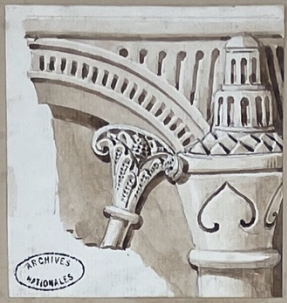
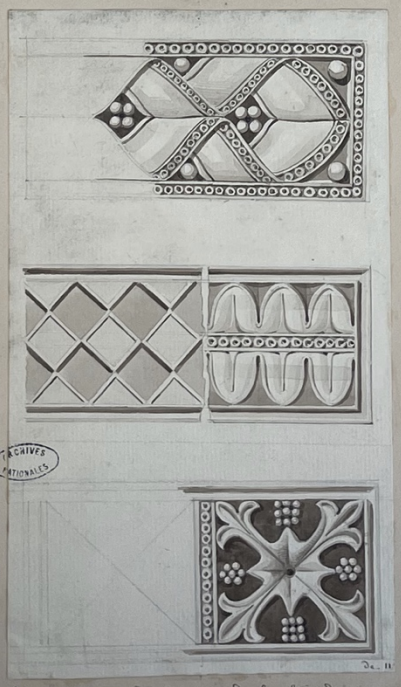
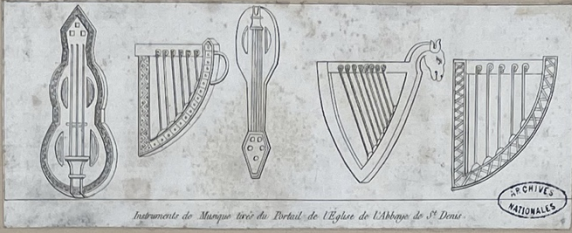


a responsive journal for art & architecture

react/review



568AP 054



react/review:
a responsive journal
for art & architecture

from ephemeral to obsolete:
the vanishing historical object

volume 5

june 2025

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Jessica Wei, 2020

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editorial statement

react/review: a responsive journal for art & architecture is a peer-reviewed responsive journal produced by graduate students in the department of the History of Art & Architecture at UC Santa Barbara.

react/review is an open-source journal published annually on eScholarship, an open access publishing platform by the University of California and managed by the California Digital Library.

ISSN 2768-3168

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acknowledgements

The Volume 5 managing editors would like to thank the Department of the History of Art & Architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara for their continued support of *react/review*. HAA's department chair Dr. Jenni Sorkin is one of the journal's earliest supporters, while Christine Fritsch has assisted through the years with digital aspects of design and promoting the journal on HAA's webpage. We are likewise indebted to our faculty advisors Dr. Claudia Moser and Dr. Richard Wittman for their guidance. We also thank the University of California's eScholarship team, who offer this space to platform the innovative work of emerging scholars.

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Introduction

Ripples of Loss: On Ephemerality, Obsolescence, and the Archive at the Abbey of Saint-Denis

Taylor Van Doorne and Ben Jameson-Ellsmore

This century has seen a flurry of publications on ephemerality in material culture. The related disciplines of art history, architectural history, cultural studies, and urban studies have foregrounded the fleeting objects and sites that have long evaded canons that privileged permanence.¹ This ephemeral turn challenged the founding premises of these material culture disciplines. As Michael Ann Holly writes, “The very materiality of objects with which we deal presents historians of art with an interpretive paradox absent in other historical inquiries, for works of art are at the same time lost and found, past and present.”² For Holly, the practice of art history entails ascribing yesterday’s

¹ See: Dominique Bauer and Camille Murgia, *Ephemeral Spectacles, Exhibition Spaces and Museums, 1750-1918* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Swati Chattopadhyay, “Ephemeral Architecture: Towards a Radical Contingency,” in *The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White (London: Routledge, 2020); Rahul Mehrota and Felipe Vera, *Ephemeral Urbanism: Cities in Constant Flux* (Santiago: ARQ, 2016); Richard Taws, *The Politics of the Provisional: Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013); Sarah Bonnemaïson and Christine Macy, eds, *Festival Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2008).

² Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 98.



Figure 1. West façade of the Basilica of Saint-Denis, north of Paris, France. Photo by Taylor Van Doorne, 2024.

objects new meanings today.³ What about those objects that are not present at all? How do vanished or deteriorated objects challenge disciplinary boundaries? How do they push against common methodologies?

Loss has long concerned artists, architects, makers, and historians. In this volume of *react/review*, articles address the issue of loss through the lenses of ephemerality, impermanence, and obsolescence. Authors in this volume explore the temporal horizons of material culture, articulating how creators or communities grapple with loss and impermanence, or how historians assemble fragments, fill archival lacunae, and contextualize the obsolete. In the capitalist twentieth century, obsolescence and disposability were built into objects and the environment to make way for future accumulation.⁴ However,

in this volume, we consider obsolescence beyond the scope of capital. For example, the Abbey of Saint-Denis, a medieval site explored in the introductory case study below, was not made obsolete by economic conditions, but rather political ones that sought to suppress the religious institution it served. Just as the functional monastery of Saint-Denis was made obsolete through the processes of dechristianization and museumification, authors in this issue consider the process of obsolescence of anachronistic social customs, spaces, and building practices.

³ Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, 21.

⁴ Daniel M. Abramson, "Obsolescence and its Futures," in *The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 231-243.



Figure 2. François Debret, *Church of Saint-Denis*, 19th century copy of 17th century engraving. Inscription below by Debret: “Copy of an untitled work that represents all of the dependent churches of the Congregation of Saint Maur. This work was to be part of the *Monasticum gallicanum* by Dom [Michel] Germain [...]” (translation by Taylor Van Doorne). Courtesy of the Archives nationales (France).

Case Study: Saint-Denis in François Debret’s Archive of Thought

Among architect François Debret’s papers for his 1814-1846 restoration of the Abbey of Saint-Denis (fig. 1) is a fragile graphite drawing on onionskin depicting the medieval monastery as it stood in the seventeenth century (fig. 2). It is a copy of an earlier representation of the grounds and served as Debret’s reference of the abbey’s vanished early modern footprint.⁵ It was Debret’s task to restore the crumbling Gothic church, which had been eroded by creative and destructive forces. In the 1790s, revolutionaries stripped the basilica of its valuables, destroyed its royal tombs, and damaged its sculptural detail. When Debret was tasked with restoring the damaged

⁵ Debret’s *extrait* is a copy of an engraving from Dom Michel Germain’s *Monasticum gallicanum*, produced in the late seventeenth century.



Figure 3 (above). François Debret, site plan of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, 19th century (undated). Courtesy of the Archives nationales (France).

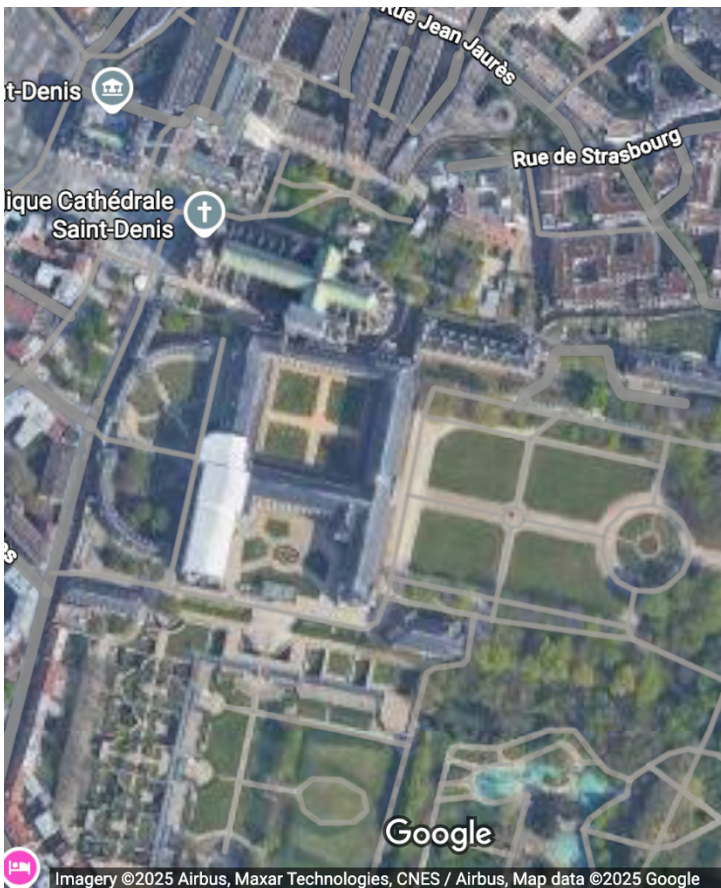


Figure 4 (left). Google Satellite screenshot of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, 2025.

building, he turned to the historical record to recapture the spirit and aesthetics of the medieval past in his restoration. However, little of the medieval site depicted in the drawing remained. Even the ancillary monastic structures flanking the abbey's southern wing were constructed in the eighteenth century (fig. 3-4).⁶

By the nineteenth century, the basilica was in disrepair and the medieval abbey was mostly demolished. We expect such profound changes in an urban landscape over the course of centuries. However, in Debret's postrevolutionary context, this material loss was inflected with more immediacy. Romantic public discourse mourned the ruinous state of Gothic buildings, reflecting a rising nostalgia for an imagined medieval past.⁷ Popular figures like Victor Hugo decried the demolition of historical monuments and advocated for the preservation of medieval architecture. For Romantics, the modern age had destabilized institutions and eroded a unified French national identity; a loss symbolized by the image of the crumbling Gothic church.⁸ Debret's renovations at Saint-Denis paralleled this discourse, but without romanticizing the aesthetics of the ruin. His interventions sought to disguise the ruination with repair work and Gothic Revival ornamentation (fig. 5-6).

Debret's repairs to the basilica may have sought to reverse the damages of time and revolution, but his onionskin *excerpt* (or copy) imagines the abbey in its pristine medieval form with conventual buildings, cloister, and gardens. The modern copy pines for a vanishing urban fabric. As Andreas Huyssen writes, "Temporality and spatiality are necessarily linked in nostalgic desire."⁹ We feel such nostalgia when we behold picturesque architectural ruins where "the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible." The same can be said for this archival document, especially since the urban fabric depicted in the drawing was nearly razed by Debret's time. Yet unlike previous architects who worked on the side, he believed the study of

⁶ Léon Pressouyre, "Did Suger Build the Cloister at Saint-Denis?" in *Abbot Suger And Saint-Denis: a Symposium*, ed. Paula Lieber Gerson (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 229. Marcel Aubert, "Le Portail du Croisillon Sud de l'Église Abbatiale de Saint-Denis," *Revue Archéologique* 29/30 (1948): 18.

⁷ Victor Hugo, "A Note on the Destruction of Monuments in France (1825)" and "War on the Demolishers! (1832)" Translated by Danny Smith. *West 86th* 25, no. 2 (2018): 224-248; François-René Chateaubriand, "Des Églises Gothiques [troisième partie, livre premier, chap. viii]," in *Génie Du Christianisme Ou Beautés de La Religion Chrétienne: Suivi de Défense Du Génie Du Christianisme* (Paris: Impr. Migneret, 1802), 23-28; Prosper Mérimée, *Rapport au ministre de l'intérieur: monuments historiques* (Paris: Impr. Royale, 1840).

⁸ Nicholas Halmi, "Romanticism, the Temporalization of History, and the Historicization of Form." *Modern Language Quarterly* 74 (2013): 363-89.

⁹ Andreas Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," *Grey Room* 23 (2006): 7.



Figure 5. François Debret, ornamentation “executed in marble in the Florentine style” for Saint-Denis, 1829. Courtesy of the Archives nationales (France).

Saint-Denis’s historic imprint was critical to the project of restoration. In other words, the *extrait* was critical to the architect’s conceptual reconstruction of the site. It evoked the spirit of what had been lost long of the site context before the Revolution stripped the basilica down to its frame. The document expresses the inherent ephemerality of the city in the *longue durée* of history.

The archival *extrait* is a sliver of Debret’s larger historical imagination, and a record of nostalgias past. Stuffed in a folder among predecessors’ and his own plans of Saint-Denis, the document is stored with print representations of the abbey and sketches of archaeological finds. This folder is one of dozens organized in eight boxes that document his plans for Saint-Denis and his studies of the surviving medieval mosaics, sculpture, paintings, and stained glass. The material variety of documents range from the sturdy wove paper to the delicate onionskin of the *extrait*. Some documents are so fragile that they are sealed with striped tape and are unavailable for viewing. Together, these drawings and recreations informed Debret’s resurrection of a medieval syntax. Today, they are the ephemeral material traces of his thought process and practice.



Figure 6. François Debret, ornamental designs for a crossing in the bay of the Winter Choir, 19th century (undated). Courtesy of the Archives nationales (France).

Though Debret had himself reported on the condition and process of restoring Saint-Denis toward the end of his tenure, his papers at the Archives Nationales constitute three decades of his historical imagination and working process.¹⁰ Taken as an ensemble, this collection constitutes an *archive of thought*, an idea we borrow from scholars of Walter Benjamin who have mobilized this concept in their attempts to decipher the fragments of the historian-philosopher's unfinished scholarship.¹¹ How can researchers reconstitute the arguments of a project like Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* using only citations and research notes? We may pose a similar question about Debret's interventions at Saint-Denis, which were nearly all reversed by his successor Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc for their archaeological inaccuracy. There is thus little trace of Debret's ridiculed restoration left for the historian to study. How can Debret's archive of thought help us understand how the architect approached his historically informed restoration? Can we as historians reconstruct his dismantled reconstruction? In a way, our own historical inquiry toward recovering a lost past using scant material traces and archival documents parallels the architect's work at the basilica.

The archive's hundreds of drawings, plans, and images capture how Debret tackled the issues of loss and recovery. However, the archive is arranged synchronistically, with few documents dated and scant paratext for further clarification. If, as Arlette Farge writes, "The archival document is a tear in the fabric of time, an unplanned glimpse offered into an unexpected event," then how do historians make sense of these hundreds of dated and undated tears shuffled together?¹² Just as scholars of Benjamin must contend with what Farge calls the "fragmented phrases" of the archive to piece together what *Passagen-Werk* (*Arcades Project*) could have been, we must think of this collection of working documents as gestures toward the totality of Debret's short-lived intervention, which was later removed by Viollet-le-Duc.¹³ In the

¹⁰ François Debret, *Notice sur les diverses constructions et restaurations de l'église Saint-Denis, par M. Debret, ... lue dans la séance publique annuelle des cinq académies le lundi 2 mai 1842* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, imprimeurs de l'institut, rue Jacob, 56, 1842).

¹¹ This concept comes from Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, trans. Esther Leslie, ed. Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, and Erdmut Wizisla (London: Verso, 2015), 2. Other scholars have grappled with similar issues in working with Benjamin's archival fragments. See also, Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press: Belknap Press, 1999). Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectic of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller: Tales out of Loneliness*, ed. Sam Dolbear, Ester Leslie, and Sebastian Truskolaski (London: Verso, 2023).

¹² Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 6.

¹³ Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 32.

face of a vanished or unfinished object, the historian of material culture scrapes what little coherent information they can from archives that are “forever incomplete.”¹⁴

Thus, we observe incompleteness and ephemerality in Debret’s *extrait* on three registers: as evidence of the impermanence of the urban environment, as a fragile archival document itself, and as a fragment of the architect’s conceptual archive. Historians, material culture scholars, and creators must navigate these contingent layers, and other such ripples of temporal and material loss.

Contributions to the Volume

Authors in this volume of *react/review* engage with ephemerality, loss, obsolescence, and the role, capabilities, and limitations of archives in preserving the past. Previous volumes drew upon the annual theme of the Art History Graduate Student Association’s Graduate Student Symposium at University of California, Santa Barbara. In the absence of the 2024 symposium, Volume 5’s theme, “From Ephemeral to Obsolete: The Vanishing Historical Object,” was chosen by the co-managing editors. Volume 5 is a special issue comprising research spotlight articles, which are open-ended inquiries that discuss new research findings, speculate on pressing research questions, or address methodological issues encountered in fieldwork, archival work, and design practice.

The first research spotlight, “Scans, Residues, Misrecognitions and Other Materialities of Loss,” is an interview by Evan Pavka of architect and artist Benjamin Busch about his virtual recreations of vanishing Berlin queer spaces for his project *Scanning the Horizon* (2022-2024). They discuss how traditional archives privilege the preservation of certain perspectives and histories, while marginal communities, especially ones that congregate in discreet interiors, are often omitted from the historical record. Using a Leica BLK 360 scanner, Busch attempted to archive the city’s “queer archipelago,” including squats, darkrooms, and clubs with varying clientele and entry protocols. But such spaces evade capture, and archiving their communities and subcultures necessarily involves the loss and transformation of visual information.

In “Spaces of Labor in the Social Clubs of British India: Obsolescence in Denial,” Nisha Shanghavi examines persistent colonial labor practices in the Tollygunge Club in Calcutta. She uses photographs to contextualize her ethnographic fieldwork, childhood memories of Tolly club, and interactions with the attendant *didis*. The term obsolescence, which usually describes the temporal horizons of material culture and buildings under capitalism, functions here to describe how old colonial labor practices persist in the postcolonial present. The piece observes how the hierarchies of server and served are preserved in ordinary spaces and interactions.

¹⁴ Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 54.

In “Denial and Dissolution: Architecture’s Battle Against Entropy,” landscape architect Eric Futerfas contemplates the architectural profession’s preoccupation with permanence in the era of climate change. He is critical of the current “construction paradigm” and its reliance on CO2 intensive materials like concrete, which are also difficult to reuse or recycle. The piece ponders the deliberate ephemerality of Black Rock City and modularity in the Metabolist movement as ways that builders have wrestled with impermanence. The piece is exploratory, applying a wide range of lenses, from the laws of thermodynamics and Buddhist teachings, to architectural sites like the recently demolished Nakagin Capsule Tower.

Annemarie Kok’s “Living Documents: On the Role of the Audience in the (After)life of Participatory and Ephemeral Art” grapples with the challenges of researching the history of twentieth-century participatory art. Kok details her search for “living documents” or past participants of ephemeral art installations and events like the Evenstructure Research Group’s 1972 *Waterwalk Tube*. While the ephemerality of such pieces lies in their event-like or “airy” nature, prior participants conserve fleeting participatory art in memory. Kok advocates preserving these memories through interviews and discusses the challenges of such work.

Likewise, Laura A. Lucci and Paul Stoesser’s “An Archive within an Archive or, Archive as Repertoire” grapples with the translation of performance to archive. Their article examines the Florentine playwright Baccio Checchi’s 1589 *Descrizione*, a technical document about the staging of the play *The Exaltation of the Cross*. Documenting the complex and multimedia production of renaissance theater, the *Descrizione* is an artifact and a manual, a physical archival record and instructions for embodied, site-bound performance. In articulating how they approach such a document, Lucci and Stoesser parse the tensions between the record and the recorded.

In “Memory, Material Experience, and Consumption: The Printed and Illustrated Ephemera of the Profumo Archive in 20th-Century Buenos Aires,” Sandra Szir and Andrea Gergich explore a collection of commercial ephemera that is not yet fully catalogued or available to the public. Owned by the Buenos Aires Museo, the archive of the 1910-1980s Profumo & Br. printing house contains labels, advertisements, and prints, but also industrial and production documents. The authors provide visual analysis of some of the collection’s labels and interpretations of their production processes, while exploring the implications of the “archival turn” for visual culture studies.

Volume 5 concludes with Jena Marble’s review, “Trending Today, Forgotten Tomorrow: The Ephemerality of AI-Generated Art on Civitai.” In it, she understands AI-generated art on Civitai and other new platforms as constituent of a new era of disposability. Today, these platforms are global sensations, mesmerizing users with a

flood of fungible visual novelty. Drawing from extant online imagery, AI art reaches unselfconsciously across genres and styles, and is wielded to capture public attention above all else. In light of this new form of visual mass production, Marble contemplates the qualities that have given art lasting value as cultural heritage up until now.

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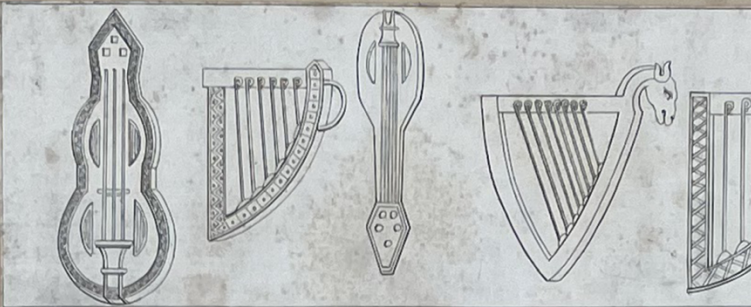


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Instruments de Musique tirés du Portail de l'Église de l'Abbaye de S^t Denis.



Plan des Colonnnettes de la porte C.



Colonnnettes du grand Portail. Portes A et C.

research spotlight

Scans, Residues, Misrecognition and Other Materialities of Loss

Evan Pavka and Benjamin Busch

Purportedly, archives exist to counter disappearance and obsolescence. They are filled with records, photographs, and other documents functioning as evidence or testaments to the events of the past, which could otherwise fade into the abyss of personal and cultural memory if not preserved.¹ Yet, such privileges and subsequent agency over interpretation are not always extended to all.² For many communities, particularly queer individuals and their intersections with various marginalized identities, there are glaring absences in public, institutional, and private record-keeping that reveal gaps and holes in collective consciousness.³ Since 2021, Berlin-based artist and architect Benjamin Busch has documented the architectural environments

¹ Louise Craven, "From the Archivist's Cardigan to the Very Dead Sheep: What are Archives? What are Archivists? What do They Do?" in *What are Archives? Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives: A Reader*, ed. Louise Craven (London: Ashgate, 2008), 7-13.

² See Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 2 (1995): 9-63, 9-11; Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 3-64, 55-58; Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (2004): 3-22, 3-6.

