

## The Nebulous and the Infinitesimal: A Conversation between D. Graham Burnett and David Gissen

By [D. Graham Burnett](#) and [David Gissen](#)

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*Sunset* by Casper David Friedrich, c. 1835, via Wikimedia Commons

*Charged to think about “The Nebulous and the Infinitesimal” in the world of made things for a day-long symposium on the future of architecture, the theorist-historians David Gissen and D. Graham Burnett launched a real-time game of TTT (Thought-Thing Tag), trading the lead in a series of improvisational meditation-vignettes. Each cameo was intended to epitomize the inoculation of ideas and objects. Peruse this lightly edited transcript of their exchanges, and see how you think they did. If it is a series, what should come next?*

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### From the Issue



**Futures of the Past**  
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D. GRAHAM BURNETT

In the 1927 edition of *Paterson*, William Carlos Williams delivered himself of that great admonition to the metaphysically inclined: “No ideas but in things.” His warning weighs on our theoretical aspirations. And so, for this conversation, David and I have decided that we will try to move under, or perhaps out from under, the spell of this materialist mantra. We are going to get to ideas, if we get to ideas, only from things. The format? Tag team. I’ll go first, and talk about a thing that seems germane or otherwise moved my spirit in connection with our assigned topic, “the nebulous and the infinitesimal,” and then at some point, I will “tag” David and he will do the same. After a few of these iterations, we’ll see where we come out. I certainly won’t try here to set up any theoretical grounding for such a performance, since that would seem rather to foreclose on the whole idea. But suffice it to say that there is a theory sniffing around down there somewhere, and we’ll see if we flush it in the next forty minutes.

I begin with the magic of plumbing, and thereby draw your attention to what I will argue is the architectural instantiation of concern for the infinitesimal at its most numinous and uncanny. Every Catholic church, both now and basically since the fourth century A.D., contains within it a very peculiar apparatus which is called the *piscina*, or sometimes the *sacrarium*. It’s a small sink, now generally located in the vesting rooms where the priest and the altar boys prepare themselves for Mass. It looks like an ordinary sink except that it is covered with a lid and is usually kept under lock and key. The *piscina* was developed as a feature of the architecture of the Christian church in almost direct connection to the formalization of the doctrine of the “real presence” in the Eucharist.

One of the basic problems of thought is the relationship between immanence and transcendence. Catholicism concentrates this conundrum in the doctrine of transubstantiation, which sets out to explain how what appears to be an unleavened wheat wafer could, in fact, be the “real presence” of Christ. The *real* presence—so that the words “this is my body,” said at the consecration, are not understood metaphorically but rather literally. Though what it means to be “literal” in this context, when the properties of that wafer remain constant—that is, when the sensory information you might derive from that object seems to indicate that it remains an unleavened wafer—has been a main driver of some of the most sophisticated philosophical work to be done in the last two thousand years. Without reprising the full history and legacy of the Fourth Lateran Council (which is anyway beyond my ability), we can simply note here that for Catholics this doctrine is a core orthodoxy of the faith and not a free topic of dispute. It is also, despite the recondite character of the technical theology, a gateway to some perfectly concrete and terrifying problems of the infinitesimal.



**John Sell Cotman, “A Piscina in Blickling Church, Norfolk,” 1814, watercolor and graphite.**

Wikimedia Commons

- 5 So, if I’ve just said the Mass and I’ve consecrated the Eucharist, I’ve touched the Eucharist. I presumably have, on my fingers, some very small particles of the Eucharist—and those particles are, in fact, particles of God, in a non-metaphorical way. This fact raised, from very early on, cataclysmic problems of disposal. How do I wash under those conditions? How would I wash anything that came into contact with such a holy thing?

The *sacrarium* is the solution. It is a sink, which, from its earliest introduction in churches (probably as a *detournement* on a traditional baptismal font), was piped into sacred ground, directly. Its conduit leads down to a kind of sepulchral space deemed suitable to the disposition of divine residue. There are some that were piped out to the sacred ground of the graveyard and there vented. As time proceeded, there were more of them built, in a sense, *over* a sepulcher—a final drywell that was under the foundations of a church.

