

THESIS



My project deals with the incipient moment of a new design, a moment in tension between precedent and the new. Reiterating, recycling, recontextualizing, reinventing - all means of producing the new. With a heavy history of copies, we wish to flee the “re”, discard and deny it, proclaim the death of the precedent and the yearning for the clean slate. From the practices of golden ratios, proportions, listing buildings, preserving skylines to those of ornament purging, tabula rasa, entropy and parametrics, all grapple with the nagging issue of precedent. Even the latter recognise the precedent by denying it.

These issues have started to congeal into my thesis in a unit that confronts the figure of the architect head on. We literally start by re-coning the work of an architectural precedent. My recon was Piranesi, an architect who never built yet constructed worlds out of re-coning the ancient precedent.

CHANGE
DRAWING



I use this model as a way to situate myself within the narrative. It is divided into four parts. We start and end in the architect’s studio - in fact a room in the AA. We travel through three worlds, versions of the original studio.

The rooms function as communicating vessels, allowing the narrative to spill from one into the other.

The narrative that we follow throughout is that of the artefact, in various guises - historical, uprooted, forged. The artefact will describe a two part trajectory - from site to museum, and from museum back to site.

SITE - MUSEUM

(HISTORICAL ARTEFACT VS. FORGED ARTEFACT)



What is truly original, in a world of precedents, where everything can be described as “been there done, that?”. What is it that defines an artefact as original? If we look at the art world, as many as forty percent of what hangs in museums and galleries is said to be a forgery. The passing off of forgeries as originals cannot be explained by economics alone. What is the real difference between a true Vermeer and what we believe to be a Vermeer? I believe the answer to be the narrative, the story. We want to believe in the authenticity of the narrative more than in the brushstrokes in front of us. Forgeries, at least very successful ones, are not reproductions, they are reimaginings of the original's narrative and most importantly have the power to produce alternate histories.



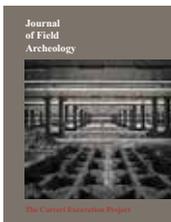
Let me give you two examples of narrative forgers: the Dutch forger Van Meegern, who forged Vermeers, and Piranesi himself.

Vermeer went to Rome but there are no Roman Vermeers - so Van Meegern fills in the gap of Vermeer's life and work by painting them. This is an image of his trial, where forgeries and originals are judged side by side.



Piranesi's forgeries are much more puzzling. In his pathological obsession with ruins, Piranesi fabricates hybrid Roman remains of odd, mutated Etrusco-Roman-Egyptian origin.

He sells these artefacts as real archeological findings. In a sense, Piranesi was re-conning ancient Rome, creating its alternate history.



In dealing with this fragile relationship between historical artefact and forgery as alternate historical artefacts, I attempt to rewrite the story of Rome by constructing the reality of a Carceri dig.



Articles in Italian newspapers document the progression of the dig throughout Rome,



from the Carceri slate at Termini,



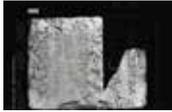
to St. Peter's square,



to Piranesi's own studio at the edge of Campo Marzio.



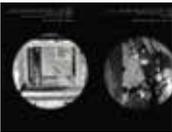
Archeological certificates root the findings in time and place through their bureaucratic validity.



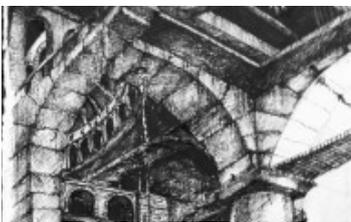
X-rays and carbon dating reconstruct the narrative of the Carceri: the finding of the Carceri plate at Termini,



the lion bones and spear heads,



the excavation of Piranesi's studio itself.



Here, an uncanny ghost is revealed: Piranesi's third state, a meta-print of a view from the depth of the Carceri and into modern Rome, a reversal of the dig. It is clear that it is a fake, a sharpie imitation. But its quality of found artefact from the past provides a rewriting of two narratives - that of Piranesi as original, and of myself as the forger.

There is a sort of equivalence between forgery and original. A forgery remains attached to the medium and scale of its original. It is dependent on the original and cannot be read independent from it. The forgery's narrative is stuck in the past, linked to a historical precedent. It has the possibility, to generate alternate histories, but not new futures.

This is why forgeries are much like original artefacts that are displayed in museums - their narrative is burried in historical precedent.

