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Factum Foundation: a conversation with Adam Lowe

David Littlefield

The Factum Foundation is a Madrid-based studio focused on documenting and assisting with heritage preservation. The Foundation focuses on high-resolution recording in order to create extraordinary replicas of fragile cultural sites and artifacts to make them available to wider audiences in both digital and physical forms. IDAC associate editor David Littlefield talks to the foundation's founder Adam Lowe about the studio's work, its values and methods, and questions surrounding themes of the original and the authentic.

KEYWORDS: Authenticity; original; voicefulness; articulate objects; replica

Introduction

Factum Arte is a Madrid-based studio, established in 2001 by Adam Lowe, Manuel Franquelo and Nando Guereta. The studio brings designers and technicians with twenty first century digital skills together with practitioners of traditional crafts to provide an environment in which complex outputs (3D forms, images and even textiles) can be realized. Factum has collaborated with the widest range of artists and creators including Anish Kapoor, Cornelia Parker, Marina Abramovic and Grayson Perry. In 2009 Adam Lowe established the Factum Foundation as a not-for-profit entity focused on developing the technologies to document and assist with heritage preservation. The Foundation focuses on high-resolution recording in order to create extraordinary replicas of fragile cultural sites and artifact to make them available to wider audiences in both digital and physical forms; the work extends to the recreation of damaged or lost cultural heritage, deploying digital techniques and precision engineering to explore the forms and surfaces of works created by unknown craftspeople as well as iconic figures such as Raphael and Michelangelo.

IDAC associate editor David Littlefield spent time with Adam Lowe discussing the work of Factum, the concept of authenticity and the nature of any sense of the “original” object. These conversations were not linear, and ranged widely across the two core themes of this special issue, while addressing also themes of looking, ideas of representation, the links between materiality and abstraction, and the processes that link making and understanding. The text which follows this introduction is not a verbatim transcript of these conversations, but a re-assembled collage of the substantive elements of it — the verbatim account shows trains of thought and association which loop back to previous themes, matching ideas with techniques, theories with projects, histories with musings. “Everyone who works in Factum knows this is a very common tendency. There is a constant recircling back to look at things again from a slightly different angle,” says Lowe. “We are always in dialogue with the objects we work with—it’s a bit like an eighteenth century English landscape, with with follies, ruins and eye-catchers that were set up to be perceived and visited from different directions.”

Factum is, perhaps, best known among academic circles for its replica of Veronese’s *The Wedding Feast at Cana* (1563), originally created for the refectory at a Venetian monastery but which now hangs in the Louvre. The replica, completed in 2007 to hang in the Palladian space it was originally designed for, became the subject of a 2010 paper by Lowe and Bruno Latour which examined the role and efficacy of replicas — arguing, for instance, that an object which prompts its replication is demonstration of its “fecundity” and ability to catalyze new experiences and creative practice. This facsimile (like all of Factum’s facsimiles) are deep exercises in the replication of surface — not just brushstrokes and grain, but close attention to

the ways that light interacts with surfaces in order that viewers see the object as intended. So, as Lowe explains below, the work of Factum is neither about looking or making, but both simultaneously; it's difficult, in fact, to speak to Lowe about the act of looking without talking about the materiality of the object or its surface, and vice versa.

