

Heritage and Hauntology: The Installation Art of Michael Goldberg

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During the Festival of Britain in 1954, it was decided to open a kind of museum of everyday life in the form of a purpose built house fitted and stocked with furniture, appliances and decoration ‘typical’ of that year. I have not seen the place, but I imagine it must seem peculiarly divorced from the historical moment that gave rise to it. None of us live in this kind of pure present. Rather, things both new and old surround us, and we constantly draw on them to help secure a particular construction of our personal history. A house devoid of such mnemonic richness must have all the evocative warmth of a display home!

Of course, the kind of cryogenic history to which this house is dedicated is not, in any meaningful sense, history at all. Instead, it is an expression of the desire for a kind of forgetting; for a tabula rasa on which the new history of post-war Britain would be written. Michael Goldberg, I suspect, would enjoy this house, as he has a highly developed radar for the various ways in which official historical sites invariably orchestrate the effacement of that which they claim to capture. He has documented

with clinical precision the diverse exorcisms performed in, for example, those odd edifices called ‘historical homes’.

Brecht’s famous quip to the effect that the pyramids stand only as a monument to the thousands of anonymous slaves who died building them can serve as a kind of conceptual point of entry for anyone encountering Goldberg’s work for the first time. Goldberg’s ambition is to invite back the ghosts that sanitised history has banished, while at the same time turning its own solid matter into ectoplasm. To take an example, his installation titled *Real Estate*, 1996, involved a subtle and insidious occupation of one of Sydney’s grandest colonial villas. The John Verge designed Tusculum was built for the wealthy merchant Alexander Spark. Verge’s promiscuous desire to imprint classical order on his new environment ran the gamut from giant columns to tiny mouldings. For Spark and his wealthy compatriots a classical make-over was the only way in which the new land could properly be civilised. Goldberg recognises that this is not just (or even) a disinterested aesthetic exercise but is rather a symptom of the desire to heroicise and legitimate the expansion of the British Empire by associating it with that of ancient Rome. For, as Marx wrote of a different moment in the history of the bourgeoisie, ‘...they anxiously conjure up the spirit of the past



Michael Goldberg, *A Humble Life*, installation, 1995

to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language'.¹

Marx writes as informatively about this process of historical 'coat tailing' in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as anyone has before or since. History as a séance, a conjuration, is as accurate a metaphor for the activities of National Heritage organisations as we are likely to find. Selected 'friendly' ghosts are trapped and condemned to a perpetual purgatory inside upholstered chaise lounges, bell jars, commodes, dados and stucco frames. Others are sent packing, and it is these that Goldberg seeks out and recalls.

In the foyer of Tusculum Goldberg installed documents pertaining to the original land grant and also architectural renderings connecting the Spark house, via the mediation of Palladio, back to its Vitruvian origins in the Roman suburb

after which it was named. In cellar rooms below, the artist set up a series of complex displays that serve to summon up the history of dispossession, privilege, pomposity and avariciousness that marks the history of our settler culture. These displays included light boxes proclaiming Vitruvian maxims (Firmitas, Utilitas, and Venustas), plaster classical columns, orderly piles of left-over material from a campaign of restoration, an ornate gilded mirror and a multimedia display of the subsequent subdivision and ownership of Spark's original land grant. Thus Goldberg's Tusculum intervention underlined the kind of self-aggrandising delusion that allowed our early settlers to present to themselves as heroic what was in reality a rather grubby history of theft and exploitation. Further, his work suggests rather inescapably that the process of transforming this history into 'heritage' cannot do other than reproduce these delusions uncritically. The greater the dedication to the authentic renovation of a bygone site, the less panoramic the historical gaze.

In the year prior to his Tusculum project Goldberg created an installation in the most widely known historic house in Sydney, Alexander Macleay's Elizabeth Bay House. Goldberg's work, *A Humble Life*, was again sited in an unrestored and hence rather abject room of this extravagant late-Georgian mansion. This room contained, among other things, an elderly display case standing in one corner of the room supported by a rough wooden pallet. The cabinet contained half a dozen Royal Doulton figurines of the kind that have proven so enduringly popular in Anglophile settler cultures. They were ordered in such a way as to draw attention to the fact that these china sets do play out real social relations at the level of the imaginary. China sets like Sweet and Twenty, Milkmaid, The Royal Governor's Cook and the rest miniaturise, infantilise and legitimise a world of abused servants, convict 'slave' labour and racism. This point is driven home with the inclusion nearby of a facsimile of Macleay's original convict register. The cabinet with the

figurines had a small adhesive label at the bottom which read, 'Museum Exhibits can Conceal Complex Personal Histories'. On leaving the room the visitor could read an inscription on the back of the door which quoted the golden rules of domestic service as prescribed in 1837 by the wife of Governor Darling: 'Do everything in its proper time. Keep everything to its proper use. Put everything in its proper place'. These are, coincidentally, also the guiding principles of a certain kind of heritage management for which propriety is the handmaiden of restitution, not revision. The obedient servant of official history will leave no corner unplastered in the desire to produce a particular version of 'figurine cabinet' history. However, history is surely not something that sets or congeals on a particular site any more than it is the story of discrete individuals. Instead it is located along and is coincident with, the myriad of ligatures (political, economic and so on) that articulate and disarticulate such sites.

