

# Castles in the Air

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## I

On 6th May 1886, while hiking in the hills around Heidelberg, a young Swiss medical student and botanist named Hermann Obrist (1862-1927) had the first of five architectural visions that would transform the course of his life. He described them much later, in his own biography, in which he referred to himself in the third person:

*“He looked up and into the distance. And at that moment... a fata morgana appeared... a clear vision of a strange, unknown city with towers and temple-like buildings and buildings such as he had never before seen, and never again would see to this day, whether in real life or in pictures. The city seemed to be translucent and was perpetually in motion, disappearing and then re-appearing. Houses materialised, affording him a view of a wondrous interior, which to this day he has been unable to reproduce. A large square appeared and with it a fountain with a roof resting on ruby-red columns entwined in fantastical wrought-iron work. In the highest degree romantic and utterly strange.”<sup>1</sup>*

Obrist promptly fainted. On awakening, he says, “he knew everything. Yet he returned to work and breathed not a word of it to anyone for fear of being deemed insane.”

Not three weeks later, during a walk in the Tauber valley, Obrist experienced a second vision, which appeared above a bridge over the river Tauber. Again, it was of a city – though different in character to the last. This time, the houses contained “exquisite woodwork interiors”, as well as “magnificent gardens” and a “wooded cemetery with tombstones made for giants.” Crucially, the subject of Obrist’s vision appeared to him to resemble no existing architectural style. Feverish and agitated, “he hurriedly drew sketches” to record his impressions.<sup>2</sup>

These two visions appear to have made a radical impression on the young student – to the extent that he was compelled to leave his studies and set about attempting to recreate what he had seen.<sup>3</sup> He began immediately, and for the first time, to sketch buildings rather than plants. He felt himself “a new and unfathomable person” who had been awakened to “the spirit of the Gothic.” In this comparison, he was not referring to the architectural style, but to that particular ‘will to form’ that once afflicted itself upon those that had assembled the Gothic churches – seized as they were by a frenzy of visionary worship.

His third vision manifested itself in Berlin, during the Winter semester of his medical studies in 1886/87. “This one occurred at half past five in the morning on the

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann, Obrist, *A Happy Life* (autobiography); repr. in Eva Afuhs, Andreas Strobl, eds., *Hermann Obrist: Sculpture, Space, Abstraction Around 1900* (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009), 120.

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<sup>2</sup> *A Happy Life*, 124.

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<sup>3</sup> Obrist writes, “a voice inside him called out to him for the first time and said: Leave your studies; go forth and picture this.” *A Happy Life*, 124.

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4 A Happy Life, 126.

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5 Obrist, in a letter to the Art Committee of I B Neumann gallery, Berlin, 1919; Afuhs and Strobl, Hermann Obrist, 30.

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6 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 3rd ed., 2002), 392.

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7 Baudelaire, "The Soup and the Clouds," in *Paris Spleen*, translated by Louise Varese (New Directions, 1970), 86. See also Georges Teyssot, *A Topology of Everyday Constellations* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013), 128.

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8 A Happy Life, 118.

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9 Hermann Obrist, "Wozu über Kunst schreiben" (Dec. 1899), in *Neue Möglichkeiten in der bildenden Kunst. Essays* (Leipzig, 1903), 21.

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10 A Happy Life, 124.

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11 There are evident parallels here with the *Einfühlungstheorie* of German psychologist Theodor Lipps.

Pfaueninsel near Potsdam and was confined to brightly coloured, purely decorative works; and even more powerfully than before, an inner voice called to him: Leave everything and picture this."<sup>4</sup>

After this, there was yet another vision: this time occurring somewhere between southern England, Cornwall and Wales. Having by now finished his medical studies, Obrist now devoted all his time to art and the craft of pottery, which would later develop into full-scale sculpture – as well as to opening an embroidery studio in Florence and then in Munich with Berthe Ruchet, a friend of his mother's. In fact, Obrist is best known today as a textile artist of the Munich branch of the *Jugendstil* movement, and as the inventor of the 'whiplash curve'; that sinuous, rhythmically looping linear flourish alluded to in the *Jugendstil* and Art Nouveau graphic arts at the turn of the century, which came to symbolise a kind of electric, frustrated desire. Yet for the remainder of his life, Obrist attempted, often clumsily, to recreate his visions in other less well-known ways: through grotesque, tendrillar stone sculptures and cave-like monuments. In Munich, the architect August Endell, with Obrist's help, designed a photography studio recreating the forested interior from Obrist's second vision; its staircase wrought with hypnotically curving iron. And his immense burial mound of Karl Oertel in Schmiedebach is certainly the "tombstone made for giants" from the same vision.