There is also, though, an implicit sense of the *political* about Factum's work, especially the replication or recreation of heritage objects and surfaces. It is, perhaps, a counter-intuitive thing, but this practice will bring the widest range of contemporary techniques (photogrammetry, photometric stereo, laser scanning, lidar, diverse forms of 3D printing and CNC milling, laser cutting and a wide range of both additive and subtractive manufacturing processes) to bear on cultural artifacts in such a way that the final result inspires something of the awe or even the sacred of the original. Sometimes, these originals are elsewhere (a tomb, a cave, a painting) and the value of Factum's work lies in providing greater access to the experience of these artifacts or spaces than would otherwise be the case. In other instances, the work is not so much about widening access, but about revealing the dynamic nature of originality and repairing damage or reversing total loss. Some of the examples which follow focus on vandalism and absence, as well as the decisions and processes invested in reversal and rediscovery. One example discussed below is the reassembly of a small marble statue by Michaelangelo, including the creation of missing parts; another is a 1:1 facsimile of a stolen painting by Caravaggio, based on photographic records and Factum's recording of other works by the same artist; another considers the recreation, as three-dimensional surfaces, of petroglyphs in Brazil. These works are severe tests of the concepts of the original and the authentic (of what the original is, or where authenticity resides), but equally, and importantly, these replicas are not conflated with the originating artifacts. "We're not trying to deceive anyone — ever. It's important to show the artifice," says Lowe. "Factum's work is focused on verification not falsification."

What Factum is trying to do is recreate the experience and continuity with the past that the originating objects (now changed or even disappeared) once evoked. All of Factum's work — though centered on discourses of aesthetics (the way things look) — touches themes of identity, ownership and belonging. There is, embedded in the work, an underlying sense of stewardship which resolves itself as the development of practices which point toward an antidote to vulnerability — or at least a degree of hope in the face of catastrophe. Importantly, one must resist the temptation to compare this work to the de-extinction or species revivalism projects of geneticists — that would be a mistake. The key to understanding the work of Factum is to consider it as a punishingly forensic way of looking;

the authenticity resides in the processes of looking; the result is the original evidence of that process.

Note: conversations between David Littlefield and Adam Lowe took place on 24 July and 13 October 2025. Details on the work of Factum Arte and the Factum Foundation can be found at: <https://factumfoundation.org/>

David Littlefield: *How would you describe the purpose of Factum? Clearly, you're involved with the replica, the reproduction; but on a deeper level, what is the work of Factum?*

Adam Lowe: What Factum does is mix making and looking. What Factum's work began with, and has always been obsessed with, is turning discrete objects back into complex subjects.

Theoretically, we focus on the ideas of Paul Valéry rather than Walter Benjamin. Valéry, fundamentally, was concerned with the fact that, at the start of the twentieth century, everything was available all at once, everywhere. He writes beautifully about being able to listen to the opera in his house rather than *going to* the opera. Benjamin was concerned with the printed lithographic image becoming separated from its materiality — and that really is a problem. Benjamin was aware of the impoverishing nature of poor reproductions that reduce the object to an image. But in most cases, it's the materiality of an object that contains and communicates the information a connoisseur or a specialist needs; the image is just one part of that information. The image is embedded in the nature of the object itself.

There's very little vocabulary to describe what we're talking about. We don't have the words to bear witness to what we are doing. The objects speak but the words we pin on them are not yet agreed ... or shared. The biggest battle we have talking to museums, or professionals of one kind or another, is to do with terminology. We use what we refer to as "re" words: restoration, replication, relocation, return, redemption, reversibility, reevaluation, recording, recovery, reunification, revisualization, reconstruction, rethinking ... the list just goes on and on. The "re" is the thing. Bringing things back together is an act of re-membering in all its senses.

Here at Factum we spend so much time looking and talking about things on screen; and then looking and talking about things as they are being made, and then when they're finished. When the process and the thing come together the facsimile becomes articulate. We discuss the nature of noise or disinformation that influences and shapes the object we're trying to record. Many of our discussions are about the relationship between information and noise.

DL: *How useful to you are the terms "authenticity" and "original"? Anything can be authentic (you can have an authentic fake or an authentic crime) while the original is rarely static. How do you deal with these terms?*



Figure 1

Adam Lowe, Director of Factum Arte and Founder of Factum Foundation, in front of the recreation of Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*, installed in the refectory of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice. Credits: © Factum Foundation

AL: There is a tension around the nature of originality and the nature of authenticity. I think authenticity is profoundly useful—in some ways more useful than the concept of originality. Most originals are not encountered as intended; they're not as located or as understood within the context or frame of reference within which they were made. Originality is actually a process not a state of being.

