

WHY PRESERVE? QUESTIONING CENTRAL EUROPEAN ETHNICITY AND THE PRACTICE OF PRESERVING BUILDINGS AND MONUMENTS; OR, CURATING (IN) DECAY

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ABSTRACT

Our culture of appreciation of old buildings today is a product of the heritage culture of the (broadly speaking) eighteenth-century Central European (white, male, educated) upper class. While we find it pleasant and historically informative to have buildings well preserved, we find the absence of critical questioning of the practice surprisingly absent, although we observe an increasing number of academic discussions in the field of heritage studies, informed by decolonisation, climate change activism, and sustainability issues. Critical artistic practices have too been venturing into heritage and memory politics. The extensive costs of preserving old architecture raise eyebrows mainly only in the far- and alt-right circles, but as late reactions by parts of the global community, such as the attacks on statues as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, signal, there might be a change coming regarding our relationship to the built material past. We offer a reading of the history of the phenomenon, which will make it easier to, first, see it as an ethnic and class construct, and then sketch out a new perspective on its metaphysics, from memory to identity, to discourse. We include voices external to the world of heritage—one that is still run by a privileged group that often claims to speak for others, and whose aims and practices are often, at least for now, accepted by others. We then proceed to discuss what kind of a role a curatorial approach could have in questioning and rethinking the idea of preserving.

KEYWORDS

Architecture, Monuments, Statues, Heritage, Preservation, Curating

“What is the use to the modern man of this ‘monumental’ contemplation of the past?”
Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*¹

“The historical moment in which old things are valued is certainly not permanent.”
Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Things: In Touch with The Past*²

The Futurists produced an urban intervention on April 27, 1910, which echoed Nietzsche’s questioning and Carolyn Korsmeyer’s warning quoted above. It was an attack on the Central European (or, broadly speaking, Western) metaphysics of historical preserving, which has, through the outreach of colonialism and diaspora, become a global trait.

Tommaso Marinetti and his followers climbed St. Mark’s bell tower in Venice. As tourists were returning from the Lido to Venice proper, the Futurists threw their manifesto *Contro Venezia Passatista* on them—repudiating the “grand nostalgic dream” and “snobbism” of the bourgeois, criticising their sentimental way of appreciating history. The tower had collapsed in 1902, and after a “funeral”—the rubble was thrown in the sea outside of the Lido, together with the last piece engraved with the date—there was a rapid decision to invest in its rebuilding “exactly as it was,” just with some added reinforcement to prevent a new collapse and an elevator to make the tower more accessible. Not only communal money was spent. Donations were also received—including from abroad.³ As we know, heritage values prevailed, both through economic support offered by the rapidly growing tourism industry, and the way artistic and historical appreciation of heritage was distributed increasingly democratically to all classes in the late twentieth century, but the Futurist attack on the appreciation of Venice may have anticipated a change in our heritage thinking.

In *Le conflit des heritages*, a survey within the history of ideas on the ideal of artistic freedom and the way aesthetic pleasure became central for the newly wedded system of art in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century,⁴ Carole Talon-Hugon writes that when these, at the time novel, conceptions were posited at the very center of the idea of art and artist, their contradictory nature was never reflected upon. When artists go “too far” with their experimentation, the same dialogue always occurs. Someone criticizes the act for being “artistic masturbation” or just asks for their money back for a theater piece, and is consequently called an uncivilized idiot who does not understand what art is about.⁵

A similar kind of dynamic has become a trademark of saving historical phenomena. Each era has its own radical authors and their courts that are happy to replace old buildings with new ones. Then there is always the wing for preservation—which, we interpret, is currently, stronger, at least in cultural circles, than the destroyer wing. It has long been hard for someone who thinks in the fashion of Nietzsche to express themselves, as fierce attacks are raised whenever someone asks, even naively, without hostility: why preserve? There are plenty of articles discussing the “idiots” who did not preserve a building, and it is typical to consider someone who is not interested in preserving (for example) old (imperial) buildings as uneducated, barbarian, or even “fascist”⁶—which sadly leads to seeing many working-class people, who often do not share the same cultural rhetoric as the middle class, as unnecessarily negative about the practice. Most of these discussions, however, do not include economic and political factors involved in the decisions. Considering the number of preserved buildings where imperialist ideologies and expressions of power by the ruling classes are visible, the constellation appears somewhat uncanny.

Well, we all want to preserve something, and it is important to note that, for the most part, working-class people and citizens representing the margins seem to accept the stress on preserving buildings, at least publicly. Still, it is also true that far-right populists want to preserve their lifestyle, and they focus on whatever they focus on: meat sausages (against vegetarians) and/or “clear gender roles” (against LGBTQ people). A grilled food enthusiast might like to save a trashy old hot-dog stand.

