

Ruined Reflections: Ellen Harvey's *Mirror*

By Alex Baker

A hall of mirrors engraved with a ruined doppelgänger of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Ethereal illumination. A building that comes to life as if imbued with supernatural powers. Shattering mirrors. Burning buildings. A gothic funhouse that channels John Ruskin and the International style. A discombobulating space that both honors and challenges the tenets of America's oldest museum and school.

Ellen Harvey has engaged the Pennsylvania Academy's 1876 historic landmark building by creating a site-specific installation in the heart of the museum. Occurring during the Academy's 200th anniversary year, the exhibition addresses the institution's Gothic Revival architecture and the time-honored realist tradition of copying works of art. Harvey has described her approach to art-making as "an often futile attempt to deconstruct clichés of art production in order to understand or reveal their continuing hold on the imagination despite all their apparent obsolescence."¹ Copying works of art and creating works based on genre archetypes are two strategies employed in Harvey's oeuvre. In *New York Beautification Project* (1999-2001), for example, Harvey spent nearly two years painting exquisitely detailed oil reproductions of nineteenth-century landscape paintings throughout New York City in places outdoors already marked with graffiti. Having created several installations in the "museum interventionist" mode for institutions such as the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, and the Secession in Vienna, Harvey is a perfect match to go up against the Pennsylvania Academy's nineteenth-century architecture and traditions.

When Harvey first visited the Academy to plan *Mirror*, she was overwhelmed by its architectural extravagance. As she relates, the spectacular stairhall "lays down a challenge to the art that follows it. It is nothing like the neutral spaces created for today's art. Art has moved on, but the Academy building remains static. Still, it continues to prove challenging to this day." "How can one compete with a building that is such a complete work of art itself?" was the question she asked repeatedly during the planning phase of the project. She decided that the best strategy would be to "one-up Frank Furness by creating something that could compete with the architecture using the language of contemporary art."²

In *Mirror*, Harvey literally holds a mirror up to Frank Furness and George Hewitt's Victorian Gothic masterpiece by re-creating—that is, copying—the dazzling interior stairhall space as a nearly life-size reverse engraving on mirror. The mirrors are assembled as large units that are installed on aluminum armatures covering each wall in the Academy's four-walled rotunda gallery. Each twelve-by-nine foot artwork is composed of sixteen mirror panels, engraved on the reverse, that when assembled as a grid form a portion of the interior view of the Academy stairhall. The reverse engravings are illuminated from behind, which causes the fine linework to glow. The resulting installation is an all-encompassing drawn environment anchored by a video projection.

The video, projected in the same dimensions as the mirror panels, documents the process of Harvey engraving one set of the mirrors representing one view of the stairhall interior. Visible in each of the sixteen incremental drawings is a video camera in the act of recording the drawing coming to life. During the drawing's evolution on the video screen, the artist is visible only as a shadow that temporarily obstructs the glowing lines. At the end of an hour, when the drawings are complete, all sixteen mirrors featured in the video shatter simultaneously and the laborious process of engraving the mirrors starts again. The video projection is synchronized with two other videos playing on monitors in the neighboring transept galleries. These videos show Harvey's hand drawing an image of the two previous Academy buildings on paper. When the mirrors shatter in the large projection, the drawings of the historical Academy buildings burst into flames—an oblique reference to the fact that the Academy's first home burned.³ With safety and longevity in mind, Furness and Hewitt designed the 1876 Academy building to be fireproof.

Upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that the Pennsylvania Academy interior depicted in the mirror engravings and video projection is far from accurate. Instead of faithfully representing the Academy's carefully maintained stairhall, *Mirror* showcases a space that has become the kind of picturesque ruin from which Victorian Gothic architecture took its inspiration. In Harvey's version, plants sprout, arches crumble, plaster deteriorates, and

boards cover the museum's entry doors. The Academy-as-ruin extends beyond the mirror drawings and video and onto the very walls of the museum itself. Using faux-finishing techniques, Harvey has aged the walls of the rotunda gallery to complement the video and mirror engravings hanging in the same space.