MUSEUM

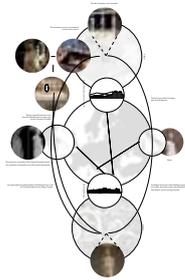
(DISPLACED ARTEFACT, ENTOMBED ARTEFACT)



I exited the previous world by stating that museum displays are similar to forgeries in that they cannot generate new histories. I'll explain this by looking at the Caryatides. Six Caryatides have been displaced from the Erechtheion and moved to museums - five are on display in Athens, in the Acropolis Museum, and one is in the British Museum. None of the Caryatides holding up the entablature on the Acropolis are originals. They are fakes ensuring an authentic tourist experience.



The paradox is that through this permutation, the copies of the Caryatides on the Acropolis are able to seamlessly replace the originals in the continuous narrative of the site. On the other hand, the museum Caryatides freeze in time, devoid of narrative.



One Caryatide is displayed in the British Museum, which is a colonial version of the Ancient World, with altered geology and geography. A huge Greece, a tiny Europe...



I move my Carceri forgeries to the British Museum.

By moving my alternate historical artefacts, the Carceri Plate, the lion skeleton and an assortment of mutate pieces, I achieve two things. On the one hand, the uprooted artefacts weave a new narrative for the museum: the existence of the Carceri room ensures the reality of the Carceri in Rome.

On the other hand, the forgeries are authenticated by being displayed in a museum, their status assured the moment they were placed on plinths.



Museum artefacts go through a sort of ritual - displacement from the original site and entombment on their plinths. In order to liberate the city of the museum, I transform the building into an artefact by following the same ritual - uprooting, displaceming and ultimate destruction.



First, the interior is filled with superscaled ballons that seal the displays into place.



The museum is then excavated and placed on a frame (or plinth) from which it is lifted into the air.

The uprooting is the key moment when the museum ceases to be building and becomes artefact, just like its displays inside.



The building is dissected and analysed according to its components. It is weighed and balanced, excavated and extracted.



Strapped to a frame, it is lifted by a column of 8 million 10 to 15m diameter balloons filled with helium.



It floats on the currents of the stratosphere, 50 000m above the earth. This colonial piñata sheds artefacts over land and sea, a culmination in the desacralization of the precedent.

MUSEUM - SITE

(ARTEFACT AS WASTE, THE TABULA PLENA)



Walter Benjamin said that we experience history not when we are engaged in the dynamic process of change, but when we see the remainder, the waste of our culture being retaken by nature. A ghost is the generator of a nascent future. It is the annihilation of the past and the prophesy of a new, more relevant future. Without the ghost, the new cannot exist.



By lifting the museum I dispose of the artefact, leaving a gaping hole in its place, the beginning of a tabula rasa. This new site, essentially dehistoricized and purged of precedent, is missing an essential element - the ghost of the precedent, the waste of architecture past that has within it the capability of generating new futures.



I embark on the last leg of my journey attempting to transform my artefacts into the very matter of the site for a new architecture.

My architectural ghosts are almost metaphysical in their material quality. They are made from heliogel, a monolithic derivate of aerogel. Aerogel is an incredibly light weigh material which starts off as a gel whose water particles are replaced by air. Heliogel, a material specifically invented for the production of these architectural ghosts, is a self-floating material that is 96% helium.



Its monolithic structure is cast into the buildings, which become super scaled drying chambers.

The underground spaces store and transport helium, silica, water and other chemicals.



Piles of silica are hydrated by vapor, forming a gel that will then dry to become heliogel.



To release the heliogel cast, the building is dismembered, peeled away to reveal its immaterial ghost. What was once air, the space of architecture, is now a solid.



The ghosts float above the city, a strange cloud formation of architecture past. Their airy structure filters the light and squeak in the breeze.



Underneath our very feet, for 20 or so meters, a new kind of geology has been forming - the geology of urban layers. The city of today is the rubble of tomorrow and the artefact of the day after tomorrow. The city exists on the ruins of its past. Aerogel slowly absorbs the debris of the city, replacing its gases with solids. The weighed down ghosts crash in slow motion to the ground, the end of an almost biological cycle.



Casting, releasing, floating, absorbing, crashing, dispersing. After they have crashed, the ghosts are reduced to their basic component, silica.

I have followed the artefact through three scales, each of them seemingly destructive. I entombed the Carceri in the British Museum, I uprooted and disappeared the museum itself and I ultimately reduced the city to the white desert. We have gone from site to museum only to return to the site. But this site that we have returned to has nothing in common with the original site, it is entirely constructed from the matter of past precedents.

What might seem a tabula rasa is in fact the very opposite, a Tabula Plena. It is formed from the waste of an overspilling, layered history. From this white desert can erupt the new.