Though he never built anything larger than a grave monument or an ornamental fountain, Obrist always spoke of himself as an "architectural sculptor."<sup>5</sup> In 1919 he even took part in an exhibition of "unknown architects" organised by the Art Committee of I B Neumann's gallery in Berlin. Spires, arches, columns, capitals and buttresses can all be discerned attempting their escape from Obrist's rudely moulded matter – especially in works like the Krupp Fountain of 1912, or his "Model for a pillar for a vaulted grotto" of 1899. Yet these architectural elements never quite find their way

to completion, remaining always in the dreamlike state. Detailed excessively in some areas, then falling into crude chiselled forms in others, the architectural compositions never manage to find their rhythm. Rather, they crystallise momentarily then slide away into lumpy matter, shifting into ambiguity – as if Obrist, tragically, could never quite capture in form the clarity of the visions. It is for this reason that the tactile, visceral and even repellent objects Obrist produced in the attempt to relieve them are as flawed as they are fascinating.

Obrist's sculptures are as distorted, elongated and distended as they might appear in a hallucination. With their refracting, endless curves they seem to give form to Walter Benjamin's notion that "*Jugendstil* is the dream that one has come awake."<sup>6</sup> The immediate precursor to Benjamin's summation of that period in art was the poet Baudelaire; who saw buried behind the brusque modernity of late nineteenth century Paris – particularly within its interiors – a phantasmagoric, "fluid" architecture constructed upon "vapours, the marvellous structures of the impalpable."<sup>7</sup> Obrist too was undoubtedly attuned to the reverberating phantasmagoria thrown up as a by-product of the rapid advance of modernity. He believed himself a committed "psychist"<sup>8</sup>, attuned to the vital forces inherent in all things, and a student of unseen – only felt and sensed – phenomena. Wishing to make manifest his own "inwardly seen or felt phantasms,"<sup>9</sup> visions and ecstatic experiences, and alterations of consciousness, formed a crucial part of his understanding of the world. In fact he narrated them matter-of-factly in his own autobiography, with neither shame nor incredulity: "He was not alarmed by this incident [referring to one of the visions] as many another might have been. He had read an extraordinary amount for a man of his years, and... was quite familiar with the essence of divine, cosmic inspiration."<sup>10</sup> Imagination was no less real than the material world for Obrist, hinting at his belief in the vital role of the unconscious processes of the mind and body in making sense of it.<sup>11</sup>

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12 Afuhs and Strobl, Hermann Obrist, 24.

Obrist's early training in biology has usually been credited as the source of his unclassifiable techno-organic forms, as plant life was for other Jugendstil artists.<sup>12</sup> Yet Obrist was a perennial outsider, unable to fit in at the *gymnasium* or at any art academy, and was therefore associated with the Munich branch of Jugendstil only loosely. His architectural sculptures come rather from a more ambiguous source, and distinguish themselves somewhat from the other foliage-inspired craft objects and decorative applications of Jugendstil in their half-formed crudeness. Their ceaseless curves are not smooth but mottled, childlike and rough. The plant-like molluscs unfurl into jagged roots that could equally be towers, piling one upon another. Another famous Jugendstil motif, the intertwined locks of women's hair featured in Peter Behren's highly charged, trance-like erotic work *Der Kuss* (1898), under Obrist's chisel are petrified into stone and plaster towers, pinnacles and caverns. The architecture of Obrist's dream has transformed into the organic, and the organic back into the architectural. This geology of forms suggests, again, Benjamin's belief that the art of the period poised at the turn of the century, like the bourgeois society that gave birth to it, conceals its alibi "in natural history."<sup>13</sup> In this manner, built technology and organic form merge into a kind of early abstraction in the products of Obrist's hallucinations.

