

WHAT HELPS DODGE HELPS YOU



A PROJECT BY BRIAN C. MOSS

"Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things..."

Walter Benjamin



This project originated in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, beside the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge at the former site of Dodge Steel Castings, Inc. Closed and abandoned in 1986, it became a broken skeleton of a once thriving factory, as well as a notorious illegal dumpsite. Starting with a bare trailer frame, only the materials present at the site were used to construct a functional sculpture in the form of a giant pinhole camera. The camera was then employed to make ten foot square pinhole photographs of the factory and the surrounding grounds. The project culminated in an exhibition at the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia and participation in the annual his-

torical celebration known as Tacony Day. The exhibition included the trailer-camera with one of the ten foot square paper negatives mounted inside it, pinhole images of the factory and the site, medium format black and white photographs of the factory interior, historical research and found artifacts, and an audio-taped interview made during a tour of the ruined foundry with George Luckenbill, who worked there for over thirty years and was president of the local Molders' Union for two terms. The Tacony Day historical celebration featured a parade that included the trailer-camera and a booth at the local Tacony Recreation Center. This display consisted of a

smaller version of the exhibition that emphasized the history of the plant and was set amongst other local historical displays.

The camera was built on the factory grounds using old wooden pallets found inside the building and good sections of timber that had fallen from an otherwise burned and rotting roof. Tractor-trailer doors dumped at the site were cut to form the walls of the camera. Since tires were one of the main components of the trash to be found on-site, they

became an integral part of the camera and formed its rear wall in layers resembling spanish roofing tile. Old signs from inside the factory cover the front of the camera, and split hard hats form half-domes over the red safety windows on either side. The camera's dimensions are approximately 12' tall, 7' wide, and 10' long. Exposures were generally an hour long in full sun using an f-stop of 1,150 (1/16" aperture and a 72" focal length). Before each exposure a piece of safety equipment (ear guards, respirators, goggles, etc.) from the factory was placed inside the camera so the shadow of the object was cast upon the image. All the photographs are made from 40" square paper negatives and contact printed. They are hung in three rows of three to make a full 120" square image.

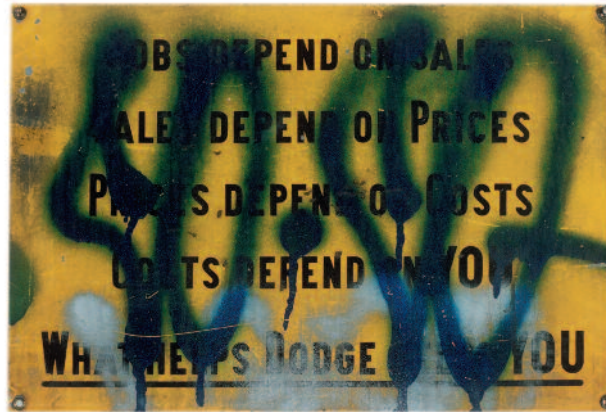
This mode of representation now appears uncannily appropriate. In a sense, the photographic process mirrors the production process that went on within the factory. In the old foundry, scrap metal was melted white-hot and poured from the ladle through a hole into a negative where it cooled until the mold was smashed and the final product emerged. This parallels the process of pinhole photography, but with this camera the scrap becomes the receptacle for light streaming through the pinhole to create a paper negative, from which a positive will later be generated. The choice of a technologically primitive and

archaic form of witnessing is congruent with the outdated mode of industry it represents, and consistent with a wish to see simply and straightforwardly what has been left in the wake of that

industry's demise. The myth of the factory as modern cathedral has been replaced by the cathedral of modern(ist) ruins, sarcastically evoking a picturesque tradition of representation; medieval abbeys and classical ruins, with glorious light stream-

ing down from the heavens into the roofless remains, still majestic, though forgotten by time. But here, the image itself is also monumental, and its clarity is such that you cannot help plainly identifying a life-size can of Valvoline motor oil littering the foreground, or an oversized Burger King wrapper just slightly blurred by the gentle breeze.

The site has a locally significant history associated with it. The original factory, Tacony Iron and Metal Works was the manufacturer of the statue of William Penn by Alexander Milne Calder and all the iron and bronze work in the tower of Philadelphia's late nineteenth century City Hall. The factory was the only one in the country capable of casting the 32' tall figure of the city's founder. After closing in 1910, Tacony Iron and Metal Works burned to the ground in 1914 during filming of a fire and rescue scene for the movie "The Gods of Fate," by Lubin Studios, an early silent movie pioneer. Dodge Steel was built in 1919 and manufactured steel castings for the shipping, rail, utility, and petroleum industries. Another film was shot on the site in 1942 called "Pride of the Marines" about Al Schmid, a World War II hero of Guadalcanal who worked at Dodge Steel before joining the Marines after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In the 1980's, the plant appears to have become another victim of the corporate



merger-mania rampant in that decade. In 1986 when it was forced to close because of huge debts, the factory was owned by a Chicago lawyer who had little to do with the day to day operations. Over one hundred people lost their jobs (down from nearly five hundred employees during

WWII), not to mention the negative ripple effect on local businesses.

In a sense, the fate of William Penn's statue is an appropriate symbol for this project. There was an unspoken agreement between city government and local contractors that eventually became law in the form of a height restriction on all buildings in Philadelphia. The restriction was imposed when Penn's statue was mounted atop City Hall in 1896. Subsequently, no building was allowed to rise above it, and there eventually came to be a horizontal line of mostly international-style office towers across the downtown skyline, interrupted only by the bronze craftsmanship of Tacony Iron and Metal Works. Penn's figure looked rather puny up there, surrounded by so many modern structures eager to rise above him, yet most of the city was proud of its odd stunted skyline, and the industrial past it evoked. However, in 1986, coincidentally the year Dodge was closed, the height restriction was broken by Willard Rouse, a major real estate developer. The slew of downtown construction that followed dwarfed City Hall, which now cannot be seen from many directions: a fitting symbol for the triumph of private property values over the public realm.

At Dodge, the promise of economic and physical security has been exposed as a lie. Industry withdrew, leaving a toxic eyesore and

an economic wasteland. Rouse's Liberty Place Towers helped to create a glut of unused older office space. Downtown was remade, but Philadelphia's net loss from the 1980's in terms of jobs, population, industry, and tax base is staggering. This loss is referred to in the title of the project, a quote borrowed from a sign inside the plant, and now mounted on the front of the camera just above the pinhole. The sign reads, "Jobs depend on sales, Sales depend on prices, Prices depend on costs, Costs depend on you; **What helps Dodge helps YOU.**"

Brian C. Moss, © 1994



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