# Restoration Reader

Compiled by
SALLY THURER

Ecce Mono (Behold the Monkey), Borja, Spain

*This text is an excerpt from a manifesto by William Morris and other founding members of SPAB (The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings) in 1877.*

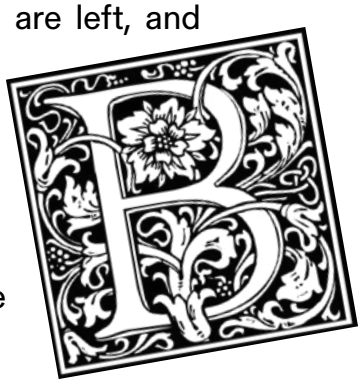
# MANIFESTO

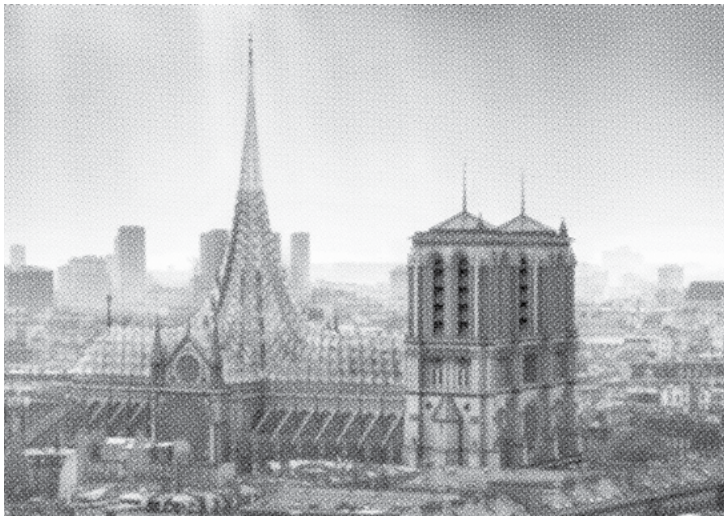
No doubt within the last fifty years a new interest, almost like another sense, has arisen in these ancient monuments of art; and they have become the subject of one of the most interesting of studies, and of an enthusiasm, religious, historical, artistic, which is one of the undoubted gains of our time; yet we think that if the present treatment of them be continued, our descendants will find them useless for study and chilling to enthusiasm. We think that those last fifty years of knowledge and attention have done more for their destruction than all the foregoing centuries of revolution, violence, and contempt.

For Architecture, long decaying, died out, as a popular art at least, just as the knowledge of mediæval art was born. So that the civilised world of the nineteenth century has no style of its own amidst its wide knowledge of the styles of other centuries. From this lack and this gain arose in men's minds the strange idea of the Restoration of ancient buildings; and a strange and most fatal idea, which by its very name implies that it is possible to strip from a building this, that, and the other part of history—of its life that is—and then to stay the hand at some arbitrary point, and leave it still historical, living, and even as it once was.

In early times this kind of forgery was impossible, because knowledge failed the builders, or perhaps because instinct held them back. If repairs were needed, if ambition or piety pricked on to change, that change was of necessity wrought in the unmistakable fashion of the time; a church of the eleventh century might be added to or altered in the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, or even the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, but every change, whatever history it destroyed, left history in the gap, and was alive with the spirit of the deeds done midst its fashioning. The result of all this was often a building in which the many changes, though harsh and visible enough, were, by their very contrast, interesting and instructive and could by no possibility mislead. But those who make the changes wrought in our day under the name of Restoration, while professing to bring back a building to the best time of its history, have no guide but each his own individual whim to point out to them what is admirable and what contemptible; while the

very nature of their task compels them to destroy something and to supply the gap by imagining what the earlier builders should or might have done. Moreover, in the course of this double process of destruction and addition the whole surface of the building is necessarily tampered with; so that the appearance of antiquity is taken away from such old parts of the fabric as are left, and there is no laying to rest in the spectator the suspicion of what may have been lost; and in short, a feeble and lifeless forgery is the final result of all the wasted labour. ❧





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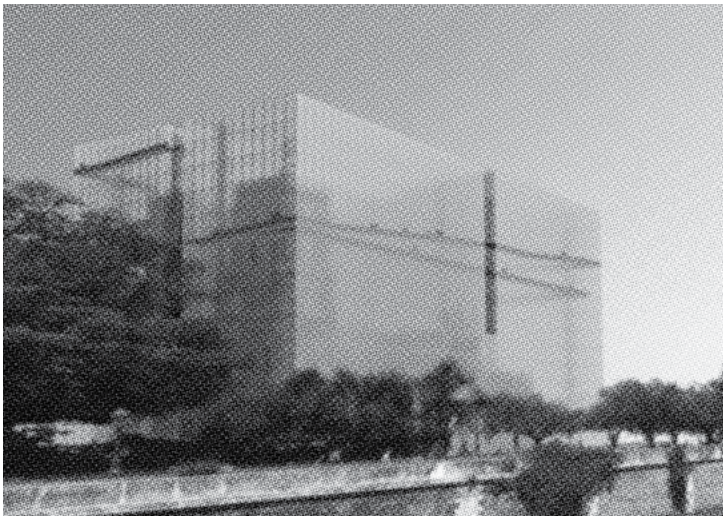