The discrete site is by itself something quite different. It is a vessel for mourning or for nostalgic reverie, that is to say, a memorial.

In any case Goldberg is not an obedient servant. His interventions invariably challenge the possibility of the kinds of localised historical containment that heritage maintenance and restoration presupposes. He cites with approval Foucault's call for a history of space and power 'from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat..¹² It is precisely this mutual exchange and dependency between different levels or intensities of activity that attracts his attention.

Goldberg moved here from South Africa in the late 1980s, and it may be that he was able to recognise parallels in the strategies of selective memorialising shared by these two settler cultures. His arrival corresponded more or less with the

apotheosis of the entrepreneur as a kind of media endorsed role model for a late-capitalist society. Shallow and despicable though this construct is, Goldberg recognises the ways in which this world of currency speculation, property development, power lunches, celebrity balls and BMWs was presented as romantic and even heroic. In a real sense the yuppie entrepreneur of the period before global recession was the heir to Nineteenth Century bureaucrats and settler-merchants such as Macleay and Spark.

Unlike their predecessors, these new predators draped themselves not in the debased trappings of a mythological past but rather in Memphis design and postmodern art. Although Philippe Starck chairs replace Chippendale ones, the effect is the same; a masking from the perpetrators themselves of the consequences of the actions of their class. In 1999 Goldberg installed *The Well Built*

Michael Goldberg, *Real Estate*, installation, 1996



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Australian in a room in the Art Gallery of New South Wales overlooking the site of a large scale speculative development in which a large derelict wharf at Woolloomooloo was being transformed into expensive and very fashionable apartments. The Gallery and the building site were connected by a rather spectacular stretch of parkland that in turn covered over a new freeway. The title appropriates the slogan of the property developer. The Gallery space was somewhat claustrophobic as it was quite densely packed with wooden formwork, steel scaffolding, mesh fencing and assorted bits and pieces associated with building sites the world over. Several paintings from the permanent collection hung on the gallery wall and the sight of valuable art in such close proximity to a *mise en scene* associated with corrosive lime dust and so on was disconcerting. We have all seen renovations taking place in an art gallery and are more or less conditioned to recoil from the conjunction of art and construction.