³ See Syrus Marcus Ware, "All Power to All People?: Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto," *TSQ* 4, no. 2 (2017): 170-180, 171.

leveraged by the queer inhabitants of the German metropolis as a contribution to a larger cultural preservation initiative. With a Leica BLK360 laser scanner and tablet, Busch has traversed the many public, semi-public, and private spaces that define the city's distinct queer archipelago, turning islands of interiors into exacting scaled three-dimensional models that, in "perverse detail," relay spatial configurations, materials, ornamentation, furnishings, decor, and more. Of the over 30 sites documented in *Scanning the Horizon* (2022-2024), a selection exists as an accessible digital platform (queerspaces.berlin) and as a parallel interactive virtual reality artwork, at present enabling viewers to move through nearly a dozen of the recorded structures.⁴ The subsequent scans are presented in their earnest digital aesthetic — navigable environments comprised of glowing clouds of data points recalling flickering neon lights in a nocturnal cityscape — as if constantly pictured at night when limits, borders, and systems of surveillance dissolve to enable other ways of being to emerge. The arrays of spatial points forming the virtual locations are further contextualized with oral histories drawn from interviews with the owners or occupants, "warm data" that maps affective experiences into and onto the sites.⁵ As Busch identifies in this conversation, the corresponding "archival gesture" is equally essential. It's an openly subjective, imperfect, and malleable collection that "does not claim to be complete," but nonetheless centers queer voices, experiences, logics of memorializing, and emerging techniques of preserving unstable heritage.⁶ At a time when subcultural spaces are shuttering due to inflation, hostile rental markets, encroaching development, and other economic pressures that make operation in many major urban areas increasingly untenable, coupled with rising violence and right-wing extremism intent on erasure and eradication, the performative scans act as a tangible precaution against a looming sense of loss.⁷ In the artist's hands, these ephemeral "residues of lived experience" are

⁴ The cumulative project *Scanning the Horizon* exists as two parallel components: a website (*Scanning the Horizon: Queer Spaces Berlin*, 2021–2024) and a Virtual Reality installation (*Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022–2024).

⁵ Mariam Ghani, "Divining the Question: An Unscientific Methodology for the Collection of Warm Data," *Viralnet*, 2006, http://www.integr8dmedia.net/viralnet/2006/2006_ghani.html. Rather than "hard factual information typical of legal and bureaucratic systems with the unquantifiable aspects of human life," warm data is the intense, affective relations both "unique and highly individual" that give such objective information its social and cultural meaning.

⁶ Benjamin Busch, "Info," *Scanning the Horizon*, <https://queerspaces.berlin/>.

⁷ Peter Knegt, "Long live The Beaver: A celebration of Toronto's most beloved queer space," *CBC*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/long-live-the-beaver-a-celebration-of-toronto-s-most-beloved-queer-space-1.5649212>. By no means a comprehensive account, the following instances reveal the slow erasure of queer establishments from numerous cities in tandem with increasing acts of extremist violence. In July 2020, Toronto bar The Beaver ceased operations due to reports of COVID-19-related

both monuments to the present moment and glimpses into potential futures, anticipating — like queerness itself — a use, meaning, and actualization on some horizon, some distant reality, or some place that is not quite here yet.⁸

Evan Pavka: “Queer” and “space” are two obvious yet contested terms when considering sexuality and the built environment. How are you thinking about these slippery definitions and approaches within the context of *Scanning the Horizon* and the sites that feature in it?

Benjamin Busch: For me, the theory of space elaborated by philosopher Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* was very formative.⁹ In the book, he describes it as a three-part continuous movement of the lived space, representations of space and the spatial imaginary (or representational spaces) where utopian ideas and practices arise. I am also fascinated with the idea of architecture as a sensor, which has been written about by Eyal Weizman in the framework of Forensic Architecture.¹⁰ I am interested in thinking about a space as something more than just a planning document — about a

pressures. It was later announced that the block on which it is located would be redeveloped by Streetcar Developments and Dream Unlimited; “Barbie Deinhoff’s schließt,” *Siegessäule* April 20, 2021, <https://www.siegessaule.de/magazin/barbie-deinhoffs-schließt/>. As a result of pandemic-related hardships, the cult queer bar Barbie Dienhoff in Berlin ceased operation in spring 2021; Charles E. Ramirez and Mark Hicks, “Crews battle fire at Woodward Bar & Grill in New Center area,” *Detroit News*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2022/06/14/crews-battle-fire-building-woodward-new-center-area/7622681001/>. On June 14, 2022, Detroit’s oldest gay bar, The Woodward, burned down from unknown causes; “Detective: Colorado Springs Club Shooter Ran Neo-Nazi Site,” *Associated Press*, February 22, 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2023-02-22/colorado-gay-club-shooting-no-mystery-but-motive-unknown>; “Harrowing Video Shows Group Holding Flags With Swastikas During Protest at Drag Brunch in Ohio,” *NBC Chicago*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.nbcchicago.com/top-videos-home/group-holding-flags-with-swastikas-during-protest-at-drag-brunch-in-ohio/3131147/>. More recent and concerning reporting has revealed that right-wing and neo-Nazi extremists have targeted queer establishments and events, resulting in a number of deaths in the case of the Club Q shooting in Colorado Springs in December 2022, and threats of violence by armed protesters at a May 2023 Drag Brunch in Columbus, Ohio.

⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction: Feeling Utopia,” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1. “Queerness is not here yet,” José Esteban Muñoz argues. “We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain.”

⁹ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991).

¹⁰ Eyal Weizman, “Introduction: Forensis,” in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (London: Sternberg Press, 2014), 9-32.

building as a witness and space as continually produced and negotiated among a myriad of actors.

The word “queer,” in a similar sense, is very open and process-based. It is a container, a vessel that people will fill with meanings that suit them. Richard Stein, operator of Südblock and one of the initiators of the early queer parties at SO36 in Berlin (fig.1), sees the term as an “unpretentious umbrella” people can stand under.¹¹ I would insist that queerness has to do with 2SLGBTQQ+ identity and experiences, but what I appreciate about the term is that it can be approached by many different communities.¹² That includes the white gay cis male communities of Berlin who often take prominence in queer histories but also the lesbian, trans*, people of color, disabled, and further intersectional queer communities. Thinking about “queer” as a vessel or organizing term for the project has allowed me to place focus on spaces that break with a definition of queer environments as competitive or hierarchized. Rather, it allows queer spaces to be seen as containing the residue of lived experience. Within



Figure 1: Benjamin Busch, *Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022-2024. Detail of SO36 sign. Photo by Benjamin Busch. Courtesy of the artist, Benjamin Busch ©.

¹¹ Benjamin Busch, “SO36 x Gayhane,” *Scanning the Horizon*, <https://queerspaces.berlin/so36>.

¹² Two-spirited, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, queer, questioning, and asexual, and more identities that fall under the more commonly used umbrella term “queer.” For brevity, this interview uses the term “queer” to signal these manifold and shifting identities.

the spaces I visited — particularly the self-organized spaces and the collective spaces like Begine, Sonntags-Club, (fig.2-3) and SO36 (fig.4) — there is a sense of solidarity that extends from the organizational structure itself into the communities that it interfaces with. In my experience, this contradicts a binary critique of what a “queer space” is or what it does, as well as who its community or communities may be.

There is also a question around the ability to be archived or published that was crucial throughout the process of creating the website and the virtual reality (VR) work. For them to remain safe, some spaces must stay private so that not everyone can have access. Simply creating a 3D scan could be considered an act of violence that compromises both autonomy and safety for certain spaces. An example might be a squat or another legally blurred territory. This also included places frequented by communities that have been historically oppressed and could face xenophobic aggression. Where it makes sense to archive and to publish are places where there is, and has been, an existing degree of publicness. All of the spaces on the website are open to the public; technically you can just walk in. You might be questioned or denied entry, as some of the spaces I’ve scanned are gender-exclusive, but these all remain accessible in ways that more private or informal sites are not. One of the questions I was asking myself about the locations and in the interviews was: What kind of protocols are in place? Indeed, the strictness of the protocol — the door protocol — plays a definitive role in the quality of the space and its accessibility, whether physical or virtual. This already creates a filter of which places can be involved in the project.



Figure 2: Benjamin Busch, *Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022-2024. Exterior of Sonntags-Club. Photo by Benjamin Busch. Courtesy of the artist, Benjamin Busch ©.



Figure 3: Benjamin Busch, *Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022-2024. Interior of Sonntags-Club. Photo by Benjamin Busch. Courtesy of the artist, Benjamin Busch ©.

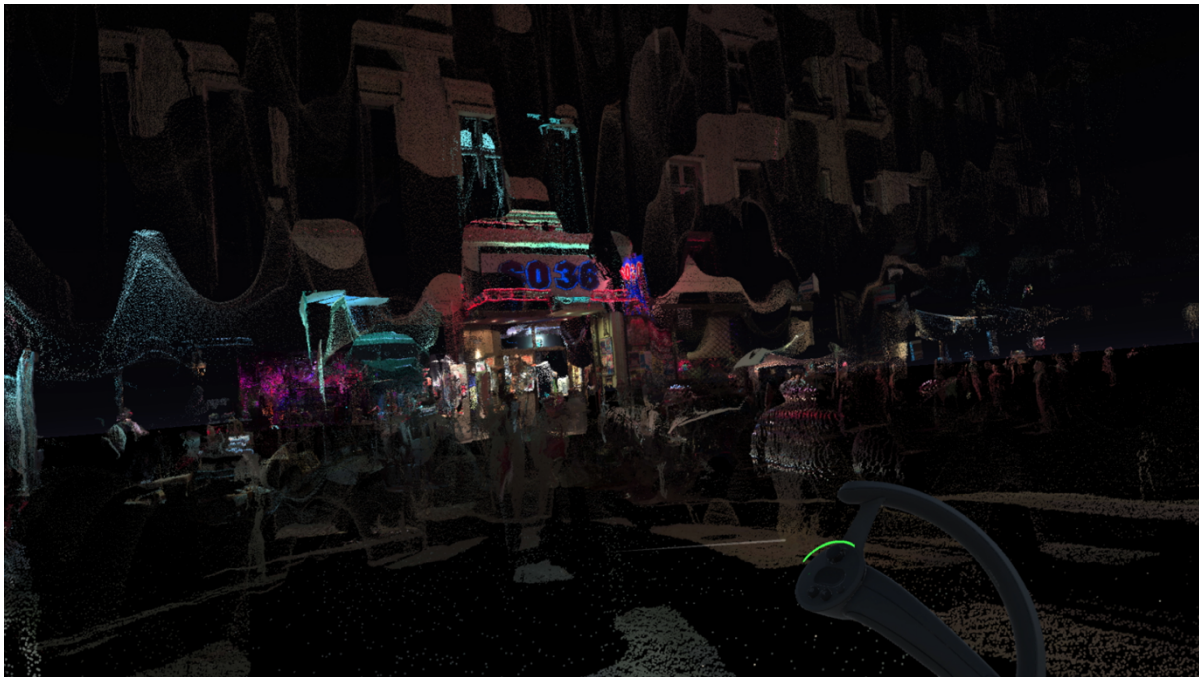


Figure 4: Benjamin Busch, *Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022-2024. Exterior of SO36. Photo by Benjamin Busch. Courtesy of the artist, Benjamin Busch ©.

EP: Your work appropriates LiDAR scanning, commonly used to create accurate, scaled and high-quality three-dimensional models of objects and architectural environments. Instead, you turn the camera toward seemingly innocuous subcultural places. This ongoing documentary project borrows its moniker from the writings of theorist José Esteban Muñoz, specifically his 2009 book, *Cruising Utopia*. But, for theorists like John Paul Ricco, cruising is practice of anonymous and uncertain, but nonetheless erotic, means of sociality involving “ungrounded movement” that generates a “groundless ground” or spatiality that is “at once no where and nowhere.”¹³ By leveraging a technology of symbolic vision that responds to subtle surface cues, gestures, depth, light and shadow, does scanning, for you, become a form of cruising architecture?

BB: It definitely has to do with voyeurism, which of course plays some part in cruising, if only because there is such a perverse amount of detail in the scans. The technology plays an important part, but the person doing the scanning plays the main role. Scanning could be a form of cruising but, in fact, this process of doing the 3D scans is more of a performance that brought me to many cruising places for the first time, such as the darkrooms¹⁴ of Ficken 3000, New Action, and Scheune. Not so much as a participant but as a voyeur — not of the bodies, but of the space and its attendant devices, textures, and residues. In some way, I also cruised spaces that have very little to do with overt sex. Through my research into existing infrastructure in Berlin, I cruised the city's oldest queer bookstore, Prinz Eisenherz, the café of its first women's only squat, Begine, and several public monuments.¹⁵ I also became more familiar with many of the spaces I had already visited through the process of scanning, which often involved long conversations with the operators, as well as the process of negotiating the completed files or following up in the cases where I did an interview.

EP: As we pan around the various spaces, we float, move through walls — even momentarily inhabit them — and trespass areas or terrains we may never have conventional access to too. Are these queer tactics or approaches?

¹³ John Paul Ricco, “Minor,” in *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 9.

¹⁴ As the name suggests, darkrooms are spaces with little to no lighting typically located in the back of nightclubs, bars, or bathhouses to provide patrons space to engage in discrete, anonymous sexual activity.

¹⁵ These monuments include the Memorial to the First Homosexual Emancipatory Movement, the Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted Under Nazism, the “Rosa Winkel” commemorative plaque at Nollendorfplatz, and the Memorial to Magnus Hirschfeld and his Institute for Sexual Science in Tiergarten.

BB: One thing that the website does as an online public artwork is to grant access not to the spaces themselves but representations of those spaces that one might not normally experience, particularly as someone who does not identify as queer. This does not simply mean physical access in the “real” world, but how the nature of the 3D scans offers impossible perspectives of seeing a building inside out, views that are physically impossible to occupy otherwise. Perhaps inhabiting this position as a viewer allows for a queer reading of space, as you can literally engage the structures from above or beside and even see interior walls becoming a penetrable surface of points. I've thought about this in relation to dissociation and depersonalization/derealization, which are experiences that may be more common in the queer community around discrimination and gender dysphoria.¹⁶ Medically speaking, depersonalization/derealization disorder is characterized by persistent experiences of detachment from one's body or surroundings.¹⁷ There is a quality of derealization to the 3D scans in that “normal” spatial perception is disrupted by the unreality of the inverted three-dimensional gaze — looking at a room inside-out. I believe dissociation relates quite well to experiences of the digital, virtual environments and my personal experience looking at the 3D scans on my desktop. And the fact that bodies are missing from the scans due to technological limitations heightens a sense of depersonalization, even to the point of a psychedelic experience.¹⁸

EP: The scans are also embedded with glitches, small gaps, or fractures. At times, partial figures are apparent on the street, doors impede the scanning of a wall surface, and occasionally the tripod and laser device appear as a haunting absence among the clustered points. Partial fragments of surrounding buildings are also frequently included, and clarity (or lack thereof) is often defined by the website

¹⁶ See Maxi Wallenhorst, “Like a Real Veil, Like a Bad Analogy: Dissociative Style and Trans Aesthetics,” *e-flux journal*, April 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/117/385637/like-a-real-veil-like-a-bad-analogy-dissociative-style-and-trans-aesthetics/>; Leah Keating and Robert T. Muller, “LGBTQ+ Based Discrimination is Associated with PTSD Symptoms, Dissociation, Emotion Disregulation, and Attachment Insecurity Among LGBTQ+ Adults Who Have Experienced Trauma,” *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 21, no.1 (2020): 124-141; Marco Colizzi, Rosalia Costa and Orlando Todarello, “Dissociative Symptoms in Individuals with Gender Dysphoria: Is the Elevated Prevalence Real?,” *Psychiatry Research* 226, no.1 (2015): 173-180.

¹⁷ Depersonalization/derealization is among the dissociative disorders that disrupt the normal integration of consciousness, identity, and perception. American Psychiatric Association, “Dissociative Disorders (Introduction),” in *DSM-5-TR* (Washington: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2022), 329.

¹⁸ See Peter Rehberg, “A Psychedelic Double,” in *BPA// Exhibition 2022*, BPA// Berlin program for artists, eds. (Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2022), 1-2.



Figure 5: Benjamin Busch, *Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022-2024. Interior of Ficken 3000. Photo by Benjamin Busch. Courtesy of the artist, Benjamin Busch ©.

buffering — almost in a state of constant becoming. Could it be said that such digital mistakes are a means of “failing to be proper,” further queering the supposed objectivity of the technology?¹⁹

BB: It became very clear to me at an early point in the process that I would have to embrace the glitch because it's a constraint, but also a redeeming feature, of the technology — it is always going to have some digital noise or artifacts or failures (fig.5). Each complete scan is composed of several individual scans taken at various positions in the space. They are later connected in the Leica companion software and finally post-processed to remove extreme statistical outliers in CloudCompare. One scan takes about five minutes to complete, so it's nearly impossible to capture anything moving with fidelity. The partial figures you see are passers-by who happened to get caught. This also has to do with the optical technology itself, in that sometimes it misrecognizes even non-moving things. For instance, the LiDAR scanner perceives objects in a mirror to be real, physical objects in what I could only call the “mirror

¹⁹ Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ* 12, no.4 (2006): 543; See also Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

world,” as it struggles with reflective surfaces of any kind. When it shoots a laser at the disco ball, it doesn’t see the disco ball as much as it sees what it reflects (fig.6). Shiny and slippery surfaces have a digital fuzz or dust surrounding them. There is a materiality of loss and a misrecognition of, or by, the spatial capture technology.²⁰

EP: Is this loss or lack of fidelity ever an issue?

BB: It brings up an interesting critique of the technology: Is it capable of reflection? In my experience, the spaces that facilitated the strongest and most visually intriguing scans were ones that had a lot of reflective surfaces due to this misrecognition.

EP: Notions of misrecognition, passing, dissociation, and imperceptibility seem to return again and again in describing queer, trans*, and gender-divergent engagements with the world, the nature of digital interfaces, and the limitations of scanning technology. Are these affects and aesthetics foundational to conveying queer spatial experiences?

BB: Queerness is elusive and so are queer spaces. In a sense, all non-normative spaces elude the codes of hegemonic society, and therefore remain illegible to some extent. I

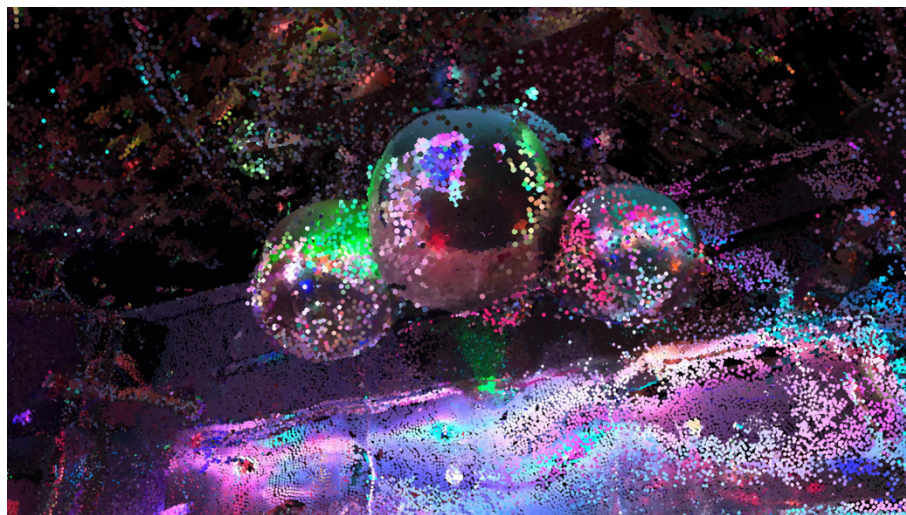


Figure 6: Benjamin Busch, *Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022-2024. Digital fuzz surrounding a disco ball in Ficken 3000. Photo by Benjamin Busch. Courtesy of the artist, Benjamin Busch ©.

think there is a connection between these concepts as they relate to queer lived experience, as well as to digital interfaces and scanning, in the way I have chosen to present the material aesthetically. The critique lies in my ongoing scrutiny of all forms and technologies of

²⁰ Linda Zhang and Biko Mandela Gray, “Beta-Real: The Materiality of Loss,” in *107th ACSA Annual Meeting Proceedings: Black Box, Pittsburg, 2019* (Washington: Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, 2019), 628-629.

spatial representation, which usually serve the goals of planners, developers, and normative society at large. Rather than processing the scans into a Pixaresque, hyperreal spectacle, I chose to stay with the “lossiness” of the scans as a refusal of total representation, to use the point clouds as a form of aesthetic encryption. I wanted to make this inherent incompleteness a defining characteristic of the work, both as criticism and as a way to convey a queer reading of space. The VR work accelerates the dissociative aspect inherent to the medium, but also to the point cloud scans themselves. Disembodied voices tell stories about the spaces, which are themselves emptied of bodies, while immersive field recordings, or “sound pools,” created by artist Sarah Martinus, immerse the viewer in a digital shadow world that is not fully real, not fully virtual, but “para-real.”²¹ There is a further destabilizing visual effect applied to the point clouds in the VR work, programmed by my technical director Vladimir Storm, that makes the digital coordinates appear as if they are suspended in water or slightly waving in the wind. No matter how the viewer identifies, queer or not, their closeness to the space is limited by the fact they are interfacing it as a representation through a computer strapped to their face. I wanted to make this apparent. But if you have been to the site, you can fill in the gaps between the points with your memories. Everyone populates the virtual space in their imagination based on their own experiences.

EP: “Queerness is often transmitted covertly,” Muñoz argued in the essay “Ephemerality as Evidence.” As he continues, “This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left [themselves] open for attack.”²² Do you consider architectural residue as part of this ephemera with the ability to function as “invisible evidence” of queer life?²³ Does this suggest that queer communities, people, and the spaces they move through require something beyond an archive?

BB: Though I situate this work both as an archive and as a publication, I do not know how much of the critique of the archive itself is intentionally embedded in the project. Rather, it is the insistence that there is a deficit of archival materials relating to queer history and that the project exists as a contribution to a growing collective archive.

²¹ Cade Diehm, “The Para-Real Manifesto,” *The New Design Congress*, December 9, 2022, <https://newdesigncongress.org/en/pub/the-para-real-manifesto>. According to Diehm, the “para-real” is “an emotional and transformative state that emerges when the electronic and the real collide.”

²² José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemerality as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no.2 (1996): 6.

²³ Muñoz, “Ephemerality as Evidence,” 6.

