Artistic Reconfigurations of Rome

An Alternative Guide to the Eternal City, 1989-2014

Kaspar Thormod

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By

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with a Preface by

Mieke Bal

2   Machines, Gods and Ghosts

Whereas theoretical reflections on historical narratives in Hazewinkel's visual artworks reconfigure and bring our time into direct contact with dimensions of our history, which we perhaps would rather leave in the past, Patricia Cronin's (the American Academy, 2006) exhibition *Le Macchine, gli Dei e i Fantasmi* (2013) offers a much more ambivalent attitude to re-envisioning historical narratives and source material. Her exhibition, to which I will turn my attention now, was shown at the turbine halls of Centrale Montemartini Museo. Since 1997, this Roman museum has displayed antique statues, busts and fragments from the collection of Musei Capitolini among gargantuan diesel engines that generated power for the city in the first decades of the twentieth century.

In this complex setting, which combines remnants from ancient and industrial Rome, Cronin displayed six large sheets of silk (c. 3 × 1.5m), which had been dyed with black and dark blue colours, creating a watercolour effect that make white ghost-like figures rise from the undulating surfaces [figs. 44–45]. These silk sheets were hung, like banners, from the platform railings of the machines. Thus, the title aptly summarises the different elements of the exhibition: machines, gods and ghosts. It is the status of the silk sheet ghosts in Cronin's exhibition that I am going to examine here. I contend that if we regard the

FIGURE 44   Patricia Cronin, "Queen of Naples Ghost" and "Ghost #25", in *Le Macchine, gli Dei e i Fantasmi*, 2013.

Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 5.
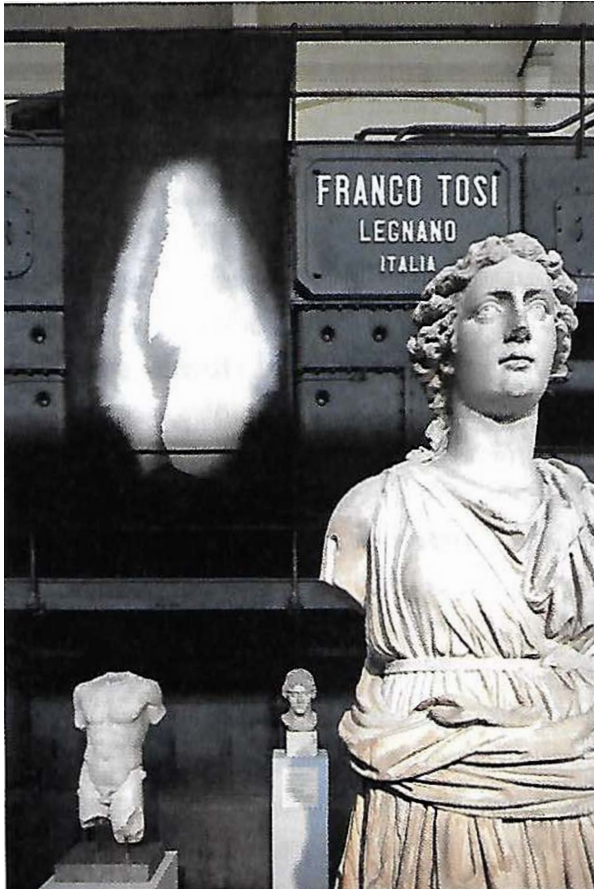
FIGURE 45
Patricia Cronin, "Ghost #18", in *Le Macchine, gli Dei e i Fantasmi*, 2013.

ghosts as interventions in a complex historical setting – that is, being situated between statues of ancient gods and modern power generators – it becomes possible to ask how the work reflects on historical narratives between Roman antiquity and modernity.

Cronin's ghosts do not offer any immediate interpretations to the viewer who visits Centrale Montemartini. Hanging from the machines behind the statues, the sheets are either backcloths or translucent barriers between them and the machines. Whilst retaining and combining the white colour of the statues and the black-bluish colour of the machines, Cronin's work transforms the materiality (stone/metal) into silk. The work is both related to the surroundings (via colour) and qualitatively different from them (via materiality). And if we regard the silk sheets as interventions in this historical locale and consider the fact that they are characterised by an integration of colour and a transformation of materiality, Cronin's ghosts are poised as visual mediators between historical epochs of Roman antiquity and urban modernity that are represented so emblematically by pagan gods and machines.

