

Conference Review

VISUALISING ABSENCE: ART & THE RUIN

Association of Art Historians Annual Conference, Student Session

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'RUIN' IS A SUGGESTIVE THEME FOR THE ART HISTORIAN, not only evoking the romantic disintegration of ancient buildings, but also providing a critical angle from which to consider a number of important issues, most pertinently the role of the present in producing the past. For Walter Benjamin, the figure most often associated with a theory of ruins, a damaged structure was of more interest than a completed one, since it bore the indexical marks of its passage through time, allowing it to function as a symbol of a dialogic relationship between the contemporary and the historical. 'Ruin' also conveys a subtext of violence, suggesting its thematic suitability not only for addressing representations of war or other destructive events, but also for theorising the possible violence to the past implicit in the practice of (art) history itself.

The theme had been chosen to complement the location of conference near Coventry, whose cathedral, damaged during the Blitz, incorporates the remains of the original fourteenth century structure within Sir Basil Spence's modernist design. Given that 'ruin' has been used to describe a shift into modernity (Benjamin) or post-modernity (Derrida), it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of delegates chose to address art, architecture and visual culture from the modern or contemporary periods. Issues of destruction, memorialisation, and shifting temporal perspectives emerged in all of the six papers, which dealt with ruin in both a material and a metaphorical sense, examining ruined buildings (the Atlantic Wall, the Black Hole of Calcutta monument, and Cambodia's Bayon Temple), the use of 'ruined' materials (Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*), photographic representations of ruin at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and

ruin as a deconstructive process in relation to Mark Morrisroe's self-portraits. The session was divided into two parts, with Thursday afternoon dedicated to three papers with a shared theoretical interest in trauma, embodiment and indexicality, while Friday morning focussed on architectural ruins.

Gemma Carroll's (UCL) paper 'The Ruin and the Ruined in the work of Kurt Schwitters' considered Schwitters's now destroyed structure, the *Merzbau* (c.1923-37), in the context of developing media technologies in Germany during and after the First World War. Carroll proposed that the *Merzbau*, assembled from the waste products of mass production, including paper packaging, flyers, advertisements and so forth, might be read as a literal ruin that functions both as an investigation into the impact of new communication technologies on the medium of paper, and as a comment on the troubled relationship between past and present in post-war Germany. She convincingly argued that this shift towards new media technologies corresponded to a change in modes of perception, moving from a model of knowledge formed in the mind towards one that bypasses the intellect in favour of the body. Much of her paper was informed by Benjamin's thought, including an emphasis on the generative potential of the ruin: constructed from fragments of the immediate past, the *Merzbau* continues to produce meaning in its ongoing engagement with viewers and art critics in the present day (either in its reconstructed version or through photographic representations of the original work). Skilfully bringing together a number of thematic concerns, Carroll's paper was richly layered (much like the *Merzbau* itself), raising several theoretical issues that resonated with my own research.

My paper investigated Jacques Derrida's reading of 'ruin', put forward in *Memoirs of the Blind* (1990), in relation to self-portraits by the American photographer Mark Morrisroe. Morrisroe died of an AIDS-related illness in 1989 after spending the final few years of his life visually documenting the disintegration of his body, most strikingly in a series of images constructed from manipulated hospital x-rays. Echoing Heidegger's notion of *Destruktion* or de-structuring, Derrida reads ruin as a positive phenomenon denoting an affirmative act of taking something apart in order to reveal its internal contradictions. Arguing that Derrida presents 'ruin' as a remarkably *embodied* experience, I suggested that both Morrisroe's work and Derrida's 'ruin' perform a similar function, dismantling ontological boundaries such as the distinction between sickness and health, inside and out, and subject and object.

Thursday's final paper, Barbara Marcon's 'Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Eye of the Camera', explored the production and dissemination of photographic images in the wake of the 1945 atomic bombing of Japan. In contrast to my own paper, Marcon read the photograph as strongly indexical; one particularly powerful image showed scorch marks on a pavement denoting the physical trace of a person literally dematerialised at the moment of the blast. Marcon employed a discourse of cultural trauma to contextualise images captured by both professional and amateur photographers, suggesting that the eventual reception of such works enabled a public understanding of the event as a collective experience, thus allowing victims to find support. Marcon remained aware of the latent tension between this socially valuable use of photography and the potential of the medium to exploit its subjects, citing several examples.

Fundamentally, however, she remained convinced that the work of photographers to capture the damage and suffering of these two events must be viewed as an essentially humanist project.

These three papers shared much common ground, including a focus on collective trauma and cultural memory, whether in relation to the First World War, the AIDS crisis, or the atomic bomb. A panel discussion bringing all three papers together would have been productive, but was not possible due to the confines of the conference format.

The Friday morning session considered three architectural ruins, again concentrating on the ruin as a cipher for a traumatic group experience. Rose Tzalmona's (VU University, Amsterdam) paper examined the Atlantic Wall, a defensive structure built by the Nazi regime using slave labour, tracing its post-war existence through film, art and architecture. In contrast to the purpose for which the wall and bunkers were originally intended (as both a defence line and an embodiment of nationalist ideology), Tzalmona suggested that today the ruination of the structures allows them to be regarded as a monument to Nazi war crimes. This wide-ranging paper drew attention to how the bunkers have found after-lives as homes, film sets, and art installations, indicating how the incompleteness of the ruin allows it to function as a receptive space for the projection of new ideas.

Amanda Sciampacone's 'Urban Ruin' was one of the few papers not to deal either directly or indirectly with photography or the modern period. Sciampacone (Birkbeck) offered a close reading of an aquatint by British artist James Baillie Fraser (1783-1856), dated 1824-26, and depicting the deterioration of the Black Hole of Calcutta monument in British India. Erected in 1760, the memorial had been intended to commemorate the British soldiers who had died in an underground cell following a confrontation with the Nawab of Bengal in 1756. Comparing Fraser's aquatint with earlier images, Sciampacone drew attention to the monument's ruined condition, suggesting that such a representation not only challenges its status as memorial, but also potentially alludes to the troubled nature of British power in India. The paper successfully drew out the ambiguities of the image, which although ultimately read as a document in the service of colonisation, at the same time hinted at fractures in the colonial project.

The final paper, given by Joanna Wolfarth (Leeds), continued the theme of colonial history with a study of the Bayon, a twelfth century Cambodian temple. Wolfarth argued that the Bayon, a distinctive structure topped with faces, functioned as a microcosmic body symbolising the empire of its creator King Jayavarman VII. Shifting to the present day, Wolfarth referred to the recent period of 'ruin' in Cambodian history, before outlining the role of the Bayon in shaping contemporary Cambodian national identity, demonstrating its ubiquitous presence in Cambodian visual culture, from art to branding on beer bottles and other commercial products. Wolfarth's awareness of the potential difficulties in applying Western theory to a non-Western model provided an interesting point of discussion in relation to the papers presented the previous day.

'Art & the Ruin' was the dedicated student session at the annual conference of the Association of Art Historians (AAH). The conference's nineteen parallel

sessions meant, on the one hand, that there was only a small audience for this session – Friday morning drew a disappointing eight attendees: the six delegates and two convenors. On the other hand, the low numbers offered a non-intimidating environment for speakers to present their first conference paper. Given the broad potential of the session's theme, the six papers formed a remarkably coherent group, with all participants taking a lively interest in others' work both during the formal session and at the bar later that evening. Presenting an emphatically modern take on the topic, this session suggested the potential of the ruin to contribute to future discussions of national identity, collective memory, and other group practices constructed through visual representation.

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