The Vague, the Viral, the Parasitic: Piranesi's Metropolis

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Piranesi's Romes

In the mid-eighteenth century Giovanni Battista Piranesi's etchings systematically document the old and new monuments, decrepit buildings and broken down infrastructures of a Rome that continues to inhabit its past. Both accurate and suggestive, Piranesi's surveys and views of Rome never fail to record the workings of time and life on the structures and spaces of the city. In his more experimental graphic works - from the *Capricci* (1744-47) to the *Carceri* (1749-50 and 1761), to the *Ampio e Magnifico Collegio* (1750) - Piranesi produces a critique of the classical language of architecture. But it is in the views of his contemporary Rome and its ruined antiquities that he offers a devastating account of the blurring of distinctions and articulations that time, use and neglect have imposed on the old differentiations of the urban and the rural, the public and the private, the monumental and the domestic. In his several volumes on the Roman antiquities (1748, 1756, 1761) ruined buildings are documented in images that represent not only their scale and magnificence, but also their decay and reversal to a state of naturalness. These works, together with the acute observations and representations of the *Vedute di Roma* (1748, 1750s and 1760s), provide the available materials that will then be dislocated, manipulated, cloned and endlessly mutated by Piranesi in the synthesis of his *Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma* (1762), the critical canvas for the elaboration of an impossible Rome in which the historical city is almost entirely dissolved and replaced by an extraordinary congestion of fictional and yet plausible fragments.[1]

Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* has long fascinated historians of art and architecture for its rich references and spatial complexity, as well as for its challenge to architectural composition and typology and to urban structure and form. Ambiguous, it combines a recognisable topography of Rome and some of its existing buildings and ruins with a congestion of invented structures that are incomplete, interpenetrated and colliding. The *Campo Marzio* represents but also reinvents the city, offering a plan and views of a Rome in which spatial and temporal relations are constantly renegotiated on an uncontrollable fluid ground that defies Cartesian measurements and opens up a redefinition of the surface as space. As a space of critical transformation of architecture and the city, Piranesi's *Ichnographiam Campi Martii antiquae urbis* has instigated investigations and speculations also in contemporary architectural design and theory, with studies and design projects that have analysed, inhabited and expanded its spatial and urban complexity (Peter Eisenman, Stan Allen, Rem Koolhaas, NOX).

In this essay, instead of once again engaging with the *Campo Marzio*, I reasses the overall portrait of Rome offered by Piranesi's *opus* as a whole, and mainly by Piranesi's *Vedute di Roma* and *Antichità Romane*, which architectural theory and design research have often ignored and left to art historians. The *Vedute* and the *Antichità* offer a view of Piranesi's city as a prophetic anticipation of the

contemporary metropolitan condition. It is here that Piranesi documents, exposes and extracts the materials that will inform the making of the *Campo Marzio*: he represents the given - Roman *palazzi* and churches together with the decaying ruins of ancient Rome - combining the 'new' and the 'ancient' with the ephemeral constructions that were erected like parasites on and in the monumental stone ruins.

It is indeed already in the entropic development of the actual city that the canons of articulation and differentiation are vanquished. Disorder and impropriety infiltrate and take control (or rather de-control) of what used to be urban, producing a re-naturalised Rome that is reclaimed by cycles of organic growth and decay. Around it activities of a marginal economy of subsistence occupy the space of dereliction of earlier agrarian economies. These spaces of dereliction coexist and collaborate in the creation of a *terrain vague* that blurs distinctions only because it inhabits and reclaims what had previously been controlled, measured, designed, both inside the body of the city and in its dissolved surroundings. Piranesi's *terrain vague* is also populated by 'invisible' crowds, which, scattered throughout the space of the representation of his Roman views, compete for space with the ruins, sometimes blending into them.

Piranesi's representations of the spaces (and times) of Rome and of the population that inhabits them both portray and question the organisation of the space of the city, posing a challenge for the architectural discipline. Here I argue that the appropriation of the representational '*vague*', of the sociological 'viral', and of the biological 'parasitical' by the recent architectural discourse - defined respectively by architecture theorist Ignasi de Solà Morales, by sociologist Massimo Ilardi and by philosopher Andrew Benjamin - can be detected to be already present in Piranesi's representations of Rome of more than two-and-a-half centuries ago. A reconsideration of Piranesi's representations of

Rome in relation to these categories suggests an alternative way to understand the importance of Piranesi's graphic spatial 'manifesto' for our present architectural concerns, especially in relation to the city and its form.

Piranesi's Rome swarms with enigmatic characters who - half man half 'thing' - reveal the dynamic time of the 'architecture of the ruin': neither static nor dead (or finished), this is an architecture of becoming, in which materiality operates beyond form, working on the properties, potentials and failures of its materials.[2] This Rome that incorporates decay, micro-changes and reinventions, becomes for Piranesi the laboratory for a process of questioning architecture that places his work beyond the debate on style and on the origin of architecture that dominated the discipline's discourse at the time. The sites of Piranesi's views, which remain for him exclusively and exquisitely 'architectural', anticipate - when they are re-read with a contemporary eye - phenomena that affect the *terrains vagues* of the metropolis today. Political, social and economic conditions have changed dramatically, but the questions asked of architecture in and by these sites allow the questioning and the challenging of the definition of an architecture of style, forms and boundaries - in the 18th century as well as in the 21st - in favour of an architecture of change. The questions though need to remain within architecture. 'In architecture' indicates issues that arise from and concern the practice of architecture, rather than being imported from other disciplines and discourses; this expression opens up the possibility for a discourse that is specific to architecture.[3]

