Camera Obscura: Drawing a Lens into the Topographies of the Inner Self

Jo Van Den Berghe

"My analysis has required more solitude than collectivity."
Fanny Bowditch Katz in a letter to Emma Jung, dated November 11th, 1916. (Shamdasani 1998)

In this text I discuss knowledge production coming forth from a drawing narrative emerging between two architectural bodies – two generations of architectures – put side by side.

This drawing narrative intertwines with language that adds precision to the drawing hand, giving meaning and direction to it. Indeed, I enter a state of grace when my drawing and my words merge in a silent flow, whereas things around me seem to whirl away.

This research is reminiscent of Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), in which Poliphilo embarks on his quest through the dark forest to find his beloved Polia. Colonna's text prevails over the woodcut images that illuminate it yet tease the reader's imaginations. Whereas for the research shown here the drawings prevail, the words provoke the imaginations of the draftsman yet more precisely situate the meaning of the drawings. Writing, here, is the indispensable verbalization, generating a more accurate understanding and an improved communicability of the newly acquired knowledge. (Van Den Berghe 2023)

This is autoethnographic research, more specifically the merging of confessional and impressionist tales (Van Maanen 1988), a narrated life history (Denzin 2008, Bochner and Ellis 2016) as a direct source of knowledge, in which *personae creation* is part of the research method – personae that bear the narrative. The positionality (Hayano 1979, Adams, Ellis and Jones 2017) of the researcher is that of a direct witness of a staged dialogue between two architectures – two personae. This setup permits for the reflexivity to occur in this research. Thick descriptions as text (Witkin 2022) resonate and intertwine with the thick visual descriptions in the drawings.

This research, on which I embarked since 2009, clarifies how a set of architectural obsessions constitute the foundational layer of my body of work consisting of drawings and buildings. Furthermore,

this body of work contextualizes in (architectural) references that seem to share these obsessions as common denominators. As I will explain further, these obsessions are the necessary conditions for this architect to find his 'beloved Polia', needed for his work to be.

Here, narrated life histories (Denzin 2008, Bochner and Ellis 2016) permit to unveil the dialectical interplay between two architectures – *Photohouse* and *Camera Obscura* – that are personifications of the grandfather-photographer and the grandson-architect (me). It is "the electrical jump from soul to soul" when "*he* [*Camera Obscura*] encounters his *you* [*Photohouse*] in which the *I* [this drawing architect] can mirror itself". (Naaijkens 2023) These architectural personifications are confronted with each other through the compositional principle of the polyptych, in which the *confrontation-by-drawing* unveils deeper layers of meaning in my body of work.

Photohouse is the photo studio of my grandfather, who was a photographer, situated on top of the rear building of my grandparental home. Only when I was eleven, I was permitted to go up there, since the ladder that gave access was dangerous. There my grandfather taught me how to develop analogous black and white photographs in the darkroom – a camera obscura. This place, demolished in 1991, still feeds my memories of its mysterious darkness and seclusion, its labyrinthine floorplan [fig. 01], a secret refuge away from the woofing world.
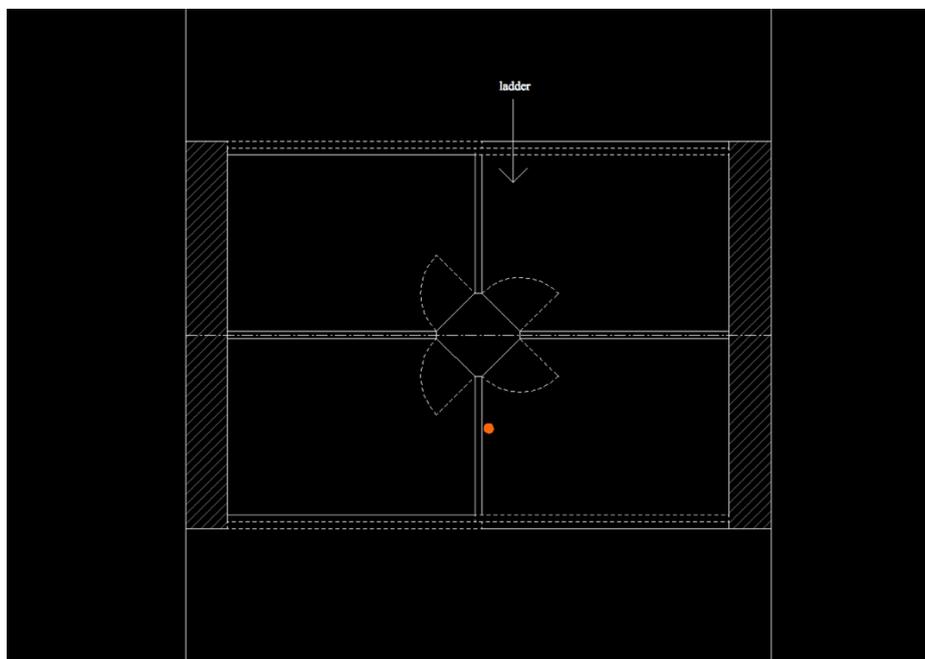

