

The Demise and Afterlife of Artifacts

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Fig. 7. Morehshin Allahyari, *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015). Middle image is a 3D-printed Lamasu with a flash drive; the side details showcase flash drives and memory cards inside other 3D-printed objects. Image courtesy of the artist.

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The Motives behind the Destruction of Cultural Heritage in the Middle East

Destruction of architecture and art objects is an ancient practice. From Troy and Tenochtitlan to Dresden and Munich and on to Bamiyan and Palmyra today, the obliteration of historic cities and heritage sites has taken place throughout history and across cultures. In the West, such events as the Protestant Reformation led to the

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monuments from Antiquity to the Islamic periods.

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Cultural Heritage: From
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destruction of many churches and religious furnishings. Later, massive aerial bombing was the major cause of cultural heritage destruction. During WWII, aerial attacks destroyed a substantial portion of Europe's historically significant buildings and museums. In Germany alone, not only major architectural monuments, but also entire cities, most famously Dresden after its firebombing in February of 1945, were obliterated.¹ A comparison of Nazi pre-WWII aerial photographs of Germany's old inner cities with photographs from the 1960s and 1970s reveals the fate of these cities: from splendid baroque and gothic urban fabric to ruins and ultimately to the postwar utilitarian architecture.²

The Nazis targeted Warsaw's buildings and monuments for the sake of removing the cultural and historical identity of the Polish people.³ However, only a handful of the twentieth century military conflicts sought the destruction of significant buildings for the sake of destroying them alone.⁴ In most cases, the main objective was to kill those who occupied the particular target site or building or to eliminate the function to which the building was put to use, such as manufacturing or storage of strategic material. Sometimes, the destruction of certain monuments, such as national memorials and government headquarters, was meant to weaken the morale of the "enemy," but that was the exception rather than the general aim of bombing. In contrast, the militant group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) today aims to erase certain buildings and artifacts based on their specific meaning according to the militants' own obscurantist interpretation. In other words, for ISIS, the ravaging of irreplaceable antiquities in Syria and Iraq is dictated by an understanding of their deviant referential significance much like the relentless slaughter of "undesirable" people (such as those deemed unbelievers, members of ethnic minorities, and homosexuals) is doctrinally justified.

This determined and extremely myopic orthodoxy has attracted the attention of the world. It also has earned the modern Middle East a hot spot in the mainstream media as the place where a twisted ideology is supposedly driving the dreadful and deliberate demolition of historic monuments. Additionally, many commentators use these destructions as another example of the incongruity between "our" values and "theirs," and they conclude that the war in the Middle East is a war between the international community trying to defend universal values and a threatening "Islamic world" intent on destroying them.⁵

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant compels his readers to rethink the “thingness of things,” by differentiating between *das Ding fur uns* versus *das Ding an sich* (the thing for us versus the thing in itself).⁶ It is, indeed, our treatment of objects that assigns them certain functions and meanings. In other words, if historic relics are neglected and uncared for, this is so because of the ways in which people perceptually constitute them as objects of contempt. It is within this Western frame of mind that conventional media reports often align the destruction of monuments with the culture and beliefs of the people in the Middle East. As **Kirsten Scheid** shows in her essay, the media determines who the people of the region are “by how they act on art, attributes their behavior to a cultural trait (or rather, deficiency), and condemns an entire populace accordingly.” Indeed, time and again, media outlets have reported that the urge to destroy has spread throughout the region, becoming a sort of plague.⁷ Although not considered a serious threat, scores of news articles reflect on some independent Muslim clerics supporting or calling for the destruction of historic monuments. For instance, in 2012, *FrontPage Magazine* reported that Bahrain’s “Sheikh of Sunni Sheikhs,” Abd al-Latif al-Mahmoud, called on Egypt’s first Islamist president, Muhammed Morsi, to destroy the Pyramids and thereby accomplish what was “neglected” in early Islam.⁸ In addition to these recent calls, there have been many historic instances of active iconoclasm in the Middle East. The foremost is the one ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad himself, who reportedly ordered the idols in the ancient Kaaba smashed, which has helped attributing the deliberate destructions that followed in Islamic history to a widespread and religiously sanctioned iconoclastic urge. Thus, modern acts of demolition are often presented as stemming from an impulse to return to the example of the Prophet—a belief that is often ascribed to the Salafi ideology (which includes the much less prevalent and militant Jihadism).⁹

However, a deeper look into each act of deliberate destructions indicates that they are much more complex than a pure imitation of the Prophet or other precedents of supposed paradigmatic iconoclasm. Consider, for example, the case of the 1700-year-old rock-cut Buddhas in Bamiyan, which fell to Taliban dynamite in 2001 (Fig. 1). In response to the heritage experts’ plea regarding the purchase of the Buddhas and their transportation to Western museums, Mullah Omar, the erstwhile head of the Taliban regime, responded: “Do you prefer to be a breaker of idols or a seller of idols?”¹⁰ While resonating with the Prophet’s story, in Afghan public imagination, this question is instead famously

attributed to Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni of the Ghaznavid Dynasty (977–1186), who faced a similar offer from Indians wishing to protect their “idols” at the cusp of the first Muslim invasion of northern India.¹¹ Islamic Art historian Finbarr Barry Flood remarks: “Although iconoclasm is often stigmatized as an act stemming from ignorance, this was a gesture that was particularly well informed about its own historical precedents.”¹² He goes on to shed light on an even more significant cause, elucidating how iconoclasm was above all rooted in contemporary conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in India. Affected by Mullah Omar’s verdict and mindful of the historical significance of the destruction of Hindu icons in India by Muslims, one conservative Indian official lauded that India “has been cautioning the world against this regression into medieval barbarism.”¹³ Subsequently, a Taliban spokesman communicated with a few New York reporters, confirming that the demolition of the Bamiyan was in fact a delayed response to the notorious 1992 destruction of the Babri Mosque in India by Hindu fundamentalists.¹⁴ So, whether it is ISIS, Mullah Omar, or a conservative from the Hindu Nationalist government, the motives behind such obliterations are wide ranging and must be contextualized in light of historically and geographically specific episodes of resentment.