Our contemporary appreciation for historical buildings has developed in connection with the art discourse (and its ideas on originality and authenticity). The idea of the arts of the ancients and their accomplishments is as much a product of the interpretations made in the early days of the art system as are the developments that lead to favouring aesthetics over social functions: stressing attentive listening over chatting and smoking a pipe at the opera, or throwing out curiosities from the (art) museums (leaving just paintings and sculptures there) in the late eighteenth century.⁷ These developments reinforce art’s role as an autonomous cultural sphere⁸ and mark the new life of the cultural products considered worthy of the concept *art*. They echo the cultural layers built by Central European (again, broadly speaking, Western) upper-class people, mostly male (one can roughly speak about a triangle connecting Florence, London and Vienna, including of

course also diaspora and colonial outreach)—and their values. Thousands of panel discussions and exhibitions have questioned their righteousness in claiming superiority of their own aesthetic hobbies over, for example, (female) knitting and artistic practices of non-Europeans, but less has been said about their ideas of heritage and the geographical and cultural outreach of their preservation ideology.

Would it be so horrible if we also asked the basic metaphysical questions about our need to preserve? Of course, this is already done to some extent, for example, in critical heritage studies, which do not just buy into the old tradition of magnifying war triumphs and saving buildings built with slavery,⁹ but so far, we have not really encountered texts that would question the whole idea of preserving old buildings (and statues), together with some cultural analysis and, even more, with thoughts on curating. As we see it, we could challenge the whole preservation ideology, and even need to do so, to get to the basic question: what is important, and how can we achieve it?

In part 1, “Contextualizing the History of Preservation,” we intend to question the idea of preserving historical buildings. The first goal of our article is to see the tradition as it is, as ethnic—like samba in Brazil or Samurai skills (and their modern applications, like Judo and Aikido) in Japan—but somewhat universalised, which makes people easily forget that it stems from a certain cultural way of thinking and a certain class position. We also intend to make visible the major investment that goes into historical preserving, and to note how extreme its cultural and political implications sometimes are. In part 2, “Curating (In) Decay,” we speculate on how curatorial practice—a practice already thoroughly politicised and through that reshaped—engages with discourses on heritage and preservation. Globalised art projects being a major example of how contemporary (Western) art has been implicated in processes of urbanisation and gentrification, it is perhaps a moment to revise our ways of thinking about what is permanent and what is not. We can also ask: what should we invest in? Finally, we cannot bypass the taking down of monuments across the globe as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Could the understanding of heritage as something experiential and performative, on the one hand, and the outlook on conservation as a practice involving personal decisions, complemented by the curatorial turn, on the other, together create a transformation in how we think of heritage as it is lived, studied, and preserved on a planetary level? If nothing else, we hope to inaugurate new paths

for discussion, reasoning and practice—and this is something we try to explore in part 3, “Discussion and Conclusions.”

CONTEXTUALISING (THE HISTORY OF) PRESERVATION

After years of critical (mostly populist) debates on Finland’s investment in refugee aid (varying estimates) and a scandalously priced expansion of Helsinki’s West side metro (1.5 billion euros)—some of the main topics for discussing excessive use of money at the end of the 2010s—there was hardly any reaction documented to the price tag of the renovation of the Olympic Stadium. The building, that represents 1930s functionalism (Yrjö Lindgren, Toivo Jäntti) and was finished with some additions for the 1952 Olympic Summer Games, was renovated without any significant critical discussions raised. The cost at first was 261 million euros, then it rocketed to over 300 million. Some of this money was for sure a good investment in having a well-working stadium, and some of it could be attributed to the novel corridors and training halls that were built. But if one stopped for a moment and started guessing how much extra was paid for just museumisation reasons, like mimicking the original plans or searching for ways to be art-historically in *unisono* with the building as it was when it was constructed, one could guess that the extra paid for ideology must still represent a large portion of the whole sum (we are talking about at least tens of millions of euros).¹⁰ The stadium could be renovated more cheaply, but the accent on the right materials, the right historical looks of the building (architects have always made compromises following economy and politics, so this ideal is quite metaphysical), and the idea of preserving it not necessarily like it was in 1952, though partly yes, but also through applying heritage thinking, makes the bill higher, at the same time as economic support for other forms of culture, like contemporary art, is dwindling. If one considers the way this kind of sums pass almost without any debates—at the time when artists are starving¹¹—and how public money is usually used when the tag *culture* is present, it would appear that preservation ideology takes up quite an extensive amount of the cultural budget. Here we are presenting just one building out of many. How many? We don’t know (there seems to be no record of this), but the sheer thought of the number of buildings which are renovated following our idea of the importance of preservation and of the costs that accompany this museumising ideology makes one wonder how long this can continue for. So far, we believe, the topic has remained untouched by politicians and cultural practitioners in Europe.

Without forgetting that the charm of the ruins and old architecture already appeared in antiquity,¹² and all the love for preserving the old notwithstanding, the modern European, Western, and, finally, global project, has many maddening aspects.

