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The Fiction of the Fabricated Ruin: Memory and History in the Work of Adrián Villar Rojas

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**THE FICTION OF THE FABRICATED RUIN:
Memory and History in the Work of Adrián Villar Rojas**

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Advised by Dr. Patricia G. Berman and Dr. James Oles

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Prerequisite for
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CHAPTER I.

Introduction: Adrián Villar Rojas

The work of Argentine artist Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980, Rosario, Argentina) subverts and amalgamates preexisting visual paradigms with abstract, imaginary forms to generate a distinctively hybridized and elusive aesthetic. The artist's practice extends across the disciplines of sculpture, drawing, painting, writing, film, and literature, with single projects often integrating a multiplicity of mediums. His predominant use of clay—arguably the most basic of art making materials—in the production of monumental sculptures since 2009 has resulted in an intriguing, and ephemeral, body of work that probes issues of memory, history, identity, and cultural loss. Existing in the juncture between recognizable visual prototypes and invented forms, these massive works actively evade the established categories and trends that serve to organize contemporary art.

Villar Rojas' monumental clay sculptures instead seek to undermine accepted artistic tropes through their repetitious mutation of cultural references and preexisting aesthetic archetypes. Combining influences drawn from as disparate subjects as science fiction, punk rock music, Japanese manga, and modern technology, these colossal forms are at once commanding in their size and elusive in their suggestion of analogous yet unfamiliar origins. Their distinctive aesthetic invokes a pervasive sense of unease but also a powerful allure, as if the artist's insinuations of parallel universes resonate with our own imaginative speculations. The sense of the uncanny that permeates Villar Rojas' clay sculptures exerts an equally compelling magnetism that seduces even as it confuses and, at times, horrifies.

Through a combination of visual analysis and historical contextualization, this thesis will seek to elucidate the aesthetic strategies and conceptual inquiries that inform Villar Rojas' ephemeral clay sculptures. I will argue that, despite the artist's increasing visibility and participation in an international network of contemporary artists, curators, and institutions, his monumental works are inevitably informed by the historical complexities inherent to his identity as a young Argentinean artist. His investigations into monumentality demand a contextualization within the political atmosphere of modern Argentina, which follows decades of political and economic volatility in the latter half of the 20th century. I will thus demonstrate that the politics of memory ensuing from this tumultuous period have important implications for the artist's practice, and that the relative dormancy of this historical narrative in the critical discourse surrounding his work does not denote its absence.

The project is structured around three works that are united in their monumentality, materiality, and amalgamation of disparate forms, a strategy that has become characteristic of Villar Rojas' practice. In Chapter One I will examine the role of displacement and collective memory in *Mi Familia Muerta* (My Dead Family; 2009; Figure 1.a), a life-size sculpture of a beached whale situated disturbingly on a forest floor. Chapter Two will discuss monumentality and the history of equestrian statuary in relation to *Las Mariposas Eternas (The Death of General Lavalle)* (The Eternal Butterflies, 2010; Figure 2.a), a sculptural group that appropriates and subverts traditional heroic statuary. Chapter Three will continue with an analysis of *Ahora Estaré Con Mi Hijo, El Asesino de Tu Herencia* (Now I Will Be With My Son, The Murderer of Your Heritage, 2011; Figure 3.a), a cavernous installation consisting of eleven columnar sculptures that

reverberates with theories of the uncanny and of the allegorical potential of the ruin. To conclude, I will argue for the centrality of the artist's individual, familial, and national identity to his desires to build the monumental, as well as analyze the evident fragility that permeates his sculptural practice.

In addition to structural and thematic similarities, these three sculptures were all presented at international group exhibitions. *Mi Familia Muerta* was created in 2009 for the 2nd Bienal de Fin del Mundo in Ushuaia, Argentina, curated by Alfons Hug.¹ *Las Mariposas Eternas* was exhibited at the Kurimanzutto Gallery in Mexico City, Mexico as part of Jens Hoffman's *Panamericana* in 2010. In 2011, Villar Rojas was selected by curator Rodrigo Alonso to represent Argentina at the 54th Venice Biennale, where he presented *El Asesino de Tu Herencia*.² Indeed, Villar Rojas' increasing participation in exhibitions and biennials (expositions of contemporary art that occur every two years) has rendered him a fixture on the international circuit for contemporary art. He has exhibited at Documenta 13 (Kassel, Germany; 2012) (Figure 4), the New Museum Triennial (2012) (Figure 5), the Shanghai Biennial (2012), the Istanbul Biennial (2011), and El Bienal de Cuenca (Cuenca, Ecuador; 2009), among others.³ In 2013, he will participate in Expo 1: New York at MoMA PS1 in New York.

Villar Rojas' meteoric trajectory and participation in exhibitions, residencies, and biennials typify him as a nomadic artist who has become firmly embedded within an international network of contemporary art. Existing literatures can be found in exhibition

¹ Polo Austral, "Bienal de Arte Contemporaneo," accessed February 15, 2013, <http://bienalfindelmundo.org.ar/>.

² La Biennale di Venezia, "54th International Art Exhibition," accessed November 12, 2012, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/archive/>.

³ Artist's CV.

and biennial catalogues as well as in larger surveys of contemporary artists. Reviews of his work in publications such as *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, and *ArtForum* have described his aesthetic as akin to “ruins from the future”⁴; “hybrid beings-part plant and part machine”⁵; and “remnants of a lost or future civilization... somehow prehistoric and postapocalyptic at once.”⁶ This emergent discourse emphasizes Villar Rojas’ interest in alternative worlds and multiverses, a narrative that is propagated by the artist himself; “What if art existed in another dimension?... What would art be like without Duchamp? I was really struck by this idea. What we have to offer Art is a different space-time coordinate, a new space-time operating table.”⁷ The uncanny visual hybridity that has become characteristic of his work seems indeed to insinuate the existence of parallel universes, and their ruinous aesthetic likewise suggests ancient yet simultaneously futuristic origins. A nonsensical atmosphere pervades throughout his practice, as disparate realms and forms defy logic to amalgamate convincingly in front of our eyes.

However, what remains largely absent from this critical discourse is a discussion of local and national influences on Villar Rojas’ work. Despite a general lack of references to the artist’s Argentinean nationality, Villar Rojas’ allusions to memory and monumentality render it imperative to evaluate his work within the larger context of modern Argentina as well as his own personal history.

⁴ Randy Kennedy, “A Colossus in Clay Speaks a Generation’s Message,” *The New York Times*, February 14, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/15/arts/design/the-ungovernables-the-new-museums-triennial-show.html>.

⁵ Faye Hirsh, “Adrian Villar Rojas: The Last Sculpture on Earth,” *Art in America*, June 2, 2011, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2011-06-02/adrian-villar-rojas-venice-biennale-argentina/>

⁶ Jessica Morgan, “Adrian Villar Rojas,” *ArtForum* (September 2011): 329.

⁷ “An Interview with Adrián Villar Rojas by Hans Ulrich Obrist,” published to accompany the exhibition “Poems for Earthlings,” SAM Art Projects, Paris (September 9—October 24, 2011), 15.

Born in 1980 in Rosario, Argentina, Villar Rojas studied fine arts at the University of Rosario. In 2003, he won the annual “Curriculum Cero 03” competition for young artists organized by the Ruth Benzacar Gallery in Buenos Aires, and was consequently granted a solo exhibition at the gallery the following year. In 2004, Villar Rojas presented “Incendio” (“Fire”) at Ruth Benzacar, thereby marking his debut on the Buenos Aires art scene. After participating in a series of group shows in Buenos Aires and Rosario, the artist began working on an installation at Ruth Benzacar entitled *Lo que el fuego mi trajo* (What the fire brought me; Figure 6.a.) in 2008. This immersive and claustrophobic work filled the gallery with relics and detritus of unknown origins; a disorienting mixture of winged figures, busts, dinosaur models, bones, and sneakers made from unfired clay mingled with bricks, tiles, and fragments (Figure 6.b). Curator Jessica Morgan in *ArtForum* likened *Lo que el fuego mi trajo* to “a memory bank of images and impressions—as if someone had set about crudely representing, in three dimensions, the flood of mediated information that is the stuff of our twenty-first century existence.”⁸ The exhibition’s enigmatic mixture of past and future relics garnered critical praise and international attention, and subsequent invitations to participate in exhibitions abroad catalyzed a rapid career trajectory that would soon elevate Villar Rojas to a global stage.

Since 2008 the artist has exhibited largely outside of Argentina, participating in the aforementioned biennials and exhibitions as well as in artist residencies in São Paulo, Bogotá, Paris, and Banff, Canada. The spatial trajectory mapped by the works in this thesis—from remote Ushuaia, Argentina to urban Mexico City to the worn labyrinth of canals that is Venice—exemplifies Villar Rojas’ nomadic movements. Yet the

⁸ Morgan, “Adrian Villar Rojas,” 330.

proliferation of memories and “mediated information” noted in Morgan’s review warrants a closer analysis of the sources and construction of these influences. Allusions to collective and popular culture are abundant in Villar Rojas’ praxis; the artist’s penchant for science fiction, punk rock, fantasy, and magic realism is evident in his enigmatic aesthetic and evocative titles. *Ahora Estaré Con Mi Hijo*, *El Asesino de Tu Herencia*, for example, combines a line from Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Circular Ruins” with a lyric by the front man of Flema, an Argentinean punk rock band, a simultaneously comical and blasphemous synthesis that Villar Rojas described as “a short-circuit with two extremes of Argentinean culture.”⁹ This fabricated title fuses elements from Argentinean literary tradition with the adolescent culture of the 1980’s and 1990’s, and thereby evinces the formative role of collective and popular culture in Villar Rojas’ work.

Yet the massive scale and imagery of his sculptures suggest additional influences found in the aesthetic traditions of history. The colossal dimensions of these works, and in particular the figuration in *Las Mariposas Eternas*, recall the practice of monument construction. The impulse to commemorate historical events or individuals through the building of monumental structures has long been driven by national efforts to recall and refashion an exemplary, and often glorious, past.¹⁰ A statue’s embodiment of a specific image was intended to discourage a multiplicity of interpretations and instead endorse a unified narrative of a shared self-image and commonly held ideals.¹¹ As James E. Young

⁹ “Es un cortocircuito con dos extremos de la cultura argentina.” Federico Liscia, “Entrevistas a Diego Gravinese Y Adrián Villar Rojas,” *Página 12*, August 16, 2012, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/no/12-6049-2012-08-17.html>.

¹⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) xix.

¹¹ James E. Young, “Memory/Monument,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 239.

notes in his essay “Memory/Monument”, figurative monuments “propagate the illusion of collective memory” by their selective referencing of historical moments.¹²

Though his works resemble heroic statuary with regards to scale, the material fragility of Villar Rojas’ clay sculptures challenges the integrity of these seemingly authoritative forms. The artist’s predominant use of unfired clay facilitates a convincing pretense of decay, and its prevalence in his sculptural practice unites the works in aesthetic and conceptual terms. A distinct ashen palette pervades his sculptural practice, visually unifying a variety of projects as if to denote their collective origin. These large-scale, often site-specific works exist at the juncture between sculpture and installation. Explanatory fictional texts and forays into documentary filmmaking often accompany his sculptures and installations, seemingly peripheral undertakings that assume an operative role upon the customary demolition of the works at the end of their exhibition period. These unfired clay sculptures both visually and literally disintegrate, a structural paradox considering their colossal scale. “I like to call them ‘suicidal pieces,’ because they are attempting all the time against their own existence,” said Villar Rojas. “They are too fragile to be preserved, they are too big to be transported, and they have to be destroyed in order to be removed.”¹³ The fragility of monumentality emerges as a central tenet in his practice, and is informed by the works’ surface disintegration, their entropic existence, and their melancholic and intimate titles that meditate on mortality and the past.

The artist’s continuous participation within a broad institutional circuit only superficially substantiates his image as a futuristic, post-national artist. An absent

¹² Young, 239.

¹³ “An Interview with Adrián Villar Rojas by Hans Ulrich Obrist,” 18.

discussion of his nationality does not necessarily entail his penchant for a more “international” identity; in fact, Villar Rojas argues against partaking in the specific artistic traditions of the cities where he exhibits. “I don’t want at all to redecorate the place or put my piece in dialogue with the classical sculptures located there,” he said. “I want a strong, solid and monumental presence: a deaf presence, almost autistic.”¹⁴ In actuality, this very resistance implies and necessitates a relationship, though it is one of defiance rather than collaboration. Rather than actively engaging with their international contexts, his clay sculptures traverse the globe as displaced and introverted entities. Operating independently of their surroundings, these works are instead informed by an individual realm of complex memories and histories, the origins of which demand further analysis and contextualization. Villar Rojas’ investigations into monumentality are thus inevitably informed by his identity as a young artist and his historical inheritance of Argentina’s complex and contested past.

¹⁴ “An Interview with Adrián Villar Rojas by Hans Ulrich Obrist,” 22.

CHAPTER II.

Dislocation and Displacement in Mi Familia Muerta

There is a pervasive surreality to Villar Rojas' works. This sense of the surreal is generated by the artist's penchant for the visual synthesis of radically disparate spheres—land and sea, the terrestrial and the extraterrestrial, the industrial and the organic. His seemingly contradictory reconstitution and perversion of naturalistic elements was vividly evident in *Mi Familia Muerta* (My Dead Family) (Figure 1.a) a massive, meticulously detailed sculpture of a beached whale situated in a small park in Ushuaia, Argentina. As one of his first large-scale works utilizing the unfired clay that has come to characterize his sculptural practice, the uncannily naturalist aesthetic and entropic existence of *Mi Familia Muerta* evoked a distinct element of surreality and dislocation: what was a whale doing on a forest floor? Villar Rojas' unsettling manipulation of the natural world and creation of an enormous, dormant marine animal elicited an acute poignancy and sense of loss, underlined by an insinuation of past brutality. The animal's lifeless body imbued the scene with a quiet horror that eluded comprehension. Upon recognition of the tragedy implied in the work's title, the viewer discerned an underlying implication of family narratives with this uncanny sense of dislocation. The dual horror of the dead whale and the dead family was further amplified by the object's disintegrating clay façade and a realization of its concurrent and active disappearance in front of our eyes.

Mi Familia Muerta assumed the form of a massive beached whale with its fins extended, sprawled on the forest floor and intertwined within a thicket of trees. Villar

Rojas molded unfired clay, mixed with quantities of rocks and soil, upon a hollow wooden frame, a pseudo-skeleton of sorts that served to support the dense exterior (Figure 1.c). Collaborating with a team of artists, engineers, and carpenters, Villar Rojas meticulously sculpted the body of the whale using a dark, slate-colored clay that echoed the tonal palette of the surrounding woods (Figure 1.d).¹⁵ The work's monumental scale (10 x 13 x 89 feet; 300 x 400 x 2700 cm) rendered the subject life-size, and its calculated positioning within a grove of increasingly barren lenga trees exaggerated its monumentality. It was sculpted along slight S-curve that wove between clusters of trees, their slim trunks heightening the whale's heavy opacity. The tranquility elicited by the supple curvature of the elongated body was negated by the seeming finality with which the whale's immense fluke, once the source of speed and movement, lay completely flat on the earth (Figure 1.b). A similar sentiment was echoed in the quiet surrender of the two pectoral fins, each resting still against the ground and appearing to fuse with the undergrowth. The detailing of the animal's slightly opened mouth reflected a degree of anatomical accuracy in its suggestion of keratin-based baleen filters, which in turn suggested a larger interior space within the subject. A pair of miniscule open eyes, located at the corners of the mouth, was similarly detailed in a highly naturalistic manner.