Fig. 1. Taller Buddha in 1963 and in 2008 after destruction.
Available at [Wikimedia](#).

Echoing Flood’s sentiments, historian Elliott Colla maintains that most of the responses to ISIS’s destructions fail to adequately contextualize them. “There is nothing uniquely ‘Islamic’ about the ISIS attacks on pagan statues or antiquities sites,” he writes. “Just as there are long histories

of vandalism and iconoclasm in the Arab and Muslim worlds, there are even older ones in the West, as the origins of the term *iconoclasm* should remind us.”¹⁵ In fact, if we go by historical evidence, the Islamic lands seem more tolerant of other cultures’ remains than many Christian territories. As historian of Islamic Art Oleg Grabar asserts, however ironic it might sound to some, the medieval Muslim world would have actually served as a haven for incarnation iconodules, or those who supported icons and their veneration, such as St. John of Damascus. He adds that particularly within the widely practiced traditions of aniconism, images in Islamic lands were not immoral per se, but simply unrelated to divine manifestation.¹⁶

In light of such a layered history, it is no surprise then that many scholars attribute contemporary iconoclastic attitudes to *history cleansing*, rather than to the revival of early traditions of the Prophet. Indeed, with nearly 5,000 years of recorded history, including the first major literary work, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2100 BC), the Middle East is where the world’s first cities emerged and where organized governmental entities were first introduced.¹⁷ The region that ISIS controls or threatens, known as Bilad-al-Sham or the Levant (modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories) and Northern Iraq (Ancient Mesopotamia), is thus particularly significant because it has layered material evidence, from Islamic and non-Islamic traditions. Zainab Bahrani, a scholar of the ancient Near East, writes, “ISIS isn’t just focused on the pre-Islamic past; they’ve also destroyed so many Muslim shrines and mosques... we focus more on their destruction of pre-Islamic sites here in the States and in Western Europe, but they’ve actually destroyed a lot of Islamic and Christian and Yazidi and Sufi temples.”¹⁸

In his book, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, journalist Robert Bevan writes of similar deliberate methods of eradication of the past—or what he calls *cultural genocide*—in the contexts of post-Ottoman Greece, Palestine after 1948, and in today’s Saudi Arabia.¹⁹

Demolitions, however, have occurred in many different forms such as damages that take place slowly due to lack of attention from government officials or from heritage and preservation organizations. After several violent conflicts, many of which involved Muslim-Christian rivalries, the Armenian city of Ani—situated in the Turkish province of Kars near the border with Armenia—became a ghost town in the 18th century. Later, after the Armenian genocide of 1915, most of the city’s remaining treasures were looted or

destroyed. Since then the city has been neglected and received little attention from conservationists.²⁰ Similar fates befell the historical Armenian city of Van and thousands of other Christian religious sites across Turkey.²¹ Other notable examples in this vein are Jewish quarters across the Islamic world. For example, the Jewish neighborhood of Yazd in Iran, which was once home to a vibrant Jewish community that migrated to Israel and America after the establishment of the Jewish State in 1948, has been neglected for many years, resulting in a nearly destroyed quarter (Fig. 2). Having been emptied of their inhabitants, the homes have lost their primary protectors and their endowers of meaning, and have thus deteriorated. In the meantime, neither the Iranian government nor private organizations have come to their rescue. It seems that the new national narrative of Iran wants to refashion the history of the country so as to remove some episodes from public memory. Indeed, removed from public memory through physical obliteration, these neighborhoods recede to become relics of the past, in the words of the French historian Pierre Nora, “Without an intent to remember, *lieux de mémoire* would be[come] *lieux d’histoire*.”²²

Michele Lamprakos writes of a similar struggle over public memory at a famous and highly charged Islamic site in Europe: the former Great Mosque of Cordoba, officially and paradoxically known as the Mezquita-Catedral (Mosque-Cathedral). The Church’s attempts to rewrite the building’s history and to omit the word *mezquita* from its official name are seen by some as an attack on the community’s memory—akin to the moment in the 16th century, when a portion of the mosque was demolished to build the cathedral. Lamprakos notes that the current conflict is—like most heritage conflicts—“as much about the present as it is about the past. Indeed, the two are inextricably intertwined.”



Fig. 2. The ruins of a Jewish house in Yazd, Iran. Photograph by Pamela Karimi, 2007.

Lack of support for preserving certain monuments and historic sites may be associated with the desire to discourage “the intent to remember” through preservation. Still, in many instances, the motive is simply a lack of funding in private organizations and/or the absence of pressure groups that would lobby the government to allocate appropriate funds for these projects. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, for instance, funding for preservation of Iraqi historic sites has been sporadic. Some provinces have not been included in the exploration conducted by the Iraq’s General Authority for Antiquities and Heritage.²³ Additionally, adequate security strategies to prevent certain sites from being looted are absent.²⁴ A prime example of this is the once-mighty Fortress of Al-Ukhaidir southwest of Baghdad, which was built around 778 AD. The fortress is now decaying in the desert of Karbala from lack of maintenance.²⁵

Yet, not all destructions stem from ignorance, ideological stances, or a shortage of resources, financial or otherwise. In truth, many progressive and modernist views have negatively affected the cultural heritage of the Middle East. Colonial urban renewal—for example, the destruction of Algiers’ historic core in the early years of French occupation—counts as destruction, as do the urban renewal schemes of the 1950s and 1960s that were carried out by newly independent governments with the help of European architects and planners.²⁶ Indeed, the creation of many nation-states coincided with a simultaneous celebration of some monuments and a deliberate obliteration of others. As **Talinn Grigor** reveals, when Reza Pahlavi became Shah of Iran in 1925, he destroyed many iconic monuments built by the previous Qajar dynasty. Likewise, during the Islamic

Revolution of 1979, Reza Shah's own tomb tower was the first monument to be brought down by a group of hardcore revolutionaries guided by the notorious Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq Khalkhali, the hardline cleric and judge of the revolutionary courts (Fig. 3).²⁷



Fig. 3. Destroying Reza Shah's tomb, circa 1979. Available at [Iranwire](#).