Throughout the 1990s, the Taliban had tortured and killed people in Afghanistan, as they aspired to hijack Kabul and build an Islamic Emirate based on (their version of the) Sharia. In March 2001 the Taliban destroyed the two largest Buddha statues on Earth, the Bamiyan Buddhas (sixth century A.D.). The destruction of these 1500-year-old stone monuments, the larger one 165ft high, was reported all around the world—way broader and more in-depth than the atrocities which had been going on. One can just imagine how this felt if one had fled Afghanistan, and one had hoped for global reactions to, for example, the torture and mass killings of the Hazaras. The fact that the statues embodied “[a] unique amalgam of Hellenistic, Roman, Indian, and Sasantian art,”¹³ as James Janowski writes, would not touch these people much. (As the idea of preservation is totally European, one could think that the Taliban were not colonized thoroughly enough.) Janowski writes that the Taliban act was “horrific,” while he does not say anything about the human victims of the same regime.¹⁴ How is this possible? How could one write that way about the destruction of sculpture in this context? It is not that we, the authors, would not love to have preserved the monuments/architecture, but this example shows the magnified and unchallenged role heritage thinking has in our culture.

The Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris, which made it into the popular canon through Victor Hugo’s novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), burned into ruins on April 15, 2019. A week later, April 22, 2019, the fundraising had already reached 1 billion euros through the involvement of rich families like the Arnaults, Bettencourts and Pinaults. The case raised questions on why and when the rich feel like contributing economically to culture, and even more, why so many of today’s burning problems, from poverty to the environmental crisis, do not open the bourses in the same fashion.¹⁵ The new type of critical reaction probably surprised the heritage circles a little, but we think this might have just been the start, as many other metaphysical formulas produced by the same cultural sphere have attracted criticism to a much higher extent (the European gender system, the art system, etc.). The estimated price tag for the Notre-Dame renovation soon reached 600 million—1 billion euros, and one does not need to be an expert to realize that it is not about making a well-functioning

and identical or pleasing-looking church, but about a pedantic heritage attitude. It would not be far-fetched to say that this is some form of fetishism for a very selective past. Could this practice be questioned? What should one think in the northern *banlieu* of Paris, where economic and ethnic privileges are visibly absent, and where the inhabitants' working-class heritage is not an object of such a preserving fever? Many might have appreciated the renovation even in this district, but if they did not, did they have the right to think that way? One must at least admit that the cases recalled here show some uncanny sides to our uncritical support for heritage ideology.

Philosophical reflection and discussion about ruins, old buildings, and heritage have increased in recent years,¹⁶ but very basic questions remain to be asked. Looking at the aforementioned cases, any critical individual should be in favour of a discussion on the way the heritage attitude might have crossed the line in some cases. One can also ask: do even those of us who always defend saving old buildings out of routine, in the end really care for it? If asked, we (the authors) would never say spontaneously that we are against it. In many cases we would think it is nice, like having affordable piano lessons offered for children. But the sheer amount of money involved in restoration easily passes the sums used for other cultural practices (one could question those too, of course). How much are we in the end for the preservation of old buildings? Sitting down, breathing slowly, and focusing on it, we say: well, it is nice that we are preserving a lot, but we notice that deep inside we are not that passionate about it, at least looking at the breadth of conservation and its costs.

Questioning is not necessarily the same as being against. Why restore so much with such care, if it costs so much? Could we restore just a bit, so we could take a look at the past? Obviously, a political struggle against the attitude might start at any moment, and with all good reasons: people have the right to think that public money—investors and patrons are another issue—could be used differently, and without a thorough revamping, heritage thinking might, at least partly, get cancelled soon.

We, the authors, come from the very outskirts, or maybe more correctly, from outside of the geographical and cultural area where the idea of restoration was developed. We can therefore understand the idea of heritage thinking, but also recognise how the topic might look to an Afghani refugee, a poor Parisian worker, or someone fighting to survive in a marginalized Stockholm suburb like Rinkeby (where one of us spent their childhood).

Since the centralisation of ruins and preserving in cultural thinking and the rise of the importance of historical architecture, which followed Johann Winckelmann's and his followers' eighteenth-century voyages to Rome and at the time novel perspective that the old had to be preserved, this way of thinking has conquered the world through colonialism and diaspora. If we look at the history of care for historical architecture, and the way Europeans and Americans (the middle-class) stress their cultural responsibilities and "ruinsplain" to the working class and non-Westerners, who are often less in love with the idea, it all starts to look rather uncanny. Carolyn Korsmeyer defends a view that the appreciation of the historically genuine carries an aesthetic aspect, one described with terms like thrill, wonder, and awe.¹⁷ This type of experience, which might be analogous to the experience connoisseurs get from conceptual art, might be true for those who feel for heritage values, but Korsmeyer does not raise the question of where this type of experience comes from and why only certain cultures and layers of education seem to stress and expand it.