The rendering of identifiable anatomical parts classified the subject as a baleen whale, and its adherence to lifelike dimensions could further categorize it more specifically as perhaps a blue whale, the largest animal ever known to have existed (Figure 7). However, the inclusion of other organic, yet anatomically inaccurate, forms on the

¹⁵ "Una ballena encallada en el bosque," *El Diario del Fin del Mundo*, April 21, 2009, <http://www.eldiariodelfindelmundo.com/noticias/leer/21860/una-ballena-encallada-en-el-bosque.html>.

surface of the body inhibited an exact classification, rendering it less a biological subject and likening it instead to fictional whales in the literary and artistic tradition. Three short cylindrical shapes were dispersed across the surface of the animal's back, their thin sides and negative spaces suggestive of hollow interiors (Figure 1.f). Though initially reminiscent of whale barnacles or blowholes, their uneven textures, sinuous attachments to the surface, and disproportionate size negated this possibility and seemed instead to suggest other organic forms, particularly tree trunks. Echoing the surrounding woods, the apparent growth of these crater-like forms from the animal's corpse seemed to imply a sustained passage of time, as though they had sprouted from the animal's back. Photographs documenting the work over time furthered the implication of the whale's prolonged existence as it changed and decayed with the passing of seasons (Figs. 1.b & 1.e). The expansion of plant-like growths on its back, its seeming disintegration into the horizontality of the terrain, and the gradual layers of foliage and precipitation that accumulated on its surface challenged a viewer's initial confusion at this nonsensical sight. The abruptness of discovering a whale in a forest was countered by the animal's lifeless, disintegrating state, generating a feeling of confusion laced with horror and pity that was only exacerbated by the morbidity of the work's title.

A. Ushuaia at the Edge of the World

Mi Familia Muerta was created for the 2nd Bienal del Fin del Mundo (Biennial of the End of the World) in 2009 in Ushuaia, Argentina, a city generally referred to as the southern-most municipality in the world. Curated by German critic and curator Alfons Hug, the exhibition integrated the works of over 60 artists from 16 countries, many of

whom were from Latin America, within the infrastructure of the city.¹⁶ The title of this biennial, “Intemperie,” translated from the Spanish as “in the open air” or “exposure to bad weather,” and denoted the exhibition’s contemplation on the precarious relationship between the climate and the environment’s human inhabitants.¹⁷ In a city located ostensibly at the edge of the civilized world, and for an exhibition contemplating the fragility of urban existence amidst a volatile climate, Villar Rojas’s choice of site within a small forest in downtown Ushuaia paralleled the notion of dislocation embodied by the displaced whale. Constrained within the boundaries of four city streets, the Parque Yatana is a grove of native lenga beech trees that was dedicated in 2004 as a celebratory space for the arts of indigenous cultures.¹⁸ This small, wooded enclave served as an exhibition space for the biennial in both 2007 and 2009, and while it remains enclosed on all sides by paved roads, it echoes the mountainous landscape that dominates the horizon above this city neighborhood. A parcel of land that has undergone a gradual encroachment, this negotiated space between the modern city and the indigenous, natural terrain served as the site for Villar Rojas’s work.

Displaced from its natural habitat and left to disintegrate on the forest floor, the lifeless mammal in *Mi Familia Muerta* transformed the wooded site into a place of melancholic surrender. A victim of an illogical overlapping of ecosystems, its death was an evident result of its removal from a marine environment. The work’s melancholic ambience was heightened by the connotations attached to this endangered species.

¹⁶ Polo Austral, “Bienal de Arte Contemporaneo,” accessed February 15, 2013, <http://bienalfindelmundo.org.ar/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bosque Yatana, “Parque Yantana,” accessed February 15, 2013, <http://bosqueyatana.com.ar/web/parque-yatana>.

Images of enormous, majestic whales lying lifeless and abandoned on a beach are powerfully affective for their insinuations of loss and vulnerability (Figs. 8 & 9). Extricated from the ocean and devoid of all sources of nourishment, a beached whale embodies a profound and intensely sad finality resulting from its situational displacement. “It was so fragile in spite of its powerful appearance,” Villar Rojas said of his work in a 2011 interview with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. “I like that mixed situation: a huge massive piece which is at the same time extremely fragile.”¹⁹ There exists an endearing gentleness about whales derived from the vulnerability of their monumentality, which in recent centuries has been exploited by new whaling technologies that have rendered certain species of this marine mammal nearly extinct. The combination of its sheer muscular power laced with a delicate fragility has predicated its use as a visual and literary motif. One is reminded, for example, of Gabriel Orozco’s *Mobile Matrix* (2006) (Figure 10), a permanent installation in the José Vasconcelos Library in Mexico City of a meticulously reconstructed whale skeleton that echoes Villar Rojas’ exploration of the mortality of monumental power. *Mi Familia Muerta*’s hollow interior (Figure 1.c) is likewise reminiscent of the New Testament story of Jonah and the Whale and even perhaps of Disney’s *Pinocchio* (1940). The most notable contemplation on the ambivalent power of the whale, however, is Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). In the novel, the vengeful Captain Ahab renders the hunted whale an immortal, ferocious, otherworldly animal in his furious attempts to ascribe evil and calculating motivations on behavior that is quite possibly unintentional and instinctual. This subtle balance between brawn and fragility, between its status as the biggest yet perhaps most vulnerable mammal on earth,

¹⁹ “An Interview with Adrián Villar Rojas by Hans Ulrich Obrist,” 7.

suffused a distinct poignancy into the supine and fatally displaced whale in *Mi Familia Muerta*. The gigantic mammal's evident expulsion from its marine habitat and reintegration into a decidedly drier deciduous forest produced a subsequent tension rife with surreality. This visual contradiction was heightened by the artist's choice to maintain a naturalistic aesthetic, rendering the amalgamation of separate ecosystems ever more realistic and consequently more unsettling. Villar Rojas' manipulation of nature was thus anything but natural.

Villar Rojas' evocation of an "unnatural" naturalism is reminiscent of the canonical land-art works of American artist Robert Smithson (1938-1973). Smithson's artistic production and extensive writings have exerted a considerable influence on subsequent generations of land-art and installation artists as well as on contemporary art criticism. In his 1969 essay "Incidents of Mirror-travel in the Yucatan," an opaque and somewhat ambulatory account of his mirror installations ("mirror displacements") in the Yucatan (Figure 11 & 12), Smithson disputed the simplistic notion that the use of organic materials somehow implied a return to naturalism, arguing instead that the practice of art making is inherently an artifice. An artist's intervention and use of natural materials automatically renders such a project unnatural, and works that ascribe to permanence only further exacerbate this difference by contradicting the inevitable decay of natural forms. "What is meant by such 'nature' is anything but natural," Smithson wrote. "When the conscious artist perceives 'nature' everywhere he starts detecting falsity in the apparent thickets, in the appearance of the real, and in the end he is skeptical about all notions of existence, objects, reality, etc. Art works out of the inexplicable...It sustains

itself not on differentiation, but dedifferentiation, not on creation but on decreation, not on nature but denaturalization.”²⁰

Smithson’s experiments with natural materials in earthworks such as his famous *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (Figure 13), in addition to his critical examination of the way artists perceive and intervene in nature, have a direct bearing on the displaced naturalism of *Mi Familia Muerta*. The work’s disorienting aesthetic stemmed from its “denaturalized” state, and complicated attempts at ascribing causal arguments to this illogical sight. Prolonged contemplation seemed only to undermine comprehension, compelling tentative coherent explanations to melt, in Smithson’s terms, into “perceptual puddles.”²¹ Villar Rojas’ decision to situate an enormous, disintegrating whale within this wooded area thereby challenged accepted delineations between the marine and the terrestrial. Despite the intrinsic interdependence of these two biomes, an overlap of their respective taxonomies, particularly an organism of this scale, is not normal. *Mi Familia Muerta* also seemed to question the space and history of Ushuaia itself as a city located on the edge of the world (as evidenced by the provocative name of “la Bienal del Fin del Mundo”) and the space of the Bosque Yatana. Although several of the participating artists hailed from Argentina, the convergence of foreign artists, curators, critics, and visitors in Ushuaia necessitated the displacement of several of the city’s public areas and exhibition spaces. The Bosque Yatana similarly embodied this notion of dislocation. A compact parcel of land preserved in the name of the area’s indigenous populations, its very designation denoted the displacement of said populations by the encroaching city, a dispossession

²⁰ Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: the Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 1996), 131.

²¹ Smithson, 130.

that was further exacerbated by the biennial's displacement of the park's delegated use. Situated within these layered spheres of dislocation, the striking finality of *Mi Familia Muerta*'s lifeless whale, engulfed by a thicket of trees, infused the site with a disorienting surreality.

B. The Chance Encounter Between a Whale and a Forest

The active displacement and subsequent overlapping of disparate ecosystems engendered an atmosphere of suspension, and likened *Mi Familia Muerta* to the indulgent realm of dreams, and of the fantastical, both characteristic of Surrealism. In his *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924, Andre Breton placed particular emphasis on “the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought.”²² The most famous conjunction of unrelated objects was the oft-quoted simile of the French writer Isidore Ducasse (1809-87), better known as the Comte de Lautréamont, in which he described a young boy as being “as beautiful... as the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”²³ This enigmatic phrase, replete with latent symbolism and congealed meaning, exerted considerable influence on the artists and writers of the Dada and later Surrealist movements. The notion of conflated associations and the prominence of dreams was echoed in Rosalind Krauss' description of Surrealist sculpture in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1981) as that which takes place “alongside and within

²² Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.

²³ Isidore Ducasse (le Comte de Lautréamont), *The Songs of Maldoror/Les Chants de Maldoror*, trans. R. J. Dent, first published in 1869 (Washington, D.C.: Solar Books, 2011), 210.

the world at large, sharing the temporary conditions of that world—but being shaped by an interior need.”²⁴ The dormant creature of *Mi Familia Muerta* seemed indeed to be operating under the internal regulations of a parallel realm governed by a logic uncharacteristic of this world, analogous to our own yet entirely distinct in its negation of ecological boundaries. This suggestion of parallelism connoted the contemporaneous existence of a similar spatial and temporal sphere. “The encounter provoked by the ‘surrealist-object’ is thus the meeting of two temporal arcs,” Krauss wrote, “which, while they are narrative in character, are (unlike traditional fiction) involved in effects that cannot be anticipated and causes that are previously unknown.”²⁵

Villar Rojas’ uncanny aesthetic reverberates with the legacy of Surrealism and Magic Realism in Latin America—with the likes of Borges, Isabelle Allende, and Gabriel García Márquez in the literary tradition, and artists such as Antonio Berni in the visual arts—in his exploration of illogical dislocation and the warped reality of dreams. *Mi Familia Muerta* also finds a curious visual parallel in the fantastical structures of Las Pozas near Xilitla, Mexico (Figure 14.a). Constructed by English poet and artist Edward James, an ardent patron of the Surrealist movement, this eccentric and disarmingly bizarre sculpture garden incorporates concrete composites of Surrealist architecture and sculpture into the lush tropical jungle (Figure 14.b). A particular sculptural group in Las Pozas echoes the uncanny subversion of naturalism in *Mi Familia Muerta*. Two hands inexplicably materializing from the forest floor (Figure 14.c) bear detailed incisions that seem to ratify their anatomical accuracy, yet the precise delineation of sinuous veins

²⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 114.

²⁵ Krauss, 123.

unsettlingly reflects the surrounding foliage. The serpentine veins of the left hand seem to have mutated into hybridized intermediaries suggestive of both veins and vines, and are strangely reminiscent of the trunk-like forms on *Mi Familia Muerta* in their bizarre growth from the surrounding vegetation. The visual contradictions in *Mi Familia Muerta*, coupled with the element of chance that predicated its discovery in the forest, provoked an unsettling intersection of dreams and reality that resonated with a pervasive Surrealist tradition in Latin America.

Even the unfired clay that disintegrates over time has its corollary in Surrealist traditions. The insinuation of decay in *Mi Familia Muerta*, both literal and conceptual, is evocative of the gradual wasting away of organic forms in works such as Salvador Dalí's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936) (Figure 15) and *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) (Figure 16), canonical paintings that horrifyingly rob the human body of integrity through active disintegration. In the case of *Mi Familia Muerta*, the dreamlike overlapping of temporalities and spatialities was generated by the active surface deterioration of the unfired clay, which synchronized the viewer's own temporal experience with the work's active presence and eventual absence. Clay is one of the earliest art making materials; its chemical composition ensures the continuity of its pliable surface contingent upon a requisite level of moisture, thus enabling a constant revision of form through the application and reapplication of force.

Central to the evocation of uncertainty in *Mi Familia Muerta*, then, is Villar Rojas' choice of material. The pliable nature of clay enables a tremendous tactile diversity, facilitating an acute sensual immediacy through the juxtaposition of smooth and coarse surfaces. The material's physical properties, particularly the way in which it dries,

engender a distinctive aesthetic that remains central to Villar Rojas' praxis. The malleability of unfired clay enables the modification of form; indeed, the variations in curvatures and non-linear forms that are characteristic of prehistoric works signify the dexterous and deliberate implementation of pressure. The work's siting within an existing ecosystem and its incorporation of organic materials were central to its evocation of this unsettling ambience. Here again Smithson offers a critical framework for art that disintegrates. In "Sedimentation of the Mind," (1968) Robert Smithson noted the ambiguity of works that utilized the natural and organic. "Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects, or what I will call 'abstract geology.'"²⁶ While *Mi Familia Muerta* cannot exactly be considered an earth project in Smithson's terms, it does operate within Smithson's aesthetic of the entropic. The unusual selection of unfired clay for the creation of monumental forms is foundational to the artist's sculptural practice, and the consistency with which it is utilized establishes both an aesthetic and conceptual unity. As evidenced in *Mi Familia Muerta*, *Las Mariposas Eternas*, and *El Asesino de Tu Herencia*, the exteriors of Villar Rojas' works are lacerated with incisions both precisely executed and naturally resulting from the slowly drying clay, engendering the mimicry of gradual decaying surfaces. The artist first utilized clay on a large scale in *Lo que el fuego me trajo* (2008) (Figs. 6.a & 6.b), and consequently elicited an atmosphere of "kitsch melancholy" and a "romantic stamp of elusiveness" that yielded a decisive impact on his future use of

²⁶ Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968)," in *Robert Smithson: the Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 1996), 100.

the material.²⁷ “What I realized with this exhibition is that clay enabled me to build fossils: I could fossilize whatever I wanted, and thus I could work with time,” he said. “I could fictionalize the passing of time by representing its effects on matter, and see how we humans read or react before this fact.”²⁸ The conceptual framework constructed from this continual exploration of the clay medium facilitates a study of its physical and thematic potentials, but its physical characteristics, particularly its accommodation of accident and its propensity to fissure during the drying process, are essential for their facilitations of the distinctive surfaces of his sculptures. The malleability of clay and its fragmentary nature enable Villar Rojas to fabricate a convincingly ruinous aesthetic. “It’s all about constructing a ruin, an abandoned moment,” said Villar Rojas in an interview with curator Inés Katzenstein, “Something whose life is only a day or week long but that appears to be hundreds of years of age.”²⁹

In *Mi Familia Muerta*, the physical disintegration of unfired clay complies with the work’s exploration of mortality and entropy by catalyzing its literal material disintegration, the realization of Smithson’s love of entropy. An inquiry into the nature of entropy was central to the practice of land artists in the 1960s and 1970s who utilized organic materials and the earth as a site. It was particularly integral to Smithson’s seminal writings on entropy and monumentality, which have served as important influences on contemporary sculpture and earth works. In “Entropy and the New Monuments,” (1966) Smithson noted the proclivity of contemporary artists to pursue “a visible analog for the

²⁷ Maria Gainza, “Openings: Adrián Villar Rojas,,” *ArtForum*, April 2009.