Questions of architecture
What is the city, and what has it been? And - more importantly for Piranesi - what is architecture? This is the real question that Piranesi pursues in his explorations and representations of Rome. Omnicomprehensive - from the site surveys to the exactly measured orthogonal projections, from the details

of stone masonry to the accurate renditions of the deterioration of the materials, to the suggestive views that, proposing fantastic or hyper-realistic inhabitations, document the coexistence of a Rome '*antica e moderna*'[4] - Piranesi's entire production is underlain by one and the same question: what is architecture? For an eye that wants to see and record what is indeed all there, the ancient and modern city are inseparable in the Rome of the 18th century, coexisting in the layered urban space. In his images Piranesi works on the ruins of Rome, but these are, in fact, the ruins of the discipline: in his *vedute* he dissects, together with the Roman ruins and monuments, also the language and the rules of the discipline, aware that its crisis has long passed the breaking point. By carefully document-ing and also theatrically staging these ruins (and their decay), Piranesi questions the changes that take place in and on them. Beside and together with the decomposition of the physical ancient struc-tures, what Piranesi interrogates is the agency of this change. The material transformations of these structures and their reinvented uses are the sites for the emergence of 'other' forms of construction and inhabitation that contradict the order of architecture - both its property and its propriety.[5] The ques-tioning of architecture here goes well beyond the issues of its style and origin. Far from the debate on the 'true' origin of architecture - the big diatribe on Greece versus Rome that Piranesi addresses directly and eloquently in his other works both graphic (for instance in his *Camini*)[6] and written (in a series of polemical texts that include the *Parere su l'architettura*)[7] - here Piranesi represents the enactment of an ongoing architectural 'beginning by remaking', by reinventing an 'other' architecture of survival. This 'other' architecture is a process of recycling and infiltration that operates slowly but continuously, fragmented to the level of pulverisa-tion, dispersion, diffusion of the material.

The ruins of Rome are the sites of Piranesi's interrogations. It is here that he looks for answers,

because for him only Rome can offer a repository and a reservoir of information that condenses in a layered and unsettled body a wealth of different styles and times. For Piranesi, Greece

will not teach him about capitals, because … there are none that bear comparison with Roman capi-tals; it will not teach him about columns, because there are so many more in Rome of every sort and size; it will not teach him about the statues of bas-reliefs - one finds these in Rome in the greatest abundance and elegance, in comparison to those of the Greeks; … to find Greece we should look no further than Italy.

Rome is for Piranesi 'the most appropriate place to learn these arts'.[8] As if unsettled and rearranged in their vertical and horizontal proximities by sudden geological transformations, the margins of the city - both external and internal - offer Piranesi the sites where the process that informs his 'research' by images has already begun, by itself. The soft sites of the city that have already undergone a trans-formation of their architectural and urban order in fact raise questions (of the discipline, of the archi-tect) that are formulated in matter and in material changes, before they are formalised by the meas-urements of the survey, the lines of the drawing and the questioning words of the treatise.

This is the multilayered Rome evoked by Sigmund Freud over 150 years later to describe the possibil-ity of the concurrent existence of different stages of perceptions and memories in the mind, a construc-tion that combines 'the survival of something that was originally there, alongside of what was later derived from it'. For Freud the pictorial description of the city can only 'represent historical sequence in spatial terms […] by juxtaposition in space'; but Rome is exceptional and offers the closest spatial configuration to the complexity of the mental life, as 'all these remains of ancient Rome are found dove-tailed into the jumble of a great metropolis which

has grown up in the last few centuries since the Renaissance.'⁹

In Piranesi's Rome, stone, flesh and mud combined together produce the exposé and 'critique by making (undoing)' which, meticulously recorded by his etchings, challenges architecture beyond the solidity and stereometry of its construction. While the construction of architecture's 'proper' project has long ended, time remains at work on its materials. Piranesi's surveys, views and measured architectural details record this as well. There is no editing out of the improper here, but rather an emphatic representation of it - emphatic by diffusion: the sprawling of the inhabitants of the ruins does not seem to know boundaries between open and close, old and new, private and public. Oblivious of boundaries these figures are everywhere; they occupy, squat, vandalise, reuse, dwell, loiter, pose, stay (still), they occasionally work. They just are. But, who are they? Beyond their social or professional (and economic) qualities, this question addresses the purpose of their presence for Piranesi on at least two levels. In the space of representation they are elements of scale-comparison and measurement to highlight, by contrast, the magnificence of colossal monuments and the technical prowess of the territorial infrastructures of the Romans; ant-like and sprawling everywhere, these creatures relieve the over-scaling of the edifices of imperial celebration even in their state of decay. In the space of the city, they occupy this decay and are themselves the agents of change, collaborating with the slow but unstoppable and ineluctable erosion of architectures and urban structures, witnessing and living through the collapse of the principles, political orders and organisational system that such structures represent. Politically - and architecture is inevitably political and always implicated with the political - these 'improper' creatures are witnesses of the long decadence of the Roman *imperium* - republican, imperial, papal. In architecture, ephemeral and fragile in their individuality but collaboratively

timeless, they undermine the integrity of the edifice of architecture and suggest new ways of inhabiting and making space.