What can and can’t go into a *piscina*, and under what circumstances, is, again, a nice theological question. But I want to leave you, for starters,

with the *piscina* as an object, and ask you to reflect on it in its peculiar historicity: Across most of the Middle Ages—in fact, from the fall of Rome to the rise of modern systems of sewage—indoor plumbing was effectively unknown in Western Europe as a means of sanitary evacuation. So I put to you a counter-intuitive observation: plumbing was preserved across roughly one thousand seven hundred years of Western history, not as a mechanism of cloacal disposal, but rather as a mechanism of sacred preservation.

Tag.

DAVID GISSEN

So, trying to focus on *things*, and continuing to talk about drainage, I'd like to discuss a thing that speaks to a lack of drainage—puddles. I suppose I'm cheating because I'm talking about a thing—a puddle—but I'm going to provide a few examples of this thing and its role within the history of architecture. While I was putting together the book, *Subnature*, I kept thinking about how to talk about these types of things that are infinitesimal and nebulous—how to write about things like puddles or dust. It's not easy.

- <sup>10</sup> When you think of images about drainage, particularly in the history of modern architecture and cities, you often think of images that speak to an optimization of the city's flows. For example, the famous sections of Pierre Patte, or the underground, dimly lit photos of the sewers built by Baron Georges Haussmann, both of which influenced Le Corbusier so much. But in addition to images that emphasize conduits and flows, we also see a series of images that position stagnancies—the lack of drainage—as theory. These puddles—which is basically what they are—emerge as interesting sites of stagnancy and stillness, and they literally conjure up additional images within their stagnant surfaces. There are two images that were made at roughly the same time, that I think present some new, less instrumental, ways to think about drainage, and that suggest how the image of drainage—literally, the water that's released off buildings—might somehow figure within the discourse of architectural history.



Here, we have two images: The first, made in 1964 by Michael Carapetian, is of the Economist Plaza; the second image, of the Bauhaus, was made roughly at the same time by Leonardo Benevelo, an Italian architectural historian. Both photographs show a puddle in front of these buildings. One imagines this puddle formed either by the ablutions of the buildings surrounding them or some defect of drainage within the plaza or street. Leonardo Benevelo reproduced his photograph of the Bauhaus with its failed, existing drainage in his *History of Modern Architecture*, and Michael Carapetian's picture became *the* dominant image of the Economist Plaza. You've probably seen it: There's a man with a bowler hat, who's actually stepping into a puddle and it's foggy, rainy, and wet. I'm completely fascinated by these images that position the puddle as a type of *punctum* that breaks through various modern historical narratives.

When I talked to Michael about why he made that photograph, he said he was really dismayed by the perfect settings one sees within urban architectural photography—its dominant image of the fixed, cloudless and bright sky. It makes the urban setting of a building akin to the staged lighting one achieves in a photographer's studio—where one photographs an architectural model, for example. He wanted to use the puddle—and the wetness and fogginess that pervades his photo—to give the image a notion of realism within the context of the city; the puddle was somehow the *Real* in relation to the way the city is seen and experienced. But he also wanted to make a gesture toward the Smithsons' own efforts within that particular building. The Economist Plaza is an early project in which the architects make the language of modern architecture an extension of the historical fabric of the city.

Leonardo Benevelo used the puddle to recast historically significant buildings as occupying our time—not as sacred objects in a book or as one of many modern and completely mediated structures (in the ways described by Beatriz Colomina, for example). The puddle enabled him to depict the building as being simultaneously within and outside the platforms of architectural mediation. It's still within media, because it appears in a photograph in a book; but it offers a fleeting glimpse of something somewhere—besides the pages of a history book—without offering up a sentimental image of locale and place specificity. So in both ways, a puddle is one of many possible unsentimental indexes of site and realism within architectural history and in its photographic depictions. Tag.

