A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS FOR FACTUM FOUNDATION

We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, directly affecting artistic creation itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.

Paul Valéry, "The Conquest of Ubiquity", Aesthetics, 1928

Digital technologies are profoundly changing how we relate to art, from the ways in which we access and display objects to how we safeguard, restore, archive and even possess them.

The Aura in the Age of Digital Materiality explores themes emerging from the unprecedented potential of the meeting between digital technology and cultural heritage at a time when we are being forced to fundamentally rethink what we value, how and why, it brings together recent projects by Factum and a wonderfully diverse collection of essays, many written especially for this book by collaborators and friends. Their widely different backgrounds and disciplines only illustrate the importance of this subject and the huge range of its relevance. Contributors include Harold Snider, Director of the British Museum, Mari Vening, the author of Pastiche Monuments: Architecture and the Power of Reproduction; Nariot Akram, Professor of Italian Renaissance and Baroque art and architecture at Westminister University; Egyptologist Nicholas Reeves; Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Powers; Shirley Dykstra Kress, Indigenous activists from the Upper Xingu; philosophers Bruno Latour; Brian Cantwell Smith and Alva Noé; Simon Schaffer, Professor of the History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge; archi- tects Charlotte von der Green, Jerry Broun, specialist in cartography and the Renaissance; and Chiara Casarin, Director of the Museo Civico di Basso del Grappa.

Our world is at a crossroads. Not only are people at risk, but our cultural heritage is under threat from lack of resources, natural disasters, climate change, terrorism, mass tourism and war. There has never been a more critical time to use technology for preservation. If these high-resolution methods had been used to record Angkor Wat before it was flattened, the stasis of Nimrud or the Bamiyan Buddhas before they were blown up, or Notre Dame before it burned, these examples of human creativity would not have been so completely lost forever. When Dresden was bombed, only photographs and memories remained. In the 21st century, we have the technological means to do so much; we urgently need to act now to record and preserve our cultural heritage for future generations. This book is a thoughtful and provocative call to action.

www.factumfoundation.org
www.silvanaeditoriale.it
THE AURA IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL MATERIALITY

RETHINKING PRESERVATION IN THE SHADOW OF AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

SilvanaEditoriale
Patrick Blackett, an experimental physicist, wrote that his work was to ‘cultivate an intimacy with the behaviour of the physical world’ – this is an equally good description of Factum’s aims.

Credits

This book has been assembled and edited by Adam Lowe, Elizabeth Mitchell, Nicolas Billard, Giulia Formaciari, YoU Tomassini, Blanca Nieto and Gwendalina Damian.