Winckelmann and his followers raised old art and ruins to the status of the highest product of humanity. Starting from the mid-eighteenth century, originality, authenticity, genius,¹⁸ and what was once artistically minded building, now appreciated as art, swept over the cultured European landscapes. As there is not much difference between the northern Italian, French, and German upper (middle) class culture, if we look at it from the outside, we can easily see that the whole thing is an ethnic project. Many view the way we desire to preserve old architecture as a universal matter, not something that arose from a certain cultural context. It is not just that architecture found its place in the Pantheon of art, with the development of its cultural role since the Renaissance, to become autonomous in the late eighteenth century, but that concepts like originality, authenticity, and the stress on history originated in this cultural area, and nowhere else. Winckelmann, the father of modern archeology and the hailed author of the *History of Ancient Art*,¹⁹ awoke the appetite for the old with his "gastronomic" descriptions of old statues and buildings. Although Petrarca described old buildings and Alberti and co examined them, one could say that not many were interested in ruins and decayed architecture before Winckelmann's work. It is good to remember this, as one still hears today laments by Western scholars when they notice that someone somewhere else is not interested in their own heritage ("Americans do not have any sense of history," or, "Arabs do not yet respect enough

their built heritage” are comments that we have heard)—so that the Western scholar “needs” to educate the person about their architectural heritage and their need to preserve it. We are recalling this here just to remind ourselves that heritage in its modern form is an ethnic product of the privileged continental European and so, understandably, it could easily spark cultural clashes—something to think about as Europe becomes increasingly multicultural.

It all started in the German-speaking world, and the German-speaking people at first had a hard time teaching even other Europeans to see architectural decay as they did. In 1819, the Austrian poet Franz Grillparzer wrote a letter to his friend from Rome. He was shocked at the way Italians dismissed their ruins. They tended cows in the Colosseum!²⁰ Grillparzer had traveled over the Alps aspiring to contemplate (in a Kantian fashion) the ruins of the eternal city. Immanuel Kant in his 1790 *Critique of Judgement*²¹ placed disinterested contemplative pleasure at the center of his aesthetic theory, overshadowing engagement with aesthetic objects, to the extent that we find his viewers of aesthetic objects somehow naturally just looking at the past, unless stimulated by magnificent natural phenomena (like huge rocks, in the dynamic sublime) and big mathematical constructions. G.W.F. Hegel stressed in his aesthetics that the high season of art was already over, as he gazed into history and its great deeds.²² He showed little interest in experimentalism of his contemporaries, but focused more on the grand history of humankind’s artistic endeavors, and so put the past at the center of modern aesthetics at the fundamental moment of its establishment and development.

Soon though, the Europeans started to learn how to look anew at architectural history, and they acquired the habit of mixing carefully the appreciation of not just any kind of beauty but the kind of beauty that had to do with art and illuminative layers of history. A new aesthetic attitude was born. In the 1870s, there were already so many tourists on the streets of Venice that its tourist hordes became a cliché in travel literature.²³ This way the heritage, although very selectively (rarely the heritage of the poor or the marginals), became somehow “owned” by a broader mass of people. But do tourists, in the end, feel much affinity with classical buildings? They roam mainly to where the view is phenomenal, like to the architectural failure of the Pisano brothers, the tower of Pisa, or something as huge as Saint Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican.

As we now have more understanding of the world and the alternatives, and as we learn that the cultural history of buildings has its own class- and ethnicity-driven boundaries, could we think of other ways of relating to this history in the West? What would it be like, for example, to think in the classical Japanese way and burn old buildings, then build them back exactly as they were?²⁴

It is beautiful how heritage thinking has slowly found its way also to appreciation of suburbs and entertainment structures, but as money is at stake, the decisions are more political than those within contemporary arts, and the main tenet has been conservative. We have heard an endless number of speeches on saving collective memory, and this has also found its way to conserving, for example, working-class buildings; but still, those who make decisions rarely ask the people outside of the educated middle class what they would really like to preserve. The populist reaction toward heritage thinking that is on the rise thus, actually, has a point: we have not shown interest in everyone's thoughts. What do Roma people want to preserve, if they do want anything material under preservation? (Many Roma burn old material objects when their user dies.) What about the indigenous Sami people?²⁵ Uneducated workers? Maybe even technocrats and the far-right, the "enemies" of heritage lovers? And, as Aylin Orbasli writes, conservation often leads to the death of city life in the old townships, which become inhabited only by museums, hotels, and McDonald's.²⁶

When the statues of Lenin were destroyed in many parts of Eastern Europe after the complicated, challenging period of socialism, many heritage people in the West said that the heritage should not be destroyed, so that people would remember their collective history (they do not say that the Allies should have saved Nazi symbols in Berlin though)—not caring about how the people in, for example, the Baltics felt.²⁷ As we saw statues being attacked by protesters worldwide in the past few years, one can conclude that the unquestioned respect for statues too could be declining in the West (the statue scene is not very much appreciated in the art world either due to its conservative nature). When will the same happen to the heritage of heritage? We do not anticipate that symbols of violence like the war monument in the Trafalgar Square (London), half-statuesque half-architecture, or old royal castles will be destroyed. But if building heritage follows other contemporary currents, the consistent support for them could perhaps decline and enter a crisis. Socialism, in many parts of Eastern Europe, already gave up heritage thinking once.