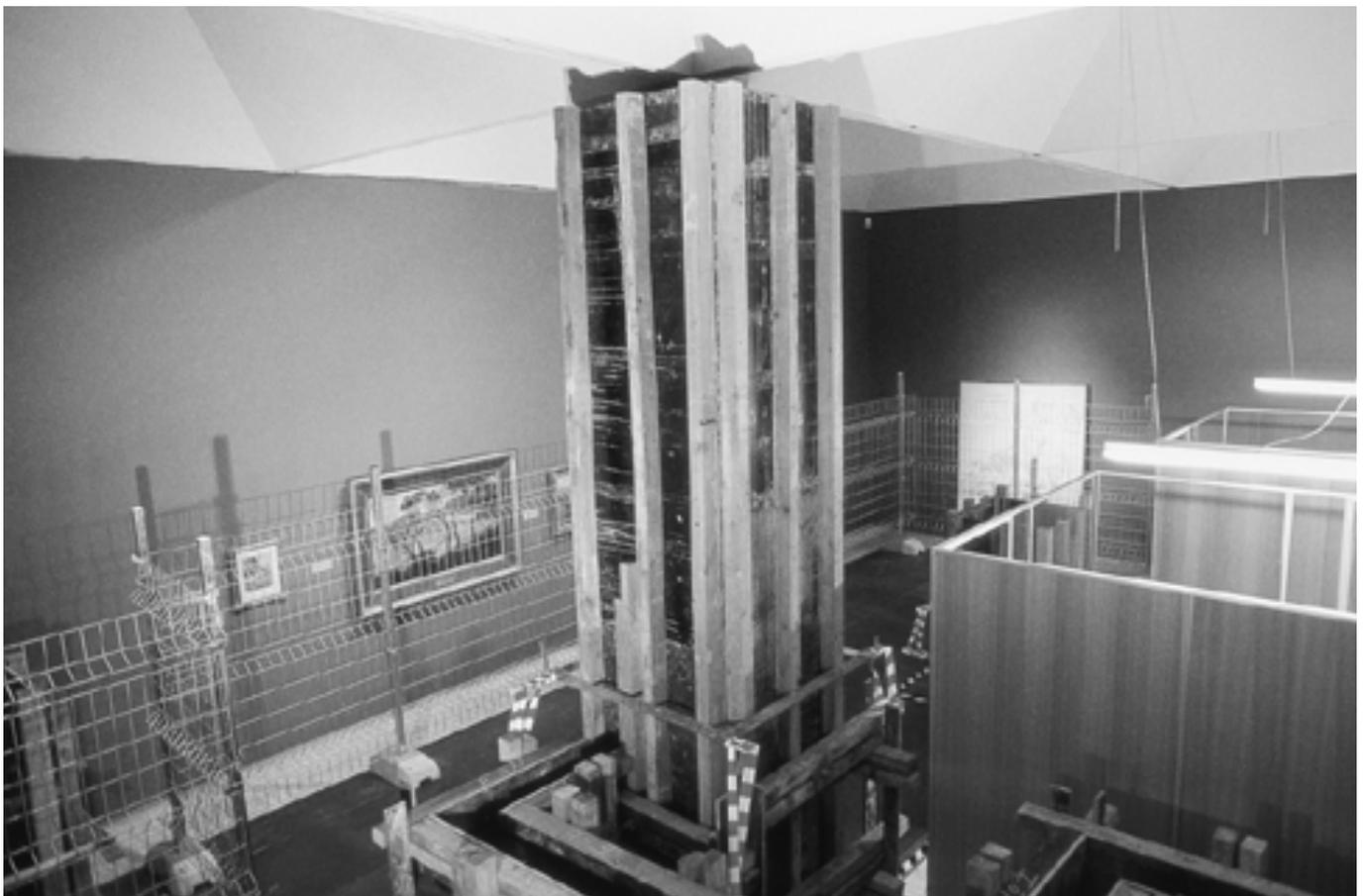
Goldberg's intervention acts as a catalyst for re-appraising this association on a number of planes. In fact urban and inner urban property development has frequently exchanged coy glances with the art world. The process of 'urban renewal' has so often been little more than a euphemism for profiting from the displacement of working class and ethnic communities. This is no less true of, say, Sydney's Redfern in the 1990s than it was of the inner arrondissement of Haussmann's Paris over a century ago. Whether it be the East End of London in the late 1980s, New York's East Village a decade before or Paddington in the 1960s artists and the infrastructure that cocoons them have been unwittingly conscripted into a kind of mercantile avant-garde. The process of making over a suburb has not infrequently followed a precise trajectory that starts with artists searching out cheap studio space and ends with boutiques, apartments and all the trappings of what the industry has come to call rather

grandly, 'life-style'.

The vista which *The Well Built Australian* contrives brings home the often unacknowledged complicity between affirmative or 'cosmetic' culture and the interests of business. The building paraphernalia in the gallery space cultures itself to the construction site in the distance and the sanctified space of the gallery becomes, for a moment, profane. The piece offers a salutary warning to those of us who may on occasion applaud the apparent implosion of high and 'mass' culture. Such implosions are not always as innocent as the avatars of an art of the 'everyday' might wish.³

In *Specters of Marx*, Jaques Derrida's eccentric reprise of communism, the high priest of deconstruction examines some of the points in his writings at which Marx chooses to deploy metaphors to do with conjuring, ghosts and possession.⁴ The passage from *Das Capital* explaining

Michael Goldberg, *The Well Built Australian*, installation, 1999





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commodity fetishism, and the section from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* referred to above, are the best known of these. But there are a surprising number of others given Marx's militant materialism. More interestingly, Derrida suggests that our own relationship with Marxism might be like that of the living with a ghost that just will not go away. He even proposes a new mode of study for the investigation of this reluctance of the dead to finally take leave. He calls it 'hauntology'. This idea, I will venture, is pretty much what Michael Goldberg has been practicing for the last decade.

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NOTES

1 Marx, K., *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, London, 1976, pp.10-11.

2 Foucault, M., 'The Eye of Power' quoted in Vidler, A., *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, London,

1992, p.167.

3 The curator of the 11th Biennale of Sydney, Jonathan Watkins was quoted as saying that the exhibition would have fulfilled its task if the visitors recognised during their travels between venues that the Sydney skyline was as beautiful as anything they might see in an art gallery. Given the rather chaotic history of urban planning in this city this might be seen as a fairly unambitious aim!

4 Derrida, J., *Specters of Marx*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1994.