²⁸ “An Interview with Adrián Villar Rojas by Hans Ulrich Obrist,” 5.

²⁹ Ines Katzenstein et al. *Creamier: Contemporary Art in Culture : 10 curators, 100 contemporary artists, 10 sources* (London: Phaidon, 2010), 249.

Second Law of Thermodynamics, which extrapolates the range of entropy by telling us energy is more easily lost than obtained, and that in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness.”³⁰

Smithson asserted in a later interview that “entropy contradicts the usual notion of a mechanistic world view. In other words it’s a condition that’s irreversible, it’s a condition that’s moving towards a gradual equilibrium.”³¹ This inevitable progression towards equilibrium was visually embodied in the material disintegration of *Mi Familia Muerta*. The presence of a seemingly robust whale prostrated on the forest floor not only elicited traditions of the surreal, but also prompted the contemplation of mortality and material ephemerality. An exploration of entropic existence pervades Villar Rojas’ work, and his practice of destroying works or leaving them to decay is driven by both practical and conceptual motives. Many of his works, for example, particularly his installations for biennials or other temporary exhibitions, are routinely destroyed at the end of their exhibition period, thus physically embodying and accelerating, in a somewhat aggressive manner, their ephemeral existence.

C. In the Presence of “My Dead Family”

The horror of displacement in *Mi Familia Muerta* is amplified by the work’s enigmatic and provocative title. The potency of the phrase “my dead family” ominously references generational shifts, the inevitability of death, and the futile attempts at maintaining a grasp on physicality. Such familial and poignant titles are seen elsewhere in

³⁰ Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monument (1966),” in *Collected Writings*, 11.

³¹ Smithson, “Entropy Made Visible (1973),” in *Collected Writings*, 301.

Villar Rojas' praxis—*Una Persona Me Amó* (A Person Loved Me) (Figure 5), *Mi Abuelo Muerto* (My Dead Grandfather) (Figure 17), *Antes de mi Nacimiento* (Before My Birth) (Figure 18), *Ahora Estaré Con Mi Hijo, El Asesino de Tu Herencia* (Now I Will Be With My Son, The Murderer of Your Heritage) (Figure 3.a), *Harto de Adioses* (Sick of Goodbyes) (Figure 19.a & 19.b)—with the proliferation of personal pronouns engendering an experience that reflects not only the artist but simultaneously implicates the viewer. The intimacy of Villar Rojas' titles evinces his self-professed desire to “return the works to himself,” and denotes the intensely personal nature of his works in their contemplation of family and generational relations.³² The continuity of a family heritage, the temporal and spatial fissures between the living and the dead, and the propagation of collective memory are all implicated in the work's vivid title.

The construction and preservation of a familial narrative finds its canonical analysis in the writings of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), who asserted that human memory is largely dependent upon a collective context. One such collective framework that exerts considerable influence over individual memory is that of the family. “From the moment that the family is the group within which we pass the major part of our life, family thoughts become ingredients of most of our thoughts,” wrote Halbwachs. “Our kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things.”³³ As the primary conduit for socialization, the structure of the family imparts commonalities upon its members that serve to organize and ensure its longevity. Though vagaries in behaviors, memories, or actions are inevitable in light of the group's

³² Hirsh, “Adrian Villar Rojas: The Last Sculpture on Earth.”

³³ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 61.

individual constituents, the family operates upon a shared sense of kinship within a larger social structure. Yet far from existing independent of this societal context, this collective internalizes and integrates aspects of society into its own familial narrative. “Just as its [family’s] memory becomes enriched from day to day, since the family’s recollections become more precise and fixed in their personal form, the family progressively tends to interpret in its own manner the conceptions it borrows from society,” said Halbwachs. “Each family ends up with its own logic and traditions, which resemble those of the general society in that they derive from it and continue to regulate the family’s relations with general society. But this logic and these traditions are nevertheless distinct because they are little by little pervaded by the family’s particular experiences and because their role is increasingly to insure the family’s cohesion and to guarantee its continuity.”³⁴ The family thus synthesizes elements of its own collective experiences with broader societal contexts for the purposes of articulating a coherent narrative with which to unify its individuals and subsequent generations.

The rendering of a colossal and lifeless whale as an embodiment of one’s dead family was an unequivocal expression of finality and loss. Nestled within a forest in southern Argentina, *Mi Familia Muerta*’s meditation on the repercussions of familial loss reverberated with the country’s tumultuous political history of dictatorial rule in the 20th century. Though I was unable to ascertain if this artist lost family members in the dictatorial period, his evocative allusions to the dead resonate in a nation recently convulsed by a series of oppressive military regimes. As such, there seems to exist a

³⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 83.

potential uneasy comingling of the biographical and the national displaced onto a surrealist object that in the end is entirely enigmatic.

Mi Familia Muerta could thus be understood as materializing a repressed past that remains a formidable yet verbally unacknowledged influence, a past that is powerfully present yet actively deteriorating. The specific choice of the whale, an endangered species, as the embodiment of a dead family alluded to the fragility of both the animal and of one's family. The appearance of a dormant yet actively present mammal in *Mi Familia Muerta* presented a visual anachronism that challenged preconceptions of nature, time, and—with the added complication of the work's evocative title—the integrity of a family narrative. The latter seems to be charged with particular importance within the context of postdictatorial Argentina, in which traumatic historical events have unsettlingly undermined and destabilized the country's semblances of collective memory regarding its recent past. In a city located at the edges of the world, in an enclosed space of indigenous land gradually subsumed by industry and civilization, this melancholic and tragic installation of a lifeless whale emphatically referenced the poignancy of cultural memory and loss.

CHAPTER III.

The Political Efficacy of Las Mariposas Eternas

Villar Rojas's meditation on cultural and familial loss remains inextricably bound to national history and collective memory. A discussion of nationality has remained largely dormant in the contemporary discourse on Villar Rojas, due in part to its occasional use as a reductive heuristic. Despite his aversion to being defined as a "national" artist, the monumentality of Villar Rojas' clay works reverberate with the complexities of Argentina's history in the latter half of the 20th century. A subversion of the self-aggrandizing tradition of monument construction is particularly evident in *Las Mariposas Eternas* (The Eternal Butterflies) (2010) (Figure 2.a), a sculptural group that evokes and undermines the heroism of the equestrian statue, the ultimate image of imperial authority. The haunting reverberations that continue to emanate from Argentina's recent past underlie and compel Villar Rojas' perversion of this triumphant artistic prototype. This work consequently demands a historical contextualization. The cultural response to the instability that convulsed Argentina during the seventies and eighties ventures to rearticulate a notion of identity amidst competing and conflicting historical narratives. The centrality of this tenuous contemporary atmosphere to the cultural activity in Argentina in the postdictatorial period cannot be overemphasized.

A. *Las Mariposas Eternas* and the Counter-Monument

The combinations of delicately organic and aggressively apocalyptic imagery characteristic of Villar Rojas' praxis may seem to negate any semblances of an explicit

political agenda. However, Villar Rojas' selective figuration and use of monumental scale in *Las Mariposas Eternas* allude to the tradition of monument construction, and his appropriation of the traditional equestrian prototype is particularly reminiscent of the heroic statuary that pervades Argentina's major cities. His subversion of this celebratory form and provocation of its operative function may be understood as a critical intervention into the history of monumentality.

As part of the exhibition "Panamericana" curated by Jens Hoffmann at the Kurimanzutto Gallery in 2010, *Las Mariposas Eternas* consisted of two over life-size freestanding sculptures made primarily of unfired clay upon an armature of wood, concrete, fossils, rocks, plastic, and glass.³⁵ Each statue was an evident derivative of the standard equestrian monumental form; the taller of the two works depicted a young boy astride a horse, while the adjacent, shorter sculpture featured a female figure riding a six-legged, robotic creature. The former work was mounted atop a multi-leveled pedestal that bore ornate arabesque decorations evocative of celebratory military monuments (Figure 2.c). Its pristine façade and carefully delineated embellishments contrasted with the coarse and rutted surface at the top of the pedestal. Its decorative forms and delineations partially masked the profusion of subtle fissures that grazed its surface, a temporal consequence of the unfired clay. Continuing upward, the horse's stance resembled that of a customary equestrian monument; the animal's right and back leg were bent as if to suggest continuous movement, and its right hoof adhered to the elegantly curved posture characteristic of military statuary.

³⁵ "Panamericana" was curated by Jens Hoffmann and took place at the Kurimanzutto Gallery, Mexico D.F. from July 14th—September 16th, 2010. <http://kurimanzutto.com/english/expositions/panamericana.html>.

Yet the emaciated appearance of the animal's legs, evidenced by bulging tendons and sinews, undermined these aesthetic parallels, as did its peculiar stance. With both its front right and hind legs aloft, the animal would most likely have collapsed as a result of this imbalance. In addition, the horse's neck or crest failed to maintain a heroically erect stance and instead sagged dejectedly towards the ground, mirroring the curvature of its bent right leg. The animal's shoulders and back appeared to be burdened with a haphazard mass of packages, and its human cargo did little to redeem any semblance of triumph. The young boy's loose grip on the thin, unembellished reins was suggestive of resignation rather than authority, and he directed an empty gaze off to the left that remained equally feeble and vacuous. A sleeveless top and ill-fitting pants replaced the usual military uniform and the boy's bare feet hang despondently over the ground, independent of the stirrups and blatant in its state of nakedness. Far from a triumphant harnessing of the animal's natural energy, the rider's posture embodied a pathetic passivity as he rested despondently on the horse's back.

Adjacent to this dejected pairing of horse and rider, a hooded female figure rode a six-legged, armatured creature with an enormous cycloptic eye (Figure 2.d). The pristine finish of the animal's shell emulated the surface sterility of robotic forms, and its two front legs were encased in large protective sleeves. The four, thinner hind legs were similarly concealed within a protective covering, and all six legs balanced delicately on double-pronged feet. The symmetry of the creature's limbs had an ambivalent effect, as the contrast between the massively oversized body and the fragile legs prompted an acute sense of agility and liveness, but also of precarious imbalance. A large cylindrical form,

resembling perhaps an industrial bolt or the handle of a screwdriver, protruded from the creature's rear (Figure 2.b).

The female rider, unlike her male counterpart, was fully dressed in padded, protective clothing and was unburdened by additional luggage. A sizeable hood shielding her hair and face brought attention to her bowed head, and her extended arms stabilized her perch on the creature's back. Leaning backward and with downcast eyes, her acquiescing posture negated any pretense of control. The robotic steed, whose armored physique dwarfed her dainty and waif-like body, was instead the figure that embodied a semblance of solidity and strength. The pair was located atop an unembellished pedestal whose rough surface contrasted with the classical baroque evident in the adjacent work. Unlike its ornate counterpart this plinth bore no decorative forms or adornment, and thereby rendered the cracks that laced its surface all the more apparent. In fact, the two adjacent works invited constant comparison, as they seemed to simultaneously mirror and subvert each other.

The composition and form of *Las Mariposas Eternas* suggested a class of triumphalist objects that had been made grotesque through the artist's choices of style and technique. Pervasive fractures and crumbling surfaces destabilized the structural integrity of the monumental form, undermining the conventional practice of selecting materials that can withstand the ravages of time. Villar Rojas' intentional ruination of the sculptures' surfaces mocked the claim that "in its materiality, a monument can be regarded as eternally true, a fixed star in the constellation of collective memory," an

assumption outlined by Young in “Memory/Monument.”³⁶ The calculated markers of deterioration incised on the surface undermined the conventional conflation of a monument’s material permanence with the permanence of its attached memory. Indeed, its disintegrating façade and eventual destruction qualified *Las Mariposas Eternas* as a counter-monument, defined by Young as that which “refers not only to its own physical impermanence, but also to the contingency of all meaning and memory—especially that embodied in a form that insists on its eternal fixity.”³⁷

The self-aggrandizing imagery typically propagated by equestrian statuary was likewise subverted by the mutated anthropomorphism in *Las Mariposas Eternas*. The heroic figurative icon had mutated into both an impoverished youth and an otherworldly adolescent, both of whom assumed submissive and unassertive postures. The model of a valiant steed had been severely degraded to a state of emaciation as well as transformed into a heavily armored, cycloptic beast. All of these perversions of traditional military typology challenged the monumental form as the symbolic incarnation of nationalist ideals. The inclusion of these sculptures in a group exhibition likewise undermined the perceived authority of public monuments; located within a high-profile gallery where memory and history are not necessarily apparent, the work’s contextualization within a commercial space negated its pretense of sovereignty. Confronted with visibly deteriorating emblems that commemorate entirely alien and imaginative characters, our understanding of a monument and its influence on the conception of memory is challenged through these subversions of imagery and form.

³⁶ Young, “Memory/Monument,” 244.

³⁷ Ibid.

B. Memory and Oblivion in modern Argentina

The aesthetics of *Las Mariposas Eternas* can be understood to engage with, and intervene in, the ongoing politics of memory and oblivion in Argentina. Contrary to the political rhetoric of the dictatorship that espoused homogenization via institutional reorganization, the multiplicity of competing narratives following Argentina's restoration to democracy has engendered a deep rift in the national memory. Argentina's entrance into the twenty-first century was preceded by decades of social conflict, frustrated economic development, and political instability that oscillated between dictatorial and democratic rule.³⁸ Antonius Robben in "How Traumatized Societies Remember: The Aftermath of Argentina's Dirty War" (2005) traced the origins of such political animosities to the populist regime of Juan Domingo Perón, during which increasing classist opposition and worsening labor conditions provoked a 1955 coup against Perón.³⁹ Consequent clashes between Peronists and the military government marked a period of guerilla insurgency in Argentina, escalating political violence and exacerbating the polarity between the revolutionary left and the military. Perón's brief reinstatement to the presidency in 1973, his decision to grant amnesty to those imprisoned under the previous military junta, and his subsequent death in 1974 provoked a period of political and economic instability that led to a military coup in 1976.⁴⁰

The ensuing period from 1976-1983, formally known as the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (National Reorganization Process) but more commonly referred

³⁸ Luis Rongier and Mario Sznajder, "The Politics of Memory and Oblivion in Redemocratized Argentina and Uruguay," *History and Memory*, Vol. 10 No. 1 (Spring 1998): 135.

