Helmut Jahn
Drawings
September 14 – October 31, 1999
Reception: Sunday, October 3 from 4 to 7pm

RELATED EVENTS
ARTIST TALK
HELMUT JAHN
AND EDWARD ROBBINS
Sunday, October 3
5:00 to 6:00pm
Jahn will be interviewed by Edward Robbins, Lecturer in the department of Urban Design at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University. Robbins, initially trained as an anthropologist, is the author of Why Architects Draw, a series of interviews with nine of today’s leading architects. This event is free and will take place in Cobb Hall Room 307 directly below the gallery.

LECTURE
MARTHA THORNE
Architectural Curator and Historian
Sunday, October 31
3:00pm
Since 1995, Thorne has been Associate Curator of Architecture at The Art Institute of Chicago where she has organized numerous exhibitions, most recently The Printers Architecture Prize, 1979-1999 and Art and Architecture, in Chicago. She will deliver a lecture on Jahn’s work. This event is free and will take place in Cobb Hall Room 402.

CONCERT
TRIO ACCANTO
Monday, November 1, 6:30pm
The Arts Club of Chicago
201 E. Ontario
Trio Accanto is among the most vital and active groups in contemporary music. The group features pianist Yukiko Sugawara, saxophonist Marcus Weiss and percussionist Christian Dierstein. With their very modern and original approach to instrumentation and their breathtaking virtuosity, Trio Accanto has caught the attention of Europe’s most important composers including Gyorgy Kurtag and Vinko Globokar. Their North American debut will feature American premieres of works by Toshio Hosokawa (Japan), Mauricio Sotelo (Spain), Fredrik Zeller (Germany) and Chicago’s own Gene Coleman. This event is co-sponsored with The Arts Club of Chicago and The Goethe Institute. The concert will take place at The Arts Club of Chicago, 201 East Ontario. $10, $8 members and students.

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An Active Imagination

Architecture. It’s everywhere, in a variety of forms. There is architecture as a profession, a practice, a field of activity, architecture as object, as form, as space and finally, the most transparent of these, architecture as metaphor, as a way of thinking as thought. Although he was not an architect, the mathematician and philosopher René Descartes began an introductory section of his famous treatise, Meditations (1637), with an architectural metaphor. In order to facilitate a more rigorous scrutiny of mind, body, soul, and their relation to a supreme being, Descartes needed to tear down his existing belief system. Before proceeding with demolition, however, Descartes needed another metaphorical dwelling, a mental structure that while consisting of only a few maxims would be sound enough to support the weight of empirical thinking. In other words, as his house of reason underwent inspection and reconstruction, reason itself would need to take refuge in its second residence, the imagination. Descartes’ explorations in logic, Euclidean geometry, particularly his use of the grid, not to mention his famous dictum, Cogito Ergo Sum (I think, therefore I am) were an unprecedented celebration of human reason. He directed his contemplation towards experiences in this world as opposed to a theological reasoning aimed at the next. This made him a seminal precursor to the Enlightenment, and by default, led to the emergence of a modern secular subject whose faith in reason rivaled, if not superseded, any religious bearings. Descartes’ understanding of the imagination as a space devoted to the interrogation and reconfiguration of reason has remained a constant throughout the four hundred year saga of Modernity. But Modernity does not take as much pride in the space of the secular imagination as it does the place of the secular imagination.

German-born, Chicago-based architect Helmut Jahn is a modernist of the Cartesian variety. His gleaming and translucent futuristic structures, often supported by a minimal, grid-like metal frame, definitely qualify as reason’s second residence. Jahn’s buildings fuel our romance with a cosmopolitan glass curtain-wall grids represents an ordered Cartesian extension of theory, Jahn’s drawing is fueled through building and he is a practical imagination, one that preys on a particular project’s constraints. His flights of fancy are rarely an end in themselves but are almost always related to solving the immediate and existing problems posed by any one of his projects around the globe.

The scope and trajectory of Jahn’s career, from early projects such as McCormick Place (1971) to recent projects such as Sony Center Berlin (1999) indicates that his interests have shifted from aesthetic to structural concerns. Maintaining an integrity of reason has remained a constant throughout the four hundred year saga of Modernity. But Modernity does not take as much pride in the space of the secular imagination as it does the place of the secular imagination.

Jahn’s buildings fuel our romance with a cosmopolitan glass curtain-wall grids represents an ordered Cartesian existence superimposed on both the urban and natural worlds. For Jahn, however, the rate of technological advances in building materials and their application is outpacing the imagination. Under these circumstances reality’s relationship to the imagination is not that of a constraint but a catalyst. Whereas Jahn’s skyscrapers and his open, light-filled atriums represent the imagination on a metaphorical level, it is in his drawings that an extremely restless and inquisitive imagination becomes visible. Given the sleek, high-tech look of his buildings, few would think of Jahn as an obsessive draftsman. The State of Illinois Center, the United Terminal at O’Hare and the Northwest Atrium Center look as if they somehow precipitated straight from the realm of digital design. But Jahn’s personal office is without a computer, a conspicuous absence for someone highly suspect of nostalgia. For architects of his generation mark-making is second nature and an activity he considers indispensable. But unlike others of his generation for whom drawing is an extension of theory, Jahn’s drawing is fueled through building and he is a practical imagination, one that preys on a particular project’s constraints. His flights of fancy are rarely an end in themselves but are almost always related to solving the immediate and existing problems posed by any one of his projects around the globe.

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