

# Piranesi Interrupted — Domesticity Reasserted

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## INTRODUCTION

*Piranesi Interrupted* is a speculative mapping, or rather re-mapping, executed in a series of drawn plates which foreground *interstitial domesticity* of the city over monumental construction. Piranesi's map of the *Campus Martius*, an influential emblem of monumental, anti-domestic tendencies in theorizing the city, is the site of my work.

The *Campus Martius* map may be topologically specific, yet Piranesi's speculative vision of Rome, stripped of the profane, transcends specific archeological conditions to promote a particular vision of the city. Piranesi's map, along with the accompanying 42 plates of the *Campus Martius* series, displays a jarring incongruity, a portrait of *city* envisioned with virtually no domesticity, no streets or residential buildings, where the profane life of the everyday takes place. This incongruity is the space which I explore through reinhabiting and altering the map's signification, in order to promote an alternative space, a parallel practice of inhabiting the city. This "space" I have called the *interstitial domesticity*, as marginal to, yet intertwined with the structure of the social space of monuments. It is a place of intersection, of ambiguity, of physical heterogeneity and social exchange. It is present in the sense deCerteau speaks of the everyday:

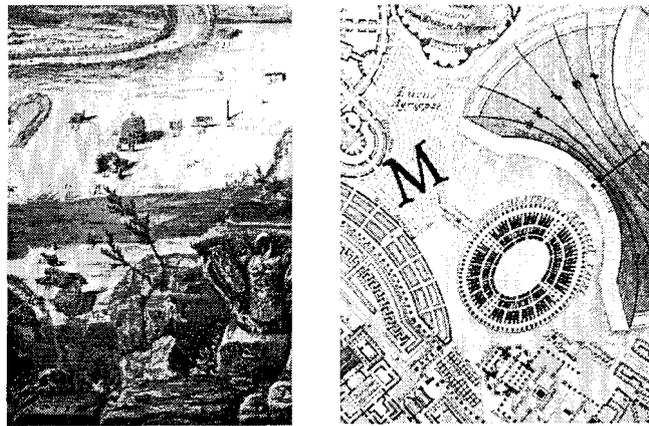
The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them.'

The notoriety and strength of Piranesi's work allow its content to be disrupted through overlay, insertion and montage of those urban components evacuated from his *Campus Martius* plan.

## TWO PREMISES

1. The loss of the domestic is equivalent to the loss of the urban: the residential interstices of a city have the potential to reflect cultural and regional distinctions in a powerful manner, as they reflect patterns of life, growth, and decay. This aggregate of lived life in a place, and the configuration of built form generated by it, is the essential *ground* of a city; it offers an arena of resistance to the homogenization of culture. Yet it is imprecise, by nature unplanned, and hence invisible to the *masterplan*. In an urban environment the quotidian, the place of "everyday" activities, implies an overlapping, a running through and under the representational space of the city, as if in disregard of an architecture of control, of unitary and binding associations.

2. The mode of signification of a map can structure our understanding of the city as cultural construct, reciprocally influencing



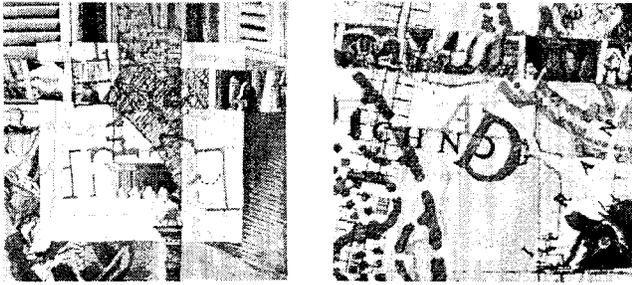
Figs. 1 and 2. Details of the *Scenographia* (left) and *Ichnographia*, from *Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma*, G. B. Piranesi.

ensuing projects. Preferring the monumental over the domestic, typical of many maps and extreme in Piranesi's *Campus Martius*<sup>2</sup> creates an implicit set of terms through which "city" is defined and validated. The domestic habitation of the city is thereby undervalued: first erased from the map, then from consciousness, then from the physical world. Development of monumental "housing" typologies in the 20th c. is a case in point: unpalatable, uncontrollable before this emergence of type, the domestic is effectively eliminated the moment it is quantified as zoned residential function. The atomized resultant maintains the status of, and the terms set by, the expert culture of the planner.

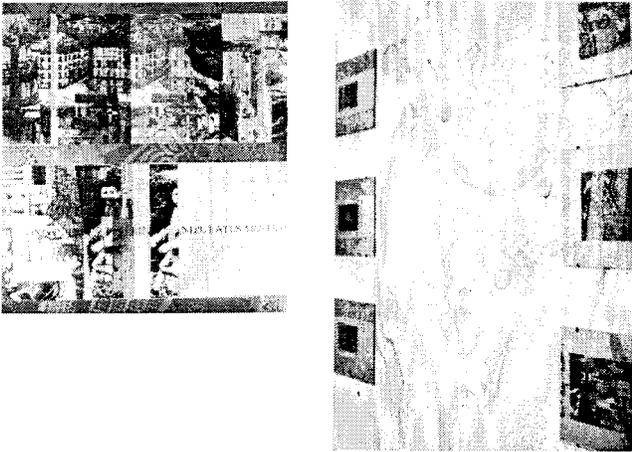
## PALIMPSEST AS METHOD

...in their own discourses, imaginary cities and ideal places like utopias are automatically proposed as possible maps on which there is a play of space to produce a text.'

