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Giuseppe Pavanello, ed.

The Arts of Piranesi: Architect, Etcher, Antiquarian, Vedutista, Designer

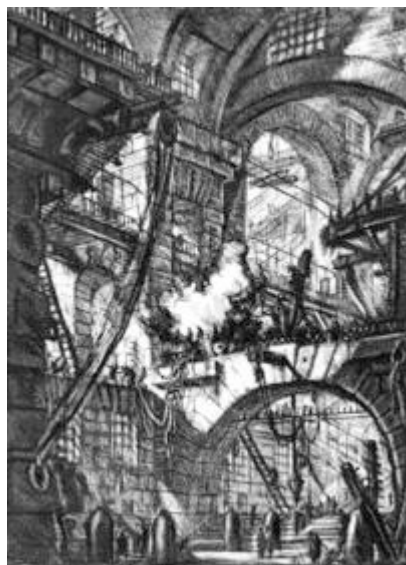
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Exhibition schedule: [Fondazione Giorgio Cini](#), Venice, August 28, 2010–January 9, 2011; [Caixa Forum](#), Madrid, April 24–September 9, 2012, and Barcelona, October 9, 2012–January 20, 2013; [San Diego Museum of Art](#), San Diego, March 30–July 7, 2013



[Sheldon Brown](#)

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Giambattista Piranesi. *Prison (Carceri d'invenzione)* (ca. 1761). Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice.

The advent of digitization has created methods of cultural production that bring new considerations to the relationships between ideas, artifacts, and audiences. Looking at the San Diego Museum of Art's exhibition *Piranesi, Rome, and the Arts of Design*, conceived by Michele De Lucchi, one can observe the effects of digitization, as the eighteenth-century designer and fabulist's work is expressed through twenty-first-century opportunities. The show goes far beyond previously typical methods of curation, creating entirely new incarnations of Piranesi's work. The result is an exhibition of eighteenth-century work with the resonance of a twenty-first-century cultural spectacle. Its ambitions tread into the territory of sensations produced by a summer blockbuster movie or theme park whose spectacularity comes from the creation of the uncanny through effects (more than through affect) that manifest realms of the imagined into realms of being that have a notional veracity. One of the curatorial risks of this exhibition is that Piranesi's material becomes a script for a special-effects version of his work. However, the exhibition is undertaking something much more interesting than offering a spectacle to be consumed: it is a provocation to consider the ontology of our emerging cultural moment; the persistence of the rich, slippery, and complex interplay between the imagination and its externalizations; and how this portends the

status and meaning of the art object.

Questions about the material and the ideal are sempiternal in philosophy and the arts, from Plato to Jean Baudrillard. The curators of this exhibition have found ingenious ways to pull on this thread in order to connect contemporary aspects of this conundrum to Piranesi's interplay between the mind and the hand. Differing from the material attitude of today's blockbuster movie producers, who carefully scrub revelatory gestures of the underlying artifice of the phenomenon from the viewer's eyesight, Piranesi indulges in his material methods and brings us along for the ride. The circuit between optical subject, its imagining, and its rendering through drawing and etching are carried out with qualities of line that mesmerize the viewer. Our gaze is drawn further into the work as we move from the consideration of its larger subject matter (e.g., the romantic state of classical ruins, sans contemporary contextualization), to the details of the scene (the ivy climbing the walls, the brickwork of the aqueduct), and then into the wavering lines of its fabrication. Piranesi shows us that the fantastic loses nothing by celebrating its own artifice, but it gains from viewers' participatory compliance in completing the myth.

The fantasist's task is to create a realm that has plausibility. In some cases this involves constructing narrative density—complex scenarios of detailed fake facts that can seem like actual history with interrelationships between competing agencies, i.e., *Lord of the Rings*, *World of Warcraft*, the Old Testament. Imbuing these fantasy realms with an intricacy that resembles our world casts them in a light of some alternative relevancy to the humdrum of the actual. Piranesi shows another approach: his visual strategies collapse the realms of the fantastic and the real, creating a vibrant tension between them, with the viewer's gaze becoming an active component of the narrative logic of the work. The lines drawn between the real and the virtual may seem clear from afar, but up close their undulating chiaroscuro is visible. As a fantasist Piranesi belongs with a later group of artists and writers that includes Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and René Magritte. His etchings of Roman ruins are stripped of their contemporary context but not of their temporal destiny. Pulling them out of history sets them as stages for projective fantasies of our collective, historical consciousness. Along with his material strategies of viewer engagement, it is a narrative strategy of viewer participation. The tools of representational rigor of his time present an alternative reality for his moment—a slight shift from the actual to a variant fantasy. This sensibility is familiar today as the way in which representations are routinely executed—whether it is the compositing of multiple layers of green-screened actors, guide wire removals, computer graphic characters and synthetic environments to make a seamless alternative reality scene in contemporary cinema, or the routine photographic recompositions that are now the accepted default of any image. We accept that our representations are probably blends of the fantastic and the real—unless we are told otherwise. (And the truthfulness of representations continues to be doubted: Did we land on the moon? Did Obama shoot that shotgun? What really hit the Pentagon on 9/11?)