Such destructions are not exclusive to local regime changes, internal uprisings, and civil wars. Indeed, the modern history of the Middle East has seen multiple instances of erasure by external forces, including those of Western and colonial powers. Many statuary, paintings, and relics that form the core of the ancient Middle Eastern collection at the Louvre Museum in Paris were looted from Egypt during the Napoleonic invasion of 1798. In fact, as **Scheid** observes, “[Napoléon] was the first conqueror to ‘legalize’ looting.”

Other examples include historic sites that were damaged in wars waged by Western powers. Consider how the ruins of the Sasanian Palace of Ctesiphon in northern Iraq became the site of a major battle of World War I. Similarly, after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, many archeological sites were damaged and their treasures looted. The United States and its allies overlooked the warnings of organizations and scholars concerning the protection of Iraq's cultural heritage.²⁸ Even worse, a military base was constructed on the site of ancient Babylon.²⁹ Coalition forces destroyed or

seriously damaged many historic urban areas and buildings, while thieves ruined thousands of unprotected archeological sites.³⁰ In addition to acts of war and invasion, Western institutions have played a major role in silencing and marginalizing certain aspects of the region's past.

Undeniably, as Colla reminds us, museums and archeology itself were mainly Western imports and Western concerns, which were then embraced by the region's autocrats and non-autocrats alike, such as Ataturk, Saddam Hussein, Anwar Sadat, and the Shah of Iran, as well as the Western-educated class and the intelligentsia.³¹ But they do not seem to have penetrated beyond that to the rest of the people. "The result of this history of colonial and despotic rule in the region," Colla writes, "is that, despite the efforts of generations of well-meaning educators, indifference toward antiquities reigns," not only because interest in antiquities is a Western import, but mainly because certain sites, artifacts, and entire historic periods did not make it to the national memory as it was being constructed in the colonial and post-colonial period.³²

In this sense, Annabel Wharton's discussion of the meaning of cultural heritage in light of the imported, Western museum is significant. In her essay, "Exhibition and Erasure/Art and Politics," Wharton writes about how, in most modern Middle Eastern museums—built mostly by foreign experts under colonial rule—"ancient objects, removed from their original context and function, are forced to act in new ways, often aesthetically and always ideologically confirming and promoting their exhibitors' *Weltanschauung* [worldview]." This "political method," as historian Timothy Mitchell upholds, "is the essence of the modern state, of the world-as-exhibition." He goes on to say that "the certainty of the political order is to be everywhere on exhibit, yet nowhere quite accessible."³³ Thus, while secular nation-states and the West are frequently credited with unearthing and protecting the actual cultural heritage of the Middle East, they are also responsible for its recasting in narratives that differ from what it was meant to be when it was first formed. Presenting and misrepresenting cultural heritage by certain institutions and agents can indeed alter its significance depending on the circumstances in which the decisions are made. For example, Lamprakos shows that the current conflict over Cordoba's Mezquita-Catedral can only be understood in the *longue durée* of its history as a Christian cathedral and historic monument. Over the course of some eight centuries, the building's older layers have been erased, suppressed, and reinvented—as Spain's Islamic past was appropriated, neutralized, celebrated, or rejected. "We

can read cycles of patronage, demolition, and restoration,” Lamprakos writes, “as an index of changing attitudes toward [the Islamic] past and the specter of the Moor: a recurrent image of ‘self’ and ‘other’ in Spanish history.” She reminds us that restoration involves demolition; at Cordoba, both are deployed at various moments to craft selective (and often conflicting) narratives of memory and identity.

Following a similar line of reasoning, certain destroyed or threatened sites, monuments, and artifacts receive more attention than others due to the interest of the tourist industry and museums in the West today. Thus, while many ancient and pre-Islamic artifacts and monuments of the Middle East are listed as world heritage sites, others, equally important but less touristically desirable, are not, and hence they do not receive much global attention. Moreover, while the media turns its full attention to the harm done to the world heritage sites such as Palmyra, it remains oblivious to the demolished spaces within which people carry out their everyday existence and the things they hold dear. In this regard, contributor **Esra Akcan** aptly asks, “Isn’t it a contradiction to mourn the destruction of monuments of cultural heritage but not the destruction of Palestinian villages?” She goes on to say that “the ways the state apparatus exerts itself on dead bodies by making some death ungrievable might not be too different from the ways the cultural and educational institutions exert themselves on architecture by making some buildings unmemorable.” To concur with cultural historian Laurajane Smith, the “authorized heritage discourses,” force us to pay attention to “aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that current generations ‘must’ care for, protect and revere so that they might be passed to nebulous future generations.”³⁴ Not only are the built environments of ordinary individuals frequently overlooked, but so too are their efforts in protecting their own cultural heritage found in these environments.