The painting that enabled us to really hit the subject of originality and authenticity was the big Veronese painting of the *Marriage Feast at Cana* in the Louvre (Figure 1). It's at one end of the room opposite the *Mona Lisa* in her bullet-proof protective enclosure. The only people you'll find facing the Veronese at the other end of the room are taking selfies with the *Mona Lisa* in the background. You've got the *Mona Lisa* in her frame behind glass; in front of that is a further barrier which is the closest point from which people can look at this small painting. But the vast majority of visitors are looking at the painting through the screen of their mobile phone. So there is yet another layer of glass that frames the already distant painting. The question about what you're looking at becomes really interesting. Most people are looking at people looking at a painting through their mobile phones. There is no engagement with the picture at all.

The *Wedding Feast at Cana* has changed fundamentally since the time Napoleon's soldiers ripped it off the wall, cut it into strips and rolled it up. It lost about 30% of its paint and you can see where it

gets put back. It was later restored with acidic compounds; it was then further restored; and there are other tears that the Louvre tried to conceal. The painting is now varnished with an optically clear varnish which didn't exist at the time it was created. So there are things that we can say are not original about the original.

With our facsimile, no one argues that what we did in Venice was more original than the painting (a painting which is a heavily restored original; that is not seen in the right context; is framed, which it shouldn't be; and hangs at the wrong height with a zenithal light). But it is a special experience being in the refectory for which the painting was made, to see the facsimile illuminated with the light in which it was intended to be in dialogue. The great compositional conceit that Veronese played is that he gives the painting a specific time; the shadows on the right hand wall of the building coincide with the shadows on the painting. The facsimile provides a far more authentic experience than the experience of looking at the displaced original.

DL: *Do you ever think about the creation of a replica as a very special way of looking? I would imagine that you and your team, in creating these replicas, are looking in a very dynamic way?*

AL: Yes. When we recorded Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*, we had to work at night. There were five people focused on the same thing—looking at the object, not looking at the meaning of the object. This is where the conversations begin to happen. Some are to do with content (the iconography, if you like) but most conversations are to do with materiality: “what’s this line?,” “why has the paint done that?.” In a way it’s closer to the way a conservator or a scientist might scrutinize a painting. However, when conservators scrutinize a painting, they’re always imagining what they’re *going to do to it*. When we scrutinize a painting, we’re asking *what is it?*

This is how I got obsessed with the whole biography of that painting. All the contexts in which Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* was made to be seen within have been removed and altered. There's a lot of things that make you look at something and ask: “why does that look like it does *now?*”

Of course, part of the conversation is talking to experts from many different disciplines, whether it's anthropologist Bruno Latour or art historians like Joseph Koerner or Matthias Wivel. These are the conversations that can start to reveal what an object is ... what the painting is actually “about.”

We were spending every night for five weeks with the *Wedding at Cana*, that meant I could also spend every night for five weeks looking at the *Mona Lisa*. I'm almost certain that the subject of the *Mona Lisa* is an exercise in peripheral vision; it's not that she has an enigmatic smile *per se*, it's that she isn't a “real” woman. She's a representation of a woman if you look at her directly – but if you look at

her hands in your peripheral vision she transforms into a representation of a moustachioed man, which Duchamp famously elaborated. I think, actually, there are four or five portraits in that painting that I could identify — though that may be a projection of mine because I want to see something in the painting. But that's part of the nature of seeing.

DL: *The Mona Lisa is arguably the most “auratic” of all images. How do you square the notion of aura with your work in the creation of replicas?*

AL: There is a prejudice against the replica. This is mainly due to the superficial nature of art school teaching. If anyone says to me “your copies lack an aura” it's meaningless because there's nothing I can do. I'm equally accused by some Egyptians of stealing the aura of ancient tombs through recording. So we get both arguments, but the fact is that *neither* argument is true.