Viewers can see themselves in a strange and bewildering space that is both a variation on Furness and Hewitt's extravagant interior and a wholly original artwork itself. Playing with the idea of the representational foundations of the Academy's original teaching methods, Harvey bestows upon the Academy a representational artwork taken to the extreme: a mirror. She also offers the viewer a seductively narcissistic experience, where s/he, according to Harvey, becomes a "star in a secret, abandoned place that is your own—your reflection also becomes the art."⁴

MIRRORING THE ACADEMY: PEDAGOGY, ARCHITECTURE, AND REPRESENTATION

As Harvey has noted, *Mirror* is the "ultimate representational piece."⁵ Not only does it re-present the defining space of the Academy, but it is literally a mirror that reflects anything before it. The impact is all the more profound since *Mirror* is displayed in one of the great temples of traditional realism, which the installation underscores and playfully subverts. *Mirror* highlights the relationship between the Victorian Gothic architecture of the Pennsylvania Academy building and the realist tradition that is the institution's backbone. As Furness scholar Michael J. Lewis has argued, the curriculum of the Pennsylvania Academy, its collecting emphasis, and the building itself are products of the pragmatic, empirical, and realist traditions prominent in Philadelphia's intellectual history. According to Lewis, Philadelphians have historically had a gift for the "empirical work of observing, cataloging, and compiling."⁶ This perspective has also permeated the visual arts in Philadelphia. Many of the city's great artists from Charles Willson Peale and Thomas Eakins to Eadweard Muybridge and John Peto, have focused their energies on the close observation of the natural world. As Lewis reminds us, "if they occasionally achieved poetry, it was through profoundly prosaic means."⁷ Since 1805, the Academy has advocated a teaching method grounded in naturalism. Thomas Eakins, the Academy's most renowned student and teacher, was just one player in a long tradition of scientific investigation and experimentation that begins with Charles Willson Peale and the founding of the Academy itself and extends to Peto, Robert Henri, Charles Sheeler, and others.⁸ Although these artists all have different sensibilities, they "shared a common fascination for the description of solid objects in real space, and that preference for 'facts and things, not words and signs,' which Stephen Girard [a renowned Philadelphia merchant who helped finance the War of 1812] defined as the characteristic Philadelphia stance."⁹

Harvey's copy of the dominant interior space of the Pennsylvania Academy asks us to ruminate on the representational tradition of the institution, the relationship between traditional and modern architecture that the Academy building embodies, and the melancholic Gothic Revival foundations on which the Academy's architecture rests. By understanding how the pragmatic, empirical, and realist legacies are reflected in the Academy's pedagogy and in its Victorian Gothic building, we are better able to place Harvey's *Mirror* in its site-specific context.

The notion of copying works of art as an artistic exercise has always been an important element of the Academy's curriculum. To this day, students draw from plaster casts (based on antique masterworks), some of which date back to the Academy's inception in 1805. Copying from Greek and Roman exemplars is the mode of instruction for which the Academy became famous. Although much has changed in the visual arts in the last 200 years, this classical approach of drawing from the great works of art history coupled with study of live models continues to be an important aspect of Academy teaching.¹⁰ Harvey both underscores and subverts the former by copying the institution's most renowned masterpiece—the building itself.

Representational veracity—especially regarding the human figure—taken to a nearly scientific level of understanding became associated with the Pennsylvania Academy during Thomas Eakins's tenure from 1876 to 1886. A draft of a manuscript based on his lectures reads as if he were arguing a scientific theorem. Chapter headings such as Linear Perspective, Mechanical Drawing, Isometric Drawing, Refraction, and Laws of Sculptural Relief demonstrate the rational precision that Eakins brought to both his art practice and teaching.¹¹ While Harvey concerns herself with copying the inanimate Academy, Eakins' empiricist approach to the study of the human figure espoused during his Academy years certainly serves as important background in making sense of Harvey's *Mirror*.