³⁹ Antonius C. G. M. Robben, "How Traumatized Societies Remember: The Aftermath of Argentina's Dirty War," *Cultural Critique* 59 (Winter 2005): 128.

⁴⁰ Luis Alberto Romero, *History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, trans. James P. Brennan (University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 215.

to as *la última junta militar*, perpetuated *la guerra sucia* (“The Dirty War”) between the state and left-wing political opponents. The military junta’s preferred method of suppression in its objective to annihilate the revolutionary left was one of disappearance.⁴¹ The routine exercise of abduction, torture, and execution transpired in clandestine detention centers known colloquially as *pozos* (“pits”) or *chupaderos* (“black holes”), and the systematic practice of discarding bodies in watery graves further shrouded the fates of these individuals.⁴² Underlying the military’s oppressive tactics was a shrewd foresight into the constitution of national memory about these events. In eliminating the physical traces of *los desaparecidos* (“the disappeared”), the military sought to confine the evidence of their repression to the discursive realm, in which the untenable memory of their disappearance would eventually yield to the official memory propagated by the victors.

Just two years after Villar Rojas was born, the military’s disastrous defeat in the Falklands/Malvinas war in 1982 and increasing economic instability predicated the junta’s fall from power in 1983.⁴³ In the months prior to the October 1983 elections organized by the transitional government, the military embarked on a vigorous initiative to rectify itself in the eyes of the Argentinean people. Arguments were made for the urgency of military intervention against a guerilla insurgency, the legality of the mandates that governed military tactics, the inevitability of torture and disappearance as consequences of war, and the centrality of the armed forces to restoring stability throughout Argentine history.⁴⁴ The careful orchestration of this narrative failed in its

⁴¹ Robben, 129.

⁴² Ibid, 129.

⁴³ Roniger, 136.

⁴⁴ Robben, 130.

attempt to construct a positive military legacy, in part because the continued absence of those who had disappeared undercut the legitimacy of these appeals. In 1983, newly elected president Raúl Alfonsín established the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (National Commission on the Disappeared, or CONADEP) to investigate the fate of the disappeared.⁴⁵ Coinciding with the large number of testimonies that emerged immediately following the dictatorship, as well as investigative attempts by the media, CONADEP compiled a report in 1984 entitled *Nunca Más* (Never Again) that painstakingly documented the use of 340 detention centers and a total of 8,960 disappeared citizens during the “Dirty War.”⁴⁶ Ironically, in a country replete with monuments commemorating military heroes, foreign allies, and nationalist emblems, there remain almost no sculptures or memorials to the nearly 9,000 disappeared victims of *la guerra sucia*.

The irrefutability of this report compelled the subsequent prosecution of the commanders of the military junta. Military tribunals asserting the legality of the junta’s actions obliged Alfonsín to move the cases to the civic courts, and the public trial of the dictatorship’s leaders began in 1985 under a watchful populace.⁴⁷ Villar Rojas’ early childhood transpired amidst this tumultuous situation in which overwhelming media coverage saturated the nation and suspended it within a fraught anticipation. Television, newspaper, and radio broadcasts regularly infused daily life with news of the ongoing trials, exacerbating the deep rift between the fundamentally different accounts of the victims and victimizers, a dichotomy itself shrouded in uncertainty. The conviction of

⁴⁵ Robben, 131.

⁴⁶ Romero, 261; Robben, 134.

⁴⁷ Romero, 262.

authoritarian figures reconfigured the frictions between military and civilian narratives within the confines of the judiciary. Robben noted that this “dynamic of denial and disclosure produced two main conflicting discourses yielding a continuous stream of new revelations about past abuses and an equally persistent stream of new disavowals.”⁴⁸ Each new revelation and corresponding denial further aggravated the divisive suspicions of each opposing faction, creating a situation rife with instability and distrust. In “The Politics of Memory and Oblivion in Redemocratized Argentina and Uruguay” (1998), Roniger and Sznajder observe that “instead of elaborating a shared vision of the past, which could have been a starting point in a dialogic move toward the future, participants in these debates tended to indulge in mutual recriminations.”⁴⁹ This deepening of institutional divisiveness problematized the government’s attempts at establishing social peace through national reconciliation.

Escalating unrest and economic deterioration in the years following the trials of the junta leaders compelled the political leadership to forge “an unstable pragmatic equilibrium between the diametrically opposed positions of the military and those who had suffered persecution.”⁵⁰ Swift reconciliation and rectification was rendered more urgent by burgeoning economic and political turbulence. Legislation such as the *Punto Final* (Final Point) in 1986 and the *Obediencia Debida* (Due Obedience) in 1987 endeavored to mitigate concurrent rebellious sentiments in certain sectors of the armed forces by placing limitations on criminal charges against individual officers and

⁴⁸ Robben, 138.

⁴⁹ Roniger, 147.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 140.

establishing varying levels of responsibility for these crimes.⁵¹ Increasing hyperinflation likewise reinforced the primacy of economic stabilization. By the time of Carlos Menem's inauguration as president in 1989, a worsening economic recession was occurring in the midst of these contentious negotiations over human rights issues.⁵² The decision to grant amnesty to military officials sentenced prior to 1986 reflects the decision to neutralize military dissent in favor of national security, and also denotes more generally a democratic model in which "institutional stability prevailed over normative principles."⁵³

Institutional attempts to expedite unification effectively suppressed the dissenting perspectives of the past, subordinating them in favor of a pretense of unity. Menem urged the populace to refrain from perpetuating a culturally divisive atmosphere by continuing to contest past human rights violations. "Argentina will not be possible if we continue tearing apart the old wounds, if we continue formenting hatred, distrust among conationals, on the basis of the false grounds of discord," he asserted during a television broadcast.⁵⁴ These efforts to extradite cases of human rights violations to the past and conceal traumatic memories with a fragile veneer of reconciliation further aggravated the struggle over the politics of memory.

The emergence of heterogeneous stances on the memory of the "Dirty War" thus prevented the establishment of a unitary understanding of the dictatorial period. The interconnected nature of the conflict continues to integrate the condemnations of one group with the denials of the other, entrenching both in a conditional relationship that

⁵¹ Robben, 139, 140.

⁵² Roniger, 147.

⁵³ Ibid, 148.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 148.

fosters an exclusive rather than an inclusive approach that could predicate eventual reconciliation; as Robben noted, “people cannot mourn their losses when others deny that those losses took place.”⁵⁵ The failure to construct a uniform interpretation of the past propelled these unresolved issues into the public discourse, where various social groups have since engaged in a struggle for hegemonic status for their rendition of the past.

Villar Rojas’ negation of the traditional monument’s “grandiose pretensions to permanence” and its celebration of national ideals exposes the ultimate futility of attempts to “assign a singular memory and meaning to complicated events.”⁵⁶ In part, this futility is a consequence of such resolute institutional objectives. An attempt to encapsulate an individual, a historical event, or an ideological concept within figuration extracts the subsequent memory of these ideals from collective consciousness, effectively denying the memory from operating intrinsically within daily life. In “Memory’s Remains: Les Lieux de Mémoire” (1994), Nancy Wood asserts that this tendency to treat “memory primarily as an arena of cultural display” results in its “compartmentalization as an experience.”⁵⁷ Wood’s study draws upon the canonical project of Pierre Nora (b. 1931), the French historian whose analysis of memory’s operative role in France elucidates the complexities inherent in the relationship between memory and history.

⁵⁵ Robben, 127.

⁵⁶ Young, “Memory/Monument,” 235-8.

⁵⁷ Nancy Wood, “Memory’s Remains: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” *History and Memory* Vol. 6 No. 1 (Spring—Summer 1994): 127.

C. “Lieux de Mémoire”

In his seminal essay “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire” (1989), Nora discerns a fundamental opposition between memory and history.⁵⁸ Memory exists within a state of perpetuity, subject to “the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.”⁵⁹ It imbues the contemporary sphere with its renditions of the past, which are in turn in constant evolution. In contrast, history is an intellectual exercise that attempts to reconstitute “a past without lacunae or faults,” a pursuit thus intrinsically incomplete and problematic.⁶⁰ Bound to a linear temporality, Nora characterizes history as being “perpetually suspicious of memory,” and desirous of its suppression and destruction.⁶¹

Nora furthers his distinction between history and memory through an elucidation of what he terms *lieux de mémoire* (“sites of memory”), or places where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself.”⁶² These may include physical sites such as archives, museums, libraries, and cemeteries; concepts such as rituals, institutions, and anniversaries; or objects such as texts, memorials, and monuments. Equestrian monuments in particular operate as intentional places of memory; as markers of authority, they aim to crystallize and immortalize military figures into permanent emblems of heroism.

⁵⁸ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (1989): 8.

⁵⁹ Nora, 8.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 8-9.

⁶¹ Ibid, 9.

⁶² Ibid, 7.

As entities that have been invested with enduring significance, *lieux de mémoire* operate as emblems of civic values and symbolic meaning that form the structural basis of a collective identity. However, Nora observes that “the moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history.”⁶³ The practice of compartmentalizing memory within a matrix of objects, sites, or customs thus extricates it from the operative frames that govern daily activity.

Nora consequently characterizes modern societies as historical rather than memorial, in which experience is actively absorbed by representative *lieux de mémoire* that embody “a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age.”⁶⁴ Wood likewise observes that such societies weaken “memory’s endogenous grip on collective life” through their insistence that “memory declare its presence through external signs.”⁶⁵ Robert Musil (1880-1942) concurs in his essay on monuments in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (1936), where he warns that “anything that constitutes the walls of our life, the backdrop of our consciousness... forfeits its capacity to play a role in that consciousness.”⁶⁶ The disengagement of memory by way of categorization or aesthetic manifestation acquiesces with history’s objective of codifying the past; in such instances where memory is encapsulated within a *lieu de mémoire*, it is thereafter objectified to perform under the jurisdiction of history.

⁶³ Nora, 12.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 12; Wood, 128.

⁶⁵ Wood, 127.

⁶⁶ Musil, “Monument,” in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman (Hygiene, CO: Eridanos Press, 1987), 62.

Villar Rojas's visual strategies in *Las Mariposas Eternas* corroborate with Nora's definition of *lieux de mémoire* by calling attention to the futility of history's attempts to arrest memory. In effect, this monumental work exposes the aims of history to suppress volatile and unpredictable memories by encasing them in material objects. Though the work is not an overt memorial in the sense that it does not propagate a specific singular meaning, its visual language references traditional commemorations of a militaristic past as a means of recognizing the impossibility and absurdity of these monuments. Equestrian statues celebrating the exploits of military heroes pervade the streets and public spaces of major Argentinean cities. The urban landscape of Buenos Aires, for example, is suffused with monuments to military figures such as Manuel Belgrano (Figure 20), Bartolomé Mitre (Figure 21), Juan Lavalle, Julio Argentino Roca, Juan Manuel de Rosas, Giuseppe Garibaldi, and José de San Martín (Figure 22), the latter of whom is also immortalized in Villar Rojas' hometown of Rosario (Figure 23). The specificity of figuration is utilized in these examples to convey a singular message, and reflects an institutional objective at imparting a fixed historical narrative. However, these celebratory icons are largely products of the nineteenth century and, as evidenced by the formal subversions in *Las Mariposas Eternas*, discrepancies regarding Argentina's more recent past have problematized this visual tradition.

Historical episodes of cultural trauma resulting from institutional violence have varied in their strategies of commemoration. Monuments (or rather, counter-monuments) and memorials have operated in a critical capacity in the mourning and reconciliation processes following the Holocaust, as examined by Young in *The Texture of*

Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning (1993).⁶⁷ Traditional acts of commemoration, particularly the construction of monuments, work to mediate divergences in memory and ostensibly reflect a general degree of consensus among its advocates, consequently encapsulating views of the past into comprehensible signifiers. This semblance of permanence is a deliberate institutional construction that utilizes the physicality of a durable material to insist on the “eternal fixity” of its embodied meaning.⁶⁸ Young identifies the political motivations for such an undertaking, and observes that “to the extent that all societies depend on the assumption of shared experience and memory for the very basis of their common relations, a society’s institutions are automatically geared toward creating a shared memory—or at least the illusion of it.”⁶⁹ The politically operative role of the traditional monument is redolent of Nora’s observation that a *lieu de mémoire* denotes an active reduction of memory into “a possible object of history,” a consolidated entity employed in the service of a secure historical narrative.⁷⁰

In contemporary Argentina, a general lack of physical monuments commemorating the dictatorial period denotes the absence of an institutionalized conception of these decades and a divisive rift in the collective consensus.⁷¹ Anniversaries currently operate as the primary realm of memory politics, in which the ritualistic repetition and cyclical reinforcement engendered by temporal markers endeavors to

⁶⁷ Young, James E. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

⁶⁸ Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,” in *Art and the Public Sphere*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 77.

⁶⁹ Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 6.

⁷⁰ Nora, 10.

⁷¹ Roniger, 161.

unify, at least temporarily, a populace through simultaneous remembrance. In 2001, for example, the city of Buenos Aires designated the 24th of March as the *Día de la Memoria* (Day of Memory) in observance of the 1976 military coup.⁷² On this day, educational programs about the dictatorial period were to be conducted throughout the city and flags would be flown half-mast from public buildings.⁷³ Though these commemorative rituals and honorific dates function as *lieux de mémoire*, the fact of their temporal existence fails to attain the domineering effect of physical monuments. The sheer profusion of self-aggrandizing monuments celebrating heroic figures in the country's major cities magnifies the absence of commemorative statues alluding to its most recent militaristic past. In addition to signifying the unresolved hegemonic struggle over this era's dominant narratives, the absence of commemorative monuments consequently enables an evasion of the objectifying grasp of history, liberating memory from its compartmentalization as an experience and instead perpetuating its intrinsic effect within the contemporary realm.

The origin and perpetuation of trauma in postdictatorial Argentina deviates from the canonical studies on the psychological repercussions of mass violence. An understanding of the mourning of mass violence has largely been shaped by Holocaust studies, which assert the primacy of repression and denial as initial responses to massive traumas.⁷⁴ In the case of modern Argentina, however, the collective response to the traumatic "Dirty War" has been characterized by a compulsive reevaluation and reliving of painful memories. Rather than a withdrawal into institutional silence or cultural denial, the post-dictatorial period witnessed an almost immediate confrontation of recent

⁷² Robben, 151.

⁷³ Ibid, 151.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 124.

horrors. Indeed, reactions to the recent past were not contingent upon political developments or legislative decisions but were evidently sown within the context of ongoing violence. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, for example, began marching in front of the seat of the Argentinean presidency in the Plaza de Mayo in March 1977, and have since then garnered international attention for their courageous and continuous protests that demand accountability for the disappearance of their children.⁷⁵

The proliferation of testimonies and truth statements, proceeding from the trials of junta officials and continuing to a series of revelations made in the 1990s throughout Villar Rojas childhood, have compounded the existing divisions in national memory. In 1995, the public confessions of military officials Adolfo Scilingo and Martín Balza initiated another impassioned debate about the repercussions of human rights violations and the fate of the disappeared. Scilingo's revelations were particularly distressing because they reinforced the redefinition of a "disappeared" person, which, as a result of the failure of the CONADEP investigations to find any survivors among the disappeared, had come to signify a person killed and unaccounted for rather than the more hopeful definition of someone alive yet missing.⁷⁶ Scilingo's vivid descriptions of the military's systematic flight out to sea and subsequent disposal of weighted bodies into the ocean exacerbated the ongoing grieving of the missing and reignited the discourse concerning the military's responsibility for the atrocities committed during the "Dirty War."⁷⁷

The compulsive reliving and reconfiguring of painful memories denotes an ongoing demand for the meaning of past brutality. Unresolved traumas agitate both the

⁷⁵ Roniger, 149.