In Defense of Artifacts

In contrast to the recent accounts of destruction, the history of the Middle East is actually replete with instances of co-existence between ethnic and religious communities as well as examples of continued endorsement and support for ancient monuments from Antiquity to the Islamic periods. Indeed, the history of the evolution of material things in the Middle East confirms philosopher Bruno Latour’s claim that, “[h]umans are not the ones who arbitrarily add the ‘symbolic

dimension' to pure material forces. These forces are as transcendent, active, agitated, spiritual, as we are."³⁵ For example, despite assaults during the invasion of the Sasanian Empire by the Arab army, the Arch of Ctesiphon (the capital city of the Parthian and Sasanian Empires, 247 BCE–224 CE and 224–651 CE, respectively) survived, as an "actant" or non-human source of action, to borrow again from Latour, became an epitome of monumentality in architecture and literature, and inspired the building of the grand *iwans* in many palaces and congregational mosques across the Islamic world. Likewise, the cross-axial orthogonal layout of the Roman city gave shape to many early Islamic towns.³⁶

Such gradual and subtle forms of appropriation, improvisation, and acceptance have been continually coupled with heroic acts of saving and conserving down to the present day. During the Iranian revolution of 1979, when the aforementioned Ayatollah Khomeini called for bringing down the Tomb of Cyrus and the remains of the 2,000-year-old Persepolis, he and his "band of thugs" were reportedly driven off by stone-throwing residents from nearby villages.³⁷ As early as 2012, with help from the Smithsonian Institute, Syrian specialists were able to create a wall around one of the most important ancient mosaic museums in Syria. Maamoun Abdulkarim, the Director General of Antiquities and Museums in Syria, reported that a significant portion of museum objects were concealed, thanks to the efforts of a team of Syria specialists, some of whom lost their lives to either the Assad regime or to ISIS.³⁸ Notable is Qassem Yehya, a young scholar who was killed by a stray mortar as he was busy at work at the Damascus citadel.³⁹ A week after Yehya's death, Khaled al-Asaad, a prominent antiquities scholar of the ancient city of Palmyra, was executed by Islamic State militants, who then went on to display his beheaded body on a pole in a main square of Palmyra.⁴⁰ Al-Asaad had reportedly refused to direct ISIS to the location where valuable artifacts from the historic site were hidden away. Such heroic acts confirm that the desire to terminate the life of the ancient monument always competes with the desire to keep it alive, albeit under the harshest of circumstances. Even when the monuments are gone and the artifacts looted, the images, memories, and heroic stories associated with them carry on.

The Afterlife of the Ruined Matter

The following photographs show how the early twentieth century British attempt to turn the Iranian city of Abadan into a utopian destination instead led to one of the Middle East's greatest dystopias as the war with Iraq unfolded half a century later (Fig. 4).⁴¹ With its oil refineries and close proximity to Iraqi soil, Abadan became an ideal target for Saddam Hussein's airstrikes, which almost incessantly attacked the city from September 1980 to May 1988. As contributor **Sussan Babaie** asserts, for many years following the Iran-Iraq war, Abadan and other Iranian oil cities remained desolate, and the wounds of their buildings never healed. The following before-and-after photo juxtapositions convey a built environment transformed by war. One group designates a city in use by people of a variety of origins—the European and American oil specialist expatriates side by side with their Iranian counterparts; the other shows damaged buildings, emptied of their residents.



Fig. 4. Abadan, an oil city in the south of Iran. Before-and-after images from the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Before photos are postcards from the personal collection of Pamela Karimi; after photos courtesy of the Organization for Cultural Heritage, Tehran, Iran.

Due to their documentary nature, photographs of damaged buildings and artifacts also can be read as crime scenes. This is how Walter Benjamin regarded the photographs of Eugène Atget, which portrayed deserted places in France. “The scene of crime too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence,” Benjamin wrote regarding Atget’s *Mur des Fédérés* (1871), a seemingly mundane wall against which the last fighters of the 1871 Paris commune were executed.⁴² Consistent with Benjamin’s interpretations of Atget’s works, images of seemingly empty ruined buildings in a (former) war zone doubly induce the possibility of imaging and imagining death because they are devoid of the residents who were probably killed there.⁴³ Such images are

not just documentary photographs to help save memories of the war; they also generate particular emotions toward these sites. They actually evoke a particular response in us, or a *punctum* (to borrow from Roland Barthes), calling to mind something conceivably similar to our own experience of violence.⁴⁴ It is no surprise then that ISIS uses sensational images of ruined ancient buildings and brutally killed victims. The blowing up of the Temple of Baalshamin, an impressive monument that for almost 2,000 years had stood amid the ruins of Palmyra, was probably one of their most effective images (Fig. 5). In a widely circulated snapshot from the first few seconds of explosion, we see a cloud of debris, similar to the distinctive mushroom-shaped cloud of an atomic bomb explosion. In front of a temple being turned into dust and smoke stand the remains of another ancient building, accentuating the horror and a feeling of being harmed.



Fig. 5. An image distributed August 25, 2015, by Islamic State militants on social media purports to show the demolition of a Roman-era temple in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra. Available at [Reuters](#).

While the Temple of Baalshamin was actually destroyed, not all of ISIS's images of destruction appear to be genuine. As **Thomas Stubblefield** reveals, several of the ancient museum artifacts destroyed in front of the camera at the Mosul Museum were actually replicas brought from a nearby market. Indeed, recurrently we see replicas and less-important materials that are destroyed in front of the camera, while others are taken to the illegal and

tremendously profitable market of ancient artifacts. Historian Charles Tripp writes: “[at] Mosul library and at other institutions which house collections of rare manuscripts that are under the control of ISIS ... a pile of unremarkable printed books were burned in front of the library, whilst sacks full of ... valuable printed material were taken out the back door. The whole operation was ... justified with reference to the heretical ... contents of the [books], but it was the market value that was of ... interest to the ISIS units charged with making the selection.”⁴⁵