If empirical and pragmatic propensities were manifested in the nineteenth-century Philadelphia zeitgeist as well as in the Academy's curriculum, how do these ideas play themselves out in a building that seems on first glance the farthest thing from such a sober point of view? What is pragmatic or scientifically logical about combining Moorish, Venetian, and Gothic architectural styles? It does not lie in the visual surfeit of Victorian eclecticism, but in the modern building methods employed by architects Furness and Hewitt and endorsed by the Academy's building committee of engineers and industrialists. Several of the technologically advanced building strategies employed in the construction of the Pennsylvania Academy belie its Old World melange of architectural history. Iron girders studded with large rivets are boldly exposed to view, the first time structural iron was exploited for aesthetic effect in a public building.¹² Mass production was employed to make detailed patterns, especially pronounced in the stairhall. The gold patterned reliefs on its earthy red walls, designed by George Hewitt in the style of a North African mosque, for example, were actually stamped from a mold. Similarly, the leaf-and-flower motif of the sandstone panels below these Moorish walls were sandblasted—another architectural first. The stairhall's brass railings, resembling crankshafts and turbines, seemingly pay homage to industrial Philadelphia and the engineers and manufacturers who sat on the Academy's building committee.¹³

Just as Furness and Hewitt's structure combined craftsmanship with the latest building technologies, Harvey's copy of the Academy stairhall employs painstaking labor in tandem with modern materials and technologies, including photography, video projection, and digital editing. The video that documents the evolution of one of the engraved views of the Academy required the construction of an elaborate workstation that kept each glass panel firmly in place and the video camera static while Harvey engraved the panels. Behind the video camera, she placed a photographic image of the Academy stairhall to create a visual backdrop for each of the mirror engravings. The panels seen in the video, unlike the larger plexiglass mirror panels on view, were glass, so Harvey could shatter each one upon completing it. After destroying hours and hours worth of intensive work, the only record that remained was the processual video drawing, edited so each drawing evolves in one hour's time—essentially a form of video animation made possible by new digital technologies.

Harvey's reverse engravings also evoke the hand- and machine-made, the traditional and the modern, that hang in balance in the design and construction of the Academy. Her hand-engraved rendition of the stairhall on mirrors anchored to aluminum armatures synthesizes the Victorian Gothic with the metal and glass skin of modern architecture. Here, Harvey obliquely comments on the central role that architecture continues to play in creating a museum's identity. In 1876, the pinnacle of high design was Hewitt and Furness's Victorian Gothic. Today, museum architecture tends toward neo-Modernism: glass, poured concrete, titanium, and other high-tech metals. Just as *Mirror* addresses seemingly oppositional tendencies in museum architecture, the installation also reconciles art-historical extremes. Simultaneously minimal and representational, the mirror panel lightboxes bring together aspects of 1960s Minimalism—like the machined quality of a Donald Judd sculpture or the grids of an Agnes Martin canvas or Sol LeWitt wall drawing—with the traditional notion that art's ultimate goal is to represent a subject as accurately as possible through careful attention to detail and adroit craftsmanship.

THE ACADEMY'S DEBT TO JOHN RUSKIN

American architects working in the mid- to late-nineteenth century were heavily influenced by the writings of the Englishman John Ruskin, the arbiter of Victorian Gothic. Furness and his partner George Hewitt were not exceptions. The façade of the Academy, with its abundance of sculptural ornament and contrasting colors and textures of marble, brick, and sandstone is indebted to Ruskin's admiration of Venetian architecture, made widely known in his seminal work *The Stones of Venice*. Ruskin was most interested in the exterior surfaces of buildings, in particular the ornamentation that was the result of painstaking human labor. The artisans of the medieval Gothic period were his heroes. He thought the industrial revolution had demeaned craftsmanship and replaced the skills of the sculptor with machine production. Nature for Ruskin was just as important a guiding premise in architecture as skilled human labor. The palette of building materials was dictated by nature—a building was fundamentally rooted

in the natural world by the very materials of its composition. Thus the building blocks themselves are the only color possibilities in the construction of buildings (this is known as structural polychromy). The Academy's façade follows Ruskin's rule: rugged bluestone for the foundation, red brick outlined in black mortar joints for the walls, bright yellow sandstone for the trim, and polished red granite for the columns.¹⁴