Figure 1. Photohouse. Floor plan of my grandfather's photography studio (demolished in 1991). Drawing by the author, based on memories.

Camera Obscura is my latest project. It is the transformation of the most remote room of an old fashion workshop in our own house (1898). Drawing this room is the architect's quest 'through the Dark Forest' for his 'beloved Polia' (Colonna 1499, Pérez-Gòmez 1994), for the desired architectural conditions of solitude and darkness, investigating where these conditions come forth from, and how to materialize them. This is a reflection on my architectural past, present and future. Making these drawings – and finally building *Camera Obscura* itself – anchors moments and places of contemplation on solitude and darkness, the agency of materials, refined architectural details [fig. 2, fig. 3] and their impact on the desired solitude and darkness, a lens to look into the topographies of the inner self of this drawing architect.

Figure 2. Dark wooden fashion workshop to be converted into Camera Obscura.
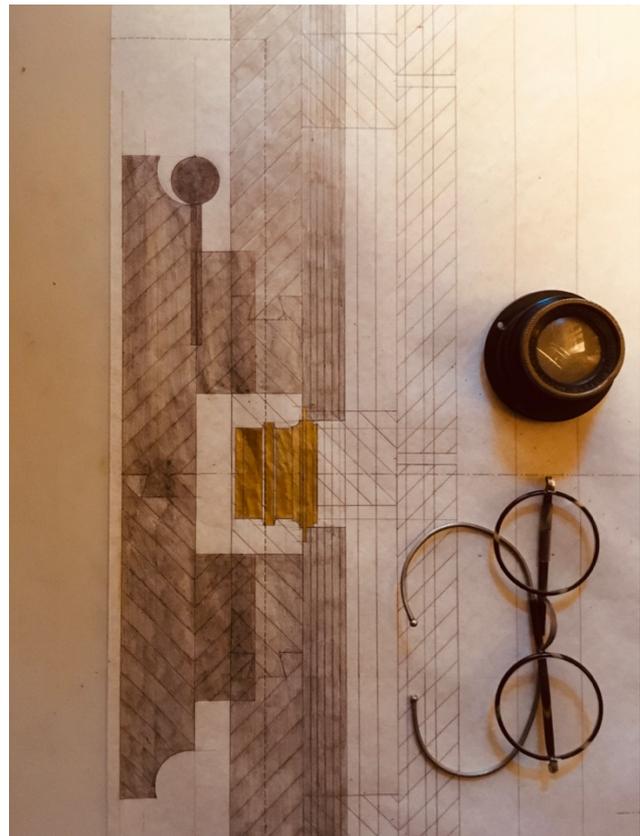Photograph by author.

Figure 3. Window hatches with lens. Horizontal section scale 1/1. Pencil, paper, gold marker on thin white paper. Drawing by author.