What we're trying to do is encourage people to confront their own prejudice through looking. Most people, when they know they're looking at a copy, say they can tell it's a copy; but if you don't tell them which is which, only about half get it right. One of the prejudices people carry is that a copy is always *less* than the original. We sometimes play a little trick by slightly exaggerating the surface in the copy — giving it *more* relief than the original. Many people will choose the one with more relief. We've done this once, publicly; about 50% got it right, meaning that people's assumptions or prejudice were as accurate as tossing a coin. In our work we encourage people to reflect on their own thinking, to think about what they're thinking about. It's not just about having an aesthetic response. A replica enables a dialogue to happen; it's the point of access that can help get people back to looking.

DL: *On the other hand, there are examples of people having very valuable, authentic experiences with replicas.*

AL: In 2014 we installed the facsimile of the tomb of Tutankhamun close to the entrance of the Valley of the Kings (Figure 2). The day after the opening, one of the great Egyptologists, Salima Ikram, visited the facsimile and had a complete Stendhal syndrome attack. She was profoundly emotional. That reaction is something, in fact, we have seen more often than one would expect — an emotional reaction to a copy.

I've experienced this myself. I was on my knees inside a facsimile of the Sacred Cave of Kamukuwaká, looking at the petroglyphs and explaining our work to a visitor, and I completely lost cognizance of what I was looking at. For a period of time, while we were talking, I actually stopped being in the warehouse and was just in the cave. It was only for a second and I don't want to romanticize it, but it was one of those moments where you enter into the orbit of the object.



Figure 2

Installing the facsimile of the Burial Chamber of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings. Made by Factum Foundation after a complete noninvasive recording in high-resolution of the original tomb, it was donated to Egypt and installed in the Valley of the Kings in 2014. Credits: © Factum Foundation

DL: *The Sacred Cave of Kamukuwaká is a fascinating project on many levels. I've seen images showing indigenous people, in traditional dress and body markings, interacting with the replica as if the replica itself has sacred properties.*

AL: In this case the cave is both an object and a text, so these people were reading the surface, checking the petroglyphs to see if we'd reconstructed them correctly (Figures 3 and 4). There is no written history of the site, so all sense of accuracy and meaning is contained within the traditions and knowledge of the people themselves. The truth is, nobody knows whether the petroglyphs are 100 years old, or 10,000 years old. Local communities just tell you they're old, and they've just become things that are looked after. Fortunately, there were enough photographs of the sacred cave before it was vandalized to enable us to generate the right data to create depth maps. Our work is part of that process of looking after, and a process of saving after an iconoclastic attack, rather than leaving the obliterated surface as a romantic ruin.

DL: *That was a project that required a great deal of exactness in terms of replacing the lost petroglyphs. But no replica can ever be perfect, so presumably you have to make careful choices concerning form, materiality or experience?*

AL: The Valley of the Kings are hot and humid, and sometimes the smell of sweat can be overpowering. When we produced a facsimile of the tomb of Thutmose III for the National Gallery in Washington DC, we suggested reproducing these atmospheric conditions, including humidity and smell—even acoustics. These are important conditions in how you react to something, but the



Figure 3

The petroglyphs of the Sacred Cave of Kamukuwaká were recreated with the help of the Wauja and Xingu communities using acetate sheets and markers. Following a project with People's Palace Project, a replica of the cave, made by Factum Foundation, was created and installed at the Cultural and Territorial Monitoring Center in Ulupuwene village, Upper Xingu. Credits: © Mafalda Ramos



Figure 4

Inauguration of the recreated Sacred Cave of Kamukuwaká in the Cultural and Territorial Monitoring Center in Ulupuwene village, Upper Xingu. This achievement marked the culmination of a six-year project in collaboration with People's Palace Projects, following the vandalization of the original site in 2018. The replica was transported from Madrid to Xingu thanks to Iron Mountain's Living Legacy program and Crozier Fine Arts. Credits: © Alaor Filho – Fotos Públicas

work eventually reproduced just the materiality and surface. It's a facsimile you can spend days in, looking in comfort—there are no protective glass screens, and therefore no reflections. It enables

you to focus on the surface conditions in way that's simply not possible in the tomb itself.