Piranesi's images of Rome portray the enactment of a space-making intervention that, without an architectural project and through the workings on material of time (and of man), operates outside the imperative of form. This is the land of sustenance and survival, of the precarious and the haphazard, and in Piranesi's Rome it coexists with the solid, the magnificent and the decaying beautiful. Architecture here does not dictate form but it offers reusable materials, makeshift shelters, renegotiable types and uses of space. The dissection operated by the ruin exposes an architecture of incomplete form and of change produced by time, by man, by *incuria* (negligence as lack of care and maintenance); it reveals how the architecture of the proper, of the magnificent and the monumental is possible only with the application of constant work. Suspended between the space of the representation and the *terrain vague* of the 18th-century city, the inhabitants of Piranesi's images are not to be read as human stories but as architectural agents. They are not human. Piranesi is no *ante litteram* sociologist or anthropologist, and the humanity he represents is not the object of a social study or survey, but part of the economy of an image (the whole series of them) that interrogates architecture and the order of the city. Piranesi's human beings - most of them derelict and almost unrecognisable as such - are in fact the objects and instruments of architecture: elements of the construction of the architectural representation, scale rulers for the measurement of the architecture represented, material additions and complements to the rotting built edifice. They represent and are part of an architectural stage (both phase and representation) in which organic and inorganic, mineral, vegetal, animal and human fuse in an environment that is not regulated by form but governed by change. One could argue that this reading of Piranesi's space is inevitably postmodern

and post-Deleuzian.[10] Perhaps Piranesi's take was or would have been different. But his acute instrumental use of his figures seems to suggest that they are such: instruments - and particularly architectural instruments for an architectural discourse by figures. This is indeed accompanied by Piranesi's accurate and systematic cataloguing of Roman ruins (objects) and their building blocks - parts and fragments. Piranesi catalogues the 'parts', those recognisable architectural elements that belong to the codified architectural orders and contain in their geometric and ornamental definition the genetic coding of the whole to which they belonged, and could possibly return to belong. The part can be identified as part of a whole, and the whole, even when it no longer exists, can be regenerated or at least evoked by the part itself. Piranesi represents in his views and uses in his compositions also the 'fragments': those parts that are broken beyond recognition, and whose features have been altered beyond a possible attribution to a whole and beyond a recollection of their origin. Broken and broken loose, unrecognisable and free to 'not belong', the fragment becomes generative of new possible constructions, which do not re-compose a given order or reconstitute a predefined form. The fundamental difference here is that the part is ultimately independent of its material constitution and is governed by formal definition and specification (both verbal and geometrical), while the fragment and its possibility of a re-engagement with form is inextricably connected with its material nature.

Fragments are offered by Piranesi in his rich production of documentary Roman views - environments, contexts and assemblages of which the *Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma* (1762) offers a misleading treasure map (there is no treasure to be found there, as the map can only be inhabited but never decoded). Fragments occupy the mirrored reality of Piranesi's fantastic views, of the *Capricci*, of the *Carceri* (urban prisons so vast and open that they let us see the city in the background - they are indeed in Rome, or better, they *are* Rome).[11]

The presence of the human figures in Piranesi's views provides another take, which allows him to move rapidly and in one step from the part to the fragment, from the broken object to the inhabitation of space, bringing together at once the categories through which architecture can be reconsidered: the project (design), its representation (drawing), its construction (building). These inhabitants, often creatures between the thing and the animate being, between the crumbling of stone and the rotting of organic matter, break the boundaries of form and time, and allow Piranesi to break the divisions of categorisations and taxonomies, and to weave a discourse on space, by images. The improper of architecture, the stillness of its representation, and the *vague*-ness of its physical presence in the space of the city are the issues raised by Piranesi's Roman works, encrypted in his apparently conventional antiquarian views of the city. Well beyond being technically and artistically excellent, these images construct a research, a discourse and an interrogation on architecture and its space, and on the organisation of urban space at large, which parallels and surpasses the concerns with the origins of the discipline expressed by Piranesi in his writings.[12]

Vague: soft ground

Piranesi's Rome and its marginal spaces are not an un-inhabited empty space, but a *terrain vague* of improper inhabitation, abandoned by the control of legal, spatial and indeed architectural orders. Its inhabitants are the agents of a transformation, a renewal that can only inhabit the 'vague'.

In architecture and urban studies the term *terrain vague* was born (or reborn) in the mid-1990s, when Ignasi de Solà-Morales used it to indicate an 'abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place'.[13] In the visual arts the paternity or appropriation of the term is attributed to Man Ray in the early 1930s. Before Man Ray

and perfectly fitting Solà-Morales's definition, Jules-René Lalique's photograph *Terrain vague*,[14] a very urban view, represents in a Parisian photographic update what Piranesi had drawn and etched of Rome: an urban lot that is not only vacant, but also still filled with ruins and debris, and already taken over by vegetal growth. In both architecture and photography the term *terrain vague* (or rather its use) seems to be inextricably linked with representation, with the fascination and at the same time the difficulty of representing such space. Be it in the optics of contemporary planning, or in the fascination of early photography become urban detective - the artificially-enhanced camera-equipped eye enabled at last to see and document what 'should not be there' - the *vague* seems to be mainly an issue and a problem of the visual. It is the same for Piranesi's views of Rome, in which the precision of the etched line has to represent the vagueness of a parasitic presence - human, animal, architectural - that inhabits the ruined architecture of the proper. Time is never still in the *terrain vague* - nor does inhabitation flee it. Images resolve the vagueness of the *vague* with juxtapositions of the impossible become possible, of the broken (mineral or human) with the amazingly partially intact vestiges. They represent the mysteries of partial intactness, which resists while next to it life decomposes and the new-old pullulates. This is the *vague*.