Soltani+LeClercq

# Nouvelle

Sadegh Behdani

Clayton Kenneth Nickum

# Notre-Dame

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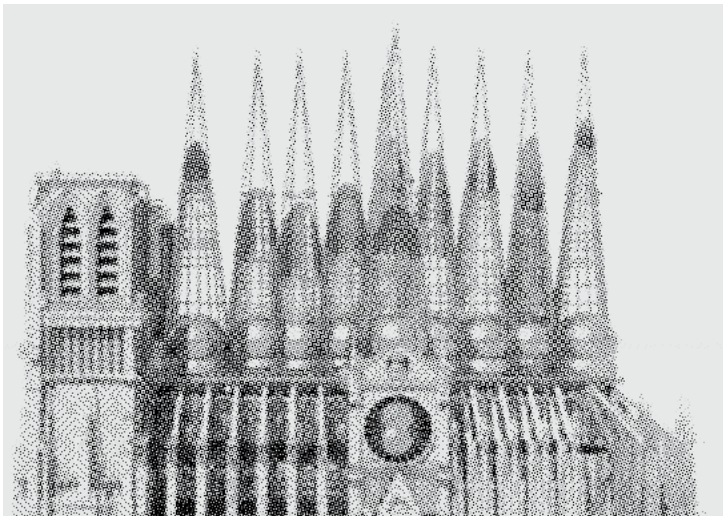
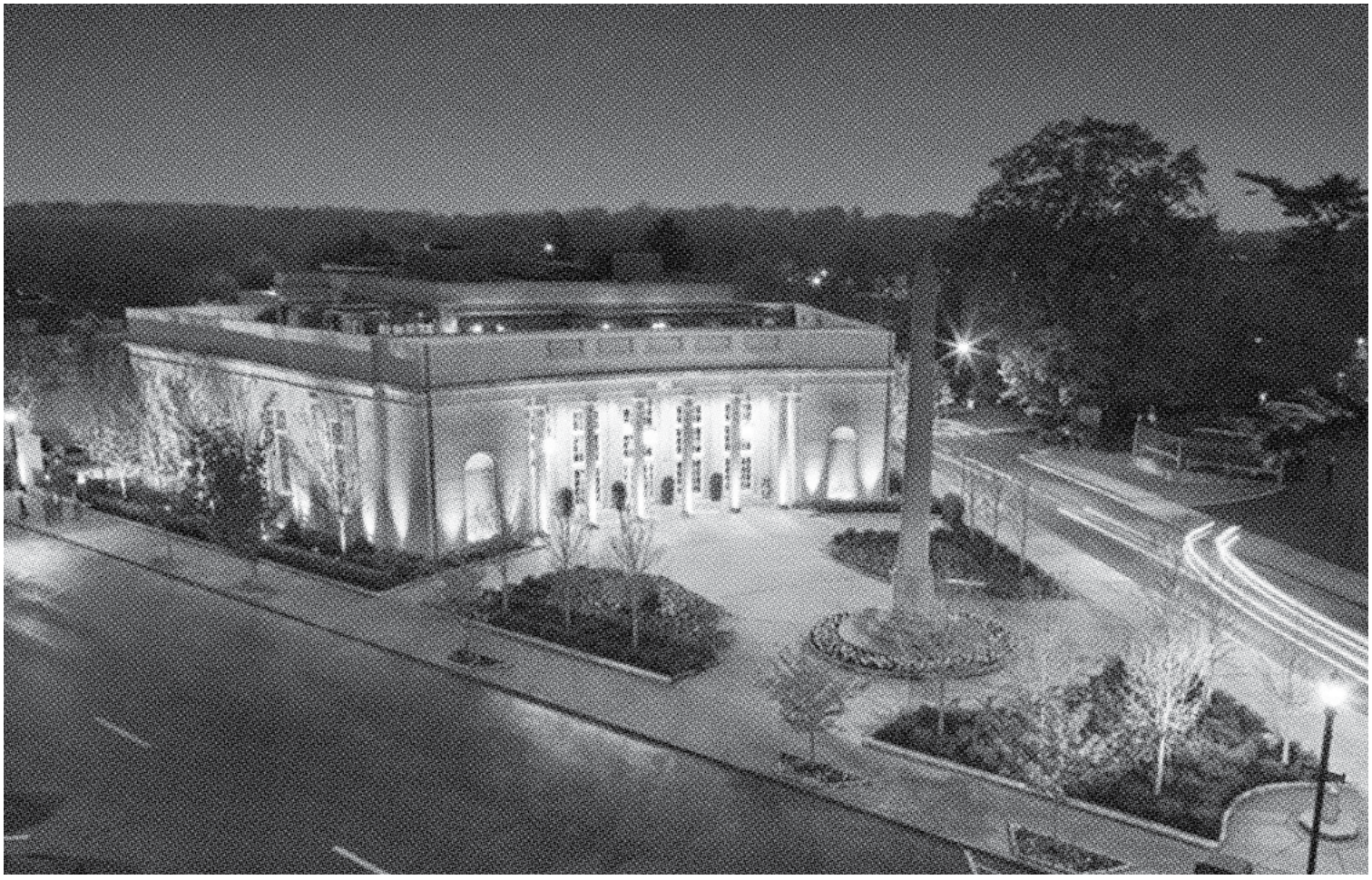


Chicago Underground Practice

# My God!

## W E ' V E DESTROYED THE WHOLE THING!!!!!



**A HISTORIC POST OFFICE TRANSFORMED**

## Municipal ⟶ Commercial

RESTORATION R E A D E R

The following text was transcribed from "RH Greenwich: The Gallery at the Historic Post Office," a video produced by Restoration Hardware in 2014.

Original Post Office

## GARY FRIEDMAN

CEO & Chairman
Restoration Hardware

What I get inspired by is leading and not following, charting our own course, creating our own unique adventure. This is gonna really take the idea of a gallery to another level. Taking a post office and turning it into something is completely different takes a lot of imagination, and I think that's what inspires us.

## JIM GILLAM

Architect
Backen & Gillam

Every place has its identity that you have to understand first of all. You have an asset there that you can build on.

## FRANK J. PRIAL JR.

Architect
Beyer, Blinder & Belle

This building was the product of a very interesting time in history. There was a period of extraordinary growth, and the United States government tried to encourage that growth by placing post offices encouraging communication and the movement of goods and ideas across the country. So, Greenwich got their congressman to go to Washington to ask for a post office that would be appropriate for the prestige and the prosperity of Greenwich. What they received was a jewel.





**JIM:** Whatever we were going to do with that post office it was going to have to be smashing and beautiful in order to be accepted by the public.

**GARY:** What's interesting with these old buildings is from an exterior point of view they look magnificent. Right...but...from an interior point of view...the interior in the back of the house of the post office was basically a big empty shell. It had been modified. It had been changed that created a lack of symmetry. So we had to gut the entire building. I remember when I got to the location and everything was gone except for the perimeter brick walls on three-and-a-half sides all being held up by stilts. Right, so it looked like a Hollywood set.

Demolished interior during renovation

**JIM:** No lights. No nothing. You could see right through everything and I think it was a huge shock. We've done this, you know. This is...this is it? My god! We've destroyed the whole thing! And you had to do it to get what we needed.

**GARY:** What Jim is marvelous at doing is he went back and found the original plans. And understanding what was the logic of the original architect, we realized it was all centered on this historical obelisk.

