WHEELCHAIR LIFT AT THE TEMPLE OF DENDUR

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With only an hour or so to spend in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I head directly to the Temple of Dendur exhibit. It is an Egyptian temple from the Augustinian period ca. 15 BCE installed in a beautifully minimal granite, windowlit room mostly to itself. I have to ask directions from a guard and he sends me all the way across the back of the museum. As I approach a sign for the entrance to the American wing, I worry that I am in the wrong place and ask for directions again at an information desk. In fact, it was just beyond the next door, and more Egyptian exhibits continued past the temple, the woman at the desk tells me, circling them on a map.

Between the American wing and the Egyptian exhibits is a perfectly appropriate place for the temple, perhaps even no accident. It was a gift from Egypt to the United States in 1965 and acquired by the MET two years later. A wall panel explains that the gift was the result of private and Congressional funds sent to Egypt to help with the preservation of ancient artifacts otherwise inundated by the construction of the Aswan High Dam throughout the 1960s. Photos on the wall show the temple flooded in its original site.

Temple of Dendur at the Met

Other observers in the space are taken with European names like “Leonardo” and what looks like “L. Politi” carved crudely with the dates 1812 and 1819 respectively into the smooth delicate reliefs. Some respond with amusement, others with disgust. But what is not to love about these carvings? In every detail including the graffiti, The Temple of Dendur demonstrates a world steadily globalizing throughout ancient and modern history. After all, the reliefs these names obscure include depictions of the *Roman* emperor Caesar Augustus taking part in *Egyptian* deity worship. In fact, L. Politi inscribed their name squarely in the middle of such an exchange on the south half of the pronaos in which Caesar Augustus wears the white crown of Upper Egypt while consecrating offerings to Isis with hieroglyphics exulting him as “The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands, Autocrator, son of the Sun God, Lord of Crowns, Caesar, living forever.”[1] Furthermore, other carvings from centuries between Augustinian and L. Politi's time indicate that a Coptic priest named Presbyter Abraham converted the temple to a Christian church in 577 CE.[2]

19th Century graffiti on the pronoas

1 Aldred, Cyril. *The Temple of Dendur* pp. 48-49
Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin vol. 36 no. 1 1978 pp. 48-59
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

2 Ibid p. 52

But the awkwardness of the ungraceful 19th century tagging is nothing compared to what I find around the back side of the temple: a high-tech looking wheelchair lift very self-consciously, yet halfheartedly obscured by a slab of granite on its outside. Make no mistake; I am not critical of the absolute eyesore it creates in proximity to the serene moat and reflecting pool surrounding the temple and the raised floor of stone slab (not wheelchair accessible) which somehow both compliments and contrasts the rough sandstone of the temple walls. On the contrary, I love it. I love it even more than the graffiti, because I believe it extends what the reliefs, graffiti, and Coptic inscriptions represent: the starkly visible accrual of changes in cultural values and necessities.

The temple was installed in the MET's Sackler Wing in 1978, twelve years before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) took effect. The irony of the lift's visual clunkiness is that the installation could have retained its elegant simplicity with a ramp running along the back side of the platform, which would have probably been just as ADA compliant. But in 1978, a relative blip ago on the timeline of world history present in the room, we still had an insufficient understanding of our own cultural needs on the most base level, and the struggle to catch up is embodied by this fairly literal example of what artist-scholar Joseph Grigely terms “exhibition prosthetics,” or the indirect, invisible, or partially visible aspects of any exhibition that facilitate the viewing of works.

