

The Glow of Grime

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We do not dislike everything that shines, but we do prefer a pensive luster to a shallow brilliance, a murky light that, whether in a stone or an artifact, bespeaks the sheen of antiquity. ... Of course this 'sheen of antiquity' of which we hear so much is in fact the glow of grime."

- Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*

The Glow of Grime explores our cultural fascination with traces of history and our assumptions of the richness and character they embody. What is this illusive character comprised of? How much of a trace is required to serve as a register of a place?

Drawing on the current popularity of "ruin porn" within Detroit culture and critique, the project asks us to consider what it means to embark on a tourism in which the primary souvenir is a photograph of someone else's dirt, though disembodied and reframed to read as a haze of beauty. What can a further the decontextualization of these records of illuminate, and how can it inform our interventions in the urban context?

In response to current rehabilitation and blight removal efforts, the Glow of Grime questions whitewashing and power washing as the preferred methods of urban renewal and architectural renovation. While solid architectural volumes tell one side of history,

residual vestiges maintain a chronicle of the everyday. The research posits that, instead of polishing back to an idealized state, we might analyze and extract the subtleties of existing environments to maintain the allure of historical continuity. The investigation does not aim to glorify dirt nor render it consumable, but rather to understand the specific phenomenologies of decay and abandonment in Detroit's building stock and how these material fragments might be extrapolated to elucidate a richer collective history of the life of a city.

The Glow of Grime began as an installation of paper cones inhabiting the puddles of a disused transmission shop in Detroit, among gears and grease and forgotten tools, mirroring the ethereal light filtering in through the skylights above. Coated with 90% isopropyl alcohol, the cones were designed to absorb the sludge that was left behind, creating a chromatographic record of each micro-environment over the course of a week. The cones become a new technology for translation, a means by which to take a record not of image, but of darkness. Backlit on a light table, the filters reveal hidden human and chemical stories, as flecks and stains cast shadow and high water marks are edged by the thin luminous line of the float of oil.

A collaboration with nature rather than a commentary or a dictation of it, the Glow of Grime allowed the sludge to draw its own patterns. Likewise, through future architectural projects, we might devise tactics for working with these subnatures, as David Gissen termed them in the book of the same name, to allow space to record and reveal its own stories.

the glow of grime

experiments in sludge chromatography

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