As Solà-Morales points out, photography, with its evocative and emotional connotations,[15] seems to be the only proper tool to measure such spaces. Piranesi is able to anticipate this with the 'vagueness' of his line - and this is not in contradiction with its precision. Piranesi's *terrain vague*, like the contemporary one of Solà-Morales's definition, is awaiting things to happen, already overloaded with traces that are more than a palimpsest, and, most importantly, are already the site of processes in the making. These processes and the presences that enact them are what both interests and 'bothers' Piranesi in relation to the architectural debate of

his time, and that is why he represents these 'other' processes. Nothing new here, apparently: an artist portraying urban destitution and the life of the poor; an engraver representing ancient ruins; an architect surveying ancient monuments, celebrating their magnificence, taking their measurements, cataloguing their technical details, documenting their material properties and recording their weathering. But all these occur together at once here, in a synthesis of times and roles. It is - as in later representations of the *terrain vague* - the juxtaposition and blurring of boundaries (both spatial and temporal) that produces questions and opens new possibilities and that - like the terrain it works on - moves. The question to ask about Piranesi's etchings then is not only why he represents these spaces - they were obviously abundant in the Rome of his time, and their representations were not only a tool of scholarly antiquarian research but also a commercially-profitable artistic enterprise - but why he makes his *terrains vagues* so very much and very lively inhabited.

That which is *vague* cannot be measured and rendered. That which is *vague* escapes the control of form (and its figure) because it changes. It *is* change, it redefines space and produces space in dynamic terms. For the order of classical architecture and its geometry, this is a revolution. Thus defined, at the time of the disputes on the 'true' origin of architecture and on its proper language and grammar,[16] the *terrain vague* is an environment that is visible to all but systematically ignored by academia beyond the antiquarian love of the ruin. It hosts and sparks a powerful revolution that pre-empts the debate on style and opens up architecture to a dynamic time. Beyond the disputes on Greek versus Roman, or bare versus highly ornamented, the ruination that affects the architectures of the *terrain vague*, and the agency of its inhabitants in its ruination, bring to the forefront the necessity of a reconsideration of architecture in its materiality and tectonics - and that is what Piranesi is interested in and what he

copiously represents.

Viral culture

The *terrain vague* has no form, it changes, it is dynamic and available - it moves. 'Virus space' moves *and* is agent of its movement. For Ignasi de Solà-Morales *vague* has the triple signification of 'wave', 'vacant' and 'vague'.[17] Characterised by instability, available emptiness, and the indeterminacy of its boundaries, the *terrain vague* is the fascinating and photogenic ground of a potentiality that remains often unexpressed. With the idea of 'virus sites', Italian sociologist Massimo Ilardi (1998)[18] acknowledges that the contemporary city is in fact already enacting the potentialities of its *terrains vagues*. Moving swiftly in time and across volatile boundaries that escape the definitions of legality, 'virus sites' in fact activate the dormant potentiality of vagueness. In shifting the discourse on the abandoned, disused, and 'uninhabited' from the *terrain vague* to the 'viral', Ilardi places the emphasis on the disruptive, pervasive, expanding forces that the *terrain vague* can only expect and evoke, and focuses instead on the agency of change of the spaces of what is (only apparently) *disabitato* (uninhabited). 'Virus sites' are characterised by the shifting, temporary and highly volatile nature of their development and flourishing. Like viruses, these spaces are opportunistically inhabited, thrive, grow and multiply where and when conditions are favourable.

Ilardi's discourse, immersed as it is in the post-capitalistic dynamics of the contemporary metropolis, might seem a far (and inappropriate) cry from the destitute crowds that swarm Piranesi's views of eighteenth-century Rome. But the dynamics of the 'other' that are triggered by such inhabitation of the city in its margins both internal and external are similar in their spatial operation. What matters here, and what is Piranesi's concern, is the architectural. The chronological and socio-political leap is possible then if the attention remains focused on

the architectural and on its production of space in those soft grounds of constant mutations that are the *terrains vagues* - in the eighteenth as well as in the twenty-first century.

The decomposing antiquity that Piranesi records in his views of Rome documents in fact a stage of the viral development (infection?) that was occurring already then, at a slower pace and in smaller numbers, and anticipated today's urban 'virus sites'. What the two have in common is their agency on the existing, not as yet another project that destroys and replaces material with material, form with form, but as the opening of a possibility to work with the given, altering it from within. The incompleteness of the given indeed offers the soft spots that allow transformations as plug-ins and grafts, rather than as replacements and reconstitutions. The focus here shifts again on the material of architecture, and while Ilardi's argument concentrates on the social nature of urban phenomena, these have indeed a physical counterpart that affects architecture. As in nature's ecosystems, the environment that allows certain activities is by such activities modified, in a process of rebalancing adjustments that keep the physical transformation of space going. The proliferation of human activities that Piranesi portrays in and around the remains of ancient Rome in fact knows no boundaries, it makes no distinction between a closed protected inside that is controlled and organised, and an outside of 'scattered' ruins. Torn open, devastated by time and neglect, the city becomes porous to a myriad of small exchanges between inside and outside, which, so diffuse, undermine and dissolve the distinction as such. A similar process occurs in the shifting of the ground, in which overgrowth and landfill question the notion of horizontality and verticality, open and close, hard and soft, in a muddling (and mudding) that only the editing lines of Giovanni Battista Nolli's plan could somehow rectify.[19] Piranesi instead sees and represents the presence of these forces and inhabitations; he explores and documents the chal-

lenged horizontality of the city, beyond the natural orographic conditions of the Roman site and including the artificial topography of a ground already articulated, excavated and redefined by centuries of human interventions.

