

Juanli Carrión. Building the Neverending Ruin of the World

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“It has been sagaciously discerned by Simonides or else discovered by some other person, that the most complete pictures are formed in our minds of the things that have been conveyed to them and imprinted on them by the senses, but that the keenest of all our senses is the sense of sight, and that consequently perceptions by the ears or by reflection can be most easily retained if they are also conveyed to our minds by the mediation of the eyes.” (Cicero, *De oratore* II, LXXXVII, 357, quoted in Yates, 1966: 4)

Building the Neverending Ruin of the World uses the image as a means to explore the idea of memory in the virtual world by analysing the new systems that generate it in that ‘invisible’ space that is gradually taking over the space of the contemporary social sphere.

The project originated from Victor Burgin’s essay “Sonnen-Insulaner: On a Berlin Island of Memory” in the book *Memory Culture and the Contemporary City*, in which a number of writers consider the theme of urban memory and the way that a memory culture is being constructed in and by the contemporary city based on its architecture, art and monuments. Burgin takes as his starting point Didi-Huberman’s analysis of Roland Barthes’ theory on the ability of the photograph to keep something alive and goes on to draw a distinction between the concepts of *imago* (image) and *vestigium* (vestige, trace, ruin) as a way to explain how the world bears the mark of a loss. He later cites the American painter Jasper Johns’ desire to produce an object that speaks of the loss, destruction and disappearance of objects. Burgin sees this object as being the photograph, which, as an image, is the trace of an earlier state of the world, a vestige of how things once were. He goes on to conclude that the sum of all photographs is the ruin of the world.

Juanli Carrión turns his attention to the concept of ubiquity and seeks to give material expression to the invisible space or the virtual space through two locations: Vitoria-Gasteiz in Spain and New York in the United States. He begins by searching on Google for images that portray the word ‘ruin’ in these two places: *Hondamen* in Basque, *Ruin* in English and *Ruina* in Spanish.

As the basis of the process, the artist will put together a collection of images that the Google search engine allows us to view. He will then use these images to give material form to one of the possible ‘ruins’ of the world, which he will construct based on the images found.

Carrión will be in the ARTIUM exhibition space throughout the entire duration of the project, sometimes in person and on other occasions as a virtual presence through the live broadcast of the artist making the project at the Abrons Arts Center in New York. Using the Google images, the artist will gradually ‘construct’ in both venues a series of photographs and a sculpture that will give rise to a project that combines performance, net-art, audiovisual elements, photography and sculpture.

In this manner, Carrión will deal with the theme of memory in the virtual world, as well as the changing concept of recollection.

Mnemonics or the art of improving memory developed around the year 500 BC. The poet Simonides of Ceos invented the system of memory aids, which became an educational discipline in the Graeco-Roman world. The purpose of *memoria technica* was to teach people how to use mental images or *imagines agentes* and the emotional charge in them to improve the intellect.

Frances A. Yates, in *The Art of Memory*, tells us that problems to do with the mental image, the activation of images and the capturing of reality through images have been present throughout the history of mnemonics. Yates traces the art of memory over the centuries, showing how it has been closely linked to art and the development of iconography. She particularly focuses on the usefulness of the painting as an image of memory and dwells at length on crucial instances related to her subject, such as the theatres of memory of the Renaissance and the Baroque and the ‘Tree of Memory’ devised by Raymond Lully.

Carrión uses webcams, information control, the Internet and the act of observation as some of the determining elements in his project and touches on the aesthetics of surveillance, a genre that has developed numerous variables since its appearance in the 1970s, especially following Foucault’s consideration of the subject in his political analysis of observation in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. According to Foucault, we are not in the society of the spectacle, as announced by Guy Debord, but in the surveillance society. Carrión’s work is a much more distant and abstract example of the surveillance genre and one in which the political component resides not in the act of observation but in the content of the work done by the artist on the other side of the camera.

There is also a certain connection between Foucault’s comments on surveillance and ‘the eye of God’, which, in the history of photography, is identified with the camera and which, in this case, could be linked to the power that the artist confers on the spectator. Foucault asserts that power comes from the bottom and talks of how we citizens comply with the disciplinary structures imposed upon us via the surveillance camera (Foucault, [1975] 1979: 217).

Thus, the citizen, like the artist or the prisoner in Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon ([1791] 2009) modifies his behaviour in front of the camera because he knows he is being watched and he enters into the game of being observed by his own system, of falling into his own trap. Our society has happily adopted these instruments of power and has turned them into an everyday mechanism through webcams and YouTube, social networks and live TV, which are nothing other than off-shoots of Bentham’s Inspection-House.

