

HOUSE FOR THE DANCE OF DEATH

Peter Olshavsky

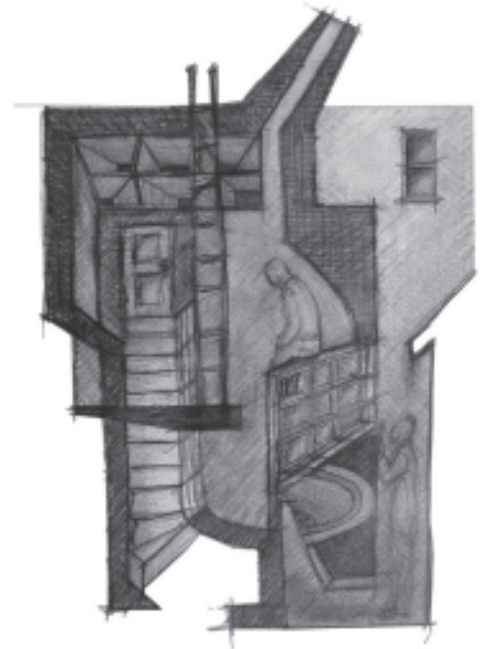
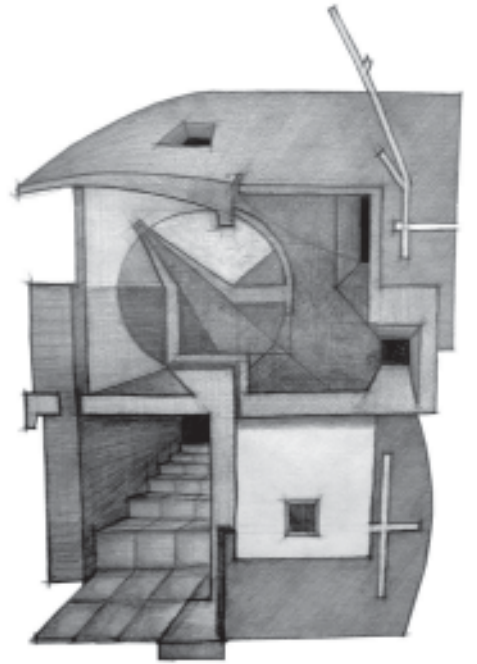
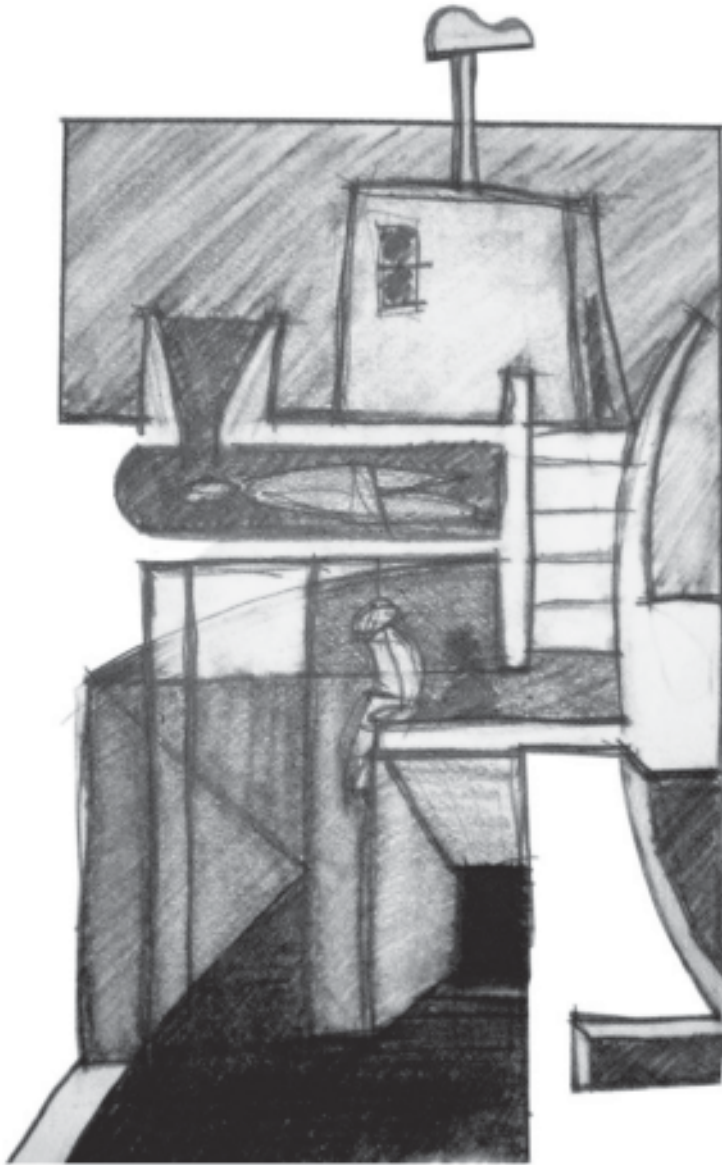
Formerly one knew (or perhaps one guessed it) that one had one's death within one, as a fruit its kernel. The children had a little death within them and the grown-ups a big one. The women had it in their womb and the men in their breast. One had it, and it gave one a singular dignity and a quiet pride."