#### D. GRAHAM BURNETT

I'm going to talk about water too, and the relationship between water and built spaces. I'm going to talk about an *elevator* that linked sea and land—a mechanical hinge between the waterworld and a flooded building. In the mid 1950s, the neurophysiologist John Cunningham Lilly [began running some experiments](#) on a bottlenose dolphin, *Tursiops truncatus*. In the course of these experiments, Lilly came to believe that the dolphin was trying to communicate with him. So he sat down and wrote a set of grant applications to the Office of Naval Research, NASA, and other government agencies to support a dolphin research program. He put the dolphin forward as a very promising model organism for thinking through how we would “break through” to a non-human species—i.e., extraterrestrials.

- <sup>15</sup> It might be surprising to us now, but this flew, and he raised enough money to build a dedicated laboratory in the U.S. Virgin Islands, which he called the Communications Research Institute (CRI). Across the period from 1961 to 1965, he undertook, in this space and on government contracts, a set of experiments with cetaceans, testing both their communicative abilities and concurrently examining their capacity for echolocation, sound fixing and ranging, and other things that interested the Navy.

Meanwhile, Lilly was tuning in, turning on and dropping out in a Leary-esque way. He had first made use of LSD in connection with experiments in veterans' hospitals to increase the sensitive responsiveness of patients undergoing psychotherapy, and he came to believe that LSD was a very powerful psychotropic agent for enhancing communicative possibilities between subjects. It was also good for breaking recalcitrant (read “enemy”) agents; the CIA experimented with the drug in that capacity in those years. Lilly thus came to believe that it might also be good for commensurating a researcher with his

experimental subject. To that end he combined LSD with another bit of Cold War techno-science that was about to make the same transit across from the military industrial complex to the swampy territory of the counterculture: the isolation tank, the use of which Lilly had pioneered at the National Institute of Mental Health. One of the main questions of this period, as far as the Cold War sciences were concerned, was “what would happen to a subject absent from any sensory input for a long period of time?” Lilly worked on this problem as part of a larger project to break into, or, indeed, possibly just to break, an enemy agent (and/or an alternate intelligence). But the weird thing was, he came to find that in those spaces he felt really *good* and really *strange*. Especially listening to stereo headphones. He began to figure this must be something like the *Umwelt* of the dolphin, our aquatic familiar. So Lilly hung in the isolation tank at CRI, wired up to the dolphin tank, and he *tripped*.

In the incandescent endgame of this story, Lilly wanted to meet the dolphins in their own world. So he arranged for his laboratory to be cantilevered over the dolphin pools, and he flooded his working space to make it dolphin friendly. A sling-like elevator dipped down into the holding pond, and lifted the dolphins into the lab space, where they could flop along in the shallows of a shared dolphin-human domesticity. The plan was to have the elevator operated by the dolphins themselves, but this never worked out. The Navy got wind of the weirdness and pulled the plug.

The dolphin elevator: I think of it as a kind of stent, holding open that occluded and nebulous passage that links nature and culture, science and fantasy, human and animal, inner space and outer space, mind and madness.

Yes, Lilly was a consultant on the movie *Flipper*. Tag.

We’ll continue to talk about architectural technology, and my thing will be the Ford Foundation atrium garden, which is something that interests me quite a bit. The Ford Foundation building was designed by Roche Dinkeloo Architects in the late 1960s. Have you been to this room in New York City? It’s a semi-public atrium space filled with plants and greenery. Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo proposed this atrium space in their initial design and asked the landscape architect, Dan Kiley, to design it. No one had grown a landscape quite like this inside an office building before.



