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Jelić, Andrea; Staničić, Aleksandar; Tvedebrink, Tenna Doktor Olsen; De Matteis, Federico; Hirschbichler, Michael; Popić, Jovana; De Piedade Ferreira, Maria; Pottgiesser, Uta; Otero-Pailos, Jorge; More Authors

DOI

[10.1080/13602365.2022.2133801](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2022.2133801)

Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The Journal of Architecture

Citation (APA)

Jelić, A., Staničić, A., Tvedebrink, T. D. O., De Matteis, F., Hirschbichler, M., Popić, J., De Piedade Ferreira, M., Pottgiesser, U., Otero-Pailos, J., & More Authors (2022). Ethics of dust: visual essay on the artistic works by Jorge Otero-Pailos. *The Journal of Architecture*, 27(4), 616-634.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2022.2133801>

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

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To cite this article: Andrea Jelić & Aleksandar Staničić (2022) Ethics of dust: visual essay on the artistic works by Jorge Otero-Pailos, The Journal of Architecture, 27:4, 616-634, DOI: [10.1080/13602365.2022.2133801](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2022.2133801)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2022.2133801>



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Published online: 19 Dec 2022.



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Visual essay

Ethics of dust: visual essay on the artistic works by Jorge Otero-Pailos

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Introduction by Andrea Jelić and Aleksandar Staničić

The works of artist and preservation architect Jorge Otero-Pailos on *experimental preservation*¹ provoke deep reflections about some of the fundamental questions dealing with heritage: temporality of objects, changeability of inscribed cultural values, the greater purpose of architectural preservation as a cultural practice, and the societal role of an architect and preservationist in formulating narratives around heritage. As the artistic installations featured in this visual essay — *The Ethics of Dust* (2014–2016)² and *Watershed Moment* (2020)³ — demonstrate, Jorge Otero-Pailos combines various elusive elements, such as water sounds and dust, to conceive meditative and contemplative spaces. His installations invite visitors to pause and reflect on the memories, both personal, social, and environmental, that define each of us; they probe deep into the past and deep into the future.

Since these are some of the issues we wanted to explore in this special issue, 'Embodiment and Meaning-making: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Heritage Architecture', we invited various artists and scholars to write a very short caption in reaction to the images provided by the author through one of these three 'lenses':

- affect, embodied experience, atmosphere;
- politics of heritage;
- processes of meaning-making.

The results reveal the power of images to provoke imagination through atmospheric and embodied experiences, and the power of experimental heritage work to convey (political) meaning across distance and different analogue or digital media.

This visual essay includes contributions from (in order of appearance): Tenna Doktor Olsen Tvedebrink, Federico De Matteis, Michael Hirschbichler, Jovana Popić, Maria De Piedade Ferreira, Uta Pottgiesser, Marcus Weisen and Brady Wagoner, with an epilogue from Jorge Otero-Pailos.

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Watershed Moment (2020), by Jorge Otero-Pailos, commissioned by Lyndhurst Mansion, photographed by Otero-Pailos Studio, 2020.

Watershed Moment (2020)

Tenna Doktor Olsen Tvedebrink 

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The first thing I notice is the light. The faint warm light flushing the brick walls on both sides, as well as creating a strong shadow across the spacious floor scenery. The light emphasises the dark scars created by the deteriorated holes in the left side, about to turn the entire site into a ruin.

Perhaps because of the direction of the light, my eyes keep wandering back to the two white columns in the back centre of the room. Here, the light is colder, with touches of bright daylight bringing forth the blue and greenish tones, perhaps of the past? Yet, the background appears blurred and diffused to me no matter how hard I try to capture it. I wonder what I am standing on. I feel like walking down, down into the centre of the space, to touch the different surfaces, feel the materials with my hands, walk across the space, and sense the change of sounds I assume it creates.

I want to move closer to the back of the space. The blurred vision and the secrets of the shadows trigger my curiosity and lure me in. *Who* is hiding there? *Why* are they here? Are they watching me, *still*?

And I return to the columns. White and slim, they speak of a grandiose purpose from perhaps a not-so-far past of splendour and magnificence, which is underlined by the impressive ceiling structure suspended above the imposing space.

The atmosphere elicits thoughts of great Roman baths; but instead, the atmosphere evokes in me strong memories of numerous trips to Venice. In my imagination, I can hear the water from *la Laguna*. A light ocean brisé drips down the raw interior walls while the silent waving sound of water splashes against the smooth stone surfaces. Perhaps I can hear a soft flutter echoing between the walls, mixing with the humming sound of whispering voices and moving bodies. Not to forget, the sound comes with the damp moist scent of old water raising from the raw stone surfaces. What are the different times that this place lived through? What stories are hidden in the dark? If only such spaces could speak and if I knew better how to listen ...



