Activating Historic Spaces
Preservation Art: An Interview with Jorge Otero-Pailos

KATHERINE MALONE-FRANCE

Jorge Otero-Pailos is a preservation artist, an architect, and the incoming director of Columbia University’s historic preservation program. We start to define the term “preservation art” in the interview that follows, but the concept is certainly informed by Otero-Pailos’ own career, through which he has carved out a space at the nexus of the artistic, theoretical, and material lives of old places. Otero-Pailos is perhaps best known for his leading-edge installations. The Ethics of Dust, for example, uses latex to capture impressions and pollution on architectural elements like Trajan’s Column at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the walls of the Doge’s Palace, which was exhibited at the 53rd Venice Art Biennale.

Otero-Pailos’ next installation will involve making luminous architectural volumes from latex sheets that have captured the layers of dust and pollution on the industrial chimneys of the Old San Francisco Mint. His work will bring this landmark building into contemporary culture in a new way with an exhibition at the nearby Yerba Buena Center for the Arts that will invite viewers to consider not only the building’s history through this aspect of its materiality but also the forces that shaped its historical and current social context. In addition to his work as an artist, Otero-Pailos also maintains an active architectural practice working on monuments, historic buildings, and master planning, often in collaboration with other international architects.

Katherine Malone-France: The theme of this issue of our Journal is “activating historic spaces,” and we know that the arts are key to doing that. You are both an artist and a preservationist, so I want to start by asking you how you see the relationship between those two disciplines. Is it an important relationship? Do the arts and preservation benefit from working together?
Jorge Otero-Pailos: I think that, at a certain level, there are no boundaries between disciplines. Obviously, there is some need to compartmentalize knowledge for the purposes of education, but as you develop within a field of knowledge, you begin to realize that you can only continue to grow intellectually by making certain connections to other disciplines. My formal training as an architect and historian informed my approach to art and preservation, so the idea that preservation and art are totally different disciplines strikes me as very odd. Because preservation was born out of the work of many people who were also artists—think of John Ruskin’s watercolors. When preservation education was formalized in the last century, they left out art for some reason, focusing on history, architecture, chemistry, and planning as well as a little engineering and law.

I find it really interesting that a lot of artists today are turning to cultural objects as the enabling elements for their creative endeavors. And a lot of preservationists and preservation institutions are looking to the arts with a new seriousness—not as simply something that is external to preservation that you bring in as you would a caterer, to facilitate an event for the day—but as something really intrinsic to the work we do as preservationists. I find it really exciting that preservation has matured sufficiently to consider art as part of what we do.

**What do you think is going on from the artists’ perspective? Why is it that they are, as you say, seeking out cultural artifacts?**

On the one hand, artists are concerned with culture. They’re concerned with trying to understand what culture is because, as cultural producers, they need to figure that out as a sort of starting point. And there is no better place to start that process of inquiry than with places, things, and objects that are over-determined as cultural. Beginning to test what culture is requires having something that everyone agrees is culture, and those things are actually not easy to find. There are things that some people view as culture and other people don’t—fashion, for example. But certain objects are undeniably held to be culture across the social spectrum, and I think that’s what draws artists to them. And I think that old historic buildings and sites are undeniably culture.
It’s where they derive their power in large part, isn’t it?

Right. Now, culture is a very strange thing because it is no one and everyone. No one can say, “I am culture.” And yet it is something that we all share in some way. It’s both inside us and outside us, and we inhabit, use, and perform it. How we experience our participation in culture and how culture is part of us affects how we engage with objects. This is not news to anyone, but what is amazing about the turn to art in preservation and the turn to preservation in art is that it underscores the fact that how we relate to objects collectively, as a culture, is changing.

That is what happens when you turn a historic site into a historic property. It goes from being used as a farm to, now, a historic farm. That is a total change in how we use it, how we relate to it. So how it remains part of culture becomes a question mark, which is where we get into questions of authenticity—are we making this farm into something inauthentic by preserving it? There’s this sense that preservation participates in estranging us from historic places, and that rift is where artists come in—not necessarily to heal it, but to interrogate it and cast it in a new light. I love the idea of “enlivening” places, because that word seems central to me.

That’s a nice segue into your own most well-known work on that front—The Ethics of Dust series. First of all, what has The Ethics of Dust demonstrated to you about how new art can enliven old places?