When we think about queer spaces from the past or when we go to archives to put together an image or a concept of those spaces, we are often confronted with a glaring absence of materials. We may have photographs, video, or films and maybe even floor plans, but we rarely have a three-dimensional representation of the space. Beyond questions of queer archiving, the work that I am doing is also questioning the archive itself as a repository for information about space. In a way, it is speculating on the utility of this type of material for the future. At present, there is a mediating function of the website that is making the material visible. I see the website and the VR work existing as an activation or mediation of the archive. But, I am equally interested to see what functional use it could have in the future for telling stories and histories about today. There's a recursive thought process — going back and forth between this speculative future of storytelling and the present reality of managing these massive data files or sets and finding a way to aestheticize them so that people can understand and begin to think about further uses. And, to perceive their potential importance. Another layer of this is spaces that can be archived or safely documented through this approach. Some may be willing, but not yet ready to be published; there could be an interest in keeping this spatial material for future use though it does not currently make sense to make it so visible.



Figure 7: Benjamin Busch, *Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022-2024. Entry to the darkroom of Ficken 3000. Photo by Benjamin Busch. Courtesy of the artist, Benjamin Busch ©.

EP: Have you documented places that you are not comfortable disseminating?

BB: I have completed a number of scans in darkrooms that I was welcomed into. I was trusted to create these scans and, until today, I have chosen not to publish them. There is a single exception, Ficken 3000, as by now it is known much more as a scene bar or even a hipster bar (fig.7). While there is a darkroom in the basement, it is also frequently used as a place to hang out, where the music is playing, and where you can dance. It is not a secret. Discussing making it available online with the owners, combined with their existing media presence, gave me permission in some sense to make this public in a way that I had not established for the other darkroom bars.²⁴

EP: Ultimately, *Scanning the Horizon* is a fragile, ephemeral archive; files can be corrupted, physical storage can be compromised and software can advance to the point that VR is no longer operational. Like the spaces recorded, it is also the subject of entropy, loss, and potential erasure. How are you working with these limitations?

BB: I appreciate the value of ephemerality and orality as strategic practices against persecution. But Berlin is quite unique in that it is possible to be very transparent about queer life. It is actively supported by state institutions, providing grants, exposure, and representation and so on. Of course, there is always a risk in writing down oral histories and recording acts on durable media, especially with the internet becoming difficult to erase as a precautionary measure if things start to turn toward the right. But there is a risk here, as there is anywhere, that these documents, recordings, or scans can eventually become tools of oppression. The question is: What kind of society has to exist for that radical turn to take place? What conditions would make that possible? Censorship and proactive self-censorship are hallmarks of political oppression, and these practices were present in Germany in the lead-up to, and finally under, National Socialism. There is a vivid memory of that history here.

When I talk about the archive, which includes about 25 interior spaces as well as a handful of public monuments, the collection consists essentially of the 3D scans which have been exported into an open format (E57). I'm in the process of archiving them on Millennial Disc, a form of optical media widely used in archival practices. There is a hope that by using a specific format and a specific medium, the 3D scans will

²⁴ For instance, see "Die Erben der Darkrooms: Frank Müller vom Ficken3000 im Gespräch mit Aron Boks - taz Talk," Youtube, posted July 27, 2021, 56:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPuRrq5MbGs>.

still be accessible far into the future. But, who knows? One thing that is certain is that until these materials and this archive find another home, it is going to remain in my private custodianship. I have somehow created a job for myself to protect and oversee this material.

EP: To avoid erasure, you have become the reluctant arbiter or “archon” of your own archive.²⁵

BB: In a sense, you could also say this is a continuation of the performance of the archival gesture in perpetuum. Ultimately, I consider the scans, as well as the oral histories that I have recorded in interviews, as being snapshots of a moment in time. As opposed to only thinking about the files as potential remains or a remainder of a space, it might allow us to anticipate future snapshots, or future performances, or future parties, or whatever it might be that will happen within these places (fig.8). As someone who studied architecture and worked as an architect, I am aware there is a sort of impending demise to every space, to every structure. Maybe it's not within our



Figure 8: Benjamin Busch, *Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022-2024. Entry corridor in SO36. Photo by Benjamin Busch. Courtesy of the artist, Benjamin Busch ©.

²⁵ Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 9-11.

lifetimes, but that is just how it is. I like to think that there could be a remainder here that has some value in the future.

EP: Perhaps it is fitting to end by returning to Muñoz. For the author, the only hope for queer futurity is a wild leap into the void. It is only here that “another mode of being that is not yet here” can be glimpsed specifically through conjuring the abyss that consumes it.²⁶ In the end, is the embrace of disappearance — of spaces, archives, scans, bodies, and more — the queerest thing of all?

BB: With the exception of outdoor spaces or the street context, there are generally no bodies in the interiors of the scans. Therefore, there is already a sense of disappearance and refusal here partially determined by the technology, but also by my personal choice not to include people. One of the discussions in *Cruising Utopia* that I found particularly inspiring was the description of Kevin McCarty's *The Chameleon Club*, where the artist photographed empty stages in many queer and DIY venues.²⁷ What I appreciated about Muñoz's reading of McCarty's work is the active role of the



Figure 9: Benjamin Busch, *Scanning the Horizon: An Immersive Archive*, 2022-2024. Dance floor and stage of SO36. Photo by Benjamin Busch. Courtesy of the artist, Benjamin Busch ©.

²⁶ Muñoz, “A Jeté Out the Window: Fred Herko’s Incandescent Illumination,” in *Cruising Utopia*, 147.

²⁷ Muñoz, “A Jeté Out the Window,” 97-113; see also José Esteban Muñoz, “Impossible Spaces: Kevin McCarty’s *The Chameleon Club*,” *GLQ* 11, no. 3 (2005): 427-436.

spectator. It gives me the sense that a queer space isn't bound by walls, but maybe more of a space of recollection, one that's continually revisited and reconfigured on an imaginative, even neurological level every time we access our memories.²⁸ Queer spaces can be relived and even lived-in through this documentation in the same manner as looking at the empty stages of McCarty, projecting a performer one remembers on that stage or who one could imagine being in that venue (fig.9). With the softness of memory, orality, and oral traditions, there is social material that is unable to be documented; it can only be experienced and perceived. This is what I want to activate: to invigorate such processes of remembering as a way to not lose access to these spaces as a community, as communities, and as a society.

²⁸ Daniel L. Schacter, Donna Rose Addis, and Randy L. Buckner, "Remembering the Past to Imagine the Future: The Prospective Brain," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* vol. 8 (2007): 657-661.

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Spaces of Labor in the Social Clubs of British India: Obsolescence in Denial

Nisha Shanghavi

Obsolescence offers a paradigm to think about temporal change by following a logic of expendability and supersession to break away from the past.¹ How can obsolescence enable re-thinking colonial spaces of labor in postcolonial India? I turn to a colonial practice of club members being waited on by lady attendants, spatially embedded in the ladies' dressing room adjoining the swimming pools – one of the least visible spaces – in the Tollygunge Club (est. 1895) in Calcutta, India.² In my analysis of the club's dressing rooms, a gender-specific facility, I examine two interconnected rooms, entered from doorways on opposite ends as a space, which even today, provides a historically colonial service of attending to female swimmers of the club: these services have no defined specifications and range from providing clean

¹ Daniel M. Abramson, "Obsolescence and Its Futures," in *The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches in Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 231-243.

² Calcutta was the capital of the British Empire in India until 1911. It was renamed Kolkata in 2001 as per its precolonial pronunciation, and a result of decolonization efforts. For the purpose of this article, I shall address present-day Kolkata as Calcutta since the discussion here addresses certain spatial and social continuities from the colonial period.

towels to watching valuables or everyday possessions that members do not want to lug around while they socialize or enjoy other activities in the club.

Ordinary spaces like doors, passages, service spaces, and served spaces often conceal the physical presence of labor. The study of these spaces, though, reveals



Figure 1: The official entrance to the dressing rooms are through the blue swinging doors. There is a notice board to post timed news bulletins, circulars, and a list of members who serve on the swim committee. On the left of the door is a five-foot-tall list of rules and regulations for the pool. The first two rules specify proper attire for swimmers, including swim caps to be worn by male and female swimmers with longer than shoulder-length hair. Photo by author, 2024.

transactions and the socio-economic hierarchies embedded within them.³ Recent scholarship has explored how servants working in the homes of British colonizers in India were made invisible as they traversed service and living spaces.⁴ Unlike colonial residences where Indian servants were a ubiquitous presence in all spaces, the dressing room staff remain within the confines of two rooms.⁵ To what extent is such obsolescent colonial labor sustained due to its spatial presence outside the margins of the visual field? How are the architectural spaces constructed to enable invisibility of labor practices and the people who perform them?

³ See Robin Evans, "Figures, Doors, and Passages," in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (London: Architectural Association, 1997), 55-91.

⁴ See Swati Chattopadhyay, "Locating the Bottlekhana," in *Small Spaces: Recasting the Architecture of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), 38-61. For detailed discussion on labor and laboring bodies in colonial India, see Chattopadhyay, "Making Invisible," in *Small Spaces*, 124-146. For further reading, see Nitin Sinha, "Who Is (Not) a Servant, Anyway? Domestic Servants and Service in Early Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 1 (2021): 152-206; "Domestic Servants and Master-Servant Regulations in Colonial Calcutta, 1750s-1810s," *Past & Present* 255, no. 1 (2022): 141-88; Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵ Although this article discusses swimming pool dressing rooms, there are even more confined spaces of labor in Calcutta's clubs. The Bengal Club's ladies' room has an all-day lady attendant who is provided with a plastic chair inside the bathroom and works 8-hour shifts. Similarly, women's bathrooms in Tolly have a female attendant during club hours.

In summer 2022, I visited the Tollygunge Club for the first time in four years. I “inherited” my membership to Tolly, as the club is colloquially called, as a child of a “full” member.⁶ My father’s undergraduate engineering degree from a U.K. university in the 1960s fetched him a decent job with an American company in Calcutta. Deemed “clubbable,” my father was welcomed into Calcutta’s British clubland – as England-returned, “civilized,” and deserving of access to what had been white-only spaces until the 1960s.⁷ Clubs were notoriously governed by strict rules and regulations of social propriety and etiquette within their premises. Today, a five-foot-tall wooden board listing pool rules is placed on the wall outside of the women’s dressing room (fig. 1).

One such club rule is that swimmers with shoulder-length hair, and longer, must wear a swim cap – a ubiquitous regulation in the colonial clubs with swimming pools in Calcutta. I purchased a silicone swim cap from the club’s sports shop – lest anyone object to my entry into the pool without it. After a short swim, I walked through a pair of blue wooden swinging doors, to the changing room with private showers and dressing stations,



Figure 2: View of the inner room/lounge area where the attendants, or *ayahs*, are provided with two plastic chairs. Note the yoga mat, water bottle, and a duffel bag are placed on the sofa by a member who is likely using the pool, or is in the club premises elsewhere – lest their things become wet, or dirty if placed on the floor. Several pool users have left their bags and personal belongings on the shelves to be under the supervision of the attendants, or *ayahs*. Photo by author, 2024.

⁶ There are various types of memberships – limited-time memberships for corporate employees, or dormant membership for outstation members, and reciprocal memberships for members from affiliated clubs. A full member undergoes a selective process for admission and enjoys a lifetime membership.

⁷ “Clubland” has been in use since the 1880s to designate London clubs within a spatial grid encompassing Piccadilly, Pall Mall, St. James’s Street, and Haymarket. My use of “Clubland” refers to the British clubs in India as a cultural phenomenon, a product and a remnant of the British empire. See Seth Alexander Thévoz, *Club Government: How the Early Victorian World was Ruled from London Clubs* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2019), 6. The term, “clubbable,” was used as early as 1763, however, “clubbable” is specifically a nineteenth-century concept used to describe “Britishness.” See Mrinalini Sinha, “Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India,” *The Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 489–521.



Figure 3: View towards the upstairs private massage room and a basement for service staff's personal belongings, changing into uniforms, and eating meals. The second shift attendants work from 1:00 pm – 9:00 pm, with lunch at 3:00 pm. A plastic chair is provided for the attendants only. Photo by author, 2024.

and rows of small lockers. Further inside is an air-conditioned lounge equipped with bathrooms, mirrors above a vanity, a pair of semi-circular green leather sofas with a small, glass coffee table between them, and freshly-cleaned bath towels stacked on a side table (figs. 2, 3). A small basement is reserved for the personal use by the service staff, where they sit on the floor, and an upstairs room for massages. The *didis* generally gather in the interior air-conditioned chamber of the ladies' dressing room, hoping to remain cool during the sweltering hot summer months of Calcutta. This interior room has a service entrance, leading directly to the main circular driveway, so as to minimize traversing through club property. With only two plastic chairs provided for the *didis*, a few of them oftentimes squat cross-legged against the wall in a corner on the floor, waiting to be called to serve – they are not allowed on the sofas.

As I was about to enter a private dressing room, a much older *ayah*, or lady attendant as they are now referred to, approached me with a warm smile, and a faint recognition. Not expecting to be recognized, let alone acknowledged, I nodded at her with surprise. She extended her arm, gesturing at my swim cap, and softly said, "let me dry it for you," probably as a kind gesture to make contact with me. Taken aback, I looked at my silicone cap, the water droplets already trickling off. I showed her how dry it already was, implying I did not need her assistance. In all honesty, I was embarrassed at the thought of giving her a meaningless chore. The encounter left me in great discomfort – why was her labor even available to an able-bodied person like me? I wondered why she considered it part of her job to dry my swim cap?

During my childhood days in the 1980s, the presence of *ayahs* in club dressing rooms had never bothered me. Children often went swimming unaccompanied by their



Figure 4: Interior view from the poolside door, looking through the outer room with changing stations on the right, rows of lockers on the left bottom, a thick floor mat to absorb water – rolled back every time the floor is mopped, and aligned perfectly by contractual cleaning staff. The service door at the far end exits to the driveway through a covered passageway. Photo by author, 2024.

their gym bags, folding wet clothes, and safeguarding personal items like wallets, electronics, etc. Throughout the day, a contracted group of women cleaners attend to the showers, especially to mop the frequently wet floors between the pool, showers, and dressing rooms (fig. 4).⁸

parents, who were comforted by the knowledge that the *ayahs* would care for the children and assist them with zippers, buttons, put on swim caps, or unknot and comb hair etc. This time, however, it felt different. I had never asked for their assistance as an adult. Referred to as (*ayah*) *didi*, or “maid-sister,” a combination of the Anglo-Indian term, *ayah*, and *didi* in Bengali for older sister, the female attendant, whose name I did not ask, proudly declared how she remembered most members because of her 30-year service at the club. For 16 hours each day, *didis* are tasked to lie in wait and assist when called. Three to four male attendants in the men’s changing rooms adjoining the pool also provide an equivalent service including packing and unpacking



Figure 5: View of the inside lounge, showing two bathrooms on the left, a two-sink vanity, and the second exit through the large door on the right. Photo by author, 2024.

⁸ In a private conversation in December 2024, the cleaning staff confided that their work was checked by a supervisor every time they mopped the floors.



Figure 6: View of the passageway connecting the doorway from the dressing room lounge to the circular pathway/driveway to exit the club. The passageway is without any openings besides the singular, shuttered window, offering privacy between the inner dressing room and the outer path. Photo by author, 2024.

With the first shift beginning at 5:00 am, and the second shift ending at 9:00 pm, a little past the pool closure time, *didis* spend most of their work time providing an endless supply of clean towels, picking up carelessly strewn used towels, hair dryers, and messy talcum powder from plastic bottles mixed with pool water lying on the floor left by female members and children, safekeeping swimmers' bags, valuables, and assisting in mundane chores. During my December 2024 visit, I had forgotten my hair tie at home, without which I could not have tucked my long hair in the swim cap. I asked the attending *didi* if she had a spare one I could use – and, of course, she did. It was a used hair tie, probably abandoned in the dressing room, which she had picked up and caringly saved in an ordinary white plastic bag, full of other little forgotten objects. I was able to swim in the pool that day because of her ability to see value in such discarded, deserted

things. The mundane labor is sustained by the members' continual dependence on the *didis*. I, much like other club members, am complicit in denying obsolescence to the labor practices embedded within these spaces.

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Denial and Dissolution: Architecture's Battle Against Entropy

Eric Futerfas

Destined for Demise

"When the baby is born there is no place to put it: it is born, it will in time die, therefore there is no sense in enlarging the world by so many miles and minutes for its accommodation. A temporary scaffolding is set up, an altar of ephemerality – a permanent altar. This altar is the Myth. The object of the Myth is to give happiness: to help the baby pretend that what is ephemeral is permanent. It does not matter if in the course of time he discovers that all is ephemeral: so long as he can go on pretending that it is permanent he is happy."

- Laura Riding, *Anarchism is Not Enough*¹

There is a beautiful, but brief window of time after birth when we fail to take the world for granted. People, places, and objects swirl in and out of our nascent consciousness as we fumble through a delirious, naïve, and helpless trance. Before the age of two, however, a new spell begins to charm us as we develop an understanding

¹ Laura Riding, "The Myth," in *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1928), 9.

that these things we witness can persist beyond our immediate senses. This is *object permanence*,² and we carry this foundational insight with us through the rest of our lives, for better or worse.

The concept of object permanence is powerful and persuasive — something so certain that its future does not demand concern. This is a convenient belief to maintain for designers who already attempt to balance so many other considerations, but rejecting the inevitable demise of our architectural creations can invite severe consequences. All matter in our universe is subject to the same phenomena — there is no exception for architecture, but its afterlife is often an afterthought. What kind of architecture might we conjure if practitioners turned away from the more technologically indulgent methods that have perpetuated an illusion of permanence and instead embraced its future dissolution more radically?

An architectural order cannot simply be created. It must also be maintained to prevent it from succumbing to the elements: corroding, flooding, or even becoming infested. This transition from higher to lower order is entropy at work. As defined by the second law of thermodynamics, *entropy* is the dissipation of energy in a closed system, which occurs as a statistical inevitability with the passage of time.³ The implications of this law are that, at a universal scale, we are sliding toward ever-increasing entropy, however, this trend can be locally disrupted with some effort. This is where architecture (and indeed any creative endeavor which invests energy into ordering things) can turn back the tide of entropy's constant creep.

The second law of thermodynamics tells us that the process of establishing order comes at a cost, however. This is because disorder cannot be truly negated. Rather, it is offset to another portion of space within an open system.⁴ This price is plainly seen in new development projects where our human habitats are erected at the expense of the environment. Although we may find a new physical order to be comfortable, convenient, and beautiful, disorder has been externalized in the form of habitat loss and population isolation.⁵ One particularly troubling example of this

² J. Gavin Bremner, Alan M. Slater, and Scott P. Johnson, "Perception of Object Persistence: The Origins of Object Permanence in Infancy," *Child Development Perspectives* 9, no. 1 (2015): 7–13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12098>.

³ Adam Frank, "Life Gives Sight To A Chaotic Universe," *NPR*, September 10, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2013/09/10/220988227/life-gives-sight-to-a-chaotic-universe>.

⁴ Robert Shapiro, "A Simpler Origin for Life," *Scientific American*, 2007, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-simpler-origin-for-life>.

⁵ Fredrick Ojijia et al., "Impacts of Emerging Infrastructure Development on Wildlife Species and Habitats in Tanzania," *Journal of Wildlife and Biodiversity* 8, no. 2 (February 5, 2024): 365–84, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11106542>.

process is the world's largest open pit iron mine located in the Amazon rainforest (fig. 1), where one of the planet's most productive carbon sinks and biologically diverse habitats is being destroyed for the extraction of raw minerals to be transmuted into steel for our architecture and infrastructure. This mine is not alone either. Many other iron mines occur in isolated, ecologically sensitive regions, where extractive activity threatens the health of wildlife.⁶ Limestone is another highly demanded ingredient for one of architecture's most ubiquitous materials: concrete. Soil and vegetation disturbance at limestone quarries increases the risk of erosion and runoff, which leads to sedimentation of local water streams.⁷ This degrades water quality and results in a disruptive domino effect for organisms lower on the food chain through effects like eutrophication and downstream flooding.⁸ Given the complexity and interdependence of living and non-living elements within the natural systems that we encroach on, the full effect of our impacts are often difficult to predict, mitigate, and fully understand.

The price of our desired order becomes even greater when understanding entropy in tandem with the first law of thermodynamics. Without a perfect conservation of energy, the reality is that the amount of chaos generated is actually greater than the order it yields.⁹ In the example of the iron mine, this occurs in the form of all of the embodied energy spent in transporting and processing ore from the site, polluting the atmosphere in addition to the baseline habitat destruction.

This chaos created is not perpetually confined to space external to the construction site, however. Regardless of how impervious we design our walls to be, the chaos sewn by our elaborate, disconnected paradigm of construction haunts us from a distance, promising to trickle back with time. Climate change is a clear manifestation of this. The same greenhouse gases that we emit into the atmosphere as a byproduct of creating and maintaining our civilization are also accelerating the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events.¹⁰ Our planet's climate system has been knocked so far off balance that we now risk creating a feedback effect that accelerates the pace of its collapse, potentially making some impacts irreversible.¹¹ The

⁶ UK Green Building Council Team, "What Are the Environmental Impacts of Construction Materials?" UKGBC, 2024, <https://ukgbc.org/news/introduction-to-embodied-ecological-impacts>.

⁷ UK Green Building Council Team, "What Are the Environmental Impacts of Construction Materials?"

⁸ Victoria Spina, "The Impacts of Sedimentation," VERTEX (blog), 2022, <https://vertexeng.com/insights/the-impacts-of-sedimentation>.

⁹ Shapiro, "A Simpler Origin for Life."

¹⁰ Hans-Otto Pörtner et al., eds., *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 2022.

¹¹ Pörtner et al., *Climate Change 2022*.

Paris Climate Accords identify a maximum increase of 2 degrees Celsius in average global temperature before 2050 if we are to avoid triggering these impacts, which we are grimly off track from achieving.¹² The building sector, specifically, is the largest contributor to this problem, responsible for 37% of global emissions.¹³ If the construction of architecture is directly fueling our more extreme weather events, it is implicated in more than its own demise.

Once the forces of entropy come to reclaim our architectural creations, we are forced to confront the challenge of processing the heaps of spent material. There are three basic options in contemporary demolition waste management: directly re-using, recycling, or landfilling. The first of these options is the most resource-efficient, or, in



Figure 1: Satellite Image of Brazil's Carajas Mines, 2018. Photo in the public domain. Courtesy of NASA.

¹² United Nations Environment Programme, "2022 Global Status Report for Buildings and Construction | UNEP - UN Environment Programme," November 9, 2022,

<https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/2022-global-status-report-buildings-and-construction>.

