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A Rhetoric of Preservation: Artistic Interventions in a Damaged World

Abstract: Rereading Walter Benjamin's often overlooked theme of preservation in his work, we offer an interpretation of an art installation that appeared in the winter of 2018 in The Heidelberg Project in Detroit, Michigan, USA. By interpreting this installation and Benjamin's insights on preservation, we make recommendations on how to make readable rhetoric that might be used to positively shape digitally disseminated climate change activist media. We examine three types of preservation: 1. preservation that makes inaccessible, 2. dialectical preservation, and 3. the preservation of the collected. In so doing, we show how performative acts of publicly available art might directly respond to the environmental crisis and how the legibility of that art might offer hope for survival in the age of climate change.

Keywords: Anthropocene; media literacy; visual ecology; Walter Benjamin; folk art; extinction.

A Rhetoric of Preservation: Artistic Interventions in a Damaged World

> To represent history as a trial in which man, as an advocate of dumb nature, brings charges against all Creation and cites the failure of the promised Messiah to appear. The court, however, decides to hear witnesses for the future. Then appear the poet, who senses the future; the artist, who sees it; the musician, who hears it; and the philosopher, who knows it. Hence, their evidence conflicts, even though they all testify that the future is coming.[1]

The words above are taken from Walter Benjamin. The passage is likely a response to a reading of Kafka. And while maybe in a different context, and although

[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Idea of a Mystery," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1927–1930*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 68.

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Benjamin was not a scholar of the Anthropocene, this passage is eerily resonant as we face down the potential of a sixth mass extinction event. How might activists working in different genres and media testify of what is to come, and how might these poetic, visual, aural, and philosophical representations converge? That this needs to happen seems more than urgent.

Activist media engagements with the Anthropocene partake in a political project that's motivated by a desire for preservation. If we take as a given that media partaking in the visual, aural, or both have rhetorical capabilities – in other words, that these media have the ability to persuade – then we might also say that these media have the capability of being used to help move along important political projects. Doing something about both the present and impending harm posed by climate change is a political project, and it's one that takes presuppositional primacy in a long list of political projects of importance. How does it take presuppositional primacy? Recognizing that all political projects involving social justice are important, all political projects also presuppose that there will be subjects and objects of the political, to begin with. Neither subjects nor objects of the political will exist if a sixth mass extinction event can't be prevented. Thus, the problem of impending extinction – meaning that most species are fully dead – is as close as one can get to a universal problem. Given the straightforwardness of that fact, might we not use visual and/or auditory media to persuade people about the urgency of preventing mass extinction, about the urgency of the political project that keeps sustained engagement in any other political project a possibility? Yes, the urgency makes it clear that we should. And although we have clarity about the *should* of this rhetorical use of media, the *how* of this use and the precise object of preservation might as of yet remain unclear. As to the how? Albeit in a different medium, in almost oracular anticipation of social media, Benjamin wonders in his essay "Reflections on Radio" about how radio hasn't made full use of its potential to "put as many people as possible in front of a microphone on every possible occasion."[2] In its modern-day form, what is this other than Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram? Digital dissemination through social media might be the most effective with regard to activist climate change media. That might be a *how*. Still, we ought to be sure that the philosophy behind what makes what's disseminated is presented in a readable way that actually does promote positive change. It's for this reason that we should think through the concept of preservation itself.

Media projects addressing the Anthropocene aim to use the rhetorical capabilities of the visual and the aural. Such media projects can include documentaries; artistic pieces, installations, or performances; works of scholarship, etc. Examples such as these are all various forms aiming to present the rhetorical content about the urgency of preventing mass extinction. And while an exploration of the multiform presentations of this content is a worthy thing to explore, exploring the form and content isn't to explore exhaustively. There's something beyond form and content, namely that

[2] Walter Benjamin, "Reflections on Radio," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 543.

which gives rise to the communicative potential of the dyadic unit of form and content itself, specifically, the preservational thinking that makes form and content, so to speak, readable. Through the example of the epistemological communicativity of an artistic installation in post-industrial Detroit, this short essay begins to explore what makes visual and/or aural media readable so that we might think about how to better use media as politically efficacious rhetoric. It uses insights from Walter Benjamin, much of whose work takes up the theme of preservation as one of its central critical concerns.