Wheelchair lift

In his book, *Textualterity: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism*, Grigely defines two ways by which artworks change over time, which he terms "continuous and discontinuous transience."[3] In the former, works change gradually by fading, decaying, or generally succumbing to the forces of time and nature. The Temple of Dendur has certainly succumbed to time's ravages, but the Temple's most potent culture value is as a record of discontinuous transience, whereby pieces change though moments of rupture. It mirrors an example Grigely uses in which a cast of Rodin's *Thinker* at the Cleveland Museum of Art was anonymously bombed, and "in an unusual appraisal of the event, Cleveland Museum president Sherman Lee took up a suggestion posed by a newspaper and returned the damaged sculpture to public display, describing it as 'a symbol of something wrong in our society today, violence and destruction without purpose.'"[4]

The similarity here is that the evidence of sudden changes are not covered up; the walls are not "restored" from the graffiti, and the wheelchair lift is minimally integrated into the surrounding motifs by a slab of granite. However, a difference between the case of Cleveland's *Thinker* and the temple (besides that adding a wheelchair lift is obviously not a violent act), is that the plain visibility of the wheelchair lift is *not* symbolic, as Lee suggests of the bombed sculpture; rather, it is directly resultant of a change in cultural necessity and values.

Just two days after my visit to the temple, a show by artist Park McArthur opened at the Essex Street Gallery on the Lower East Side. The main piece in the show was an installation of wheelchair ramps organized in a grid-like pattern on the gallery floor. Each ramp was either bought or constructed by art institutions, residencies, and studios, which did not provide proper wheelchair access until McArthur requested them. The ramps show a wide variety of construction techniques, materials, care, and degradation. Each was cataloged in a corresponding index available in the back of the gallery. The power of the installation reflects what I enjoy about the temple's wheelchair lift: they are not metaphoric of issues surrounding agency and access, but real, direct results of these issues.

The temple's situation between the Egyptian and American exhibits might be metaphorical, but its movement to America is not. It is the immediate result of a new form of global image and object diplomacy which David Joselit outlines in his book *After Art*. He argues that two attitudes have emerged regarding the exchange of art as currency: a "neoliberal" attitude whereby works are free market commodities without much regard for context and an "image fundamentalist" attitude whereby a given "visual artifact belongs exclusively to a specific site (its place of origin)." Both of these stances are ultimately different forms of conservatism and, "not coincidentally [nor

3 Grigely, Joseph. *Textualterity: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI 1995 pp. 70-80

4 Ibid, p, 77

symbolically, I would add], they correspond with those [dominate positions] that structure contemporary global politics."[5]

How one fits the temple into these image economy paradigms may depend on their cynicism towards its story. On the one hand, fundamentalism would have failed it, resulting in its destruction by flood (though there is surely a rabbit hole of neoliberal justifications for the event that would have destroyed it). On the other hand, while it is considered a gift from Egypt, it is the kind of gift that follows a huge financial transaction, reinforcing the neoliberal free trade position. Paradoxically, preservation of ancient art and artifacts acquired by western nations from far-off civilizations tend to come back around to a form of temporal fundamentalism, espousing the belief that such works must resist change and remain documents of their original time. The Sackler Wing was meticulously designed by the firm of Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates to be the temple's permanent home, but the wheelchair lift now affixed to its side, just below ancient reliefs, illustrating that even this new found permanence can still be altered by the heavy weight of real and changing cultural needs in the globalizing present.

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I head to the Met specifically to see the Temple of Dendur; it is my only priority. I want to look it in a different light after a concert I had heard on NPR back in 2011. The concert had turned into something of an obsession for me, and I want to try to complete the image of a chamber orchestra up on the platform in front of the columned entrance, surrounded by the moat. I want to try to imagine what context such a serene but culturally complicated venue would add.

The concert commemorated the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11 and was performed by the Brooklyn-based Wordless Music Orchestra. The program featured appropriately contemplative, strained, mournful works with just the right amount of comfort and hope in their resolution. Pieces by Osvaldo Golijov, Ingram Marshall, and Alfred Schnittke made up the first half. After the intermission was the world premiere of the William Baskinski's *D/P1.1* from his 2001 *The Disintegration Loops* series. The piece had never been performed live in its entirety before, because doing so is hardly possible.[6]

The Disintegration Loops resulted when Basinski began digitizing unused recordings that had just been taking up space for decades. (He has been using tape loops to compose since the form was fairly new.) The actual material of the tape had decayed so much that iron oxide, which documents the recorded sound information, began to flake off of the plastic backing, falling

5 Joselit, David. *After Art*
Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 2013 Kindle ebook edition Loc. 107

6 The concert is available for streaming on NPR Music's classical blog:
http://www.npr.org/blogs/deceptivecadence/2011/09/07/140265002/remembering-september-11-a-live-concert-webcast-from-the-temple-of-dendur

gradually to the floor. With no way to reverse the process, he let it continue and found that as the tape disintegrated so did the sound it played.

