

NATIONAL MUSEUM *of*

**NOSTALGIA FOR
THE VERY MOMENT
YOU ARE LIVING**

Creditable Unrealities Building façades as art and metaphor

In 2008, the Mexican artist Fabiola Torres-Alzaga was traveling through the state of Durango—an area that includes the west flank of the Sierra Madre Occidental and a geographic diversity of mesas, deserts, canyons, and forests. Durango’s natural geography has been historically favored by the film industry in both the U.S. and Mexico, so several films have been shot here. It was attractive “for its sky and its light, in addition to cheap Mexican labor, which made it a fruitful place for filming,” said Torres-Alzaga, adding, “I knew this, but I did not know what I could find.”

What she did find included a series of abandoned film sets, mainly ruined façades of buildings, that she later learned belonged to a 1989 film titled *Fat Man and Little Boy*, starring Paul Newman. What interested her was how these rather incongruous architectural remnants constituted “a fragmentary geography, and its logic and continuity are dependent on the camera that sees them and the editing that brings them together.” I was fascinated by Torres-Alzaga’s photographs, which offer in my view not just the full picture, if you will, of a process of artifice, but they also document the vestiges of an illusion, a careful and real register of something that was never real in the first place. In an odd way, the depiction of the ruin of something false (or something used to simulate something real) gives it authenticity. But even more interesting to me, and perhaps even more poetic, is the fact that by documenting the understructure of the filming process, Torres-Alzaga was also presenting the abandoned materials of that temporary magic: an archaeology of fiction.

Beyond this instance where photography, illusion, and architecture intersect, Torres-Alzaga’s explorations of the “blind spots” of artifice and illusion are interesting to think about as coda to what constitute political blind spots of sorts: the fascination by people with means and power to construct public buildings that double as narcissistic markers of their legacy. In Mexico, as in many other countries, politicians rush to build various public works before the end of their term (building hospitals, schools, bridges, and, of course, art museums), so that their projects can bear their name and/or they can take the credit for them—something I often refer to as the Ozymandias complex, mainly because

the moment those politicians go away, the institutions they created rarely evolve, and their grandiose façades begin to crumble. Among the many examples in Mexico is the grand cultural project of the Vicente Fox administration of the early 2000s. For a while, the administration wanted to build a major art museum of contemporary art, but the project faced the stiff resistance of the Mexican art world, most of who argued that instead of creating a shell of a building with no collection inside, the culture ministry should direct the resources to Mexico’s underfunded and languishing art museums, which count in the thousands but, in contrast to the country’s archaeology museums, receive a much smaller share of federal support. Then the Fox government moved to create what is known as the “White Elephant”: the Biblioteca Vasconcelos, a massive library designed by architect Alberto Kalach. Hastily opened to the public in 2006, the library had a lot of structural problems including water infiltration and leakage (on the very day of the inauguration ceremony, a friend who was there told me, “It was *raining* inside the building”). After the opening ceremony, the building had to be shut down for 20 months for repairs.¹

A public building for a library, it must be said, is also a double façade: large collections of books are in themselves status symbols, representing erudition and respectability. In Mexico, the emblematic example of communicating the status of the public intellectual through the display of a vast library was established by Alfonso Reyes, probably the most important man of letters in Latin America in the first half of the 20th century. Reyes, who was a diminutive man, assembled one of the largest and richest private libraries in Mexico—with great emphasis on classical antiquity and Spanish language literature. He later donated his library to the nation, and now it is open to the public, and known as Capilla Alfonsina. For better or worse, subsequent generations of Mexican writers had to measure their living quarters in relation to that example; so, more often than not, every Mexican intellectual’s home is entirely filled with books.

But of course, as I already suggested, the use of books as backdrop (nor museum façades posing as institutions) is not exclusive to Mexico. And not only is the sale of books by the foot a common source of income for used bookstores, but it is also common for Zoom backgrounds (as one Zoom background site says,² “who doesn’t want to look smart?”).

Whether a museum building, a fake bookcase, or a Zoom background, façades serve as cosmetic symbols that are, at best, aspirational (hoping to visualize what we want to be) and, at worst, shameless imposture (offering something that we know is not there), and many times are something in between: “fake it ‘til you make it” practices are usually predicated on the idea that one eventually will reach a substantial product (e.g. the politician hopes that the museum will one day function effectively as one). But as far as art works are concerned, the best place for them is somewhere in between: the ability to create an illusion but somehow with the complicity of the viewer.

In the U.S., the artists engaged with Institutional Critique (from Michael Asher onward) zeroed in on the symbolism of museum buildings and the way they enhanced the names and reputations of donors. There, the creation of institutions that trafficked in parafiction (to use Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s term), as well as their accompanying museum buildings or containers, became a genre unto itself, from real museums that excelled in constructing baroque ambiguities like the Museum of Jurassic Technology to Maurizio Cattelan’s The Wrong Gallery (permanently closed, so you could never get through the door). Façade art like that helps us reflect on what would be the art world version of talking about books you haven’t read (or talking about shows you haven’t seen) by liberating us from seeing anything beyond the door. Like in Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, the pilot/narrator is asked by the Little Prince to draw him a lamb and, unable to draw it, he instead draws a box with a peephole that ostensibly contains a lamb inside, and the Little Prince is fascinated.

This year, I was invited to be the inaugural artist to propose a name for **The National Museum’s** façade in Pittsburgh. The question then was what name to give the museum. Ultimately, I reasoned that façades are the most direct indicator of the time when they were built: they are the things that we try to use as visual reference to identify a city we know in a historic photograph; they are time markers.