⁷⁶ Robben, 131.

⁷⁷ Roniger, 151.

victims and the victimizers in Argentina, engendering a multitude of testimonies, confessions, and assertions that destabilize the construction of a singular historical narrative. This propensity to “retreat into social multiplicity and heterogeneity and individual pursuits” denotes an aversion towards collectivization, with the corollary being a preference for individualized remembering and mourning.⁷⁸ Argentina’s history of the “Dirty War” is thus an amalgamation of innumerable intertwined yet conflicting accounts, its tenuous existence subject to the fluctuations of its composite fragmentary memories. Using Nora’s terms, the Argentine response to its recent traumatic past reflects a shift “from a history sought in the continuity of memory to a memory cast in the discontinuity of history.”⁷⁹

D. The Efficacy of Silence

In a 2011 interview with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Villar Rojas briefly addresses the visual inspirations for *Las Mariposas Eternas*: “With this work, I tried to confront two models of thinking: a kind of Japanese manga-inspired idea of future and technology represented in one figure, and a classic Western idea of energy and force and glory of 19th century Latin American independence heroes represented in the other one,” he said.⁸⁰ Here we are offered a rare reference to the self-aggrandizing tradition of military statuary, but the interview continues, like other existing literatures on Villar Rojas, without further mention of the work’s political nature. Overt politicization is largely avoided in the discourse surrounding Villar Rojas, and predictably so. The dangers of an unwanted

⁷⁸ Roniger, 161.

⁷⁹ Nora, 17.

⁸⁰ “An Interview with Adrian Villar Rojas by Hans Ulrich Obrist,” 20.

allegation of political advocacy or a simplistic reduction of his work have suppressed a critical discussion of nationality, and Villar Rojas himself has avoided expounding on *Las Mariposas Eternas*' political connotations.

The artist's reluctance to define his monumental clay works in solely political terms recalls the invocation of silence in the decades during and after the dictatorial period. The high visibility of trials, truth commissions, and testimonies that have exacerbated divisiveness in the national memory find their counterpart in the repressed narratives of those who lived under the dictatorial regime. Silence was invoked as a means of self-preservation and protection, as the secret tactics of oppression utilized by the junta engendered an atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty. Such strategies of suppression were sustained in the years following the end of the regime; those that chose not to participate in the public hegemonic struggle for their version of the past instead confined their narratives to relatively more private realms. Thus, while influences culled from popular culture are more regularly acknowledged in discussions of *Las Mariposas Eternas*, a materialization of these historical complexities and suppressed narratives is nonetheless evident in the work's subversion of an authoritative aesthetic prototype. Indeed, I speculate that the artist's relative silence here is in itself a strategy. An invocation of silence, however, is not always equated with retreat or evasion. Rather, the voids engendered by repressed narratives are often the sources of their power. On the efficacy of silence, Foucault asserts that "silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse... than an element that functions alongside the things said,

with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies.”⁸¹ He argues against a binary division between what is verbalized and what is not, contending that “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.”⁸² In Villar Rojas’ artistic praxis, the voids generated by what is left unsaid and the calculated destruction of his monumental sculptures are endowed with a discursive efficacy. The artist’s construction and subsequent destruction of monumental forms refutes the organizational impulse of history that seeks to neutralize memory, and more specifically invokes a critical silence that echoes Argentina’s ongoing politics of memory.

Villar Rojas’ subversion of the archetypal equestrian monument in *Las Mariposas Eternas*, his purposeful ruination of the sculptures’ material permanence, and his choice of an enigmatically lyrical title—“the eternal butterflies”—implicated the work within the politics of collective memory and national history in the aftermath of the divisive “Dirty War.” Though the aesthetics exude a sense of otherworldly origins, particularly the eccentric pairing of the cycloptic creature and its hooded rider, the work’s adherence to traditional monument composition inevitably invokes the myriad triumphalist statues of military and political figures in Argentina’s history. The artist’s citations of anime and science fiction are significant as both genres suggest nonsensical circumstances that escape logical reasoning, but his visual allusions to a classical sculptural prototype immediately denote an additional referent. Despite the general repression of a nationalist discourse of Villar Rojas’ work, *Las Mariposas Eternas* subverts and mutates a classical

⁸¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 27.

⁸² Foucault, 27.

nationalist emblem of authority to expose the politicized construction of nationhood and national identity.

CHAPTER IV.

The Instability of the National Space

Two years after Villar Rojas presented *Mi Familia Muerta* at the biennial in Ushuaia, he was launched onto an international stage at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, when he was one of the youngest artists to ever be selected as an individual national representative at the Biennale. Villar Rojas was chosen by Argentine curator Rodrigo Alonso and commissioner Magdalena Faillace to represent Argentina at what is arguably the most renowned biennial exhibition of contemporary art worldwide. While this designation catapulted him onto the international scene, it also embedded him within the politically layered nature of the Venice Biennale, in which artists and works are largely organized along national boundaries. For the 54th edition of the Biennale, Argentina occupied an enormous, cavernous gallery in a privileged space within the Arsenale complex, a centralized location that promoted dialogical exchange and provided valuable visibility for this young artist.

Situated in a discursive context that advocated and organized artistic innovation within a nationalist framework, Villar Rojas elected to utilize Argentina's designated gallery to construct a landscape of monumental yet dilapidated ruins imbued with a hazy nostalgia. Entitled *Ahora Estaré Con Mi Hijo, El Asesino de Tu Herencia* (Now I Will Be With My Son, the Murderer of Your Heritage; henceforth referred to as *El Asesino de Tu Herencia*) (Figure 3.a), the installation's fusion of the aggressively industrial with the sensuously organic imbued the cavernous gallery with an ambiguous tension, further amplified by the imposing scale of the eleven columns and the dimly lit interior. Villar

Rojas' transformation of the Argentinean pavilion into a space pervaded by acute foreboding and discomfort was magnified by its location within the linearly organized Arsenale, in which adjacent national pavilions predicated the spatial impact of the work. The prestige of representing Argentina at the Venice Biennale affiliated Villar Rojas with the construction of a national identity, an ambivalent task that was visually reflected in the ambiguity of the installation's transitory monumentality. In addition, Argentina's 110 years of nomadic existence at the Biennale culminated in 2011 when it obtained a permanent pavilion in the Sale d'Armi section of the Arsenale, which it is to restore in time for the 2013 exhibition.⁸³ On this occasion of symbolic importance for the history of Argentinean representation at the Biennale, Villar Rojas' choice to construct a surrealist landscape of monumental and brooding forms was as much an extension of the artist's aesthetic practice and conceptual inquires as it was a response to the complexities inherent to the visual embodiment of national identity.

A. The Uncanny Realm of *El Asesino de Tu Herencia*

Upon reaching the Argentinean pavilion from the adjacent pavilions of India and Saudi Arabia, one was confronted with a rectangular doorway that was noticeably smaller than those preceding it. Modified by Villar Rojas and his team of collaborators (composed of artists, carpenters, and engineers), the condensed entryway gave way to a dim 250-square-meter space colonized by eleven colossal structures that seemed at once

⁸³ Laura Traversi, "New National Pavilions Planned for Arsenale," *The Art Newspaper* 220, January 4, 2011. <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/New%20national%20pavilions%20planned%20for%20Arsenale/2160>.

transitory and forcefully permanent (Figure 3.b).⁸⁴ Permeated by a gray, ashen palate and an abundance of enveloping shadows, the installation's dense concentration of stalactite-like sculptures evoked a contemporaneous yet entirely foreign existence. The massive columnar structures up to 20 feet in height crowded the space to form an immersive, sculptural forest of sorts, albeit one characterized by the unnatural fusion of the organic and the mechanical (Figure 3.c). "The towering, impacting pieces are aggressively polyglot," noted Smith, "alternately going 'native,' figurative, and military-industrial."⁸⁵ Combined with the echoes of shuffling footsteps and muted conversations of other visitors, *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* actively frustrated attempts at classification and understanding. An acute sense of foreboding was magnified by the scarred, mottled, and evidently deteriorating surfaces of the sculptures, consequently eliciting an indefinable yet palpable melancholy as one navigated through this dense assemblage of monumental ruins.

Each of the 2-ton sculptures was molded using unfired clay upon a large armature of cement, burlap, and wood. Textural fluctuations ranging from pristine, smooth surfaces to crude, rugged expanses actively coalesced with forms both organic and aggressively industrial. Exhibiting the scars of continuous decay, these monumental structures were reminiscent of the enigmatic vestiges of antique civilizations. Though reminiscent of the massive pyramids of ancient Egyptian or Pre-Columbian societies, they bore closer resemblance to industrial ruins of modernity or the mechanical relics of science fiction (Figure 3.d & 3.e). They fostered inquiries as to their origin, usage,

⁸⁴ Hirsh, "Adrian Villar Rojas: The Last Sculpture on Earth," *Art in America*.

⁸⁵ Roberta Smith, "Everyone's a Critic," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/arts/design/2011-venice-biennale.html#/6/>.

construction, and meaning, directly appealing to our propensity for projection and imaginative speculation when confronted with the unfamiliar. Enticing our fearful fascinations with unknown eras, the work fluctuated between the past and the future, the familiar and the alien. In their seeming adherence to recognizable yet foreign parameters governing space and time, the eleven enigmatic ruins seemed to insinuate the existence of an entirely distinct yet parallel universe.

The hybridism of forms and imagery engendered a powerfully disorienting effect. The extent of Villar Rojas' elusively idiosyncratic aesthetic was evident in the critical responses to the work, in which the challenge of articulating the installation's visual eccentricities necessitated a considerable degree of linguistic creativity. "Villar Rojas's oversize semi-abstract forms confront the viewer with something that looks quite distinct—not simply in superficial stylistic terms but, paradoxically, through their open adherence to preexisting tropes and shared visual memories," Jessica Morgan noted in *ArtForum*.⁸⁶ Roberta Smith of *The New York Times* indulged in more imaginative language in her visual analyses: "some rough clotted shapes might almost have been made by giant bees or ants; others are sharp-edged and modern, like weapons or thruway pylons,"; "one especially streamed vertical is topped by protruding spikes that evoke the crown of the Statue of Liberty, abstracted; another piece suggests a space alien whose head seems to be splitting open,"; and finally, delighting in a particularly animated image, "a three-legged form reminiscent of a giant water tank suddenly morphs into a giant rooster" (Figure 3.f).⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Morgan, "Adrian Villar Rojas." 329.

⁸⁷ Smith, "Everyone's a Critic."

The combination of indulgence and hesitation in these colorful descriptions denotes the sheer difficulty of defining the work's aesthetic. Indeed, its elusive appearance seems to demand a vocabulary uncharacteristic of the critical language. For example, one structure consisted of a smooth, cylindrical form that emerged from a base of roughly shaped clay to morph into a shape akin to a mushroom cloud. Nearby, four wing or leaf-like forms, each of which was hollow and tipped, emerged upward from the base of another sculpture, punctuating its coarse surface (Figure 3.c). Another structure included what appeared to be an upended, anthropomorphic robotic figure; the precision with which the feet, legs (particularly its mechanical set of knees), wings, and torso were detailed contrasted with the absence of arms and the replacement of the head with a flat, protruding form (Figure 3.g). Faye Hirsch in *Art in America* described the sculptures as having been "beamed from a future time or faraway planet," seemingly involved in gentle communion with one another "in a wordless manner inaccessible to our understanding."⁸⁸

In the same manner that their aesthetics eluded classification, the sculptures' disintegrating facades seemed to undermine the structural integrity implied by their immense scale. The juxtaposition of abrasive, scarred surfaces with evenly finished, yet often fractured, expanses insinuated the active decay of each towering structure, challenging yet again the perceived permanence of the monumental form. The sensuous surfaces of *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* were a product of the malleability afforded by unfired clay, the primary material in this and many others of Villar Rojas' works. The artist's consistent application of clay in the building of monumental forms has imbued his

⁸⁸ Hirsch, "Adrian Villar Rojas: The Last Sculpture on Earth."

practice with an aesthetic unity that facilitates the continuation and expansion of his conceptual inquiries. The predominant use of this material refutes more industrial and technologically dependent methods of production in favor of one of the earliest art-making materials. Smithson noted in “Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” (1968) that a return to natural materials facilitates a series of emancipatory repercussions. “By refusing ‘technological miracles’ the artist begins to know the corroded moments, the carboniferous states of thought, the shrinkage of mental mud, the geological chaos—in the strata of esthetic consciousness,” Smithson wrote. “The refuse between mind and matter is a mine of information.”⁸⁹ In the same manner that clay’s seemingly impossible usage for massive structures is undermined by Villar Rojas’ monumental works, so too does its unexpected application to create pristine and aseptic surfaces challenge preconceptions as to its use.

Throughout *El Asesino de tu Herencia*, protrusions of scarred, mottled forms typified the crumbling and abrasive condition of dried clay, and expanses that fluctuate between bumpy and smooth were symptomatic of the fluid modeling of the moist material. The cylindrical precision of pipe-like forms contrasted with the irregular surfaces of surrounding lumps of clay, with certain patches that bore the obvious imprints of vigorous prodding and pushing lie adjacent to slick and seemingly polished surfaces. Such evident remains of deliberate molding stimulate one’s own familiarity with kneadable surfaces, and this consequent appeal to the tactile sensibility incites a desire to replicate the artist’s trace and agency over the clay’s pliable skin. The play between emergence and subversion of forms to the mottled clay was reminiscent of the works of

⁸⁹ Smithson, “Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968)” in *Collected Writings*, 107.

Auguste Rodin in which human forms materialize from the mottled surfaces of their marble bases, as seen in such works as *La Main de Dieu* (The Hand of God) (Figure 24) and *Danaïd* (Figure 25). More akin perhaps to the congealed surfaces of *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* are the anthropomorphic bronze sculptures of Willem de Kooning or Alberto Giacometti (Figs. 26-29), while the profusion of immense columnar forms are evocative of Peter Voukos' ceramic and bronze "stacks" (Figs. 30 & 31) that similarly bore the imprints of vigorous gouging on their surfaces. In the tradition of exploiting the material range of a clay surface, Villar Rojas' sculptures "flaunt a materiality which fiercely questions the senses," eliciting an innate impulse to touch and caress their clotted and creviced surfaces.⁹⁰ Junctures between hygienic planes were either clean intersections or mottled crevices that suggested a gradual disintegration. Geological formations that were intimated by fissured clots of clay were melded with starkly smooth areas that evoked the sterile quality of industrial surfaces. This juxtaposition of raw expanses and pristinely polished surfaces was integral to the invented domain that characterizes Villar Rojas' work. Located at a juncture that confused temporal linearity, this world synthesized the aesthetics of industrial, at times futuristic, machinery with the tactile primacy of the organic.