All projects carried out by the Factum Foundation are collaborative and there are many people to thank. This is not the place to name everyone but some people have done a great deal to make all this work possible including: Charlotte Skene Catling, Otto Lowe, Tarik Noly, Simon Schaffer, Pasquale Gagliardi, Fondazione Giorgio Cini and everyone in ARCHVe, Bruno Lunari, Harwig Fischer, Jerry Botron, Roberto Terra, Cat Wors, John Tifilmenko, Maudela Meno, Peter Gildeswell, The Griffith Institute, Emma Duncan, Lord Rothschild, Fabio Bronnotsky, Ana Brito, Paloma Brito, Lady Helen Harleian, Ziyasudin and Olga Magomedov, Radial Korach, Andrew Edmonds, Colin Franklin, Ed Magee, the Hereford Mappa Mundi Trust, Rosemary Firman, Philip Heseltine, Helen Dorey, Peter Gildeswell, Purdy Rubin, Fernando Caramulo, Susanne Bickel, Martina Leitner and everyone at the Swiss Embassy in Cairo, Tim Moran, Kathelyn Gray, Johnny Allen, Bassam Daghastani, Mohammed Jamel, George Richards, David Coulson and the Trust for African Rock Art, Jeffrey and Monica Brennan, Ben and Donna Rosen, ClarkWinter, Mauricio Torres Ledere, Mario Golia, Anthony Satan, Nicholas Penny, Mark Leitner, Carole Patry, Michael Snodin, Silvia Dowell, Bill Sherman, Nax Schwartz, Julian Rothermuen, Ahmed Meier, Larry Keith, José Luis Colonmer, Richard deTischer and the trustees of the Carène Foundation, William Ewing, Paul and Jen Cross, Sir Paul and Jill Ruddock, Jonathan and Jane Ruffett, Lindsay Stainton, Pippen Shirley, Juan Manuel Abeneda, Casilda Ybarra, Jorge Coll, Ana Debernardi, Gabrielle Fialk, Stephen Clarke, The Gentle Author, Ali Alkonturi, Hans Eschor, Ramon Blesa, Annette Warren Gibbons, Michael Jones, Rui Balestero, Rebecca Foote, Dima Casso, Fabio Rovera Monaco, Richard Terra, People’s Palace Projects, Shobha Panja, Sarah Thomas, Daniel Crouch, Fred Hobler, Sir Charles Samuelsen Smith, Michael and Sarah Spencer, Akin Weston Lewis, Nicholas Kajel, Pilar de la BBandière, Dario Gandolfi, Jorge Otero Palleo, Beno Settes, Ken Singer, Chiara Can ìn, Matteo Lunfranconi, Mario Mattia Wiesel, Chance Coughenour, Anna Somers Cocks, Bernardo Vittoria Montaperto, Clare Foster, Clemens Weijers and Raymond on his Roof, Gabriele Fialk, Jonathan N. Tubb, Phil Harvey, Roberto Grandi, Roger Law, Sarah Thomas, and many others who care about the preservation of the past.

And, of course, everyone at Factum Arte who works tirelessly to support the Factum Foundation and turn its vision into a reality.

This book is dedicated to Pasquale Gagliardi, who first got the ball rolling.
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Conclusion, Adam Lowe
Even the most fecund of methods may eventually become sterile without the fertilizing stimulus of new problems to solve.


The Scanning Seti exhibition at Basel’s Antikenmuseum begins like many other exhibitions of Egyptian antiquity – in an orientation room filled with expository text. Here, the story of the 1817 European discovery of the New Kingdom tomb of Pharaoh Seti I is told on graphic panels with supporting images from historical volumes. These are nested within wall murals made from 19th-century watercolors of the Theban hills. Romantic palm trees arch over a famous portrait of Scanning Seti’s main antagonist, Giovanni Battista Belzoni, sporting a turban. Belzoni was the Italian engineer and theatrical showman who found Seti I’s tomb during a stop-gap expedition for Egyptian antiques after his water-pump enterprise failed to impress Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman governor who sought to modernize Egypt. To complete the Orientalist tone of the room, a Turkish carpet on the parquet floor muffles the sound of visitor footsteps, giving one the feeling of being in the salon of some esoteric Egyptological society.

Many scholars have written about Egyptomania and its relationship to the formation of modern Western museums. The West’s longstanding fascination with Egyptian antiques is just one of a variety of elements that transformed Egypt into a colonial territory, along with cotton exports, new trade routes, tourism, and the formation of academic disciplines like archaeology and Egyptology. The valuation of Egypt as a source of both natural resources and cultural heritage remains a fraught business in our postcolonial age. Knowledge about Ancient Egypt is driven by a passion for new evidence, thanks to the CT scanning and genetic sequencing of mummies, as well as the digitization and scientific conservation of sites and artifacts. The Egyptian state itself plays dual positions, simultaneously asserting its sovereign rights over the material culture of Ancient Egypt, while leveraging global resources to preserve and showcase that culture on the grounds that it is a source of humanity’s shared heritage.

In this age of global tourism, displays of Ancient Egyptian artifacts still evoke the mystery and Gothic overtones that Europeans placed on early exhibitions, like the one...
that Belzoni mounted in London’s Egyptian Hall in 1821. Unlike the aesthetic curators of Scanning Seti, this exhibition puts the rest of the exhibition apart from its didactic opening scene. Past the carpeted salon, visitors are lured into darkness by the foreboding presence of a stone-like block with a model of Seti I’s tomb carved into its core. Split down the center, with one half of the tomb appearing on each side, the model is a perfect miniature of the burial complex’s corridors and rooms. Centered on the wall between the model’s two sides is a monitor showing a 3D fly-through of the tomb that Factum Arte created. As the sacred burial space appears simultaneously from these dual perspectives – here as dollhouse, there as bird’s-eye view – one begins to sense that Factum Arte is setting up a distinct mise-en-scène of surrogates and doubles.