Though logically we know that there is as direct connection between the sound we hear and its physical apparatus, we rarely think of it that way until it is mapped out before our senses. Basinski was fascinated to find that each note disappeared from the back, so to speak, with the sustained echoes disappearing first, leaving at last just the initial attack of the sound. The quieter the sound that the oxide recorded, the more prone it was to falling off.

D/P 1.1 and the other *Disintegration Loops* are another example of direct results of change becoming perceivable. Unlike other works of music, the changes that lead the listener through these pieces only happen in one manner and in one direction: decline, like a car driven off the lot. Rather than any other type of theme and variation, the loops move ever towards silence with no chance of recovery, mechanically objective and yet undeniably melancholy.

In some form, all constructed cultural spaces and objects are in decline, though it is difficult to imagine architecture like the Temple of Dendur or the Sackler Wing as anything less than permanent. Buildings are certainly not made with their own demise in account. Decline is mediated by both the physical structure and cultural use, the defining concepts behind what a space is and what a place is.

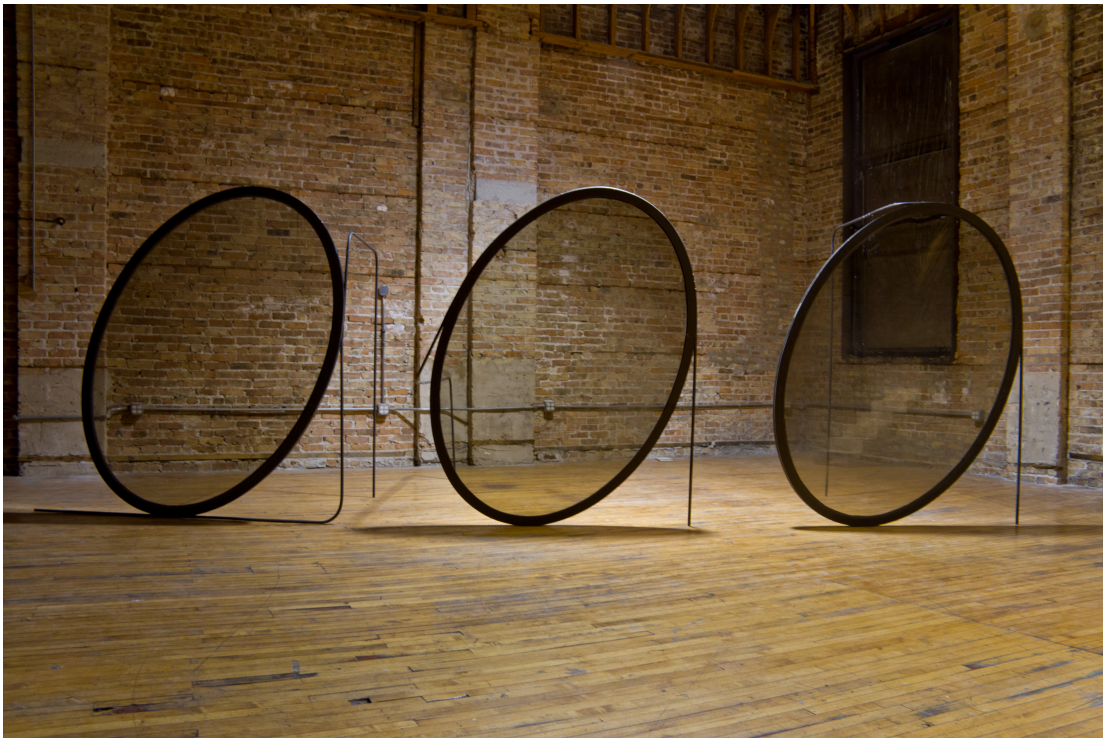
Chicago-based sculptor Jeff Prokash explores this distinction in an ongoing installation piece called *Prentice Windows*. Following a long, public debate aimed at whether or not to preserve the historical, Brutalist building Prentice Women's Hospital by Bertrand Goldberg, Prokash began negotiations to obtain three of its iconic, elliptical windows upon its demolition. Since it was no longer in use, the building's ownership was unclear to Prokash: as owned by Northwestern University, it was a hospital (or a would-be historical landmark); but as owned by the demolition company, it was physical material. As it turned out, Northwestern determined the windows were the demolition company's to relinquish. Directly resultant of this transfer of ownership, the *hospital* – its hospital-ness – was demolished before any concrete was removed. The cultural idea of a hospital must first be ontologically converted into poured concrete, steel, and ovular glass in order for those materials to be dismantled. The demolition company owned the building *as materials* for destruction, not as a space for healing.