The Heidelberg Project (untitled photos by the first author)

The art installation above appeared in the McDougall-Hunt neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan, USA. It was located on Arndt Street, two streets from The Heidelberg Project. The Heidelberg Project is an ongoing, outdoor folk art installation started by Tyree Guyton in 1986. This decades-long project, which sprawls across the greater McDougall-Hunt area, continues to draw attention to inequality and potential in a distressed neighborhood through a transformative vision of community-based art. Operating from a theory of change that believes that "all citizens, from all cultures, have the right to grow and flourish in their communities," the mission of The Heidelberg Project is "to improve the lives of people and neighborhoods through art."[3] Further, The Heidelberg Project has often been inclusive and welcoming of the participation of local children in generating the art itself. Many of the installations have consisted of repurposed toys. In this context, it's interesting to think of Benjamin's observation regarding a curated museum exhibit of toys where toys of collectors were only of secondary importance: "But we must not forget that the most enduring modifications in toys are never the work of adults, whether they be educators, manufacturers, or writers, but are the result of children at play. Once mislaid, broken, and repaired, even the most princely doll becomes a capable proletarian comrade in the children's play commune."[4] Community-oriented from the outset, The Heidelberg Project operates from the position that communities have the potential to both redevelop and sustain themselves through public art. This must be inclusive of young people.

[3] "Our Mission. Our Vision," The Heidelberg Project, https://www.heidelberg.org/mission-vision, acc. on March 31, 2021.

[4] Walter Benjamin, "Old Toys," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1927–1930*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 101.

The particular installation photographed above appeared circa winter 2018, had remained intact for about a year subsequently, but did not fully survive the winter of 2019 and the polar vortex. Suffice to say that increasingly extreme weather conditions brought about by climate change make any outdoor art installation less durable. Still, there's an interesting reading that we can give this particular installation regarding durability. We'll do this a bit later. One notes that the installation is deceptively simple. There are vinyl records suspended by nails on trees. However, many interpretive possibilities emerge from this combination. For a first example, the act of suspending the records, while perhaps reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's readymades, accomplishes something different. Whereas readymades in some sense make something readably original from mechanically produced copies, this Heidelberg installation highlights a different aspect of mechanically produced copies. Vinyl records are mechanical reproductions containing content that isn't readable without a machine to read them. Sure, one can apprehend them visually. Any record aficionado might speak of the elegant, aesthetic uniformity of their collection, but to read what's recorded on vinyl requires the mediation of a record player. Thus, the performative act of installing vinyl as an art object doesn't only shift that object into another plane of readability, but this forecloses it from its mechanical readability should the installation remain intact. True, one might not be able to sit on the bench or ride the bicycle deprived of its wheel, but the artistic act of bringing together those two things in some way highlights the benchness of the bench and the wheel-ness of the wheel inasmuch as our expectation of how we usually apprehend these objects becomes redirected. In other words, though we may no longer *use* the bench as a bench nor the wheel as a wheel – micturate in the urinal without rousing the ire of art lovers and the museum guard – there's a level upon which we can't help but at least initially read those objects in terms of what they once had been. The nailing of records to trees forecloses both the records' use and the aural readability that's inscribed mechanically and readable only mechanically. We should also take this outdoor exposure of the vinyl without their protective album covers in the context of how vinyl has itself become fetishized by the collector. The most sought-after records are ones that haven't been played, and playing those records often decreases that value. The installation in some ways subverts this fetishization. On top of this, the outdoor nature, exposed to the elements, itself subverts the fetishization of art as a precious object. Here, what's brought to the fore are preservations accomplished by making inaccessible.

Further to this, the installation of records onto trees combines what we might think of as natural objects and technological objects. The bringing together of these two types of objects produces a combined object, neither natural nor technological but one made through *poiesis*. In other words, the natural and technological are subsumed in an aesthetic bringing forth. This particular aesthetic bringing forth aligns the similarities of the trees and the vinyls. Both are objects that have longevity and thus history. Some of the oldest living beings on the planet are trees. The plastic vinyl may, in a manner of speaking, outlive the tree as a technological artifact long after

the machines that can read them are inoperative or gone. The trees have rings in cross-section, just as the records have grooves. The tree rings are hidden from vision unless one cuts down the tree, just as the grooves of the record remain silent without a record player. Also, regarding aspects of their respective materialities, the paper labels on the vinyls are made from trees. Trees grow from the minerals in the soil and plastic is a petroleum byproduct. Thus, for both, part of the substance carries forward a historical heritage of ancient organisms. With regard to the *poeisis* and to what's hidden in the material substance of both the trees and vinyls themselves, we're reminded of the transformative, dialectical preservation which brought the materials of the installation about, preservation that's at the same time elevating and destructive, preservation that has resonance with Hegel's *Aufhebung*.

