanders and were relieved that they were not supposed to carry the heavy load themselves.

The last time the Countess exited a casino with money in her bag was in 1974. Excluded from all casinos in Western Europe and the Americas, she had to tour the poor countries behind the Iron curtain and, in under a month, she crushed

all the gambling floors from Albania to Czechoslovakia.

She didn't like Eastern European art, but arrived home not empty handed: in Belgrade she had met a desperate Romanian sculptor and helped him cross the border at Trieste, in promise of his future professional services. Since he didn't speak any foreign languages, they only communicated through gestures and facial expressions.

With no official papers, the sculptor was stranded on the little Venetian island. To him, it felt like paradise. Only a few dozens of artworks escaped the executors; they had probably mistaken them for pure junk. Still, for him it was a fabulous first encounter with Western art.

He convinced the Countess to let him take care of the pieces. More than that, he promised to build single-handedly the new building she longed for; twelve small rooms for the most precious artworks, elevated from the ground to keep away from moisture. The American architect's sketchbooks provided a good-enough guide for him.

He proved to be a fabulous craftsman.

In less than a year, he indeed finished the new building.

The Countess was very happy.

Confined once again to her room, this time because of an aggravated osteoporosis that severely restricted her moves, she could see from her window the glazed new little rooms for her artworks ("my most trusted friends", as she used to call them).

The sculptor then began to take care of the small family villa and started to restore it, room by room.

The restoration would have progressed on the same pace, if not for a tragic accident: when trying to replace a wooden beam on the upper floor, the scaffolding collapsed together with the masonry wall it was secured to. The sculptor and the two old servants were crushed to death.

The Countess lived a few more months in complete solitude, resorting again to

a deadly regime of painkillers, alcohol and antidepressants.

Canned food and medicines were left at her door, once a month, by a delivery service paid a year in advance.

The exact date of her death is not known.

What we do know is that when the police landed the island, alerted by the delivery man who noticed no change in the pile of supplies, none of her artworks were to be found anymore.

In her testament, the Countess left all her possessions to the city of Venezia.

It took almost a decade for the slow paced Venetian bureaucrats to evaluate her bequest.

An uninhabitable *villetta* of 13 rooms on two floors, and four annex buildings, one of which illegally built without a permit, totalling 656 square meters. A library with 5.112 books. Few items of jewellery. No valuable furniture, antiquities or heritage objects. No records, documents or letters. An artificial island of just 7.176 square meters.

The State Property Office decided to put the island on the market at a reserve price of 1.2 million euros.

There was not much interest at the upcoming auction, except for some civic associations protesting in the local newspapers that the State is privatizing another piece of the lagoon, without a public project.

The only offer came by phone from a German real estate brokerage company and the hammer fell down at the asking price.

The German company, specialized in island sales and rental, island development and private island appraisals, re-sold the property in mid-1990s (at double the price) to an eccentric “collector” of such type of real estate (having bought from the same source two other islands - in Australia’s Great Barrier Reef and in the Bahamas).

Except for repeated changes of ownership, not much has happened to the island.

A small fire was reported a few years ago, but it had already died down at the time the fire brigade came to intervene. Apparently, it burned the former tents in the deserted vegetable garden, probably because of some teenagers who landed the island to smoke mushrooms away from inquiring eyes.

Due to a very expensive divorce, the island collector put the property up for sale in 2007.

An Italian consortium of catholic businessmen, led by a powerful far-right politician, bought the island for 3.6 million euros.

They already had prepared an architectural project to develop the property into the hospitality sector. Only the main house, which is protected heritage, was to be restored, while all the annexes were set for demolition.

In 2012, the Council gave the go-ahead to the urbanistic variant that will allow the realization of a tourist facility with spa and restaurant (all within the confines of the restored *villetta*) to serve a *glamping* resort with 12 upper-class rental units scattered around the island.

In 2018 the consortium fell into bankruptcy as well - some whisper because of too many unpaid debts related to Marghera's heroin market. Its estates were confiscated by the City Council and two years later the little island went into another bankruptcy auction, this time for half the price.