So, what is it, that operates behind this desired solitude and darkness, wanting to dwell in the most remote room of the house? Solitude to shield the fragility of this architect's inner self, being inside the inside of insides, emotionally hence architecturally? Is darkness the indispensable condition for the clear manifestation of light, which is the necessary darkness for the development of analogous black and white photography? This slow self-interrogation seems to take me to a specific childhood moment in *Photohouse* in February 1973.

PHOTOHOUSE REVISITED

Solitude is not loneliness. The desired solitude, personified architecturally by drawing (and building) *Camera Obscura*, is only bearable through the sensed proximity of close allies – architectural personifications of humans. There are many of those in my personal spatial history (Van Den Berghe 2012).

Photohouse[1] is a key close ally, very valuable as an architectural personification for this research. The place has been constitutional for my spatial intelligence (van Schaik 2008), because of its utter darkness and difficult accessibility, its labyrinthine floor plan[2], and the slow occurrence of the photographic image on the photo paper that resonates with the slowness of drawing by hand and the quiet pace with which drawing unveils gradual knowing.

1973. I stand at the entrance of *Photohouse*, gazing into its black depth. Gradually I can trace the contours of a room, a door in the corner. I open the door and find myself in a tiny one square meter room consisting of four identical doors [fig. 01]. I open the door next to the first door, and I see a room identical to the first room. I open the two other doors, and I discover two more identical rooms. Where am I? Is this a dream covered in disquieting silence, yet a comforting labyrinthine protection wrapped in the thin black air?

Then, my grandfather demonstrates me how to develop black and white *clichés*. Paper with a thin layer of silver put on a horizontal stand. Darkness. The timer, the time of Kronos: ten seconds of light. Then darkens again. Switching on an orange light bulb. Putting the paper in a bath with chemicals. Half-light. Waiting. Gazing. Magic! The time of Kairos: a photographic image of me slowly emerges from the paper! My grandfather points at different kinds of black in the photographs we are developing.

"Is this black, here, equal to the previous blacks I pointed at?"

"No, granddad, it's blacker?!"

"So, it means that there are different kinds of black!"

"Yes, indeed granddad, I can see now! I see black, and blakc, and blac, and blak, and blaq, and blacq, and ..."

CAMERA OBSCURA REVISITED

The mental proximity of *Photohouse* whilst drawing *Camera Obscura* is now obvious to me. For my research, I decided to strengthen this mental proximity by drawing *Photohouse* close to the drawing of *Camera Obscura* [fig. 5].

The radicality of the desired solitude requires a radicality in the material conditions through which this architect wants to draw and build solitude, which requires thickness of walls and sharply carved windows looking away from the civilized world. These windows are introverted, meant to look more inwards than outwards.

Firstly, the lens[3] [fig. 3] in the wooden hatch permits the outer world — by its upside-down projection on the opposite wall of the room — to penetrate this room.

Secondly, the window with its architectural gesture curiously turning inwards [fig. 4] expressing its 'change of mind' by 'looking back' into *Camera Obscura* to 'see' what is going on inside the topographies of the inner self.

Thirdly, the window with two times double glazing, a golden hatch on the outside and an oakwood hatch on the inside, expressing the desire to find solitude, silence and darkness in the interiority of *Camera Obscura*. The golden hatch, East-facing, is meant to be opened only partially at sunrise to cast a metaphysical light into *Camera Obscura*[4].