In developing *Piranesi Interrupted*, Piranesi's etching technique provided a starting point for methods of overlay, control of line, and ambiguity of reading. "Overlay" is expanded to include overwriting as a means to develop interdependency between the works; not to erase the Piranesi but to alter it through addition, including textual overlays, and scalar shifts or confrontations. It is important to relate the new work to Piranesi's chosen medium, the etched print, and to expand on the possible print techniques, using acetate, photocopying, various weight papers, and computer imaging. Excursions are taken into the Piranesi map, investigating the interstitial spaces left



Figs. 3 and 4. Two etchings from the series *Piranesi Interrupted*



Figs. 5 and 6. Etching and view of the show from the series *Piranesi Interrupted*.

between the crowding of monuments he superimposes over the paradigmatic Roman landscape. The new etchings overlay Piranesi's plan-based *Campus Martius* map, confronting his panoptic vision with a mapping of trajectories of an everyday existence over, under and through the monumental, displacing its singular importance. The mapping of "trajectories of everyday existence" is based in part on site sketches, ranging from conventional plan, section, elevation and detail drawings of architectural "fabric," to the more ephemeral, such as placement and use of daily markets and movement of people in daily routine.

Etching leaves traces of the process on the plate, including erasure and build-up of line. Paintings assemblages, such as Rauschenburg's *Cuban Diary*, and etchings such as Sue Fuller's *The Sailors Dream*, demonstrate that process can work as palimpsest, and that overlay could become a metaphor for the complexity of life of the urban street. The eidetic nature of the process of gradually developing a plate, of reaction and counter, is a parallel method of palimpsest, a kind of analogical enacting of the movements of daily life.

Three areas of study in the city were chosen for their continued vibrancy of domestic life, in correspondence with Piranesi's drawings of these sites. The sites include antique ruins which had been built into over time. The *Campus Martius* map was not taken as a whole; excursions were made into it as a series of three walks or critiques, attempting a kind of spatial intertextuality. The technique of overwriting or insertion, keeping Piranesi's work present, intends to test the productive potential of such a re-mapping to "...participate in the invention of meaning."<sup>4</sup>

Both Piranesi's written and cartographic texts for the *Campus Martius* are constructed of citations, confrontations, incongruities. Tafuri writes of the *Campus Martius* map in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*: "We end up with a kind of typological negation, an architectural banquet of nausea, a semantic void created by an excess of visual noise."<sup>5</sup> There can be no definitive historical analysis, nor is this the intent. Piranesi's overlapping texts elude Tafuri's analysis as the beginning of the end of language (positing Piranesi "the wicked architect," placing his work at the epistemological threshold of modernity in the 18th c.). The "live" aspect of the work is shelved in Tafuri's theoretical superstructure. In the interplay of texts new meanings emerge which could not have been understood without the ground of the first, disputed text.

## END NOTE

In "Modernity: An Incomplete Project." Jurgen Habermas calls for "a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis..." and "reappropriation of the expert's culture from the standpoint of the lifeworld."<sup>6</sup> The reassertion of the domestic and the process of textual insertion to alter meaning in *Piranesi Interrupted*, address Habermas' concern with engagement or infiltration of the everyday with expert culture, that of the planned city. In *Piranesi Interrupted* a specific product or resolution of terms, however, is not intended. The re-mapping of Piranesi's *Campus Martius* is intended both as a piece of propaganda and critique. The resultant etchings resist singular interpretation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Univ. of California Press, 1984).

Historically the *Campus Martius* is thought not to have contained residential quarters, being outside the walls of the city. yet I would maintain that Piranesi's document is propaganda, a model for the future city.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, in "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality." speaks of the interpretation of models "as sustained metaphors aimed at the redescription of reality... Imagination at work — in a work — produces itself as a world." , p. 117 ff. Mario Valdes, ed., *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (University of Toronto Press, 1991).

Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Originally published as "Modernity vs. Post-modernity." *New German Critique* 22, (Winter 1981); reprinted as "Modernity-An Incomplete Project." *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Hal Foster, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).

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The work was executed at the American Academy in Rome while in residence as a Fellow. and exhibited there in 1996. I am grateful to the American Academy and to Syracuse University for giving me the opportunity to do this research. The work was also exhibited at the Galleria di Arteed Architettura Moderna Gallery in Rome in 1996, the Casa di Dante in Florence in 1997. and at Syracuse University in 1998.