Piranesi finds further metanarrative strategies when the work moves out of the in-world depictions of perspectival space and into the above-world representations of maps and plans. The map is a drawing of a map that places the viewer in the subject space of the drawing. These drawings of drawings prefigure the nineteenth-century philosopher Josiah Royce's parable of ontological conundrums:

Let us undertake to define a map that shall be in this sense perfect but that shall be drawn subject to one special condition . . . to draw it within and upon a part of the surface of the very region that is to be mapped. . . . To fix our ideas let us suppose . . . a portion of the surface of England is very perfectly levelled [sic] and smoothed and is then devoted to the production of our precise map of England. . . . But now suppose that this, our resemblance is to be made absolutely exact in the sense previously defined. A map of England contained within England is to represent down to the minutest detail every contour and marking natural or artificial that occurs upon the surface of England. At once our imaginary case involves a new problem. This is now no longer the general problem of map making but the nature of the internal meaning of our new purpose. . . . For the map in order to be complete according to the rule given will have to contain as a part of itself a representation of its own contour and contents. In order that this representation should be constructed the representation itself will have to contain once more as a part of itself a representation of its own contour and contents and this representation in order to be exact will have once more to contain an image of itself and so on without limit. (Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1901, 504–5)

Using examples of these “metanarrative” works as bookends to the exhibition, the curators are destabilizing normative relationships to viewership in an effort to fully ready viewers for a deeper immersion into the exhibition's central experience: Piranesi's *Carceri* (Prisons), and a computer-animated, virtual-world video created from them.

The ambitious project of these etchings (which we would now characterize as Kafkaesque) leaves the viewer to question their integral completeness. Perspectival rigor and connections between panels give evidence of an overall logic applied to a highly complex, but possibly coherent, web of a world. It is another of the lures that bring viewers into the work, giving the gaze more operational requirements than one might typically have with a picture that lacks this sort of teasing logic. The exhibition's curators have taken an extraordinary turn with this series, by manifesting its suggestive geometries as a cohesive whole, presented to the

twenty-first-century audience as a cinematic realm. The spatial logic of the etchings is followed as a looping labyrinth—every suggested path isn't necessarily taken, or resolved, but the spatial logic is shown to have robustness as a scheme, engaging the viewer's way-finding cognition through a subjective, first-person, immersion. It can initially be seen as a spatial scheme of cinematic extent—facades of sets, enough of which are constructed to articulate the narrative realm. Here, the set is the subject itself, not an environment in which actors carry out a narrative drama, and its artifice is its most salient characteristic. The forms themselves are resolutely planar. It is an origami space made by folding the etchings into a paper warren. The geometry of surfaces is extracted from the perspectival clues of the etchings, but this representation does not enact the etchings as a kind of plan; rather, the geometry is an incantation that releases the latent life embedded within the images. The etchings themselves become the material of their own plan. It is a process that seemingly could have occurred only via a digital transformation, but rather than this distancing us from the objects' original materiality, it creates a new relationship to it that is almost forensic. We gain a better relationship to not just the suggested spaces, structures, and contents of the prison, but also to the act of their creation, to the gestures of mediation that Piranesi undertook in their making.

A cinematic comparison is a bit inadequate, though; the visual language is really more of the postcinematic game space. The experience is a complex navigation through spatial levels, evoking the trope that is as emblematic of game structure as the three acts are to narrative drama. In games, navigation is the means of operationalizing the gaze of the viewer with the temporal responsibility of taking the art form from A to B.

Maze tropes have been a part of video games from its earliest *Pac-Man* days (1980) and the first-person traversals through the pixelated tunnel walls of *Doom* (1993). The magnified lines on Piranesi's walls in this game-like simulation recall the materiality of those early texture map distortions (the common technique in video games and virtual worlds where an image is placed on the surface of a 3D model), distinguished from the current push for game environments to become indistinguishable from the visual aesthetics of movies made with similar components that are combined in slightly different ratios. In this way, the simulation of Piranesi's *Carceri* reads as a more familiar game space than many new games currently read. Interactivity is not required for a Piranesi prison etching to be thought of as a game space; its use of a game operator's way of seeing continues the visuality that has always been present in Piranesi's work, now cast in the current-day media condition. A Piranesi of today would be a game-level designer creating geometries as uncanny as those of *Portal* (2007), whose figures of gothic lives serve as non-player characters. The creation of the animated *Carceri* could be thought of as the collaborative completion of Piranesi's project, though Piranesi could not have foreseen the possibilities of digital image projection.

The joy and tension of this modern gesture is its restaging of the ongoing questions about the veracity of representations, sharing the centuries-old anxiety about the nature of reality, descriptions of reality, and the complicated relationship between the two. With the invention of every new form of mediation, we seek to understand the relationship between the sign and the signified—or to have an actual reality that assures us of our own existence: if the fictional and the real collapse into each other, how can we be sure that we are not fictional? These stakes are resonant with the fantasy constructions of movies, which have also used the developments of contemporary media as complicators of our reality schema, in films such as *eXistenZ* (1999), *Videodrome* (1983), *The Matrix* (1999), and *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) (among others).

