Editorial

Between creation and destruction

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In an early essay on "The General Nature of African Art," Léopold Sédar Senghor, the poet-president of Senegal, wrote that "the artisan-poet is not concerned to make a work for eternity. The work of art is perishable. The style and the spirit are preserved, but the old work is quickly replaced and realized anew as soon as it becomes antiquated or is destroyed."[1] This early indication that "African art time" (as archaeologist Ekpo Eyo calls it) often includes an expectation that the object experiences a specific life span ending in a form of death and rebirth was long repressed in the literature. Instead, functionalists preferred to claim that the short life span for many African works of art was due to the rigors of the tropical climate, even though African hard woods, when oiled and stored properly, or sheathed in copper, easily endure for centuries.

The novelist Chinua Achebe returned to this theme in 1984 when invited to write the preface for an exhibition catalogue on Igbo art from Nigeria. The writer was interested in motivation: "Collections by their very nature will impose rigid, artistic attitudes and conventions on creativity which the Igbo sensibility goes out of its way to avoid."[2] Achebe maintains that the Igbo allow their art to disintegrate because they value process over product. He argues that piling up precedents from the past can inhibit everyday acts of creativity through the exaltation of norms out of step with contemporary needs. Thereby, Achebe slyly insinuates that it is the Europeans and Americans who are the true object-fetishists, unwilling ever to let go.

At a disciplinary and institutional level, the investment in the production of permanent objects to which Achebe alludes is reflected both in attempts to stabilize the material fabric of objects, and in a tendency to privilege the moment of creation over circulation and reception. Reacting to this synchronic fixation, recent anthropological and sociological approaches to objects have sought to emphasize that they are "infinitely malleable to the shifting and contested meanings constructed *for them* through human agency."[3] In his work on the circulation and recycling of luxury goods in Byzantium, Anthony Cutler has expressed the idea more poetically, arguing that objects should be seen not as stable self-contained entities but as "evanescent links in a chain of Becoming."[4]

In trying to understand the elusive "biography" of the object, however, the bare fact of reception is less informative than the various ways in which the object is redefined and redeployed. Kopytoff's now classic essay on the cultural biography of things made this point in relation to transcultural circulations, noting that "what is significant about the adoption of alien objects—as of alien ideas—is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use."[5]

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1. Leópold Sédar Senghor, "The General Nature of African Art," *Prose and Poetry* (1956; reprint London: Heinemann, 1965), pp. 81–83.

2. Chinua Achebe, "Foreword," in *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, ed., H. M. Cole and C. C. Aniakor (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, U.C.L.A., 1984), p. ix.

3. Christopher B. Steiner, "Rights of Passage: On the Liminal Identity of Art in the Border Zone," in *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, ed. F. R. Myers (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001), p. 210. Responding to the consequent danger of treating objects as transparent windows onto cultural or historical processes, Bill Brown distinguishes between the history of things ("understood as their circulation") and the history in things ("the crystallization of the anxieties and aspirations that linger in the material objects"): Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, Autumn (2001):4; idem, "How to Do Things with Things (a Toy Story)," *Critical Inquiry* 24, Summer (1998):935.

4. Anthony Cutler, "Reuse or Use? Theoretical and Practical Attitudes Towards Objects in the Early Middle Ages," *Settimane di Studi del Centro Italiano di Studi Sull'alto Medioevo* 46 (1999):1079. See also Claire Sponsler, "In Transit: Theorizing Cultural and Appropriation in Medieval Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32, no. 1 (2002):17–39.

5. Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural*

Practices of displacement and reconsolidation provide particularly useful points of entry into the imbrications of subject and object. Moreover, with their emphasis on a diachronic approach to material culture, analyses of these practices serve to deconstruct any notion of a simple dialectic between birth and death, creation and destruction, while engaging a contemporary interest in the productive, even creative potential of consumption.

