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**Editorial**

e-flux journal #47 — september 2013 [Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle](#)  
Editorial

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Where do artifacts go when they are destroyed? They enter a void of historical erasure, of fabricated narratives and convenient amnesia. We used to call that place a museum. But what happens when a museum is itself destroyed, when it is burned or looted, when icons and artifacts turn to dust or fall back into the hands of people? Can we still access them, and do we even want to? As Boris Groys points out in this issue:

After all, what is the revolution? It is not the process of building a new society – this is the goal of the post-revolutionary period. Rather, revolution is the radical destruction of the existing society. However, to accept this revolutionary destruction is not an easy psychological operation. We tend to resist the radical forces of destruction, we tend to be compassionate and nostalgic toward our past – and maybe even more so toward our endangered present.

After a stream of disappointments following the uprisings of recent years, we start to think about cultural heritage and who secures the narration of history. The notion of history and the nation of history. Thinking back to the 2003 looting of the Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, we can remember how confusing it was to mourn the loss of civilization at the same time as mourning the loss of human life. It was confusing because it was emotionally difficult to understand which one produced the other. When the museum was looted, we did not know whether it was a place containing artifacts from a history we wrote, or from a history that actually wrote us. This was civilization converted into information, then manifested as material history in the museum before finally exploding into the streets – a dematerialization of art taken to another level completely.

Following an outpouring of the social imaginary, we start to think about concrete power and where it really rests. And it makes us ask strange questions: Who stabilizes narratives and provides absolute protection for heritage? It is certainly not the internet. And it is certainly not historians or religious fanatics. It has always been the military – guarding the state as repository, literally holding it together to narrate itself as a community, keeping people from becoming artifacts. Naturally, it's important to remember that the looting of the Museum of Iraq took place in the midst of an insurgency from outside the country, not from inside. These are two very different things. In this issue, Nato Thompson looks at the “cultural turn” in the US military, evidenced by new programs it deployed during the occupation of Iraq. These programs

used grassroots organizing tactics to build social bonds between the occupying army and communities within Iraq. Such programs provoke us to face a paradoxical overlap between nonviolent and violent forms of organizing, and the unsettling similarities in how each produces concrete transformations in society.

We might say that this paradox is itself the location of art. And before making assumptions about art's complicity in being instrumentalized by power, or its autonomy as a free space in some imaginary absolute, it becomes important to identify the particular quality of concreteness assumed by artworks placed at the center of this paradox. We have to find the terms for understanding the fact that we are living inside an epic contradiction, hopped up on speed. Returning to Groys's essay, it was precisely Malevich who created the first artifact of destruction – his *Black Square*, an image of permanent destruction that survives permanent destruction. It is a paradoxical post-revolutionary recovery operation that preceded even the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Where do artifacts go after they die? It may be that contemporary artists are remaking them. Let's then think together with Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis about plastics. And let's take a little rest and let a pre-human *Petrosaurus Rex* tell us something about the the heritage of the elastic future.

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