The transformation of the *Carceri* etchings into the animated virtual world first requires them to become digitized. Until recently, digitization often implied an inevitable loss of some aspects of the original. But today's multi-megabyte sensors, gigabyte images, and terabyte files provide a fidelity to the original that far exceeds our senses' discernment, leaving just a trace of lament from a few vinyl record audiophiles and chemical photography aficionados. The vast majority of media production from the most demanding studios of audio and motion pictures is digital, and once in the domain of data, the demiurgic nature of its inherent mutability presents tremendous creative opportunities. As data, digital productions can be reused in endless ways by simply feeding them into a new algorithm. As we see with the *Carceri*, the data can be mined for patterns to construct a spatial geometry, and the surfaces of that geometry can be decorated with the perspectively transformed texture maps of itself, an iterative scheme of fractal representation as Royce described in the quotation above.

The exhibition demonstrates other ways that Piranesi's work can be rearticulated as data phenomena. Objects that Piranesi described through detailed plans and drawings have been brought into existence for the first time through various computer-controlled fabrication processes. The baroque designs of chimneys, tripods, altars, and amphora already seem to be the stuff of computer game fantasies, but rather than simply creating another graphical representation of these imagined artifacts, the organizers of the show have taken this a step further and used the latest methods of data translation to execute their code into material form.

Computer-controlled fabrication processes such as rapid prototyping (additive manufacturing where elements are built with three-dimensional pixels) and CNC fabrication (a subtractive process where computer-described models are carved out of chunks of raw material) can be thought of as both a new means of material creation as well as a new method of representation. They provide to

object space a flexibility that image space has been developing for the last thirty years as its methods have become increasingly digitized. The expansion of Piranesi's imagined world into our own takes us closer to the Baudrillardian simulacrum, collapsing the real and imagined. But how "new" is this situation? With this exhibition bridging centuries, it is clear that these contemporary digital methods are just another turn in the interplay between the real and the imagined—the territory that is negotiated in our religions, our dreams, our memories, our histories, and our expectations for the future. Unlike the transformation of etchings into a virtual space, which emphasizes the hand of Piranesi through the exaggerated blow up of his lines, these objects come out of the computer-mediated processes in a near ideal form—without artifacts of tool, material, or author. They lack the history of the ruin, and are evidence of the timelessness of the data state that the work has now become.

This contemporary restaging of the work is a channeling of Piranesi's ambitions, and one can imagine his astonishment at the results, and wonder to what ends he might put these new methods of spatial and temporal conjuring. While an architectural plan is an abstraction of a building yet to be created, and the map operates in the other direction, abstracting the world that exists, the objectification of a fantasy to a new realm of experience creates an uncanny charge to the subject. These fantasy objects are amazing, but no more so than the Asian artifacts down the museum hall or other select Baroque artworks. But the transcendence from original media after three hundred years creates an aura of delight and a celebration of the present collapsed into the past. The new creations mimic Piranesi's own attitudes of historical fantasy—the computer-fabricated objects have a new historical context that is a merging of past, present, and future. They are imbued with a perpetual possibility of reimagination now that they have entered the circuit as data, for they no longer belong to any fixed material condition.

The connection between Piranesi's work across different media and those of our own time reiterates the satisfaction of "word-building"—the development of scenarios for narrative forms—in which the systems, rules, methods, outcomes, and sites of engagement are holistically bound together. They have lessened their dependency on the external real, taken from it all they require to launch their own worldlet, whose frisson comes from the interface between that world and our own, and our own movements between the two. This is an aspect of the ongoing project of art at large, whether it is found in cathedrals, perspective paintings, novels, photography, the movies, video games, virtual worlds, or rapid-prototyped objects: all are means of manifesting the imagined into the actual, slowly reformatting the real as a product of the imagination.

Beyond the presentation of Piranesi's work, this exhibition is also an invitation to consider our emerging cultural condition and the persistence of complex relationships between the ideal and its materialization. As Piranesi romanticized ruins of Rome, a new romantic view of his moment is created via the perpetual currency of data. With his work accessible as data it will be possible to remake it into new contexts and with the materials available at any present moment. Today it is an HD video of a virtual world, a stereo-lithographed altar, and a laser-cut architectural model. Tomorrow it will be assembled by self-organizing nanorobotic grains of synthetic marble. Its operation as fantasy is perpetual. That is where the true work is, and it can be replayed as a score through whatever new instruments happen to be at hand.

[Sheldon Brown](#)

Professor, Department of Visual Arts, University of California, San Diego

sgbrown@ucsd.edu

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50 Broadway, 21st Floor, New York, NY 10004 | T: 212-691-1051 | F: 212-627-2381 caareviews@collegeart.org