Five of the six sheets are simply entitled 'Ghost' and given a number (for instance, *Ghost #25*). The remaining silk sheet is entitled *Queen of Naples Ghost*, but what the ghost of a historic figure, who could be Joan II (1371–1435) or Maria Carolina of Austria (1752–1814), has to do with antique statues and machines is difficult to grasp when one stands in the turbine hall. In fact, it is only when one consults the exhibition catalogue that one learns that the title *Queen of Naples* refers to a now lost statue by American neoclassical sculptor Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908) in whose work Cronin has previously shown a keen interest, creating a catalogue raisonné in which she reproduced Hosmer's known statues and rendered her lost works (including *Queen of Naples*) as blurred shadows.[18]

The inclusion of a reference to Hosmer's work makes the juxtaposed historical narratives at Centrale Montemartini Museo even more complex. We now have to understand how the ghosts mediate between antiquity, a neoclassical American sculptor and the modernity of urban Rome. In order to make sense of this, art director of the American Academy Peter Benson Miller and art critic Ludovico Pratesi use the catalogue accompanying *Le Macchine, gli Dei e i Fantasmi* to create a strong textual frame that encourages us to use both Cronin's biography and her previous body of work as interpretive keys for understanding what her ghosts are alluding to.

"Evoking the nineteenth century fascination with death, mourning and the supernatural, Cronin explores the afterlife of classical sculpture, harnessing it to a profound meditation upon matrimony, memory and a reconsideration of contemporary gender and sexuality", writes Benson Miller (27). He reaches this conclusion by weaving a rich tapestry which includes references to Cronin's sexuality, to a marble sculpture entitled *Memorial to a Marriage* (2002) in which Cronin depicted herself and her partner Deborah Kass embracing, and to a general Romantic fascination with ghosts that characterised a number of American artists and writers who spent time in Rome in the nineteenth century, including Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Hosmer:

> Invoking these ghosts, Cronin's monumental apparitions conjure up what novelist Elizabeth Bower, in *A Time in Rome*, called *Roma Sparita* ("Vanished Rome"), by which she intended not just the physical traces of antiquity, but "an atmosphere, partly psychic, partly social", the relatively

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18   Patricia Cronin, *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found* (Milano; New York: Charta, 2009); Peter Benson Miller and Ludovico Pratesi, eds., *Patricia Cronin: Le Macchine, gli Dei e i Fantasmi* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2013), 35.

recent collective memory, evanescent yearnings, friendships and rivalries, for example, of that network of expatriate American artists and writers. (25)

The openness of Cronin's work makes it possible for Benson Miller to connect it to numerous contexts ranging from the artist's biography to the Romantic yearnings of expatriate Americans. However, he also concludes that "Cronin's ghosts evoke not only these lost souls, but also the challenges implicit in the reclamation and rereading of the past" (27). From this statement it seems that *Le Macchine, gli Dei e i Fantasmi* really does reflect on historical narratives, but how Cronin's ghosts exactly intervene in the particular historical setting of Centrale Montemartini Museo remains a mystery.

I wish to question this dominant interpretation of Cronin's work that has been reproduced in practically all the media coverage.[19] My point is that if one claims that the ghosts are about the difficulties involved in recovering the past, one also needs to ask *what* past(s) the work attempts to recover. Antiquity? Expatriate Americans in the nineteenth century? Roman modernity? Pratesi's contribution to the catalogue makes us none the wiser when he declares that Cronin's works create "a new dialogue between time, memory, and desire […] Their placement throughout the museum will generate a powerful dialogue between past and present, between archaeology, industry, and, of course, contemporary art" (25). It is all well and good to point to all these ephemeral connections and connotations, but it also gives the impression that Cronin's ghosts only interact in a superficial manner with these Roman narratives.

I find Cronin's ghosts both beautiful and evocative, and I believe that we need an alternative reading of them – that is, a reading that neither builds on the artist's biography and previous work, nor on abstract notions of a "dialogue between time, memory, and desire". Let us begin by thinking about what these ghosts might mean. Avery Gordon has argued that the presence of ghosts signifies that repressed or hidden (subjective, social, institutional) aspects of history interfere directly or indirectly with the present. She writes that "[h]aunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the

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19   The media coverage includes: "Patricia Cronin Confronts the Present with the Past", *National Trust for Historic Preservation*, February 17, 2014; "I fantasmi di Patricia Cronin alla Centrale Montemartini", *Il Messaggero*, November 11, 2013; "Patricia Cronin: presenze e assenze", *Artribune*, November 9, 2013; "Dedicato a te, Harriet Hosmer", *Corriere Della Sera*, October 11, 2013; "Omaggio alla Hosmer di Patricia Cronin", *Corriere Della Sera*, October 7, 2013. For a critique of such textual layers in exhibitions of contemporary art, see Bishop, "History Depletes Itself", 325.

way we separate the past, the present, and the future".[20] Perhaps Cronin's ghosts really are haunting the turbine halls of Centrale Montemartini Museo, where they interfere in an elusive way with the historical narratives of antiquity and modernity.