But Furness and Hewitt were not Ruskinian purists. They were working in a city that was one of the industrial centers of the world and were operating within its empirical and pragmatic traditions. They might have embraced Ruskin, but they also modernized and contradicted him. Just as the architects employed new technologies in performing work once done by artisans, they used chemical pigments to create color possibilities no longer restricted by geology—anathema to the Englishman's beliefs. The Academy's decorative frieze beneath the cornice of the building announces the new era of chemical polychromy in architecture. Here, glass panels were painted on the reverse with transparent paint and backed with gold leaf; the glass sealed in the color, making it safe against soot. It should also be mentioned that even the structural polychromy visible in the Academy's façade was a pragmatic choice whose colorful liveliness was well-suited to withstand the coal pollution of nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Another example of the color intensities born of the industrial revolution is the cobalt blue ceiling of the dazzling stairhall, complete with silver stars.¹⁵

RUINING THE ACADEMY

But there is another aspect of Ruskin and Gothic Revival architecture that is not altogether evident in the Academy building that Harvey explores in *Mirror*—the ruin. In her copy of the Pennsylvania Academy stairhall, Harvey has subtly altered the original by conceiving it as a ruin, alluding to Victorian Gothic architecture's origins. Despite the modern technologies and new building techniques that were employed in the construction of the Academy, its aesthetic ancestry lies in Romantic England, where melancholic longing and medieval ruins intersected to produce an architectural movement international in scope.

The Gothic Revival was a literary movement before it was an architectural one. In early-eighteenth-century England, a literary appetite for melancholy, horror, gloom, and decay developed. Such sensibilities resonated with the crumbling medieval structures that dotted the English landscape. These derelict abbeys and monasteries became choice places on which aristocrats built their estates. The estates would soon boast gardens punctuated by altered ruins or entirely new buildings made to look like ruins constructed in a medieval style. But before the Gothic Revival could be fully embraced, a radical aesthetic shift needed to occur. Since the Renaissance, classical architecture stood for everything that was beautiful. If one were to embrace the art of the so-called Dark Ages, a new way of appreciating art had to develop, and associationism or the picturesque was born to confront artistic challenges. According to this doctrine, a work of art does not have to be judged by intrinsic qualities like form or proportion, which were classical ideals, but should be compared with the mental pictures that are conjured in the viewer's mind when encountering a work of art. The ultimate site for indulging picturesque associations became the landscaped English garden, which appropriated melancholy ruins from the repertoire of seventeenth-century painters such as Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa. However, English ruins in the landscape, whether real or artificial, were decidedly medieval as opposed to Claude and Rosa's classical creations.¹⁶

Summarizing mercilessly, the artificial ruin made of flimsy materials soon led to more permanent structures that were not just theatrical set pieces in garden environments (such as Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill, built 1750–77). Estates, churches, and public buildings adopted the Gothic style whose lineage could be traced to the ruins of the English landscape. What began as an English architectural movement that announced a brand of nationalism distinct from the Roman Catholic Baroque that predominated in France, spread internationally, and began to serve the needs of countries such as Germany and America. The eclecticism that is evident in the Victorian Gothic of the Pennsylvania Academy—motifs appropriated from ancient Greece, medieval Europe, Morocco—can be seen in eighteenth-century English Gothic gardens, where Hindu, Chinese, and Moorish pavilions sprouted amongst authentic and artificial medieval ruins.