In the corner, a photograph of Seti I’s unwrapped mummified face hangs without explanation. His closed eyes refuse our gaze. He is captive, yet inscrutable. This inclusion of photographic evidence is clearly a desecration of the deity-king’s formerly wrapped body. However, the neutral purse of his desiccated lips suggests that the Pharaoh is indifferent, having already left the chaos of the world for the orderly sky. One need only look to Ancient Egypt’s Myth of the Heavenly Cow, which covers the walls of Seti I’s tomb, to understand that the Pharaoh’s cosmos was organized by the sun god to contain human conflict on Earth, so that order could reign at other celestial registers. The myth establishes the origin of kings as earthly mediators between layers of the visible and invisible, human and divine. Moreover, the myth’s presence within Seti I’s tomb instantiates the Pharaoh’s transformation into a god of the afterlife. The photographic evidence of his unwrapped corpse says more about our world than his. It is an indication that we, the spectators, are the reflexive focus of this show, not the Pharaoh. What we choose to see, or not see, is the issue at hand.

Adjacent to Seti I’s portrait is a discreet hole in the wall – a portal cut at a deep angle. Looking through it, one sees an image of Seti I on a distant surface surrounded by the gods that he joined in the afterlife. I watch other museum visitors to see who notices this view, hidden in plain sight. Most pass by without noticing, reminding me that some scholars believe the Ancient Egyptians kept the presence of the dead in daily life through similarly subtle acts of recording and concealing. While one cannot say that it is in the power of Factum Arte to re-perform this magic, it is nevertheless a way of understanding Ancient Egypt through its manner of operation. The divine is rendered present in surrogate form, and the more surrogates there are, the stronger their presence. Indeed, no less than four versions of Seti I and his tomb are registered by Factum Arte in this dark opening scene.

Registration – certifying the transfer of one thing to another – is an essential idea in Factum Arte’s work, where the facsimile must be precisely aligned with the contours of its disfigured or absent referent. What is seen immediately registers what is unseen, 3D model of the entire tomb of Seti, with doorway (based on the design used in Belzoni’s original exhibition) leading to the re-created Hall of Beauties.

Registration and the Aesthetic

Lowe argues that the neutral purse of Belzoni’s picture of Seti I’s unwrapped corpse suggests indifference, while the neutral purse of his desiccated lips suggests that the Pharaoh is indifferent, having already left the chaos of the world for the orderly sky. In Ancient Egypt’s Myth of the Heavenly Cow, which covers the walls of Seti I’s tomb, the Pharaoh’s cosmos was organized by the sun god to contain human conflict on Earth, so that order could reign at other celestial registers. The myth establishes the origin of kings as earthly mediators between layers of the visible and invisible, human and divine. Moreover, the myth’s presence within Seti I’s tomb instantiates the Pharaoh’s transformation into a god of the afterlife. The photographic evidence of his unwrapped corpse says more about our world than his. It is an indication that we, the spectators, are the reflexive focus of this show, not the Pharaoh. What we choose to see, or not see, is the issue at hand.

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4 Factum Arte’s model is a nod to the one made by Belzoni for his exhibition. See ibid., 114.
6 Alan B. Lloyd offers a distinctly performative understanding of Ancient Egyptian mimesis. His interpretation emphasizes the role of mimesis as a powerful means of encoding and concealing. While one cannot say that it is in the power of Factum Arte to re-perform this magic, it is nevertheless a way of understanding Ancient Egypt through its manner of operation. The divine is rendered present in surrogate form, and the more surrogates there are, the stronger their presence. Indeed, no less than four versions of Seti I and his tomb are registered by Factum Arte in this dark opening scene.
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that this is a fantasy of a lost past reality. The layering of real and imagined surfaces forces one to recognize that there is more than one version of the story on display, making Scanning Seti feel at times like a game of hide-and-seek.