CURATING (IN) DECAY

Scholarly understandings of heritage are based on beliefs in inheritance and belonging: heritage presents itself as a naturally passed-on property, or a quality that can belong to a person or a society. However, a heritage site is not just a building or monument: it is enmeshed in its associated symbolic values and ideologies; this is why it can become weaponised, attacked, destroyed, for instance as a result of mobilised contestations or activist movements.²⁸ Heritage is loaded with *politics of authentication* and *aesthetics of persuasion*: according to Meyer and Van de Port, heritage is directly linked to the idea of authenticity (heritage produces aesthetic experience for its aficionados).²⁹ Lately, some heritage scholars have been problematising affective aspects of heritage. Laurajane Smith proposes to understand heritage as a *discursive construction* with material consequences,³⁰ describing a visit to a heritage site as an affective practice.³¹

Heritage legitimates relations of power and knowledge while creating new subject positions for social groups and communities. The current deregulation of existing mechanisms of heritage means that heritage is no longer only in the hands of the state: multilateral institutions and transnational corporations, NGOs and associations are playing defining roles in heritage management and funding. Multiple politicised assertions of cultural heritage, using similar claims and vocabularies, instruments and technologies, but expressing distinctive understandings of history, identity, and value, have to coexist in the same space. Rosemary J. Coombe and Lyndsay Weiss write: “Neoliberal heritage regimes deploy various technologies to bring a new level of scrutiny upon local understandings of identity, prompting new identifications, connecting these with social as well as economic valuation while engaging enterprising subjects to exploit such values to diverse ends.”³² Smaller and bigger cities actively gentrified around the turn of the century—Coombe and Weiss describe how cultural heritage was turned into a resource for individuals and communities, for instance through attracting tourists. Today, they propose to look at heritage through the prism of cultural rights at a planetary level. And the planetary level is of course leaking into the lives of privileged white Westerners through immigration, the refugee crisis, and global warming (all partly caused by privileged Westerners). In response to this, contemporary art especially has tasked itself with deconstructing and challenging the metanarratives of competing total utopias that marked the twentieth century and came to an end with the fall of the Berlin

Wall.³³ Are contemporary globalised practices, including curatorial ones, helpful for reconsidering the idea of preserving something for the future—a decision usually delegated to conservators and legislators?

During the recent Black Lives Matter protests, public statues related to colonial past were taken down or attacked by protesters in the US, the UK and Belgium, which was seen negatively by part of the global population. In Bristol, Edward Coston's monument was toppled on June 7, 2020, and protesters stated that the former slave-owner "was not anymore the son of the city."³⁴ Toppling monuments is not a recent phenomenon, and in this case, it served as a clear political message: "It [the debate] is one about who gets to decide what we are confronted with in public space and, more importantly, what kind of society we are."³⁵ If we see people expressing views on heritage as a way of claiming basic rights, does it help us to understand the indignation against the billionaire investments in the renovation of Notre-Dame?

In the 1980s, at the time in museum history when institutions were tasked with acquiring new, undiscovered works of art for collections based on *collective values*, it went hand in hand with the establishment of new procedures, protocols, and codes. A divide was set between conservation and curating: an independent, external curator emerged as a progressive force, in contrast with the institutional curator—*conservateur* in French. Hernandez Velasquez reminds us also that the progress achieved at the ICOM gathering in 1972 in Chile, marked the beginning of a new museology, and allowed the museum to respond to the demands of underprivileged (Latin American, in that case) communities, and include them in the museum—not only their artifacts.³⁶ The new museology adhered to seeing museum collections as archives of the commons rather than storehouse of treasures, and museums—as occasions for conversations about a community's sense of cohesion. When grassroots organising becomes part of a museum's work, communities' need to preserve their own heritage is realised—a curator should thus act as a mere "vanishing mediator."³⁷ When more independent curators entered the scene, they took a distance from the institution, to criticise and question its protocols and machinery, like artists did earlier. But the questions of memory and heritage always remained at the core of independent curatorial practice—it was curators who started bringing to the fore forgotten, neglected histories, and curatorial and artistic production took up the issues of postcolonialism and decolonisation earlier than the theory-heavy fields.

What if we took up a habit of asking, in a pedagogical way, how heritage was made public, who sponsors it, how much space is left for one's own associations and previous knowledge, what are the discursive formations and underlying assumptions, and to what extent does it produce hegemonic, culturally specific patterns of interpretation among the publics?³⁸ According to Roger I. Simon, the affective responses of audiences at exhibitions where heritage is involved are unconscious and uncontrollable—they are beyond the influence of curatorial judgment. We should nevertheless acknowledge the need for a practice working with difficult knowledge, instead of only “lovely knowledge,” Simon writes.³⁹ When audiences are confronted with something beyond their interpretative abilities, something that provokes anger, pain, and other unpleasant feelings, it can have an educational potential.

