Building from Ruins: The Wandering Space of the Feminine

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There will be no cure for the sickness of the city until architecture builds from the body of the feminine.

―John Hejduk

Thus the temporal aspect of architecture no longer resides in its dual nature of light and shadow, or in the aging of things; it rather presents itself as the catastrophic moment in which time takes things back.

―Aldo Rossi

Modernity gave itself the task of composing space in conformity with the will. Michel de Certeau contends that the aim of this will was to articulate itself on bodies as on mobile and absorbent pages. The body then becomes what society can write: this body-book takes on a scientific form whose postulate is in every case the struggle against aging. Certainly, modern architecture is characterized by this struggle. In this struggle against aging, much has been exiled. The exiled lies in ruins at the edges of our cities "as the 'expenditure' of a pleasure that is indissociable from the ephemeral, as the elusive vanishing point that links 'excess' to the mortal."6

Rossi suggests that the temporality of architecture is the temporal difference between aging and catastrophe. I would like to suggest further that to think the temporality of the catastrophe is to think what has been exiled in
the struggle against aging: the elusive vanishing point that marks the expenditure of an excessive pleasure. In what follows, I would like to consider the catastrophic moment as “ruination”: the disturbing proximity of a pleasure that has been exiled. This is to reconsider the body and dwelling: the fracturing of dwelling, the immemorial situation of dwelling. This is to consider the exiled body of the feminine. Specifically, it is to consider the exiled body of the feminine as it appears in the work of John Hejduk.

**EXILED PLEASURE**

Irigaray points out the dangers of attempting to make the feminine body a subject of discussion. It could so easily be a matter of merely moving the subject elsewhere: ruses, strategies, practices that ensure the subject’s self-knowledge and self-possession even in its decenteredness. Here the “I” still calculates and knows where it stands. In this schema, Irigaray argues, woman is nothing at all. She is merely the placeholder who continues “to hold the place she constitutes for the subject, a place to which no eternal value can be assigned lest the subject remain paralyzed forever by the irreplaceableness of his cathected investments” (SW, 227). As the placeholder, she herself is never dis-placed.

Irigaray avoids the danger of the subject and its nomadic ruses by articulating a different sense of the “nothing”:

> Now, the/a woman who doesn’t have one sex organ, or a unified sexuality (and this has usually been interpreted to mean that she has no sex) cannot subsume it/herself under one generic or specific term. Body, breast, pubis, clitoris, labia, vulva, vagina, neck of the uterus, womb, ... and this nothing that already gives pleasure by setting them apart from each other. ... (SW, 233)

To rethink the “nothing at all,” therefore, is to think the “nothing” which marks and differentiates feminine sexuality; it is to think that which already gives pleasure (*jouissance*): “For the sex of woman is not one. And, as jouissance bursts out in each of these/her ‘parts’, so all of them can mirror her in dazzling multifaceted difference” (SW, 239). To think the exiled body of the feminine, therefore, is to think pleasure (*jouissance*).

*Jouissance* must be distinguished from pleasure understood as plaisir, a distinction first thought by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*. Indeed, this text can be read as a long reflection on the exiled pleasure of the feminine. Barthes argues that the difference between plaisir and jouissance is the difference between, on the one hand, pleasure as comforting, reassuring, and culturally sanctioned (*plaisir*), and on the other, pleasure as scandalous, disruptive, and in conflict with cultural norms (*jouissance*). *Jouissance* has the power to unsettle “historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions” (PT, 14). It challenges ideology and brings to a crisis our very relation with