**The atrium garden of the Ford Foundation building, designed by Dan Kiley.**

Photograph copyright David Leventi, 2013

This was during the rise of the climate-cooled “HVAC’d” building (heating, ventilation, air-conditioning). This type of climate engineering was built into virtually every office building in New York City, and standardized through protocols like “the comfort zone”—that is, the idea that every worker in the office will have a 70 degree and 50% humidity environment. Kiley was brought into this context and said, ‘let’s grow a forest within the space. But since the comfort zone in this building is fundamentally about providing a comfortable, functioning environment for a human being, how do I think of the comfort zone as a context or an environment for plant life?’ To understand what this could be and how it might work, Kiley turned to a Dutch colonial botanist named Fritz Went, who studied plant life in a space he called a phytotron, a facility in which he examined the growth of plants and made idealized atmospheres of urban and non-urban contexts; for example, he studied the ideal temperature, humidity and artificial sunlight conditions for tomatoes. Went believed that if you standardized the environment for a plant, you could standardize the plant! Kiley was very influenced by Went’s exceedingly mechanical vision of biology, but where Went began with the plant, Kiley essentially reversed the process. Given an environment—the office building’s comfort zone—Kiley’s task was to assess the possibilities for life within it. Kiley reasoned that the 70 degree and 50% humidity environment was like the Virginia Shenandoah landscape. He assumed that the same kind of plants would grow in the atrium. As a result, a lot of the initial species of plants he introduced, such as maples and oaks, were from the Shenandoah Valley area.

Well, the trees died. Not only did they suffer from the bits of pollution that made their way into the HVAC system (no HVAC system can be

completely removed of pollution), but they experienced enormous climate stress. While Kiley discovered that interior, architectural environments can be interpreted as a representation of some place—a fascinating observation of the comfort zone—he incorrectly identified the comfort zone’s representational analog. What the landscape technicians who maintained the plants ultimately realized was that the temperature and ventilation conditions in the building were essentially tropical. So, they removed all the American woodland trees and replaced them with tropical trees that were grown and cut to look like the original species. When you visit the Ford Foundation today, almost all the species (*ficus*, et cetera) *look* like the plants of the Shenandoah Valley. It’s a very WASP-y organization, so they weren’t going to give up on Virginia as their ultimate reference.

I think Kiley’s innovation was to understand this air around us, in this room right now, as a representation—which also suggests that the air in this room is a thing. A much more important theorist of environment—Reyner Banham—regarded HVAC as either an assemblage of instrumental gadgets or as a counter-environment situated within and through technology. In the Ford Foundation garden, we see technology and the environment itself as having a representational, and frankly, monumental, character. What I find inspiring is that the environment within architecture, *made* by architecture, can have a monumental quality that is exhilarating in some ways, and makes us think about the environment very differently from the ways that we generally do: It becomes a form versus a mechanism or a flow. Tag.

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

Should we do two more? Two more?

25

DAVID GISSEN

Okay, yeah.

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

In 1958, Vannevar Bush, who was, at that point, probably the most powerful scientist in the world (having played a leading role in the Manhattan Project, and having been central to the reorganization of the American science and engineering community across the Second World War), turned his attention to a most improbable device. This was a person who had, at his command, the entire resources of science and technology as they were then practiced in the United States. And he set his mind on the *microtome*. A microtome is just what its etymology would suggest: a *thin-cutter*. It’s the basic tool of a pathological anatomy lab: a salami slicer on a tiny, tiny scale.

Let's say you want to look at things that aren't transparent naturally, using *transmitted* light—in other words, you don't want to try to shine light on them and have that light reflect back up the microscope's tube, but rather want to be able to put light directly below the stage of the microscope and illuminate them *filmically*, which is much more efficient, especially when you start to have compound microscopes with higher magnification. To do this you have to be able to cut a slice of that solid material thin enough to make it susceptible to the transmission of light in the visible range. So until you have a microtome that allows you to make a microscopically thin shaving of an opaque material, you are limited in the level of magnification you can achieve in looking at a surface.

But this thing has been around for a long time by the 1950s. It isn't rocket science. Why does Vannevar Bush care? He has a very wacky new idea for a radically novel kind of microtome, which he realizes in prototype, though it never enters large-scale manufacture. So, imagine, if you will, the shutter of a movie camera transformed into something like a blade. And then imagine, cartoonishly, pressing an object, salami slicer-like, against that whirring blade. Imagine each of the shavings that comes off, as that blade whirrs, being immediately applied and fixed to a piece of 35mm film running through the device.