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13 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 226.

Obrist's final vision was the most explicitly architectural of all, and it came in 1824, not long before his death. This time it was a waking dream of a church, the excitement of which sent him into a bout of anaemia that lasted well over a year. Whether this vision appeared either before or after his modelling of a series of hilltop churches is uncertain: but these works are nonetheless the most architecturally explicit of all his objects, with their impossible towers perched upon craggy precipices, about to bend, sway and tip into imaginary abysses below.

## II

In his mining of the chthonic, the subterranean and the subconscious for the development of architectural form, Obrist joins a long though rarely codified tradition. Ever since the 1499 publication of the allegorical *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* by the erstwhile Dominican priest Francesco Colonna – a fevered, dreamlike account of a journey through an architectural landscape of antique fantasy that inspired architects from Bramante to Boullée – architects have allowed fictional and allegorical visions to drive their invention of form. The *Hypnerotomachia* is in fact a compound of three Greek words, hypnos (dream), eros (love) and mache (strife) – "the strife of love in a dream," as it has recently been translated into English by Joscelyn Godwin. The entire text is a narration of the erotic dream of Poliphilo, who attempts to win the love of Polia. Along this journey to reach her, Poliphilo, a lover of architecture, encounters the ruins of Antiquity; which he reconstructs, through the freedoms afforded him by his visions, into glorious palaces, temples and gardens. Poliphilo is, rather infamously, just as erotically aroused by great works of architecture as he is by Polia or the other beautiful nymphs he encounters. His unmitigated desire to taste, touch and feel the world in all its earthly senses is irrepressible. His dream presents a world in which all objects and subjects are rendered equal by his own sensual response to them – and this response is not just physical, but also idealistic and intellectual.

Poliphilo's dream has been richly mined by architects over the centuries since its publication. His reconstructions of classical architecture – which are part archaeological and part fantastical (such as could only be permitted to take form under the permissive conventions of a dream), have formed the basis of the revival of the antique from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te in Mantua (1524-34), Bramante's Cortile del Belvedere and associated garden (c. 1506), Tommaso Temanza's design for S.

Maria Maddalena in Venice (1780, based on Poliphilo's description of the temple of Venus), the drawings of Baldassare Peruzzi, various works of the early French Renaissance and seventeenth century France (including Boullée's Cenotaph to Newton, 1784, and Ledoux' Shelter for Rural Guards in the city of Chaux, 1789) all owe their designs in part to descriptions of antique architecture in Poliphilo's dream.<sup>14</sup>

In the realm of the garden arts Colonna's text was no less influential. The *Hypnerotomachia* is directly quoted in the fountain of the sleeping nymph in the forecourt of the Villa d'Este (c. 1560-72), in the monstrous sculptures of the Sacred Wood of Bomarzo (c.1550s), and the layout of Versailles (1662-85).<sup>15</sup> The allegorical nature of Poliphilo's journey was also revived by propagators of English Picturesque garden designs of the mid eighteenth century – like Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham, whose allegorical paths dotted with temples, ruins and ephemera at Stowe gardens in Buckinghamshire (c.1716-1750) allude to the political choices of the individual, caught between the trappings of sensuous delight and his or her burgeoning moral development.

Yet the extent to which these visions are pure intellectual affectations rather than genuine experiences varies from case to case – and one can often be difficult to distinguish from the other. Colonna's text may well have originated in a dream, but it became something much more: a sprawling, frenzied exploration of the subconscious written in a gibberish of half-Latin half-Italian, an erotic meditation on pleasure and its uses, and a sublime reconstruction of an idealised image of the antique world. The dream-convention in these cases is the fiction that allows for the construction of the otherwise impossible. The late eighteenth century British essayist Joseph Addison later drew upon the structure of the *Hypnerotomachia* also as a mode of literary freedom: his aim was to lay out a radical Whig political position in the England of his day that could not be articulated explicitly, but only through the allegory of the 'dream'.

Addison therefore sets out a symbolic landscape in his somnambular fantasy, which is described in great detail in the *Tatler* (no. 123, 21 January 1710).