Villar Rojas' proclivity to retain clay in its natural unfired state in *Mi Familia Muerta*, *Las Mariposas Eternas*, and *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* refutes its traditional role as a preparatory medium to make models for larger sculptural works. The exteriors of Villar Rojas' clay works are instead left to dry naturally, subject to exterior interferences or atmospheric variances that may permute the clay's surface as it dries. In rendering the

⁹⁰ SAM Art Projects, *Poems for Earthlings: Adrian Villar Rojas*, September/October 2011.

material vulnerable to external influences, Villar Rojas yields a measured degree of the artistic agency that compels the typical transformation of a clay model into a permanently metallic condition. While the surfaces characteristic of the works of Giacometti or de Kooning, for example, may similarly evince the repetitious molding that predicated their creation, such indentations remain nonetheless rigidly confined by the work's final encapsulation in bronze. In his prolific use of a material commonly limited to preparatory stages, as well as through a perpetuation of its pliancy, Villar Rojas challenges its physical limitations and probes the extent of its material integrity. Unfired clay, frequently utilized in sculptural practices for its forgiving nature yet ultimately rejected for its susceptibility, is here employed exactly for its tenuous and impressionable nature.

B. The Geopolitics of the Venice Biennale

Situated within a dim, cavernous gallery embedded in the corridors of the Arsenale, the silently brooding forms of *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* posed a stark contrast to the overwhelming, and at times ostentatious, spectacle that is the Venice Biennale. In the summer of 2011, the 54th Venice Biennale infused the city's labyrinth of lapping canals and gilded palazzos with the newest in contemporary art. Entitled "ILLUMInazioni/ILLUMInations," this behemoth exposition featured a record eighty-nine participating countries (a significant increase from the seventy-seven nations in 2009) in addition to Swiss curator Bice Curiger's central exhibition of 83 artists and a myriad of collateral shows staged throughout the city.⁹¹ Surrounded to the point of near

⁹¹ La Biennale di Venezia, "A Statement by Paolo Baratta," accessed September 4, 2012. <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/archive/54th-exhibition/baratta/>.

saturation, the act of navigating through the Biennale's vast exhibition venues was largely dictated by the separation of spaces into national zones. The pavilions in the Giardini and Arsenale, in addition to those throughout the city, denote the separation of artists and works for the purposes of visually articulating a certain national identity, consequently generating a rhetoric of competition to be assessed according to a criterion of artistic progress (Figure 32). The exhibition's division of space starkly defines the literal and ideological borders between countries, a vestige from the Biennale's early history that perpetuates the existence of latent political undertones.

Beginning in 1907, the twenty-nine permanent pavilions in the lush Giardini were constructed at varying times by the initial participating nations, many the product of renown architects that imparted a particular style to each individual building.⁹² Gerrit Rietveld, for example, designed the current Dutch pavilion in 1954 (Figure 33), while the Austrian pavilion is the product of Josef Hoffmann (Figure 34).⁹³ Ernst Haiger redesigned the German pavilion in 1938 (Figure 35) under orders from Adolf Hitler, and United States Pavilion occupies a Palladian-style structure designed by William Delano and Chester Alrich in 1930 (Figure 36).⁹⁴ The façades of the individual pavilions, each emblazoned with the nation's name in Italian, facilitate a discursive realm through their visual and spatial communion, with many of them facing each other directly. "It is an old formula envisaging the presence of states," said Biennale president Paolo Baratta.

"Precious in a globalization time, [as] it gives us the primary reference backdrop where to

⁹² La Biennale di Venezia, "The First Foreign Pavilions," accessed September 4, 2012, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/pavilions.html>.

⁹³ La Biennale di Venezia, "National Pavilions," accessed September 4, 2012, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/biennale/venues/pavilions.html>.

⁹⁴ Biennale, "The First Foreign Pavilions,"; The Peggy Guggenheim Collection, "US Pavilion," accessed September 4, 2012, <http://www.guggenheim-venice.it/inglese/pavilion/index.php>.

observe or better highlight the individual geographies of artists.”⁹⁵ As idealized spaces intended to assert the idea of a national identity, the individual pavilions inevitably categorize and designate their representative artists in a manner tinged with vestiges of nineteenth century nationalist, and vaguely imperialist, undercurrents. The Giardini’s organization effectively constructs a political framework that structures the experiences of both its artists and its audiences, and continues to engender what curator Okuwi Enwezor has deemed to be “a cartography of nations.”⁹⁶

This historically renowned celebration of contemporary art thus remains delineated among national lines, utilizing traditional hegemonic structures to administer and organize an art world that has becoming increasingly more intellectual and international. It is also notoriously known for the immense audience that it attracts over the span of its six-month exhibition period. In her review of the 54th Biennale, Smith noted that “when it comes to dense, out-of-control concentrations of contemporary art, there is nothing like the Venice Biennale.”⁹⁷ A profusion of artists, curators, dealers, critics, collectors, museum directors, and corporate sponsors drives the ostentatious whirlwind of the Biennale’s opening week, which upon subsiding gives way to a broader public audience and the plethora of tourists that descend upon the city during the summer months. The Venice Biennale thus vaulted Villar Rojas onto an international stage and furnished unprecedented exposure for the artist’s praxis.

⁹⁵ La Biennale di Venezia, “54th International Art Exhibition,” accessed September 4, 2012, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/archive/54th-exhibition/54iae/>.

⁹⁶ “Okuwi Enwezor on the origins of Haacke’s Pavilion,” *Phaidon* video, 9:34, 2011, <http://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/video/2012/may/29/okwui-enwezor-on-the-origins-of-haacke-s-pavilion/>.

⁹⁷ Roberta Smith, “Artists Decorate Palazzos, and Vice Versa,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/arts/design/the-54th-venice-biennale-sedate-and-pumped-up-review.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

The expansive galleries and national pavilions of the Arsenale construct an analogous yet distinct discourse from that facilitated by the freestanding pavilions in the Giardini (Figure 37). For the 54th Biennale, the Argentinean pavilion occupied a spacious gallery in the Artiglierie section of the Arsenale complex, a massive production center dating to the 13th century that supplied the Venetian fleet at the height of its maritime prowess.⁹⁸ The extensive corridors of the Artiglierie and adjacent Corderie, originally utilized as workshops, are conducive to the display of large works across a variety of media, and in recent years have been devoted to the section of the Biennale's central exhibition designated for the promotion of young artists, aptly named "Aperto" ("Open").⁹⁹ In 2011 the linear corridor was divided in two, with one half devoted to the central exhibition and the other reserved for the national pavilions of Saudi Arabia, Argentina, India, Croatia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Chile, in addition to the Latin American Pavilion organized by the Italo-Latin American Institute.¹⁰⁰ Despite the Arsenale's comparatively more integrative organization, Argentina's insertion within a linear arrangement of other national displays heightened the necessity for aesthetic distinction. The division of a vast linear corridor into multiple pavilions perpetuated the undertones of national pride and occasional nationalistic agenda, as evidenced by the Argentinean press release written by curator Rodrigo Alonso. "The Argentinean

⁹⁸ La Biennale di Venezia, "Arsenale," accessed September 4, 2012, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/venues/arsenale.html>.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Venice Biennale exhibition map; The Latin American Pavilion has been organized since 1972 by the Italo-Latin American Institute in Rome (IILA), an organization dedicated to the promotion of relations between Italy and Latin America. Curated by Alfons Hug, the 2011 exhibition was entitled "Entre Siempre y Jamás" ("Between Always and Never) and included works from artists from all 20 Latin American countries. Hug also served as the head curator for the 2009 Bienal del Fin del Mundo in which Villar Rojas participated. (http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Politica_Estera/Aree_Geografiche/Americhe/IstitutoItaloLatinoAmericano)

representation this year operates as an investment into the future, as a platform to initiate a dialogue with the international artistic circuit and, at the same time, to generate interest in the artistic scene in Argentina.”¹⁰¹ Alonso continued by noting that Villar Rojas’ selection “has kept in mind the possibility to exhibit and mark, through his work, the quality of the production of the artists that live in this country.”¹⁰² The exhibition was organized under Alonso’s guidance, whose selection of the then 31-year-old artist denoted a contemporary divergence from the conceptualist and ready-made traditions that have dominated modern Argentinean art.¹⁰³

C. Ruins of the Future

Within this national space, Villar Rojas’ enigmatic landscape of columnar forms was reminiscent of the vast sites of ruin that had elicited the raptures of Petrarch and Diderot. In such locales, nostalgic sentiments were predicated on the reorientation of architectural forms into the natural landscape. In contrast to this romantic perspective on the reconciliation of nature and man, however, *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* imparted a decidedly more unsettling atmosphere. The root of this uncertainty lay in the work’s tenuous suspension between opposing temporal progressions. Unlike traditional

¹⁰¹ “La representación argentina de este año se propone como una apuesta al futuro, como una plataforma para entablar un diálogo con el circuito artístico internacional, y al mismo tiempo, generar interés hacia la escena artística argentina.” from Alonso, “Presentación a la prensa de la designación de Adrián Villar Rojas como representante argentina en la 54 Bienal de Venecia,” accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.argentinaenvenecia.com.ar>.

¹⁰² “Su elección ha tenido en cuenta la posibilidad de exhibir y señalar, a través de su obra, la calidad de la producción de los creadores que habitan este país,” Alonso, “Presentación a la prensa de la designación de Adrián Villar Rojas como representante argentina en la 54 Bienal de Venecia,” accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.argentinaenvenecia.com.ar>.

¹⁰³ Previous pavilions had exhibited the works of Guillermo Kuitca (2007), Jorge Macchi (2007, 2005), and Marta Minujin (1986).

perceptions of historical ruins as finitely produced architectural structures that evidence the gradual passage of time through nature's neutralizing effects, these eleven polygot sculptures played "tricks with causality," thus preventing the regulation of these colossal ruins to a fixed period in the past.¹⁰⁴ Their visual evasion of logical ordering found a parallel in the haunting architectural spaces of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Carceri* ("prisons"), a series of intricate copper-plate etchings of vast, fictitious interiors (Figs. 38 & 39). Piranesi's illogical intersections of vaults, arches, stairways, and columns create nonsensical interlocking compositions shrouded in shadows, "stimulating the beholder's imagination at the same time that they fill him with wonder, a deep sadness and a sense of mystery."¹⁰⁵ Described as "more powerfully suggestive for being so impossible," these mysterious architectural fantasies are embedded throughout with miniscule and insignificant human figures, their movements and fates seemingly at the mercy of the looming architectural forms.¹⁰⁶ The loss of corporeal agency embodied by these tiny figures is not unlike the acute despondency evoked by *El Asesino de Tu Herencia*. Dwarfed by the work's enormous scale and denied a vantage point that afforded complete visibility, the viewer's ambulatory movement throughout the installation was strictly dictated by these massive columnar ruins.

The deteriorating materiality of *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* likewise contributed to the work's slightly menacing, yet undeniably alluring, atmosphere. The evocative aesthetic and semantic potential of the ruin engenders its intellectual and sensual appeal.

¹⁰⁴ Boym, "Ruins of the Avant-Garde," in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 58.

¹⁰⁵ Philip Hofer, introduction to *The Prisons (Le Carceri) by Giovanni Battista Piranesi; The Complete First and Second States* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), xii.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, xiii.

Ruins are frequently perceived as architectural remnants that, though having lost their functionality, still retain inherent historical, aesthetic, and political significance that has become heightened through the veneer of age.¹⁰⁷ Their transient existence is manifested in their vanishing materiality, as crumbling structures gradually deform original facades and embed the remains within the surrounding landscape. The absence of original forms facilitates an allure of imaginative potential and musing, as the continual challenges to structural integrity enable meditations on an increasingly invisible past. Emblematic of both the loss and the endurance of the past, the ruin likewise remains suspended between its status as a tangible, finite entity and a process of continuous decay. The temporal insinuations inherent in a deteriorating surface are many, as are its historical implications. In *Ruins of Modernity*, Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle observe that ruins “reveal an ambivalent sense of time, at once the awareness of an insuperable break from the past that constitutes the modern age and the sense that some valuable trace has endured and needs to be cherished.”¹⁰⁸

In accordance with the rise of Romantic sensibilities, a reverence for the patina of age facilitated an appreciation for the aesthetic of classical ruins beyond their historical implications. Picturesque taste extolled the beauty of an authenticating patina,

¹⁰⁷ A renewed appreciation for antiquity during the Renaissance facilitated a veneration of physical traces of ancient civilizations. The humanist relationship with the past was one of both admiration and rejection; an awareness of the present’s contingency upon the past was balanced with the desire to transcend this classical heritage. A preference for the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations adhered to concurrent endeavors to denounce the more recent medieval past. “Reviving a distant past for its own uses,” Lowenthal observes in *The Past is a Foreign Country*. “The Renaissance was the first epoch to see itself as ‘modern,’ as distinct from both the immediate past it discredited and the remote past it idolized.” This embrace of the antique past became evident in the proliferation of classical ruins in the visual arts. Fragments of classical architecture and sculpture served primarily as inspiration for Renaissance artists in their reinterpretations of antiquity, but they also engendered admiration in their deteriorating state. As paradigms of artistic excellence, classical ruins physically embodied humanist ideals and values.

¹⁰⁸ “Introduction,” in *Ruins of Modernity*, 5.

particularly in stonework.¹⁰⁹ Deteriorating architectural forms were frequently utilized as scenic backdrops in painting, as gently crumbling facades gradually assimilating with the surrounding vegetation coincided with pastoral themes.¹¹⁰ Sites where ruins had accrued en masse, such as the Roman Forum, were particularly popular for the immersive experience they afforded visitors. Renaissance humanists extolled the evocative nature of Roman ruins; in a letter to Francesco Colonna in 1341 or 1337, Petrarch famously described a walk through Rome, stating that “Rome was greater, and greater are its ruins than I imagined.”¹¹¹ French critic and poet Joachim de Bellay marveled at “these old walls and palaces... these old archways... what ruin and what pride, temple and dome!” in his 1558 collection of sonnets, *Les Antiquités de Rome*.

The use of ruins as a pictorial motif in painting likewise inspired reverence for such architectural remains. The landscapes of Giovanni Paolo Panini often featured classical facades as backdrops for allegorical scenes, with eroding surfaces countered by ruins of massive scale that bespoke of bygone grandeur (Figure 40). In his review of Hubert Robert’s debut in the Salon of 1767 (Figure 41), Denis Diderot exalted the painter’s vivid scenes of urban disasters and consequent ruins. “The ideas ruins evoke in me are grand,” Diderot noted, “Everything comes to nothing, everything perishes, everything passes, only the world remains, only time endures.”¹¹² Such grandiose reflections on the supremacy of past glory and greatness adhered to “the optimism of Enlightenment thought” that venerated classical ideals and aesthetics, and Andres

¹⁰⁹ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 164.

¹¹⁰ Lowenthal, 157.

¹¹¹ Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum familiarium libri*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1975), 113.