Gary Friedman pointing

**JIM:** Everything was essentially coming together to one point the middle of an intersection of Arch Street and Greenwich Avenue.

**GARY:** Everything emanated from that. And so what Jim did, he was able to create harmony between the exterior and the interior. He was able to line up all the exterior windows with the interior sightlines. The genius part is we were able to basically double the square footage without any impact to the exterior historical building. So we took all the part that was not historical internally and made it look like it was historical. We added a tremendous grand staircase that went up to a skylight that went up to a second-floor conservatory and rooftop. If you didn't know, you'd think it was always there.

Construction of grand staircase

**JIM:** So that when the public comes in they say this is absolutely beautiful! And completely...you know completely changed, but it looks like it's always somehow been here.

**FRANK:** It's the perfect example of a way that historic building has been transformed into a building that will bring the best to Greenwich. And will be a monument as it has been all along.

Grand staircase





New "historical" interior

**JIM:** It's certainly not a cash and carry environment. It's a lifestyle! A place to go and spend time!

**Gary:** I think what we try to do is we try to create harmony. We try to create harmony with the community. We try to create harmony with the customers. And that harmony really comes from a respect for the community, a respect for the customers, a respect for what was, and a level of inspiration of what can be.

Ribbon cutting ceremony

Gary with his girlfriend, Bella Hunter at Burning Man, 2018

# PRESERVATION IS OVERTAKING US

The following text is a transcript of part of a talk delivered by Rem Koolhaas at Columbia University on September 17th, 2004.

We were lucky in 2002 to receive a commission from the Beijing government that enabled us to try to investigate and define for China a specific form of preservation. This is one of those unique moments in which we come closer, and maybe I should say in this case that I come closer, to one of my most intimate utopian dreams, which is to find an architecture that does nothing. I've always been appalled that abstinence is the one part of the architectural repertoire





that is never considered. Perhaps in architecture, a profession that fundamentally is supposed to change things it encounters (usually before reflection), there ought to be an equally important arm of it which is concerned with not doing anything. To the extent that this may sound like I am coveting an appointment in [Columbia's] historic preservation department, it may not be far off.

What we started to do is look at preservation in general and look at a little bit at the history of preservation. Now, the first law of preservation ever defined was in 1790, just a few years after the French Revolution. That is already an interesting idea, that at the moment in France when the past was basically being prepared for the rubbish dump, the issue of preserving monuments was raised for the first time. Another equally important moment was in 1877 where, in Victorian England in the most intense moment of civilization, there was the second preservation condition. If you look at inventions that were taking place between these two moments—cement, the spinning frame, the stethoscope, anesthesia, photography, blueprint, etc.—you slowly realize that...

REM KOOLHAAS

# PRESERVATION IS NOT THE ENEMY OF MODERNITY BUT ACTUALLY ONE OF ITS INVENTIONS

That makes perfect sense because clearly the whole idea of modernization raises either latently or overtly the issue of what to keep.

We then looked at the history of preservation in terms of what was being preserved, and it started logically enough with ancient



monuments, then religious buildings, etc. Later, structures with more and more (and also less and less) sacred substance and more and more sociological substance were preserved, to the point that we now preserve concentration camps, department stores, factories and amusement rides. In other words, everything we inhabit is potentially susceptible to preservation. That was another important discovery: the scale of preservation escalates relentlessly to include entire landscapes, and there is now even a campaign to preserve part of the moon as our most important site.


Image from *Chronocaos*, OMA, 2010

Then, we started looking at the interval or the distance between the present and what was preserved. In 1818, that was 2,000 years. In 1900, it was only 200 years. And now, near the 1960s, it became twenty years. We are living in an incredibly exciting and slightly absurd moment, namely that preservation is overtaking us. Maybe we can be the first to actually experience the moment that preservation is no longer a retroactive activity but becomes a prospective activity. This makes perfect sense because it is clear that we built so much mediocrity that it is literally threatening our lives. Therefore, we will have to decide in advance what we are going to build for posterity sooner or later. Actually, this seems an absurd hypothesis, but it has happened, for instance, in the cases of some houses that were preserved at the moment they were finished, putting the inhabitants in a very complex conundrum.

We then started to look how to apply this to the issue of preservation. Of course, preservation is also dominated by the lobby of authenticity, ancientness, and beauty, but that is, of course, a very limited conception of preservation. We started to conceive and imagine that you could perhaps impose upon the entire center of Beijing a





kind of bar code and declare that the bands in the bar code could either be preserved forever or systematically scraped.

**IN SUCH A CASE, YOU WOULD HAVE THE CERTAINTY THAT YOU PRESERVED EVERYTHING IN A VERY DISPASSIONATE, DEMOCRATIC WAY**

—highways, Chinese monuments, bad things, good things, ugly things, mediocre things—and therefore really maintained an authentic condition. Also, you could begin to plan the city in terms of a kind of phasing. In all the cities that now are almost suffocatingly stable in the center and alarmingly unstable in the periphery, you could introduce a new condition of phasing where sooner or later any part of the city would be eliminated to be replaced by other stuff. You could project and plan over almost millennia to generate a situation in which each part of the city would always confront its opposite in a kind of complementary condition. ♻


Photo by Mike Albans

**On July 13, 2000, a wall and two floors collapsed at Irreplaceable Artifacts, an architectural salvage shop at Second Avenue and Houston Street. City officials ordered the building destroyed, along with everything inside including a walnut ceiling from William Randolph Hearst's collection and several Tiffany windows valued at $50,000 each.**

# THE CUSTODIANS

*How the Whitney is transforming the art of museum conservation.*

BY BEN LERNER

I walk south on Manhattan's High Line toward the Whitney Museum of American Art: international tourists with their selfie sticks, sunbathers on the wooden benches in various stages of undress. The power of the High Line—abandoned railway tracks repurposed as a popular park—is that it feels at once triumphant and post-apocalyptic. Grass grows over the rails, trees among the trestles; it's almost as if nature had reclaimed the infrastructure of a civilization wiped out by an unspecified disaster. I feel as if I were wandering through a composite, the rails peeking through the C.G.I. And the elevation itself is eerie, an acknowledgment of rising seas.