Addison, being a devotee of the garden arts, was uses the conventions of Poliphilo's dream expressly. Like Poliphilo, Addison falls asleep and dreams he is in a great wood made up of many paths, which in this case correspond to a series of moral choices. It is unsurprising that Viscount Cobham, politically inclined in the same direction as Addison, drew upon the writer's imagined landscape for the construction of Stowe gardens, and likewise for the articulation of its progressive political message.<sup>16</sup> Yet Addison's 'dream' cannot not be taken literally – it is a writerly flourish; the romantic's typical method of intellectual enquiry. The dream in question is a means to an end – not the end in itself. Obrist's visions are different to someone like Addison's, in that they are ends in themselves. The only message they carry is one of pure form and outline. If there is any moral implication to these visions, it is certainly not explicit.

It is of course possible that Obrist may too have been treating his cathartic visions, like Addison, as literary conventions used to lay out an artistic position. Perhaps they never really occurred, and were only fictions built to contain the myth of a 'visionary artist'. Yet the sculptures that later emerged from the workings of Obrist's unusual mind are so uncanny, and so unlike any existing form, that it seems otherwise difficult to trace their inspirational origins to any other source. Indeed, reactions to Obrist's outlandish archi-sculptures in his own lifetime were mixed, though they have since been considered by the art historian Nikolaus Pevsner to be the definitive precursors of twentieth century abstract sculpture, as well the sublime towering architectures of both Antonin Gaudi and Louis Sullivan.<sup>17</sup> The sculpture "Movement" for example, exhibited in front of the theatre designed by Henry van der Velde on the site of the Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne in 1914, is a tower of Babel in miniature, and a precursor to Tatlin's

<sup>14</sup> Liane Lefaivre, Leon Battista Alberti's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*: Re-cognizing the Architectural Body in the Early Italian Renaissance (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 42-43. Lefaivre hypothesised that it had actually been the architect Alberti, not Colonna, who had authored the book, which was originally published anonymously.

<sup>15</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, Introduction to Francesco Colonna *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*; *The Strife of Love in a Dream*, translated by Joscelyn Godwin (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher McIntosh, *Gardens of the Gods: Myth, Magic and Meaning* (London: I B Tauris, 2005), 87.

<sup>17</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *Wegbereiter moderner Formgebung*. Von Morris bis Gropius (Cologne, 1996), 98.

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18 Afuhs and Strobl, Hermann Obrist, 26.

tower.<sup>18</sup> It winds ceaselessly upwards, scaleless, forming something almost recognisable as an architectural composition – which just as suddenly dissolves back into those city-forms “perpetually in motion” described in his waking dream.

Obrist’s lifelong attempt to give concrete shape to his singular fantasy can certainly be seen as part of the same trajectory set up for other architects by the *Hypnerotomachia*. But besides the obvious fact that in this case he was drawing upon his own visions rather than someone else’s, Obrist’s attempt was also related unequivocally to the upheavals of the period in which he lived. The retreat into the phantasmagorical and the organic was symptomatic of his desire to leave the viewer, as he put it, “fortified against the affliction of modern life.”<sup>19</sup> In the service of this goal, no architect has written so explicitly about their direct experiences with hallucinations and ecstatic visions. By doing so, Obrist never ceased to give credit to the role of fictional illusion and frenetic delusion in the construction of his castles of retreat from modernity.

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19 Hermann Obrist, “Wozu über Kunst Schreiben,” 25-27.

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Emma Letizia Jones is an Australian-born architect, historian and writer who obtained her Phd in 2016 from the University of Zurich, supervised by Prof. Martino Stierli, with the thesis “Schinkel in Perspective: Architecture as Representation and Experience”, a new account of how drawing shapes architecture and territory as told through the drawings of the Prussian architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Emma was also educated at the University of Sydney Faculty of Architecture and the Architectural Association London, and has worked in architectural practice in both Sydney and London. Alongside developing her thesis for publication, she has been a design studio director of at the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) in the ALICE Laboratory. Her writings on architecture and drawing have appeared in *AA Files*, *San Rocco* and the *Architectural Review*, and she has participated in architecture exhibitions and workshops in Zagreb, London and Sydney. She currently teaches the history and theory of architecture at the ETH Zurich gta, and is a founding member of TEN - an association of young architects based in Zurich.