Historical and communicative value attached to buildings, artworks, and personal objects will be the foundation of decision-making on preserving them: “Choosing one or another solution [for conservation] depends upon *interpreting* which meaning of an artwork should prevail at the expense of the others (the historical over the aesthetic, the functional over the archeological, etc).”⁴⁰ Lisa Giombini notes that heritage reconstruction (for instance, after a natural catastrophe) is not a neutral enterprise: “The leading question is thus whether reconstructions are able to keep the values alive for the people for whom the site is *perceived* as significant.”⁴¹ And while conservation is performed on the basis of strict protocols, encompassing existing cultural, historical, ethical, and aesthetic considerations, value conflict is nevertheless possible, and can become especially apparent when the artwork has aged or there has been a destructive event; but then, the ways of dealing with damage also depend on interpretative judgment—not something objective. Reconstruction might as well “wipe out the memory of the catastrophic event, pretending somehow that it never happened.”⁴²

A well-meaning artistic act can be used as a justification of a non-reflected use of privilege. When the British artist Marc Quinn put his sculpture of Black female activist Jen Reid on the emptied pedestal where colonial owner Edward Colston's monument used to be, he did so “in collaboration” with her, claiming that they were both artists in this case, and all the profits from potential sale of the sculpture would be used to support Black communities. Looking closer, the monument, which was ordered to be removed by the city a few days later at Quinn's expense, was indeed an act of redistribution of power: Quinn (white, male artist) took up the

vacated public space, granted his artistic capacity and position—instead of, for instance, leaving it up to the Black communities or the city to decide what to do about the place of conflict. As an example from institutional practice, Caesar Atuire writes about Herman von Wissmann’s (a German colonial governor) statue from the Hamburg Observatory. After being taken down from a pedestal in the course of student protests in the 1960s, it is now exhibited in the museum lying on the ground.⁴³ This curatorial decision gives justice to the historical narrative, and Atuire sees the gesture as true to the moment when it happened. To preserve, Atuire writes, is to present within an interpretative framework, because monuments and statues are symbolic representations of an interpretation of history—and their meaning can change with time. Half a century later, a question about having this statue exhibited at the museum might be raised again. At the same time, removal of something does not always mean destruction or obliteration: it signifies a conflict between the visions of history. This attitude is no news in heritage management, where traces of historical process have long been presented as part of heritage.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Witnessing the current boom in panels on heritage and sustainability, amid a backdrop of various political responses to the destruction of symbols and heritage sites, we wanted to understand these phenomena together, as well as what sort of potential there is in thinking about heritage actions in a critical curatorial way, and how contemporary artistic and curatorial practice engage with the heritage context.

Seemingly related fields dealing with cultural heritage and contemporary cultural production—conservation and curating—think in different terms, or with different timeframes, but both increasingly have the subject of aesthetic reception, audience, and affect quite at the center. We also wanted to remind the reader about the way not all of us are really interested in heritage preserving in the way it is done today—and anyway, we have a right to have that attitude. Maybe in the end the “business” of heritage itself has to face new democratic challenges.

Our question—why preserve—comes at a moment that anthropologist Tim Ingold describes as demanding a radical transformation. Questions related to intergenerational inheritance and ownership are gaining traction. Ingold paints the Western way of thinking about generations as layers, when each new generation has to impose a new layer over the old one, necessarily

destroying an imagination of the future that the previous generation laid out for it.⁴⁴ As cracks and traces of processes are increasingly left to be seen in heritage sites, could we think of destruction or decay as something to save for future generations? As many white Western intellectuals raised eyebrows following the way monuments portraying rich white people, including slave-owners, were destroyed during the Black Lives Matter movement, we would prefer to leave the tipped statues as they are, and we were astonished that many seem to think that the statue and monument scene really is important for our collective memory, and should therefore not be destroyed. There can be no harm in shaking Western statue culture.

With the symbolic and sociocultural aspects attached to them, narratives about heritage have an affective and transformative potential, creating inclusions and exclusions. There is no neutral representation of history. Any heritage building or artifact are linked to associated desires. If ethnocentric or class-driven discourses, which are far from being one-size-fits-all, dominate the practice of preserving, how could more pasts, supporting different futures, be made possible?

As the Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed by the Taliban, one could ask: what would be a local way to engage with this issue? Afghanistan is not a place where preservation thinking would have origins, at least not in any Western sense of the concept. What do the locals think or wish—not just the (Westernised) educated middle- and upper class? Could new statues be built—and without a neurotic preservation attitude, which costs a great deal? Or is that even important? Is the issue relevant to even think about when we think of the atrocities that have been going on in the region?