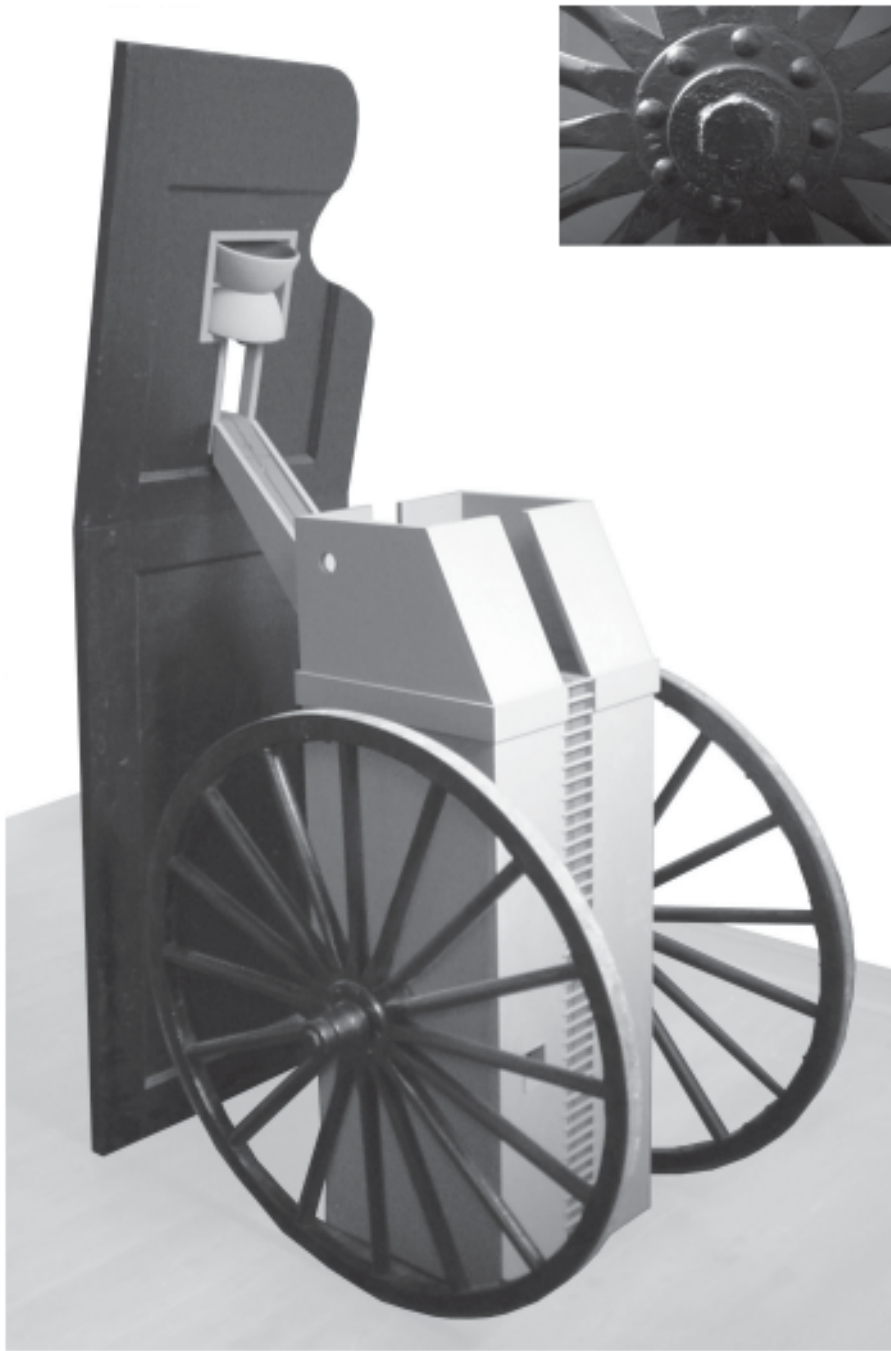
- Rainer Maria Rilke

The Dance of Death (*La Danse Macabre*) is a traditional depiction of a farandole, or a dance where participants join hands and are led in a serpentine manner to the accompanying music. Depictions of the dance typically alternate between a living person and a skeletal partner. The procession descends through the reigning hierarchy of society, from the Pope down to the beggar, covering the gamut of roles.

Hans Holbein's rendition of The Dance of Death is comprised of 41 woodblock engravings executed in Basel between 1524-26, later to be published in 1538 in Lyon. Articulated as individual frames, it begins with the Christian 'Creation' and descends in typical fashion through the social hierarchy. The series embodies a humility and respect for the threshold between life and death and its primary function is as a reminder, in short, a *memento mori*.