It is so that the island became property of a Sicilian developer already known for being the owner of a local soccer team. His construction company is set to develop the approved *glamping* concept.

One very famous American actress already reserved two "platinum" tents for the opening week of the next year's Mostra del Cinema.

The demolishing works were set to begin in early 2020, but the recent health crises temporarily halted the construction works.

In the spring of 2020, Giovanni and Marialuisa, two architecture students from the IUAV, who fund their spare-time journalistic ambitions by conducting building measurements for a local demolishing company, were intrigued by the

weird looking postmodernist annex they were sent to survey on the island.

It vaguely resembled an old speculative project they remembered to have stumbled upon on the web.

It took them countless hours and a lot of luck to find that post on the @canadiancentreforarchitecture Instagram account, but the effort was worthy: it was without a doubt that the building they just investigated was a project by John Hejduk no one in the whole world knew it was actually built!

While confined in their homes during the lock-down, they took the time to further research the recent history of that little island and of its unknown architectural jewel.

It wasn't easy to assemble the bits.

Apparently, Hejduk reused the architectural concept that he originally created for the *Contessa*: he developed for it a new narrative and published it years later under the name "The House for the Inhabitant who Refused to Participate".

Curiously, Hejduk's paper project was even exhibited in Venezia for a symposium at the IUAV, around the time when the building based on his initial design was stealthily erected on *Contessa's* island!

When contacted by the inquiring students, two scholars specialized in Hejduk's oeuvre confirmed that there is no archival evidence to suggest that Hejduk had any idea that his lost design was actually built.

Some traces of the *Contessa's* annex can in fact be identified in Hejduk's notebooks. Without any indication of name, date and location, they were prior believed to be just drawing exercises in the endless series of "wall houses" that the architect kept sketching throughout his career.

The two students posted their findings on a Facebook group for lovers of forgotten architectures and, despite their story being dismissed as a prank by some arrogant know-it-alls from the Italian academic circles, it sparked the interest of others, including us.

We got in touch with the current owners of the building, asking for permission

to visit their property together with a professional photographer. It could have made a killer publishing material!

The PR department of the construction company smelled the dangers and the opportunities associated with our request.

They denied our request for any kind of photo-video recordings shot on location and, more than that, they even sent a cease & desist letter to the two students, asking them to remove all the online traces of their research.

The construction company was obviously afraid that a buzz generated in the architectural circles could stir things up and, perhaps, even lead to the revocation of their demolition permit.

At the same time, they sensed the chance for some quality unrequested publicity - they granted us permission to land the island on a very narrow timeslot and even offered us funding for a one-week residency on the island for 12 international architects of our choice.

On two conditions: the contract unequivocally stated that, one, everything must be kept top secret prior to the effective demolition of the building, and, two, the outcomes of the residency must be exhibited during the next Venice Architecture Biennale.

The demolition of Hejduk's wall house started on November 21st, 2020 and was completed by early-December.

On December 17th, 2020 the online exhibition www.ritualsofsolitude.com documented the artworks made by the twelve international architects during their one-week residency in *Contessa's* abandoned house. They were its first and last residents, and their works, created in complete solitude while locked inside the 12 rooms of the house, are the only proof left of the incredible and sad tale of the lonely *Contessa* and her destroyed wall house.

Now, the third Unfolding Pavilion opens up to the public, unveiling the 12 artworks inside the belly of the cargo boat that, perhaps for the last time?, will sail the tides of time and memory, travelling once again to the island where once stood the *House for the Inhabitant who Refused to Participate*.