Constantly, and anew, we need to ask the question “why preserve?” and take into account every imaginable group affected by the preserving act, paying (taxes) for it, and/or having to live with its consequences, if we want to think about this as a collective mission. We cannot be blind and say that a small group of middle- and upper-class people, scholars and museum professionals would be able to do the work for us all collectively. Even when named experts in preserving ask citizens to take part in making decisions, only some, mostly educated ones, who share their worldview, participate. It might be that there is no one answer to any gesture of preservation, but we have to face the dynamics. We have to make it clear that it is always about what we, *we* who have the power, want to do, and why. We might want to stress the

aesthetic, the everyday experience of local people, or whatever, but keeping heritage reflective is definitely one thing we aim for with our inquiry. We hope that taxi drivers might choose to save a certain old road which is pleasant to drive—or that the Roma families of the city could choose to preserve a wasteland where they settle (subaltern heritage should not be picked up just by academic leftists). What is so hard to accept in this redistribution of aesthetic and historical power in a world where every tiny town has its oldest Gothic church preserved through major economic investments? Concerning aesthetics: heritage as architecture, monuments, and city space has been left too much to just one group of cultural agents. If their foundations of thinking are connected to architectural history and aesthetically stressed art history, should new groups in aesthetics also take up the challenge? Everyday aesthetics and postcolonial aesthetics could find a new role in discussing in radical ways why preserve and what to preserve, and to support with theory the redistribution of power. Although we here base our reflection on (besides the practice of curating) theoretical aesthetics, maybe all this also shows the way for another type of aesthetics, an inquiry into what other than academic aestheticians see as beautiful or artistically meaningful. This might beg for work through interviews, but would you not be curious to know what the local butcher feels like preserving—or the populist you hate? As long as preserving something does not overshadow the needs of others and as long as we can democratically work on our collective heritage, there can be nothing wrong with it, and no one should feel left out.

For all this, we hope with our inquiry to have cleared the path to be a bit more open. We have reminded the reader about the historical and ethnic background of heritage thinking, the way a lot of money is spent on heritage through the selections of a small privileged group, and, we hope, have shown both a glimpse on how curatorial work has been pioneering the work that might increasingly be needed in heritage practice and even taken this further, into radical intellectual democracy (here we find very useful Jacques Ranciere's comment that people are wiser than we expect⁴⁵) where anyone's view on preserving should and could count. Next? Let the children choose what to preserve!

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, translated by A. Collins (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1957), 14.
- 2 Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Things: In Touch with the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA), 10.
- 3 See e.g. John Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 159.
- 4 See e.g. Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics," Part I, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, No. 4 (Oct 1951): 496-527, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707484>; *Władysław Tatarkiewicz, History of Six Ideas* (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1980); Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001). For an overview of the ethnic nature of both art and our ideas of culture with a capital C – without forgetting its global outreach through colonialism and diaspora – see Max Ryyänen, *On the Philosophy of Central European Art: The History of an Institution and Its Global Competitors* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).
- 5 Carole Talon-Hugon, *Le conflit des heritages* (Avignon: Actes Sud-Papiers, 2017), e.g. 80.
- 6 See e.g. Lloyd Alter, "Sold for scrap: great city buildings that were stupidly demolished," *The Guardian* Wed April 6, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/06/great-city-buildings-demolished-destroyed-les-halles>.
- 7 See James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- 8 Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, 91.
- 9 See e.g. the articles in Jeanette Bicknell, Jennifer Judkins and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds, *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments and Memorials* (London: Routledge, 2019).
- 10 The sum is based on discussions with experts and people involved in the work. (For obvious reasons, they do not want their names to be published.)
- 11 To compare, the largest sector getting state support for salaries and venues – performing arts (theater) – was valued at 60.8 million euro in 2017, while the rest of the arts together were estimated to receive 63.9 million euro in the same year. Source: Cupore study <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11166949>.
- 12 Zoltan Somhegyi, *Reviewing the Past: The Presence of Ruins* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 24–25.
- 13 James Janowski, "Bamiyan's Echo: Sounding Out the Emptiness," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments and Memorials*, ed. Jeanette Bicknell, Jennifer Judkins and Carolyn Korsmeyer (London: Routledge, 2019), 215–227, 215. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315146133-19>
- 14 *Ibid.*, 218.
- 15 See e.g. Yvette William's reaction "Our government owes nothing to Notre Dame and everything to the people of Grenfell," *Metro* April 19, 2019. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/04/19/our-government-owes-nothing-to-notre-dame-and-everything-to-the-people-of-grenfell-9241499/>. See also Alice Cuddy and Bruno Boelpaep, "Notre-Dame fire: Has too much money been given to rebuild it?" *BBC News*, April 25, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48039770>.
- 16 Besides Judkins et al. 2019, see e.g. Lisa Giombini, "Artworks and Their Conservation," *Aesthetica Preprint* no. 110 (2019) and Max Ryyänen and Zoltan Somhegyi, *Learning from Decay: Essays on the Aesthetics of Architectural Dereliction and its Consumption* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018). See also Zoltan Somhegyi, *Reviewing the Past: The Presence of Ruins* (London: London – New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020) and Lisa Giombini, "Reconstructing Heritage: Places, Value, Attachment," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020), <https://contempaesthetics.org/2020/11/16/reconstructing-heritage-places-values-attachment/>.
- 17 Korsmeyer, *Things*, 21, 28.
- 18 Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989). <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350926790>
- 19 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Winckelmann: Writing on Art*, selected and edited by David Irwin (London: Phaidon, 1972).
- 20 The cows are absent, though, in Grillpartzer's poem *Kolosseum* – where he favoured appraising the ruin in a sublimated manner. Franz Grillpartzer, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 1, München 1960-1965, 113-114. See Volktheater's work on Grillpartzer's agony: <http://www.volkstheater.at/magazin/nie-habe-ich-an-etwas-mit-so-viel-lust-gearbeitet>.
- 21 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).
- 22 G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Volume II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 630-700. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198244981.book.1>
- 23 John Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered*, 15.
- 24 Yuriko Saito, "Reflections on the Atomic Bomb Ruins in Hiroshima," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments and Memorials*, ed. Jeanette Bicknell, Jennifer Judkins and Carolyn Korsmeyer (London: Routledge, 2019), 201-214, 201. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315146133-18>
- 25 Unesco notes the need to rethink indigenous heritage: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/496/>. For the challenges that co-management (with e.g. state parties) brings, see e.g. Sam Grey and Rauna Kuokkanen, "Indigenous Governance of Cultural Heritage: Searching for Alternatives to Co-Management," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26, no. 10 (2020): 919-941. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1703202>. We anyway leave the decision to preserve or not, and what to preserve, to the indigenous people themselves.
- 26 Aylin Orbasli, *Tourists in Historic Towns: Urban Conservation and Heritage Management* (London: E & FN Spon, 2000).
- 27 See e.g. Agata Pyzik, "Why Soviet Monuments Should be Protected," *The Guardian*, Sep 29, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/soviet-ussr-monuments-should-be-protected>.
- 28 We started working on the article in 2019, months before the dismantling of statues related to the Black Lives Matter movement happened. We mention these events later.