For Ilardi,

The terrain vagues *are the territories abandoned by the law […]. They are spaces devoid of symbolical meanings, of precise functions, of settled activities, and therefore spaces of utmost freedom. Uncultivated and undefined lands, they have been abandoned by the ancient city and by its institutions because they are now devoid, for their dislocation, of any economic and social value. The* virus sites *are instead the* terrains vagues *that acquire 'public-ness', that is, become once again public spaces in the moment when they raise the problem of their presence in the city 'as a possible factor of destruction of its established order' and of its values.*[20]

Ilardi's socio-anthropological definition of 'virus sites' in the city is significantly derived from the architectural discourse on the contemporary metropolis (Ilardi quotes and borrows the term from Italian architect and architectural theorist Franco Purini). In Piranesi, two-and-a-half centuries before the development of a sociological discourse on the viral sites of the contemporary metropolis, the question remains strictly architectural, and it is made evident, silently but explicitly, by the graphic nature and visual contents of his drawings and etchings: what Piranesi decides to represent and how he does it, becomes both crucial and critical.

   In Piranesi's 18th-century Rome the 'public-ness' of the viral spaces is not that of a general accessibility and frequentation (although these remain in fact possible), or that of a public and cultural identification. What 'becomes once again' here is the architecture itself, which is reused, reinvented and modified. The architectural and archaeological

interest in these sites constitutes a passive moment of documentation; it produces a theoretical and philological reconstruction (interestingly, Piranesi does not reconstruct); it is an operation of cultural (and indeed physical) ransacking; it suggests a possible physical restoration and reconstruction - here the polemics on style of the 'in what style should we build'[21] are anticipated by the 'in what style should we rebuild' question (and how much of it). The inhabitations that here take place produce instead a reactivation of the broken form as a 'continuity with change of activity' that does not require the reconstitution of the broken whole: the physical environment and its inhabitation mutually adjust to each other. These inhabitations of the incomplete show the incubation stage of the viral explosion in the *terrains vagues* of the city (the economical and political trigger agent may be dormant here, but it is already present). Piranesi's work can then be re-read today, *ex post*, as a laboratory for viral culture: for the growth of a biological material that expands its definition into the architectural, to include its physical matter, its definition of space, and the practices and cultures of its occupation and perception.

   For Ilardi the virus sites are 'no longer spaces created by ordering systems, but by disorder, by irregularity, by anomy, by the instability of the bodies that move across them. Spaces without form and without measure, and therefore without organization and law.'[22] Piranesi's spaces at the margins of the historical city - both external and internal, and all the way down to the grain of the materials of the buildings - anticipate the tears and the breaking of orders of the contemporary city. By questioning the orders and the making of space of the classical city, his work opens up the possibility for these spaces and their representation, before they happen in the contemporary city. By recording a de facto reality that undermines and inhabits from within the formerly urban, his views portray 'places of the provisional which demystify any centrality, any compact and close system, every knowledge and

form that proclaim themselves definitive and homogeneous'.[23] Piranesi represents this on the margins of the city, but also in the internal undoing of the body of Rome. He represents not only the objects - new and intact in their monumentality, or ancient and crumbling and broken - but also what surrounds them, the (rotting?) flesh of the city. Here the difference between the *Vedute di Roma* (1748 and later) and the *Antichità Romane* (1756) and *Della Magnificenza ed Architettura de' Romani* (1761) becomes clear. And yet the signs of time are not absent from the documentary representation of the ancient object, even when this is taken apart in the taxonomy of the measured survey rather than in a pictorial rendering of its remains, or when the 'as-it-was' state is represented (but always in conjunction with the 'as-it-is'). In the detailed documentations of ancient architectural elements, the breaking, undoing and opening up is transferred to the level of the materiality of the components of architecture, of the weed shooting from the cracks in the wall, of the efflorescence of stone and the peeling of plaster, or the growth of mould. What emerges here as the agent of change is the material, the bodily - human presence included. For Ilardi, in the contemporary city '[i]t is the material individual in its constitutive and irreducible corporality that produces the metropolis'.[24] In Piranesi's views the body becomes the complement of the broken architecture of the ruins, collaborating and becoming one with the broken tissue of the architectural body - scarring it, grafting on it, somehow healing it. Fundamentally, the operation that the individual bodies perform on the remains of architecture is a swarming activity that is not facilitated, organised or regulated by architecture. It in fact operates with and around architecture, besides it, almost notwithstanding it. In making do, it makes, it undoes and changes its host.