The Whitney Museum
Renzo Piano, 2015

The park now terminates in a great ship: Renzo Piano's nine-story Whitney building, one of many architectural nods to the largely vanished industries on which the surrounding neighborhood once depended. (Piano was born into a family of Genoan builders; his Astrup Fearnely Museum, on the water in Oslo, resembles a giant glass sail.) The Whitney was, in fact, erected with flooding in mind. Hurricane Sandy struck early in the construction process, leading Piano to adjust the museum's design; the steel frame is built to bend, not break, whenever the next storm arrives. I can't help thinking of it as the Noah's Ark of American Art. *You are to bring into the ark two of every kind of painting, two works of every school. . . .*

I enter through the museum's glass façade—the lobby is crowded, but the lines move quickly—and take one of the elevators to the fifth floor. The walls of the elevator are panelled with mirrors; half of the occupants are filming their reflections as we ascend. I've come to see a sculpture entitled "Cost of Living (Aleyda)," by Josh Kline, one of a series, for which Kline, who is thirty-six, interviewed janitorial workers and then used 3-D-printing technology to create sculptural assemblages based on scans of their bodies. The physical work consists of a janitor's cart, to which L.E.D. lights have been taped, and on which are several objects, printed in plaster and cyanoacrylate: brushes, sponges, a bottle of cleaning fluid. Also on the cart are two 3-D prints of the digitally imaged head of "Aleyda," a housekeeper at the Hotel on Rivington, along with a print of her hand, enclosed in a plastic glove, and of her foot, in a sock and shoe. The surface of one of the heads shows Aleyda's face; the other has been replaced by the label from a bottle of Stain-X. Her body is not only segmented; it is becoming another cleaning product.

*Cost of Living,*
Josh Kline, 2014

Standing before the sculpture, I think of how it has long been fashionable in the art world to speak of "dematerialization": the dematerialization of labor in our so-called information-based economy, the dematerialization of the art object in conceptual practice. To confront the severed head and fragmented body of a janitor in a museum space is a discomfiting reminder of the undocumented (in more than one sense) material labor from which such discourses can help distract us. Somebody is still making the hardware from which you upload data to the cloud; somebody is still scrubbing the toilets at the museum that hosts your symposium on Internet art.

More subtly, "Cost of Living" could be said to pun on the museum as "custodian" of art works. Kline's 3-D objects are not intended to last. There is what he calls a "resolution gap" between the digital files and current 3-D-printing technology, meaning that printers capable of matching the resolution of his scans don't yet exist. At a certain point—five years or fifty, it's hard to say—technology will improve, enabling the scans to be realized in full detail. But part of the conceptual content of the work is, will have been, the process of switching out the objects over time. Kline is reversing the traditional temporality of the "original" art work: what comes first are copies; the real work will arrive in the future. None of this complexity is indicated in the placard beside Kline's sculpture in the current show; the museum doesn't know how to represent it yet.

THE NEW YORKER, JANUARY 11, 2016

How does the museum determine when to reprint the objects? And, once you start replicating parts, when is the work no longer the work? These and other questions are the domain of the Whitney's replication committee, a little-known but increasingly crucial body within the museum. The committee is, as far as I know, the only one of its kind. Founded in 2008, it is composed of fourteen people—conservators, curators, archivists, a lawyer, and a registrar. The committee convenes to determine when a work of art, or a part of a work of art, cannot be fixed or restored in the traditional ways—when and how it must, instead, be replicated. These discussions result in recommendations that affect the way art works are maintained, classified, and described in exhibitions.

As I leave the building, I find myself thinking of the ship of Theseus, king of Athens. According to Plutarch, the ship

> was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.

If it isn't the same ship—if restoration has crossed into replication—which piece of timber was decisive? And where does the identity of an art work reside if it will be fully realized only in the future, plank by printed plank?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro
Photo by Eric Helgas

At the head of the replication committee is Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, who also leads the Whitney's conservation department. (It had no conservation department before her—why, some wondered, would a museum of recent American art need such a thing?) In 1968, two years after the Arno flooded Florence, Mancusi-Ungaro was a first-year graduate student in art history at N.Y.U. When she saw a show at the Met featuring damaged Florentine frescoes, her interests turned from the study of periods and styles to the material fate of art objects in time.

Mancusi-Ungaro left N.Y.U. with a master's degree and moved with her then husband to New Haven, where he was a medical student. A former professor put her in touch with Andrew Petryn, the chief conservator at the Yale Art Gallery, who took her on as an apprentice. (She still has no official credential as a conservator.) For five years, she was in the workshop with Petryn almost every day. She supplemented her apprenticeship with a Yale course in organic chemistry to advance her understanding of paints and solvents.

*Madonna and Child*, Workshop of Giovanni Bellini, ca. 1475–85
before restoration

After restoration

Petryn, who died in 2013, remains a controversial figure in the field of conservation. In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, he undertook the restoration of Yale's collection of early Italian paintings. Or, rather, he undertook their de-restoration: advocating a purism then popular among some conservators, he decided to remove previous restoration, leaving, or aspiring to leave, only the hand of the artist. And the hand of time: what conservators call "losses"—lacunae, expanses of bare wood—overwhelmed the original images. By the time Petryn retired, in the mid-eighties, many considered the state of the Yale collection to be a scandal. (The current director of the Yale Art Gallery, Jock Reynolds, has described Petryn's tenure as a time of "aggressive over-cleaning.") Attitudes in the field had shifted toward a more aesthetically oriented approach, in which conservators disguise losses, with the goal of enabling the work to be experienced as a picture, not just as an archeological artifact. In the nineties, Yale sent some of its Italian collection to the Getty Museum to be re-restored, undoing what Petryn had undone.

I asked Mancusi-Ungaro about Petryn during one of my first visits to the Whitney conservation studios. "I understand the opposition to his work, but I'm grateful for the rigor of his teaching," she told me. He tasked her with making from scratch every black pigment listed in "Il Libro dell'Arte," a Renaissance treatise. "To make 'vine black,' I had to use young tendrils from grapevines," she recalled. "I got them from my Italian grandmother's relatives. To make 'ivory black,' I gathered some discarded shards of ivory from a keyboard factory in Ivoryton, Connecticut."