Répétiteur (2018), by Jorge Otero-Pailos, photographed by Sebastian Freyer, courtesy of New York City Center and Sebastian Freyer, 2018.

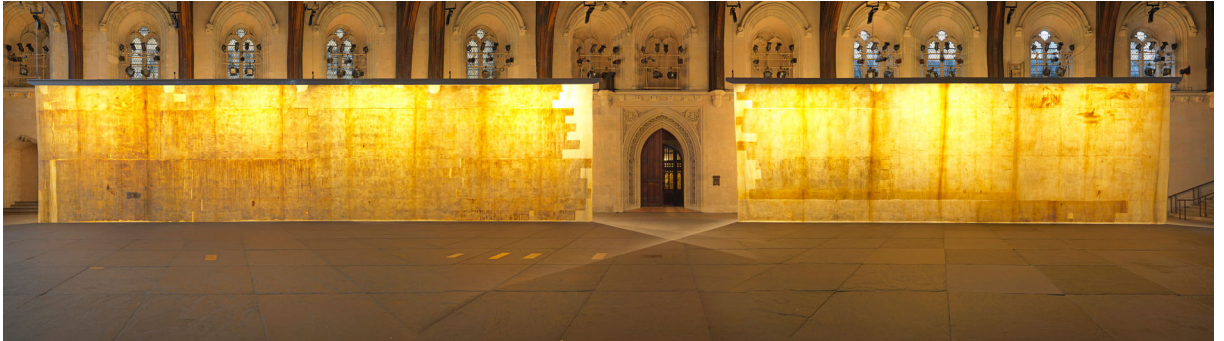
***Répétiteur* (2018)**

Federico De Matteis 

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A wall tile is ripped, displaced, flipped, turned, stretched, mounted, and backlit. A specimen of surface, where the technical device brings into view the otherwise invisible texture, grain, humour, soot, and stains. As a contraption sitting mysteriously on the floor, it querulously demands a scrupulous gaze, peering into the depth of unspoken details and unfathomable hauntings that have left their marks on the walls. Yet, beyond the *me-and-that*, the *here-and-there*, and the *then-and-now*, beyond all the duplicities and distinctions, binomials and dualisms, there is only *one* space, flooded in light. And in this space, *I* fall into the dust, and sense the sharp smell of bodies in motion, the warm feeling of hands and backs resting against the plaster, of hearts beating in unison. And all this, and myself, are one, and I am *here*, and there is only *now*.



The Ethics of Dust: Westminster Hall (2016), by Jorge Otero-Pailos, commissioned by Artangel, photographed by Marcus J. Leith, courtesy of Artangel and Marcus J. Leith, 2016.

The Ethics of Dust at Westminster Hall (2016)

Michael Hirschbichler 

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Centuries of dust suspended in space —
a history of stains and stories
freed from the weight of stones,
transformed into glow.



The Ethics of Dust: Westminster Hall (2016), by Jorge Otero-Pailos, commissioned by Artangel, photographed by Marcus J. Leith, courtesy of Artangel and Marcus J. Leith, 2016.

The Ethics of Dust at Westminster Hall (2016)

Jovana Popić

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Here they stand:

The first day and its past futures present.

Authorities of the war and of the bread, of the skin and of the blood, of the fire and of the red.

Of the ethics and of the dust.

Of space for consent and of space for resistance, between the timeless dirt and its power.



The Ethics of Dust: July 22, 2011 (2014), by Jorge Otero-Pailos, photographed by Kwan Sheung Chi, courtesy of Tai Kwun Contemporary, Sappar Contemporary, and Kwan Sheung Chi, 2014.

The Ethics of Dust: July 22, 2011 **(2014)**

Maria De Piedade Ferreira 

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Contemplating 'The Ethics of Dust' evokes the memory of the story surrounding the *Sudarium*, the stained cloth that preserves the markings of the body and blood of Christ, transforming these large latex cloths into relics which preserve the material reality of bodies and buildings. The process of covering the building's body with latex, stripping its surface and preserving it as an object to be displayed, also evokes associations with beauty by waxing and with dirtiness often attributed to body hair and dead skin cells. By contemplating this surface of markings, the image confronts the viewer with the inevitability of waste and decay, the anxiety surrounding loss, the fear of the ageing process of bodies and buildings, and the human instinct to collect and preserve that which is meaningful.



