

LISTEN TO THE STONES

Mariana Castillo Deball Among the Ruins

Dieter Roelstraete in *MOUSSE*

I come from a country, Belgium, with a rich enough history (I studied in a city often referred to as the “Manhattan of the middle ages”) – but not one that travels back very far: apart from a handful of shards scattered around the former Roman military encampment of Tongeren (Atuatuca Tungrorum in 1st century parlance), there is very little in Belgium’s sandy soil that would help to lure serious archeologists to these here shores. My wife grew up in Vancouver, one of the world’s youngest cities; there, history means something altogether different still (they do have archeology, to be sure), but both of us pretty much experience the same awe when marveling at the stones of Venice, when roaming the arid expanse of Athens’ ancient agora, or when ambling around a 300-year old colonial slave cemetery in lower Manhattan – the classic response to the presumed nobility of all archeology as something that is somehow engaged in the profound business of uncovering truth (a romantic view that has also fed into the Indiana Jones myth of archeology as something that cannot possibly be very prosaic or banal). Interestingly, however, this is not an attitude shared by every present-day inhabitant of these hallowed historical sites: for many Athenians, for example, the modest beginnings of an archeological dig, no matter how small the scale of its conception, usually usher in a long, tedious process of urban dysfunction – plainly “bad news,” for there is simply too much buried in the ground there to inspire hope that (as would be the case in either Brussels or Vancouver) nothing will come of the dig and that urban life will soon resume its normal, oblivious post-historical pace. I remember sitting in a cab in Athens once when the taxi driver suddenly erupted in a barrage of expletives – an important thoroughfare had been closed off because what had initially started off as a building site had gradually been turning into an excavation site instead, and the demands of science would doubtlessly mean that this street would remain closed for a long time to come; maybe even forever, if the archeological find would prove epic enough. I immediately tried to imagine the profound, and potentially paralyzing feelings of anxiety that undoubtedly accompany the administration of such historically rich, palimpsestic terrain: every building promoter or project developer who sticks a spade in the ground with the banal hopes of maybe opening up a parking lot probably spends a lot of time praying that his little plot of land will appear miraculously free from history’s ubiquitous traces – curses rather than the blessings we often dream about.

This is one example of the way in which the archeological record, in countries such as Mexico, Italy, Greece and much of the Middle East, insinuates itself in daily life, to paraphrase Jesse Lerner in his introduction to Mariana Castillo Deball’s ambitious project, part book, part exhibition, *These Ruins You See*; an example of archeology’s weighing down upon the *economy* of daily life first and foremost. But there is also the tremendous history of archeology’s *politicization*, its mobilization for political uses as well as the formative influence exerted upon the political project of, say, nation-building; and it is this “politics of archeology” that seems to constitute the core of Deball’s artistic concerns. In *These Ruins You See*, Deball takes a close look at her native Mexico in particular, scrutinizing (with both the patience and eye for detail more typical of archeology, exactly, than art) the implication of archeology – most of it performed by colonial ‘others’ who sold off their loot to museums in Berlin, London and New York – in the genealogy of Mexican statehood, as well as in the construction of the imagined community of *Mexicanidad* from a wide array of highly distinct precolumbian cultures such as the Aztec, Maya, Olmec, Toltec, Totonac and Zapotec. Part of Deball’s interest in these creation myths concern the paradigmatic character of the archeological enterprise as an *episteme*, i.e. as a truth procedure and site of the production of knowledge: archeology is by its very definition bound to a materialist view of culture, history and society, and it is also always a science of origins (“arche” being the ancient Greek word for “beginning” or “first principle”); on a related note, images culled from both geology and mineralogy as such exact materialist sciences of origins do appear quite regularly in Deball’s

work). Dig and ye shall find – and seeing as the earth, or the many mute materials that it hesitatingly hands over to the industrious digger, cannot lie, the process of excavation functions as a promise of revelation, of the unveiling of a hidden truth. This high ideological charge – anacalypsis or the “raising of the Veil of Isis” – is what permeates much scientific thinking in general, and Deball has devoted much of her research in recent years to mapping out these intricate histories of enlightenment and illumination – often in close collaboration with her Amsterdam-based, Argentina-born colleague Irene Kopelman, with whom she initiated the Uqbar Foundation in 2006 (named after a doubly fictional place in a Borges short story). In one collaborative project, *A for Alibi* (organized at De Appel in Amsterdam in 2007), both artists took the historical collection of scientific instruments from the museum in Utrecht as the point of departure for an interdisciplinary reflection upon the disconnection between the imagery produced by science on the one hand, and the ‘reality’ of the laws produced by it on the other: alibi is Latin, it is worth remembering here, for ‘elsewhere’ (like Borges’ Uqbar, in other words) – shorthand for the experience of spatial disconnect.

Sites for the production of knowledge, or laboratories where new truth procedures can be developed and tested – isn’t that also what (art) museums are, or what we want (art) museums to be? Isn’t this historical association, mediated through the museum, of truth and art the exact location of the polemic initiated by what has since become known (and, one should add, *institutionalized*) as “Institutional Critique” – an effort to “mine the ruins of the museum”, in the critical parlance of our times, hoping that it will yield the many unsavory truths of its corrupt political genealogy, its implication in a messy meshwork of power relations and relations of ownership? It is no coincidence that the exhibition component of Deball’s *These Ruins You See* – most fully articulated at Mexico City’s Museo Carrijo Gil in 2006-2007– seems to lean rather heavily, tongue subtly lodged in cheek, on the formal idiom commonly associated with the canonical phase of Institutional Critique: firstly, there are audioguides (providing the actual narrative red thread that holds together the exhibition, their use inevitably reminds us of Andrea Fraser’s hilarious *Museum Highlights* video pieces); unopened crates, disused pedestals, office furniture and similar suggestions of knowing glances furtively cast behind the scenes of ‘the’ institution (the reference here being to Mexico City’s world-class National Museum of Anthropology), scattered around the exhibition spaces in such a way as to conjure the ghost of Hans Haacke; empty vitrines and remnants of exhibition design and display architecture of all kinds, exuding the casual candor of a making-of documentary – enter Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Louise Lawler, Fred Wilson et al. Yet Deball’s museological installation, which luckily lacks the bitter righteousness of much of the work referred to above (Broodthaers being the priceless exception), is doubly folded, just like Borges’ original Uqbar is doubly fictional: if the museum is the natural destination of all archeological artifacts, and if an art project ‘about’ archeology ventriloquises Institutional Critique’s fetishistic problematization (through the heavy-handed foregrounding of the politics of object selection and display) of the museum as a mummifying destination of living art as well, what are we left with then? The museum as the natural destination of the museum, or the archeology of archeology? The museum of museums (the museum as the context within which reflections upon the nature of museology are staged) *and* the archeology of archeology: such double binds and other avatars of the mythical figure of Ourobouros, the (featherless!) snake that bites its own tail, are really only possible, of course, provided that there is an element of empathy, of enjoyment even, underlying all this relentless meta-scrutiny and constant epistemological poking and prodding. Deball’s relationship to the objects of her research, no matter how detached and clinical-looking, is ultimately animated by this exact empathic glow: the archeologist’s loving care for even the minutest shard, the museum guide’s unending devotion to the stony beings he or she guards or lends his or her ear to, listening to their every story of ruin and recovery.