We could regard the virtual world as the prime example of what Marc Augé defines as the ‘no-place’ (*non-lieu*), an anonymous and interchangeable space, an environment for communication and consumption that forges financial and commercial nexuses in a system that the very idea of the virtual has made ‘global’ due to its ubiquity.

Pierre Nora circumscribes within *milieu de mémoire* the collective memory that derives from the occupation of a particular place for generations. These *milieux* have disappeared with the emergence of our present-day ‘developed’ societies, with things such as monuments and museums, commemorative events and annual celebrations, travel guides and history classes, which provide us with different and disparate places as receptacles for memory—where it is formally invoked—and which Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*.

So, if we connect memory with the virtual world, what should we call the virtual space? A *milieu de mémoire*? A *lieu de mémoire*? Or perhaps a *non-lieu de mémoire*?

In *Building the Neverending Ruin of the World*, Carrión talks about the concept of recollection that is changing as a consequence of the virtual era, of the organisation and subjugation of the power to which the image is still subject in cyberspace through language, location and even politics. In addition, the virtual experience is frequently reduced to the image and it is on this that the project focuses.

In the well-known *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*—the subject of several studies by Didi-Huberman, mentioned earlier—the German theorist Aby Warburg (1866-1929) put together a series of panels of images based on his particular vision of the world of art and his *Pathosformel* (Pathos formulas or emotional formulas), universal stereotypes used by artists. According to Warburg, images survive beyond the precise moment they were created and enjoy a life after death, a *Nachleben*. He spoke about ‘dynamograms’, as that type of form that survives in the manner of images and so remains as a trace, as a ruin identified as memory, Mnemosyne. In his Atlas, Warburg sought to construct a kind of theory of human memory through images. One can only speculate on how he might have drawn up his Atlas if he had had the Internet as a search tool and as an area of research.

The images that fill the net are increasingly subject to a series of premises, norms and restrictions put in place by governments, companies and individuals. What is left is a sanitized ‘collective’ selection of the images that make up the world in the virtual public space. Many of these images can be viewed but not ‘used’, since they are encumbered by property rights, thereby restricting our control of the space they represent but allowing us access to the image of it at a particular moment.

In addition, images are also victims of the human need to catalogue and structure since they exist in the virtual world through tags, labels with which we ‘organise’ our images. These tags clearly elucidate the predominant tools and allow us to see the structures of power that direct and control information.

Today Google is the window through which more than 70% of Internet users worldwide begin their search for information on the Web (according to market research carried out by Google itself, the figures are USA: 81%; Great Britain: 90%; Australia: 93%; France: 90%; Germany: 92%; and Spain: 93%).

Juanli Carrión tells us about how it is the giant Google and its famous search algorithm that today determine the collective imaginary. An algorithm created for a useful and practical purpose when it comes to gathering information but which, with the passing of time, has become contaminated by other, mainly commercial, interests, the goal being, so Google says, to offer users higher quality hits. However, this directly affects non-commercial users of the search engine and the way in which memory works within it. Today, there is no other Lady on the Web but Lady Gaga, and that is not because more important Ladies have never existed.

Google’s argument is that it trusts the user and their critical judgement when it comes to filtering the hits, a declaration of neutrality that is more than open to question.

Google’s search algorithm is based to a large extent on location and the user him or herself. In other words, the order in which hits appear varies for different users, even if they are in the same room, since one of the factors Google takes into account is the search history of the IP address of the computer used. Where is the neutrality in this?

But it is not just a question of the order in which hits appear but also of how many hits we can see, since Google continues to reduce the visible hits to make searches more ‘useful’, as they put it. A search can throw up millions of hits, though we are only able to see a selection determined in advance on the grounds that these are the most relevant of all those found by our search criteria. The limit, as imposed by Google, stands at 1,000 hits.

The Web is obviously becoming less and less the ‘public realm’ of its early days and is proving unable to fulfil its promise as a truly open place where individuals and collectives would find a forum for free expression that would turn the virtual world into a *milieu de mémoire*. The materialisation of our recollections is fading in a virtual *locus* that it would perhaps be more appropriate to call the *non-lieu de mémoire*. An undoubtedly far more environmentally-friendly system that will update itself after our disappearance and overwrite us. As F.T. Whity says in “Anamnesis and the Ruin as a Whole”, civilisations are built ruin upon ruin, like a palimpsest of demolished pasts. But what is the ruin, Whity asks, if not the trace, the vestige of what once was, the remaining part of every vast empire, the soul that contains in every ruin the totality of what was?

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