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The conservation department, on the sixth floor of the new Whitney, occupies more than three thousand square feet, about six times as much space as in the old building. In the department's main studio, where Mancusi-Ungaro and I talked, a wall of windows faces north, offering stunning views and steady, diffuse light of the kind painters have coveted for centuries. The space is open and airy, despite giant fume extractors that snake down from the ceiling; they keep the air breathable when conservators are working with solvents. Mancusi-Ungaro showed me a Rothko painting that was, she said, "exhibiting some unexplained, inconsistent coloration." Matt Skopek, a painting conservator, was examining the canvas with an infrared camera, looking for evidence of damage and traces of prior interventions. "It might be that Rothko himself restored this, and did a poor job," Mancusi-Ungaro explained. In that case, conservators would improve on the artist's attempt to play conservator, protecting the artist's hand from the artist's other hand, so to speak. But they were also studying other Rothkos to make sure they weren't misinterpreting his intentions. If the inconsistent coloration was an aesthetic decision, their priority would be to preserve it, not undo it.

Jars of dry pigments
Photo by Eric Helgas

My attention was drawn away from the Rothko by a painting I found vaguely familiar. It was Barkley Hendricks's "Steve," a full-length portrait of a man wearing a white suit and mirrored sunglasses, in which the windows of Hendricks's studio—and, if you look closely, part of Hendricks's head—are reflected. Mancusi-Ungaro reminded me that it had been on a 2009 cover of *Artforum*,




*Artforum*, April 2009

**"Should we celebrate the patina of time or what's beneath it?"**

which is probably why I recognized it. But that cover had been cropped. In the painting, there are yellow patches on the glossy white suit, probably due, Skopek told me, to a previous restorer's application of a glue that was originally clear but had yellowed with time. Skopek had been cleaning the surface with a scalpel—"I work with the scalpels used in eye surgery; they're more precise"—and was preparing to reinforce an area of the back of the canvas with acupuncture needles, selected for their mixture of strength and flexibility.

Talking about undoing previous restoration led us back to Petryn. His approach was part of a long history of "cleaning controversies," as conservators call them. (That Kline's sculptures involve cleaning products helps position them, perhaps unintentionally, in relation to the conservation practices that his work subverts.) Such disputes are as old as Pliny, who claimed that a painting by Aristides of Thebes was ruined by whoever tried to clean it up for the Games of Apollo. These debates are fundamentally about temporality: should we celebrate the patina of time or what's beneath it?

In "The Lamp of Memory," written in 1848, John Ruskin, a pioneer of what has been called the "anti-restoration movement," argued that buildings and objects must be left to decline, even die—that the "greatest glory of a building . . . is in its Age." He wrote that restoration "means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed." The French architect and theorist Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc—who, beginning in 1845, oversaw the restoration of Notre-Dame—represented the opposing view. He advocated reconstructing lost components of a building in order to "reëstablish it in a finished state, which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time."

These days, conservators tend to seek a middle ground between Ruskin's position, which risks fetishizing damage, and Viollet-le-Duc's, which risks the Disneyfication of the historical record. In certain instances, the conservator will

protect an image's over-all compositional effect while also seeking to acknowledge the newness, the falseness, of what she has done. Such strategies can be traced to Cesare Brandi, a twentieth-century Italian art historian and critic, who developed a method called *tratteggio*, in which the restorer fills in lacunae with a series of small lines. From a distance, the lacunae recede, allowing the viewer to experience a pictorial unity; upon closer inspection, the addition declares a loss. *Tratteggio* is just one such technique—alterations can also be signalled by a slightly recessed surface, a flatter color, or a subtle line drawn around a restored area. The guiding ethos of conservators is "reversibility"—making sure that the future has the right to a different vision of the past.

Detail of *Crucifix*, Cimabue, 1287–1288 restored using a technique similar to tratteggio called chromatic abstraction

*Tratteggio* might work on a Renaissance fresco, but what is the equivalent for an abstract painting, let alone a work of conceptual art? How much time has to pass before its passage might be worth preserving? Medieval and Renaissance painters working within a guild system had firsthand knowledge of their pigments, what was likely to last and what wouldn't. By the nineteen-fifties, American artists often used cheap, mass-produced materials that weren't intended to endure—at least, not across centuries. Postwar artists didn't go to the art-supply store, Mancusi-Ungaro has said; they went to the hardware store.

For many modern and contemporary artists, ephemerality is part of the point. Dieter Roth, to take just one example, didn't cover his canvases with yogurt for the sake of durability; they were built to biodegrade. Picasso and Braque told friends that they would rather let their canvases deteriorate than have them varnished, which they felt would ruin the subtle texturing of the surfaces. For a long time, their preference was disregarded. (According to the art historian John Richardson, a postwar public raised on glossy reproductions found the varnished look familiar; original paintings, he suggests, were being "restored" to resemble their color-plate copies.) Conceptual and performance artists—in part as a protest against the commodification of art objects—sought to dispense with material art works altogether (although such happenings were then preserved for the future through collectible documentation). "Art history only begins after the death of the work," Duchamp once said; for him, to conserve was to embalm.



In 1976, Mancusi-Ungaro moved to Los Angeles, where she took a job at the Getty Museum. "I don't know why they hired me, exactly," she said. "This was when the Getty was still in a villa in Malibu and didn't have the money it has now. But I loved California. I was eating avocados off the trees for lunch." A year and a half later, she moved to Ohio and took a position at the Intermuseum Conservation Association, then situated at Oberlin. In 1982, she was recruited to be the chief conservator at the Menil collection, in Houston, where she stayed for nearly twenty years, undertaking major restorations of works by Cy Twombly, Barnett Newman, and Jackson Pollock, among others. "With the exception of one canvas by Joan Miró, I'd never conserved a work of modern art before I came to the Menil," Mancusi-Ungaro told me. "I was excited by the immediacy of it—how I was often the first person restoring a canvas, as opposed to dealing with a century of past restorations. And I loved, whenever possible, consulting with the artists themselves."

In 1964, Mark Rothko painted two black-form triptychs (black rectangles on a plum-colored ground) for the Menil Chapel. The paintings were finished in 1967 and installed in 1971. Shortly thereafter, the paint began to whiten, and a mysterious crystalline pattern spread across the surface. This wasn't Rothko's hand or the hand of time; it was the material's instability in the chapel's humid conditions. Removing the disturbance became one of Mancusi-Ungaro's chief preoccupations during her time at the Menil.