Parasitic inhabitations: the thing

'Parasites intrude and inhabit. In so doing their presence demands a rethinking of sites of inhabitation.'[25] In 'Parasitism in Architecture', Andrew

Benjamin redefines the parasite in architectural terms by moving beyond the parasitical appearance of the form of architectural designs and structures, to analyse instead their parasitical behaviour.[26] What is essential for a definition of architectural parasitism beyond form is the move from the literal - what the parasite looks like[27] - to the figural - what it is that the parasite does. The question that allows Benjamin to define parasitism in architecture beyond and besides simple appearance is then 'how, in architecture, is parasitism to be understood once it is no longer reducible to its literal presence?'.[28] In order to answer this question Benjamin analyses the relationship between the parasitical guest and its host in terms of both site and time. In terms of site relation to the host, a key condition for the survival of the parasite is 'its refusal to recognize lines that mark out pre-existing edges and boundaries. In refusing certain edge conditions the parasite constructs its own edge condition. That refusal however can be neither indifference nor destruction. 'Any compromise undertaken by the parasite becomes a structural transformation of the site'. By inserting itself the parasite alters the boundaries of the host. A transformation without destruction is necessary for the survival of the host, and consequently of the guest itself. The parasitical relation, that is, must operate for a conservation of the host, with which 'the parasite has to negotiate the space of its internal incorporation'. The crucial point that emerges from these considerations is the intrinsic ability of phenomena of parasitical inhabitation to intervene within an already existing site that is to be both maintained and transformed at the same time. The 'transformation is essential not because the parasite has to transform the site as such - though this is always a possibility - but because the *conditions of edge and boundary* that establish the site have to be *transgressed and thus reformed* by the presence of the parasite'.[29] At this point Benjamin moves on to define the figural in architectural parasitism in terms of time, that is, through a process of dynamic adaptation to the 'absorbing infrastructure'

that establishes between the parasite and its host changing relations of limited duration.[30] Benjamin is concerned with the architectural parasitism performed by projects and built structures on other and otherwise organised built structures and urban spaces. This is parasitism performed by architecture on architecture (and urban space). But in Piranesi's representations of Rome the distinction between architecture and inhabitation is still blurred. There is in his views - their main feature - the official architecture of stone of the Roman ruins (the main feature and the subject of his etchings), but this is already compromised by the erosion perpetrated by time and by man. This architecture is already broken, its forms and boundaries already blurred, and literally crumbling. There is also the parasitic occupation of the ruins by shacks, makeshift shelters, improvised dwellings, carried out with salvaged materials likely to have been ransacked and recycled from the very same structure they occupy, or often simply coinciding with the body and the ragged clothing of the inhabitant. This is a stage in which architecture is still 'carried on the body' (a satchel and a stick that can become a tent), and a case where the parasitical (or viral) intrusion is performed by human bodies and by some basic and precarious props (tools of survival). In some cases it is the bare human body that finds accommodation in the cracks of the broken old structure, thus reinventing uses for the crumbling existence (of both the architectural ruin and the human body). This is a pre-architectural tectonic act performed on and through the body itself.

Piranesi's ruins and derelict spaces of Rome are not only inhabited by recognisable characters whose social roles are delineated by their costumes, the tools of their trade or the activities they perform - surveyors, architects, 'tourists', aristocrats, craftsmen, washerwomen, greengrocers, peasants, tramps and beggars. Beggars - but they are indeed unidentifiable figures - are most often supported by a stick or a perch, a necessary prosthetic complement for perambulation on the rough terrain of the

'undone' city, and already a tectonic element as well as a survival weapon. Incomplete beings otherwise, these creatures are like the incomplete architectures in which they wander, loiter, sink. Other bodies are even less identifiable as human beings - they drip rags, half sink in mud, grow vegetation, become stone. A lost humanity inhabits the cracks and crevices of an entirely artificial and yet brutally re-naturalised urban landscape in the *terrain vague* of Rome. Piranesi's fast nervous line allows him to blur and blend flesh and stone, creating characters which are neither and both at the same time, between living stone and mineralised body, breathing statue and petrified human being, in a symbiosis in which the body temporarily sutures the wounds of architecture and crawls the grounds of a horizontality that needs to be redefined - anticipating the dynamic and the undefined of the *vague*, and the precarious and the volatile of the *viral* of the contemporary city.[31] Part human, part animal, part vegetal, part mineral, Piranesi's creatures carry out a fantastic appropriation of the spaces and architectures of Rome by improper or unplanned uses; they also operate a reversal, returning architecture to the essence of its pre-formed matter. They perform a cellular-molecular transformation of the material of the 'architecture of the ruin', suggesting 'other possible reconstitutions, in a new project of architecture that, having rejected the uniqueness and singularity of its origin, is by definition multiple and open'.[32]

The political and social conditions of the contemporary city and of Piranesi's eighteenth-century Rome, their demographics and cultural dynamics and the very speed of their changes are different, but the architectural physical processes of gradual substitution and internal operational changes - the parasitical operations of 'maintaining and transforming' - are the same, if the discourse is kept strictly in the architectural, as Piranesi does. Beyond the urban-representational (Solà-Morales) and socio-anthropological (Ilardi) interpretations of the images, an architectural reading of Piranesi's

representations of eighteenth-century Rome allows us to draw links across different times and different operational speeds for an understanding of those *vague*, unstable, and liminal spaces that the city has always had. In this context the architecture of the city is always already redefined beyond the Vitruvian canons of *firmitas*, *soliditas* and *venustas*, as a dynamic process of making, transforming and inhabiting space.

