

SPLITTING ARCHITECTURAL TIME

GÓMEZ + GONZÁLEZ HOLMESBURG PRISON PROJECT

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In *Doing Time / Depth of Surface*, Patricia Gómez and María Jesús González have split open a space between the walls of an architectural monument and its visible surface. Their intervention has created a new artifact, a detached portable skin with a unique spatial character. Holmesburg Prison was designed by the Wilson Brothers & Co. in 1886, a firm that believed in progressive institutions and the power of architecture to change character.¹ The paint layers removed by Gómez + González date up to 1996, a moment of decline and disillusionment in the Philadelphia correctional system. *Doing Time / Depth of Surface* is a powerful testament to the human experiences that transpired within the walls of the prison. The work, however, accumulates significant depth by its implicit understanding of architectural discourse and modernity's fascination with the ruin that begins with Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Carceri* in the eighteenth century and continues today with the debates of "ruin porn" associated with Detroit.² The project is both empirical and sublime; it employs tactics of conservation science but the emotional effect is irrational. Through this very conflict, Gómez + González revisit a fundamental dialogue within the discipline of historic preservation and architectural theory. What is the value of a building? How is architecture affected by its cumulative temporality? Which moment is more important in a building's biography? The moment of its birth (design and construction)? The moment of its death (abandonment)? Or all the moments in between? By stripping the outermost layers of paint from so symbolic a monument, Gómez + González thematize conservation as a discipline. The "time" and "depth" of the project's title announces an investigation of the spatial manifestation of time, specifically the 100 years elapsed

between the construction and abandonment of Holmesburg Prison. Thus, Gómez + González align their artistic practice with innovative strategies emerging from new pedagogies in Historic Preservation developed by Jorge Otero-Pailos at Columbia University.

The history of Historic Preservation is divided between two paradigms emerging simultaneously in the middle of the nineteenth century. French architect Viollet-le-Duc sought to restore monuments to a fictive state of completeness, while British aesthetic theorist John Ruskin resisted any scraping of accumulated layers.³ In 1877, the leader of the Arts and Crafts Movement William Morris founded the Anti-Scrape Society (The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings), which was one of the earliest advocacy groups resisting restorations. Morris articulated a notion that the "life and soul of monuments" accumulates through the various users of the buildings and is hence distinct from their "bodies merely," or the inert masonry designed by the architect.⁴ This anti-restoration movement developed an alternative architectural language to describe the stratigraphic accretion of building layers. One of its proponents, the writer Anatole France, denounced Viollet-le-Duc's restorations as barbaric and connected walls with the notion of writing surface. "For change is the essence of life. Every age has left its mark on it," he wrote, "[i]t is a book wherein each generation has written a page, and not one of these pages must be tempered with. They are not all in the same handwriting because they are not all inscribed by the same hand."⁵ Romantic Historicism had already established conceptual antagonism between writing and architecture, whereby a visceral response to monuments was posited as more effective than textual documents in studying the historical past. Witnessing

the wholesale destruction of old buildings under the banner of progress, writers like Victor Hugo articulated an anxiety over the death of architecture. In his pronouncement "this will kill that; the printed book will kill the edifice," Hugo prophesized the eradication of architecture by print media.⁶ The project of historical memory, whether through the scientific documentation of buildings or their physical conservation, needed to be done through a competition of surfaces.

As printmakers, Gómez + González have created a two-dimensional page that conserves layers of Holmesburg Prison's architectural life imbedded in latex paint. Rather than scraping, they have imbedded the building's physical fabric in a new medium and ultimately belong to the Anti-Scrape tradition. Although the pigments adhering to the black cloth are limited to the last surfaces of life, the architectural frame creates a dialogue with the monument's original identity. All three of the prisons that Gómez + González have documented are Panopticon prisons. Developed in the eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham, this form became the architectural paradigm of the Enlightenment. The Panopticon gave architectural form the institutional dream of reforming consciousness.⁷ By imprinting the interior walls into an elevation that unfolds in a single plane, Gómez + González address the history of architectural representation, namely orthographic projection. The mediation of architecture through drawings begins as *diseño* in the Renaissance but develops into "invention" by architects like Robert Adam who use elevation fold-outs.

The split that Gómez + González insert between the different layers of paint and wall, addresses the architectural complexities of a building's chronological pages. Using hazmat suits to avoid the toxicity of lead paint is an ironic reversal of the building's original ethos of aerial reform. The Wilson Brothers were pioneers in institutional reform and engineering innovation. In preparation for the Main Building of Drexel University, Joseph Wilson toured new technical academies in England and Germany hoping to introduce educational reform in the

United States.⁸ While Holmesburg Prison was under construction, the Wilson Brothers wrote about a recently completed prison at Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, "every precaution has been taken to ensure good ventilation and to meet the most rigid sanitary requirements."⁹ The vaulted interiors of each cell at Holmesburg assured a rational system of ventilation.