Thirdly, though trees and vinyls have longevity as objects, the aesthetic object of the installation itself is nondurable. Eventually, rain deteriorated the paper labels, and the harsh winter winds of the polar vortex blew away most of the records. What remains preserved from the installation isn't the installation itself – the trees and the vinyls now separated – but only the memories of people who had moved through it and pictures on digital devices stored somewhere on a hard drive or in the cloud, preservations just like the memories of the authors and photographs represented here. In these, we have the preservation of the collected. When what's gathered together is gathered together by memory, we have preservation that remains proximate to its origin, even during a time when the origin is materially absent. When what's gathered together is gathered together through representative objects, we have what we might think of as the collection of a collector.

In order to introduce some useful insights from Benjamin, from these three interpretive possibilities, let's recap the three examples of types of preservation, recapping so that we might discuss these types in terms of preservational rhetoric, one that we might use to continue the project of doing something to curb climate change. The three types of preservation represented here are: 1. preservation that makes inaccessible, 2. dialectical preservation that destroys at the same time as it elevates, and 3. the preservation of the collected.

On the Preservation that Makes Inaccessible

> In the most extreme instance, the dwelling becomes a shell. The nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling's interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet. What didn't the nineteenth century invent some sort of casing for! Pocket watches, slippers, egg cups, thermometers, playing cards – and, in

> lieu of cases, there were jackets, carpets, wrappers, and covers.[5]
> Plush – the material in which traces are left especially easily.[6]
> The étuis, dust covers, sheaths with which the bourgeois household of the preceding century encased its utensils were so many measures taken to capture and preserve traces.[7]

What we see in the passages above from Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is a critique of preservation that makes inaccessible. Like plush 19th-century interiors, shells bear the impression of what occupies the shell, and in this way, the built environment of humans is built to bear this impression and, in a way, to imprison its occupant in velvet. Dwelling and the implements of dwelling are separated from and made illegible in terms of their use. Pocket watches, slippers, egg cups, thermometers, playing cards, needles, furniture, and anything sheathed are meant to have value in their utility, but the 19th-century bourgeois' addiction to dwelling fetishized the objects of dwelling such that their careful protection implied that dwelling not be focused on the use of the built and manufactured environment, but the protection of the built and manufactured against touch, and therefore use. Instead, just as plush material literally bears the impression of the traces left by what comes into contact with it, the built and manufactured are meant not for their utility, but to capture and preserve the traces of who would've used them. If we think we've left all this behind in the 21st century, look no further to the very lucrative market of smartphone and laptop cases, keyboard covers, and screen protectors, things that all at best only slightly impede our use of objects whose primary value is utility, objects with which many of us spend most of our time interacting.

And in a modern-day context, doesn't the Heidelberg installation make a similar critique? That it's outdoors is itself a refusal to fetishize art itself. Art isn't a precious object to be protected behind velvet ropes in gallery spaces that in many ways discourage accessibility. Art is meant to be open, accessible to the public not only on the special occasion of a gallery or museum visit but incidentally as one passes by. Nor is the pristine nature of vinyl's collectibility protected. Rather, they're removed from their jackets and repurposed for another kind of aesthetic use. And that the records as an aural medium become unreadable through this repurposing, our attention is drawn to the fact that even the artistic act – something we typically hold as sacrosanct beyond critique – can remove objects from their original context of useful readability.

We can read Benjamin and the Heidelberg installation as suggesting that we think about the fetishizing preservation that makes the useful inaccessible. If we think about this in the context of climate change, we might be confronted with the very difficult question of ecological preservation. Though it might seem most morally

[5] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Keith McLaughlin (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 220.

[6] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 222.

[7] Ibid, 226.

praiseworthy to take an extreme position of absolute preservation, such an idea isn't possible should life be something to continue. Living never allows it such that everything can be preserved absolutely. Life must use and consume and be used and be consumed. Just as fetishized absolute preservation doesn't allow for a dwelling whose purpose isn't transformed into something but to leave traces, it's an uncomfortable fact that traces of living will be left no matter how one has lived, for all living things will die in any case. If zoological living is of value in general, though, then preservation that makes life itself inaccessible isn't ever an option. To realize this isn't to assert the opposite extreme that there should be no preservation, that everything becomes part of a standing reserve only meant for human use, or that preservation shouldn't be practiced at all possible times. It's only to assert that the commitment to preservation be balanced with the fact that life must sometimes make expenditures to achieve other things of value. In other words, though preservation can't be the highest value, it is an important value among others if the highest value is for zoological life to persist.