Whether fake or not, the images of ISIS members burning books or smashing ancient statues with power drills and sledgehammers have been extremely powerful. The Islamic State militants seem to be fully aware of the strong impact of photographs and video footage, and when they fall short, they forge scenes of violence. This is the case of a November 2015 propaganda video that showed Manhattan streetscapes in panic on the cusp of an imaginary attack by a suicide bomber who ostensibly pulls on an explosives trigger before the screen goes black. The blackened scene is then followed by French President François Hollande, who comments on the Paris attacks, saying, “It’s horrible.” The screen then reads, “And what’s coming next will be far worse and more bitter [sic].”⁴⁶

Using technology and images to communicate its point, the militant group arguably betrays its own “iconoclastic” ideology. In “War of Images, or the Bamiyan Paradox,” the cultural critic Jean-Michel Frodon contends that the Taliban betrayed themselves, because in destroying the rock-cut Buddhas of Bamiyan, they too “did politics with images.” As Frodon suggests, progress toward immateriality actually implies prior engagement with the realm of matter, disclosing an inherent contradiction: the impossibility of transcendence without first engaging materiality.⁴⁷ If ISIS finds representations of the destroyed artifacts and architecture to be effective, so too will be their images from the time when they were intact. In this vein, erasure and smashing do not necessarily put an end to the life of a historic monument or an ancient artifact.

Stubblefield states that after being destroyed, many monuments and artifacts take on another life through their representations. “Disappearance no longer proves synonymous with forgetting or loss, but rather forms the condition of possibility for a specific mode of image production,” he writes. The loss of an original historic artifact is devastating, but the possibility of the mechanical and virtual reproduction of images and objects leaves room for optimism. Indeed, as design historians Keith Bresnahan

and J. M. Mancini remind us, “Along with conception and construction, [destruction] is an essential component of any building’s life-cycle.”⁴⁸

Digital visualization is another way to assure the continued life of a building. For instance, the Syrian government’s Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums is currently working in partnership with a Paris-based architectural firm to produce “before” and “after” digital representations in astonishingly hyperrealistic, brick-by-brick and stone-by-stone detail.⁴⁹ Just as axonometric projections allowed many designers—from 18th century Jesuit strategists to early-20th-century Russian constructivist architects—to foresee the shape of a building in ways that suited their needs,⁵⁰ photography and digital-reproduction bring out the allegorical potential of lost objects and buildings. However, no matter how realistic, images are devoid of the object’s materiality and its original use value. For Karl Marx, only when “the object was consumed did it shed its material nature.”⁵¹

When it comes to the reproduction of lost artifacts, three-dimensional (3D) printing technology, rather than two-dimensional images, should be credited for opening up new possibilities.⁵² Recently, a group of archeologists has been challenging or resisting ISIS by reproducing replicas through 3D printing. To assure the accuracy of the 3D models, the Institute for Digital Archaeology—a collaboration among the University of Oxford, Harvard University, and the Museum of the Future—has begun distributing 3D cameras to volunteers around the Middle East and North Africa with the goal of gathering images of threatened monuments in case they are lost or damaged. So far, they have created a 3D model of the entrance to the temple of Bel which is now assembled in London’s Trafalgar Square as an act of defiance against ISIS (Fig. 6).⁵³ Not only is the object reproduced, but also a new use-value is assigned to it. Some might argue that the 3D printed arch is predominantly theatrics or even a ploy to raise funds. Others express concern that too much attention to Palmyra’s ruins might eclipse the suffering of the Syrian people. Soon after the unveiling of the 3D printed arch in Trafalgar Square, Joseph Willits of the Council for Arab-British Understanding communicated his unease in these words: “While the digitally created replica of Palmyra’s Arch of Triumph looked glorious in the London sunshine, I cannot help but feel this project plays a role in cementing the idea that Syria’s monuments and heritage are far more important than its people.”⁵⁴ Willits’s concern echos architectural historian Jorge Otero-Pailos’s insight into the

idea of preservation as that which is often “associated with a sort of deference to the past over the needs of the present.”⁵⁵

These concerns must not be taken lightly. However, the act of reproducing the original is a positive aftereffect in and of itself, bolstering architectural historian Andrew Herscher’s optimistic claim in *Violence Taking Place: The Architecture of the Kosovo Conflict* that destruction can, indeed, be considered as “a form of construction.”⁵⁶ Moreover, in keeping with media historian Laura Mark’s provocative claims in *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, the process of additive manufacturing is consistent with the central logic of art-making within the Islamic world, in which “a point can unfold to reveal an entire universe.”⁵⁷ Indeed, just as in additive manufacturing successive layers of material are formed under computer control to generate an object, in Islamic art, too, consecutive identical patterns of geometric and abstract shapes create complex muqarnas vaults and elaborate surfaces. Thus, even if for the sake of its symbolic value, 3D printing or additive manufacturing is an apt method of reproducing lost objects and buildings from the Middle East.



Fig. 6. The reconstruction of the arch nears completion in Trafalgar Square. Photograph, showing only a portion of the arch under construction, by Parham Karimi, 2016.

This phenomenon of additive manufacturing of lost artifacts has also captured the imagination of artists. In her series *Material Speculation*, Iranian-American media artist Morehshin Allahyari reconstructs selected artifacts that were destroyed by ISIS in 2015 (Fig. 7). Each item contains a flash drive and a memory card within the printed object. According to Allahyari, “Like time capsules, each object is

sealed and kept for future generations (with instructions on how to open the artifacts to access the memory drives without destroying the objects themselves).”⁵⁸ The information in these flash drives includes images, maps, PDF files, and videos documented in advance of the time of destruction. It is debatable whether these objects can substitute for the lost ones. Regardless, the flash drive containing the memory of the object hints at further possibilities in light of forward-thinking technology.



Fig. 7. Morehshin Allahyari, *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015). Middle image is a 3D-printed Lamasu with a flash drive; the side details showcase flash drives and memory cards inside other 3D-printed objects. Image courtesy of the artist.