The production and reception of figural art in the Islamic world provide particularly rich terrain for an exploration of themes of permanence and impermanence. Although often honored more in the breach than the observance, the hadiths, the canonical collections of the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, make a clear distinction between potentially animate and inanimate representations. In doing so, they prescribe parameters both for the creation of images *ex novo,* and for the alteration of preexisting images that are considered religiously unacceptable. Two basic interventional strategies are prescribed: recontextualization in a manner that obviates the possibility of idolatry, or decapitation.[6] The latter practice (often interpreted as defacement or effacement) might be assumed to have as its end the "death" of the image or the object with which it was associated, but in fact was often a means rather than an end, permitting the continued survival of preexisting images (albeit in altered form), often as part of a larger whole.[7]

Recommending the practice of decapitation, some traditions compare the resulting acephalic figure to a plant or tree (Ar. *shajara*). The resemblance is predicated not on shared isomorphic values but on a common ontological status, for both are perceived to lack a spirit (Ar. *rūḥ*) and, consequently, the potential for animation. Within the theological and theoretical framework of the hadiths, the performance of decapitation is thus deemed to reinscribe the image within the category of what is licit, effecting a recoding of meaning that amounts to a radical shift in its ontological status. Such altered images index their own history of transformation, which is integral to the production of what is in effect a new work. In this respect, the traditions offer a transformative theory of artistic (re)production that prefigures a notion of the iconoclast-artist championed in the work of certain twentieth- and twenty-first-century Euro-American artists. Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* of 1953 is the obvious case in point.[8] Like Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur,* the iconoclast-artist effects a "continual reconstruction from the same materials" in which the signifying potential of the object is characterized by a potentially open-ended capacity for physical, formal, and semiotic transmutation.[9]

Even in pre-modern societies, physical interventions upon existing artworks were, of course, by no means confined to individuals moved by anxieties about figuration or its associated objects. A myriad of Byzantine icons or Arabic and Persian manuscripts also attests effacements of "original" artworks motivated by aesthetic concerns or "restorative" endeavors; the over-painting of faces offers a ubiquitous but little studied example of the phenomenon.[10] These diachronic engagements with images suggest a performative aesthetic at odds with some of the more self-consciously historicizing approaches of the modern institutions that now house them. Indeed, whether motivated by aesthetic or pietistic concerns, such retouchings were frequently removed after the acquisition of the manuscripts by museums and libraries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cesare Brandi represents these interventions in quasi-iconoclastic terms as processes whereby the "historical passage" indexed by physical accretion "is removed and canceled from the live body of the work of art. . . ."[11] The conceit of objects as living

Perspective, ed. A. Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 67. See also Appadurai's introductory comments, p. 5, and Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 123.

6. Daan van Reenen, "The *Bilderverbot,* A New Survey," *Der Islam* 67 (1990):27–77.

7. Examples include medieval Indian mosques and mosques built after the reconquest of Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187, which reuse architectural elements bearing anthropomorphic imagery. In both cases, defacement permitted the redeployment of material that was evidently valued for its aesthetic qualities, and attests a concomitant investment of economic and temporal resources in the process of transformation.

8. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, ed., *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1997), p. 92; Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 268. See also Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 62–63; Jeffrey Kastner, "Art Attack," *ARTnews,* October (1997):154–56.

9. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La pensée sauvage)* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 21.

10. John Seyller, "Recycled Images: Overpainting in Early Mughal Art," in *Humayun's Garden Party: Princes of the House of Timur and Early Mughal Painting,* ed. Sheila Canby (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1994), pp. 49–80.

11. Cesare Brandi, "Theory of Restoration, III," in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage,* ed. N. S. Price, M. Kirby Talley, Jr., and A. M. Vaccaro (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), p. 378.

entities is closely associated with the origins of the museum, witnessed for example in Abbé Grégoire's 1794 call for an institution to house French national patrimony, which would demonstrate to the ignorant (who saw artworks only as static objects) that "marble breathes" and that "canvas is alive."[12] In an era of Botox, however, the restorative emphasis on surface aesthetics (the body beautiful) runs the danger of producing the rictus of "museum style."[13]

The utopian investment in a return to a hypostasized "original state" will invariably elicit a wry smile from a postmodern observer. Nevertheless, in its endeavor to affect a temporal reversal, the cathexis reveals some of the ironies associated with the institutional production of "permanent" objects. Historically, the taming of the recalcitrant museum object has involved two opposing impulses: a subtractive endeavor to remove diachronic accretions; and an additive impulse to complete the fragment.[14] Both undermine the ascription of authorship to a solitary agent-creator that is a hallmark of the "synchronic fixation." The disjunction between them can often be correlated to tensions between aesthetic and historical value, the former characterized by the irrelevance of contingency (the isolated work as timeless and universal), the latter by its being in time (the creation of context).