And finally, 'the letterbox window', a horizontal slit covered with a brass hatch on the outside and a wooden sliding panel on the inside, ready to receive 'a message', but only when the inhabitant of *Camera Obscura* wants to participate[5].
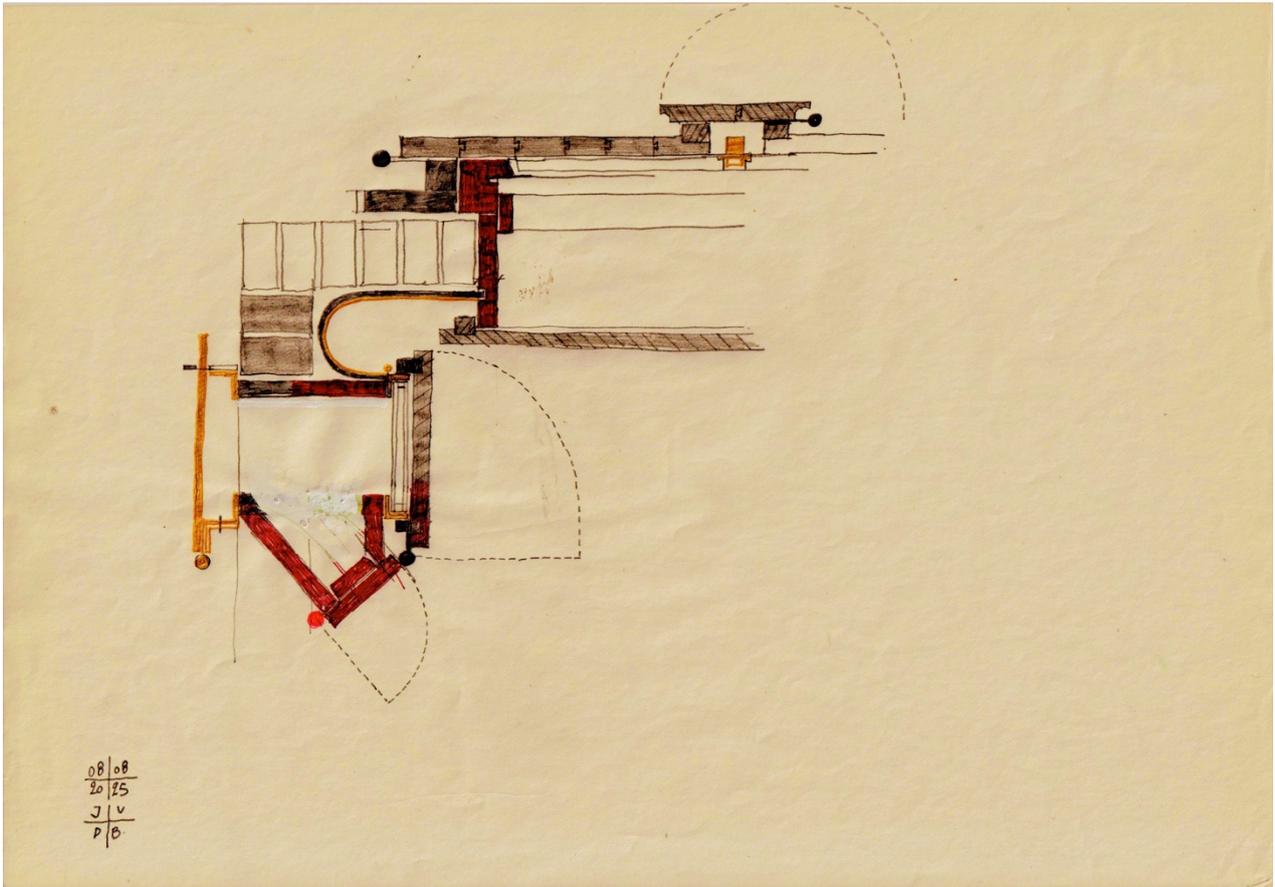
Figure 4. Investigation window looking inwards. Horizontal section. Pencil, paper, brown marker on silk paper. Drawing by the author.

These precisely characterized windows, densely staged in one small room, confirm a solitude of darkness promised by the blackness of the outer architectural expression, affirmed by obscuring hatches that can turn this building into a blind, deaf and mute architectural body [fig. 02]. Materially, it is a solitude of dark coarseness that would keep the uninvited at a distance.

Once all the hatches are closed the room is obscured. Then, *Camera Obscura* starts teasing out a long introspective gaze emerging in shoreless moments — a perfect time of Kairos, obsessive drawing intertwining with a *monologue interieur* that works as an immediate verbalization of thoughts and images occurring in the mind of this drawing architect. Verbalizations are provoked by drawing, yet these verbalizations provoke new drawing moments that provoke new thoughts and verbalizations, and so on. This cyclical process is propelling the seamless continuation of this *monologue interieur* in the intense moment of drawing. A trance. Leave me alone. Let me draw. Solitude.