By peeling the top layer of Holmesburg, Gómez + González inevitably celebrate the latest inhabitants of the cells, creating an archaeological record of c. 1995, as indicated by drawings, graffiti, and print media that provide glimpses of the prisoners' inner worlds and visual culture. Gómez + González do not attempt to interpret artifacts but offer them to the viewer as an architectural curiosity to decipher; we want to learn more about the Philadelphia Flyers after seeing the prisoner's pinup from the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* hockey coverage (June 1, 1995) and an Arabic inscription demands our attention and invites us to translate the document as if it were a dedicatory inscription (it reads, "God Almighty, thine aid we seek," from the Quran).

Entering the visual space of 1995 launches an architectural inquiry about the manipulation of the original space across the building's lived century, as earlier occupants of the cells recede in the tactile coverage of the cells' surface. This method of imprinting turns any data that is not perfectly flat into a black hole. Where plumbing once existed, we confront a gaping hole. We seek earlier occupants, such as the infamous inmates who received dermatological tests. In *Acres of Skin*, for instance, Allen Hornblum reports on an incident where inmate Johnnie Williams had a hallucinatory reaction to the experiments and dislodged a toilet from his cell.¹⁰ Although we have no physical evidence of this event, this project allows us to imagine the invisible shadows of such powerful interactions between architecture and its users.

Cultural theorists have argued that the ruin and the notion of authenticity that it embodies are fundamentally modern preoccupations. Ruins offer a "double

exposure to the past and the present" and signal the absence of utopia, "the refusal of wholeness and classical closure."¹¹ A certain reading of the postmodern condition has banished the viability of grand narratives and utopian architectural solutions. Piranesi's apocalyptic critique in his *Prisons* survives into the work of Frankfurt School cultural theorists Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, who prophesized the death of architecture. "Philosophy as architecture is ruined, but a writing of the ruins, micrologies, graffiti can still be done."¹² Incapable of designing correctional utopias, therefore, all we can do is engage with micronarratives left on the ruined walls. Among contemporary practitioners of historic preservation, Jorge Otero-Pailos has rediscovered the phenomenological undercurrents of postmodern architecture, born by the paints of Jean Labatut's camouflage or Charles W. Moore's Supergraphic murals.¹³ Like Gómez + González, Otero-Pailos dissolves the disciplinary line between art and conservation. He peels building layers adhering to new skins of latex and presents them as autonomous installations. For Manifesta 7 (2008) and the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009), Otero-Pailos imprinted the exterior layer of dirt, grime and pollution from the Fascist Ex Alumnus Building in Bonzalo and the Gothic Ducal Palace in Venice. With a nod to Ruskin's *Ethics of Dust*, these projects offer micrological critiques that revolutionize notions of cultural heritage along with the pedagogies of preservation. Preservation professionals have access to a panoply of digital tools that can dissect the minutia of the physical world much more efficiently than latex transfers can. In an age when conservators can produce three-dimensional scans of astounding resolution, the physical transfers of Gómez + González and Otero-Pailos reflect a conscious resistance to the digital future. What they gain is the creation of works with a haptic presence, with texture and translucence.

Gómez + González's photographs of Holmesburg Prison engage yet another conversation between art and preservation,

centering around the disintegration of modern American cities. During the 1990s, photographer Camilo José Vergara initiated a documentary tradition of displaying a "Smithsonian of Decline" in *American Ruins*.¹⁴ Like social reformer Jacob Riis, Vergara's lens had a persistent mission and it brought attention to major concerns of preservation. By the early 2010s, however, the obsession with ruined American modernity stirred some criticism. The proliferation of ruin tourists that descended upon blighted Detroit created a photographic genre derogatorily referred to as "ruin porn."¹⁵ Its critics noted that Detroit's social suffering and architectural demise created a cottage industry of artistic exploitation.¹⁶ Detroit natives like Jack White (of the White Stripes) urged all photographers to stay away from their city.¹⁷ The verdict over ruin porn remains open. Irresistible images of America's urban decay may precipitate political action and preservation initiatives, or they may simply supply beautiful complacency. *Doing Time / Depth of Surface* oscillates between various architectural traditions. Its abject materiality resists slick and easy consumption. Instead, this timely project highlights the three-dimensional complexities of space and temporal distance caught between a building's walls and its exterior surfaces.

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Endnotes

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- 17 Mike Rubin, "Capturing the Idling of the Motor City," *The New York Times* (August 18, 2011).

The *Doing Time / Depth of Surface* artist residency and exhibition at The Galleries at Moore College of Art & Design is a project of Philagrafika, a nonprofit arts organization in Philadelphia that provides leadership for large-scale, collaborative initiatives with broad public exposure for the field of printmaking. *Doing Time / Depth of Surface* has been supported by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage through the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative and in collaboration with SPANISH CULTURAL ACTION, AC/E. Exhibition support was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional project support was provided by the Haverford Hurford Humanities Center Internship Program and Crane Arts.

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