DL: *In The Stones of Venice Ruskin talks about the 'voicefulness' of buildings, concerning the way they speak to us, or a certain form of special sympathy which people bring to their experience of a place. Though he didn't develop this idea much further than simply introducing it. Is this a term you find useful, or ever think about?*

AL: Voicefulness isn't a term I use. But at Factum we do talk about *articulate objects*. I think that's what Ruskin is referring to with the word voicefulness.

This is why it's important to start with the materiality of the thing. If you read things properly, if you spend time with them, they tell you everything they want you to know about them. They constantly and subtly direct your attention to the things you don't know or don't understand. The way I'd describe 'articulateness' in an object is the extent to which it enables you to see the world from the point of view of somebody else. That's what an object does, especially one that belongs to a different time, a different culture, or religion, philosophical framework, or form of emotional engagement. There's a different form of dialogue. The reason the Parthenon marbles are so important is not because they're beautifully carved, it's because they're part of a context that raises many of the key issues that were immensely important at the beginning of the nineteenth century — and remain immensely important today. These are issues to do with social structures, with how societies work, with civilization, with how you engage with people around you.

I think objects come to the fore at different times. For example, we've done a lot of work in Nigeria, with the Bakor monoliths and the Benin bronzes. But the project I find more interesting concerns the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes [Figure 5]. The Benin bronzes are actually brass, but the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes *are bronze*. They were cast in the ninth century through the lost wax method. They're probably the best castings anywhere in the world from that time. They're super-detailed, unbelievable objects from a specific burial site. We've made exact facsimiles, with bronze patinas, of a group located in museums in Lagos and outside of Nigeria — these facsimiles will soon be back with the local community. They are objects which represent a dialogue about making, about communicating, about trading, movement and money, and about where value resides. These qualities are embodied in things. So voicefulness is something I would rephrase as articulateness; articulate objects.

DL: *Much of Factum's work concerns a response to damage or catastrophic loss—reconstructing or even reimagining what's been lost through time, accident, neglect or even willful destruction. How do these projects function as forms of articulation? And where is the articulation—in the process of making and looking?*



Figure 5

Facsimile of the Roped Pot, 3D-printed in steel and patinated (and details). A team from Factum Foundation carried out a training programme for a group of young Igbo-Ukwu community members, using photogrammetry to 3D scan a select number of bronzes from the National Museum in Lagos. Credits: © Oak Taylor-Smith | Factum Foundation

AL: The reconstruction of Michelangelo's *San Juanito* [*The Young St John the Baptist*] is a powerful example of re-articulation. The *San Juanito* was a small, marble statue located in a church in Úbeda, Spain. It was the only Michelangelo in a Spanish collection, but was smashed in an act of vandalism during the Civil War. It was a great piece: much of it was lost; the head was scorched in a fire; and all we have now are a dozen fragments. We spent over two years piecing it back together using photographic records, photogrammetry scans of the fragments and analysis of other Michelangelo works (Figures 6–8).

An Italian reconstruction from the 1990s had put the pieces into an approximation of *San Juanito* — there was no attempt to re-make



Figure 6
Creating the digital reconstruction of Michelangelo's *Young St. John the Baptist*. The physically reconstructed sculpture was among the facsimiles made by Factum Foundation for 'Michelangelo Imperfect' at the Statens Museum for Kunst (29 March–31 August 2025). Credits: © Factum Foundation



Figure 7
3D model of the digitized fragments of Michelangelo's *Young St. John the Baptist*, recorded in the Hospital de Tavera, Toledo. The physically reconstructed sculpture was among the facsimiles made by Factum Foundation for 'Michelangelo Imperfect' at the Statens Museum for Kunst (29 March – 31 August 2025). Credits: © Factum Foundation

the figure or its missing parts in the style or language of Michelangelo. It produced a discordant object. I would prefer to see the isolated fragments and reconstruct them in my head where they