This seems to be the room for the extinction of the last light[6].The black house sucks in every light and absorbs the eye into its matt darkness [fig. 02], a closed enigmatic architecture paradoxically inviting one to enter yet warning one to stay out. The dark wooden thickness is carved out by the biting sawtooth and sharp chisel of the carpenter, which is the sharp pencil of this drawing architect, the unknown carved out as material sediment out from a black mass hence becoming insight and knowledge to unveil the topographies of the inner self of the architect that seem to hide inside this dark body of wood. The impermeability of this enigma catalyses the real homesickness of this drawing architect, longing to come home, time after time, and drawing house after house after house.

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO ARCHITECTURAL PERSONAE

November first, 2025. *Photohouse* and *Camera Obscura* exchange their aspirations, the architect's disappointments, the photographer's memories, through the dialectical interplay between their architectural personifications — black architectural bodies side by side. Drawing both in each other's proximity, through the application of the polyptych as a compositional principle, provides growing insight and understanding regarding the agency of their architectural meaning in my work. This meaning clearly revolves around making an architecture of solitude and darkness.

To have their alliance unspoiled both personae, *Photohouse* and *Camera Obscura*, want their architectures conjuncted with a wire of gold. Then they invoke the Goldsmith, skilled to forge this indispensable umbilical cord of past and present and future that dangles above a dark pond. *Camera Obscura*, a room for deep architectural thinking-by-drawing, is needed by the grandson-architect wandering through his dark forest, on his quest to find his own 'beloved Polia', his architectural obsessions, the remainders of an architectural life. The alchemist incantations emitted by *Photohouse*, where the grandfather-photographer patiently dwells, whisper to his grandson silent wisdom breezing through the Goldsmith's golden thread [fig. 5].

Figure 5. A dialogue between two architectural *personae*: Camera Obscura and Photohouse, waiting for the Goldsmith. Brown ink on silk paper. Drawings by the author.

Notes

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[1] Thomas Edison's *Black Maria* (1893) is an important ally for me. Its blackness and its corresponding enigmatic outer appearance, the fact that it is also a photo and film studio, its coarse and uninviting demeanour, a hermetic architectural body. See also Van Den Berghe 2019).

[2] The labyrinthine is another obsession of mine, that resonates with the labyrinthine quest of Poliphilo through his dark forest (Colonna 1499).

[3] The peephole in the door of Sigurd Lewerentz's *Chapel of Resurrection* (1925) in Stockholm must have anchored itself in my subconscious. The lens I am drawing for *Camera Obscura* is undoubtedly indebted to it. I consider the lens of *Camera Obscura*, and the way it 'looks inwards' by projecting the outer world on the opposite wall, as the successor of the literal introspection into Lewerentz's funeral chapel. Both the funeral chapel and *Camera Obscura* are places of solitude, silence, remoteness and, indeed, darkness.

[4] I refer to Alvar Aalto's little window here, with its wooden 'curtain' in the council chamber of the *Säynätsalo Town Hall* (1952).

[5] I refer to John Hejduk's project *House for the Inhabitant who refused to Participate'* (1979). The intention, the title, the soundless emptiness of the depicted square, the hollow grave, the implicit darkness and silence in this work.

[6] Andrew Wyeth (1988). Surprisingly, when I first saw this painting in 2022, it appears to represent an almost identical architectural composition as my homestead.

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BIO:

Jo Van Den Berghe, professor at KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture, graduated at Sint-Lucas School of Architecture (1984). He runs a critical reflective practice. PhD at RMIT University Melbourne (2012). Co-founder of the Research Group The Drawing and the Space. He teaches experimental architectural design (www.studio-anatomy.org), investigating the tension field between Techné and Poiesis through experimental drawing. Programme Director KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture (2017–2022). Visiting professor at Politecnico di Milano, EPFL Lausanne, Queen's University Belfast, RMIT, and University of Barcelona.