The Ethics of Dust: Old United States Mint (2015), by Jorge Otero-Pailos, photographed by Charlie Villyard, courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2016.

The Ethics of Dust: Old US Mint (2015)

Uta Pottgiesser 

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The skin-like latex sheets not only challenge our perception by turning real massive brick walls into translucent morphologic curtains but also, as prints of façades at the scale of one-to-one, they embody the atmospheric dust and question current preservation practices and our views on dealing with cultural heritage.

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The Ethics of Dust: Old United States Mint (2015), by Jorge Otero-Pailos, photographed by Charlie Villyard, courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2016.

The Ethics of Dust: Old US Mint (2015)

Marcus Weisen

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A silence of many tales,
a still of time passing,
warmth of a brick,
leper-like excretions of dried-up still-pointing,
warmth of skin,
so alive: the splendour of decay.
My friend, my mortality, my life.
I can hold onto you, you take hold of me.



The Ethics of Dust: Trajan's Column (2015), by Jorge Otero-Pailos, commissioned by V&A Museum, photographed by Peter Kelleher, courtesy of V&A Museum and Peter Kelleher, 2015.

The Ethics of Dust: Trajan's Column **(2015)**

Brady Wagoner 

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Jorge Otero-Pailos's *The Ethics of Dust: Trajan's Column* turns heritage inside-out, both literally and symbolically. It reveals the interior architecture of what might otherwise be perceived as a solid. The architecture we discover is that of an industrial chimney which is emblematic of pollution and, thus, associated with the impure and profane. Rather than producing pollution, this chimney has absorbed it. By putting this on display in the form of a glowing, golden column, it takes on a sacred aura. Thus, the work reverses our symbolic universe: inside to outside, producer to absorbent, impure to pure, and profane to sacred.

Epilogue by Jorge Otero-Pailos

Jorge Otero-Pailos

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I am grateful for the generosity of the observations that each author has offered above, and pleased that for many the dust in these artworks is a source of wonder, even poetic rhapsodising. The form and content of the observations are important because they attune us to the long tradition within which the observation of dust has yielded important artistic and scientific insights about the nature of matter. In ancient times, Lucretius noted that under certain light conditions it was possible to observe dust moving in the air, seemingly defying gravity. His observations about the Brownian motion of dust particles influenced later theories about the motion of atoms. Significantly, Lucretius described his scientific observations in a poem, much like some of the authors published here.

Poetry becomes a necessary method for elucidating knowledge in instances when we find ourselves devoid of an a-priori framework for making sense of what we are observing. That is to say, when we encounter something radically new, poetry can offer, among many things, a first muddling through towards an original understanding; one that is very vulnerable to impatience because it doesn't yet fully make sense, susceptible to being dismissed prematurely because it is not immediately recognizable as knowledge, and at risk of being replaced with what we already know. As an epistemological method, poetry employs rigorous forms to draw the contours of an aesthetic realm within which we can freely explore the new, playing with what it might mean, safely exposing ourselves to it without being forced into hasty conclusions.

Choreographer Merce Cunningham said it best in a 1985 interview on NPR's Fresh Air:

One only has to get one's mind out of the way [...] about deciding that something is good or bad and rather allow for different things to take place [...] so that you are [...] discovering something [...] rather than repeating what [you] know about. Audio of his more succinct pronouncement 'what it is, is what it is' resonates acoustically from within my homage to him in *Répétiteur* (2018). How fitting that Federico de Matteis described the installation as a choreographed fall into the dust, through which he experienced it 'beyond the me-and-that, the here-and-there, the then-and-now'. This being outside oneself is the playful realm of art.

This and the other installations shown here are attempts to create realms that, like poetry, allow for a playful encounter from which a new understanding of dust might emerge. One senses the emergence of such new insights in each of the playful observations above, and I look forward to seeing how they yield new insights about dust within their own practices and disciplines at this urgent moment, when dust is reshaping not only our ancient buildings but also our atmosphere and climate.

Notes and references

1. Jorge Otero-Pailos, 'Experimental Preservation', *Places*, September 2016 <<https://placesjournal.org/article/experimental-preservation/>> [accessed 5 July 2022].
2. See 'The Ethics of Dust' series on Jorge Otero-Pailos' website featuring his works <<http://www.oteropailos.com/the-ethics-of-dust-series>> [accessed 5 July 2022].
3. 'Watershed Moment' exhibition at the Lyndhurst swimming pool building (2020–2021) <<https://lyndhurst.org/collections/watershed-moment/>> [accessed 5 July 2022].