Menil Chapel, Houston, Texas

She and her team could have simply remade the Rothko paintings—after all, assistants had helped to paint them in the first place—but Mancusi-Ungaro wasn't going to pursue replication. "Although Rothko may not have physically painted every inch, he orchestrated the brushwork of his assistants in a way that asserted his authorship," she told me. Rothko committed

suicide in 1970, but she tracked down one of the assistants, Ray Kelly, and asked how Rothko's colors had been prepared. The blacks, velvety and matte, were made fresh every morning by mixing (in unrecorded proportions) oil paint, turpentine, damar resin, and whole egg. Mancusi-Ungaro, working with scientists at Shell, painstakingly simulated this process and eventually determined that the egg was causing the white film on the paintings' surface. She and her collaborators developed a fast-evaporating solvent mixture that could remove the whitening. It was, deliberately, a superficial intervention. The discoloration has not recurred, but if it does the treatment can be repeated indefinitely without damaging the work.

Mancusi-Ungaro's frustration that she couldn't consult with Rothko during the restoration process led her, in 1991, to start the Artist Documentation Program, a series of interviews with artists about their "materials, working techniques, and intent for conservation of their works." The interviews are both illuminating and a little eerie, because they are essentially living wills. (She plans to conduct such an interview with Kline.)

In the absence of explicit and complete instructions—that is, most of the time—conservation is fundamentally an interpretive act. After Rothko's death, many critics described (or dismissed) his late, dark works as monochromatic dead ends, evidence of his despair. But Mancusi-Ungaro felt that the subtle contrasts between the plum-colored borders, which are painted with pigments dissolved in rabbit-skin glue, and the black expanses represented a more complex range of aesthetic and emotional concerns. "These paintings aren't about darkness," Mancusi-Ungaro told me. "They're about light—about reflectance." Her interpretation helped to change critical attitudes about Rothko's later work. A less exacting conservator ("ivory black"; "vine black"), or a conservator blinded by the common view (black works; bleak time), might have missed this element of the Rothkos, and likely destroyed it.

Talking about Rothko with Mancusi-Ungaro, I was struck, not for the first time, by how the work of a conservator can re-sacralize the original art object. Had Mancusi-Ungaro and her team replicated the Rothko murals, I'm not sure that I would have been able to tell. An awareness of her labor, however, invests those particular surfaces with a powerful charge. The care the paintings inspired feels like evidence of their importance, as if it were not just a cleaning but a veneration (an effect amplified by the fact that the surfaces are in a chapel, no matter how modern). Conservation can help produce—not just protect—the aura of the original.

Installation of Rothko's Murals, Holyoke Center, January 1963.

**"In the absence of explicit and complete instructions, conservation is fundamentally an interpretive act."**

In 2001, Mancusi-Ungaro was offered two jobs simultaneously: the Whitney wanted her to start a department of conservation, and Harvard wanted her to establish a center for the study of modern and contemporary artists' materials. She felt that the Whitney had great art but limited research resources, and that Harvard had great research resources but a less expansive collection of modern art. So she took both positions at once, serving as a bridge between the two institutions.

Mancusi-Ungaro's final project at Harvard—as of last year, she's been at the Whitney exclusively—also involved Rothko. In both its boldness and its cautiousness, it typifies Mancusi-Ungaro's voice as a conservator. In 1962, five large mural paintings by Rothko, ranging from light pink to deep purple, were displayed in Harvard's Holyoke Center. A decade of exposure to sunlight had destroyed the original coloration: some areas were washed out, others faded to blue. The compromised canvases were determined to be beyond repair and moved to storage.

In 2007, Mancusi-Ungaro helped form a team to study the murals. The team developed a series of colored-light projections that, when thrown against the canvases, would return the works to their original colors. It was a radical, digital *tratteggio*. Last year, the enhanced canvases were displayed publicly for the first time; the effect was of the miraculous and instantaneous resurrection of the paintings. (At least, according to those who saw the exhibit. It was closed by the time I learned about it—the light projections stored digitally, the canvases in a climate-controlled facility.) Yet the projections are a little larger than the

canvases, and the projector makes noise, breaking the spell. Bold: we're no longer looking at paintings but at a multimedia installation. Cautious: this might be the most fully reversible restoration in history.

Does this light projection differ in kind, or only in degree, from a gallery controlling its lighting conditions? The Harvard team insists on the specificity of the interaction between the damaged canvases and the light display, but surely that's a technical "problem" that could eventually be overcome. What if the projections alone could produce the same optical effects? Then the "Harvard Murals" could be displayed anywhere in the world, or in multiple places at once, and the paintings themselves could be discarded. This is not replacing the wooden planks of Theseus' ship(s) with new wooden planks; it is changing media, pigment for projection. Mancusi-Ungaro's work at the Rothko Chapel is centripetal, focussing on the object; her experiment at Harvard is centrifugal, spinning away from the actual.

The room on the seventh floor of the Whitney where the replication committee interviewed Kline about "Cost of Living (Aleyda)"—the Frances Mulhall Achilles Library—has a huge bank of sloped windows facing the Hudson River. When I was told we'd be meeting in the "Achilles Library," I remembered how the Greek hero would have been immortal, wouldn't have had a vulnerable heel, if his mother had fully varnished him in the River Styx. But when I arrived at the library I was put in mind of more recent mythology: the architecture recalled the observation deck of the U.S.S. Enterprise in "Star Trek: The Next Generation," a show that I watched late in the last millennium in my childhood home, in Topeka. On the Enterprise, you asked the computer's "replicator" when you wanted something to eat or drink and it materialized before you—no alien workers necessary.

As I sat watching a plane trailing a banner that read "Happy Birthday Dalai Lama" above the sparkling water, I thought about the Prime Directive, from "Star Trek": Starfleet officers may not interfere with the development of alien civilizations. This imperative has a kind of Petryn-like absolutism about it, and

Star Trek "replicator"



many "Star Trek" episodes revolve around the moral quandaries that arise as a result. Conservators also strive to avoid interference—conservation is not supposed to affect creation—and yet, as Mancusi-Ungaro and the other Whitney "officers" prepared to interview Kline, I was struck by how contact between the museum and the artist inevitably changes the art it would conserve. The questions, however neutrally posed, compel the artist to make decisions about what is permitted and what isn't, decisions that then become part of the work's conceptual content.

Kline arrived at the meeting flanked by two fabricators from N.Y.U.'s Advanced Media Studio, who oversee the printing of his sculptures. Mancusi-Ungaro introduced everyone and asked Kline if he'd like to say a few words about "Cost of Living." Kline said that the digital files contain the still unrealized, the still unrealizable, scans, and that "there is nothing precious about the current prints." Everyone nodded politely.

