# Photography as Monument

Chris Dercon in conversation with Bettina Pousttchi


1. Photography and the Monument

Chris Dercon (CD): A conference took place a short while ago on the subject of historic-monument preservation,[1] at which the architect and historian of architecture Thordis Arrhenius gave a lecture on Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. In the 1840s, the French government commissioned Viollet-le-Duc with the restoration and preservation of historic monuments that had been damaged or destroyed during the Napoleonic Wars or by the sans-culottes—abbeys, churches, cathedrals. Viollet-le-Duc had highly distinctive views on the subject: he was preoccupied with authenticity and with how authenticity could be reinterpreted. Arrhenius showed in her lecture that Viollet-le-Duc's theories on the preservation of monuments and their implementation would have been impossible without photographic developments in the nineteenth century.
That led me to reflect on the use you make of photography and your approach to historic buildings. *Echo* (2009), at the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin, for instance, was a preservation and restoration. And what you've done now with Wolfsburg Castle in *The City* is also a reinterpretation of "monumentality," asking the questions: What is a monument? What is the age of a monument?
In his lecture at the same conference, the architect and architectural theorist Jorge Otero-Pailos dealt with the concept of monumentality and asked to what extent the preservation of historic monuments is an act of reinterpretation. In this connection, he coined the term "monumentaries" and went on to say:

> Preservation is an exceptional form of interpretation because it presupposes more than words and laws. It requires that one manipulate the material fabric of the monuments. The replacing of roofs and the strengthening of foundations are physical acts of interpretation for restorers. Significant ethical effects are connected with them because they irreversibly alter the structural documents of mankind. Manipulations of this kind are seen to play a central role in enhancing the relevance of monuments for the public that ultimately has to foot the bill for the preserving of these monuments.[2]

So, on the one hand, there is the monumental strand in your work, because in Berlin and Wolfsburg you have worked with monuments that raise the issue of restoration and preservation. On the other, it's a question of photography and the role it can play in being a monument, as a physical substance. How do you see the relation between monument and photography in your work?

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[1] "Preservation Design," Nikolaus Hirsch with Thordis Arrhenius, Beatriz Colomina, and Jorge Otero-Pailos, seminar at Berlin Documentary Forum 3, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, May 31, 2014.
[2] Berlin Documentary Forum 3 publication (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2014), p. 120.

Bettina Pousttchi (BP): Photography in *Echo* had a range of functions. *Echo* wasn't a true-to-life replica of the demolished Palast der Republik but an interpretation of the original building with photographic means. The 970 paper posters in my photomontage were applied to all four sides of the building, which made the installation a three-dimensional spatial volume. So, on the one hand, it was a building made of photographs. On the other, I could never have developed this photo installation without the archival photos of the original Palast. Here, too, then, the photographic aspect was involved. By the time I started my project, the Palast had already been pulled down, and only with the aid of existing photos could I elaborate its photographic afterimage. So *Echo* only came into being thanks to photography, and while it was in place it was itself a photo.

Another edifice is being reconstructed on the site now, the Berlin Stadtschloss. Again, it can only be rebuilt because there are photos that show what it once looked like. Here the relation between photography and monument is particularly clear.

In *The City* I bring together ten skyscrapers from different places to form a new skyline with photographic means. You'll never see the buildings like that—photography alone sets them side by side.

CD: Between those two projects you realized another, in Frankfurt in 2012: *Framework*. How do your interventions in Berlin and Wolfsburg differ from the intervention in Frankfurt, would you say? There, too, in almost the same way, you were dealing with a form of critical reconstruction.

BP: The subject of reconstruction is highly topical in Frankfurt right now. The city suffered massive bomb damage in World War II, and most of the old half-timbered houses went up in flames. The heart of the old town, directly adjacent to the institution that invited me to mount an exhibition and put up a facade installation, is now being rebuilt. When I visited the Schirn Kunsthalle premises for the first time to work on preparing the exhibition, the Technisches Rathaus next door was being demolished to make room for the new concrete half-timbered houses. You saw the wrecking ball and a lacerated Brutalist construction. There are already a few reconstructed houses at the Roemerberg/Rathausplatz. I developed the pattern for *Framework* from my photos of these buildings.