What you could do, then, is take a tidbit, say, the heart of a mouse, embed it in paraffin, set on the stage of the microtome, and press a button. What would ribbon out is a strip of 35mm film, each frame of which is a sectional thickness of that mouse heart, each no thicker than a single cell.

So what you have here, I would argue, is something like the reification of our desire to experience a world liberated from matter—Bush's "automatic" microtome had the power to convert all solid things into a receding dance of diaphanous veils. The ostensible advantages of the device were that it enabled you to print off a set of these images for demonstration purposes using the same technologies that you'd use for copying a film—so you could transfer directly from the real to the photorealistic via simple projection. It also allowed you (in principle) to do histological stains using the same techniques used for the development and fixing of emulsions in filmic processes. But, given that the device met no actual need in the period and was eventually abandoned, I think it's more interesting to understand it as a very peculiar robotic reification of a perennial visual fantasy: the flight of the eye through solid things. Tag.

DAVID GISSEN

So we're supposed to be somewhat manifesto-like, right?

Go.

DAVID GISSEN

You talk about linear trajectory of the eye. The next thing I'm going to talk about is related to this. The vector: it's that thing that instructors of environmental architecture tell you that you have to draw to make a building green or sustainable, but it's also that thing that you draw to depict any flow in and through a building. In an environmentalist context, it shows the air moving in and out of buildings. We can trace vectors to seventeenth century drawings of mechanical objects and their operations. It eventually enters into fluid dynamics. Today, it has become the visual, representative language of the infinitesimal and the nebulous in architecture, right? It becomes the representation of air; it becomes the representation of water; landscape urbanists use it to represent schools of fish. We often represent these things and others as flowing or moving, using the language of vectors. And yet, I want to give a manifesto, in three minutes, against the vector, because I think that the vector ultimately reduces everything to pulse. And while I'm sympathetic to the vision of the world and the city as flow, it is not how I understand myself to experience it. I imagine the environment, again, always as some kind of representative or monumental feature.



**Pittsburgh's Bellefield Boiler Plant, also known as the "cloud factory" in Pittsburgh.**

Photograph by Joel Strait, November, 2006

When I look at a photograph of the smoke over Pittsburgh from the early twentieth century as an image of air, I don't think the vector has anything to tell us relative to that image. I think we look at that, we understand that there's something about the sky over our heads, and we occupy a very different sky when we stand in Pittsburgh today. The air of the past takes on a monumental, representational character. It's the air

of another time. To draw air as vector—or any other “flow”—is to deny that representational possibility of our environment. Within architecture, we don’t have a visual representative language to think about our environment under the historical terms within which we think about the environment every day. When people talk, today, about reducing carbon emissions to their levels of thirty years ago, it’s really a historical argument. If we reproduce the sky over our head, like it was thirty years ago, somehow there will be salvation, right? If we recreate streams, or recreate brownfields, into something that’s green and verdant, we’ll return the earth itself into some pre-industrial, pre-modern form. The vector cannot articulate that historical mentality that lies within our contemporary discussion about environment, nature and change. And so, I would love to see an architecture that deals with the environment, with nature, that can drop the vector, whatever that might look like. Tag.

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D. GRAHAM BURNETT

I want one more just because of the “sky over our head” line. What I hope is going to happen is that maybe in the closing movements of the conversation now, we might turn a little bit to self-consciousness about what it is to move from objects, to the relationship between sense and signification.

So you’ve got your Platonist readings of the basic pathology of the relationship. You’ve got your hopeful Aristotelian adequation of these registers. And, of course, you have Christian apologetic accounts that spool out across two millennia in both the Platonic and the Aristotelian modes. Some of these tell you that the relationship between the thing I touch or see, and the idea that I form of it, is akin to the miracle of the incarnation (something like the original “transubstantiation”). In my view, that’s a very exciting, Bonaventurian reading of the way matter and spirit could be entailed to each other. Admittedly, for those without an appetite for such things, it’s a pure mystification—even madness. On the other hand, you have stranger, but, in some ways, more easily rehabilitated, accounts that come, in part, out of the anti-iconoclast writings of the early Middle Ages. I’m thinking of [Saint Theodore of Studium](#), for instance, who suggests that what happens in that relationship between the sense of the thing and the making of ideas, isn’t a mystical transmutation of essence, but a kind of “economy” of participation—a redistribution or circulation of a shared element.