Figure 8

Final reconstruction of Michelangelo's *Young St. John the Baptist*. The sculpture was among the facsimiles made by Factum Foundation for 'Michelangelo Imperfect' at the Statens Museum for Kunst (29 March–31 August 2025). Credits: © Oak Taylor-Smith | Factum Foundation

remain full of potential. To try to recreate the sculpture and integrate the fragments in an authentic way is a different activity. To live with these fragments for two years and to talk with art historians and 3D modelers is how I love to spend my time. So when we were commissioned in 2025 to produce work for a Michelangelo exhibition at SMK in Copenhagen, we saw it as an opportunity to rethink the principles of exhibiting these fragments.

We did have access to contemporary photographs of the statue — but it had been located in a niche, above eye level, so the photographs had been taken from below. There was also some lens distortion and obviously we had no information about the parts that were concealed. What followed is something that absolutely

fascinates me. The project became a deep questioning about what happens when a 3D object is flattened into a tonal photographic image. In each photograph, the *San Juanito* appears slightly different. By looking at multiple photographs, you get a kind of composite view — which, if you're working with photogrammetry, allows you to create something resembling true form. We could also scan the reconstruction, of course, and extract the fragments from the body. So we had this palette of information comprising photographs, three-dimensional files and 3D scans of casts of the fragments — we could start to look at the sculpture of *San Juanito* afresh. It became a fascinating process of moving back and forth between 2D and 3D, comparing a scanned object with its flattened representation on screen, or a photograph with 3D printed objects. This project raised so many issues about how we see things and how we react to them. How do we read photographs? What *happens* in a photograph ... in mimesis in general ... in the relationship between the world and its representation?

DL: *The final piece makes the joins between the remaining fragments and the more conjectural elements very clear—if conjecture is the right word. How did you approach these differences between known form and spaces between?*

AL: This question goes to the heart of mimetic art. If you're trying to make something have the qualities of something else, what kind of data do you need? How does our technician model like Michelangelo when he's carving a block of a marble and she's working with a digital pen on a Wacom pad? We asked a whole series of questions about whether or not we could, for example, adopt other Michelangelo sculptures from the same period which had the qualities we were looking for. We eventually took the legs of Bacchus as a starting point (they had to be flipped and altered in their position) but it's worth remembering that Michelangelo's legs are not anatomical legs, they're sculptural legs. Any sculptor is not just replicating life, they're building something else which works as sculptural form; so we were working within a dialogue of one thing representing another, and asking how the facsimile operates within this system.

There are clear differences between the scanned elements and the reconstruction. We're not trying to deceive anyone — ever. It's important to show the artifice, so all the lines and joints are clearly visible. However, the head had been thrown into a fire so it's very different from the other fragments; we decided not to make it as black as it really is because that would make it very difficult to see the whole piece in any meaningful way. The work embodies a whole debate about mimesis in sculpture, aesthetics, authenticity and truthfulness or articulateness.

DL: *In many ways, your work is not about the object, or the facsimile of the object—it's about the phenomena of the object,*



Figure 9

The unveiling of the recreation of Caravaggio's *Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence* in the Oratory of San Lorenzo, Palermo. The stolen painting was recreated by Factum Foundation in collaboration with Amici dei Musei Siciliani for 'Mystery of the Lost Paintings,' a Ballandi and Sky Arts production. Credits: © Factum Foundation

including the entire cultural apparatus in which it sits. Surely, you're handling the intangible as well the tangible? In this sense, the 'object' is an extended one, embracing original and replica, and all their associations?

AL: It's the *materiality* we're engaging with. Of course, we don't exist in a vacuum, so the extended object is a subset of a whole narrative around visual communication. Caravaggio's *Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence* is a useful example [Figure 9]. It hung over the altar in the Oratory of San Lorenzo in Palermo, but it was stolen by the Mafia in 1969—perhaps it was eaten by pigs or perhaps it still exists in the oxygen-free environment of a freeport in Zurich. There are various accounts of how the story will end.