Notes

1. For a recent publication of Piranesi's complete etchings see Luigi Ficacci, *Piranesi: The Complete Etchings* (Cologne: Taschen, 2000).

2. I have analysed some of the figures that inhabit Piranesi's etchings in Teresa Stoppani, 'Voyaging in Piranesi's Space. A contemporary re-reading of the beginnings of modernity', *Haecceity Papers*, 1, 2 (Spring 2006), pp. 32-54. There I suggest that the presence, attributes, behaviours and movements of those characters are fundamental spatial and temporal indicators: the 'incorporation' of the multiple figure of the architect/observer in the *Carceri* offers a haptic reading from within of their exploded order; the presence of women in Piranesi's Roman views and antiquities produces an 'irruption' into architecture of external forces of a practical reality of pre-industrial production, both instantaneous and eternal; the architects and visitors to the ruins represent the static time of an architecture that is 'frozen' and 'inserted' as permanent presence in a constructed official history; while the marginal world (marginal, that is, to both the social structure and the construction of the image) of the beggars, the loiterers, the shacks, the mud, the debris that are present in all the images of Piranesi's Rome offers the dynamic time of the 'architecture of the ruin', an architecture of becoming in which materiality operates beyond form, working on the properties, potentials and failures of its materials.

3. The term 'in architecture', used to 'signal the practice of architecture and therefore its material presence' is discussed by Andrew Benjamin in his *Architectural Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2000). Here Benjamin addresses 'the particularity of the architectural' (p. vii) and its thinking, and considers architecture not 'as a language, or as a sign system or as the domain of examples' (p. viii) from which philosophy draws, but as 'indissolubly connected to function' (p. 1) For Benjamin architectural 'function cannot be thought outside a complex structure of repetition' (p. 1), and his argument on a specifically architectural thinking is therefore developed in relation to time and function. The notion of repetition, with the interruption and the alterity that are its correlates, allows him to open up the argument of an independent architectural thinking that specifically links function and time.

4. Piranesi published several series of views of Rome. The first series was included in a publication that also included work by other artists, *Varie vedute di Roma antica e moderna disegnate e intagliate da celebri autori, in Roma 1748, a spese di Fausto Amidei Libraro al Corso* (Rome: Amidei, 1748).

5. The ideas of the 'proper', 'propriety' and 'property' in architecture are discussed in Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998). See in particular chapter two, 'What is Proper to Architecture', pp. 30-61.

6. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Diverse maniere d'adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizi desunte dall'architettura egizia, etrusca, e greca con un ragionamento apologetico in defesa dell'architettura egizia, e toscana, opera del cavaliere Giambattista Piranesi architetto* (Rome, 1769).

7. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Parere su l'architettura, con una prefazione ad un nuovo trattato Della introduzione e del progresso delle belle arti in Europa ne' tempi antichi* (Rome: Generoso Salomoni, 1765). Now translated in Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Observations on the Letter of Monsieur Mariette; with Opinions on Architecture, and a Preface to a New Treatise on the Introduction and Progress of the Fine Arts in Europe in Ancient Times* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2002). The volume contains a lengthy and comprehensive introduction to Piranesi's polemical works by John Wilton-Ely, a topic that Wilton-Ely had

already addressed in the introduction to an earlier facsimile Italian edition of these works, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi, The Polemical Works, Rome 1757, 1761, 1765, 1769* (Farnborough, Hants.: Gregg International, 1972).

8. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 'Observations on the Letter of Monsieur Mariette', in *Observations on the Letter of Monsieur Mariette*, p. 89.

9. 'There is certainly not a little that is ancient still buried in the soil of the city or beneath its modern buildings.' Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and Its Discontents' (1930[1929]), I, in *Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and Its Discontents and other works*, The Penguin Freud Library, vol. 12 (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 251-60.

10. See Teresa Stoppani, 'Voyaging in Piranesi's Space', and Teresa Stoppani, 'Translucent and Fluid: Piranesi's impossible plan', in M. Frascari, J. Hale, B. Starkey (eds.), *From Models to Drawings: Imagination and Representation in Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2007). In these texts I propose a reading of Piranesi's etchings as both a representation and a construction of a new notion of space – open, infinite, changing, smooth, dynamic – which still engages the efforts of contemporary architectural and spatial practices. I recur to the Deleuzian notions of 'smooth' and 'striated' space (see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press 1988)) as contemporary tools for a re-reading of the space of the pre-modern city beyond the distinction of urban and rural, in an attempt to identify elements of contiguity, continuity and coexistence rather than contrast, and focusing on the processes of continuous reworking of the urban space that infiltrate and defy (and are a constitutive part of) the Enlightenment project of rationalisation and ordering.

11. I have suggested this in Teresa Stoppani, 'Voyaging in Piranesi's Space'.

12. See Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Observations on the Letter of Monsieur Mariette*, op cit.

13. Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubío, 'Terrain Vague', in Cynthia E. Davidson (ed.), *Anyplace* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 122-23.

14. Jules-René Lalique (1860-1945), *Terrain vague et façade (pharmacie)*, 1905 (Paris: Musée d'Orsay). Available from <http://www.photo.rmn.fr/c/htm/Home.aspx> [accessed 17 May 2009].