Beyond the reconstructed room, a dark gallery presents a series of framed drawings made by Belzoni and his team during the first months that Belzoni spent at the site. They render the tomb’s walls in pencil, ink, and watercolor. Between 1817 and 1859, the exhibition tells us that the tomb was visited and plundered by a whole host of expeditions. Accompanying the gallery of drawings is a room full of stone fragments extracted from the tomb by Belzoni and others, now deposited in museums around the world. The display supports Factum Arte’s advocacy of preservation through reproduction as an ideal way to reassemble the scattered remains.

This drive to preserve history as a commercial salvage operation is not without precedent. Despite Factum Arte’s impassioned call to save Seti I’s tomb from past injustices of colonial plunder, the facsimile is nevertheless made over in Basel as cultural capital whose caché is heightened by the level of social interaction it affords. You can step into the tomb, post a few images of it on Instagram, and feel good knowing that the original is protected by the experts. It is a subtle reworking of the same narrative that drives many archaeological projects today. Salvage and circulation also drove modern Egypt’s first president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, to disassemble and ship a handful of Ancient Egyptian temples to international cities like New York and Madrid. In exchange, Nasser’s modernizing Egyptian state received the funding and expertise needed to save the great temple of Abu Simbel by moving it out of the Nubian flood plain caused by the construction of the Aswan High Dam.

Whether one approves or not of saving world heritage sites through the flood of data is a pressing issue, especially when many borders are closed for asylum-seeking refugees.  

11 For more on the long shadow of international development and salvage archaeology see Lynn Meskell, A Future in Ruins (London: Oxford University Press, 2018).
The next gallery extends colonialism’s tragic plot by merging the story of the tomb’s destruction with actual reenactments of the crime. At first glance, visitors might misinterpret this display as a demonstration of Factum Arte’s own artistic processes, but closer scrutiny reveals that one is seeing an indictment of past abuses presented as demonstrations in a forensic laboratory. A second facsimile of a wall from the ‘Hall of Beauties’ is also present. This time, it is not shown as an ideal ancient past, but as a scene of more recent crime. Blood-red wax is splattered down the side of Seti’s body from the neck, where a wax impression was taken of his face. Dripped plaster pools on the floor in front of another version of the Pharaoh, his body covered with cracks and holes from souvenir extraction. The wall functions as a demonstration for a casting technique known as ‘squeezing’. Well before laser scanning and photogrammetry, squeeze casting from souvenir extraction. The wall shows three examples of squeeze casting materials: wax and vegetable fiber, plaster, and wet paper. Each technique creates a different kind of impression, with a discernibly different damaging effect. A screen next to the wall also displays a documentary video of the squeeze-making process as it was performed at the Factum Arte studio.

Turning away, I am faced with a reconstruction of the wall relief of the Myth of the Heavenly Cow. Here, a facsimile of the relief is presented as it is today – covered in wax from multiple squeezes, blackened from soot and impurities, and loaded with graffiti from two centuries of tourist abuse. As I stand before the wall, scrutinizing its marks, I notice that it starts to change. The surface brightens and my shadow appears on the surface. Very gradually, a projection from behind me grows brighter and whiter, and blackened from soot and impurities, and loaded with graffiti from two centuries of tourist abuse. As I stand before the wall, scrutinizing its marks, I notice that it starts to change. The surface brightens and my shadow appears on the surface. Very gradually, a projection from behind me grows brighter and whiter, and

Antiquarian study containing artifacts from the facsimile-making process, and facsimiles including replicas of the lid fragments from Seti I’s sarcophagus.

black, blues, red, ochre, and yellow sepia. I realize that Salt’s watercolor has been used as a compensation image and mapped onto the facsimile’s surface.