The artistic process is such that you often don’t have everything figured out before you start—it’s not the same as master planning. You might start making something and then figure out what it was that you did.
As I’ve worked on *The Ethics of Dust* over the years, I discovered that one can tell new stories with old buildings—that a building’s narrative is never complete. Art can be a way to recover objects that are historic but have lost their connection to what we think of as culture—they represent old cultures but not our culture. That’s what starts to kill historic places: they become somebody else’s culture. *The Ethics of Dust* has allowed me to begin to understand how one can bring objects that we don’t necessarily think of as part of our culture into our everyday concerns.

**We talk about that a lot at our historic sites: How do you make these places part of our culture, part of the fabric of everyday life for people?**

They have to address people’s concerns and interests. It really has to come from within—it cannot be imposed upon visitors, constituencies, or communities. The preservationist artist, if we could call it that—we have preservation architects and preservation planners so we can have preservation artists!—would have to enter into a relationship with those that care about a place as the first step in the creative process.

Artists are used to being the ones that put something out there, that make their stuff whether others like it or not. As a preservation artist, the work comes first, and you come second. And the goal is for the work to continue not to be yours. The sign of success in preservation art is for the work to continue belonging to culture, not to the artist. Of course, if that object is a historic site, presumably it’s already part of culture; except, of course, it often isn’t—many sites are forgotten, uninteresting, cultural residue. The preservation artist tries to bring them back into living culture.

Preservation art is mistakenly associated with appropriation art. This is not the same as Duchamp, who was taking everyday objects and appropriating them into high art by “over-coding” them with marks of the artist’s intention, like a signature. Here it’s different. The preservation artist doesn’t impose intention on the object but supplements the object to help it do what it cannot do by itself, like outlast its normal decay or continue to be culturally relevant. Hopefully, you end up with the recognition that the artist’s work is not theirs.
And that’s where we need to establish criteria for what is good and bad preservation art. In the worst cases, contemporary artists whose work is not fundamentally about historic sites are nonetheless brought to those sites—like Jeff Koons at Versailles. This is like bringing in a catering service: the caterer offers a set menu that doesn’t change in response to the venue.

One of the things I love about The Ethics of Dust is how close it is to the building itself. It’s all about proximity in some ways, how close you get to the architectural fabric to create these new works.

I think the issue of proximity is a very important one. If there is such a thing as preservation art, it should help preserve the thing that it is being installed in. That art shouldn’t just be external, it should help make the place endure in some way.

Of course, there is the materials-conservation side of that when you physically make the object more durable, but the social dimension is that an object doesn’t survive unless people take care of it. The social dimension of preservation art is engaging a community in caring for objects. It’s not just creating a nice artistic experience that bears no relation to the place or the community that cares about it. Preservation art is about sustaining people’s relationship to a place in ways that are meaningful and long-lasting.
Broadly speaking, if preservation art is going to enliven a place, it needs to be resonant with this place—to have an intellectual proximity. And resonance can be something that appears in the middle or end of a project, as it begins to enliven the place.

Absolutely. And resonance is a form of proximity because things resonate when they’re in the same harmony—their harmonic range. That can happen in many different ways. The National Trust, for example, has residencies for artists, where they come, spend time, and attune themselves to a place and discover it. Nothing beats spending time with an object or site to be able to learn and understand it.

But there are other ways, too. Part of enlivening objects is bringing our concerns to them and seeing how they help us deal with our own concerns. *The Ethics of Dust* is that, too—I bring my concerns about the environment, pollution, dust, and history to buildings that resonate with those concerns. Not every building would work for that particular series. We cannot pretend that we completely surrender ourselves to objects. We bring certain concerns, and what brings the objects to life is that they matter for us today.

And the challenge is to really figure out what concerns resonate with culture today. What are the issues and problems? And what are the objects that we’ve inherited that help us provide new answers, think anew about these problems, and develop ideas that would not otherwise be available to us? The short of it is learning from the past.