¹³ United Nations Environment Programme and Yale Center for Ecosystems + Architecture, "Building Materials and the Climate: Constructing a New Future," 2023,

<https://wedocs.unep.org/20.500.11822/43293>.

terms of entropy, externalizes the least amount of chaos. Despite being the least resource-intensive, re-using is perhaps the most planning-intensive, requiring designers to carefully specify durable materials for systems that are easily disassembled. Building with mechanical fasteners makes this much more achievable compared to sticky and persistent adhesives.¹⁴ The logistics of disassembly are also key, requiring plans for workers to safely access and remove materials. This may be complicated enough to demand a manual for future owners and workers to consult.¹⁵ Reuse also requires buy-in from future stakeholders, agreeing to constrain the composition of their projects to the raw remains of another.

Recycling offers a higher degree of flexibility in material adoption, but it comes with a higher processing cost, and a portion of material that is theoretically recyclable is often unrecoverable, leaving it to be disposed of in landfills.¹⁶ In the US, about 24% of demolition materials, by weight, are simply landfilled.¹⁷ By far the largest material captured for reuse by weight is concrete, but there are limitations to concrete's recycling potential. The only reliable way to recycle concrete is to pulverize it into aggregate for another concrete mix, but this is only sparing a marginal amount of global warming potential because the highest driver of carbon emissions in concrete production is not aggregate, but the cement used to help bind the aggregate together.¹⁸ Additionally, mixes using recycled concrete aggregate are often only adequate for low-strength applications, demanding a larger amount of cement to compensate.¹⁹

The reality is, without 100% recycling or reuse efficiencies, most of our modern construction materials are destined for landfills sooner or later. This isn't to say that we shouldn't recycle. In the face of climate collapse and all its implications, we shouldn't spare any solutions, however insufficient, but the building industry's outsized impact presents a profound potential for change. Architects and engineers must investigate

¹⁴ American Institute of Architects, "Design for Adaptability, Deconstruction, & Reuse | The American Institute of Architects," 2024, <https://www.aia.org/resource-center/design-adaptability-deconstruction-reuse>.

¹⁵ American Institute of Architects, "Design for Adaptability, Deconstruction, & Reuse."

¹⁶ Milad Ashtiani, Jordan Palmeri, and Kathrina Simonen, "End-of-Life Modeling and Data in North American Whole Building Life Cycle Assessment Tools," *Carbon Leadership Forum* (blog), March 30, 2024, <https://carbonleadershipforum.org/eol-modeling-data-wblca>.

¹⁷ Environmental Protection Authority, "Advancing Sustainable Materials Management: 2018 Fact Sheet," December 2020.

¹⁸ Ryan Mills, "Policy Opportunities to Increase Material Circularity in the Buildings Industry," RMI, August 4, 2022, <https://rmi.org/opportunities-to-increase-material-circularity-in-the-buildings-industry>.

¹⁹ Mills, "Policy Opportunities."

methods for conducting the profession more responsibly, because our attempts to externalize disorder in a game of capitalist hot potato are coming to a head, as we all fundamentally share the greater environmental and social contexts which our projects impact.

We don't have to look far for examples of civilization without the architectural end-of-life dilemmas that we currently face. In the Great Basin of western Nevada and eastern Oregon, Native peoples have lived within an arid landscape of mountains and deserts through austere means and sacred practices for over 11,000 years.²⁰ The Northern Paiute tribe were particularly successful survivors in this region until they were encountered by western pioneers and silver miners whose encroachment, hostility, and occupation made their traditional lifestyles increasingly difficult to maintain. In 1859, the US government relegated the Northern Paiute people to the Pyramid Lake Reservation, making their nomadic way of life effectively impossible.²¹ Before this, their architecture was *deliberately* ephemeral to coincide with their occupation patterns as nomadic people. The Northern Paiute would weave structures from what little substantial plant material could be gathered: grass, tules, cattails, sagebrush, willows and pine boughs.²² These shelters served primarily as an easy means to protect from the elements – they were never exactly regarded as a “home.”²³ The Northern Paiute did produce longer lasting settlements woven mostly of willow branches, bent and lashed against each other into dome shapes (fig. 2), and clad with cattail or tule leaves to break the wind and shed moisture. These structures might last more than five years before having to be rebuilt, but this short life-cycle does not share our familiar concerns for disposal. Thanks to the organic (i.e. low entropy) material palette, these structures could simply break down and return their nutrients to the ecosystem where they fuel future growth. In the event that a death occurs in one of these dwellings, however, the Paiute would perform a special ritual. Instead of disassembling or abandoning the

²⁰ William Sigler, Steven Vigg, and Mimi Bres, “Life History of the Cui-Ui, *Chasmistes Cujus Cope*, in Pyramid Lake, Nevada: A Review,” *Great Basin Naturalist* 45, no. 4 (October 31, 1985), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn/vol45/iss4/1>.

²¹ Kelly Aliano, “Life Story: Sarah Winnemucca,” *Women & the American Story* (blog), <https://wams.nyhistory.org/expansions-and-inequalities/westward-expansion/sarah-winnemucca/>.

²² Margaret M. Wheat, “Building Houses,” in *Survival Arts of the Primitive Paiutes* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1967), 103.

²³ Wheat, ““Building Houses,” 103.



Figure 3: Jimmy George (left) and Daisy Aster (right) demonstrating traditional Northern Paiute shelter assembly with willow branches, 1967. Courtesy of University of Nevada Press.



Figure 2: Aerial View Burning Man 2014 During Embrace, 2014. Photo by Duncan Rawlinson.

structure to allow it to passively degrade, such structures would be burned to help transition a lingering soul to the afterlife and purify the space of its residual presence.²⁴

Contemporary Native peoples may not practice architecture like their ancestors, but the Pyramid Lake Paiute tribe is working to continue the legacy of their culture in Nevada. Since 1990, an ancient lake bed within the ancestral territory of the Northern Paiute known as “the playa” has served as the site for the ephemeral metropolis of Black Rock City to ritualistically emerge through the work of upwards of 80,000 Burning Man festival attendees (fig. 3).²⁵ Thousands of years of seasonal flooding and alkali sediment deposit have transformed this area into one of the largest and flattest places on earth,²⁶ providing what Koolhaas and Obrist call a “tabula rasa”—or blank slate—for Burning Man participants to spawn all sorts of experimental installations and experiences.²⁷ Despite its empty appearance, the playa is a site of historic Paiute presence and reverence, and is still considered sacred by them today. To respect this history, the Burning Man organization grants hundreds of free tickets to members of the Pyramid Lake Paiute tribe, and its spiritual leader Dean Barlese is invited each year to personally bless the Temple structure for the festival.²⁸

The Temple is redesigned and rebuilt each year by a team of volunteers in the center of the city as its crown jewel, beckoning attendees to reflect, mourn, or simply take refuge from the desert sun. It is a secular monument to whatever meaning people are inspired to instill it with, however it is not intended to be permanent, as most monuments are. As in the death rituals with the shelters of Dean’s ancestors, the Temple leaves this world in a controlled blaze, taking with it all the notes and offerings that people have left in its confines throughout the week. This brings a somber catharsis to an otherwise ecstatic and whimsical festival, laying the emotional groundwork for people’s impending return to the “default” world, and symbolizing the beginning of another cycle (fig. 4).

²⁴ Jerry Schaefer, “‘Now Dead I Begin to Sing’: A Protohistoric Clothes-Burning Ceremonial Feature in the Colorado Desert,” *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 22, no. 2 (July 1, 2000), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/55k3s7j6>.

²⁵ “Burning Man Timeline - 2019,” <https://burningman.org/timeline>.

²⁶ Kate Galbraith, “Burning Man Rain: All About the Ancient Lake Bed Where the Festival Takes Place,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 3, 2023, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/climate/article/burning-man-playa-rain-18345507.php>.

²⁷ Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist eds., *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks* (Köln: TASCHEN GmbH, 2011), 56.

²⁸ Lucy Kang and David Boyer, “Burning Man Special: Black Rock City Is Built on Northern Paiute Land,” KPFA (blog), September 5, 2020, <https://kpfa.org/blog/burning-man-is-built-on-paiute-land>.



Figure 4: David Best and the Temple Crew, *The Burn of the Temple*, 2016. Photo by Jacques de Selliers 2016 ©.

Burning Man is only made possible through permits granted by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), an agency responsible for ensuring the health of 245 million acres of public land across the United States. One of the ways that the Burning Man organization continues to garner the confidence of the BLM is by enforcing a principle for attendees called "Leave No Trace." This principle mandates that participants remove everything they brought to the playa, and refrain from engaging in acts that would disrupt the site's physical integrity, such as dumping greywater. This drives a lot of creativity in how people survive on the playa, from water evaporation basins to deployable architecture. Tents are a classic example of deployable architecture, designed to be quickly constructed and packed away with minimal impact to the earth. Tents are ubiquitous in Black Rock City, constituting the vast majority of structures, however, one organized camp of attendees, who go by the name "Hotel California," opt for a modular timber approach instead. Their multi-level flagship installation utilizes a clever structural node assembled out of six identical CNC-ed pieces of marine grade



Figure 5: Hiroshima in the aftermath of the atomic bomb, 1945. Photo in the public domain. Courtesy of the US Air Force.

baltic birch plywood.²⁹ This node allows for the structure to take on a bespoke, modular 3D-gridded form that nimbly adjusts to desired programming requirements and site constraints, such as neighbors or public rights-of-way. Black Rock City retains the same radial planning scheme each year, but internal adjustments to its grid are always made. This is just one of many variables ensuring no two gatherings are alike. Whatever the exact context will be Hotel California's scaffold structure can adapt, and because it is assembled without screws or adhesives, the structure can be easily deconstructed and packed flat into shipping containers for removal, where it will await redeployment once again. Soon enough (and not without some challenges) the surreal partyscape of Black Rock City goes dormant for another year, and Dean Barlese makes a final blessing of the land to clear it of any negative energy left behind.³⁰

²⁹ Hotel California, "GitHub - Hotelcaliforniabm/Duxel: A Nifty Way to Build Modular Multi Story Structures," posted 2019, <https://github.com/hotelcaliforniabm/duxel?tab=readme-ov-file>.

³⁰ Kang and Boyer, "Burning Man Special."

The concept of birthing an adaptive metropolis out from a tabula rasa landscape is not novel. While *Burning Man* draws on the idea of a tabula rasa to facilitate a process of creative renewal in a landscape whose apparent emptiness is the product of environmental factors, another example emerges from landscapes subject to deliberate deletion. Appearing as a sudden, silent white flash,³¹ entropy expelled by atomic bombs swept through the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 at unfathomable speeds, reducing vast swathes of dynamic urban territory to radioactive debris within seconds, and taking upwards of 210,000 human lives.³² In the wake of the unprecedented attacks, these decimated landscapes became a sort of tabula rasa canvas for the reimagining and rebuilding of Japan, guided by a new architectural movement that rose from the ashes (fig. 5).

Urban Reincarnation

“There are atom bombs, and architecture will perish....Architecture can no longer be like temples, the pyramids, or gothic cathedrals. Architecture is finished, it has been destroyed, and that's why we are proposing Metabolism.”

- Hiroshi Hara, recalling a quote by Noboru Kawazoe, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks*³³

“Metabolism” was an avant-garde utopian modernist architecture and urban planning movement in post-war Japan that attempted to integrate the humbling lessons of impermanence bestowed by the bombs. The name was proposed by one of its key members, Noboru Kawazoe, after translating *metabolism* from the word *shinchintaisha* (新陳代謝) which he read about in a Japanese copy of Friedrich Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature*. In it, Engels writes about the scientific discoveries of the time: “all rigidity was dissolved, all fixity dissipated, all particularity that had been regarded as eternal became transient, the whole of nature shown as moving in eternal flux and cyclical course.”³⁴

Contemporary science continues to rebuke object permanence and elucidate entropy’s role as it probes at one of the most foundational mysteries of our ontology:

³¹ John Hersey, “A Noiseless Flash,” in *Hiroshima* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1946), 5.

³² Thomas Gaulkin, “Counting the Dead at Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (blog), August 4, 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/08/counting-the-dead-at-hiroshima-and-nagasaki>.

³³ Koolhaas and Obrist, *Project Japan*, 239.

³⁴ Friedrich Engels, “Introduction,” in *Dialectics of Nature* (International Publishers, 1934), 30.

the origin of life itself. Two of the most distinguished traits of life are the abilities to replicate and metabolize, but there is debate among scientists about which of these processes came first. The replication-first theory — based on RNA — was prominent for some time, but many chemists have flocked to the metabolism-first theory due to complications with replication and the relative simplicity of metabolism.³⁵ The metabolism-first theory requires a precise stew of biochemical reactions to kickstart a metabolic process, but this low-entropy precision requires a distinct zone for filtration and containment. As outlined in the beginning of the essay, entropy can be spatially offset, however something is needed to keep it at bay. This is where membranes emerge as a solution, a barrier to help maintain physical separation between different zones of low and high entropy, or life and non-life. Today, we see sophisticated double-layered cell membranes made of lipids, but it is fairly conceivable how some inert feature — like small pores of a particular geologic formation — could have initially served the same purpose in the recipe of life.³⁶ Discoveries of geothermal vents within

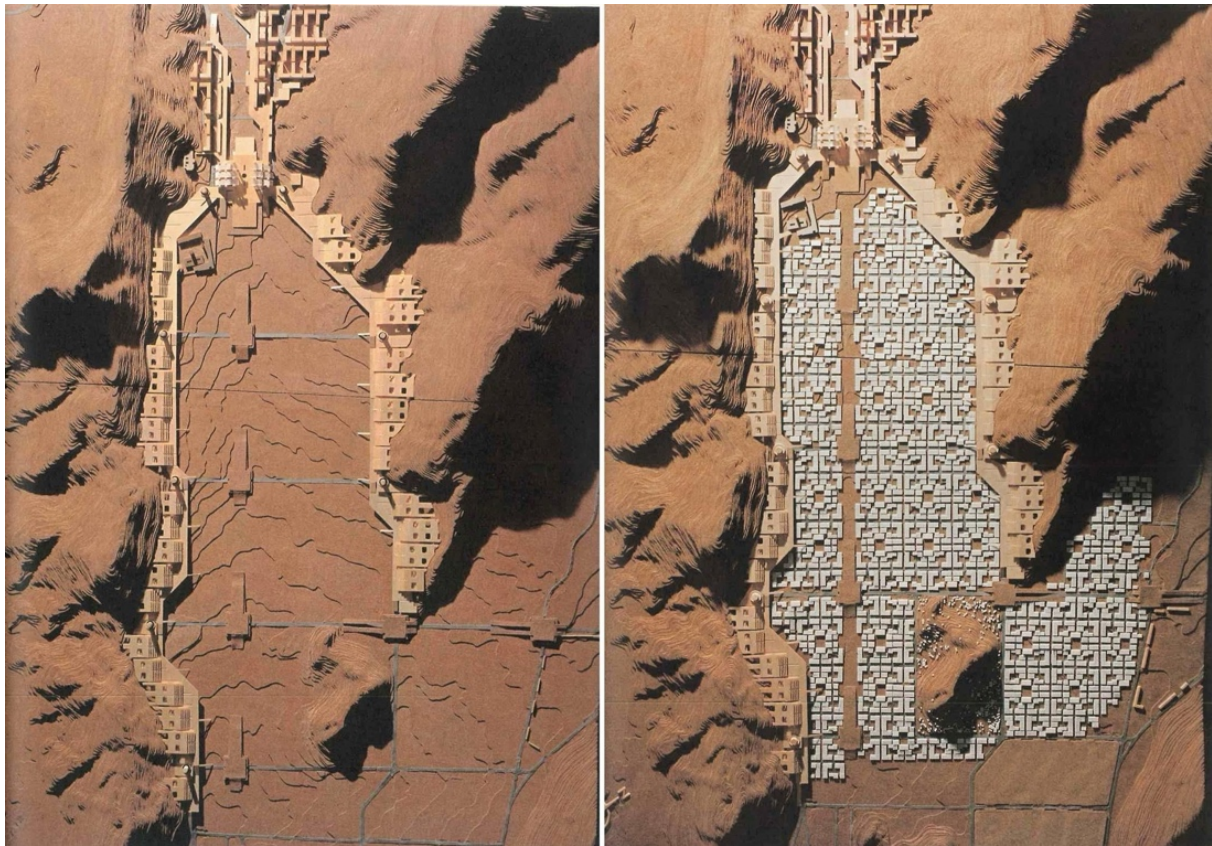


Figure 6: *Master Plan for Pilgrim Accommodation in Muna, Saudi Arabia, 1974*. Before and after tent deployment. Courtesy of Tange Associates.

³⁵ Koolhaas and Obrist, *Project Japan*, 239.

³⁶ Shapiro, "A Simpler Origin for Life."

the ocean have led further credibility to this theory, as they contain the exact combination of biochemical and geologic conditions that scientists had previously speculated must exist to produce life in a metabolism-first scenario.³⁷

As the name suggests, the Metabolist movement of post-war Japan took overt inspiration from this elemental inception of biology, imbuing architecture with the concepts of growth, adaptation, decay, and renewal to birth a new “living” architecture. This was done in part through their promotion of the module — a cellular unit that could be aggregated to compose larger, organic forms that adapt to their context over time. The Metabolists referred to this method of recursive, adaptive design as “group form.”³⁸ Thanks in part to the flexibility of the module, the Metabolists produced a diversity of projects in both form and scale.

Toward the larger end of the spectrum were masterplans, like Kenzo Tange and Kenji Ekuan’s 1974 design for a pilgrim city near Mecca (fig. 6). This project was commissioned by King Faisal of Saudi Arabia to accommodate two million pilgrims during the yearly four-day celebration of Hajj. Due to the sacredness of the Mina valley in which it was to be located, the tent city was designed to bloom into form only during the Hajj, after which it would retract into more permanent, consolidated structures at the foot of the perimeter hills, preserving the integrity of the sacred grounds as with the *playa* after Burning Man. Despite the desire to implement the project, King Faisal was assassinated the following year, and the project was shelved.³⁹ Many Metabolist



Figure 7: Kisho Kurokawa, *Capsule Tower*, Tokyo, Japan, 1972. Photo by Carlo Fumarola.

³⁷ Sean Carroll, “All of the Universe’s Disorder, Explained in 6 Minutes,” *Big Think* (blog), 2024, <https://bigthink.com/the-well/sean-carroll-on-entropy-complexity-origins-of-life>.

³⁸ Koolhaas and Obrist, *Project Japan*, 302.

³⁹ Koolhaas and Obrist, *Project Japan*, 612.

projects remain unbuilt, but Kenzo Tange lamented the cancellation of this one more than any other.⁴⁰

Perhaps the most influential built project by the Metabolists was Kisho Kurokawa's 1972 *Capsule Tower* in Tokyo (fig. 7). The building is anchored by two structural/utility/circulation cores, which 144 nearly identical 8'x13' prefabricated modules are plugged into and secured with only four bolts each. Kurokawa asserts in his *Capsule Declaration*: "the capsule stands for the emancipation of a building in relation to the ground, and heralds the era of moving architecture."⁴¹ Indeed, the capsules were designed to be moved, or rather removed and replaced with new, updated capsules at the end of their life cycle, similar to the process of cellular regeneration in organisms. Kurokawa insists that the project was supposed to live for 200 years if they were replaced about every 25.⁴² This never happened after the process was determined to be prohibitively expensive, however, and entropy was allowed to reclaim its space. The capsules' steel shells began to corrode, requiring the structure to be wrapped in safety netting to prevent debris from collapsing to the street, and many capsules were abandoned.⁴³

To the dismay of many architects, *Capsule Tower* was finally dismantled in late 2022, each of its modules carefully plucked from their stem like an over-ripe fruit. Most were not in salvageable condition, but 23 modules are being refurbished and given a new life for dispersion to architectural exhibits around the world, pollinating the planet with the ideas of Metabolism.⁴⁴ Although not the exact cycle intended by Kurokawa, *Capsule Tower* is nonetheless being critically metabolized by future generations of architects.

Accepting a Fleeting Architecture

"Incubated cities are destined to self-destruct
Ruins are the style of our future cities
Future cities are themselves ruins
Our contemporary cities, for this reason,
are destined to live only a fleeting moment
Give up their energy and return to inert material

⁴⁰ Koolhaas and Obrist, *Project Japan*, 502.

⁴¹ Koolhaas and Obrist, *Project Japan*, 338.

⁴² Tim Hornyak, "In Tokyo, Rescuing the Residential Spaceship That Fell to Earth," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/15/realestate/tokyo-japan-nakagin-tower.html>.

⁴³ Hornyak, "In Tokyo."

⁴⁴ Hornyak, "In Tokyo."

All of our proposals and efforts will be buried
And once again the incubation mechanism is reconstituted
That will be the future.”

- Arata Isozaki, “Incubation Process,” *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks*⁴⁵

It is easy to admire the material and technological feats that have delivered us with the potential for such ordered, resilient, and functional habitats. However, our increased technical mastery has perhaps also enabled a dissolute, cavalier, and myopic prescription of architecture without broader concerns for the disorder that it externalizes to time and space. It has become convenient to forget that our creation’s demise has not been indefinitely delayed, but with the concept of object permanence being undermined by entropy, architects must ask themselves: how can we responsibly embrace ephemerality and prevent our practice from grossly generating further disorder to the planet?

The answer lies in the fact that Earth is not a closed system. Our planet receives a constant stream of external energy in the form of low entropy radiation from the sun.⁴⁶ This energy becomes progressively converted into higher-entropy forms as it disperses through the planet’s systems, creating temperature gradients, promoting phase changes, and fueling metabolism up the food chain. This high-entropy energy is ultimately radiated from the planet back out into space, leaving behind an observable increase in organization while the overall energy balance remains roughly the same.⁴⁷ The building industry must tap more directly into this flow of low-entropy energy bestowed by our star, break its dependence on depleting resources, and relinquish stubborn standards that use long-term materials in pursuit of short-term incentives in a dissolute, technology-fueled frenzy. Rather, we can embrace the ephemeral nature of lower entropy materials and, not just allow, but plan for, our designs to be metabolized into future urban forms. This new (or perhaps old) form of order may not necessarily present as austere as the Paiutes, as flashy as the Burners, or as formal as the Metabolists, but each of these examples embrace ephemerality in a way that is more aligned with the entropy guiding our planet’s evolution into more complex yet stable states. Our attachment to architecture has impeded this trajectory, and we must now let it go.