This latter sort of argument is what undergirds those theories that tried to protect and defend the power of icons. It’s not, according to this view, that the icon is a fraudulent picture of God (and therefore must be destroyed, since it’s simply a bait for our illusion). It’s rather that God has, in Christ, a kind of circumscribable form, and that the icon

participates in that space that can be circumscribed. As a result, a genuine icon circulates within the larger economy of the Divine Being. If we know how to bring ourselves to the icon properly, we can, in fact, participate in the Divinity and there is a kind of exchange between us: a trade, if you like. We are in the “trading zone” of spirit and matter. This story, which is, in its proper philosophical constructions, alien and perhaps rebarbative, nevertheless might be salvageable, in that it seems to promise a way to re-imagine the relationship between thought and matter. In these strange ideas we detect a mighty aspiration: an extravagant, even desperate, desire to overcome the terrible dialectic between ideas and things. To go back to William Carlos Williams: “No ideas, but in things.” But what would that look like? What would it be to have ideas in things? We don’t think things, right?

I can’t resist offering one more real, concrete story that is something more than a metaphor for how the “clouds over our head” (the space of ideas), and the way before us (with its impedimentary objects), could be set into a mutually reflecting and, at the same time, enabling relation.

I need a date again: 1822. The year that saw the publication of William Scoresby’s two-volume *Natural History of the Arctic Regions*. Scoresby was a whaler who spent his life chasing down bowhead whales near Spitsbergen, in the first decades of the nineteenth century. He was also a philosophically-inclined person who didn’t think of himself merely as a grubber in whale oil. To prove his elevated capabilities, and to reflect his admission to the Royal Society, he composed a vast repository of philosophical knowledge about the Arctic, which was one of the main texts upon which Melville drew while writing *Moby-Dick*. Scoresby presented, in a section on navigating pack ice, a fantastic account of how the whalers of Hull learned to find their way as the freezing sea began to close over at the tail end of the season. He described a particular kind of atmospheric condition, which was by no means universal, but was a kind of salvific grace when it obtained. Imagine: you’re in the crow’s nest of a whale boat; you’re trying to find your way out through the Greenland straits before the winter ice packs you in tight enough that you may end up having to walk out (if you’re lucky). And the question is, how should you navigate through what is a shifting maze of block ice ahead of you? You can only get up so high; maybe you can see a dozen miles from the crow’s nest to the horizon. How do you see beyond the horizon line? In the atmospheric condition that Scoresby could not explain, but which he had himself experienced (and which Melville, too, talks about as “looming”) the reflected light under the cloudy sky could actually throw up onto the underside of the clouds a nebulous and difficult-to-read, but nevertheless legible, *reverse image of the patterns of pack ice beyond the horizon*.

A representation.

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

Right. So you're looking up, and what you're seeing is, if you know how to read it, a pattern of what's below, what's *ahead*. And that was how they found their way out, when the meteorological graces permitted. It's a version of "looking up to see down" that seems promising, at least metaphorically, as we try to think through this business of thoughts and things. Do we immolate objects into the sweet smoke of their meanings? And if not, how do we keep them present as the sacrificial fires of signification are lit? Part of the game here, in this conversation, was to erect an ekphrastic cabinet of curiosities. Should we get wood, put it on the altar? Say what we *mean*?