Moving from this possible lesson regarding the epistemic legibility of visual and auditory media, we can apply this to the form and content of these media, too. Again, visual and auditory rhetoric can be persuasive, and one can fall into the trap of thinking that rhetoric is most effective when it takes hyperbolic positions. Extreme positions, however, aren't useful if they propose something untenable. We should remember that ought implies *can*. Moreover, to urge people to act in ways that aren't possible may inadvertently encourage them to give up altogether and create a nihilistic apathy. The best thing to do is to encourage people to do the *most* possible, not require the impossible. And here, we should clarify that by *impossible* we mean that which is literally not possible in any possible material configuration that can follow from the point to which we've come. We acknowledge that it's true that specific historical circumstances can foreclose potentials that would otherwise be possible, but this isn't what we're talking about. Thus, neither the form nor content of media that supports climate change activism can partake in the extreme position of absolute preservation. Namely, the content can't take the position of absolute preservation should it also value living. Nor can the form of this media be held accountable to the extreme position of absolute preservation, say, by climate change deniers. For instance, regarding the latter, it isn't necessarily hypocritical that producing activist media consume and expend energy, thereby taking some materials out of a preserved state.

On a Dialectical Preservation

> Historicism presents the eternal image of the past, whereas historical materialism presents a given experience with the past – an experience that is unique. The replacement of the epic element by the constructive element proves to be the condition for this experience. The immense forces bound up in historicism's 'Once upon a time' are liberated in this experience. To put to work an experience with history – a history that

> is originary for every present – is the task of historical materialism. The latter is directed toward a consciousness of the present which explodes the continuum of history.[8]

> The medium through which works of art continue to influence later ages is always different from the one in which they affect their own age. Moreover, in those later times its impact on older works constantly changes, too. Nevertheless, this medium is always relatively fainter than what influenced contemporaries at the time it was created.[9]

> To the Public: Please Protect and Preserve These New Plantings
> What is 'solved'? Do not all the questions of our lives, as we live, remain behind us like foliage obstructing our view? To uproot this foliage, even to thin it out, does not occur to us. We stride on, leave it behind, and from a distance it is indeed open to view, but indistinct, shadowy, and all the more enigmatically entangled.[10]

To read Benjamin's thoughts on historical materialism, we might think of his description as one that could involve the bringing forth of *poiesis*. Although historicism might have narrativity pretensions with its "Once upon a time," historical materialism constructs history as a historical present, one that's always already proximate and bound to its origins, one wherein history is experienced during the present and preserved as part of it. Though the past is destroyed qua past, it remains elevated as ever-present from the viewpoint of historical materialism. Though admittedly not typically thought as being related to *poiesis*, historical materialism also brings forth from the void, bringing forth a consciousness from the particular void of historicism's continuum. Moreover, pairing this with Benjamin's thoughts about the influence of the medium itself on later ages, we see yet further similarities between *poiesis* and historical materialism. Namely, even though the medium of the work of a produced work of art may remain the same from the time it's contemporary to later ages, there's a transformation regarding legibility when it comes to the value of the medium itself.

Along with Benjamin, then, one might read *poiesis* of the Heidelberg installation of what we might think of as the natural trees and technologically aural records as accomplishing something similar to historical materialism in a very literally materialist way. The natural and technological aren't presented alongside each other as though separated by an expansive distance in a historical continuum, but rather as a

[8] Walter Benjamin, "Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935–1938*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 262.

[9] Walter Benjamin, "The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913–1926* (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 235.

[10] Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913–1926* (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 449.

fused aesthetic object, one that emphasizes the organic, present heritage of both what we often think of as natural and technological objects. In this dialectical synthesis, the concepts of natural and technological are destroyed and elevated into a legibly aesthetic object wherein the organic origins are brought forward as ever-present. And what can we take from this reading as it relates to activist media regarding climate change?

Visual and aural media performing climate change activism might do well to consider the shared relationship of the natural and the technological. From a historical materialist perspective, the natural isn't so much of a past for which we ought to have nostalgia because we've entered a fallen age of the technological. What we might consider is rather than being cleanly separated, the technological itself can be thought of as part of nature, for the technological contains within its present the origins proper to the natural. What technology doesn't have as its substance that which comes from nature? What technology isn't fueled by something natural? Nature is ever-present in the technological, this to such a literal extent that plastic models of dinosaurs may in some cases be made from an actual dinosaur! Rather than suggest a perhaps now impossible return to nature, what if climate change activism were to think of ways to embrace the technological as nature? What if, as Benjamin observes, in the passage from *One Way Street*, that we can both literally protect new plantings, so to speak, while not simply leaving behind more difficult questions, content to have them obstruct our view? Perhaps activist climate change media can think through what seems to be the obstruction of technology not as an obstruction, but as itself part of the "foliage" to be protected. And thus, digitalized climate change activism shared through social media might be seen in this positively technological light.