⁴⁵ Koolhaas and Obrist, *Project Japan*, 38.

⁴⁶ Mark Buchanan, “The Thermodynamics of Earth,” *Nature Physics* 13, no. 2 (February 2017): 106–106, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nphys4031>.

⁴⁷ Buchanan, “The Thermodynamics of Earth.” This is decreasingly true as greenhouse gases accumulate and create a net positive balance of energy harbored on Earth.

This practice of non-attachment serves as the very basis for the Buddhist theory of liberation. In his quest for enlightenment, the last Buddha — Siddattha Gotama — was said to have penetrated to a level of awareness so subtle that he could observe the fundamental structure of the physical universe — a composition of extremely tiny particles arising and passing, in and out of existence, trillions of times every second.⁴⁸ This phenomenon of universal ephemerality is referred to in Buddhism as “Anicca.” If everything is ultimately fleeting in an endless scheme of cosmic recursion, how can we reasonably form attachments to things without inviting suffering once they are gone? Architecture’s fate may be sealed as an ephemeral blip, but humanity’s destiny still hangs in the balance. If for nothing but our own sake, can we find the will to claw ourselves out from the pit of our current construction paradigm? Can we atone for the gross chaos sewn in its wake? Can we stop suffering?

⁴⁸ S. N. Goenka and William Hart, “Day Three Discourse,” in *Discourse Summaries*, 1st ed. (Onalaska: Pariyatti Publishing, 2000), 28–29.

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Living Documents: On the Role of the Audience in the (After)life of Participatory and Ephemeral Art

Annemarie Kok

[1] “Participatory” art

Participatory art is characterized by a certain “openness,” inviting members of the audience to fill in the gaps of a work of art that is initiated by one or more visual artists.¹ Processes of interaction, collaboration, and co-production are at the heart of this type of art practice, which started to flourish for the first time—at least in the western art world—in the so-called “long sixties” (starting in the late 1950s and ending in the early 1970s).² These temporary processes do not necessarily bring about tangible end products that can be preserved for the future. Participatory art projects tend to be focused on the here-and-now and the results are mostly characterized by

¹ See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

² Anna Deuze, ed., *The ‘Do-It-Yourself’ Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012); Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagen, eds., *Practicable: From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); Annemarie Kok, *Pioneering Participatory Art Practices: Tracing Actors, Associations and Interactions across the Long Sixties* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2024).

Figure 1: Eventstructure Research Group (ERG), *Waterwalk Tube*, Groningen, 1972. Photo by press photo agency D. van der Veen, collection Groninger Archieven. Courtesy of the artists.

mutability, multiplicity, and ephemerality. An example of such a project is the *Waterwalk Tube* initiated by the Eventstructure Research Group (ERG). On August 28, 1972, ERG placed a large air-inflatable tube made from PVC foil in the water of the connecting canal (Verbindingskanaal) in Groningen, a city in the



north of the Netherlands.³ People could enter the U-shaped tube from a platform via a revolving door and—as if by magic—walk on the water (figs. 1–2). In this way, participants animated or “completed” the work. After one day, the tube was deflated and taken out of the water where it left no visible traces.

Many other participatory art projects of the long sixties vanished into thin air, including Yoko Ono’s [Cut Piece](#) (first performed in 1964, Kyoto), the street intervention [Une journée dans la rue](#) (1966, Paris) initiated by the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel (GRAV), Allan Kaprow’s [Fluids](#) (1967, Los Angeles County), David Medalla’s [Down with the Slave Trade!](#) (first performed in 1971, London) and Joseph Beuys’ [Büro der Organisation für Direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung](#) (1972, Kassel). The artists who initiated these works all invited audience members to interact with the provided materials and tools and to participate in joyful, political, ritualistic, or activist events that

³ ERG had previously presented the *Waterwalk Tube* during a street art program (*Experiment Strassenkunst*, 1970) in Hanover, where the tube bridged the water of the Maschsee in a straight line. See Theo Botschuijver, *Playful Inventions* (Eindhoven: Lecturis, 2021), 66–71.



Figure 2: Eventstructure Research Group (ERG), *Waterwalk Tube*, Groningen, 1972. Photo by Pieter Boersma ©. Courtesy of the artists.

only lasted a few minutes, hours, or days. During such events, various human, non-human, material, and immaterial actors were connected and collaborating. Once the happening was over, the collective dissolved, and the actors went their separate ways.

Being both participatory *and* airy—using “airy” here as a synonym to transitory,

ephemeral, fleeting, volatile—these art practices could also be described as “participatory.” I want to introduce this neologism, involving a blend of the terms “participatory” and “airy,” to point out a particular category of open works that easily vanish into thin air and not only ask for specific considerations from an art historical, but also from a heritage practice (concerned with passing on what we have inherited from the past to future generations) perspective.⁴ In none of the aforementioned cases of participatory art was there a lasting, physical art object left that could find its way into the collection of a private individual, company, or museum, and could, in the traditional sense, be stored and safeguarded. Consequently, alternative practices of preservation and care are needed for this form of heritage and, as I will argue, participating audience members can and should play a role in this.⁵ These participants may—beyond

⁴ The term “participatory art” is commonly used in art historical discourse to refer to practices that invite audience members to participate in the creative process. Related and partly overlapping terms are “do-it-yourself art,” “interactive art,” “community art,” and “practicable art.” See also Kok, *Pioneering Participatory Art Practices*, 19–25. Although the term “air art” is used to refer to art practices embracing air as artistic medium, the term “airy art” is not particularly common in art historical discourse, but introduced here to refer to art projects that easily vanish into thin air. Note that there is a difference between “air art” and “airy art.” Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, for instance, was not concerned with air as a medium and can therefore not be considered an example of “air art,” but can, because of its ephemeral nature, be described as an example of “airy art.” ERG’s *Waterwalk Tube*, however, provides us with an example of being both “air art” (using air as a medium) and “airy art” (being ephemeral).

⁵ See on the issue of care for ephemeral art forms, with a focus on performance art and media art, Caitlin Jones and Lizzie Muller, “Between Real and Ideal: Documenting Media Art,” *Leonardo* 41, no. 4 (2008): 418–9; Alexandra Saemmer and Bernadette Dufrêne, eds., “Patrimoines éphémères,” *Hybrid*, no. 1

the accounts of the artists and other eyewitnesses—provide valuable information on the participatory artworks and their effects, and help in continuing the works' trajectories, even after their supposed vanishing.

[2] Ephemeral, but not to be forgotten

To a certain extent, one needs to accept that participatory artworks—i.e. works that are both participatory *and* ephemeral in nature—are no longer there and can, in the form of a physical object, not be preserved, stored, and collected for the future. Peggy Phelan has even argued that an ephemeral art form like performance cannot be “saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations.”⁶ She claimed that any attempt to document, capture, or preserve performance art is a betrayal of its ephemeral nature.⁷ Even though it may seem paradoxical to want to make last what is meant to be transient, and one can argue against fixating fleeting artworks, I would want to state that one can consider alternative, more open, and fluid ways to pass them on, in order not to forget about them and enable them to continue acting and having effect on new audiences, in alternative contexts, in other times.⁸ After all, they are part of our histories of art, communities, and cities, have contributed to the formation of our identities and, as such, they—or at least stories, traces, and memories of them—are worth transmitting to next generations. They are worth being cared for and shared, also to inspire and move new publics. And photographs and other documents may play a valuable role in processes of continuation and “reactivation,” as is also argued by Philip Auslander, in opposition to Phelan.⁹

Moreover, even though there might have been a clear wish by the artists to initiate ephemeral works of art for various reasons, including challenging institutional

(2014); Fernando Domínguez Rubio, “Preserving the Unpreservable: Docile and Unruly Objects at MoMA,” *Theory and Society* 43, no. 6 (2014): 617–45; Vivian van Saaze, “In the Absence of Documentation: Remembering Tino Sehgal’s Constructed Situations,” *Revista de História da Arte*, 4 (2015): 55–63; Dietmar Rübél, “Die Musealisierung des Ephemeren,” in *Plastizität: Eine Kunstgeschichte Des Veränderlichen* (München: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2012), 268–305; Hanna Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin, eds., *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Care*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2023).

⁶ Peggy Phelan, “The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction,” in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.

⁷ See Anja Foerschner and Rachel Rivenc, “Documenting Carolee Schneemann’s Performance Works,” *Getty Research Journal*, no. 10 (2018): 180–1.

⁸ See also Marilena Alivizatou, “The Paradoxes of Intangible Heritage,” in *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, ed. Michelle L. Stefano et al. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 9–22.

⁹ Philip Auslander, *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).



Figure 3: Negatives from photographs made by Pieter Boersma, showing ERG's Waterwalk Tube in Groningen (1972). Courtesy of the artists and photographer.

systems and escaping forms of commodification, they did not necessarily desire that their work be forgotten or want the effects of their projects to stop. Various artists made efforts to document their work through photography, film, and video, in an attempt to save it from oblivion, an initiative further supported by circulating these documents through exhibitions, publications, and websites. The members of ERG, for instance, photographed many of the participatory events instigated with the help of their inflatable structures or allowed others, including photographer Pieter Boersma, to record their works in the 1960s and 1970s (fig. 3).¹⁰ A selection of these photographs can be found online in the *Jeffrey Shaw Compendium* and in a recently published book by Theo Botschuijver—Shaw and Botschuijver being two of the founding members of ERG (fig. 4).¹¹ One could argue, as Auslander notes in his book *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and its Documentation*, that it is precisely the documentation of these types of fleeting art that “makes it not ephemeral.”¹² In this regard, we must be careful not to allow ourselves to be distracted too much by the “myth of ephemerality,” and not only focus on the element of disappearance, but also on what endures.¹³

Apart from photographs and film images, pioneering participatory art practices have left us with other immaterial and material traces and remains, including project plans made by the initiating artists, as well as written instructions, props, or reviews by art critics. Moreover, audience members who participated in these events in the 1960s and 1970s may still be around. Audiences contributed, with their bodies and minds, to the coming into being of a particular art project and can, when still alive, be seen as important remnants of the work. As collaborators, these participants were important eyewitnesses of fleeting events who experienced the works firsthand, and can potentially tell more about the developments and results of these co-production processes. They can even be considered *living documents* or *living archives*: repositories of data, stories, and memories to which far too little attention has been

¹⁰ An artist like Allan Kaprow also became increasingly interested in the documentation of his ephemeral works, as the 1960s progressed. See Laura Routledge, “Reconsidering ‘Art’ and ‘Life’: the Multiple Entanglements of Allan Kaprow’s Happenings,” *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies*, no. 1 (2022): 243–68. The other artists mentioned in this article had their fleeting works “captured” by photography as well. In the case of David Medalla’s *Down with the Slave Trade!*, I was even able to trace around 25 photographs, made by at least four different individuals, and now scattered around various archives and collections in London, Oxford, Utrecht, and The Hague.

¹¹ See the online *Jeffrey Shaw Compendium*, <https://www.jeffreyshawcompendium.com/>; Botschuijver, *Playful Inventions*.

¹² Auslander, *Reactivations*, 4.

¹³ Also see on this topic Dorota Sajewska, “Mit efemeryczności teatru,” *Dialog*, no. 1 (2015): 80–92, translation via: <http://re-sources.uw.edu.pl/reader/the-myth-of-the-ephemerality-of-theater/>.

paid by scholars, archivists, and conservators to date.¹⁴ Nowadays, interviewing professional artists and their assistants is a generally accepted part of presentation, conservation, and research practices in order to obtain information on modern and contemporary artworks; participating audience members should not be overlooked in this regard.¹⁵ They might, for instance, tell more about how they experienced Yoko Ono's silent presence on a stage, why they took part in the event initiated by GRAV, what conversations took place while building the ice structures proposed by Kaprow, how Medalla guided and instructed audiences in their participation, and what they learned from entering Beuys' office in Kassel.

[3] From co-production to co-care

From the perspectives of art history and heritage, it may be meaningful and desirable to keep the ephemeral and participatory artworks of the long sixties "alive" and take care of their remnants (including participants), but it also provides art historians, conservators, and other caretakers of art with challenges. How does one pass on these fleeting forms of art without limiting or stabilizing them? How does one keep them "in motion" to prevent them from vanishing? And who should take part in these practices of safeguarding and transmission? This is not the place to discuss all these questions in

¹⁴ In the fields of dance and performance studies, one can observe a growing trend of thinking about human beings as "memory-preserving media" (Sajewska) or "vehicle[s] of knowledge" (Hahn). See Sajewska, "Mit efemeryczności teatru"; Daniela Hahn, "'Our method is transmission': the body as document in Christina Ciupke's and Anna Till's performance *undo, redo and repeat* (2014)," in *Performing Arts in Transition: Moving between Media*, ed. Susanne Foellmer et al. (Oxford: Routledge, 2019), 182. See also André Lepecki, "The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances," *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 28–48; Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011); Franz Anton Cramer, "Body, Archive," in *Dance [and] Theory*, ed. Gabriele Brandstetter and Gabriele Klein (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 219–21; Sajewska, "Körper-Gedächtnis, Körper-Archiv: Der Körper als Dokument in künstlerischen Rekonstruktionspraktiken," in *Seien wir realistisch: Neue Realismen und Dokumentarismen in Philosophie und Kunst*, ed. Magdalena Marszalek and Dieter Mersch (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2016), 339–66; Julia Wehren, *Körper als Archiv in Bewegung: Choreografie als historiografische Praxis* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016). Notions of "the body as archive" and "the body as document" have obtained a central place in ongoing debates on issues related to the documentation, reconstruction, and conservation of (ephemeral) dance and performance practices. The body—particularly that of the professional dancer or performer—is considered a place and tool of documentation, memory and history transmission. I want to argue for thinking about the "minded body" or "embodied mind" as document and—in connection to this—for not only paying attention to the stories of the professional performer or artist, but also to those of the active and participating members of the audience.

¹⁵ See Lydia Beerkens et al., eds., *The Artist Interview: For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art: Guidelines and Practice* (Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2012). See also Lucia Farinati and Jennifer Thatcher, eds., *Theorising the Artist Interview* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

JEFFREY SHAW COMPENDIUM

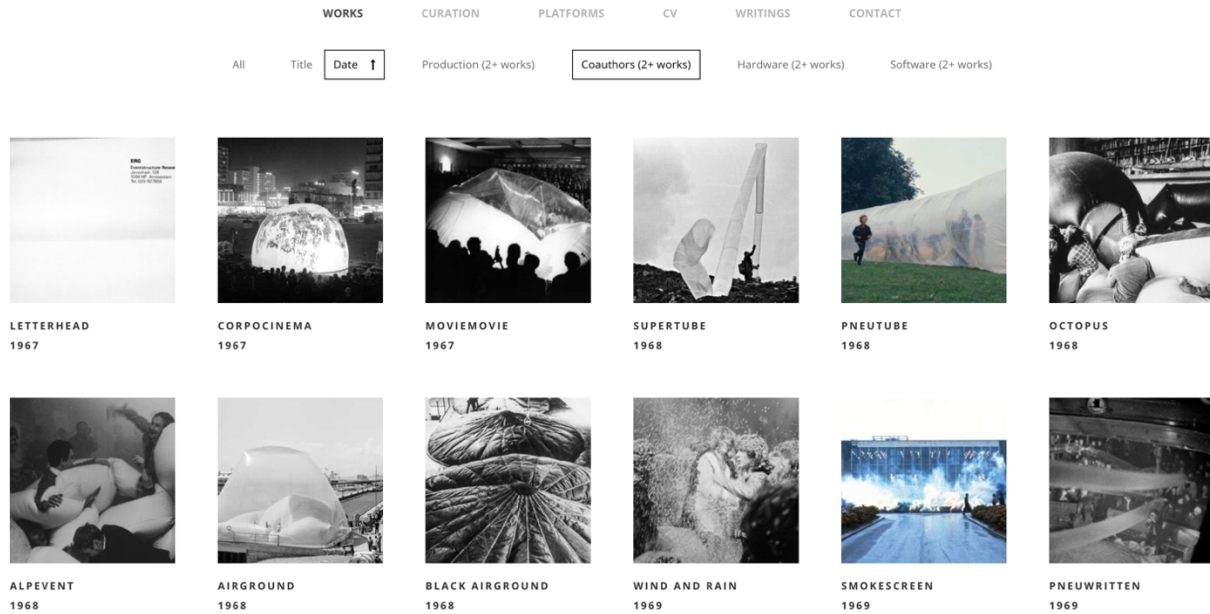


Figure 4: Screenshot of the online *Jeffrey Shaw Compendium*, including projects by ERG. Archive facilitated by Chronus Art Center, Shanghai. Produced and coded by Raphael Chau Tsz Kin. Courtesy of the artist.

detail or come up with definite, unequivocal answers—if possible at all. What needs to be pointed out here, however, is that respect for the open, changeable, and ephemeral nature of these art practices seems an important starting point for thinking about their transfer and continuation. As with other forms of intangible heritage, such as language, dance, and legends, caretakers could consider strategies of reenactment (not to truthfully recall or capture an event from the past, but to re-activate it in an up-to-date, alternative version), as well as open archives for documents, memories, and remains (to which different people can continuously add new elements and perspectives) or forms of oral transmission (to pass on conversational versions of a work).¹⁶ These strategies can all contribute to keeping artworks “in motion” and preventing them from decay or fixation.

¹⁶ A lot has been written on these strategies, including Barbara Büscher, “Traces and Documents as Medial Transformations, or: How to Access Performance Art History,” *Stedelijk Studies*, no. 3 (Fall 2015), <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/traces-and-documents>; Yaël Kreplak, “Artworks in and as practices: The relevance of particulars,” in *Practicing Art/Science: Experiments in an Emerging Field*, ed. Philippe Sormani et al. (London: Routledge, 2018), 142–63; Cristina Baldacci et al., eds., *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory* (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022); Cristina Baldacci and Susanne Franco, eds., *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools* (Torino: Accademia University Press, 2022).

In line with the collaborative engendering of participatory art projects (i.e. co-production), it also seems appropriate and desirable to jointly take up the care of these works and let different people and institutions participate in it (i.e. co-care). In this regard, it is important to include participating audience members—the so-called “living documents.” Although artists initiating participatory projects in the 1960s and 1970s wanted to share their actions and agency with members of the audience, the focus of heritage institutions and the art historical discourse remained for a long time on the artist(s) and their stories, intentions, and memories. Fortunately, within the fields of archiving, conservation, and research, there is growing interest in documenting and studying art audiences and their experiences with an emphasis on oral and dialogical forms of transmission.¹⁷ As a historical method of inquiry, oral history is particularly concerned with “history from below” and with giving voice to those groups in society who have been excluded from official accounts.¹⁸ The audience of participatory art is such a group. It is urgent to start listening to their voices; to include these “living documents” in practices of archiving, conservation, and reconstruction; to make them active participants again. As is also the case for artists, the participants’ recollections will not necessarily reveal the truth (since, for one thing, their memories may fail them) or complete the story, but they may fill some gaps in the “official” records, add new and alternative perspectives or layers to the works (that are physically no longer there), and help to pass them on in fluid ways, with the potential of sorting further effects among new audiences. In these ways the trajectories—or lives—of participatory works may continue, even after they vanished in their initial form.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Lizzie Muller, “Towards an Oral History of New Media Art,” Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, 2008, <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2096>; Lizzie Muller, “Collecting Experience: The Multiple Incarnations of Very Nervous System,” in *New Collecting: Exhibiting and Audiences after New Media Art*, ed. Beryl Graham (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 183–202; Hélia Pereira Marçal, “Conservation in an era of participation,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 40, no. 2 (2017): 97–104; Katja Kwastek, “Documenting Interaction,” in *Histories of Performance Documentation: Museum, Artistic, and Scholarly Practices*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi and Jonah Westerman (London: Routledge, 2018), 132–48; Gabriella Giannachi, “Documenting the Participants’ Points of View: Re-Thinking the Epistemology of Participation,” in *Participatory Practices in Art and Cultural Heritage: Learning through and from Collaboration*, ed. Christoph Rausch et al. (Cham: Springer, 2022), 13–23; Gabriella Giannachi, “Documenting Hybrid Mixed Media Art Forms: The Role of the Audience,” in *Conservation of Contemporary Art: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*, ed. Renée van de Vall and Vivian van Saaze (Cham: Springer, 2024), 217–33.

¹⁸ See Staughton Lynd, “Oral History from Below,” *The Oral History Review* 21, no. 1 (1993): 1–8. See also Derek Reimer, ed., *Voices: A guide to oral history* (Sound and Moving Image Division: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Victoria, B.C., 1984), quoted in Muller, “Towards an Oral History,” 5; Hahn, “Our method is transmission,” 189.

[4] The challenge of finding “living documents”

In my own search for the stories (in the sense of personal accounts of past events) by audience members who interacted with participatory art projects in the 1960s and 1970s, I experienced how difficult it is to find these. In the archives I visited, hardly any documents have been preserved—apart from photographs—that report about the participants of that time, let alone about their background or their experiences. With regard to the *Waterwalk Tube* introduced above, I therefore tried to trace people who once participated in the work, hoping they could, in hindsight, share their personal recollections with me. ERG’s project was part of a program with all kinds of events organized for city residents, in order to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Groningen Liberation Day (Groningens Ontzet). Photographs of the *Waterwalk Tube* in Groningen demonstrate that many people went to take a look at the airy art project, which lasted only one day, and quite a few (at least 100 different participants can be counted in the photographs) also dared to enter the plastic event structure.

Through extensive photographic materials showing recognizable faces and the strong sense of community in Groningen, I hoped to identify and track down people who participated that day in August.¹⁹ By way of both traditional media (regional newspaper and radio) and digital, social media (Facebook, X, and LinkedIn), I put out several calls for people to come forward with information (figs. 5–6). To increase visibility and reach, I also received help from a number of heritage institutions, including the Groninger Archives (Groninger Archieven). Eventually, only two people contacted me and shared their memories of their interaction with the *Waterwalk Tube* in Groningen in 1972.²⁰

¹⁹ See, with regard to the strong sense of community, the results of a survey on the identity of Groningen and its citizens by Sociaal Planbureau Groningen in 2019: <https://sociaalplanbureaugroningen.nl/brede-welvaart/ervaren-leefbaarheid/trots-op-groningen/#sterke-verbondenheid-met-provincie>.