Beyond the squeeze room, the exhibition grows more labyrinthine. There is a space arranged like an antiquarian’s office, evoking the home of Sir John Soane, who purchased Seti I’s alabaster sarcophagus from Belzoni’s agent in 1824. Stone designed a special sepulchral chamber for it, where the sarcophagus is now permanently displayed. The office contains flashes of humor. A small memento mori cutout of Seti I’s mummy is propped up behind a desk lamp. Tongue-in-cheek images evoking Britain’s golden age of collecting hang on the walls.

The adjoining room contains the life-size facsimile that Factum Arte has painstakingly produced of the sarcophagus itself. Here the facsimile reproduces in detail the sarcophagus’s many inscriptions, figures, and historical scars. Texts along the sides of the room depict the complete Book of Gates. Occasionally, a visitor will lean over to scrutinize the wall and inadvertently find themselves bumping into the facsimile sarcophagus behind them. Some appear startled by the inadvertent taboo of touching the ‘artifact’, while others seem more surprised by the sensation of bumping into something that has the appearance of heavy stone, but sounds light and hollow. This happens to one man who gives the object a good knock with his knuckles to demonstrate its hollow resonance to a friend. ‘See?’ he says, ‘Plastic!’ His friend then grasps the ridge of the sarcophagus where the lid once rested. Without concern, he holds and caresses its surface. It is a brazen defiance of museum decorum, ironically situated at the very spot on the sarcophagus where Belzoni carved his name.

Adjacent to the sarcophagus is a small gallery of artifacts presented in a more traditional exhibition format, clearly a zone managed by the Antikenmuseum’s curatorial staff. These original objects are displayed in protective glass cases with an array of explanatory wall labels. At the end of the gallery, one realizes that it also contains a surprise. A facsimile wall of a pillar in the tomb’s Hall E is placed at the threshold. It depicts Seti I with Horus, standing before Osiris, and Hathor. Turning around, I recognize a hole in the adjacent wall. I lean over and look through. Peering back is a pair of eyes from someone back in the model room, and I find myself caught up again in the exhibition’s play of appearances.

In the adjoining room is a much larger gallery divided into two sections. To the left is a large grid of framed black and white photographs that Harry Barton took of the tomb of the Metropolitan Museum of Art between 1921 and 1928. The photographs coincided with inspections of the tomb conducted by Howard Carter after large portions of the ceiling, rear wall, and middle pillar of the burial chamber collapsed in 1901–02. Carter embarked on a year-long restoration of the space by reinforcing walls and archways with brick, and installing electric lighting to prevent further smoke damage from the use of torches. The rubble from the collapsed sections of the tomb was collected and thrown into a spoil heap near the tomb of Ramesses X, which the University of Basel has been excavating since 1999. In the center of the gallery are two distinctly different kinds of reconstructions of destroyed pillars, which were produced by the University, along with photographs and descriptions from other nearby excavations in the Valley of the Kings. While informative, and a welcome nod to interdisciplinary collaboration, the academic contribution to the exhibition feels incomplete, if not marginalized, because of the stark contrast with Factum Arte’s larger aesthetic project.

12 In the middle of this ‘family portrait’ is a small square section of enhanced coloration that was made on the original relief as a restoration test by the American Research Center in Europe. The restoration has now been replicated as well.
This is made most apparent by the other end of the gallery—the largest area of the exhibition, which immerses the visitor in Factum Arte’s studio practice. Several objects and media here attest to the different technologies that have evolved over many years of the company’s experimental practice. One of the most important of these is the Lucida Scanner, a dual camera and laser scanning system that Factum Arte custom built for the reproduction of large-scale art and artifacts. Scanning Seti’s most bespoke tool appears as a black box of perfected technology, but its real history is one of intense trial and error to achieve maximum fidelity. Lucida now functions in more of a supplementary role, buttressed by recent advances in photogrammetry and the need for speed when scanning and rendering a file.