Since its emergence in 1839, photography has been well positioned as a medium to satisfy both the desire to produce and possess indexical traces of a valorized past in object-form. This linkage between technological and institutional registers of representation was already anticipated by Charles-François Tiphaigne de La Roche in 1760. In his allegorical novel, *Giphantia,* he imagines his narrator whisked off by a whirlwind to a desert oasis in Africa, where the elementary spirits who watch over humankind come to refresh themselves. When his host gives him a tour, the narrator is perplexed by seeing the ocean out of a window, but when he tries to thrust his head out of the window, he hits a wall. As the prefect explains:

> Thou knowest that the rays of light, reflected from different bodies, make a picture and paint the bodies upon all polished surfaces, on the retina of the eye, for instance, on water, on glass. The elementary spirits . . . have composed a most subtile matter, very viscous, and proper to harden and dry, by the help of which a picture is made in the twinkle of an eye. They do over with this matter a piece of canvas, and hold it before the objects they have a mind to paint. . . . This impression of the images is made the first instant they are received on the canvas, which is immediately carried away into some dark place; an hour after, the subtile matter dries, and you have a picture. . . .[15]

Tiphaigne de La Roche foresees with uncanny accuracy the technical process of photography, the application of light-sensitive chemicals to a planar surface, which is briefly exposed to light and then allowed to develop and harden in the dark during a fixed time period. However, Geoffrey Batchen has argued that such prognostications are most important for what they tell us about the "cultural meaning of photography."[16] In other words, what social and historical conditions produced was the "*desire* to photograph." In this sense, there is also a striking continuity of purpose from Tiphaigne de La Roche, evoking an instrument to capture the passing "instant," to William Henry Fox Talbot's announcement in 1839 that the "most transitory of things . . . may be fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy."[17] Tiphaigne de La Roche even senses the debate that will arise over the nature of this nascent technology: is it science or is it art? He writes that the elementary spirits "are not so able painters as naturalists."[18] And yet, it transpires that the scintillating seascape that so captivates the narrator was intended "to represent allegorically the troublesome state of this world, and mankind's stormy passage through the

12. Dominique Poulot, "Revolutionary 'Vandalism' and the Birth of the Museum: The Effects of a Representation of Modern Cultural Terror," in *Art in Museums, New Research in Museum Studies* 5, ed. S. Pearce (London & Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Athlone, 1995), p. 194.

13. Ernst van de Wetering, "The Surface of Objects and Museum Style," in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage,* ed. N. S. Price, M. Kirby Talley, Jr., and A. M. Vaccaro (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), pp. 418, 420. The notion of style as stable and static is at odds with its status as a historical configuration, as George Kubler has pointed out: "Style and the Representation of Historical Time," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 138 (1967):849–855.

14. Kirsty Norman, "Restoration and Faking of Islamic Ceramics: Case Histories," in O. Watson, *Ceramics From Islamic Lands* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), pp. 69–89.

15. Charles-François Tiphaigne de la Roche, *Giphantia: or, A View of What Has Passed, What Is Now Passing, and, during the Present Century, What Will Pass, in the World,* trans. French (1760; reprint London: Robert Horsfield, 1761), vol. 1, pp. 95–96.

16. Geoffrey Batchen, "Desiring Production Itself: Notes on the Invention of Photography," in *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces,* ed. R. Diprose and R. Ferrell (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1991), p. 19.

17. Talbot, quoted by Batchen, ibid., p. 16.

18. Tiphaigne de la Roche, see note 15, p. 95.

same. . . ."[19] Already, the first "photograph" is embedded in poetic expression.

Finally, Tiphaigne de La Roche also links photography to the institutional production of permanent objects and instantiated histories. Apart from the ocean view, the elementary spirits have also displayed two hundred "windows" in a long gallery, featuring snapshots of historical figures and events dating from the reigns of Nimrod to Charlemagne. In the prefect's words these permanent traces of ephemeral events constitute "the most real signs" of "history."[20]