²⁰ One of these two individuals, a man, shared his account of the event with me through email on August 30, 2023. The other person, a woman, also contacted me through email on August 28, 2023 and agreed to meet me in person for a so-called semi-structured interview on September 12, 2023 in Assen, which was audio recorded. See Svend Brinkmann, “Unstructured and Semi-Structured Interviewing,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Patricia Leavy (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2014), 277. See also the *Stories in Motion Workflow* that resulted from the research project “(Re-)Tracing History: New Methodologies for Making the Past Tangible, Palpable and Negotiable”: <https://sprekendegeschiedenis.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SIM-WorkflowOralHistory.pdf>. Both the email correspondence and the audio recording are (for now) stored in my personal archives. Ideally, there would be one central, digital, and open repository for these type of participant interviews.

GRO

Honderden Stadters waagden zich tijdens de 300ste viering van Bommen Berend massaal in de ruim 200 meter lange 'Waterwalk Tube' die in het Verbindingskanaal was gelegd. Kunsthistoricus Annemarie Kok van de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen wil voor haar onderzoek naar participatiekunst hun ervaringen optekenen.

FRANK VON HEBEL

Tijdens de 300ste editie van het Groningens Ontzet in 1972 werd stevig uitgepakt.

Zo bracht koningin Beatrix, opgewacht door 15.000 duiven (die uiteindelijk werden losgelaten), 4000 scholieren, een Rijdend Carillon en Show drumband Avanti, een bezoek aan de stad die in 1672 de bisschop van Keulen trotseerde.

Maar wie herinnert zich nog de bijna 250 meter lange plastic buis die in het Verbindingskanaal op de huidige plek van het Groninger Museum dreef? Stadters werden aangemoedigd om door de 'Waterwalk Tube' te wandelen.

De plastic buis was een initiatief van de Eventstructure Research Group (ERG), een kunstcollectief dat in 1967 was opgericht door Theo Botschuijver, Jeffrey Shaw en Sean Wellesley-Miller.

'Hoe hebben de deelnemers dit beleefd? Daar wil ik achter komen'

„Het doel van de kunstenaars was om de deelnemers te stimuleren op een andere manier naar de wereld te kijken”, legt kunsthistoricus Annemarie Kok (1984) uit. „Ze hoopten ook dat dit tot meer bewustwording van vrijheid en creativiteit zou leiden.”

Kok is bezig met een studie naar participatiekunst. „Deze kunstvorm kwam in de jaren zestig voor het eerst in beeld. Het doel is dat het publiek deelneemt aan het kunstproject, want deze kunst kan anders niet bestaan. Maar we weten helemaal niks over de bijdrage van dat publiek. Hoe hebben de deelnemers dit beleefd? Daar wil ik achter komen.”

Ze stuitte bij toeval op het kunstproject van ERG. „Ik was jaren geleden voor onderzoek naar participatiekunst in een archief in Kassel (Duitsland, red.). Hier las ik voor het



De plastic buis lag op de plek waar later het Groninger Museum zou komen. FOTO: PIETER BOERSMA

Gezocht: Groningers die over water liepen

eerst over de interactieve lucht-kunst van ERG. Later ontdekte ik dat ze ook in Groningen een project hadden gedaan. Er gingen meteen allerlei alarmbelletjes af.

Kok ontdekte dat de 'Waterwalk

Tube' in 1970 voor het eerst in Hannover werd gebruikt. „Naar het schijnt is deze na Groningen ook nog in Delft gelegd, maar daar heb ik nog geen beeld van gevonden. Voor mijn onderzoek concentreer ik me

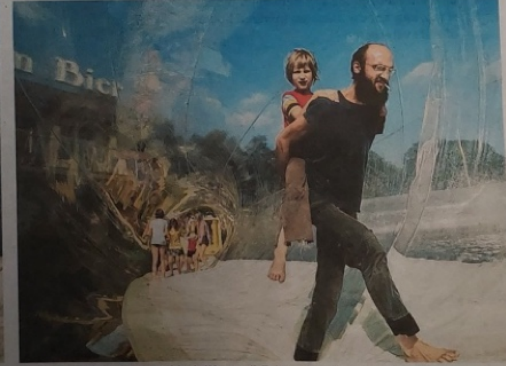
op Groningen.”

Overigens, de 'Waterwalk Tube' is niet meer. „Een van de kunstenaars heeft deze nog jarenlang bewaard, maar op den duur was de buis gewoon 'op'.”

Lezers die zich hun wandeling in de plastic buis nog herinneren worden verzocht te mailen naar m.f.a.kok@rug.nl.



Kunsthistoricus Annemarie Kok zoekt mensen die in de buis liepen. FOTO: PIETER BOERSMA



Stadters waagden zich in 1972 in de Waterwalk Tube. FOTO: PIETER BOERSMA

Figure 5: Article in regional newspaper *Dagblad van het Noorden*, September 16, 2023, with a call for people who “walked on water” in 1972 using ERG’s *Waterwalk Tube*. Photo by the author, 2023.

As scholar and curator Lizzie Muller notes, and I agree with her, “as few as three audience interviews can demonstrate a great variety of detailed and unexpected experiential aspects.”²¹ Two stories also do provide us with valuable information about the participatory project in Groningen, including the insights that participants indeed had to take off their shoes before entering the tube (confirming what is visible in the pictures); that walking inside the tube was not easy; that there was an atmosphere of joy and excitement, but also that there were incidents of bullying; and that the experience—at least for these two respondents—has created a lasting memory that is even shared with grandchildren. Apart from the accounts of the two initiating artists and the photographs, there was little to no information about the effects and experiences of this work—not even a newspaper report was found. The two stories of the participants fill these gaps and complement the stories of the artists, who are inclined to focus on their intentions, the used materials, and the success of the project.²² As important contributors to the animation of the *participatory* tube, the participants can rightly play a valuable role in forms of aftercare and afterthought; and since the work is *airy* (i.e. ephemeral) in nature, their stories are much needed to make the work “survive.” This example may alert contemporary artists, curators, conservators, archivists, and other art and heritage specialists to pay attention to, record, and collect the stories of participants in current *participatory* art projects and

²¹ Muller, “Towards an Oral History,” 14.

²² See also the two interviews with Theo Botschuijver and Jeffrey Shaw, respectively, conducted by the author on July 11, 2023 (in Amstelveen) and September 28, 2023 (in Lausanne).



Figure 6: Call for people who “walked on water” on August 28, 1972, spread by the Groninger Archieven via Facebook on August 28, 2023. Photo by the author, 2023.

involve them in practices of sharing and caring. Nevertheless, the result of the two accounts of the Groningen tube is somewhat thin, and I hope that there are more voices and stories to be found in the near future, possibly via alternative routes. But time is ticking: if yet undiscovered “living documents” die, important knowledge and memories disappear with them.

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An Archive within an Archive or, Archive as Repertoire

Laura A. Lucci and Paul J. Stoesser

Baccio Cecchi's *Descrizione dell' apparato e de gl'intermedi fatti per la storia dell' Esaltazione della Croce rappresentata in Firenze da' giovani della compagni di S. Giovanni Evangelista con l'occasione delle nozze delle altezze serenissime di Toscana nell' anno 1589* (hereafter *Descrizione*) documents several significant technical and artistic aspects related to the festive production of the play, *The Exaltation of the Cross*, written by his father Giovanmaria Cecchi.¹ Politically aware, loyally astute, and a lifelong *notariato* of the Florentine bureaucracy, Giovanmaria Cecchi wrote prolifically from his well-established classical training, producing *L'esaltazione della croce* at the height of his creative powers. Drawing inspiration from the medieval histories and folklore contained in *The Golden Legend*, Giovanmaria derives and elaborates upon the story of the exaltation of the Holy Cross to create contemporary, that is Renaissance, Medici parallels in both function and imagery.² In pre-Baroque times

¹ Written in 1589 and printed in 1592.

² Biancamaria Brumana, "Spettacoli Fiorentini Del Cinquecento: 'L'esaltazione Della Croce' Di Giovanmaria Cecchi e Le Musiche per i Suoi Intermed," in *Catalogo Della Mostra Bibliografica* (Montepulciano: Società Bibliografica Toscana, 2023), 74; Laura A. Lucci and Paul J. Stoesser, "'On the Horizon Appeared from Tuscany a New Light': Mythology and the Medici in Cecchi's *L'esaltazione della croce*," conference presentation delivered at the MLA Annual Convention, online and in Toronto, Ontario, January 10, 2021.

when much theatre production emerged from a medieval-Renaissance hybridization, the 1589 production of *L'esaltazione della croce*, as reported by Baccio, specifically involves the application of reinterpreted classical norms in conjunction with current developments in staging to realize these parallels with the Florentine ruling family, which by extension, demonstrate how art and artistic patronage, functioning as tools of pedagogy and propaganda, also act as enduring expressions of corporate solidarity.³ Both the playwright Giovanmaria Cecchi and his son Baccio were *fratelli* in La Compagnia di San Giovanni Evangelista, from whom late in his life, the elder Cecchi had been commissioned to compose the drama and *intermedi*.

Baccio's treatise on the production, while not an altogether unknown work, until this writing, has been largely overlooked by scholarly consideration.⁴ Our investigation and commentary demonstrates the significance and importance of this unusual document, which is a scarce example of a contemporary, first-hand account and analytical work of Renaissance theatre production. While an object of confounding complexity in both its historical and contemporaneous contexts, the *Descrizione* is on the one hand, an artifact, on the other, a production casebook.⁵ The resulting spectrum of interpretative possibilities necessitates comprehensive archival investigation, while at the same time, invites speculation on the how-to manner of the practical descriptions of the actual production. Additionally, the *Descrizione* is useful in parsing some of the reasoning for the inclusion of the production of *L'esaltazione della croce* at this particular time. However, with these opportune temptations come a caution that "the pleasure of archive work includes experiences that, we are warned, may enchant us."⁶ Mindful of the myriad avenues of investigation regarding the *Descrizione*, Gale and Featherstone's caution to the researcher against investing themselves too deeply in the charm of the archive, however exciting the enterprise is or privileged the position both the labor and its laborer occupy, is as valid for practical investigations as it is for the archival.⁷ Any researcher is well advised by this general admonition. Given the breadth and depth of investigative potential afforded by the *Descrizione*, it is indeed particularly appropriate.

³ Lucci and Stoesser, "'On the Horizon Appeared from Tuscany a New Light.'"

⁴ With one recent exception, a conference proceeding in Italian, concerning the music of the *intermedi*. See Brumana, "Spettacoli fiorentini del Cinquecento," 73-84.

⁵ Although contemporary copies of the *Descrizione* are available in archives, for convenience of use and accessibility, we have relied on Baccio Cecchi, "Descrizione dell'apparato e degl' intermedi," in *Sacre Rappresentazioni Dei Secoli XVI, XV e XVI*, ed. Alessandro D' Ancona (Firenze: Successori Le Monnier, 1872), 121-38.

⁶ Ann Featherstone and Maggie B. Gale, "The Imperative of the Archive: Creative Archive Research," in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 20.

⁷ Featherstone and Gale, "The Imperative of the Archive," 20.

Furthermore, while the document is undoubtedly archival, Baccio's commemoration of his own liveness – his presence within the space and time of the performance – speaks directly to repertoire. In recording these impressions, particularly those pertaining to the decoration of the theatre space and structure, Baccio both creates a precise record of the appearance of the theatre as well as preserves how it was intended to prepare the audience for what they were about to witness, and attests to the success of the endeavor. Even in its materiality and its longevity, the *Descrizione* is itself a signal of ephemerality. Beyond its wealth of technical information, the production, of which otherwise there are exceedingly limited traces, straddles medieval and Renaissance performance idioms. At its most superficial level, it is a description of the temporary theatre built for the production of Giovanmaria Cecchi's *L'esaltazione della croce* and an account of the six *intermedi* that were written to punctuate the five acts of the primary drama, as well as prefacing and closing the production. Dazzling, biblically inspired *intermedi*, each a tour de force realized with the latest in Renaissance scenic innovation, counterpoint the primary drama. Overall, the production was fit for a king, or, in our case, a Grand Duke. Complete with its *intermedi*, *L'esaltazione* was presented in honor of Ferdinand I de' Medici and his bride, Christine of Lorraine, on the occasion of their 1589 wedding.⁸

The dearth of contemporary information about the production of *L'esaltazione* stands in stark relief against the painstaking records of the wedding celebrations as a whole. Unlike the layers of archival and scholarly work around the wedding or about Giovanmaria Cecchi as a playwright and Medici devotee, there is a pronounced void. James Saslow cannot precisely date the performance and Konrad Eisenbichler suggests, in his cursory examination of the *Descrizione*, that the scale and intricacy of this confraternity performance is an exception because *sacre rappresentazioni* were

⁸ The immediate face-value, political as well as economic, importance of this marriage is easily understandable. A further expansion of the significance of the marriage outside the specific scope of this paper's argument regards its pan-European impact. In the middle of the Counter Reformation, this importance cannot be minimized since the nuptials occur a mere seven years following the notorious St. Bartholomew Day in which Christine's grandmother — the French queen, Catherine de' Medici — was implicated in the foment leading to the religiously motivated atrocities. Accordingly, the marriage is a religious, that is, Catholic closing of the ranks and an overt act of continental consolidation. Notwithstanding Catherine's death short months before the wedding, this union — a dynastic reinforcement of familial bonds — was sanctioned, condoned, endorsed, and encouraged equally by pervasive Medici influences in Rome as in Paris. Mindful of these historical considerations, the themes and imagery employed in the play script and production are both apt and obvious. See Lucci and Stoesser, "'On the Horizon Appeared from Tuscany a New Light,'" citing Konrad Eisenbichler, "Spazi e luoghi nel teatro Fiorentino del Cinquecento: Giovan Maria Cecchi," *Yearbook of Italian Studies* (1987): 51–62.

typically presented under more modest conditions.⁹ Anna Evangelista offers a short overview of the limited records related to the producing confraternity held in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze.¹⁰ Yet, Evangelista's treatment of the *Descrizione* is narrow in scope, arguing that it is of "extreme interest" insofar as it constitutes an "exact reconstruction of the set-up."¹¹ These accounts notwithstanding, further examination of archival records held in various Florentine repositories will be necessary to create a more complete understanding of the Cecchi production. Which is another way of saying that a fuller understanding of the "liveness" of the *L'esaltazione* performance is contingent upon a much more in-depth exploration of Medici records, as well as those of related confraternities among others.

The 1589 production of *L'esaltazione* stands, then, as something of an outlier. That this production is largely overlooked in the scholarship and seemingly without corresponding documentation to trace its production history, this performative quality becomes muted. Unlike its counterpart Girolamo Bargagli's *La Pellegrina* (produced at the Medici Theatre in the Uffizi and mounted for the wedding as well), *L'esaltazione's* records are sparse, perhaps because *La Pellegrina* represents a superlative example of 16th-century theatrical arts. Overseen by Bernardo Buontalenti, master of Renaissance scenic spectacle and architect of the Medici Theatre, he was also the production manager responsible for the multiple and various presentational features of the wedding festivities. The *intermedi* of *La Pellegrina*, in addition to their own dazzling scenography, are some of the most influential precursors to opera, a form that would emerge less than a decade later with Jacopo Peri's *La Dafne* (1598) and *L'Euridice* (1600), both staged in Florence. Generally, our present understanding of the form and substance of the 1589 wedding is largely the result of the Medici family's "compulsive record keeping."¹² Saslow details the political and economic underpinnings of this union, the triumphal arches and ceremonial entries that marked Christine as being "of" Florence, and the public performances and sporting events which engaged all levels of the Florentine citizenry.

At this juncture, Baccio's *Descrizione* troubles and is troubled by the archive/repertoire paradigm. It is in the archive that repertoire's characteristic resistance to capture and containment, that this fundamentally ephemeral knowledge

⁹ James M. Saslow, "May 1589: The Wedding As/In Performance," in *The Medici Wedding of 1589: Florentine Festival as Theatrum Mundi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 171. Eisenbichler, 59.

¹⁰ Anna Evangelista, "L'attività spettacolare della compagnia Di San Giovanni Evangelista Nel Cinquecento," *Medioevo e Rinascimento* 18, no. 15 (2004): 354–59.

¹¹ Evangelista, "L'attività spettacolare," 357. Translation by Laura A. Lucci.

¹² Saslow, "Introduction," 3.

may become separated from the knower across both time and space.¹³ The *Descrizione*'s polarity of possibilities, and all that lies between, attracts scrutiny across history, theory, and practice, possessing a plethora of details – including stagecraft as well as statecraft – between the extremes of historical record and practical procedure. Diana Taylor defines the archival as memory which “exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change,” and the repertoire as “[enacting] embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing — in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge.”¹⁴

Yet, some artifacts seem to reside within the space between the titular poles of Taylor's study, such that they resist both the stability of the archive as well as the ephemerality of the repertoire. The *Descrizione*, both enchanting and infuriating, is one of them. The epistemological dimension of the performance and the *Descrizione* itself are both predicated on performer/audience co-presence. If, according to Taylor, performances travel, but are also always “in situ: intelligible in the framework of the immediate environment and issues surrounding them,” then the *Descrizione* is an attempt to demonstrate the comprehensibility of the performance and the playscript in its historical moment.¹⁵ The dimensions of this theatrical performance extend beyond the embodied work of the players to the physical setting of the theatre space and the technical requirements of the scenic effects. This is not to say that the document exists as repertoire – its stability precludes that. But, as a representation of Baccio's co-presence in the theatre, his impressions, and his knowledge received from the space and performance, it exceeds the limits of the archive.

Baccio's *Descrizione* of the production of his father Giovanmaria's play resists simple interpretation insofar as it calls attention to the tension between Taylor's stable archive and ephemeral repertoire. Taylor's framework places these two concepts in constant interaction and she notes, with some consternation, the degree to which the ostensible permanence of the archive elides the ephemeral, embodied knowledge that is emblematic of the repertoire.¹⁶ The repertoire, in its ephemerality and nonreproducibility, locates in embodied practices — that is, performance “vital acts of transfer” and “ways of knowing” that transmit necessary social and civic knowledge and shape identity and culture.¹⁷ The “liveness” of the repertoire “exceeds the

¹³ Diana Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

¹⁴ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” 19.

¹⁵ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” 3.

¹⁶ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” 21.

¹⁷ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” 2-3.

archive's ability to capture it."¹⁸ Baccio Cecchi's *Descrizione* does attempt to preserve in great detail the physical character of the space – its dimensions, colors, materials, and style of decoration. In this way, it is very much an archival document in a doubled sense: as an imprint, it is preserved by and can be accessed in an archive, as well as in the sense that Baccio's record is itself an act of preservation.

Still, the archives do not archive themselves, and the *Descrizione* ventures into the realm of repertoire in several key ways. Archives are themselves non-neutral. They imply decisions about what is kept, cataloged, accessed, and reassessed. The *Descrizione* is much more than what it appears to be, preserving not just what the theatre and the *intermedi* looked like, but invoking the "vital acts of transfer," which constitute Taylor's repertoire. By communicating what knowledge — political, religious, and civic — that this event was intended to enact, Baccio's *Descrizione* is not only an item housed in an archive, but an archive itself, making it both an archived object as well as an archive in its own right. It likewise invokes the repertoire by way of the necessary co-presence between the observer/archivist/knower and the knowledge that is being embodied and transmitted. And so, the document, in every reading, takes on a performative quality that attempts to revive the didactic quality of the production and the theatre. In this way, the document exists in tension between the archive and repertoire. Baccio's written record of the theatre and the *intermedi* is significant because it is more than a straightforward technical account of the building's scale and appearance or the production's scenic effects. These are, naturally, of interest, but the document itself is a recollection of Baccio's particular impressions of the performance of the *intermedi* and what meanings are embedded in the production including how these aspects were reinforced by the physical theatre space. Any act of preservation and record keeping speaks to the tendency to archive.¹⁹

Central to this tension is the requirement to imagine. A succinct example of the push-pull pressure between archive and repertoire is found in Baccio's account of the Second *Intermedio* which, taking the Exodus as its source, is imbued with the tension of a performance report of columns of fire leading the way to be gradually dispersed and replaced by a cooling cloud. No small scenic matter, and yet in the document itself, we are challenged by the record to (re-) imagine in its mere possibility, the "miraculous" achievement of such an effect.²⁰

Elsewhere Baccio refers to "apparatus," including a red awning or tent, in which coats of arms of the Medici and the House of Lorraine were centered. This was in turn

¹⁸ Taylor, "Acts of Transfer," 20–21.

¹⁹ Baccio does not refer to himself directly in the *Descrizione*, instead speaking of himself in the third person, and directing praise by name to his father Giovanmaria Cecchi and others actually involved in the production.

²⁰ Cecchi, "Descrizione dell'apparato e degl' intermedi," 128.

encircled, at least in part, by a Doric-order frieze that terminated on one side with the seal of the Cardinal and Archbishop of Florence (Alessandro Ottaviano de' Medici, later Pope Leo XI), which was a variation of the Medici family seal and on the other with the Seal of the Medici Family proper. Baccio's description of the theatre's decoration is the primary and most significant act of transfer contained in the *Descrizione*. Baccio's attention to these details recalls for the reader a key aspect of the production – that this *sacre rappresentazione* was made as much for the glory of the Medici as it was for the glory of God. Baccio describes the frieze as representing the Cross in three states: as a gallows, as a relic, and as a reward, with “the furthest at its most base, in the middle, its exaltation, and immediately above the stage, its glorification, in this order.”²¹ Baccio's recollection communicates to the reader that the theatre itself was meant to instruct the audience how to encounter the performance, presenting them with a multiplicity of meanings of the Cross in advance of the beginning of the performance. The images that Baccio describes for the readers clearly make these meanings not only eternal and co-present with each other, but also with Medici power, and in so doing, roots this particular production in a specific moment in history that cannot be reproduced even with the most meticulous historical record.