However, current cutting-edge thinking in science suggests that the fundamental nature of the spatial three dimensions of the universe may in fact be nothing more than the projection of a deeper, more fundamental two-dimensional surface.⁵⁹ We may therefore construct our entire reality at every second via projections of this “holographic universe,” just as we may now interpret the world mediated through digital data conveyed to us from all points on the globe in real time.⁶⁰ In this era of dematerialization, it is worth contemplating the role of the virtual pathways that have already begun to mediate between us and our material world.

Thus, while the loss of cultural heritage is devastating, we can prove that ISIS has not won. Listed under two larger themes: “On Erasure and Its Aftermath” and “On Civility, Barbarity, and Acts of Violence against Inanimate Objects,” the collection of essays in this dossier pays homage to this spirit of optimism.

Wharton demonstrates that it is not just the act of physically removing that takes cultural heritage away from

our collective memory. By focusing on how certain Western and colonial institutions have systematically disregarded the cultural heritage of certain groups, she warns against subtle forms of erasure. Implicit within Wharton's essay is the range of possibilities for different modes of display that may pave the way for a better and more all-encompassing acknowledgment of cultural heritage.

Similarly, **Lamprakos's** essay suggests that a history of Mezquita-Catedral, which acknowledges and juxtaposes all layers, extant and erased, may help us confront and even reconcile a contested history and a contentious present.

In "'DNA' Damage: Violence against Buildings," **Babaie** speaks of the degree to which harming buildings can equally damage and traumatize generations of inhabitants and outside onlookers alike. Despite this, there seems to be a threshold at the end of the dark tunnel. Babaie calls for a sense of responsibility toward the built environment that treats it like an animate being. Like humans, buildings too deserve to be nurtured and protected from harm, and thereby we might develop strategies to prevent further damage and ultimately even reverse the damage already done.

Turning his attention to the afterlife of ruined artifacts and buildings, **Stubblefield** encourages us to avoid simplistic assumptions based on sensationalist images and footages produced and spread by ISIS, followed by their duplication in the mainstream media. Revealing detailed accounts of a series of destructions in Iraq, Stubblefield shows how images of iconoclasm speak more of the specific political agendas of terrorist groups or authoritarian regimes than a general belief system and cultural outlook. This positive stance is especially important to elevate the morale of people within the region, thereby permitting them to more actively engage in reforming the (religious) education system that fosters incorrect knowledge or intolerant attitudes.

Finally, **Akcan** cautions against the collective philanthropist feeling of developed countries toward the current war zones in the Middle East. We learn not to lose sight of the fact that while the global cultural heritage is worth protecting, the built environment of the everyday life of ordinary people, especially that of underrepresented communities, must be equally valued and protected against destructive forces, such as terrorist attacks, civil wars, or bombings by Western coalition forces. More importantly, she asks: How is it possible to criticize meaningfully the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East, if we are not to question the state apparatus, the modern institutions, as well as the

mindsets of politicians—and even designers—that lead to terror and destruction in the first place?

The destructions that occurred during WWII, or in the 1990s wars in the Balkans, forced many specialists, politicians, and even ordinary people to become more conscious of the value of Europe's multi-layered histories. It is hoped that the same lessons will be learned from the recent and current destructions of cultural heritage in the Middle East. While rules and regulations regarding the protection of important heritage sites ought to be more rigorously defined and defended, we must also not lose sight of the destruction of cultural heritage in more remote, or lesser-known areas. Equally essential are ordinary built environments that are meaningful to people on the ground rather than to the international community and world heritage organizations. The more modern and insignificant the damaged buildings—or, what historian Nick Yablon calls “untimely ruins”—the better reminders of the sufferings of their occupants.⁶¹ Thus we must ensure that several damaged buildings are kept as such to denote the pain of their human occupants for generations to come. These “untimely ruins” will stand as chief reminders, because as environmental historian Rebecca Solnit asserts, “[m]emory is always incomplete, always imperfect, always falling into ruin; but the ruins themselves ... are ... our links to what came before, our guide to situating ourselves in a landscape of time.”⁶² And hopefully these ruins will not be perceived as mere sites of grief, but of far-reaching promises, hence forging a new revolutionary future, to borrow from Walter Benjamin's “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”⁶³ Finally, it is hoped that more novel avenues of inquiry are opened for historians to study the destructions in systematic and theoretically stimulating ways. Indeed, this collection aspires to bolster the emerging body of literature that is enriching our understanding of the many motives behind the destruction of Middle Eastern architecture and its cultural heritage and ways to counter them.

Related Material:

The Demise and Afterlife of Artifacts: Further Reading

✓ Transparent Peer Reviewed

Pamela Karimi and Nasser Rabbat, “The Demise and Afterlife of Artifacts,” *Aggregate 4* (December 2016), <https://doi.org/10.53965/TLGX4448>.