Demolition of Prentice Women's Hospital, photo by Prokash

The remains of Prentice Women's Hospital as of October 9, 2014, photo by Prokash

In the same way, the decline of sound in Baskinski's *The Disintegration Loops* is predicated on the fact that a real, physical material prone to destruction underlies the music. The graffiti carved into the temple walls records new and changing cultural meanings, but does so reductively through the brittleness of the sandstone. As the sand falls off the wall onto the silty temple floor, it resembles the iron oxide flaking off the clear tape backing.

Prokash's piece is not a preservationist work. It does not recreate how the windows originally fit into the building the way the giant sandstone bricks of the temple were meticulously cataloged and disassembled in Egypt and reassembled in New York. Custom steel armatures fabricated differently depending on the venue hold the seven-by-four foot windows upright or angled on their more precarious narrow arcs. Several aspects of the piece create an architectural system of its own: the structural challenge of holding the windows up; the recognizability of windows as windows despite their unusual shape; the site-responsiveness of tailoring the armatures to the shape and materials of the surrounding room; the line formed by the windows' repetition and the tension of how it bisects the gallery walls. The combination of these formal qualities amount to a meditation on how building happens, how line and plane creates a space. But I have also talked to viewers of this piece who gave birth in Prentice Women's Hospital and architectural enthusiasts who recognize the ovals immediately. Their connection to these windows as cultural and physical artifacts is strong and personal. Though the cultural meaning of the building has been separated from its substrate, both are present in this piece in different ways.



Prentice Windows installed at Ballroom Projects, Chicago, March 2014

I believe that the ontological distinction been material and cultural value is real and the effects of changes between either state is not strictly metaphorical. In other words, the shift between temple and art exhibit, between music and dust, and hospital and concrete are the direct result of physical or social changes. However, we still have a strong need to interpret these changes, especially in the case of decline which inherently provokes feelings of loss.

Perhaps this need for deeply personal interpretation led to the translation of *The Disintegration Loops* into something that can be played by human hands live for human ears. A piece so mechanically generated would, upon first thought, resist any emotional content. But for Basinski (perhaps because of coincidental timing) the loops are a reflection on September 11, the most sudden and brutal example of discontinuous transience in recent memory. The album artwork for the four volumes of *The Disintegration Loops* are photos taken from Basinski's Brooklyn studio of the sun setting through the rubble cloud over Manhattan on that day of extreme ontological shift. In an interview for the NPR broadcast, Ryan McAdams, conductor of Wordless Music Orchestra at the Temple of Dendur that day, likened the piece to September 11 as "destruction that no one could have anticipated."

We culturally experience changes in our physical surroundings even if we don't see them occurring. This takes place naturally amid the movement of image economies. However, the total dismantling of meaning can only result from image economies and ideological paradigms at war. The Temple of Dendur, with its new-found prosthetic and comfortable view of Central Park, ontologically has it all: it was preserved from destruction but retains its susceptibility to change.