This irreproducibility is, naturally, true of all theatre. That is the nature of the form. Even video recording loses fidelity in the decisions of where to focus the camera angle and where to make cuts or splice different recordings of the same show. The form is ephemeral and co-created, in its most fundamental configuration, between the performers and the audience members. The *Descrizione* is therefore unique in that it aims to capture the indebtedness of the production to this particular historical moment and to keep animate the knowledge that is otherwise ephemeral. Baccio continues this effort as he turns his attention to the *intermedi*. The *intermedi*, intertwined as they are with the primary drama, likewise adopt a position of continuity between the Church and the Medici as protectors of the faith that is co-present and eternal. Baccio's description of the *intermedi* themselves extend these acts of transfer, almost suggesting a precursor to the “thick description,”²² which derive from Baccio's contextualizations. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the sixth and final *intermedio*. Whereas the first five *intermedi* presented Old Testament narratives and the main drama represented the turmoil of the early church, this final *intermedio* offers a vision of the Church Triumphant, showing the founding and spread of religious

²¹ Cecchi, “Descrizione dell'apparato e degl' intermedi,” 121. All translations from the *Descrizione* are by Laura A. Lucci.

²² In the sense of Clifford Geertz, building upon the work of Gilbert Ryle. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (Reprint, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009), 3–30; Gilbert Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts: What Is ‘Le Penseur’ Doing? (1968),” in *Collected Papers 2* (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 480–96.

orders throughout the world. Religion²³ — specifically, an allegorical portrayal of Roman Catholicism — descends from the heavens, seated within a red cloth pavilion on “a most bright cloud [...] dressed in a habit white and pure, full of majesty, with the crown of the Most High Pontiff on her head and two crossed keys, one of gold and the other of silver.”²⁴ At the sight of the splendid, jewel-encrusted cross Religion holds in her hand, all the knights and religious assemblages kneel in adulation, and angels sing. Altogether, the space and production reinforces a cosmological vision in which all places, times, and things are united under a divine plan and that the present proliferation of the faith is timeless in continuity between both the ancient world and the future one. This production of Giovanmaria Cecchi’s *L’esaltazione* is a cohesive vision of Christianity, as well as of Florence and the Medici’s place in the preservation and advancement of the Faith.

In short, we contend that Baccio’s *Descrizione* is simultaneously indebted to its “knower,” as much as it is to its interpreters. In wrestling with the archive, we necessarily rejuvenate it. In this *Descrizione*, there is a unique opportunity, as it confronts us not just with the absence of what once was, but with the traces of human intervention that nonetheless operate on both facets of the archive/repertoire framework. Predicated as it is on the individual’s presence in the space and their involvement in the production part of the wedding, the *Descrizione* itself functions as an act of transfer, collapsing the push-pull of the archive/repertoire framework. Taylor’s paradigm holds that performances are, as previously noted, “always in situ” and consequently resistant to capture.²⁵ The value of the repertoire is affirmed in the “doing,” that is, in the action. The efficaciousness of performance is the conduit through which vital, unique information passes.

Yet, the archive, in its non-neutrality, is something to be acted upon and with. Baccio’s *Descrizione*, especially when paired with the elder Cecchi’s drama, invites us to (re)situate this production. Not in space — the location of the temporary theatre remains unclear — nor in time — there is no definitive date in the available records or the scholarship — but within the networks that made this production possible in its moment and are still intelligible over four centuries later. Baccio’s *Descrizione* functions at times as both archive — in its attempts to preserve, to fix, the visual characteristic of the production — as well as repertoire, insofar as it engenders in the reader the vital

²³ Lynnette Muir contends this is the Pope, in spite of Baccio’s description suggesting a much more allegorical presentation of Mother Church. Lynnette R. Muir, “The exaltation of the Holy Cross,” in *Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and Their Legacy* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 161.

²⁴ Cecchi, *Descrizione*, 138.

²⁵ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” citing Peggy Phelan, 3-5.

political, social, and spiritual knowledge embedded in the event.²⁶ Baccio's *Descrizione* at once confronts us with the expansive possibilities of the archive/repertoire framework and simultaneously singularizes it in its attempts to preserve and (re)enact what has passed, standing as a uniquely enchanting, and equally unruly, artifact in its invitation to (re)member that which first appears to us as dismembered from its time, place, and larger historical record.

²⁶ To the degree that the *Descrizione* attempts to do something, we may even call it "performative" in its demand that we attend to the confraternal, political, religious, and economic contexts from which the production is otherwise divorced. J.L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al (New York: WW Norton & Co., Inc, 2001), 1432–33.

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Memory, Material Experience, and Consumption: The Printed and Illustrated Ephemera of the Profumo Archive in 20th-Century Buenos Aires

Sandra Szir and Andrea Gergich

In the world of archives, we often identify collections of printed ephemera, from different origins, gathered by individuals or institutions that grouped them according to a thematic interest, particular use, or type of document. The Profumo archive, in Argentina, presents a unique case in archival terms, since it is made up not only of numerous printed ephemera, but it also includes documents that explain the industrial processes of a single producer, the Profumo & Br. printing house, which operated in Buenos Aires from 1910 to the early 1980s.

Its production archive, now part of the Buenos Aires Museo,¹ includes labels,



Figure 1: Author unknown, *Agua colonia "Hermosa"* ("Beautiful" Eau de Cologne) label, 1926, golden ink and relief on paper, 2.2 x 2.2 in. Client Harrods Bs. As. Lda. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc01_19. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

¹ The Museum opened in 1968 under the name of Museo de Buenos Aires. Its name changed to Buenos Aires Museo in 2021.

N° 22250 ORDEN DE TRABAJO A EJECUTAR 9 de Abril 1941.-
(FECHA DE RECIBIDA LA ORDEN)

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SEGUN pedido verbal.

CON INTERVENCIÓN DEL SR. Minervini.
(VENDEDOR)

de acuerdo a nuestro presupuesto de fecha 9 del etc.

A ENTREGAR el día 5 de Mayo próximo.
(EL DÍA, MES, AÑO, O DETALLE IDEM. DE ENTREGAS PARCIALES)

(DEFINICIÓN GENERAL: CANTIDAD, CLASE, TÍTULO, COMPONENTES, VARIEDADES, TAMAÑO, MODELO O PROYECTO, BASE, CAMBIOS, ACABADO, ETC.)

500.000 Envoladuras para "TALETAS DE FRUTAS TRINEO", confeccionadas en 5 variedades, 200 mil "NARANJA", 150 mil "LIMON", 50 mil "PERA", 50 mil "ANANAS" y 50 mil "FRUTILLA", todas ejecutadas en forma semejante a las anteriores según muestras adjuntas, pero reemplazando la firma "Valentin & Simon Litvin" por "TRINEO Soc.Resp.Ltda." y suprimiendo además la leyenda "Envasado".-

NOTA: A ejecutar simultáneamente con la orden N°22251.

CONDICIONES PREVIAS A LA EJECUCION Ninguna.
(PRESENTAR PROYECTO O DIBUJO O PRUEBAS, O AVISAR AL CLIENTE LA PUESTA EN MAQUINA, O NINGUNA)

PIE DE IMPRENTA O CARACTERISTICAS No.
(NO, O SI Y DETALLE DE LO QUE DEBE PONERSE)

(DETALLES DE EJECUCION: SISTEMA TINTAS, COLORES, RELIEVE, ENGOMADO, BARNIZADO, TRAZADO, CORTE, PEGADO, DOBLADO, COMPLEMENTACIONES, ETC.)

EJECUCION en offset a 5 tintas y barnizado.

(DETERMINACION DEL MATERIAL: CLASE O NOMBRE, FORMATO, PESO, COLOR, N° CATALOGO, OTRA, ETC., O PROVISTO POR EL CLIENTE, O DE NUESTRO CONFECCION)

adas sobre papel obra lra. 72x104 de 28 kls. a pedir.-

(REFERENCIAS SOBRE PROYECTO, DIBUJO, GRABADO, CLISES, GALVANOS, FOTOCROMO, FOTOLITO, PLANCHAS, COMPOSICION, CORTANTES, ETC. O EXISTENTES)

ELEMENTOS: Dibujo y fotocromo existente A MODIFICAR y planchas a preparar.

(INDICACIONES SOBRE: AGENDAMIENTO, FRACCIONAMIENTO, ROTULACION, SISTEMA DE ENVIO, LUGAR DE ENTREGA, ETC., O NORMAL)

ENTREGA normal.

CON
 NETIQUETA

FORM 144-1000-2-40 o/19375.

Figure 2: Profumo & Br. production order for Trineo fruit tablets wrappers, 1941, typewritten text on printed form, kraft paper, 8.5 x 11 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc04_36. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

advertisements, illustrated prints, and industrial documents like originals for reproduction and production orders (figs. 1-4).²

This archive enables a set of research questions and problems since their materials allow us to investigate the modes of production, aesthetic and design features, and cultural meanings carried by the representations they contain. The pieces in this archive, categorized as "ephemera,"³ are valuable in the first place for exploring historical industrial

graphic production in the 20th century in Argentina. In addition, they can be helpful to

understand visual and design culture of the time, as well as the commodification of everyday life. Likewise, the Profumo archive is neither described and organized nor adequately available for research, as it lacks a complete catalog of its contents, a clear

² The printing technique is indicated only in those cases where it appears in the documentation, otherwise it is not possible to state with certainty the technique used.

³ The Society of American Archivists defines ephemera "as materials, usually printed documents, created for a specific, limited purpose, and generally designed to be discarded after use." Examples of ephemera include advertisements, tickets, brochures, and receipts. Society of American Archivists (SAA), "Ephemera," <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/ephemera.html>.

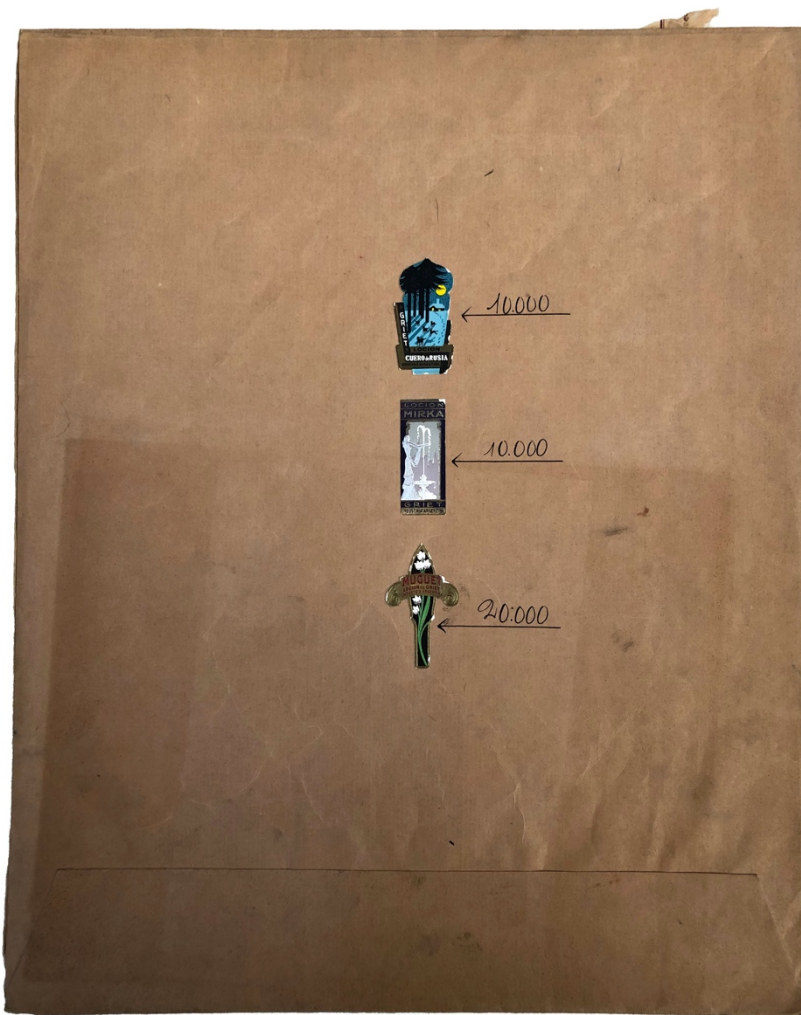


Figure 3: Profumo & Br. production order (back), with three samples of labels for cosmetic bottles, 1938, golden ink and relief on paper. Client Perfumerías Griet. 8.5 x 11 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc29_01. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

order of the pieces, and, furthermore, it is not open to the public or for consultation by researchers, confronting us with its fragile materiality, preservation, and access.

The graphic artifacts that make up this archive, by their use and consumption in the past, their aesthetic and material qualities and their iconographic representations, articulate the research perspectives of the history of visual culture, graphic arts, design, production technologies, and social history.

Since the 19th century and with greater intensity in the 20th century, large urban centers, such as Buenos Aires, have been flooded by ephemeral graphic

imagery on a previously unknown scale. These paper-based prints, usually reproduced with industrial techniques, were linked to the daily administrative, economic, and pedagogical dimensions of urban life and the consumer society of industrial capitalism. Often destined to be discarded after a specific use, many of them remained in public or private collections and were preserved for their symbolic, aesthetic, or emotional value. In this vast territory of objects and categories coexist, among others, illustrated magazines, labels, advertisements, commercial papers, leaflets, menus, posters, brochures, invitations, postcards, and cigarette wrappers.

The objects and images that make up the category of graphic ephemera, despite their aesthetic vocation, did not enter the recognized canon of fine arts, nor

the narratives of art history,⁴ since their processes implied artistic and manual, but also industrial procedures, and in many cases, they constituted objects of everyday, popular, and mass consumption. These artifacts without an author, produced quickly on a mass scale, on humble supports, with sometimes rudimentary prints, were generally not adequately preserved, due to their utilitarian and contingent functions. In addition, many of them, due to the fragility and low quality of the papers used, present inconveniences for their proper storage and conservation. However, these graphic objects generated significant experiences, visual and cultural meanings for wide audiences, and have been re-signified in recent years by the so-called visual culture studies.⁵



Figure 4: Author unknown, original drawing for printed reproduction, 1954, tempera paint on cardboard, 7.8 x 6 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc30. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

In Argentina, the vast majority of these kinds of print have been lost, or found in fragmented collections, rarely known, or scattered in sets grouped by their use or subject. They have been rejected by high culture and neglected by academic research, including design studies, as traditional Argentine historiographies of design disregard popular graphics prior to the consolidation of the profession in the mid-20th century. However, ephemera, as part of the common graphic heritage, shaped the visual and material culture of the past, and formed a treasure of experiences and collective social memory. In this sense, the Profumo archive represents a singular case, since it constitutes the only known set of this type of material that has remained relatively complete in Argentina, and is unique in its features and scope. It consists of approximately 5,000 documents, donated to the

⁴ Bertrand Tillier, "L'éphémère imprimé & illustré: un objet à la lisière de l'histoire de l'art du XIX^e siècle," *Fabula / Les colloques: Les éphémères, un patrimoine à construire* (2015), <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document2921.php>.

⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Mostrando el ver: Una crítica de la cultura visual" ("Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture"), *Estudios Visuales*, no. 1, (2003): 17-40; Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Una introducción a la cultura visual (An Introduction to Visual Culture)*, trans Paula García Segura (Barcelona Paidós, 2003); J. L. Brea, "Estética, Historia del Arte, Estudios Visuales" ("Aesthetics, Art History, Visual Studies"), *Estudios Visuales*, no. 3 (2006): 8-25.

Buenos Aires Museo shortly after the workshop closed its doors in the early 1980s, by a person linked to the printing company, whose name was lost in the bureaucracy. While collectors of ephemera generally focus on special pieces valuable for their visual, material, or emotive features, this archive includes not only the final prints like perfume labels, company leaflets, or clothing advertisements, but also related production documents, like original drawings and production orders.

It is precisely this coexistence in the archive, of the final printed pieces together with the work orders that document the manufacturing processes, which makes the Profumo archive unique. In Argentina, there are, although scarce, some private or institutional collections, with ephemera pieces such as cigarette packs, postcards, greeting cards, or children's game cards, among other typologies. However, it is uncommon to find production archives of graphic companies like Profumo's that preserve materials documenting the industrial production process along with the final printed pieces. These documents provide significant information about particular technologies applied, the number of prints delivered, and commercial data, such as the name of the firm behind popular consumer articles. They also reflect an appreciation for the manufacturing process, on the part of those responsible for keeping them, and later donating the collection to the museum.

For various reasons, lack of resources or qualified personnel, low interest or appreciation, the archive was not processed or cataloged for many years. After the attention of a research group focused on the study of graphic culture in Argentina, the collection gained special interest and became the object of a series of projects that are currently studying it.⁶ In a sense, this renewed interest can be read as part of the so-called "archival turn,"⁷ which since the late 1990s, proposed new ways of valuing the

⁶ Some of these current projects are: Proyecto Mecenazgo cultural, Ministerio de Cultura de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (Cultural Patronage Project, Ministry of Culture of the City of Buenos Aires, 2020 and 2022):

a. Sandra Szir and Andrea Gergich, "La persistencia de lo efímero en la memoria gráfica. Clasificación, digitalización y exhibición virtual del Archivo Profumo, patrimonio del Museo de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires" ("The persistence of the ephemeral in graphic memory: Classification, digitalization and virtual exhibition of the Profumo Archive, heritage of the Museum of the City of Buenos Aires").

b. Andrea Gergich and Sandra Szir, "La persistencia de lo efímero en la memoria gráfica (segunda etapa). Ordenamiento, exposición y catálogo del Archivo Profumo, patrimonio de Buenos Aires Museo" ("The persistence of the ephemeral in the graphic memory (second stage). Arrangement, exhibition and catalog of the Profumo Archive, patrimony of the Buenos Aires Museum"). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the authors.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Mal de archivo. Una impresión freudiana (Archival Disease. A Freudian Impression)*. (Madrid: Ed. Trotta, 1997); Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* no. 110 (2004): 3-22, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>; Lila Caimari, "El momento archivos" ("The Archives Moment"), *Población & Sociedad*, 27, no. 2 (2020): 222-233, <http://dx.doi.org/10.19137/pys-2020-270210>; G. Swiderski, "La Archivología nacional y los modelos explicativos de la disciplina" ("National

material heritage of institutional collections, which were then the focus of transdisciplinary approaches beyond the traditional perspective of historical studies. The archival turn highlighted that archives are tools for understanding both past and present, including the power strategies that determine what should be preserved and what should not. This insight appeared salient to our investigation of the Profumo archive, in both its internal composition and in the history of the archive itself, which remained neglected for a long time before these new interests arose.

Our interest in the management and cultural-historical study of this archive implies both constructive and interdisciplinary work with archival professionals for the tasks of order and description, as well as a theoretical and methodological approach. The different types of documents that were identified in the archive —work orders, samples, sketches, final art, originals, payment vouchers— constitute the material basis



Figure 5: Author unknown, *Agua colonia Lilas* (Lilac Eau de Cologne) labels for cosmetic bottles, 1929, golden ink and relief on textured paper. Left 1.7 x 3.3 in. Right 1.3 x 2.5 in. and 3.3 x 0.6 in., sample labels stuck on the back of production order, with the number of prints requested written in pencil (detail). Client Perfumerías Griet. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc01_47. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

Archival Scholarship and Explanatory Models of the Discipline”), *CHUY, Revista de Estudios Literarios Latinoamericanos*, Dossier Archivos latinoamericanos, no. 14 (2023): 4-29, https://www.academia.edu/105381489/La_Archivologia_nacional_y_los_modelos_explicativos_de_la_disciplina; M. Nazar, “Archivos, memoria y derechos: reflexiones en torno al caso argentino” (“Archives, Memory and Rights: Reflections on the Argentine Case”), *Comma, International Journal on Archives*, no. 2 (2010): 145-158.



Figure 6: Author unknown, original drawing of raspberries for printed reproduction, ca. 1940, tempera paint on cardboard, 7.4 x 7 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc31. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

for questions about the production procedures, since these graphic devices represent the traces of those processes, while their iconographic aspects become sources of their cultural meanings, their consumption, and appropriation practices.

The company's core product was the quality label. These labels were printed to identify a variety of everyday products, meeting the demands of important clients from sectors such as cosmetics, medicine, fashion and clothing, beverages, and food. The cosmetics and beverage brands stand out, showing the

company's high printing quality and eloquent design models. This is notable because these products were intended for popular consumption, resulting in massive circulation, and eventual obsolescence (fig. 5)

These materials reveal details, such as the skill and care of the draftsmen and graphic technicians involved in creating these pieces. This is clear in some original drawings that depict the products and related scenes or elements in a highly naturalistic style, as can be seen for example in an illustration of raspberries showing a very precise mastery of the tempera technique, especially in the glow and shadows of the volume of each individual berry depicted (fig. 6).

For these reasons, this archive is particularly interesting for studying graphic culture, a realm that includes the objects, techniques, practices, concepts, people, and organizations involved in print production. The technical elements of the production process included in this archive, such as sketches, originals, and printing proofs, offer significant data for understanding historical techniques and methods applied in the manufacture of the various graphic products, all generated by the same printing workshop.

The documents concerning the production of the labels *Loción maderas de Oriente* (Orient Wood Lotion) (fig. 7) for instance, present a final print of each label, stuck on the back of the production order (left), as well as the original handmade ink



Figure 7: Author unknown, left: *Loción Maderas de Oriente* (Orient Wood Lotion) labels for cosmetic bottles, 1942, letterpress printing on paper, special inks and relief, 1.2 x 2.4 in. and 0.6 x 1.4 in. Right: original drawing for printed reproduction, ink on paper with details in pencil, 7 x 7.6 in. The paper is glued to a hardboard, and protected by a tracing sheet. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc30. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

drawing used for print reproduction (right). The document on the left shows the printed samples of the labels, together with the number of labels to be printed, written by hand. The document on the right shows some details of the technical process, as the hand-drawn crosses provide a visual guide to the technician, who would reduce the drawing by half or more of its original size using photographic techniques. The pencil-drawn texts at the bottom of the labels show where they should add the phrase, "INDUSTRIA ARGENTINA."

These documents reveal information of the print production processes not visible in the final printed piece. For example, the size in which the original drawing was done, triple the size of the final printed label, tells us about the use of photographic reduction techniques to minimize errors from tracing the hand-drawn images. The comparison with the final piece also allows us to identify what aspects of the drawing correspond to the color parts of the label, and which to the subtle relief lines that depict arabesque ornaments. This tells us, at the same time, the way all these details in the label were defined from the very beginning by the illustrator of the original drawing.