¹¹² Diderot, *Diderot on Art*, ed. and trans. John Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 198-199.

Huyssen notes that “nineteenth-century romantic images of ruins tended to domesticate and beautify ruins by making them picturesque.”¹¹³ The beauty of patina accorded with a faith in historical linearity and “decay as a guarantor of antiquity,” and corroborated with “the increasing cachet of authenticity” in the late eighteenth century.¹¹⁴

Meditations on ruins were not without reference to their implications of mortal transience. “Wherever I cast my glance, the objects surrounding me announce death and compel my resignation to what awaits me,” said Diderot. “What is my ephemeral existence in comparison with that of a rock being worn down?”¹¹⁵ The decaying aesthetic of ruins sharpens an awareness of transience, perpetuating their compelling allure through their confusion of temporalities. As Andre Malraux explains in *Voices of Silence*, “It is not that we prefer time-worn bas-reliefs, or rusted statuettes as such, nor is it the vestiges of death that grip us in them, but those of life. Mutilation is the scar left by the struggle with Time.”¹¹⁶ Just as ruins rupture physical divides through their erosion and gradual integration into the surrounding landscape, so too do they confuse temporal parameters through their intimation of overlaid temporalities. The knowledge of a ruin’s bygone origin and the truth of its concurrent existence within our own temporal reality create a fissure in the belief in the linearity of time, in which events transpire in a rigidly sequential order. In the presence of a ruin, linear time as an “atomic and divisible” entity is challenged by a concept of spatial time that extricates time from a strictly linear

¹¹³ Huyssen, “Authentic Ruins,” in *Ruins of Modernity*, 22.

¹¹⁴ Lowenthal, 149;171.

¹¹⁵ Denis Diderot, *Diderot on Art*, ed. and trans. by John Goodman, Vol II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 198.

¹¹⁶ André Malraux, *Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 635.

frame.¹¹⁷ The simultaneity of ruins engenders the inception of heterogeneous temporalities, in which the integrity of the present is undermined by the physicality of the residues of the past.

The dialectic between absence and presence embodied in ruins inevitably stimulates a propensity for invention. Through their presentation of a spatial and physical void, ruins enable an imaginative reconstruction of the tangible past in the face of its vanishing materiality. “An emblem of transience, ruins facilitate an imaginary repetition of the past similar in intensity to the original sensations it afforded,” note Hell and Schönle. “The ruin, in short, enables individual freedom, imagination, and subjectivity.”¹¹⁸ The emancipatory capacity of the ruin lies in its accommodation of the inventive and fantastical through its destructive effect on traditional and institutional order, a potential that Walter Benjamin defines in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as being analogous to literary allegory. Benjamin seeks to resurrect the authentic nature of allegory from its marginalized position as a subordinate to the aesthetic symbol; observing the romantic propensity to regard the symbol as ostensibly representative of an “indissoluble unity of form and substance,” he condemns the totalizing aims of symbolism and advocated its negation through the use of the allegorical form.¹¹⁹ Benjamin extends his analysis of the allegorical sensibility by identifying its analogue in the material realm. “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things,” he writes, thereby aligning the allegorical form with a fragmentary

¹¹⁷ Thomas J. Cottle, *Perceiving Time: A Psychological Investigation with Men and Women* (New York : Wiley, 1976), 395.

¹¹⁸ “Introduction,” in *Ruins of Modernity*, 8.

¹¹⁹ Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 81.

materiality.¹²⁰ As the paradigmatic emblem of allegory, the ruin physically embodies its transient and incomplete character with its state of active disintegration. Just as the allegory “‘immerses itself in the abyss between pictorial being and meaning’ by probing the inevitable discrepancy between arbitrary signs and absolute, stabilized significance,” the ruin epitomizes the failure of material permanence and cohesion through its gradual disintegration.¹²¹

An exploration of heterogeneous temporalities thus functions as a central tenet in Villar Rojas’s ruinous aesthetic. His expressed interest in the multiverse theory, the belief in the existence of multiple universes, accords with the simultaneity inherent in ruins, in their occupation of an invisible temporal realm that is contiguous yet separate from our own. His purposeful invention of ruins acknowledges the truth of their overlaid temporalities, and seeks to elucidate the consequent impression of simultaneity. Villar Rojas utilizes the multifarious tensions evoked by ruins—fragment versus whole, individual versus collective, the specificity of an instant versus its implications within a grander narrative— to challenge the semantic and temporal frames that govern visual culture.

Villar Rojas’ transformation of the Argentinean pavilion into an eroding and eerily ruinous environment sought to undermine the “transposition of the principle of causality in the unfolding of historical time,” and challenged a perception of time “as a medium both continuous and linear, in which an infinite series of causes and effects can

¹²⁰ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: NLB, 1977), 178.

¹²¹ John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 133.

unfold in uninterrupted fashion.”¹²² Having seemingly appeared from undisclosed origins, the eleven sculptures of *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* undermined the enduring singularity of what Benjamin has termed the “history of the victors,” a history which through reiteration and repetition has subsumed the narratives of the vanquished. In the Biennale’s catalogue Alonso notes that the sculptures seemed to be rendered as “monuments to a nameless memory and also metaphors of silent resistance,” and indeed their enigmatic temporality and idiosyncratic aesthetic suggested the existence of a parallel sphere replete with latent narratives.¹²³ “The sculptures point to something extraordinary and beautiful that we are unable to understand,” Alonso notes, evading the grasp of history and prompting its reevaluation to discern a repressed past.¹²⁴ Rather than a passive remembrance, however, the spatiality of *El Asesino* and its corporeal demands on the viewer compel an active attempt to rescue an elusive past, “of discerning the traces of a forgotten or repressed past deep within our own present.”¹²⁵ Evocative of Freud’s definition of the uncanny as something that “ought to have remained hidden but has come to light,” *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* excavated the monumental ruins of an unsettling yet eerily familiar parallel existence to salvage its repressed narratives from the totalizing claims of history.

¹²² Stephane Moses and Ora Wiskind, “The Theological-Political Model of History in the Thought of Walter Benjamin,” *History and Memory*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1989): 6.

¹²³ Rodrigo Alonso, “Argentina,” in *ILLUMInations: 54. Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte, la Biennale di Venezia*. Catalogue edited by Bice Curiger and Giovanni Carmine (Venice: La Fondazione, la Biennale di Venezia, 2011), 323.

¹²⁴ Biennale catalog entry, Alonso, 323.

¹²⁵ Moses, 10.

D. The Unfulfilled Promise of Modernity

In this space of international privilege, in the spotlight of the art world, this young artist imbued the space of the Argentine pavilion with monumental ruins that were simultaneously elusive and uncannily familiar. The amalgamation of natural forms and industrial parts and one's immersion into the installation's dimly lit environment evoked an uncertain yet acute nostalgia, as if the origins of these ruins existed just beyond the grasp of memory. This disturbing lack of clarity, however, seemed to be the allegory attached to the brooding forms and fissured surfaces of *El Asesino de Tu Herencia*. Despite their seemingly alien origins the sculptures retained forms strongly suggestive of mechanical parts, thereby implicating an industrial age and its corresponding aspirations. The installation's massive scale echoed the grandeur of modernism's utopian ideals, yet the gradual mutation of each columnar form into a deteriorating assemblage of aseptic and oozing surfaces seemed to suggest a disintegration of the modern project. Elements of a mechanical age were seemingly reduced to mere relics of industry embedded within decaying mounds of earth, their original functions nullified and their initial ambitions relegated to past projections of an ideal future. Subsumed within decaying heaps of parasitic earth and voided of their original intentions, these monumental, machine-like forms seemed to embody the ruined and waning promises of modernity. The contemporary visitor was challenged with navigating through the ruins of an idealistic future and contending with the material traces of a failed modernity, heightened by the uncanny, fabricated permanence of this cavernous and somewhat frightening installation. Allusions to a future driven by monumental utopian goals were rendered futile by Villar

Rojas' active and aggressive ruination, leaving in its wake a mutated environment that retained vestiges of an unfulfilled future.

Contextualized within Argentina's national space at the Venice Biennale, the monumental ruins of *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* were endowed with additional if not ambiguous significance. Though the artist's perspective on the nation remains unclear, the ruination of triumphalist forms—as seen in *Las Mariposas Eternas* as well as the enormous columnar structures in *El Asesino de Tu Herencia*—seemed to signify the surrender of modern idealism to the weight of its own ambition, an occurrence that has transpired more than once in Argentina's recent history. The work's implication of a failed modern project may be analogous to the almost repetitious pattern of an emergent utopian program and its subsequent collapse in modern Argentina; the socialist ambitions of the Peronist regime having been subsumed under the authority of military juntas, or the explosion of the military government's economic policies in a crippling economic crisis in the early 2000s. The gradual erosion of modernity's promise of security and solidity appeared to be embodied in Villar Rojas' decaying, fissured, and ambiguous forms which, when situated in a space designated to be emblematic of Argentina's contemporary artistic program, seemed to insinuate unsettling parallels between the work's material disintegration and the decaying ideologies of the nation's past. The material ruination and disintegration of monumentality in *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* may be understood to epitomize the aftermaths of a failed modern project and its utopian aspirations.

CHAPTER V.

Conclusion: A Fragile Monumentality

The centrality of instability seems to crystallize the consequences of a failed modern project in Argentina, and perhaps in the post-industrial world as a whole. The fragile monumentality in Adrián Villar Rojas' sculptural practice embodies the inherent volatility of a historical past and a projected future, exposing the underlying fissures that threaten the structural integrity of authority and promise. The artist's subversion of the monumental form probes into the vacant spaces and silences generated by loss, and as such remains inextricably tethered to his own memory and history.

An examination of a series of works united in their scale, ephemeral materiality, and distinctive hybrid imagery has revealed several key strategies and themes. The fatality of dislocation vividly embodied in *Mi Familia Muerta* alluded to the latent yet active presence of the deceased. The enduring nature of a familial narrative was reincarnated in the form of a lifeless whale, a victim of displacement that nonetheless defiantly existed in its dormant state. The sculptural pairing in *Las Mariposas Eternas* likewise meditated on the repercussions of loss through its perversion of an authoritative and confident artistic prototype. In mutating and lacerating the classic imagery of the equestrian monument, *Las Mariposas Eternas* also exposed the tenuous and volatile nature of national identity. *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* presented an unsettling landscape of industrial and organic columnar forms, menacing in their massive scale yet enticing for their suggestion of future origins. Their ruinous state imbued the space with a sense of nostalgia, a sentiment

of longing, both retrospective and prospective, for something that no longer existed.¹²⁶ All three references to the repercussions of loss—of the family, of a national history, of a yet unknown future—are inevitably informed by the artist's own intimacy with loss, which is in turn shaped by his coming of age in postdictatorial Argentina.

Villar Rojas' nomadic movements in past years would seem to negate this characterization. The artist's dynamic and somewhat incessant participation within an international circuit of biennials, museums, galleries, and other institutions has intertwined his idiosyncratic aesthetic into the current critical and aesthetic exchanges in contemporary art. A rapid succession of consecutive, high profile projects—what has indeed a remarkable and meteoric rise—has vaulted him within the last few years onto a global stage.

Yet the perpetual state of displacement ensuing from his constant movements abroad surely demands a keen sense of individual identity, which is in turn informed by familial and national narratives. The literal and conceptual elusiveness of his works can thus be understood to reference the contested and consequently elusive nature of his national heritage. Born during the years of the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, Villar Rojas belongs to a young generation charged with the task of articulating and grasping a historical period from a dispersed continuum of memories and conflicting accounts. For a seemingly apolitical and post-national artist, wed to the rapidity of contemporary art and the allures of popular culture, Villar Rojas produces work that are inextricably intertwined with his historical inheritance.

¹²⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

This evaluation of Villar Rojas' work probes further into the pervasive rapidity that seems to dictate contemporary art and the international network it has generated. The very technological developments that have enabled these international exchanges are exactly those that Villar Rojas seems to memorialize in *El Asesino de Tu Herencia*. The prevalence of ruined industrial forms embodied the decline of the utopian aspirations attached to modernity, which, on the other hand, have enabled the rise of an increasingly interconnected circuit for contemporary art. Villar Rojas' frequent invocation of a post-apocalyptic perspective can be understood as a response to the deterioration of the modern project, yet this is made ambiguous by his active participation in exhibitions, residencies, and biennials abroad. The failed promise of modernity implicit in his monumental ruins seems to have paradoxically catalyzed his meteoric career, rendering the relation of the modern project to contemporary art to be rather ambivalent.

Related to this is an inquiry into the motivations for contemporary artists to pursue an international agenda. Disregarding economic incentives, the notion of "working in the planet," in Villar Rojas' terms, necessarily denotes an artist's displacement from his or her place of origin. One is reminded here of artists like Francis Alÿs, a Belgian national living and working in Mexico City whose frequently engages in international projects (Figs. 42 & 43), and Cyprien Galliard, a young French artist whose affinity for urban decay has compelled him to seek ruined architecture and vandalized monuments abroad (Figs. 44 & 45).¹²⁷ This emergent desire to surpass national limitations calls for an analysis within the context of a failed modernity, the aftermath of

¹²⁷ Yablonsky, Linda. "Beautiful Ruins." *The New York Times Style Magazine*. April 10, 2013. <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/beautiful-ruins/?partner=rss&emc=rss>.

which now serves as the context for an emergent generation of artists who must now contend with this somewhat bleak inheritance.

Ultimately, Villar Rojas' response to a failed modernity has evidently compelled his nomadic movements and participation in the feverish exchanges of contemporary art. Yet by producing works abroad that are intentionally oscillatory and endowing them with familial, and often morbid, titles, the artist appears to allude to the pervasive ambiguities in Argentina's political atmosphere that perpetuate the elusive nature of its recent historical past. Regardless of the foreign city in which he may find himself, Villar Rojas' enigmatic and ruinous aesthetic remains driven by his latent historical inheritance. In effect, this young artist continues to carry his dead family with him wherever he goes.

Illustrations



Figure 1.a. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Mi Familia Muerta* (My Dead Family), 2009, clay (unfired), wood, rocks, soil. 2nd Bienal del Fin del Mundo, Ushuaia, Argentina.



Figure 1.b. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Mi Familia Muerta* (My Dead Family), 2009, clay (unfired), wood, rocks, soil. 2nd Bienal del Fin del Mundo, Ushuaia, Argentina.



Figure 1.c. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Mi Familia Muerta* (My Dead Family), 2009. Installation view, 2nd Bienal del Fin del Mundo, Ushuaia, Argentina.



Figure 1.d. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Mi Familia Muerta* (My Dead Family), 2009, clay (unfired), wood, rocks, soil. 2nd Bienal del Fin del Mundo, Ushuaia, Argentina.



Figure 1.e. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Mi Familia Muerta* (My Dead Family), 2009, clay (unfired), wood, rocks, soil, 2nd Bienal del Fin del Mundo, Ushuaia, Argentina.



Figure 1.f. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Mi Familia Muerta* (My Dead Family), 2009, clay (unfired), wood, rocks, soil. 2nd Bienal del Fin del Mundo, Ushuaia, Argentina.