The urban redevelopment of Frankfurt is based on the assumption that half-timbered houses are an architectural feature specific to Frankfurt. This raises the question of the possibility of a local, or national, construction style. A further question relates to the kind of buildings that ought to be built in Germany today. Who is being appealed to here; whose history do we want to build up and show? It is entirely questionable to assert that half-timbered houses are a specifically Frankfurt feature. Half-timbered structures are found not only throughout Germany but in other countries as well. National distinctions are being lost as a result of globalization, which in many places leads to renationalization. There's a need, a yearning, to reinstate national identity.

CD: So for you preserving historic monuments and photography are inseparable. And photography is not only a form of preservation but itself has physical substance.

BP: It really is both. My facade installations were all developed from photos, either archival material, as in the case of *Echo* and *The City*, or from my own photos, as with *Framework*, *Piccadilly Windows*, or as now in my Dallas exhibition. They appear again in space as photographic prints on various materials including construction tarpaulins, paper posters, and self-adhesive window stickers, where they have their own physical presence.

CD: This is particularly clear with *Echo*. There's another aspect concerning photography and how you work with it that interests me: you keep generating monuments, and yet these monuments have no authentic relation to the past but exist photographically as the "now."

BP: Photography as medialized monument. It has its own distinct physical presence. Located at Schlossplatz in central Berlin as it was, *Echo* represented a new material reality. In *The City* in Wolfsburg, 2,150 square meters of construction scrim conceal the castle. This creates an illusory space; at the same time, it is physically present. It stands there, a thirty-five-meter-high, three-dimensional sculpture, not a little model. Hence, it has physical presence that takes its existence from virtuality. I didn't myself shoot the images that I used in *The City*—they came from professional online archives. For *Echo* the archival images were still analog. The work in Wolfsburg physically imports the digital, virtual world archived online into urban space. It's an analog realization of the digital. To this extent, the installation is physical without its actually having been built. It's not an architectural structure but a photographic surface.

CD: Approaches to the restoration and preservation of monuments today vary enormously. Berlin has David Chipperfield. Critical reconstruction is a Berlin invention, and meanwhile theorists have gone so far as to maintain that even discourse can be a form of restoration and preservation—by adding something contemporary, for instance, and thus setting in motion discourse on the preservation of monuments.
In my time, as director at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, we discussed its preservation with Rem Koolhaas and Herzog & de Meuron with a view to returning it not to its 1937 state but to that of 1953, when it was structurally transformed and everything was painted white, trees were planted, and so on. Maybe that is the authentic moment.
Could one say that your installations are not just physical substance, and not just a medium, but something else in addition? Maybe your photographic interventions restore an important element—the moment between forgetting and memory, the fact that no memory is possible without forgetting, and vice versa.

BP: That's an important point. A memorial element is activated—photography can do that. Some of the photographic edifices I've erected are still standing, others aren't. They are recollections of buildings that no longer exist and of buildings that are still standing.
One of the buildings in my Wolfsburg installation is New York's Singer Building. When it was completed in 1908, it was the world's tallest building. Then it was demolished in 1968. I never saw it, only ever read of it. I know it through media and

could only re-erect it because there are photos of it. So its architectural history is not one I've ever experienced. It ceased to exist as a building more than forty years ago and here, now, it's part of the skyline.

CD: So the buildings are no longer there, but they exist, as media, and you return them to reality. Is it an illusion then?

BP: It's a different reality.

CD: There's a significant difference between what you did in *Echo* and what you do in *The City*. *The City*, to my mind, in contrast to *Echo*, is like an archive.

BP: *Echo* was the afterimage of a building that had stood on the site a short while ago. None of the high-rise buildings in *The City* ever stood on that site.

CD: And why did you want to bring these high-rises to Wolfsburg? Here, again, it seems you've created a monument, a critical monument.