*Transparent peer-reviewed

- 1 For more on the destructions in Germany during WWII, see W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library Publishers, c. 2004). [↑](#)
- 2 For images and more information regarding 3000 aerial photographs whose negatives were recently discovered in a box inside an attic in the northern German city of Kiel, see Kate Connolly, "A lost heritage: Nazi pictures reveal full devastation wreaked by allied bombers," *The Guardian*, July 09, 2008, accessed May 19, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/10/secondworldwar.germany>. [↑](#)
- 3 Known as the planned destruction of Warsaw, these aerial attacks by the Nazis happened shortly after the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Norman Davies, et al., "Warsaw: National Capital, Poland," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/place/Warsaw>. [↑](#)
- 4 It is worth mentioning that it is not always violence that leads to destruction. (Architectural) design itself might prompt violence. For an array of "violent" designs and provocative texts about them, see, Paula Antonelli and Jamer Hunt, *Design and Violence* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art Press, 2015). [↑](#)
- 5 Sarah Aziza, "Critics of ISIS Are Perpetuating Its Ideals," *Middle East Eye*, January 14, 2016, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/critics-isis-are-perpetuating-its-ideals-1902302542>. Aziza highlights a series of problematic examples, including Richard Lourie's "ISIL has launched a world war: The radical group is drawing the world's major powers into an open-ended struggle," *Al-Jazeera America*, December 31, 2015, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/12/isil-has-launched-a-world-war.html>. [↑](#)
- 6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, c. 1998), 254–257. [↑](#)
- 7 For a critical view of ISIS's iconoclasm, see Elliott Colla, "On the Iconoclasm of ISIS," accessed July 24, 2015, <http://www.elliottcolla.com/blog/2015/3/5/on-the-iconoclasm-of-isis>. Cited in Ömür Harmanşah, "ISIS, Heritage, and the Spectacles of Destruction in the Global Media," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78.3 (September 2015): 170–177. [↑](#)
- 8 See, for example, Raymond Ibrahim, "Calls to Destroy Egypt's Great Pyramids Begin," *FrontPage Magazine*, July 10, 2012, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/136907/calls-destroy-egypts-great-pyramids-begin-raymond-ibrahim>. [↑](#)
- 9 It is noteworthy that many within the Islamic world—including non-experts—find this reasoning absurd. And, indeed, it does not take too much effort to negate this logic. Abbas Shouman, under-secretary of the al-Azhar University in Egypt, articulated it best when he argued that unlike the statues destroyed by Muhammad, the artifacts destroyed by ISIS "are nothing but stone and no one believes they are gods." See further, "Iconoclasm and Islamic State: Destroying History's treasures," *The Economist*, March 07, 2015, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21645749-jihadists-are-attacking-more-regions-people-destroying-history>. [↑](#)
- 10 Finbarr Barry Flood, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum," *The Art Bulletin* 84.4 (December 2002): 641–659. Cited from page 651. [↑](#)
- 11 Ibid. [↑](#)
- 12 Ibid, 652. [↑](#)

13 Cited in *ibid.* Also see, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2001/march/mar10j2001.html>

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14 *Ibid.* On the destruction of the Babri Mosque, see, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Modernity and Ethnicity in India," *South Asia* 17.1 (January 1, 1994): 144–27. ↑

15 Colla, "On the Iconoclasm of ISIS," *op. cit.* For more on Colla's ideas read his book, *Conflict Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). ↑

16 Oleg Grabar, "Islam and Iconoclasm," in *Iconoclasm: Papers from the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies at the Center for Byzantine Studies*, ed. Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin (Birmingham: Centre for Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, 1977), 46. Cited in Mia M. Mochizuki, "Iconoclasm," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Frank Burch Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 310–320. ↑

17 In the past few years many historians, archeologists, and art historians have tried to convey, to the general public, the rich history of the region under ISIS attack. Mentioning all sources is, obviously, beyond the scope of this essay. See, as an example, Stuart Manning, "Why ISIS Destroys Antiquities," *CNN*, March 09, 2015, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/06/opinions/manning-isis-antiquities/>

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18 Hannah Ghorashi, "'This Is a Genocide': Art Historian Zainab Bahrani on ISIS's Destruction of Cultural Heritage," *ArtNews*, November 11, 2015, accessed January 01, 2016 <http://www.artnews.com/2015/11/11/this-is-a-genocide-art-historian-zainab-bahrani-on-isis-destruction-of-cultural-heritage/>

. Similarly, Robert Bevan asserts that from Hitler's 1938 Kristallnacht—also known as The Night of the Broken Glass, during which almost 200 synagogues were destroyed and over 8,000 Jewish shops were sacked—to the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in the Iraq War, all military campaigns have resulted in *cultural genocide*. Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 11–14. ↑

19 *Ibid.*, 137–151. Recently the government of Saudi Arabia has demolished the country's many Ottoman buildings. For more information, see, for example, Jerome Taylor, "Medina: Saudis Take a Bulldozer to Islam's History," *The Independent*, October 26, 2012, accessed May 7, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/medina-saudis-take-a-bulldozer-to-islams-history-8228795.html>

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20 For an in-depth account of the city and the Ottoman and the Turkish Republic's policies toward the preservation of its heritage, see Heghnar Watenpaugh, "Preserving the Medieval City of Ani: Cultural Heritage between Contest and Reconciliation," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 73.4 (December 2014): 528–555. ↑

21 Bevan, *Destruction of Memory*, 74–82. ↑

22 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," *Representations* 26 (Spring, 1989): 7–24. Also see, Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler, *The Art of Forgetting* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), in which the authors write of how the materiality of monuments provokes a particular collective mode of remembering. ↑

23 Wassim Basseem, "Stepping Back 1300 Years into Iraq's Ukhaidir Palace," *AlMonitor*, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/iraq-karbala-ukhaidir-palace-neglect-history.html#ixzz3taHwXZhv>