**Besides your own work, are there any other specific projects in preservation art that you think our leader audience should pay attention to? That have been particularly successful?**

A ton of artists out there are doing amazing preservation art, although they might not call it that. One better-known example is Ai Weiwei, who has been doing some remarkable exercises in saving objects. He has been buying traditional ancestral halls that are being demolished to clear land and finding ways to save them by bringing them into the art market. He is, of course, totally conscious of the history of antiquities trade, which has done so
much damage to preservation. He did an exhibition in Beijing recently wherein he convinced the owners of two contiguous, adjacent galleries to allow him to pierce through their dividing wall and put the ancestral hall across it—so that you can never really perceive the entire hall in one glance or really inhabit it. But they also cannot sell it, because who’s going to sell it between these two galleries? He was able to use this building to question the gallery system, to undermine building codes about fire safety, to say that the ancestral hall is more important than all that other stuff, that it should be the central focus, and all other decisions should be subservient to preserving it and finding a new life for it as part of contemporary culture. That’s one extraordinary, very thoughtful project that doesn’t shy away from all the problems and complexities of the difficult place of traditional Chinese architecture in today’s real estate–driven Chinese marketplace.

I would also cite Olafur Eliasson’s recent project for COP21, which involved one of the most ancient objects one can find—a glacier, which is an incredible piece of world heritage that we have no technique for saving. He brought a piece of one to Paris and allowed it to melt in the middle of the square during the COP21 talks. This extraordinary project brings preservation art as performance into the political arena in a very powerful way—as a call to action from political leaders.

Works that have to do with the divestment of states from culture are also very interesting. For example, Azra Akšamija, an
artist and a professor at MIT who is originally from Bosnia, has been working with the objects of the former Yugoslavian state that now have no state to take care of them. The new state doesn’t want to take care of Yugoslavian stuff, they want to build a new Bosnia-Herzegovina. She’s using art and the art world to figure out other instruments to fill that void for taking care of that heritage for the next generation. She invites people to bring her objects, documents them, puts them in what she calls a “future heritage collection,” and acts as a registrar to account for all this heritage in some way.

This Journal issue is going to touch on enlivening broader historic landscapes and neighborhoods as well as sites. Could you talk about your collaboration with Work Architecture Company on the master plan for New Holland Island in St. Petersburg? What do you think the approach to enlivening these larger historic areas should be?

New Holland Island was a military site for 300 years and was closed to the public. That mysteriousness was what made it so enticing for people. So the difficulty there was maintaining what was interesting and important about the site, which was its “closedness” and its mysteriousness, while also providing access.

One of the things I did there was design smells for the site—so that the whole neighborhood, the whole area, would smell differently than the rest of the city. The smells were those of the island 300 years ago when it was the site of ship manufacturing, and they used oak, tar, and fish oils in an 18th-century industrialization of the building process.

Of course, smell can’t be closed off—it has a plume to it. It was a way to reveal the site without necessarily having you see, access, or enter into it. The site, in a way, entered into you. We have this idea that public access means being able to put your foot inside and look inside—it’s all visual and territorial. By working with smell, I was trying to suggest the possibility of experiencing and having access to things without having to enter into them—or of entering into them mentally and imaginatively, not physically. When we talk about enlivening something, we are talking about entering into it mentally, experiencing it as part of us and our lives, making it ours.
Smell brings that in a very tangible way: rather than us entering into the object, the object literally enters into us.

**If we are defining preservation art, I like the idea that it has to have a preservation impact. I can’t think of a better way to preserve something than to have it become a part of you.**

Exactly. The more successful heritage is the one that invites people to take it home somehow. Obviously, you can take a photograph and take it home, but you can also take a memory home. You can take a way of life or a different attitude about the world home. These are now really important challenges or objectives for heritage.

As people that work in heritage, our job is to be able to gather people’s attention and organize it toward the potential for certain objects to help us answer certain questions. Not every object can do that for every concern, but we can go to certain objects to understand certain things in contemporary culture. As heritage managers and curators, we can telegraph what the potential of objects is, so that when people are searching for that, they find it. People go to Yosemite in search of something that’s very particular—somewhat intangible but real. People go to the Tower of Pisa expecting to take a picture of themselves propping it up. Historic sites and monuments set up expectations in us, and it is key for preservationists to articulate those expectations. That’s where art comes in—helping render those expectations in clear and compelling ways. The object itself is 90 percent, but that last 10 percent requires art.