This elusiveness is not clarified by the title *Le Macchine, gli Dei e i Fantasmi*, which simply lists the elements of the exhibition. The title also brings to mind the Latin term *deus ex machina* – a term that in Greek and Roman dramas meant 'god from the machine', signifying the sudden introduction of a god that would resolve the narrative.[21] But again a clear resolution to these narratives is exactly what we do not get in this exhibition. In this regard, then, Cronin's work appears to be much more ambiguous than for instance the work of another American artist, Shimon Attie, who, as we saw in Chapter two, created a series of evocative, ghostly installations that reconfigured the concrete historical narratives of Roman sites like the Colosseum.

So in order to create an alternative reading, which takes into account the ambiguous status of Cronin's ghosts, it is necessary to look at the silk sheets themselves. International artists in Rome often use cloth, veils or shrouds in their work, and such work might contain references to baroque drapery and might be connected to the concept of the fold.[22] But in Cronin's work a second cloth- and Rome-related connotation seems to be more relevant, namely "Veronica's Veil".

According to the legend, Saint Veronica wiped the face of Christ with her veil, and, miraculously, the veil continued to carry a (ghostly) likeness of the face of Christ. Later, the veil became a holy relic which pilgrims went to see in St. Peter's Basilica where it is kept today, and in Renaissance and Baroque art the veil is a fantastically popular subject.[23] In connection with *Le Macchine, gli Dei e i Fantasmi*, I contend that the ghosts of Cronin's work can be connected with the ghostly image of Christ displayed on Veronica's Veil in Rome.

To unpack this complex idea, it is necessary to understand the centuries-old tension embodied by artistic representations of Veronica's Veil. Hans Belting has claimed that before the thoroughly secular idea of art as a commodity had taken root in the Renaissance, icons like Veronica's Veil would be perceived by

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20   Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

21   "Deus Ex Machina", *Britannica Academic*, accessed October 7, 2016, https://www.britannica .com/art/deus-ex-machina.

22   See for instance Liz Rideal's (the British School at Rome, 2009) use of cloth in her work *Dancing with Borromini* (2008).

23   Cf. Irene Earls, *Renaissance Art: A Topical Dictionary* (New York; London: Greenwood Press, 1987), 297; Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 190–91.

religious beholders as embodying the presence of the divine. That is, not as representation but as pure presence. Within the ritual of the Catholic Church, the icon did not refer to something outside the icon, such as an abstract idea of God, which it represented or symbolised; instead there was a one-to-one relationship between God and the icon – they are the same. A new situation arose when religious images began to be construed in a secular sphere as 'art': "The new presence *of* the work succeeds the former presence of the sacred *in* the work", as Belting puts it.[24]

Lacking a one-to-one connection with the divine, the secularised image signifies that there is a gap between the divine and the icon. In other words, it becomes a ghostly image that represents a presence of absence where only faint traces of the divine linger on. Similarly, I believe that Cronin's dyed silk sheets point to a gap in the narratives that are represented at Centrale Montemartini Museo. Seeing them as secularised Veronica's Veils, the ghosts come to signify a presence of absence as they hover in a void between representations of pagan gods and the machinery of modernity. In this way it becomes possible to understand the indeterminacy of Cronin's work as a theoretical reflection on a fundamentally unresolved and in many ways impossible urge to negotiate the relationship between antiquity and modernity. Having lost their power to conjure up real historical connections, the ghosts occupy an indeterminate space characterised by an ambivalent attitude towards the past.

3   Touching at a Distance

Both Cronin and Hazewinkel create objects that seek to interact with ancient statues and the narratives surrounding them through connections to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But whereas Cronin's work ultimately points to the impossibility of bridging the gap between historical narratives represented in Centrale Montemartini Museo through visual artistic representation, Hazewinkel anchors his work in the materiality of the source material and exploits these connections to create alternative narratives that bring the past into dialogue with our time in unexpected ways.

