

Afterlife [2020]

10 Pigment prints 66 x 88 cm each

Afterlife is composed of ten photographs and one text excerpt from Peter Weiss's novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975). The photographs document plaster casts in the collection of the Museum of Classical Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, made from sculptural fragments preserved in museums around the world. Peter Weiss's text describes the scene of the construction of the Great Altar of Pergamon, inspired by the archaeological remains in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. Weiss evokes the process of extracting the stone blocks in a quarry near the place where the monument is being built, in which masters, sculptors, slaves and prisoners of war coexist in a relationship of production and inequality, while the bodies of the workers serve as inspiration for the sculptures for the frieze.

With Peter Weiss's text, we begin a journey that takes us from the bodies of slaves to the sculptures of classical antiquity, from the sculptural fragments to their plaster casts, from the plaster casts to the photographs of them and, finally, to the spectator who stands in front of the photographic work in the gallery.

The defeated bodies of slaves and war prisoners emerge, so to speak, with the sculptural fragments of Gods, Lapiths, Giants, Centaurs and Amazons excavated from the rubble of ancient temples and palaces. These ancient monuments, now reconstructed as ruins, are presented as unified, positive objects with a tangible past that "ought not to be disturbed" (Gastón R. Gordillo, *Rubble. The Aftermath of Destruction*, 2014, 6). However ancient monuments and their sculptural elements are inseparable from the damaged bodies of the labouring force who extracted the stones and were engaged in their construction. The museum displays of ancient remains are haunted by violent histories and by those 'enlaboured' bodies, their presence marked on stone.

The plaster casts of original sculptural fragments were made to circulate across the world. Their existence, like ghosts and spectres of the original stones, responds to the desire to unfix the unique and fragile artworks and to disseminate worldwide their histories and knowledge. Although the making of plaster casts dates from antiquity, it was only in the 19th century that they became part of national museum's collections and displays, such as the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, with the purpose of educating and training the taste of larger audiences. Since collecting archaeological remains from all over the world was part of the colonial project of western imperialism, one may ask what histories were to be disseminated with the plaster casts of ancient remains, removed from their native cultures and landscapes, and what histories were to be disregarded? In spite of their imperial past, however, the plaster casts, in their humble status as reproductions, offer an opportunity to begin to unlock our attention from those original and unique objects and direct our thoughts, as Adorno put it, to their constellations, to their positional value in relation to other objects, and to the processes stored in them (*Negative Dialectics*, 1973, 163-164). Reorienting our thoughts from the objects to their constellations, therefore, is a step towards paying attention to material histories and to the multifaceted textures of human labour.

The photographs of the plaster casts are ghosts and spectres once again of those original sculptures, in a sense just another representation of the art of antiquity. Yet the partial views in the photographs are fragments in themselves, made not by time but with the camera in order to address the dim histories of the human bodies who worked the stones out from the quarries and into the realm of art. As fragments of fragments, ghosts of ghosts, spectres of spectres, the photographs aim to conjure those labouring bodies by showing less and closing in. The afterlife of the ancient bodies – which were fixed and immobilised as the labouring force of extractive and violent economies, negated and destroyed in the creative act of monumental construction – is held in the missing limbs, heads, faces, torsos that were left in the rubble, unrecognisable. The photographs point to these missing body parts not as voids, but as a kind of matter which, as Aristotle argued on the spatial qualities of the void, is "bereft of body" (*Physics*,

Book IV Part 1). To examine 'negatively' the sculptural fragments through the photographs of their plaster casts, that is, through what is missing in them, is, paraphrasing Gastón Gordillo, to do it by way of those bodies that were negated and that inhabit spectrally the museums of the present (Gordillo, 2014, 11).

Finally, there is the body of the spectator who stands in front of these photographs of plaster casts of ancient sculptures hanging on the gallery wall slightly below eye level. Lefebvre wrote that nothing vanishes without a trace, which is to say that inevitably, there is a sedimentation of destruction on the surface of things. The intangible traces of those enslaved, damaged bodies in the sculptural remains of Gods, Lapiths and Giants, their plaster casts and the photographs of them, may bear witness not only to a past long gone, but also to a future to come.

© Xavier Ribas