The Preservation of the Collected

> The great art of making things seem closer together. In reality. Or from where we are standing; in memory […] This is the mysterious power of memory – the power to generate nearness.[11]
>
> But the emphasis changes completely if we turn from photography-as-art to art-as-photography. Everyone will have noticed how much easier it is to get hold of a painting, more particularly a sculpture, and especially architecture, in a photograph than in reality. It is all too tempting to blame this squarely on the decline of artistic appreciation, on a failure of contemporary sensibility. But one is brought up short by the way the understanding of great works was transformed at about the same time the techniques of reproduction were being developed. Such works can

[11] Walter Benjamin, "The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1927–1930*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 248.

> no longer be regarded as the products of individuals; they have become a collective creation, a corpus so vast it can be assimilated only through miniaturization. In the final analysis, mechanical reproduction is a technique of diminution that helps people to achieve control over works of art – a control without whose aid they could no longer be used.[12]
>
> The person who created this collection of plant photos can eat more than bread. He has done more than his share of that great stock-taking of the inventory of human perception that will alter our image of the world in as yet unforeseen ways.[13]

If memory makes things seem more proximate, then might we say that to have taken in an art installation, it can remain proximate to us in memory? And if those who haven't been able to take in that installation because of a distance of time and/or space, might we not also agree with Benjamin about art-as-photography, or in other words about art as preserved as legible through photography? The spirit of The Heidelberg Project is one of community and collaborative aesthetic practice. So if the mechanical reproduction and preservation of art makes art no longer the product of an individual, so too is an installation no longer the legible product of an individual when remembered without the mediation of mechanical reproduction, whether that remembered experience may come from being present in the time and space of the installation, or if that experience had been initially made through something like a photograph.

The installation that we've been exploring in this essay is preserved through memory and through technological means. Many of us who are in the community have the desire to legibly preserve iterations of the installations as it's known that the installations are ever-evolving. This comes not only from the creative spirit of those who work on it, but also from the sad fact that the outdoor installations survive for shorter and shorter periods of time as climate change makes the weather more and more unforgiving. People passing through the installations sometimes share their visual and audio representations with friends and family and with the world to be read through social media. Such representations offer important counternarratives to the deficit discourses that are often projected onto post-industrial areas such as Detroit; at the same time, and not unrelatedly, folk art quietly tucked away in this and other neighborhoods regularly serves to uplift and inspire residents and passers-through alike, offering not only everyday reminders of hope and faith and possibility[14] but also critical invitations to reconsider how and where we go from here. While it's true that

[12] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 523.

[13] Walter Benjamin, "News about Flowers," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1927–1930*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 155.

[14] Jasmine Ulmer, "Photogenic Images: Producing Everyday Images of Possibility," *Revista Brasileira de Sociologia da Emoção* 16, 47 (2017): 127.

neoliberal economies often attempt to capitalize on the renewing transformation – often taking the form of gentrification – of what it deems to have been in ruin, we would argue that what's going on here is something that attempts to subvert that. Visual and audio representations shared with friends on social media don't serve the financial gain of the people who would typically share such representations. Yes, social media companies can and do capitalize using engagement metrics of popular posts, and there are social media influencers who capitalize on their own social media presence, so making those exceptions, social media users who wish to share the enjoyment of art for no reasons other than that are collectors of art par excellence. It's well known to people – people such as the authors of this essay – who live in the area and are opposed to gentrification and exploitative fascinations with what's only thought to be in ruin from the perspective of the reality television home makeover show ethos of late capitalism.

We modestly propose that apropos to the above sentiment of Benjamin – and not in a *let them eat cake* sort of way – that those who continue to share this ongoing art installation by partaking in its creation and shareable reproductions can eat more than bread, too, for these images may alter the world in ways yet unforeseen. And it's through acts like this that we might explore the power of digital preservation through visual and/or auditory means as something that holds lasting potential to become something transformative inasmuch as it can preserve both something valued, though there might be a shift from the preserved media to another type of media when digitally preserved. This influence remains to be seen, but again, it holds potential.

This potential is what gives us hope for the persuasive, rhetorical potential that the digitally disseminated visual and auditory preservations encouraging climate change activism might bring. So long as this activism can stay focused on doing the most possible and show us how our futures are bound up with the materiality of our historical present, for all of us and the youth yet to come, there's hope.

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