**I’d like to revisit the topic of international examples. You were born in Spain, you were educated in the United States, and you work all over the world. Is there a different understanding of enlivening heritage outside of the United States? Is there greater tolerance for it? Less of a tolerance for it?**

It really is not something that one can answer in nationalistic terms. I don’t think that certain nations are more or less attuned to this. I do think that certain people are. And those people are leading the rethinking of heritage in contemporary society in certain places, but they also move. The way we communicate today has
really broadened the opportunities for dialogue, but nothing can replace going to the historic building or site. Those things are immovable, so when people who have a certain understanding of heritage are in the right place and have the right opportunity, the stars align for preservation art.

What we’re talking about here is something that remains quite rare. It’s an emergent field. And preservation artists require training, but there are currently very few artists with training in preservation—just as there are very few preservationists with training in art. It’s still a rarity, but one worth continuing to nurture because there’s so much potential there.

Sometimes when projects bring artists, commercial partners, or others to enliven historic sites or neighborhoods, we run into resistance. Have you encountered any resistance to the enlivening of historic places in your work? And, if so, how do you handle it?

The word “art” comes with baggage. There are a lot of presuppositions about what artists do and a lot of suspicion that artists are not going to respect the object—they’re going to transgress certain taboos and demote the object in some way. Overcoming that fear requires trust, which is built over time. It’s an important process that takes years. For example, I’m opening a project in London this summer, and it’s taken me six years to get to this point.

It’s also really key that things evolve over time, because preservation art is not an event. If the art comes in and goes away overnight, it’s not really preservation art we’re talking about, because it doesn’t help to preserve the object.
Trust is essentially an understanding that everyone is taking responsibility for this work, including the artist, instead of the museum or the heritage manager giving the artist this set of rules: “You can’t drill into this wall, and you can’t do this, and you can’t do that. As long as you don’t touch my object, you can do your art.” Preservation art requires allowing the artist to touch the object, but the artist has to demonstrate their commitment to preserving it. It takes a long time to build trust, especially because preservation art is not mature as a practice. We have protocols in place for demonstrating that a conservator has that intention when they start removing plaster, but we don’t have those protocols in place for artists. That’s why I think that training is really important: preservation artists need to be trained, just like preservation architects.

As the new director of Columbia University’s preservation program, how do you think we should approach training preservationists to think broadly and creatively about enlivening places and making them a part of culture?

We have to allow for time in people’s training for them to make their own discoveries and ask their own questions about the objects they’re engaging, not the same old questions. We need to guide students, but trust their intuitions a bit more. We need to let students experiment more and learn from what works and what doesn’t.

We need to engage in collective pondering, testing, and examining of preservation with students through technological, intellectual, political, and legal exercises. At Columbia we are working to make creativity the center of preservation education, but that means really conceptualizing what creativity is in preservation, which is very different than in other fields. Preservation art is responding to something existing that is culturally charged: a response, not a projection; an attunement, not an imposition. That’s a very different idea than the one taught in art and architecture schools, because it places the thing before the person. I think of what preservationists produce as “not me” creations.

This is particularly important at this juncture when we are facing massive environmental and political challenges. We have to find a way forward that depends not on charismatic personalities...
but on our ability to work together from the bottom up. You need a model of creativity that is not centered on the romantic notion of the genius, but is inclusive, collaborative, and centered on shared objects. Our environment is a shared object. Our air, our cities, and our monuments are shared objects. We are trying to find ways to come together around these objects. In the 19th century, we figured out how we come together around a building. In the 20th century—around a city: we need landmarks commissions, we need certain preservation bureaucracies. We even figured out how we come together around big pieces of land with national institutions like the National Parks Service.

But the objects have gotten bigger. Preserving the oceans, preserving the forests, preserving the atmosphere—those escape our current institutional forms of coming together, so we need to find new ways. That’s one of the things that we’re trying to help students invent creatively. We need to be daring and experimental because things have changed, and we don’t have the tools and the necessary institutions in place yet. We can’t saddle new generations with the thinking of the 19th and 20th centuries. We have to stay nimble and experimental, with our ear to the ground, to enable them to do the work they need to do. FJ

KATHERINE MALONE-FRANCE is vice president for historic sites at the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

VIDEO
Watch a lecture about experimental preservation by Jorge Otero-Pailos.