

STRATEGIES FOR LOSS: THINKING AND (RE)MAKING THE PAST

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For any student of material culture, objects provide the means for understanding social values, ritual and domestic procedure, and individual artistic development. Objects and structures are proxies for vanished makers and patrons, and remnants of the world they created. But there is always a tension between the substantiality of these physical remains and the absence of their historical context. They are both emissaries and orphans.

Anya Kivarkis, in her qualified retrieval of objects – past and present – gives form to this ambivalence. In her previous body of work, *Blind Spot* (2006), she carefully reproduced jewelry from historical renderings, then inverted or covered her objects with paint in order to disguise their precious material and legible form. Her current series *Vanishing Point* (2007–present, selections on view) – based on contemporary images of the jewels worn by celebrities on the red carpet – similarly recodes and critiques contemporary jewelry. The generation of her work begins with an artifact whose iconography and deeper societal meanings are only made apparent through her ruminative and physical re-creation. Kivarkis' project is analysis through making that identifies the distance between source and copy, history and the present moment.

In my work as an architectural historian, I seek a similar dialogue with objects and archives. While we share an interest in researching material culture, I approach archives as a reservoir of facts available for interpretation. For Kivarkis, however, an archive is not fixed; it is shifting and mutable. The source material for her current work – Internet images of posing celebrities – is compiled from a fragmented inventory. These paparazzi and media photographs are the portraits of our age, fleeting, afloat in a sea of competing images, frequently and easily replaced. Isolating moments in which jewelry worn by celebrities is visually truncated or seen from an unexpected angle, Kivarkis' objects reference not only the jewels themselves but the famous figure that activated them. But these simulacra are strangely anonymous when viewed independently from their source, enshrining the image of the celebrity rather than the celebrity themselves. These objects insist on degrees of separation rather than proximity. They are not the jewels actually worn next to the skin but an objectification of that ephemeral moment.

While Kivarkis acknowledges and even emphasizes the contingency of her sources, I initially conceived of my archival materials as less mutable both in their physical form and the information they provided. Stored in the cavernous National Archives or the charmingly eccentric collections of the Arsenal and the Library of the City of Paris, my fifteenth and sixteenth-century documents of creased paper and thick leather bindings are tactile and aromatic proof of the past. Likewise, the buildings to which they pertain still stand; their facture can be read in both text and stone courses.

But as I considered the positivist solidity of my archives through the lens of Kivarkis' practice, I began to read the

limitations of these centuries-old archives and buildings in a different manner. Rather than concentrating on all the testaments, foundations and contracts I could access, I began reflecting on all the documents I don't have: the initial contracts naming architects, major donors and construction history. The inventories of several churches listing long-vanished manuscripts, liturgical vessels and vestments started to seem less like useful evidence of communal practice and more a mournful register of what cannot be retrieved. As an architectural historian, I emphasize the record that exists and fill in the gaps in the textual narrative as best I can from the physical record of the building: the disruptions of courses; the change in molding profiles and pier sections; new vault or window forms. The moment when the documents are lost, when the record falls silent in my archive is the same moment in Kivarkis' work when the model turns her head or a ruffle covers the face of a brooch. By collating, describing and writing about my sources, I seek to present both the original sources and the vanished world they describe. Kivarkis' objects may acknowledge the gaps and vacancies of her own archives, but they provide a kind of solace in their solidity; they are present despite their omissions. In our shared attempts to retrieve the past, we are reminded of the ultimate impossibility of that task, a notion which Kivarkis embraces. The historian in me resists.

Another perhaps more obvious parallel in our work is interest in the luxury object and its social signification. Even the careful observer might not make an immediate connection between Kivarkis' formally and intellectually stoic constructions with their medieval predecessors. But, in the unexpected turn of collaborative dialogue, some commonalities became apparent.

In the medieval period, precious materials such as colored glass, metals and stones were reserved, as they are today, for the elite. This meant not only the aristocracy but the Church as well. Suger, the abbot who undertook the rebuilding of Saint-Denis near Paris in the mid-twelfth century, defended his use of sumptuous and costly materials as appropriate to the honor of the Divine. The use of precious materials was understood to be an apt metaphor for the process of spiritual transformation. As the worshipper contemplated the jeweled lights of a stained glass window or a finely worked golden reliquary, the belief was that their thoughts would be elevated, through craftsmanship and splendor, to a higher plane. Through an insistence on materiality, a state of supra-materiality might be reached.

Something very similar is operating both in Kivarkis' choice of source material as well as through the critique it retroactively initiates. She simultaneously enshrines and denies the status of her objects. They become otherworldly; fragments from the body they once adorned. The jewels that bedeck Renaissance aristocrats or modern-day celebrities telegraph the possession of wealth, prestige, and status; these meanings are clearly understood. But when seen through the lens of medieval history, other, more subtle, meanings emerge. It is not simply status or wealth that the jewels communicate; it is a numinous power that society confers upon these individuals. They are sacralized much like the bodies of medieval saints, fragments encased in gold elevated into objects of honor and intense visual interest. In both cases, the precious objects frame, not just embellish, the wearer. By recreating her own objects from popular internet-based archival sources, Kivarkis draws attention to the connection between the wearer and the worn. Excised from their original context and recreated in three-dimensions, Kivarkis' isolated and fragmented forms function as stand-in for the wearer. By covering or obscuring the original imagery and form of these pieces, Kivarkis illustrates the impossibility of recreating the past, of holding it, of knowing it. In writing history, in spelling out the limits of my *own* conversation with the past, I too, am effectively covering an object with a layer, not of paint, but of contemporary analysis that firmly fixes it as here but gone.