

Postscript 54: Dark Matter

KIMBERLY PHILLIPS
on ABIGAIL DEVILLE

“I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades’ curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past...” (Marco Polo to Kublai Khan, in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*)¹

At the centre of Abigail DeVille's Vancouver installation is set of measurements. Twelve feet long and twenty-four feet wide: the purported dimensions of the Globe Saloon, Gastown's first settler establishment, erected in 1867 amidst towering cedars at the crossing of present-day Cordova and Water Streets, around the corner from Artspeak. The proprietor of this bar was John "Gassy Jack" Deighton, after whose lwoquacity the area became affectionately known. Idle sawmill workers were charged to build the rough structure in a day—as the story goes—in exchange for all the whiskey they could drink in one sitting. When the township was declared four years later, the saloon was demolished without a trace and replaced, initiating the relentless spectacle of destruction and redevelopment that continues today.

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To describe DeVille's practice as site-specific does not really capture the intimacy with which she works in time and place. Her materials are the city's very matter itself, the detritus it has abandoned—exhausted, broken, consumed—to the alleyways and dumpsters immediately surrounding the galleries in which she exhibits. The artist gathers these components as though assembling a sentence, and with them crafts a dark, terse spatial poetry. Her retrieval process is discriminating, economical, and the resulting construction—assembled into a monumental,

immersive environment—is submitted to a syntax entirely her own.

Though DeVille had realized a number of these installations in other cities, the composition of Gastown's debris differed markedly from her expectations. In the streets surrounding the gallery, she encountered few personal effects. Any abandoned clothing, furniture or food, she surmised, was immediately folded back into the day-to-day subsistence of the impoverished community who inhabited these spaces. The waste which appeared in abundance however, and which DeVille salvaged, revealed the other side of the neighbourhood's socioeconomics—mangled roof flashing and shingles, tar paper, aluminum ducting and crumbling gypsum panels—the material facts of gentrification.

Entering the space of the installation was akin to stepping into some blackened, post-cyclonic ruin. Materials of all sorts had been hammered together, armour-like, to form a strange, formidable architecture. Ducking between these stalagmite forms and stepping uneasily on a debris-strewn floor, my body became defensive and hunched. I was repelled by the strong odour of aged tar, dust and something else: something that might be described as the exhalation of decades-old buildings being wrenched of their contents. A smell of displacement and loss. Thinned paint—left over from previous exhibitions at Artspeak—had been thrown against the walls and allowed to run in rivulets of muddy lavender, slate

and beige. Curiously, a splintered board, its original usage unclear, was hung apart from the rest of the assemblage at the entrance to the gallery. With dimensions and placement suggestive of a didactic panel, it seemed a mournful summary of the installation itself.

Overhead, reams of perforated black plastic sheeting was draped, darkening the entire space and obscuring the ceiling from view, but throwing delicate, winking points of light across all surfaces like snow. Its clear relation to camouflage netting begged a question: was this space in fact a threatening one? Or was it meant to shelter us from a far more menacing force beyond? Well aware that I was privileged enough to entertain these ideas on a Saturday afternoon at an art gallery, my thoughts returned to the streets from which this debris was pulled. I wouldn't presume to know the complex reality of the many bodies surviving the harshness of that environment, but I can only imagine that for a good many folks, it's a far less threatening existence than the places from which they came. In this tense oscillation, between suggestions of shelter and threat, DeVille's installation became filled to capacity with a thousand stories, with an unseen architecture that somehow structured what we saw.

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It is hypothesized that dark matter accounts for a great amount of the total mass in our universe. This dark matter cannot be directly seen; it neither emits

nor absorbs light. Instead, its existence is inferred from the gravitational effects it appears to have on visible matter and on the structure of the universe as a whole. One could imagine, therefore, that dark matter is in fact responsible for configuring the relationships of *all* things to one another. Perhaps it is this force which Marco Polo attempts to describe to Kublai Khan in Calvino's beloved book: the dark matter of the city, a great undetectable presence that dictates its logic, binding space to space, person to practice, and present to past.

DeVile has referred to other cosmic bodies—specifically black holes—as metaphors for the historical erasures her vortex-like installations call up (at every site, she has stated, there is a history purposefully forgotten). But black holes—the utter absence of light—consume information to be lost forever. Histories can be brutally overwritten, it's true. They can be violently maligned and their narrators displaced and silenced. But their dark matter lives with us still, and this un-visible presence continues to define the relationships between the measures of our space, our bodies and the events of our pasts long after any material traces have been rubbed out. Perhaps this installation, then, is the closest thing we might come to confronting that dark matter in our midst.

1 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (USA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974), 10.

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