15. Solà-Morales Rubío, 'Terrain Vague', *Anyplace*, op cit., pp. 118-23.

16. Piranesi reflects on this in his dialogue *Parere sull'Architettura* (1765). Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 'Opinions on Architecture: A Dialogue', in: *Observations on the Letter of Monsieur Mariette*, pp. 102-14.

17. Solà-Morales Rubío, 'Terrain Vague', in *Anyplace*, pp. 122-23.

18. Massimo Ilardi, 'Virus City', in *Gomorra: Territori e culture della metropoli contemporanea*, 1, 2 (June 1998), pp. 10-12. All translations from this text are mine. See also the more extensive '*Virus city o del vuoto*', in Massimo Ilardi, *Negli spazi vuoti della metropoli: Distruzione, disordine, tradimento dell'ultimo uomo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), pp. 98-116.

19. I refer here to Giovanni Battista Nolli's famous plan of Rome, *Topografia di Roma* (1748). I have discussed Piranesi's and Nolli's different ways of representing Rome in the context of their collaboration for the production of a smaller version of the plan, the so-called *Small Nolli*, in Teresa Stoppani, 'Translucent and Fluid: Piranesi's Impossible Plan'.

20. Massimo Ilardi, 'Virus City', p. 10. Quoting Francesco Purini, 'La città narcotica', in *Le architetture dello spazio pubblico* (Milan: Electa 1997). My translation.

21. 'In what style should we build' (*In welchem Style sollen wir bauen?*) is the title of Heinrich Hübsch's 1828 book that sparked the debate on the search for an appropriate architectural style in the German architectural discourse of the early 19th century. Produced around the mid-18th century, Piranesi's oeuvre precedes this debate and is interestingly chronologically placed between it and the earlier 18th-century debate on the true origin of the classical language of architecture – the 'Greek vs. Roman' debate. While Piranesi supports the re-elaborative richness and experimental freedom of Roman architecture and proclaims its independent origin under the influence of the Etruscan civilisation, his studies of Roman ruins place a particular emphasis

on the structural, the material and the tectonic aspects of the Roman achievements. In a way, both his writings and his etchings seem not only to anticipate an answer to the 18th-century question on style, but also to surpass the question itself by suggesting new languages and orders beyond the re-composition of the given. Piranesi's work breaks with both the classical architectural order and the urban one. On this, see Manfredo Tafuri's readings of Piranesi's *Campo Marzio dell'antica Roma* and of his altar of San Basilio for the church of Santa Maria del Priorato in Rome, in Manfredo Tafuri, '"The Wicked Architect": G.B. Piranesi, Heterotopia, and the Voyage', in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987)*, pp. 25-54. On the debate on style in the 19th century see *In What Style Should We Build? The German Debate on Architectural Style* (Santa Monica CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992).

22. '[W]ith the destruction of every institutional purpose or habit, these new spaces are legitimated to function as large laboratories for new social and political alchemies. In the virus sites of the metropolis, anything that belongs to the practice of destruction and "illegality" is therefore *public* and *legitimate*. […] whenever a conflict creates a vacuum of legality […] virus sites are immediately defined there.' Ilardi, p. 11. My translation.

23. Here I am applying to Piranesi's images Ilardi's words on the 'virus sites' of the contemporary city. Ilardi, p. 11.

24. Ilardi, p. 12.

25. Andrew Benjamin, 'Parasitism in Architecture', in *Ephemeral Structures in the City of Athens. International architectural competition. The programme* (Athens: Cultural Olympiad 2001-2004, Hellenic Cultural Heritage SA, 2002), pp. 55-61. Quote from p. 55.

26. '[The] twofold nature of the parasite redefines the relationship between guest and host. Parasitism will undo any straight opposition of the form guest/host. […] There is an inherent social dimension to the complex logic of parasitism. The term raises biological, ecological and anthropological issues. The question however is what does it mean to position the parasite, the guest and the host - as marking out occurrences that occur in architecture.' Benjamin, 'Parasitism in Architecture', p. 55.

27. In the literally parasitical 'the formal presence of the work would be such that its incorporation would allow it to remain formally distinct and yet programmatically interconnected with its host. […] [A] fundamental element of literal parasitism is the object's visual presence'. Benjamin, 'Parasitism in Architecture', p. 55.

28. Ibid., p. 56.

29. Ibid., p. 57. My emphasis.

30. '[B]y concentrating on movement and allowing relationality to determine the continuity of its configuration, the site then opens up the possibility of parasitical relations that can only be sustained for periods of finite duration. Indeed, their presence as architectural possibilities would be defined in temporal terms.' Benjamin, 'Parasitism in Architecture', p. 60.

31. See 'Materiality: the Thing as Architecture', in my 'Voyaging in Piranesi's Space', pp. 47-50.

32. The 'architecture of the ruin' is 'the opposite of the "ruin of architecture", which decrees a failure of architecture when its forms are not always already and lastingly defined. This distinction is at the basis of Piranesi's dynamic and critical relationship with the language of classical architecture: the incompleteness or the failing of the ruin is not simply the witness of a past that must undergo antiquarian restoration, intended as reconstitution of a broken whole; nor is the fragment a relic to be isolated, recontextualized and venerated as new whole. The broken piece, the fragment, the incompleteness of the ruin […] suggests instead other possible reconstitutions, in a new project of architecture that, having rejected the uniqueness and singularity of its origin, is by definition multiple and open.' Stoppani, 'Voyaging in Piranesi's Space', pp. 49-50.

Biography

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