Works inside the exhibition:

1. ErranteArchitettura (after a project by John Hejduk), *"The House for the Inhabitant who Refused to Participate"*, 1:16 scale reconstruction, MDF, solid wood and metal profiles, 93 x 90 x 26 cm.
Individual rooms, mixed media, 12 x 11 x 17 cm (each):
(ab)Normal, *"Room 1 contains a kitchen sink"*.
Bart Lootsma, *"Room 2 contains a kitchen stove"*.
James Taylor-Foster & Anton Valek, *"Room 3 contains a dining table and a chair"*.
Fala Atelier, *"Room 4 contains a refrigerator"*.
Cruz Garcia & Nathalie Frankowski (WAI Architecture Think Tank), *"Room 5 contains a sleeping bed"*.
Mariabruna Fabrizi & Fosco Lucarelli (Microcities / Socks-studio) with Giaime Meloni, *"Room 6 contains a study table and chair"*.
Fosbury Architecture, *"Room 7 is empty"*.
Shumi Bose & Space Popular, *"Room 8 contains a living seat"*.
Matteo Ghidoni, *"Room 9 contains a bath sink"*.
Aristide Antonas, *"Room 10 contains a bathtub"*.
MAIO, *"Room 11 contains a shower"*.
Traumnovelle, *"Room 12 contains a toilet"*.
2. *"Rituals of Solitude"*, video loop, 720 x 1080 px, montage by: hund.
Individual videos:
(ab)Normal, *"ASMR Sink"*, 1'45".
Bart Lootsma, *"The Fire"*, 6'07". Music: Television, *"The Fire"*, track 6 on Adventure, Elektra Records, 1978.

James Taylor-Foster & Anton Valek, *"Mukbang Veneziano"*, 1'05".
 Fala Atelier with Aïcha Belkhodja, *"Capsule with Fuzz"*, 12".
 Cruz Garcia & Nathalie Frankowski (WAI Architecture Think Tank),
"Post-Colonial Victims", 10'.
 Mariabruna Fabrizi & Fosco Lucarelli (Microcities / Socks-studio) with
 Giaime Meloni, *"A Llullian Dream"*, 2'11".
 Fosbury Architecture (scriptwriting), Andrea Dal Martello (director),
"Savage Love", 5'10".
 Shumi Bose & Space Popular, *"Let them eat screens"*, 2'43".
 Matteo Ghidoni with: Maja Wilchelm, Noemi Benatti & Nicola Revolti,
"Soap Opera", 4'19".
 Aristide Antonas with Katerina Koutsogianni (image and video editing),
"Bathtub for John Hejduk", 33".
 MAIO, *"#shower"*, 14'02".
 Traumnovelle, *"The chosen Twelve"*, 1'14".

3. Giovanni Benedetti, "The House of Contessa Luisa Albertina di Tesserata", digital print on photographic paper, framed, 45 x 45 cm.
4. *"The Hollywood Squares"*, TV show, VHS recording, 22'44", NBC Day - time, 1975. Created by Merrill Heatter and Bob Quigley. Hosted by Peter Marshall. Set design by Dick Stiles. Courtesy of: © NBCU.
5. Daniel Tudor Munteanu & Davide Tommaso Ferrando, *"The Incredible and Sad Tale of a Lonely Contessa and Her Wall House"*, original story narrated by Alina Mihăescu, digital audio file, 20'.
6. Unfolding Pavilion, *"Rituals of Solitude"*, website, December 17, 2020, <https://ritualsofsolitude.com>. Concept: Daniel Tudor Munteanu & Davide Tommaso Ferrando; Web Design and Development, Sound Design: hund; Illustration: Giovanni Benedetti.

Exhibition credits:

Curators: Daniel Tudor Munteanu, Davide Tommaso Ferrando

Exhibition Design and Model Making: ErranteArchitetture (Sarah Becchio & Paolo Borghino)

Web Design and Development, Sound Design: hund (Ernesto Bellei, Federico Bergonzini, Antonio Alessandro Di Cicco, Simone S. Melis)

Photography and Video: Laurian Ghinițoiu; Stefano Di Corato (atelier XYZ)

Illustrator: Giovanni Benedetti

Cover: Marialuisa Montanari

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Narrator: Alina Mihăescu

Production: Marco Ballarin; Carnets (Matteo Vianello, Davide Cecconello, Caterina Barbon, Marco Andreatta); Elisabeta Rabiniuc Mocanu, Ana Victoria Munteanu

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Website:

www.unfoldingpavilion.com

www.ritualsofsolitude.com

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Rituals of Solitude

Ἡμετέριον Βαλάνιον