The video work *Marte e Venere – A Hand Held Monument* (2013) by German artist Johann Arens (the British School at Rome, 2014) provides a third example

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24   Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 459; emphasis in original. I have also discussed this idea in Thormod, "Memory in Ruins: Heemskerck's Self-Portrait with the Colosseum", 66–67.

of a contemporary visual artwork which is centred on ancient Roman sculpture and seeks to bring surprising historical narratives to the fore. This work is a 10-minute, non-linear, essayistic art video, which experiments with collages of different images that often are superimposed upon one another. Weaving together different layers of meaning, the work examines the story of an ancient Roman statue of Mars and Venus, which adorned the official residence in Palazzo Chigi of the then prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, but it also opens up into a more general sociological investigation of the notion of touch and touch screen interfaces, which mediate people's interaction with art today.

As we shall see, the theoretical reflections on historical narratives in Arens's work offer a counterpoint to Cronin and Hazewinkel, not only because it moves away from an object-based response to ancient sculpture, but also because Arens engages in a wider sociological and museological investigation of our present-day relationship with remnants of antiquity. It is this shift towards the most recent narratives surrounding ancient artefacts in Roman museums that I examine in the following analysis.

In 2009, an antique group sculpture representing Mars and Venus became the centre of a political scandal in Rome.[25] Through the decision to restore the sculpture which dates from AD 175, the then prime minister Berlusconi spent 70,000 euros of public funds in order to add a magnetic prosthetic penis as well as new fingers and hands. The decision caused public outrage because Berlusconi was spending a vast sum of money to disfigure the 1,800-year-old statue.[26] The scandal showed how Berlusconi had used his political power to 'retouch' the sculpture, which he had to look at every day – perhaps because the missing male member could be associated with political castration.

After Berlusconi had to step down as prime minister, the statue was de-restored and moved to Museo Diocleziano. All this highlights the idiosyncrasies of Berlusconi as well as a general aversion to aggressive restorations, thus adding surprising layers of meaning to the afterlife of ancient sculpture in Rome. *Marte e Venere* does not simply recount this extraordinary chain of events; Arens also pursues the fate of the removed prosthetic limbs, which now linger in a store room detached from the statue. There is a melancholic, poetic quality to these abandoned, defunct limbs. Metonymically, they refer to the

25   Laura Larcan, "Marte e Venere sono tornati al museo. Berlusconi ordinò il ritocco delle statue", *la Repubblica*, accessed January 24, 2018, http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/05/27/news/marte_e_venere_sono_tornati_al_museo_berlusconi_ordin_il_ritocco_delle_statue-35989688/.

26   "Le statue truccate di Palazzo Chigi mani e pene posticci a Venere e Marte", *la Repubblica*, accessed May 20, 2015, http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/11/18/news/statue_palazzo_chigi-9230481/.
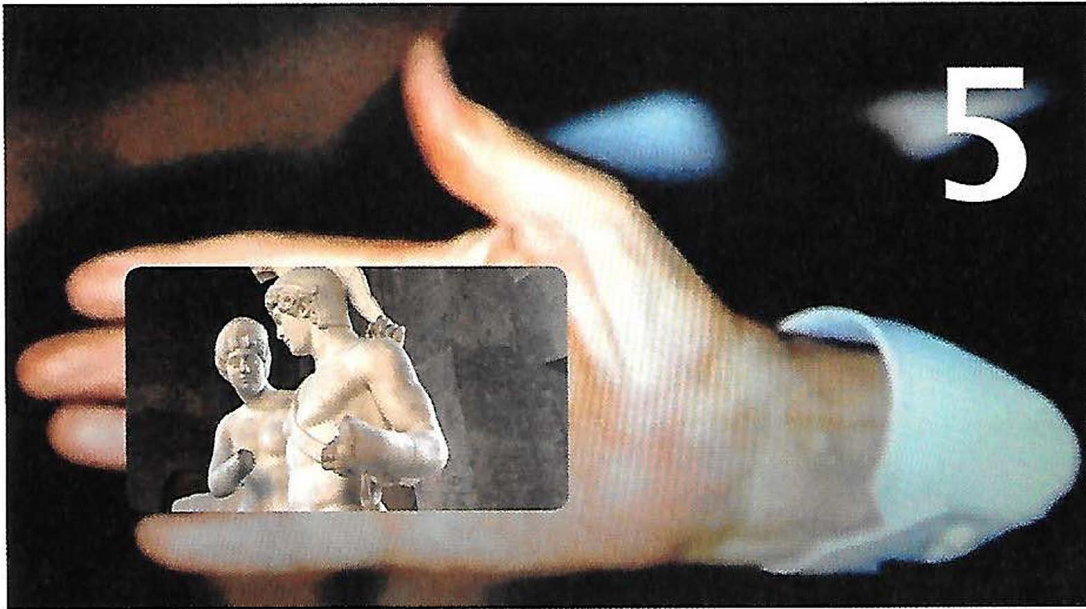
FIGURE 46   Johann Arens, video still from *Marte e Venere – A Hand Held Monument*, 2014.

scandal, and in the video they are juxtaposed visually with images of Berlusconi's hands, caught in mid-air gesticulation during televised speeches [fig. 46].