A two-channel video loop projected on the largest wall of the gallery presents in wordless documentary format the dual aspects of fabricating and printing that make up Factum Arte’s present-day process for replicating sections of the tomb. The video on the left shows two different machine techniques used for producing the wall reliefs prior to their painting. The process for registering the surface images on the relief is documented in the second video. Artisans are shown manufacturing an ultra-thin, semi-elastic material, or ‘skin’, which is then printed using a custom-made inkjet printer. After printing, the ‘skins’ are applied to the surface of the relief in an elaborate and careful process. Together, both videos dramatically demonstrate the complex interplay of computerized machines and human artists. While one screen displays a close-up of a very precise milling machine at work, the other screen presents two artists literally climbing onto a table to smooth out the creases on a freshly applied ‘skin’ with the full weight of their bodies.

The room gives visitors a peek into Factum Arte’s process over the past two decades, which is in a constant state of evolution, pushing at the constraints of time, money, and technology. Every moment of transformation produces new anomalies in their experimental effort to register a perfect double. Thus, every moment of imitation is also one of radical novelty. As Scanning Seti reveals, the art and science of reproduction is always subject to dramatic plays of difference. Materials present obstacles to the reproductive process, and their appearance creates subtle shifts in the subjective aim of an act of remaking. Original and copy inevitably diverge along their own drifting historical trajectories.

A single doorway to a long and narrow hallway leads to the final gallery of the exhibition. Along the way, one encounters a small screening room where videos about Factum Arte play on a continuous loop. Most of these contain Adam Lowe, speaking in one way or another about his ideal museum visitor, who willingly adopts the ‘new contract’ that Factum Arte proposes, in which the original artifact is hidden away and preserved in exchange for a facsimile that takes over its public duties. As Lowe points out, Seti I’s tomb was never meant to be seen, yet it is the digital copy that may make it possible for countless generations of people to scrutinize it in ways that the Ancient Egyptians never intended.

The possibility that an ever-more perfect copy could be made from the vast trove of data in the future becomes the key to the tomb’s transcendence. Like the king, the tomb must be made again and again, comprising a sequence of multiples made possible by the power of “datareality” that Factum Arte has stored. Expansion of the artifact as a class of repetitions that Factum Arte’s artisans and technologists have the skill to make durable is offered as another way for museology to make the past endure as a form of stable knowledge. This suggests that the historicizing work of curation—of investing things with a rarefied aura—is rapidly merging with the art and science of conservation-as-reproduction in Factum’s experimental atelier. Factum Arte dispenses with the need for originality at the same time that it doubles-down on the importance of technological fidelity as a poetic expression of truth.

What seems like a contradiction is at the heart of Factum Arte’s challenge to established professions that make up the cultural hegemony of museums. Lowe’s rhetoric simultaneously draws on the romance of preserving priceless artifacts, while extolling the destruction of museology’s sacred cow: originality. Factum Arte’s ambivalence toward authority in the museum creates a new kind of artisanal epistemology. Knowledge is repositioned to privilege the ones who have the skills to remake the thing itself.

13 George Kubler was prescient in his observation that the metaphors of modern technology, from transmissions to circuits, seemed most suitable for characterizing the way that artifacts are made to endure across time as open-ended and expanding classes. See The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 9, 34.

[186x211]THIS PAGE
Display showing the effects of superimposing (casting) the painted relief surfaces.
The facsimile of Seti I’s sarcophagus made using elevated printing technology.

OPPOSITES
Close-up of a test for the digital restoration of the sarcophagus of Seti I, showing the goddess Nut, with the blue infill which is no longer present on the original.

13 George Kubler was prescient in his observation that the metaphors of modern technology, from transmissions to circuits, seemed most suitable for characterizing the way that artifacts are made to endure across time as open-ended and expanding classes. See The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 9, 34.
The copy looks the same as the original, but does it act differently? Could Factum Arte not only remake the tomb of Seti I, but also restore the power that is found in the magic of the Pharaoh’s high priests? Or is this simply confusing ancient divine secrets with modern technical skills? One thing seems clear. In both cases, what is displayed has the power to conjure a certain kind of truth. Indeed, Scanning Seti heightens the power of the facsimile by using multiples to emphasize the contrast between different times in the life of the object, including the trauma inflicted on the artifact, which serves to heighten its aura.13 One version of the ‘Hall of Beauties’ highlights the destruction. Nearby, another version reimagines its original perfection. This is quite an omniscient position to occupy over the leveling forces of time. Perhaps this is the ultimate pursuit of Lowe, whom a television reporter once called, ‘the man who leads Factum with evangelical fervor’. Scanning Seti definitely plays to one of the West’s most powerful forms of historical, and religious, emplotment – resurrection.