Although the transitory nature of human experience is a long-lived leitmotif in European literature, the relationship of the permanent to the impermanent takes on especial urgency during the modern period. Tiphaigne de La Roche's conjuring of the photographic process is situated in a novel with the subtitle: *A view of what has passed, what is now passing, and, during the present century, what will pass, in the world.* Many scholars have situated this anxiety to "fix" time in a perception of accelerated change due to industrialization, social transformations, and political upheaval.[21] Batchen argues that texts like Tiphaigne de La Roche's are exceptional before the 1790s, when the desire to fix the transient (or render the impermanent permanent) became incessant. By the time Arago triumphantly described Daguerre's process to the French Chamber of Deputies in 1839, he could take for granted that "everyone who has admired these images [produced in a camera obscura] will have felt regret that they could not be rendered permanent."[22]

Another symptom of this intensification of perennial desire for the permanent lies in the contemporaneous preservation movement. In 1837, France established the Commission des Monuments Historiques to identify historical monuments in need of restoration. Their work was closely affiliated with the photographic process from conception.[23] The announcement for the daguerreotype in 1839 applauded the rendering of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris and urged fledgling photographers to use their new medium to compile "precious historical document[s]."[24]

Photography, the preservation movement, and swift development of the museum all proved powerful technologies for the production *and* the circulation of seemingly permanent objects, historically situated in origin but rendered quasi-immortal. These technologies had proved so effective by the early twentieth century in amassing and disseminating a huge repository of permanent images that Filippo Tommaso Marinetti opened the first Futurist Manifesto in 1909 with a call to empty the museum:

> For too long has Italy been a dealer in secondhand clothes. We mean to free her from the numberless museums that cover her like so many graveyards. . . . Admiring an old picture is the same as pouring our sensibility into a funerary urn instead of hurling it far off, in violent spasms of action and creation. Do you, then, wish to waste all your best powers in this eternal and futile worship of the past, from which you emerge fatally exhausted, shrunken, beaten down? . . . Come on! set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! . . . Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious canvases bobbing adrift on those waters, discolored and shredded! . . . Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers, and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, piteously![25]

Prefiguring Achebe's comments on the inhibiting effect of artistic precedent, Marinetti's appeal against the repressive weight of history is reified through the imagery of the museum and of cities rich in historical monuments. He argues that piling up artistic precedents has stifled the creativity of contemporary artists and rendered them impotent ("exhausted, shrunken, beaten down"). Unlike artist-activists who have sought to destabilize the permanent object by drawing attention to its potential mutability, Marinetti appears to be invested in the notion of a simple dialectical opposition between past and present, reflecting the success of the very institutions that he inveighs against.

Peter Weibel has identified "radical reflexivity" as a fundamental characteristic of modern art, which drives it constantly to redefine the definition of art itself.[26] Since artists had already undermined the conventions for representing nature and the production of a unique object, it was inevitable that they should also begin to problematize the assumption that works of art should strive for eternity. The convention of "duration" posed

19. Ibid., p. 98.
20. Ibid., p. 100.
21. For example, see Albert Boime. *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution, 1815–1848* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), ch. 8.
22. In Batchen, see note 16, p. 19.
23. Boime, see note 21, pp. 424ff.
24. Ibid., p. 425.
25. F. T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," in *Let's Murder the Moonshine,* ed. R. W. Flint (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Classics, 1991), pp. 50–51.
26. Peter Weibel, "An End to the 'End of Art'? On the Iconoclasm of Modern Art," in *Iconoclash,* ed. B. Latour and P. Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 663.

the perdurance of the work as a metaphor legitimating the timelessness of the work's "values," both cultural and aesthetic.[27]

Although Marinetti's appeal remained rhetorical, it presaged a century of artistic production, during which the work of many artists seemed to attack the convention of "duration." Examples include Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and the performance art of Yoko Ono, Christo, and Ana Mendieta. In *Homage to New York* (1960), Jean Tinguely took Marinetti's logic to its extreme when he devised a machine-sculpture capable of consuming itself. Although rooted within a similar tradition, Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tirs* (1961–1963), highlighted some of the paradoxes of this engagement with impermanence.[28] The works consisted of bladders of polychromatic paint embedded in plaster, which were destroyed (and hence activated) by shots fired from guns wielded by the artist. The static remains of these dynamic iconoclastic events were then collected, conserved, and displayed in international art museums. In both cases, as in many others, photography provided the most durable (and widely circulated) record of the fleeting performance itself.