Figure 2.a. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Las Mariposas Eternas (The Death of the General Lavalle)*, 2010, clay (unfired), wood, concrete, fossils, rocks, plastic, glass, 400 x 450 x 500 cm. Installation view, “Panamericana,” Kurimanzutto Gallery, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 2.b. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Las Mariposas Eternas (The Death of the General Lavalle)*, 2010. Installation view, “Panamericana,” Kurimanzutto Gallery, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 2.c. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Las Mariposas Eternas (The Death of the General Lavalle)*, 2010, clay (unfired), wood, concrete, fossils, rocks, plastic, glass, 400 x 450 x 500 cm. “Panamericana,” Kurimanzutto Gallery, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 2.d. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Las Mariposas Eternas (The Death of the General Lavalle)*, 2010, clay (unfired), wood, concrete, fossils, rocks, plastic, glass, 400 x 450 x 500 cm. “Panamericana,” Kurimanzutto Gallery, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 2.e. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Las Mariposas Eternas (The Death of the General Lavalle)*, 2010, graphite on paper, 38.2 x 29 cm.



Figure 3.a. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *El Asesino de Tu Herencia (The Murderer of Your Heritage)*, 2011, clay (unfired), wood, cement. Argentine Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale.



Figure 3.b. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* (The Murderer of Your Heritage), 2011, clay (unfired), wood, cement, Argentine Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale.



Figure 3.c. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* (The Murderer of Your Heritage), 2011, clay (unfired), wood, cement, Argentine Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale.



Figure 3.d. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* (The Murderer of Your Heritage), 2011, clay (unfired), wood, cement, Argentine Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale.



Figure 3.e. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* (The Murderer of Your Heritage), 2011, clay (unfired), wood, cement, Argentine Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale.



Figure 3.f. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* (The Murderer of Your Heritage), 2011, clay (unfired), wood, cement, Argentine Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale.



Figure 3.g. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *El Asesino de Tu Herencia* (The Murderer of Your Heritage), 2011, clay (unfired), wood, cement, Argentine Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale.



Figure 4. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Return the World*, 2012, clay (unfired), wood, cement, metal. Documenta 13, Kassel, Germany.



Figure 5. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Una Persona Me Amó (A Person Loved Me)*, 2012, clay (unfired), cement, wood, metal, styrofoam, latex, sand, burlap, sand. Installation view, "The Ungovernables," New Museum Triennial, New York.



Figure 6.a. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Lo que el fuego me trajo* (What Fire Brought Me), 2008, clay (unfired), bricks, cement, lime, sand, demolitor rubbish, wood, mirrors, glass, soap, shells, windshield, car hood, stickers, pins. Installation view, Ruth Benzacar Gallery, Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Figure 6.b. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Lo que el fuego me trajo* (What Fire Brought Me), 2008, clay (unfired), bricks, cement, lime, sand, demolitor rubbish, wood, mirrors, glass, soap, shells, windshield, car hood, stickers, pins. Installation view, Ruth Benzacar Gallery, Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Figure 7. Blue whale.



Figure 8. A beached whale in Queens, New York. Source:
<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/26/beached-whale-at-breezy-point/>.



Figure 9. A beached whale in Yorkshire, England. Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk>.



Figure 10. Gabriel Orozco (b. 1962), Installation view of *Mobile Matrix*, 2006, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Graphite on gray whale skeleton. Biblioteca Vasconcelos, Mexico City.



Figure 11. Robert Smithson (1938-1973), *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1-9)*, 1969. Yucatan, Mexico.

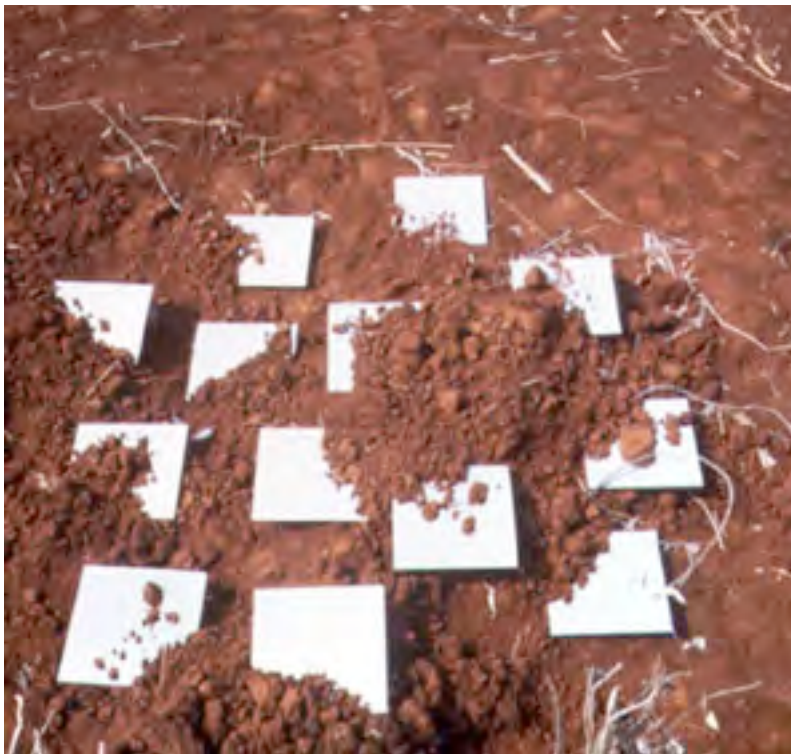


Figure 12. Robert Smithson (1938-1973), *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1-9)*, 1969. Yucatan, Mexico.



Figure 13. Robert Smithson (1938-1973), *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water coil. Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah.



Figure 14.a. Edward James (1907-1984), *Las Pozas*, 1960-1970, concrete. Xilitla, Mexico.



Figure 14.b. Edward James (1904-1984), *Las Pozas*, 1960-1970, concrete. Xilitla, Mexico.



Figure 14.c. Edward James (1907-1984), *Las Pozas*, 1960-1970, concrete. Xilitla, Mexico.



Figure 15. Salvador Dali (1904-1989), *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)*, 1936, oil on canvas. The Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 16. Salvador Dali (1904-1989), *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931, oil on canvas. The Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 17. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Mi Abuelo Muerto* (My Dead Grandfather), 2010, clay (unfired), wood, burlap, cement, 570 x 2300 x 600 cm. Akademie der Kunst, Berlin, Germany.



Figure 18. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Antes de mi Nacimiento* (Before My Birth), 2012, clay (unfired), wood, cement, styrofoam, apple, World Financial Center Plaza, New York.



Figure 19.a. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Harto de Adioses (Sick of Goodbyes)*, 2011, airbrush, acrylic, and lacquer on motorcycle helmet.



Figure 19.b. Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980), *Harto de Adioses (Sick of Goodbyes)*, 2011, airbrush, acrylic, and lacquer on motorcycle helmet.

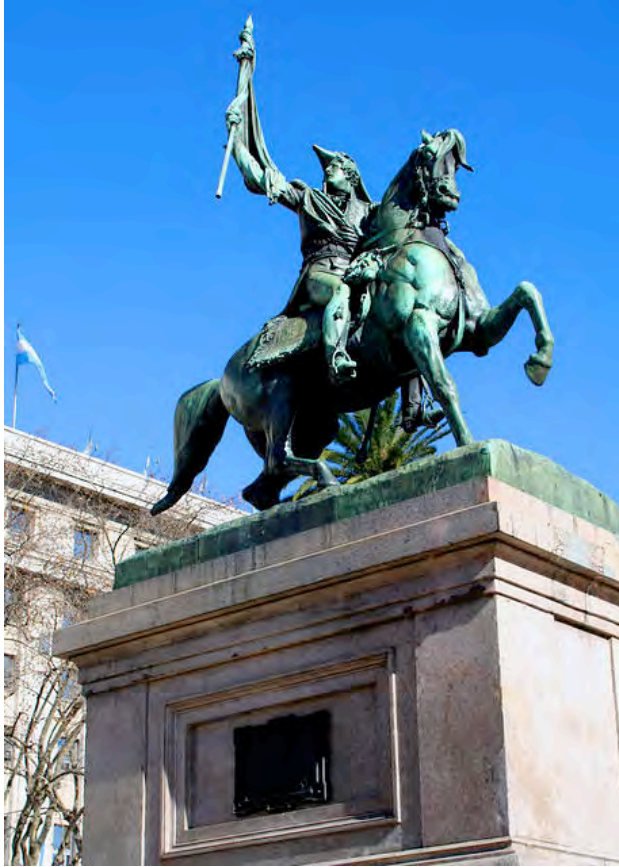


Figure 20. Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, *Monumento al General Manuel Belgrano*, 1873, bronze, Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Figure 21. David Calandra and Eduardo Rubino, *Monumento a Bartolomé Mitre*, 1927, bronze, granite, Plaza Mitre, Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Figure 22. Louis-Joseph Daumas, *Monumento al General San Martín*, 1862, bronze, Plaza San Martín, Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Figure 23. *Monumento al General San Martín*, bronze, Plaza San Martín, Rosario, Argentina.



Figure 24. Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), *Le Main de Dieu* (The Hand of God), 1896, marble, 94 x 82.5 x 54.9 cm.



Figure 25. Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), *Danaïd*, 1889, marble, 36 x 71 x 53cm.



Figure 26. Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), *Hostess (Bar Girl)*, 1973, bronze, 48 3/4 x 38 x 25 3/4 in. (123.8 x 96.5 x 65.4 cm.) Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, Dallas, Texas.



Figure 27. Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), *Seated Woman on a Bench*, 1972, bronze, 37 3/4 x 36 x 34 3/8 in. (95.9 x 91.4 x 87.3 cm).



Figure 28. Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966), *Annette*, 1953, bronze, 58.4 x 15 x 11 cm (23 x 5 7/8 x 4 5/16 in.).



Figure 29. Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966), *Eli Lotar III (Seated)*, 1965, bronze, 65 x 25 x 35 cm.



Figure 30. Peter Voulkos (1924-2002), *Untitled Stack*, 1995, bronze, 40 x 27 x 28.5 in.



Figure 31. Peter Voulkos (1924-2002), *Cortez*, 1995, ceramic, 113 x 77 x 71 cm.



Figure 32. Giardini, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.



Figure 33. Gerrit Rietveld, Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 1954.



Figure 34. Josef Hoffmann, Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 1934.



Figure 35. Ernst Haiger, German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (installation shot from 1993, Hans Haacke), 1938.



Figure 36. Chester Alrich and William Delano, United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (installation view from 2007, Feliz Gonzalez-Torres), 1930.



Figure 37. Arsenale, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.

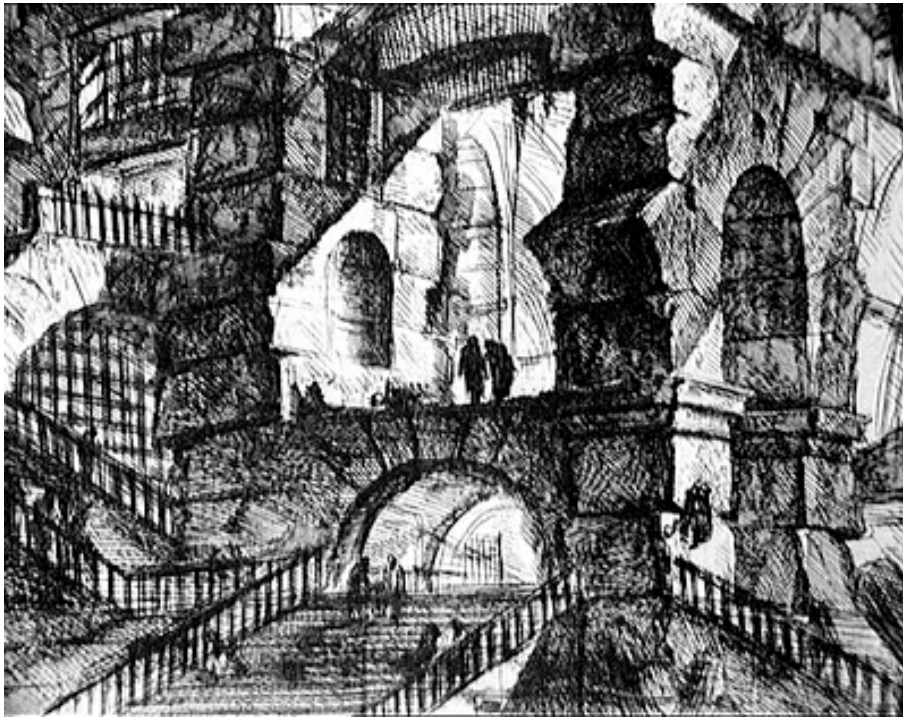


Figure 38. Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) Plate Fourteen, From *Invenzioni capric di carceri* (First State), 1749-1750.

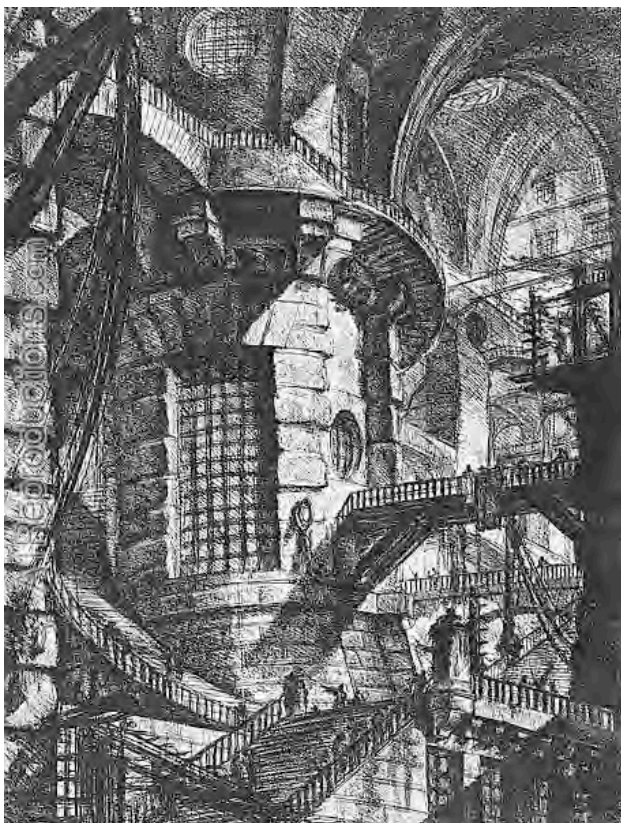


Figure 39. Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) Plate Three, From *Invenzioni capric di carceri* (Second State), 1749-1750.



Figure 40. Giovanni Paolo Panini (1692–1765), *A Capriccio of the Roman Forum*, 1741, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery.



Figure 41. Hubert Robert (1733-1808), *Vue du Port de Ripetta a Rome*, 1767, oil on canvas. Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts.



Figure 42. Francis Alÿs (b. 1959), *Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)*, 1997, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 43. Francis Alÿs (b. 1959), *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002, Lima, Peru.



Figure 44. Cyprien Gaillard (b. 1980), *Geographical Analogues*, 2006-2013, wood, glass, 9 Polaroids, 25.59 x 18.9 x 3.94 inches.



Figure 45. Cyprien Gaillard (b. 1980), *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*, 2009, 16 mm and 16 mm film (8:52 min).

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