On the one hand, this visual connection between the statue, the limbs and Berlusconi points not only to Berlusconi's inappropriate retouching of the sculpture, but also to the fact that there is a prosthetic quality to Berlusconi himself – a man who brags about his virility and whose own body has been restored through plastic surgery.[27] On the other hand, Arens connects the prosthetic limbs and the hands of the prime minister to a wider examination of notions of tactility, specifically the ban against touching statues in Roman museums.

Marte e Venere begins in a museum hall where a man sits on a wooden bench, completely absorbed in drawing a bronze statue from the back, at which he glances from time to time. The scene is peaceful; the museum quiet. Then a woman enters the frame, approaching the statue from the front. Her movements are quick; her gaze is fixed. She places a small puppet made of what looks like red felt on the statue, steps back and takes a photo with her phone camera, retrieves the puppet and leaves the scene [fig. 47].

Just before the woman commits her 'crime', the video cuts away to another scene where a pair of hands slowly lifts the black rectangular screen of a camera phone up in front of a bronze statue. Then the video cuts back to the

27   Michael Day, *Being Berlusconi: The Rise and Fall from Cosa Nostra to Bunga Bunga* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 90, 104.

FIGURE 47 Johann Arens, video still from *Marte e Venere – A Hand Held Monument*, 2014.

woman. This intersection of different images and scenes, which later in the video are also superimposed upon one another, is typical of Arens's video in that its scope is at once sociological and symbolic. A quirky incident from the museum hall is juxtaposed with a symbolic image of the hands and the touch screen, which hints at a desire to photograph and to touch those artefacts that are on display.

Like the woman with the felt puppet, many people have a strong desire to touch ancient statues and artefacts, to feel the stone or metal that seems so alive. Arens's work contains several scenes where members of the public interact with ancient artefacts through touch. A man walks around the Mars and Venus sculpture, looking as if he is going to touch the marble; then he steps back, looks around as if nervous that someone is watching him, and takes a photo. In another scene, we see a man touching his own hair almost manically whilst looking at a sculpture. These museum scenes are interrupted by and sometimes merge with the rectangular shape of a smartphone, super-imposed upon the real-life footage as a symbolic field within which a tactile desire to transgress the ban against touching is permitted to unfold. We also see several close-ups of statues in front of which a pair of hands are grasp-ing and caressing a touch screen, which means that Arens's work connects the story of Berlusconi's inappropriate, politicised touch with the urge of the museum-goer to ignore one of the essential conventions of the museum [fig. 48]. At one point, the camera zooms in on a sign reading: Please do not touch the artwork.

FIGURE 48   Johann Arens, video still from *Marte e Venere – A Hand Held Monument*, 2014.

Arens's work adds new layers to the afterlife of ancient sculpture in Rome by examining how sculpture today can become politicised, and how, in the age of camera phones and tablets, these artefacts have become subject to a new perceptual regime. The work suggests that the desire to touch has been displaced so that people now caress the screens in their hands instead of the statues. Thus, the video explores a paradox in the afterlife of ancient sculpture: even though ancient sculpture like the Mars and Venus statue depicts sensuality and is centred on the idea of touch, we as museum-goers have become utterly detached from this sensuality because the museum as an institution values vision above touch. But in an increasingly mediated world the proliferation of touch screens has enabled us to sidestep this ban against tactilism, which has caused us to interact with the statues by touching our screens.[28] In *Marte e Venere*, the superimposed images of hands caressing touch screens call to mind what Paul Virilio in the mid-1990s described as "touching at a distance":

> Cyberspace is a new form of perspective. It is not simply the visual and auditory perspective that we know. It is a new perspective without a single precedent or reference: a *tactile perspective*. Seeing at a distance, hearing at a distance – such was the basis of visual and acoustic perspective.

28   Caro Verbeek defines 'tactilism' as "the unmediated sense of touch [that] prevails over vision and other senses". Caro Verbeek, "Prière de toucher!", *The Senses and Society* 7, no. 2 (July 1, 2012): 226.