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- 29 Birgit Meyer and Mattijs van de Port, "Introduction: Heritage Dynamics: Politics of Authentication, Aesthetics of Persuasion and the Cultural Production of the Real", in *Sense and Essence: Heritage and the Cultural Production of the Real*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Mattijs van de Port (Berghahn Books, 2018), 1-39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvw04hqq.5>
- 30 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*. (London: Routledge, 2006), 11-13. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203602263>
- 31 Laurajane Smith, keynote talk, "Cultural heritage: politics, nationalism and populism," *No Such Thing as Heritage? – From basic assumptions and constructs to reconceptualizations*, International Symposium at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, March 4, 2020.
- 32 R.J. Coombe, L.M. Weiss, "Neoliberalism, Heritage Regimes, and Cultural Rights," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2016), 43-69, 55, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2644495>
- 33 See e.g. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworlds and Catastrophe: the Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002).
- 34 Annie Olaloku-Teriba, *Toppling Statues Is Not About History, It's About the Present*. *Frieze.com* June 12, 2020, <https://frieze.com/article/toppling-statues-not-about-history-its-about-present>.
- 35 Hernandez Velazquez, Yaiza M. "Imagining Curatorial Practice after 1972," in Paul O'Neill, Simon Sheikh, Lucy Steeds and Mick Wilson, eds. *Curating after the Global Roadmaps for the Present* (MIT, 2019), 255-270, 257.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Based on the course material *Historical Roots*, by Nora Sternfeld and Minna Henriksson, Aalto University, 2015.
- 39 Roger I. Simon, "A Shock to Thought: Curatorial Judgment and the Public Exhibition of 'Difficult Knowledge,'" *Memory Studies* 4, no. 4 (2011), 432-449. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698011398170>
- 40 Lisa Giombini, "For the Sake of Authenticity. Philosophical Concerns in Art Conservation," in *Aesthetics in Dialogue*, ed. Zoltan Somhegyi and Max Ryyänen (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020), 203-223.
- 41 Lisa Giombini, "Reconstructing Heritage: Places, Values, Attachment," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 18 (2020), <https://contempaesthetics.org/2020/11/16/reconstructing-heritage-places-values-attachment/>.
- 42 Lisa Giombini, "Artworks and Their Conservation. A (Tentative) Philosophical Introduction", *Preprint*, #110, January-April 2019, (Aesthetica Edizioni, 2019), 22.
- 43 Caesar Alimsinya Atuire, "Black Lives Matter and the Removal of Racist Statues. Perspectives of an African," *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* 2 (2020). DOI: 10.11588/xxi.2020.2.76234
- 44 Tim Ingold, *The Young, The Old and The Generation of Now*, *RIBOCA2*, August 6, 2020. <https://www.rigabiennial.com/en/riboca-2/programme/event-imagination>.
- 45 See Jacques Ranciere, *Proletarian Nights* (London: Verso, 2012).