And when it comes to museums, they traditionally seek to project timelessness, especially those august institutions whose neoclassic façades promise a container of art for the ages. So, I thought that this façade should be the threshold not of art history but of our own awareness of that history and our minuscule place in it, knowing that the

present that we are living so vividly will soon wash away, largely unimportant within the broader scope of human life. In 2001, doing research on people who consumed ecstasy,³ I was struck by the effect that the drug had on some people’s temporal awareness, and how it resonated with my own (drug-free) experiences. Thus, the phrase, “I have nostalgia for the moment I am living,” became the premise for the inaugural title of **The National Museum**.

Culturally, in the 21st century, we are a culture of façades: the fake and glamorous representations we make of ourselves on social media, the way institutional and political images are polished and impeccably presented through advertising and press releases, the beautiful Zoom backgrounds that hide the mess in our apartment. We speak about books we haven’t read; we opine about issues we don’t have the time or energy to meaningfully study to have an informed opinion. And then that façade we create of ourselves becomes us. As Octavio Paz once wrote:

El otro

The Other

Se inventó una cara.

He invented himself a face.

Detrás de ella

Behind it

vivió, murió y resucitó

He lived, died and resurrected.

muchas veces.

Many times.

Su cara

His face

hoy tiene las arrugas de esa cara.

Today has the wrinkles of that face.

Sus arrugas no tienen cara.

His wrinkles have no face.

We might not be able to overcome that overwhelming social pressure to construct those false presentations of the self, those set designs made as if for a hypothetical Hollywood film about our lives—but admitting that we all are complicit in this complex collective construction of realities will make us more authentic and might prove to be a more enduring statement than the myriad Ozymandias monuments today that are likely to languish one day in the desert like those abandoned movie sets in Durango.

Pablo Helguera

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1. “La Biblioteca Vasconcelos, ¿cuál es su historia?,” *Obras por Expansión*, obras.expansion.mx/architectura/2022/04/22/biblioteca-vasconcelos-cual-es-su-historia

2. “Top 20+ Bookshelf Zoom Backgrounds to Make You Look Smart,” *Virtual Background Image Collections*, blog.zoombackground.io/bookshelf-zoom-backgrounds

3. “I Have Nostalgia for the Moment I am Living (2001),” *Pablo Helguera Archive*, pablohelguera.net/2001/06/i-have-nostalgia-for-the-moment-i-am-living-2001

4. Pablo Helguera, “Creditable Unrealities,” *Beautiful Eccentrics*, Sep 28 2023, pablohelguera.substack.com/p/credible-unrealities

One Beautiful Thing

*as it heats, it turns white,
then begins to sparkle*

On the verge of promise and prosperity
you will find busts and bursts
swinging, with Pride.

Enter from the north (or west),
you will lose your breath
for a second.

Hold still.
Between these hills,
you have a right to your Inheritance.

Golden tributaries savor sacred tales,
the bounty of tempered dreams
wait for attention.

Somewhere near Hysteria,
black locust canopies whisper
something about Invisibility.

We hold tight relations,
the beautiful and broken
and beautiful again.

Truth be told: Industrious people come from Industrious people.

You play along.

janera solomon

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Pablo Helguera (b. Mexico City, 1971) is a New York-based artist working with installation, sculpture, photography, drawing, socially engaged art, and performance. Helguera’s work focuses on topics ranging from history, pedagogy, sociolinguistics, ethnography, and memory, to the absurd, in formats that are widely varied including the lecture, museum display strategies, musical performances, and written fiction. Helguera has exhibited or performed at venues such as the Museo de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; ICA Boston; RCA London; 8th Havana Biennial, *PERFORMA 05*, Havana; Shedhalle, Zurich; MoMA P.S.1, New York; Brooklyn Museum; IFA Galerie, Bonn; Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, Tokyo; MALBA museum in Buenos Aires, Ex-Teresa Espacio Alternativo in Mexico City; The Bronx Museum; Artist Space; and Sculpture Center, amongst others. Reviews of his work have appeared in publications like *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *The New York Times*, and *ArtNews*. In 2008, he was awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and was the recipient of a 2005 Creative Capital Grant. He is the author of many books, including *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2011) and *The Parable Conference* (2014). He writes a weekly column titled *Beautiful Eccentrics*. pablohelguera.net

janera solomon is a writer, strategist, and catalyst for cultural change. As a Guyanese native, janera draws inspiration from writers and artists of African and Caribbean diaspora. In her essays and poems, she explores the impact of art and public space, personal identity, motherhood, and the richness found in unremarkable, everyday experiences. janera is a 2022 graduate of Johns Hopkins University, with a MA in Writing (creative nonfiction). Her writing has been regularly featured in the *Pittsburgh City Paper* and she is a former Martha’s Vineyard Creative Writing Institute fellow, in addition to participating in prestigious writer spaces including the Looking Glass Writers Conference and Minnesota Northwoods Writers Conference. She is currently working on a memoir about marriage and finishing her debut collection of essays and poems, *Here Comes the Sun*. janerasolomon.com

The National Museum repeatedly asks which stories, histories, and futures are deemed worth saving and which are ignored or forgotten. Each month, a different artist is invited to change the name of the museum and a national writer is invited to use that museum title to create a written response that could take a variety of forms.

The National Museum is located at 604 Wood Street in Pittsburgh’s downtown corridor. Like many downtown properties after Covid, the building has its windows papered over so that no one can see inside, encouraging the invited artists as well as the public to conjure the entire contents of a museum that might be coming soon or perhaps long gone. Every two months, a local sign painter is hired to paint out the old sign and hand-paint a new one. This free broadsheet is published with each iteration of the museum.

Artist and writer Pablo Helguera contributed the inaugural name for **The National Museum**, which is paired with an article he authored for his weekly column that examines the ways in which façades have operated as art and metaphor. Pittsburgh-based poet and writer, janera solomon, was further invited to reflect on the museum’s name.

The National Museum

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