But touching at a distance, feeling at a distance, this shifts perspective into a field where it had never before applied: contact, electronic contact, tele-contact.[29]

The distant touch of our fingertips on a scratch-resistant glass display substitutes for the actual materiality and surface structure of the Mars and Venus sculpture – heavy, cold, smooth, worn, rough, curved. The antique body as a tactile object has given way to a pristine hand-held body. At the same time, the ban against touch and loss of materiality also gives rise to a suppressed sense of erotic touching: the caressing hands in Arens's work point to a yearning for intimacy, which perhaps also represents a yearning for being in direct contact with history, that accompanies this new perceptual regime.

At first glance, the title of the work *Marte e Venere – A Hand Held Monument* seems to imply an intimate touch, of holding the sculpture in the palm of your hand. But given the nature of the mediation and the distance it creates between museum-goer and artefact, it is more likely that the 'monument' in question alludes to the absence rather than the presence of history. The video ends with a close-up view of a widescreen TV which is placed in a corner of the museum. The screen is black. "Non toccare lo schermo", it says underneath. Do not touch the screen. The camera zooms in on the mirror-like surface and suddenly we notice a ghostly reflection of a marble statue. Is this the sad afterlife of ancient sculpture in our mediated world – dematerialised figures hovering on a black screen? And do the dismembered prosthetic limbs perhaps not only symbolise Berlusconi's hubris but also our own disconnected touch? These questions are raised but left unanswered in Arens's work.

Despite not producing an object-based artistic response to ancient sculpture, Arens plays nevertheless on notions of materiality and immateriality in ways which are comparable to Hazewinkel's and Cronin's work. Hazewinkel's work attempts to make present absent statues by focusing on the materiality of glass plates that carry their images into our time; Cronin's ghosts hover between ephemeral connections and a distinct materiality of the silk sheets; and Arens's work revolves around the mediation and (in)tangibility of these ancient remnants. All these works are characterised by theoretical reflections on historical narratives and source material as they engage with the past and bring it into contact with the present. It is not about establishing when a given statue was made, where it was found and what function it had in its contemporary cultural context. Rather, it is about exploring how conflated temporal

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29   Paul Virilio, "Red Alert in Cyberspace", *Radical Philosophy*, no. 74 (1995): 2; emphasis in original.

layers, narratives and mediations are an integral part of our experience of these statues.

Particularly in Hazewinkel and Arens's work, we see a move away from the self-referentiality of the art world and an engagement with historic source material and environments in ways that resemble the work of historians or sociologists. But what are the differences between the artist-historian and more academic scholars who live side by side with the artists at the foreign academies in Rome? The impulse in contemporary art to turn to history in a search for material has coincided with a transformation of the way artists work, which has seen many abandon traditional studies and workshops in favour of artist research on laptops and in archives.[30] Hazewinkel, Cronin and Arens are part of this wave of artists, but their work still differs significantly from academic scholars.

Firstly, they might excavate or gather source material, but whereas scholars produce written interpretations and often rely heavily on supplementary textual sources, artists actively re-envision the source material. Secondly, this re-envisioning of historic material brings it into contact with the present. Thirdly, this connection to the present is further enhanced by the focus on materiality and sensorial engagement with the source material. And finally, the viewer of the work becomes an essential agent in the reactivation of the artistically reconfigured source material. Thus, the theoretical reflections on historical narratives pointing to an impulse to interact with ancient sculpture should be understood as a particular kind of knowledge production, which is not limited to interpretation and information distribution, but which, being centred on materiality and perception, is connected with the sensorial experience of the sources in the present. This is different from the simple use of historic material as a source. And this is why I refer to these artworks as being characterised by theoretical reflections on historical narratives, rather than merely sampling historical source material.[31]

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30   Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel*, 21. Roelstraete speculates that this trend is perhaps connected to an "academization of art educations" as well as to several recent historical events. For instance, there was a wave of artistic work in the 1990s and early 2000s that examined the histories of the Eastern Bloc because the world of Soviet Communism had ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Rather provocatively Roelstraete suggests that the new historiographic impulse in the 2000s could be seen as a reaction to the politics symbolised by the Bush II administration in the sense that many artists simply took refuge in the past and became obsessed with archives and history because art seemingly had lost its power to change anything in the present neoliberal world (33–35, 39).

31   Artists who engage in research-based work have often been called 'knowledge producers'. I avoid using this term because it is too broad; it both includes artists who interact directly with physical archives and artists who simply work with found material. Also, the term