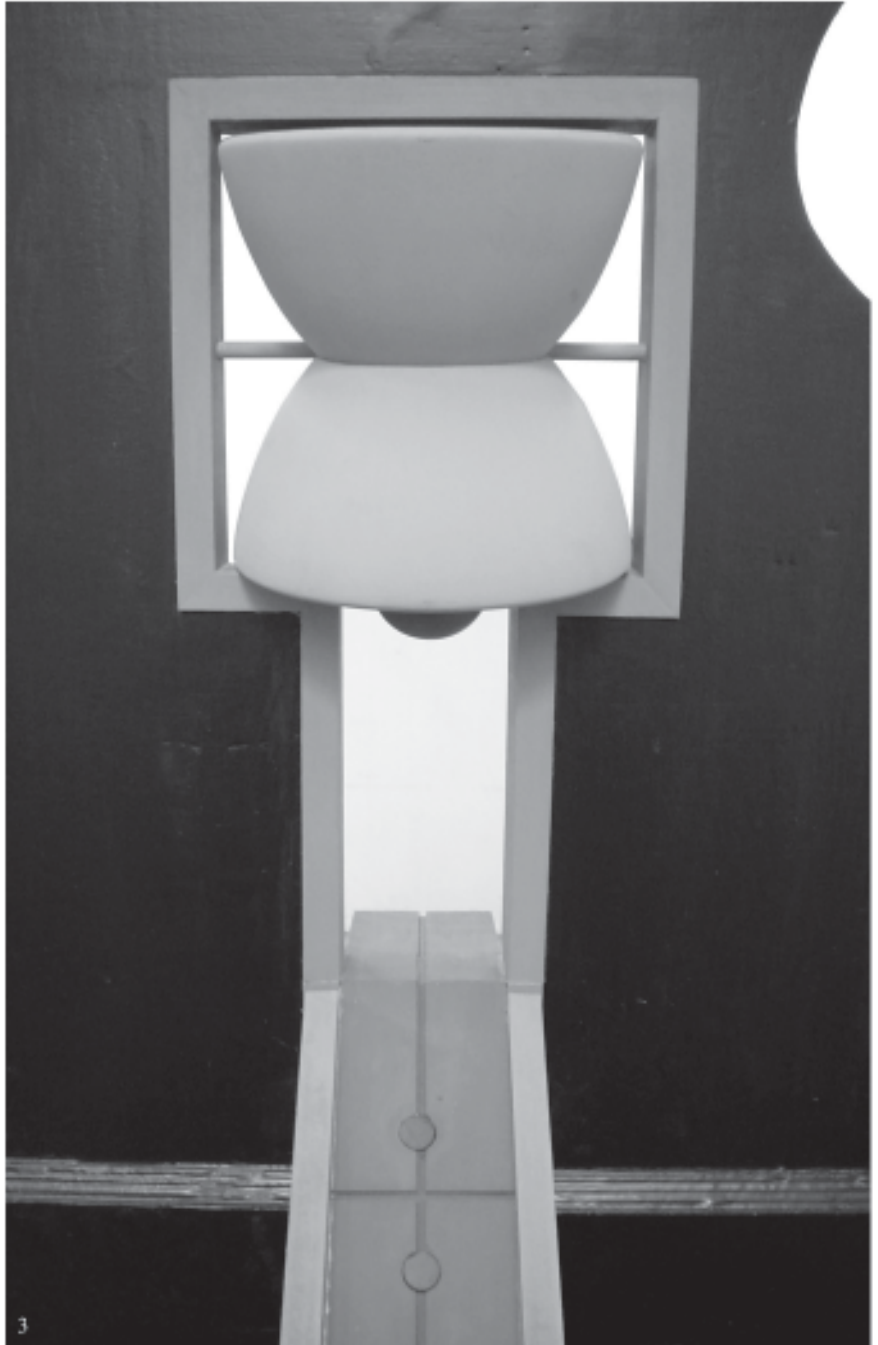


Death is an immanent threshold across which all must pass. This transience is inherent to man's being and it is from this condition that one's significance is revealed. Accordingly, the project seeks to translate Hans Holbein's Dance into contemporary society. As the current age looks to eradicate death, this project seeks to recover the fundamental importance of this irreversible limit. Perhaps it can be said that one can only truly begin to live with the acknowledgement of this threshold. For as Nietzsche stated, "a living thing can be healthy, strong, and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon; if it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself, ... it will pine away slowly or hasten to its timely end."¹ Nietzsche's "timely end" signifies not the literal death of man, but rather a loss of something culturally shared and truly human. "In a more subtle sense," Dalibor Vesely maintains, "horizon contributes to the identity of a situation, while at the same time serving as a key to exploring its inexhaustible richness. The most important aspect of horizon is, no doubt, its ability to bring to our awareness what is in our experience but is not yet visible or known."²

The project thus works to address the contemplative quality of the Dance and engender through form, shifting scales, implied movement, and double readings the opacity and depth of experience. At its core this translation functions as a rehearsal that ultimately invites silence.

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

² Vesely, Dalibor. *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004.



1 - bed and dance floor
2 - main stairs
3 - timepiece and overlook