That’s one view. However, I want to propose a more complicated understanding of Lowe’s aim. As I have stated, Factum Arte prefigures its mode of display in aesthetic and moral terms. We are invited to decide for ourselves whether the copy is a good surrogate, or whether it fails to register the truth of the artifact’s history. Thus, real and copied fragments are reassembled without differentiation in the exhibition to conjure a mythos that lures spectators with feeling rather than dispassionate objectivity. The act of making in Factum Arte’s studio shares similarities with Ancient Egyptian practices of cleaning, perfuming, dressing, and feeding a cult statue. Scanning and routing, casting and sculpting, adding and subtracting, layering and passing, rendering and processing… All of these steps are never-ending acts of problem solving, perfecting, and care. They fill the material form with a certain kind of constructivist loving that brings life back to the artifact. Immanence and transcendence and combined.

More traditional forms of museum display might simply give visitors a general schema of Ancient Egyptian cosmology in text beside a glass case. Immersive exhibits ofinfotainment might just embrace the clichés that dramatize Ancient Egypt as obsessed with death. A more critical postcolonial form of display might focus so intensely on the West’s problematic gaze that the tomb’s presence might seem incidental. Factum Arte uses a little of all of these techniques, and none of them fully. Instead, its idiosyncratic obsession lies with reproducing fragments by the micron in pursuit of a more meaningful whole. Something about Factum Arte’s approach is expressed in what Hayden White found so distinct about Giambattista Vico’s claim that the most true expression of a thing’s history comes from dissecting and reassembling its discrete heterogeneous parts. Vico’s famous response to the modern Cartesian age was a constructivist mantra: verum esse ipsum factum. By reassembling the tomb’s billions of small attributes, both physical and performative, Factum Arte lives up to the assertion that what is true is precisely what is made.

I continue along the dim hallway, which opens onto a platform before the final gallery. Here I step into the exhibition’s final reproduction of the ‘Hall of Beauties’. Unlike the wonder felt with the Belzoni version, or the gruesome horror of the room as a crime scene, this space presents the hull in its current condition. The truth is sad. The residue of squeeze castings mingles with extracted stone and cracked surfaces. Part of the ceiling has collapsed, which the facsimile mirrors, complete with graffiti made by candle smoke. The display is made all the more honest by the fact that it is a continuation of the same history of desecration that it reproduces, just in a less materially invasive way. A sign on the wall announces that visitors are free to use their cameras, and encourages them to hashtag their photos on social media. Following the crowd, I pull out my smartphone and take a selfie with Seti’s half-erased image on the wall, before entering the column-filled hall adjacent to the Pharaoh’s burial chamber.

This is where the unfinished replica ends. The floor is lined with raised wooden pathways that creak when you walk, and gaps between the walls and floor are filled with a brown styrofoam-like material that simulates gravel. Embedded in the gravel are a handful of speakers that play a new-age ambient sound reminiscent of Brian Eno’s Music for Airports. The non-contextual cosmic atmosphere complements with a loud HVAC system that is required to heat the temporary space, protected beneath a tent in a service courtyard of the museum. Around me, visitors pose for photos of themselves standing in front of the tomb’s most captivating images. Belzoni would be impressed with the quality of the copy. I walk toward the exit and notice one last panel at the very end of the path. It fills in the final section of surface with one of Harry Burton’s black and white images – an unusual registration of one era of documentation with another. I find out later that it is a placeholder for a section of the tomb that could not be scanned before Factum Arte’s permit to work in the tomb had expired. The gap in data will remain unfilled until Factum Arte’s papers are renewed by the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities and Scanning Seti begins again.

15 Drawing on the work of Michael Tausig and Walter Benjamin, Christina Rigg raises this question about the importance of the public secret in Ancient Egyptian society in Unravelling Hidden Egypt, 190–95.