Figure 8: Author unknown, original drawings for *Agua de colonia Ophelia* (Ophelia Eau de Cologne) label, ca. 1930, ink on cardboard, with details in pencil, 6.4 x 7.8. The paper is glued to a hardboard, and protected by a tracing sheet. Client Harrods-Gath & Chaves. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc31. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

In this way, the originals provide visual and material information on the methods used to produce the images and texts that define the design of the pieces, revealing the step-by-step process of Profumo's graphic production.

Another clear example is the series of originals

for the *Agua de Colonia Ophelia* label (Ophelia Eau de Cologne), which allows us to analyze the way the image is constructed based on the separation of colors necessary for the final printing (fig. 8). As printing is done in layers, these documents show how the area corresponding to each color of ink is indicated in different plates, accompanied by the indications written by hand on the tracing sheet that covers the drawings. In the sequence, we can see different plates corresponding to each specific ink to be printed. In the first place on the left, the original complete drawing of the label is depicted. Secondly, we can appreciate how the different parts of the image are selected according to the color of ink chosen for it, and consequently separated into different drawings. One plate highlights small areas corresponding to little flowers in the drawing, plus the logotype of the product "Ophelia," marked with the color *rojo* (red); another highlights the dress of the woman depicted and the name of the brand "Gath y Chaves," marked with the color *azul* (blue); another that only marks some details in the dress, the arm and hair of the woman, is marked with *violeta* (violet), and so on. Other traces of production such as the pencil drawing lines that set the final size of the label (59 mm), and the crosses that indicate the limits of the label's outline, testify to the practices of Profumo's graphic technicians.

The separated originals give us valuable information to interpret the final print regarding the number of colors used in reproduction. Whereas the standard image reproduction uses only four ink colors (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, CMYK), labels usually demand a higher number of inks in order to expand the color spectrum. This



Figure 9: Author unknown, "Revelation," *Agua de colonia al neroli* ("Revelation," Neroli Eau de Cologne) label for cosmetic bottle, 1929, golden ink and relief on paper, 1.9 x 2.5 in. Client Harrods-Gath & Chaves. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc02_96. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

presents a difficulty for the analysis of the printed piece, as it is very hard to identify how many inks have been used to depict each color. By having these originals, we can know with certainty which inks and colors were used to print the label, and therefore understand how the different inks combine to obtain the final result. These findings help us to deepen our understanding of Profumo's technical processes, allowing new questions to arise from the materiality of the archive.

Documents such as work orders, on the other hand, provide information about the technical specifications of each job, such as the quantities of prints requested by the client, the machines indicated for each job, the type of paper used, and the surface finishing applied to the pieces, among other details. This information is clear, for example, in the work order for Trineo fruit tablets wrappers (fig. 2), where one can read the printing system to be used: offset printing, the number of colors: five inks, the paper used: first class work paper, and surface finishing: varnished, as well as the number of prints requested by the client: 500,000 copies.

The content of the Profumo archive helps us understand the manufacturing, distribution, and consumption of print productions, along with the

meanings these ephemeral, mass-circulation items convey. In this sense, these prints showcase a variety of iconographies and visual narratives, and they offer valuable study objects for exploring visual culture from multiple disciplines. Among others, these objects highlight issues posed from the field of gender studies that allows us to critically approach stereotypes of the feminine and masculine that stand out clearly in labels for cosmetic products. A clear example are the labels made for *Perfumerías Griet* and other cosmetic brands for Gath & Chaves, an important Argentine department store founded in 1883, with its headquarters in Buenos Aires and branches in the largest cities of the country.⁸ In them, idealized feminine faces or bodies, with

⁸ Gath & Chaves played an important role in the circulation of consumer products for Argentina's wealthy class in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, developing several lines of their own brand products, mainly in the cosmetics sector. In 1922, it merged with the Argentine branch of Harrods, the only branch

references to classical culture and associated with elements of nature, flowers or other vegetal figures, offer the consumer models that allude to an idea of beauty (fig. 9).

In effect, these printed artifacts composed and sustained an imagery in which, together with the design, typography, and page layout, we can observe scenes and



Figure 10: Author unknown, advertisement for *Lana Mimosa* (Mimosa –cuddly– Wool), ca. 1950, offset printing on paper, 10.6 x 14.2 in. The phrase depicted says: “To knit well... Mimosa wool”. Client Cordova Hnos. & Cia. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc42. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

situations that refer to social constructions. In this sense, these images demand further analysis regarding childhood, social roles and hegemonic aesthetic models. A relevant example is the case of the advertising of Mimosa Wool where the subject depicted, and target audience, is a woman in a domestic environment (fig. 10), an image illustrative of the sexual division of labor that for much of the 20th century assigned women to domestic tasks and men to work outside the home. Embroidery, knitting, and weaving, particularly inscribed in institutions and school curriculums, were present in advertisements and commercial design, and evoked home and family. But from the depicted scene, we can imagine in this case a home located in a privileged situation – represented by the luxurious couch, the woman’s garments, and her makeup and hair – so that gender and class are intertwined. In this way, the confinement to domesticated labor that characterized the stereotype of femininity for the first half of the 20th century is softened in

a way, presenting a smiling woman in a comfortable and safe home environment.

In addition, the labels for Trébol and Extrafina stockings, as well as Griet toilet soap wrapper materialize the ideal of beauty in young female figures with long slender legs, and elegant blond hair (figs. 11 and 12).

of the firm outside England. Perfumerías Griet offered various lines of products such as perfumes, lotions, soaps, and make-up powders, and was very popular in the first decades of the 20th century in Buenos Aires.

The Profumo archive is the only one of its kind in Argentina, where no other production record of the printing industry has been preserved almost integrally. In this sense, this collection of printed ephemera operates against the expiration of the objects and the loss of the social memory connected to them. These objects, which were conceived for a specific use and a short useful life, are collected and recovered from oblivion by researchers of the visual and graphic culture of the past. The archive thus opens a rich path of inquiry into the design, imagery, production processes, and visual strategies of collections of ephemera that represent “a submerged continent that we are just beginning to discover, but which, better known, will mean a remapping of our understanding of the role of the visual in that



Figure 11: Author unknown, Trébol and Extrafina (Clover and Ultraslim) labels for stockings ca. 1940, offset printing on paper, 2 x 5.6 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc30. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.



Figure 12: Author unknown, Chela toilet soap wrapper, ca. 1928, golden ink on paper, 6.9 x 4.8 in. Fondo Profumo & Hno. AR-CABA-MC-PROF01-uc44. Courtesy of Buenos Aires Museo.

period.”⁹ The record offered by this archive is an invaluable resource that crosses disciplinary boundaries, between the history of art, design, and visual and material cultures, allowing a perspective that interweaves production processes and technologies with consumption and everyday life. As researchers, it is up to us to preserve and study these traces of culture, even with the fragile support of printed and illustrated paper, and to lead the social rediscovery of these materials.

⁹ Patricia Mainardi, “Introduction: Another World,” in *Another World: Nineteenth-Century Illustrated Print Culture* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2017), 2.

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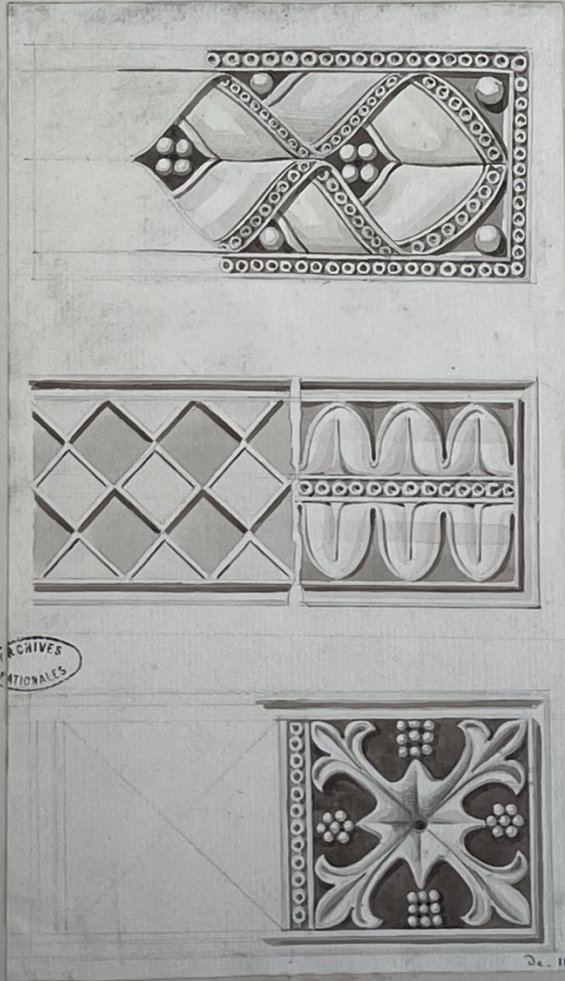
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Trending Today, Forgotten Tomorrow: The Ephemerality of AI-Generated Art on Civitai

Jena Marble

In early 2024, the Willy Wonka Experience in Glasgow became infamous for its lackluster execution. Promised an immersive adventure, visitors instead encountered a dark, poorly decorated warehouse with minimal set design and dubious use of AI-generated visuals.¹ Guests, and soon the internet at large, criticized the event for its lack of effort and creativity. While initially amusing, this uninspired production could be indicative of a broader trend: the rapid, superficial production of content driven by generative AI and the consequences of overreliance on AI without thoughtful human input.

Generative AI — referring to artificial intelligence systems that can create new content like images, text, or videos by training on large datasets — have seen wide adoption. These tools, like DALL-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and Adobe Firefly, allow users to input prompts and receive creative, often complex, results with minimal effort. The platforms offer varying levels of accessibility, from free open-source models to subscription-based services, making them widely available and easy to use. As of

¹ Calum Watson, Morven Mckinnon, and Megan Bonar, "Willy Wonka experience: How did the viral sensation go so wrong?" *BBC*, March 2, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-68431728>.

mid-2024, Midjourney had over 20 million users on Discord.² ChatGPT had an average of 1.5 billion monthly visits in 2023.³

While this technology may help to broaden access to content creation, it has also introduced an era of disposability, where the overwhelming volume of output overshadows lasting impact. This is particularly evident in online galleries like Civitai, a platform launched in November 2022 that serves as a showcase for AI-generated art. While Civitai's community-driven approach and accessible resources make it popular, its emphasis on speed and novelty — the site boasts that users generate up to 10 million images a day — seem to prioritize momentary appeal over enduring value.⁴

In September 2024, Civitai's trending image page demonstrated its quick shifts in popular content and user interests. The platform's bend toward unconventionality was evident in a single day's most popular prompt: a bizarrely buff Smeagol from *Lord of the Rings*, mid-workout in a gym.⁵ The image is a weird, unexpected combination that captures immediate attention. The most-reacted to image of that week featured a female warrior hurling a fiery meteorite, while the monthly favorite showed a cyberpunk character in a retro-futuristic, dystopian setting.^{6,7} Both highlight the community's appetite for specific, complex, and striking imagery. The all-time most reacted-to prompt combines maximalist fantasy with pop culture, blending elements of cosplay, video games, and hyper-detailed traits — intricate, weathered, and atmospheric — perfectly capturing Civitai's inclination towards genre-defying imagery.⁸

These rapidly changing trends exemplify Civitai's tendency toward novelty and immediate visual gratification. While each prompt represents creativity in its

² Midjourney Discord invitation screen, showing current member statistics, <https://discord.com/invite/midjourney>.

³ Krystal Hu, "Booming traffic for OpenAI's ChatGPT posts first-ever monthly dip in June," *Reuters*, July 5, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/booming-traffic-openais-chatgpt-posts-first-ever-monthly-dip-june-similarweb-2023-07-05/>.

⁴ "Using Civitai: The On-Site Image Generator," Civitai, <https://education.civitai.com/using-civitai-the-on-site-image-generator/>.

⁵ User @UnstableGen's exact prompt was "a ridiculously buff, roided-out Smeagol wearing a sleeveless hoodie, curling a massive dumbbell in a realistic gym setting," shared to Civitai September 14, 2024, <https://civitai.com/images/29438139>.

⁶ @dever's complex prompt began with "intensely focused Viking woman warrior with curly hair hurling a burning meteorite from her hand towards the viewer," shared to Civitai September 10, 2024, <https://civitai.com/images/28746697>.

⁷ @LizardMan245's long prompt started with "the image is a digital illustration in a detailed, vibrant, high contrast, semi-realistic art style with 90s retro futuristic anime elements without noise or comic halftone effect," shared to Civitai September 4, 2024, <https://civitai.com/images/27763004>.

⁸ @ajuro's prompt had mention of specific franchises and characters, including *Atomic Heart* and *Final Fantasy*, as well as negative prompts, including bad proportions, ugly, and extra fingers, shared to Civitai March 2024, <https://civitai.com/images/9173928>.

conception, or perhaps more accurately, a proficiency in prompt engineering, the continual cycle of different styles and themes results in a fast-paced environment where viral hits disappear as quickly as they emerged. Moreover, the pieces in the online gallery often lack the personal connection or story that gives traditional art its lasting value. Rather than being shaped by an artist's unique perspective or life experience, these images are the result of specific keywords and phrases, often lacking the depth and personal touch that gives traditional art its profound effects.

The surrealist trend seen throughout Civitai parallels the work of traditional artists like James Jean, whose ethereal portraits blend natural forms with dreamlike elements.⁹ Jean's art, marked by its intricate details, underscores the rich, labor-intensive process behind his traditional creative practices. On Instagram, Jean shared that most of his sketches alone take about a day to complete.¹⁰ This time investment starkly contrasts with AI's ability to generate hundreds of images in minutes. The use of generative AI, often without thoughtful consideration, risks trivializing the time, skill, and personal experience that have traditionally shaped artistic expression.

It's important to note, however, that AI-generated imagery isn't entirely without merit. Some creatives may use this technology as a tool for artistic exploration, incorporating generated elements into broader, more considered works. In these cases, AI acts as a collaborator, augmenting rather than replacing the human's role. When AI supports, but doesn't overshadow their process, creators can achieve impactful and thoughtful results.

Still, the overwhelming trend toward ephemerality on Civitai raises important questions about the future of creativity and long-term implications. As AI-generated content becomes increasingly prevalent, how will it shape our perception of art and human creativity? Will the flood of easily created, trend-driven visuals devalue the time, skill, and craftsmanship typically associated with art-making? Conversely, could the rapid obsolescence of AI-generated images — with their tendency to be quickly forgotten — paradoxically preserve the enduring value of traditional artistic practices?

The rise of generative AI and platforms like Civitai present complex challenges. While they expand access to creation and open new modes of visual expression, they also risk promoting a culture where art is seen as easily consumable and quickly disposable. As we address these complexities, it's important to consider how we

⁹ Jamie Green, "James Jean's phantasmagorical world of technicolour fever dreams," *It's Nice That*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/james-jean-zugzwang-phantasmagorical-paintings-180816>.

¹⁰ Jean shared an intricate sketch based on a photo from his travels, accompanied only by a teapot emoji. In response to a comment, he noted that most of his sketches take about a day to complete. Instagram, September 7, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/C_nz_hVvoRG/?hl=en.

engage with AI while still preserving the depth, longevity, and human touch that have long made art a vital part of our cultural heritage.

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author biographies

Benjamin Busch is a US-American/German visual artist living in Berlin. First trained as an architect (M.A. Arch.), he received his M.A. in Spatial Strategies in 2017 from the Weissensee Academy of Art, Berlin. In his artistic practice, he employs architecture as a narrative device to shed light on underrepresented communities. Through his critical writing, social practice, and mixed-media and multimedia artworks, Busch engages the production of space as a convergence of its perceived, conceived, and lived modalities. He was a 2021–22 participant of BPA// Berlin program for artists, and from 2018 to 2022 he co-directed the artistic project space The Institute for Endotic Research (TIER). His artwork and writing have appeared in artist monographs, edited volumes, journals, and magazines, and he has exhibited in Germany and internationally.

Eric Futerfas is a graduate of UC Berkeley's M.S. Architecture program where he studied the interface between built and natural systems through a series of experimental projects, including bioprinting seed germination capsules and designing a mycelium-based indoor biofilter. He's been awarded for multiple competition projects, including a geothermal greenhouse for LAGI 2020 at Fly Ranch and a halophytic garden installation for Domaine de Chaumont in rural France. Eric worked for 2 years as a sustainability consultant at Atelier Ten, optimizing large architectural projects for water reuse, daylight exposure, and life cycle impact. He now works at Hyphae Design Lab, designing buildings with natural materials in culturally critical ways to create bridges with nature rather than boundaries. He is a member of the AIA, CASBA, and is LEED BD+C accredited. Outside of

environmental design, Eric enjoys making ambient electronic music and film photography.

Andrea Gergich is Director of the Degree in Design and Visual Communication of the Department of Humanities and Arts at the National University of Lanús, Argentina. Professor of Social History of Design at the same university. Associate Professor of Visual Communication History and Design History in Argentina, in the Degree in Graphic Design at Architecture, Design and Urbanism Faculty of the University of Buenos Aires (FADU, UBA, Argentina), where she is also lecturer of the postgraduate seminar Image and design. The construction of modern visualities, of the Master in Communication Design. Graphic Designer and Master in Communication Design, she participates in and leads research projects related to design history, graphic and visual culture. Lecturer and author of several articles and book chapters.

Ben Jameson-Ellsmore is an architectural historian and ethnographer of marginal landscapes in U.S. cities. He is currently a Postdoctoral Research Associate and Lecturer in the Engagements Program at the University of Virginia. After obtaining his Ph.D. in History of Art and Architecture at University of California, Santa Barbara, he worked for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documenting encampments of the unhoused in West Oakland, California. He also co-managed *react/review: a responsive journal for art and architecture* volumes 4 and 5.

Art historian **Annemarie Kok** works as postdoctoral researcher at the University of Groningen on 'Cultural Archives, Digital Collections, Identity Formation, and Care for Heritage.' Her current research focuses on the making, experiencing and preserving of ephemeral and participatory art practices. In 2023 she defended her dissertation on participatory art of the so-called long sixties, published under the title *Pioneering Participatory Art Practices: Tracing Actors, Associations and Interactions across the Long Sixties* (transcript Verlag, 2024). She is the author of a book on Dutch art criticism between 1989 and 2015 (*Kunstkritiek in een tijd van vervagende grenzen*, nai010 publishers, 2016) and her writing can also be found in *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art / Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, and *Sculpture Journal*. She has lectured at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, Utrecht University and the University of Groningen.

Laura A. Lucci is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Department of Communication Studies, Dance, and Theatre at Saint Mary's College. She holds a PhD in Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies from the University of Toronto, where she completed her doctoral thesis, *Pirandello's Dramaturgy of Time* in 2017. At Saint Mary's, Dr. Lucci teaches courses in Communication Studies, Theatre Studies, and English, with an emphasis on developing student voices in writing and public speaking. She is an active member of the Pirandello Society of America, publishing scholarly work with its journal *PSA* regularly. Most recently, Dr. Lucci has joined the Society's Board of Directors, serving as its Webmaster and the Managing Editor for the journal. Dr. Lucci is also an active theatre director, working with both student productions as well as in the wider Michiana community.

Jena Marble is a graphic designer, art director, and clinical assistant professor at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. In the classroom, she blends hands-on instruction with real-world expertise to create practical learning environments. Her research focuses on artificial intelligence and graphic design, exploring generative AI's potential to reshape creative practice.

Evan Pavka is currently an Assistant Professor at Toronto Metropolitan University and serves as Associate Editor of the journal *Interiors: Design/Architecture/Culture*.

Nisha Shanghavi is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of art and architectural history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, specializing in the visual culture of British India. Her current research looks at the colonial landscape of British social, country, and hill station clubs in India. She is a recipient of the Paul Mellon Center research grant, and a Humanities and Social Sciences research grant from UCSB to conduct field research at clubs in Chennai, Ootacamund, and Kolkata, India.

Paul Stoesser is emeritus faculty and technical director at the Center for Drama, Theater and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto. Dr. Stoesser's primary research interest examines the theoretical basis of *opsis* in conjunction with the history and development of theatre production technologies especially regarding modern applications of Renaissance staging techniques. Other select research projects include a functional analysis of an actual *Commedia dell'arte* *batocio*; a computer-imaged examination of original early 16th century play stagings in Old Hall, Queens' College Cambridge; an edited collection of essays on Futurism; and, extensive topics in Canadian theatre with special consideration for the pervasive influence of the international Art Theatre movement on the national development of both professionalism as well as scenographic expression. Dr. Stoesser's main areas of

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A charter member of the Canadian Institute for Theatre Technology, Paul is also the company designer and a founding member of Toronto Laboratory Theatre/Théâtre-Laboratoire de Toronto.

Sandra Szir holds a Ph.D. in History and Theory of the Arts from the University of Buenos Aires, a Master's in Sociology of Culture and Cultural Analysis from IDAES, National University of San Martín (UNSAM), and a Bachelor's degree in Arts, also from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). She is a specialist in visual and graphic culture, history of illustrated press and printed images in Argentina during the 19th and 20th centuries. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in the fields of Theory, Methods, and Historiography of Visual Arts and History of the Book at the University of Buenos Aires and the National University of San Martín. She is the author of the book *Infancia y cultura visual. Los periódicos ilustrados para niños (1880–1910)* [Childhood and Visual Culture: Illustrated Children's Magazines (1880–1910)] and editor of *Ilustrar e imprimir. Historias de la cultura gráfica en Buenos Aires, 1830–1930* (2016) [Illustrating and Printing: Histories of Graphic Culture in Buenos Aires, 1830–1930]. She has also co-edited *Entre la academia y la crítica. La construcción discursiva y disciplinar de la Historia del Arte* (2017) [Between Academia and Criticism: The Discursive and Disciplinary Construction of Art History] and *A vuelta de página. Usos del impreso ilustrado en Buenos Aires, siglos XIX y XX* (2018) [Turning the Page: Uses of Illustrated Print in Buenos Aires, 19th–20th Centuries], in addition to publishing articles in specialized journals and books. She has been awarded research grants from both Argentine and international institutions and leads research projects in her areas of expertise. Currently, she serves as Director of CIAP (Center for Research in Art and Heritage, CONICET-UNSAM).

Taylor Van Doorne is a Ph.D. candidate in art and architectural history at the University of California Santa Barbara, specializing in the history and theory of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European architecture. Her research has received several grants including a Samuel H. Kress Foundation Institutional Fellowship at the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art and a Chateaubriand Fellowship. She is a co-founder of *react/review*.