DAVID GISSEN

What interests me about that is that one of the ways that architects in the last ten years, in particular, have transmitted their interpretations, their aesthetic sense of objects and things, has been through history. History has played a very vital role within our profession. It's one of the sites in which we can witness a kind of vanguard thinking about architecture. So now that we have all this truly enormous historical knowledge, what do we do with it? We've been warned, those of us who have been trained in this discipline, that we should not instrumentalize our history, which is to say, simply, that you shouldn't make buildings by approaching historical assessments as scripts for future works. Nonetheless, this historical mentality is everywhere, in terms of the writing in architecture, right now. One of the things I'd like to suggest is that our largely historical mentality, within which we see, may begin to re-inform the object itself. But in informing objects, I'm not imagining an instrumental relation between object and text. Rather, I want to imagine an object that takes on a historical character—but in a way quite different than, let's say, a nineteenth-century historicist building.



**Jorge Otero-Pailos peeling back a wall.**  
Michele Nastasi for *Art 21 Magazine*

Here I'm going to bring up some specific examples: if you look at the work of Philippe Rahm, a Swiss architect who reconstructs historical atmospheres from the past, or the work of Jorge Otero-Pailos, who [preserves the dust that history has left](#) on buildings, history is becoming the content of architecture. But this is not an explicitly populist postmodernism. We're seeing a historical reflection, on the object, pushed back onto the surface of the object; it's "history without historicism." So it's a reflection of a historical mentality, but it's not one in which you say, "That's a classical building." The interpretation and the thing exist *within* each other, similar to how you described it, but history is very important.

#### D. GRAHAM BURNETT

'History without historicism.' That's a very elegant formulation of the historicity of a cabinet of curiosities, right? It is only historicism that can "redeem" the merely historical aggregation of past particulars, and it does so by affording that dreaded (if also irresistible) *theoretical basis*. As theories go, it's pretty flat-footed, but it is big and powerful and flat footed. Historicism can thump just about any solid proposition, *mano a mano*. That is the Nietzschean point: there are no definitions, only genealogies. Are you really willing to live in that world? It should feel a little odd. The only out, as far as Nietzsche was concerned, was art. And indeed, perhaps this 'history without historicism' play that you say is happening in architecture parallels a certain kind of pseudo-anti-historical "play" that's happening in contemporary art right now, where the archive becomes a medium for artistic works, or creative types navigate and generate historical records, and historically oriented "research practices" are characteristic of certain forms of artistic life. All well and good, except I do think at a certain point, the old school critical thinkers are going to put to us the question: Isn't this just so much miscellanea? Isn't this ostensible *omniverousness* just the recrudescence of a simple kind of bourgeois, self-stroking with *mucho* do-dads? Do-dads that are kind of, 'Oh! How, um, curious! [cue frisson] How...interesting!'

It has a pretentiousness.

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

Well, it might be even worse than pretentious, which is, at least, a kind of style. We might be looking at something closer to the dreaded *death-by-a-thousand-medium-sized-dry-goods*, you know? And right there we're back again on the basic problem, which is *particulars*. Things. Dumb things. They don't say anything. You just aggregate a bunch of freaking *things*, and then what?

DAVID GISSEN

Obviously the word *bourgeois* is extremely loaded, right? Because it talks about not only pretense, but frivolity, and a certain kind of audience, of a particular class. But, just to pick up on that point specifically, you can also see the examples I brought up as part of a working class history. You can see it as neo-Marxist. If I'm going to preserve the dust of a factory in a city, I'm acknowledging the indices of a certain form of labor that no longer exists in the city. Today, when I watched workers washing the Bank of Montreal building, they're creating an *image* of a building that reproduces the post-industrial sky under which it sits; the sky that no longer has smoke. They're making that building a reflection of the sky overhead. And I think developing a curatorial or preservation-oriented approach toward pollution, of all things, is far from bourgeois. In fact, I would say that it definitely brings imprints of a history that is gone in every American city, which is both an industrial and a working class history, back in and through an architectural image or form of representation. So I think we need to look more closely at the material at hand, and see how they potentially enforce our memory of certain forms of economy and labor that don't appear as meaningful aspects of a city's history. Personally, I think that's very far from a kind of middle class city. It's only upper middle class in the sense that we recognize that this doesn't exist anymore in any kind of productive, economic fashion.