We'd already had experience of Caravaggio — we'd created facsimiles of three paintings depicting moments in the life of St Matthew in

the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. The project on the stolen *Nativity* was really about how Caravaggio worked. What was he doing? Why did his paintings look like they look? Why do the surfaces have the particular qualities they have? Why don't Caravagesque paintings look like a Caravaggio on the surface? The whole project became one of looking, talking, engaging and thinking about *how* Caravaggio painted.

In reconstructing this painting we worked with the last professional photograph taken of it before it was stolen. The photograph was taken in '68. It's a good photo — medium format, four by five inches, but obviously the colors have shifted and we had to blow it up to three by two meters. At that point all you're looking at is film grain. We went through a whole set of processes to enlarge the photograph to the scale of the original painting, which was done both digitally and physically. We recreated the surface of the painting, rephotographed it, and digitally retouched it; we printed it again at 1:1, and repainted it, constantly trying to close the gap between the object we were making and the representation of that object.

This process of looking and making generated a long discussion about the date of the painting, and whether it might have been made earlier in Caravaggio's career. He wasn't in Sicily for long, and I know he painted fast, but there are things about it that make me almost convinced it's a painting he sent to Sicily and that it's from 1603 or '04 rather than 1609. To me this is all about looking — the more you look, the more you see; the more you see, the more you understand the visual language. So it's about seeing all the way down and all the way up again: digitally, photographically, physically. What we are talking about in this case is data input and data output; both condition what you look at and how you see.

DL: *And how do we see? How do you see? You mentioned earlier about separating the information from the noise—how do you (or we) do that?*

AL: At Factum, there is always a conversation around what we want someone to focus on. Do you want someone to look at the *smoothness* of the skin as was traditional in the fifteenth century, or do you want someone to look at the *matter* of the skin, as depicted by Rembrandt or Francis Bacon?

For us, our seeing involves making decisions all the way down to sub-pixel level — all the way through the materiality of an object to the way the light reflects off a varnish, or screening out speckled noise. Speckled noise arises in scanning when the lasers are interfering with the surface and the space just above that surface, especially in a dusty environment. The poetics of speckle noise is a great subject.

There is a very real question around seeing and the decisions we take in creating what we see. This is becoming well-known among

general users. Most people read photographs as a kind of realist register. But increasingly, in an age of three-dimensional technologies, we know that cameras distort. We know from personal experience that we don't look like the photographs of ourselves. It's one of those curious things. Most aesthetic notions of beauty are now conditioned by selfies: the type of lens; how far away you hold the phone; how you look in it; which of your features need adjusting to make them adhere to notions of beauty you might want to project.

In 1984 I went to the *Genius of Venice* exhibition at the Royal Academy, where there were 200 great paintings. The one painting I always came back to was Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*. It was slightly dirtier than some of the others, but the more I looked, and the more time I spent with it, I realized it was the only painting in the exhibition with no significant restoration history. What I was actually looking at is the way oil paint ages and the way fluid dynamics operates over time — what was applied with the hand, what was applied with a brush, what was moved and smeared and smudged. And, of course, the subject of the painting is the removal of the skin of Marsyas. So Titian was playing with a whole narrative in which the *subject* was the *object* of his painting. This was just brilliant. I obsessed for years on this, looking into the fusion of surface and subject.

There are ways to condition the response to something by the way you apply its surface. We are trying to re-condition people to think about the aura in the age of digital materiality... and to ask if it really exists. This is what Factum started with, and it remains the core of what preoccupies us.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Biography

Dr David Littlefield is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Architecture + Cities at the University of Westminster. He is co-convenor of the university's Heritage & Place Research Group, leads the MA in Interior Architecture and co-ordinates cultural context teaching across the School. David's research interests focus on heritage, authenticity, and sense of place. He is an associate editor of *Interiors: Design, Architecture, Culture*.

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