There was a pause during which the only sound was a curatorial assistant taking notes by hand. (I thought it was strange that a meeting about archives and cutting-edge technologies was not itself digitally recorded.) Then came a barrage of questions:

"Can and should the Whitney retain old prints as part of the archive?" Farris Wahbeh, an archivist, asked. "And what about old file formats of the scans as software changes?" Kline deferred to the museum to make a decision.

"Can individual components of the assemblage be reprinted?" Margo Delidow, a sculpture conservator, asked. Delidow was interested in immediate issues of material care. (I later heard her say, "If I can bump into it, I have to conserve it.") "Is the kind of tape holding the L.E.D. lights significant?" she asked Kline. If so, is it the color of the tape that matters, or the make, or the level of adhesiveness? Kline said that the color temperature of the lights was important, and that he preferred gray; as long as that condition was met, the tape could be replaced. I had the sense that he was thinking out loud.

Dana Miller, a curator and the director of the Whitney's permanent collection, had concerns that were both philosophical and practical. "If there's a show in, say, China, do we need to ship

these objects, or can they just be reprinted there? If they can be reprinted and not shipped, could the same work be shown in two locations at once?"

Mancusi-Ungaro remained focussed on fundamental issues. "How much does the printing technology need to improve—or how much do these prints need to degrade—in order to trigger reprinting?" Kline said that he hadn't established clear thresholds, and that he would need to reassess over time. Nobody brought up the fact that these questions might outlive him.

Kline is a thoughtful artist, and he was frank about what he hadn't yet determined. The goal of the Whitney's staff was to honor his intentions with the greatest degree of exactitude possible. But, precisely because of the thoroughness and intelligence of their queries, I felt that I was watching conservation shade into collaboration. This didn't bother me at all, but Mancusi-Ungaro clearly didn't like the word "collaboration" when I brought it up in a later conversation. "We're not trying to influence the work," she said. "These decisions will have to be made at some point, and we want the artist to be heard."

But why not embrace conservation as collaboration? The Whitney was founded to focus on living artists, to experiment with new media—to be, as Mancusi-Ungaro put it in another conversation, "unencumbered by traditional structures." To boldly go where no conservator has gone before.

In an unpublished lecture that Mancusi-Ungaro gave at N.Y.U.'s Institute of Fine Arts, in 2011, she described how conservators of modern art are increasingly confronted with the problem of the "elusive original." "Traditionally, scientific analysis has been able to distinguish authenticity by the nature and age of materials," she said. But what is the status of the "original" when the artist's hand wasn't directly involved in the fabrication of the work?

The Whitney acquired Claes Oldenburg's "Ice Bag Scale C" in 1972. Many Oldenburg sculptures present everyday objects on a monumental scale, and "Ice Bag" is—well, an ice bag, the kind people once used for headaches. Oldenburg worked with a

*Ice Bag Scale C,* Claes Oldenburg, 1972




*Oldenburg/Think Big/ Wim,* Boot Boyz Biz and Bootlegwiki, 2018

TV-production company to build the sculpture, which is eleven feet high and more than thirteen feet in diameter. Inside is a combination of custom-made and commercially available materials, including three motors and six fans designed to make the bag move more or less at random—to make it seem alive.

It's hard not to joke about Oldenburg giving the Whitney a headache. According to an academic paper detailing its exhibition history, " 'Ice Bag' never functioned for longer than a few days at a time, and, even then, it performed only part of its intended motion. Throughout its exhibition history, 'Ice Bag' had broken gears, exuded noxious fumes, leaked oil, ripped its own fabric exterior, growled, squeaked, and set itself on fire." It is described in museum archives in psychological terms: the sculpture is reported to be "moody" at one point, "suicidal" at another.

In 2009, the Whitney decided to restore "Ice Bag." The conservator Eleonora Nagy, who oversaw the effort, had little information about the sculpture's original construction; she told me that she "had to restore it in order to figure out what it was." The acrylic lacquer on the cap of the ice bag was refinished by an autobody expert who works on vintage cars. The sculpture's exterior fabric was discolored, brittle, permanently creased. The team searched everywhere for the same fabric (18404 Black Aluminum buff-free neoprene-coated nylon, for the record) and found a perfect match in every way but one: the color was close but not identical. The Whitney asked Oldenburg if he would approve the change in color, and he did.

But Nagy decided to repair the internal mechanisms whenever possible, rather than replace them. She and Mancusi-Ungaro hired experts of various sorts—a guitar maker, an electrician, a robotics engineer—to fix most of the original motors and wiring. The replication committee ultimately determined that "Ice Bag" had been conserved, not replicated—that the sculpture remained original—because, although the exterior was replaced or repainted, most of the internal parts were maintained. This allows the museum to continue to exhibit the work

as "Ice Bag Scale C," not as a version of "Ice Bag Scale C."

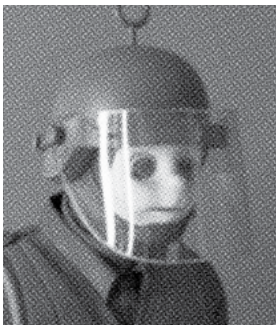
Oldenburg made his name, in part, by mocking art-world pretension, and yet the Whitney treated his sculpture with an attention that would have been appropriate for a religious icon. It would have been easier to jettison the original motors and wiring and replace them with a new system. The bag would have moved as intended; the change would have been imperceptible. Why are the mechanical guts worth preserving? I don't believe that they have a patina, or that they show the artist's hand—they are invisible, after all, and Oldenburg outsourced most of that labor. Furthermore, if the eccentricity of the original machine was valuable, isn't something lost when it actually works? The replication committee here approaches the contradictory logic of Viollet-le-Duc, attempting to "reëstablish" that "which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time."

The replication committee assumes that replication should be avoided whenever possible. But Josh Kline's work makes it impractical to privilege rehabilitation over replication. "Cost of Living (Aleyda)" stages a confrontation between the culture of museum conservation and the culture of the disposable prototype.

A few weeks after the session with Kline, I attended an official meeting of the replication committee. Mancusi-Ungaro opened the discussion about "Cost of Living (Aleyda)" by saying, "This work represents an emerging category of object."