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

OK, so, politics. We get to politics. But only in *things*. So, tag me, I want one more *thing*. [Tag]

I want *dots*. 1946. Rome. The semi-fascist Italian philosopher of art Cesare Brandi is the founding director of the *Istituto Centrale per il Restauro* (the Institute for Restoration), which had been created under Mussolini to help restore the grandeur that was Roman *imperium*, back at a moment when that was much on Mussolini's mind. "Restoration," however, had a very different feel after the war, since it meant trying to put back together the shattered artistic heritage of Italy. It is in this context that Brandi develops, and eventually publishes, his "[theory of restoration](#)." Brandi's theory is one of the really weird and wonderful folds in the fabric of Modernism, and it is an effort to place the relationship between the present and the past (at least in architecture and the arts) on a firm philosophical footing. He was basically a

Hegelian, out of the pessimistic, Neapolitan, Benedetto Croce school. As such, he believed that restoration has been painfully split between two camps.

<sup>50</sup> “Empirical” restorers had a kind of *sprezzatura*, or clairvoyant gift, for imagining what ought to happen in that big, missing section in a damaged fifteenth-century painting. Let’s say you have a lacuna, and it needs to be filled in. An “empirical” restorer would say, “I know what that should have looked like,” and he paints it in. For Brandi, this is pure forgery.

On the other hand, you have the new “scientific” restorers, who are basically archaeologists. All they want to do is stabilize the damaged object, and put it back on the shelf. Say it’s a broken pot: you don’t try to remake the pot; you take the shards you’ve got, stick them out there, and say, “Look. There was once a pot, and this is what we have left.”

Neither of these methods is right, according to Brandi. Why? Because the empirical restorers fail to understand the sacrosanct qualities of the original work; they corrupt it by mingling themselves with its historicities, and thereby violate its essential originality—which lies in the precise physical form taken by the sacrosanct *idea* of the original artist. All we have of the idea is the material instantiation of the fragments that remain. We can’t mess with that. But the “scientific” restorers are even worse, because they don’t understand what an art object is; that is, they think they’re restoring an *object*, but they forget the *idea*. They just attend on whatever remains of the thing, but in doing so they fail to remember that these bits secrete an Idea—with a capital I; the Hegelian Idea—that demands attention. You can’t just leave the painting stabilized in its damaged condition, because we can’t actually see *the painting* if you just give us the canvas with this big hole in it.

So here’s his unbelievably crazy and magnificent solution to this problem. It’s all about the infinitesimal and the nebulous—remember those? Our themes for this conversation.

The solution is *dots*. Brandi developed a strategy for restoration, for “in-painting,” that involved pure hues, unmixed pigment, and single strokes (nearly invisible, *pixilated* strokes), through which the restorer repainted the missing region, using only the kind of post-Seurat, high-Modernist technique of optical blending to create mixed hues (and painterly forms). Why would you go through such a crazy process? Because what Brandi wanted to do was choreograph your experience of the work of art as an “idea” (super-historical, transcendent), and your experience of the work of art as an “object” (material, historical artifact), by *forcing the in-painted image to dissolve, at a distance, into the*

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painting.

55 So imagine, I'm standing ten feet from the painting, and the pixilated region looks exactly like the left shoulder of the Madonna. But once I come close, it resolves back into its pixilated form. At distance, I grasp at the idea of the original work. Up close, I immediately discern the historical object of the original work. Back and forth. Past and Present. Back and forth. Image and canvas. Back and forth. Idea and thing.

So here is Williams' problem—no ideas but in things—moved from the monitory register of the *axiom* onto a plane defined by the *axes* of time and space. Thought or Matter? Spirit or Flesh? Forget it. Any fixed answer is going to be the product of *standing still*. But that won't do. You've got to *move*, baby. And *keep moving*.

DAVID GISSEN

Like in a *tag team*.

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

Exactly! Like in a *conversation*...



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