Born at a moment of heightened anxiety about the relationship of the permanent to the impermanent, photography plays a special role in the life of iconoclastic or ephemeral works of art. In a famous passage, Susan Sontag has written: "All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."[29] Building on Sontag's observations, art historian Henry Sayre has argued that photography's "ability to be read in terms of *both* presence and absence" has made it critical to the presentation of both conceptual and performance art.[30] Ironically, the photograph is able to deliver the "continuous and perpetual present" demanded by formalists like Michael Fried, while legitimating the authenticity of a past experience.[31]

Works such as Tinguely's *Homage to New York*, Mendieta's *Silueta* (1973–1980), and Ant Farm's *Media Burn* all respect a certain photo-logic by translating a single, performative event into a photograph. Sayre argues that in so doing, "art no longer transcends history; instead, it admits its historicity, its implication in time."[32] However, these artists have found the means to lay claim to permanency while acknowledging the contingency of the event. Incorporating photo-logic into the very conception of their work, they rely on the circulation of reproductions for its survival.

Ironically, the fragility of the photograph itself in medium requires endless circulation for survival, necessitating translation from negative to print, from slide to digital scan, from video to DVD, and so on, in a continuous progression. Mechanical reproduction and digitization thus facilitate processes of circulation and reinscription on a scale that pre-modern artist-iconoclasts can hardly have imagined.

In a knowing parody of the art world, Nick Hornby mocks the iconoclastic posture of modern art, and its institutional and technological entanglements. In his story, "NippleJesus," a security guard works hard to safeguard a huge close-up of Jesus' suffering on the cross composed of photographs of women's nipples torn from pornographic magazines.[33] He is appalled when the work is ripped and trampled despite all his efforts, only to discover that the artist herself is elated. It turns out that her ultimate goal is the creation of a videotape, "Intolerance," capturing the work's destruction at the hands of an unruly mob.

Avant-garde movements like Ant Farm (1968–1978) have even gone so far as to question the necessity for permanence in architecture, an attack on the very medium that enables a "cult of monuments." In his famous essay on the topic, Alois Riegl distinguishes between age value, historical value, and deliberate commemorative value. Although the latter suggests permanence, Riegl notes the perpetual investment necessary to stabilize the material fabric of commemorative monuments, and hence preserve "an eternal present, an unceasing state of becoming."[34] The ontological tensions inherent in this endeavor are

27. Gamboni, see note 8, pp. 271–272.

28. http://www.niki-museum.jp/english/frame7.htm and http://www.knotmag.com/?print=380

29. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 15.

30. Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 1–2.

31. Fried, quoted by Sayre, ibid., p. 7.

32. Ibid., p. 4.

33. Nick Hornby, "NippleJesus," in *Speaking with the Angel*, ed. N. Hornby (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000), pp. 98–125.

34. Alois Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung* (Vienna: W. Braumuller, 1903). Translated by Karin Bruckner and Karen Williams as "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Essence and Development," in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, ed. N. S. Price, M. Kirby Talley, Jr., & A. M. Vaccaro (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), p. 78.

highlighted by Don Fowler's work on ancient Rome, in which he observes that "the essence of the monument is paradoxically its lack of monumental stability . . . and therefore its inability to offer a return rather than a new journey."[35]

The paradoxical ability of the monument to take on a life of its own was highlighted by the controversy that swirled around the demolition of Rachel Whiteread's sculpture *House* in London's East End in 1994. *House* consisted of a full-scale dust-colored cast of the interior of one of three houses remaining from a nineteenth-century terrace before its demolition, a positive impression of negative space that explored the intersections between materiality and memory in the private and public spheres.[36] Originally envisaged as an ephemeral memorial, *House* was demolished as Whiteread received the Tate Gallery's Turner Prize, provoking an outcry from a public who clamored for its instatement as a permanent fixture of the landscape. Traces of the work endure in photographic form, however, circulated in print and digital media.[37] The museum, the art world, the academy, and even the public—all are willing to problematize permanency, but not to renounce it.

35. Don Fowler, *Roman Constructions: Readings in Postmodern Latin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 211.

36. Richard Shone, "Rachel Whiteread's 'House,'" *The Burlington Magazine* 135 (1993):837–838; Tom Lubbock, "The Shape of Things Gone," *Modern Painters* 10 (1997):34–37.

37. http://www.johndavies.uk.com/artwhiteread.htm