BP: *The City* relates to the city of Wolfsburg and its history. It can be read as a critical commentary on the urban environment. Wolfsburg is a planned city. It was founded under National Socialism in 1938. It was designed to provide living space for the workers in the newly built Volkswagen factory. It's a city of the modern age, and I wanted to bring that out with my photoinstallation concealing the vast surface area of a Renaissance castle. Many people view skyscrapers as icons of the modern age. My photomontage brings together ten skyscrapers, each of which, at the time it was built, was the tallest building in the world.
For a long time, building such high structures was impossible. People were testing out what man could do—Babel … how high can we get? It was a symbol of progress, just like the automobile. It took off and turned into a contest among nations—who could produce the tallest building in the world? The Burj Khalifa in Dubai, which opened a few years ago, currently holds the title, while a yet higher tower is already being built in neighboring Saudi Arabia. The buildings symbolize a kind of national striving for dominance, a dubious undertaking, bearing in mind that international architectural practices design these structures and international engineering companies then develop them. The question is what's national about that. What interests me is the idea of the transnational. *The City* unites at one site ten structures that stand, or stood, in five cities in four countries. Together they form a kind of transnational skyline. Wolfsburg seemed to me a good place to reflect on history, memory, and modernity.
Peter Koller, who played a central role in the planning of Wolfsburg, chose to build horizontally rather than vertically, and he developed a garden city. *The City* is the reverse—it represents maximum vertical density. It asks the questions, What is a city, and how do we want to live in the future—in this maximum congestion?

CD: It could also be said that high-rise structures are an extremely primitive type of building, because, ultimately, they were produced as a kind of *architecture parlante*. I have in mind here the eighteenth century, Boullée, Ledoux, and the idea of "speaking architecture" whose form expresses its purpose. Above and beyond their purely spatial substance, of course, the high-rises express something different,

exploring the nature and meaning of space, which, as I see it, is central to modernity. High-rise structures are in fact faces.

The idea of preservation, mediality, the question of how, by means of photography, one can achieve a new kind of monumentality or re-explore the monument and bring it back again—on top of these issues, what you do in Wolfsburg is to bring back an architectural aspect, namely, the aspect of *architecture parlante*.

BP: Photography is my main focus. It's great that buildings always fit the photographic frame no matter how big they are.

CD: You'll have to explain that. Are you thinking of particular photographers who've taken pictures of high-rise buildings or cities?

BP: I'm thinking of New York.

CD: New York and skyscraper photography are inextricably related. Our perception of the city is shaped by its photographs.

BP: Lewis Hine's photos documenting the construction of the Empire State Building are famous. The American myth has always been closely connected with the skyscraper because, for a long time, it was a primarily American style of building. It existed principally in the United States, and so it became a symbol of the West and of progress.

CD: *The City* in Wolfsburg, but also *Echo* and *Framework*, put me in mind of Pierre Bourdieu and the social uses of photography. Bourdieu characterized photography as a middle-brow art. He was a photographer himself.

BP: In his book *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, Bourdieu shows why it is so difficult for photography to be recognized as an art.[3] Photography is so much a part of our daily use and everyday life that, for a long time, there was no plausible ground as to why photographs should be considered as artworks. This has changed vastly in recent decades, and the photograph has now arrived in the art context. What I find exciting about this book of Bourdieu's is that what he describes as photography's problem is precisely what I see as its potential, namely, that it's a part of everyday life, of our habits of seeing and memory processes, and that we take it for granted in a way that brings it close to us. The book came out in the 1960s, and it's instructive to reread it today. I first read it some fifteen years ago, at a time when photography had already been recognized as art. At that juncture, many saw the transition to digitalization as the end of photography. I saw it as the opening of a new chapter in its history.

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[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

2. Size and Scale

CD: It seems to me that the relation between size and scale is central to your photographic work.

BP: It is indeed a central aspect. I approach all of my facade installations photographically, so the question of size and scale comes up twice—in relation to the building, and in relation to the photographs. Are the photographs blowups or reductions? In advertising, what's depicted is almost invariably enlarged. In the facade installations, I try to approximate one-to-one to a building. I want to steer the photos away from miniaturization—away from the framed image of something hanging on a wall.
*Echo* greatly reduced the size of the Palast der Republik, but because the installation occupied physical space one took it for the building itself. The Wolfsburg skyscrapers are between one tenth and one twenty-fifth of their actual size, but because we're dealing with thirty-five-meter-high photographs they have physical presence and don't seem small. A building is there in front of you, and the windows in the photos are approximately the size of real windows. The illusionistic space that they create shows the nature of photography at various levels: it has to do with preserving—it's a documentary medium; it is also a memorial medium; and, in a certain sense, it's an illusionistic medium.