Dana Miller agreed. "Plenty of works in our collection involve a split between a file and an output"—any film or digital work does. And many works might require partial refabrication (re-creating, for example, the nylon exterior of "Ice Bag"). But with Kline's sculpture, Miller said, "we have no 'correct' physical work to match new iterations against."

The discussion circled back repeatedly to a central question about Kline's project: "What is the medium?" This is both a deep philosophical query and, for an archivist registering works or a lawyer defining them in contracts, an urgently practical one. The committee thinks of Kline as a maker of objects, but much of the making has been deferred into the future. Listening to the committee's discussion, however, I increasingly felt that Kline's medium, rather than digital files or 3-D prints, is museum conservation itself. And it's a rich medium. At a time when so many artists outsource fabrication, Mancusi-Ungaro and her peers are conservators of skill: they know a material's chemical composition, its reflectance levels, its history of usage (and if they don't know they'll find out). In an era when many critics speak of the rise of curation as art—when artists arrange objects as often as they make them—conservation is deeply curatorial, as conservators choose which aspects of a work are presented and how. To treat conservation as it has traditionally been treated—as the behind-the-scenes work of minimally invasive technocrats, bursting onstage every few decades during a cleaning controversy and then receding into the shadows—is to exclude essential questions about culture and value from the domain of contemporary art.



Detail of *Freedom*, Josh Kline, 2015

**"Conservation is deeply curatorial, as conservators choose which aspects of a work are presented and how."**

What will be the new *tratteggio*? I don't mean a technique for covering losses in new media. I mean a strategy for acknowledging the hand of the institution in the life of the work—a way of showing when and how and why the museum has altered what it displays. In the Whitney's recently concluded inaugural exhibition, the museum label describing "Cost of Living (Aleyda)" was somewhere between insufficient and misleading. It said that the objects on the cart were made by 3-D printing, but it said nothing about the planned obsolescence of those particular objects; it did not indicate that the work remains unfinished, awaiting more advanced printers. (Curators, as if granting Duchamp's pessimism about conservation, call museum labels "tombstones.") This placard is a placeholder until Kline and the Whitney can settle on a more accurate description of the work. What's clear is that the traditional data—measurements, materials, even dates—will be inadequate.

These omissions seem particularly significant given that the sculpture was

displayed in a gallery whose wall text described "a revolution in digital technologies" that has altered the production and consumption of images. The exhibition in which "Cost of Living (Aleyda)" was included was called "America Is Hard to See." Kline's work is, indeed, hard to see—one could argue that, owing to the "resolution gap," you can't yet see it at all.

The vast conservation spaces in the new Whitney are visible from outside the building—from the High Line, from the street—as if to announce that the institution will no longer treat conservation as marginal. "Everybody who walks in here feels that this space is an endorsement of the importance of conservation," Mancusi-Ungaro told me during my last visit. To me, it feels like the bridge of the ship. And I admire the mixture of openness and expertise that I hear in the committee's conversations. No single professional vocabulary—conservatorial, curatorial, legal, archival—is more important than another; nobody pretends that the questions that are encountered can be answered impartially or finally.

We stood on her office's outdoor deck overlooking the Hudson. I could see happy-hour drinkers atop the Standard hotel; I watched a blue tugboat push something, probably a trash barge, slowly upriver. As we discussed the sweep of her career, from Renaissance pigments to disposable 3-D prints, I registered how the replication committee had dissolved much of my initial skepticism about the Whitney—how the tone of the place had changed for me. Instead of seeing the new building as pure triumphalism, another "capital project" in a sinking city, I'd grown aware of a genuine exploratory current—a mixture of boldness and caution, strength and flexibility.

Recently, I've been walking around listening to Nina Simone's version of "Who Knows Where the Time Goes." The recording sounds particularly beautiful, because my headphones are staticky, a false patina that interacts well with the lyrics and the grain of Simone's voice. ("I do not count the time / for who knows where

Isis militants attack ancient artifacts with sledgehammers in the Ninevah Museum in Mosul, 2015



**"Everywhere I look, I see development that's hard to differentiate from destruction."**

**"We refuse to undertake such restoration because it would devastate the image of antiquity we've inherited from the Renaissance."**

the time goes?") Everywhere I look, I see development that's hard to differentiate from destruction: the proliferation of Chase Bank branches; the speakeasy storefronts bearing the commodified image of the Brooklyn that preceded the Brooklyn they're replacing, as if gentrification were restoration. I have little right to lament, Ruskin-like, the passing of "the old New York"—I'm part of the gentrification it's fashionable for gentrifiers to lament, and one New York is always passing into another anyway. Meanwhile, ISIS continues to make its horrifying video art; I watched that video of men in Mosul destroying statues with sledgehammers while my Q train idled on the Manhattan Bridge. Oxford and Harvard archeologists are distributing thousands of 3-D cameras in Middle Eastern conflict zones, hoping to capture images that will allow them to replicate crucial artifacts once they are destroyed. In Kline's work, I discover (or at least I project) vulnerability as well as technophilia: rather than producing works that can be shattered or lost, he is sending blueprints into the future.

I wander through the Met, which will soon take over the Whitney's old location on the Upper East Side. I walk among the ancient sculptures that we leave fragmented and paintless even though we could try to restore the vivid polychromy they originally possessed. We refuse to undertake such restoration, however, because it would devastate the image of antiquity we've inherited from the Renaissance. I find that inconsistency somehow touching; I don't want these statues to look like the loudly painted figures of the miniature-golf courses of my youth, even if they did.

In my favorite nineteenth- and twentieth-century European-painting galleries, I see van Goghs (many of his paintings ruined, say some conservators, by wax lining) and Braques (many destroyed, supposedly, by varnish), and I wonder what to make of the fact that several of the defining aesthetic experiences of my life took place in front of canvases that were merely a "false description of the thing destroyed." At the moment, I find it

enlivening rather than depressing. Spending time among the replicators has helped me become aware of what it's easy to acknowledge intellectually but more difficult to feel: that a piece of art is mortal; that it is the work of many hands, only some of which are coeval with the artist; that time is the medium of media; that one person's damage is another's patina; that the present's notion of its past and future are changeable fictions; that a museum is at sea. ♦

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The Whitney's conservation room, Photo by Richard Barnes

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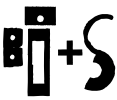 by Paul Elliman/Fuse

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