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24 *Ibid.* ↑

25 *Ibid.* ↑

- 26 See, for example, Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). [↑](#)
- 27 For detailed accounts of Khalkhali's destructions of Pahlavi monuments, see *Khatirat-i ayatollah Khalkhali: Avvalin Hakim-i Shahr-e Dadgahay-i Enghelab* [Memoirs of Ayatollah Khalkhali: The First Clergy Judge of the Revolutionary Courts] (Tehran, Iran: Nashr-e Sayeh, 1383[2004]), 341–351. [↑](#)
- 28 Global Policy Forum, "War and Occupation in Iraq—Executive Summary," accessed May 1, 2015, <http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/168-general/37141-war-and-occupation-in-iraq-executive-summary.html>. [↑](#)
- 29 Ibid. [↑](#)
- 30 Ibid. [↑](#)
- 31 Colla, "On the Iconoclasm of ISIS." [↑](#)
- 32 Ibid. [↑](#)
- 33 Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 179. [↑](#)
- 34 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 29. Cited in Jorge Otero-Pailos, "Experimental Preservation," *Places Journal*, September 2016, accessed September 14, 2016, <http://placesjournal.org/article/experimental-preservation/>. [↑](#)
- 35 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 128. [↑](#)
- 36 See, for example, Oleg Grabar, "Iwan," *Encyclopedia of Islam* IV (1973), 287–288; Nasser Rabbat, "The Iwans of the Madrasa of Sultan Hasan," in *Mamluk History Through Architecture: Building, Culture, and Politics in Mamluk Egypt and Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 104–111; Hugh Kennedy, "From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria," *Past & Present: A Journal of Historical Studies* 106 (1985): 3–27. [↑](#)
- 37 Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 168. [↑](#)
- 38 Tim McGirk, "Syrians Race to Save Ancient City's Treasures from ISIS," *National Geographic*, July 15, 2015, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/07/150710-palmyra-syria-isis-looting-museum-archaeology/>. [↑](#)
- 39 Pádraig Belton, "A Tribute to Khaled al-Asaad, the Archaeologist Killed by ISIS in Palmyra," *Apollo: The International Art Magazine*, August 20, 2015, accessed August 2, 2016, <http://www.apollo-magazine.com/a-tribute-to-khaled-al-asaad-the-archaeologist-killed-by-isis-in-palmyra/>. [↑](#)
- 40 See further, Nasser Rabbat, "They Shoot Historians, Don't They?" *Artforum*, November 2015, accessed August 1, 2016, <http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201509&id=55521>. [↑](#)
- 41 For more information on the development of architecture in Abadan by the British architects, see Mark Crinson, "Oil and Architecture," in *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2003), 52–66. [↑](#)
- 42 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 226. [↑](#)
- 43 Ibid. [↑](#)
- 44 See further, Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Photography and Death," in *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 119–126. For more information on the representations of ISIS's destructions in the media, see Ömür Harmansah, "ISIS, Heritage, and the Spectacles of Destruction in the Global Media," *Near Eastern*

Archaeology 78.3 (September 2015): 170–177. For the significant role that representations of architectural ruins play in shaping the general public's perception of war and preservation policies, see Melissa Renn, "Fine Arts under Fire: *Life Magazine* and the Display of Architectural Destruction," in *Architecture and Armed Conflict: The Politics of Destruction*, ed. Keith Brensnahan and J. M. Mancini (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 72–86. According to Renn, the extensive depictions of WWII ruins in the *Life Magazine* throughout the 1940s "both shaped the reception of American actions during the war and presented the United States as a force for preservation and reconstruction by the war's end," *ibid.*, 72. [↑](#)

45 Charles Tripp, "The Artifice of the Destruction of Art in Iraq," *The Middle East in London Magazine* 11.4 (June-July 2015): 11–12. Quoted from page 12. [↑](#)

46 Shawn Cohen, Isabel Vincent, and Tina Moore, "ISIS threatens NYC in New Propaganda Video," *New York Post*, November 18, 2015, accessed January 3, 2016, <http://nypost.com/2015/11/18/isis-threatens-nyc-in-new-propaganda-video/>. [↑](#)

47 Jean-Michel Frodon, "The War of Images, or the Bamiyan Paradox," in *Iconoclasm*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 221–223. Cited in Daniel Miller, "Introduction," in *Materiality* (Durham, NC, and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2005), 21. [↑](#)

48 Keith Brensnahan and J. M. Mancini, eds., *Architecture and Armed Conflict: The Politics of Destruction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 1. [↑](#)

49 Evan Hadingham, "The Technology That Will Resurrect ISIS-Destroyed Antiquities," *PBS*, June 9, 2016, accessed August 2, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/next/ancient/digital-preservation-syria/>. [↑](#)

50 Yve-Alain Bois, "Metamorphosis of Axonometry," *Daidalos* 1 (Sept. 15, 1981): 40–58. [↑](#)

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52 In addition to these efforts, there are archeologists who are tracking what is lost as well as recording the damages in a systematic way. Noteworthy is the work of Boston University archeologist Michael Danti, who leads the ASOR Heritage Cultural Initiative. Danti and his team publish a weekly report archiving attacks on sites in Syria and northern Iraq. Funded by the U.S. State Department, the team utilizes many historic and contemporary images, ranging from Cold War–era CORONA spy photographs to images provided by the commercial satellite operator DigitalGlobe. The group also relies on the reports from local informants. See Evan Hadingham, "The Technology That Will Resurrect ISIS-Destroyed Antiquities," *PBS*, June 9, 2016, accessed August 2, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/next/ancient/digital-preservation-syria/>. [↑](#)

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- 55 Otero-Pailos, "Experimental Preservation." [↑](#)
- 56 Andrew Herscher, *Violence Taking Place: The Architecture of the Kosovo Conflict* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010). [↑](#)
- 57 Laura Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity, an Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 5. [↑](#)
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- 59 Z. Merali, "Theoretical Physics: The Origins of Space and Time," *Nature* 500 (August 29, 2013): 516–519, accessed September 10, 2013, <http://www.nature.com/news/theoretical-physics-the-origins-of-space-and-time-1.13613>. [↑](#)
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- 61 Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819–1919* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009). [↑](#)
- 62 Rebecca Solnit, *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 354. Reprinted partially as "The Ruins of Memory," in *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Brian Dillon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 150–152. [↑](#)
- 63 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), 245–255. Cited in Brian Dillon, "Introduction: A Short History of Decay," in *Ruins*, 18. [↑](#)