CD: This kind of urban intervention also points to the total simulation that we experience in cities today through advertising. Not only buildings but entire parts of cities get encased in huge advertising panels—in Berlin right now it's ads for the iPhone. Do you see your works as suggesting what architecture actually is at the moment? It's advertising space.

BP: Architecture is increasingly becoming advertising space. This is where my interventions take off. It's leading to massive changes in the urban landscape. Similar to when our metropolises were suddenly flooded by neon advertising, facades covered in vast advertising scrims are growing more and more common. In the process, our relationship to facades alters because sometimes you hardly know anymore what building the scrims hide. On a corner opposite the station at Potsdamer Platz here in Berlin, there's a building that consists entirely of scrims. It looks authentic, not least because it also has an advertisement—it's not just the simulation of a building, but of one with advertising on it.
On the other hand, my facade installations are possible only thanks to these sophisticated advertising techniques. If it weren't for growing demand in the advertising industry, these powerful printing techniques would never have been developed and I wouldn't be able to use them.
During construction or renovation work today, the buildings involved are often clad with scrims displaying the promise of what's to come. Surprisingly, what the future holds in store usually comes from the past. Wolfsburg Castle really is being renovated behind my scrim images in *The City*. The scrims are attached to the scaffolding as a protective screen for the workers while the overhaul is going on.

CD: Compared with regular advertisements, what strikes me is that you make use of black-and-white again and again—very anachronistic. *Echo*, though, was gray. In this respect I find *The City* similar. When I saw *Echo*, the Berlin photographer Michael Schmidt, the inventor of gray as Berlin's color, who has just died, came to mind, and also John Gossage, who in 1980 said: "When I was in Berlin I looked for pictures of Berlin. And the only pictures I found that really show the city are Michael Schmidt's gray pictures." Why gray?

BP: My photo installations consist of black-and-white photos that look gray when seen from way off because then they appear between clear resolution and blurriness. The added line effect enhances this shift. Black-and-white has numerous associations. It marks the start of photography. It comes with the advent of many media—newspapers, surveillance cameras, television—everything was black-and-white then, and streaky. What's also remarkable is that the past is always depicted in black-and-white, while color is used for the future. Godard made a fantastic film on the subject where he reversed the principle—totally confusing. Our image of history is steeped in black-and-white.

CD: To return to the size/scale issue … You said that the viewer's perspective is important to you. You even mentioned the size ratio between your installations and the originals: one-to-ten, one-to-twenty-five; with your sculptures it's often one-to-one.

BP: In my sculptures using metal crowd barriers and street bollards, I work with the things themselves, with existing objects, which I alter and deform—I don't make replicas of them. The viewer's point of view poses a particular challenge when the works are outdoors. The installations can be viewed from ten centimeters or one hundred meters—that makes a big difference, and I have to take it into account at the design stage. The viewer's distance varies less in indoor exhibitions.

CD: In our preliminary talk a few months ago you said: "I'm a photographer first and foremost—I make 3-D photos."

BP: Of all the artistic media I work with today, photography is the one I've worked with longest. My architectural interventions stem from a photographic approach and, in a sense, this is also true of my sculptures. The new mural reliefs— *Framework*—are physical realizations of my digital photographs. They are materializations of the digital in an archaic material: glazed ceramic. Digital photography makes the materialization of a photo a more conscious process and it has great new potential, with which I experiment.

CD: Your sculptures remind me of Jeff Wall's *Lost Luggage Depot* (2001) for Kop van Zuid in Rotterdam, a monument to the emigrants who boarded ships of the Holland America Line at the south harbor there. It is a cast-iron monument consisting of luggage and other objects deposited on shelves—it's like an iron photograph. Your sculptures also affect me that way, as if they were photos in cast iron.

BP: I do see my work as expanding photography in the direction of sculpture and architecture.

(...)