The ruin played an important role in Ruskin's conception of architecture. In fact, the idea of the ruin was so central, that, if we follow his argument to its logical end, all great buildings must eventually become ruins. Ruskin disdained the notion of architectural preservation. In the mid-nineteenth century, England undertook a major

restoration effort to preserve medieval churches, cleaning, scraping, recarving, and in some cases, replacing lost elements with modern copies. This affronted Ruskin's idea of dignified decay, that buildings must be allowed to slowly decline into a ruinous state.¹⁷ If ruins are to serve their purpose as aesthetic inspirations, then a building cannot be preserved because this gesture threatens its very status as a ruin. As Ruskin wrote:

Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true meaning of the word *restoration* understood. It means the most total destruction which buildings can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with fake description of the thing destroyed. Do not let us deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is *impossible*, as impossible to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture.¹⁸

Ellen Harvey takes Ruskin to heart and shines light on his idea of restoration equals destruction by conceptually transforming the Pennsylvania Academy into a ruin—as if no restoration had ever been undertaken since the building's completion in 1876. Evoking a Gothic mood, Harvey's reverse engraved, backlit drawings on mirrors seem ghostly, almost like apparitions. Her depiction of the building's esteemed stairhall as a kind of ruin represented as an ethereal, glowing entity—ectoplasm from the spirit world—works in tandem with her decision to artificially age the Academy's rotunda and transept walls to appear as if the building had not been renovated in its nearly 130 year life. Exploring the foundations of the Gothic Revival movement in architecture, Harvey's ruin pays homage to one of the great examples of the Victorian Gothic in the world today. Following Ruskin's argument, since only inspirational buildings become ruins, Harvey's transformation of the Academy into a ruin honors its importance in the history of architecture.

Harvey's ruination of the Academy has some precedent in art history. During the early nineteenth century, interest in and longing for the picturesque charm of ruins was so great that existing structures were envisioned by artists as ruins. Joseph Michael Gandy, who worked as architect John Soane's draftsman for the design of the Bank of England (built 1788–1833), made drawings of this important building as if demolished and weatherbeaten, as he imagined it might look in the future. In France, Hubert Robert painted an image of a gallery in the Louvre as it looked in 1796 and then another image of that same gallery in a ruined state. As Paul Zucker underscores in his analysis of these artworks, “nothing could characterize better the attitude of this era where genuine and artificial ruins catered equally to the lacrimose sentimentality of the era.”¹⁹

HARVEY'S MUSEUM

Mirror is one of several installations created by the artist that engage the museum as site and subject. Two projects undertaken by Harvey in Poland address museum architecture and renovation by employing “ruination” techniques. These installations underscore how dynamic change has impacted the built environment in both the post-World War II and the post-Communist periods. In *Derenovation* (2005) [see page 44], Harvey created a permanent installation for the director's room in the Wyspa Institute of Art, a newly renovated art center in the Gdansk Shipyards. Harvey “derenovated” a wall in the building, restoring it to its earlier appearance and revealing pre-World War II graffiti in the process. Harvey painted trompe l'oeil depictions of the building before its renovation directly on the walls and installed mirrors opposite the paintings so viewers could see themselves in the building's past as they entered the room. *New is Old* (2003) [see page 52] is another site-specific installation that addresses a museum's architecture; at the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Warsaw, Harvey focused on her observation that most buildings in Warsaw that look old are actually new. The buildings of the CCA are an assortment of recent buildings made to look like seventeenth-century structures originally on the site (the Ujazdowski castle), and one original seventeenth-century building (the Laboratorium) that looks much more modern than the contemporary reconstructions. Riffing on this discombobulating architectural hodge-podge, Harvey “aged” the façade and interior walls of the modern-looking Laboratorium so it matched the neoclassical style of the castle creating a “living ruin.”

Like *Mirror*, Harvey's Polish installations demonstrate her ability to attune the viewer to the architectural context of the museum experience. In all three projects, Harvey architecturally deconstructs the museum by artificially aging it, temporarily undoing any modern renovation or re-creation and metaphorically revealing the ruin that lurks just beneath the surface. The ruin presented in *Mirror*—including the representation of the Academy in the mirror panels and video, as well as faux-aged walls of the exhibition space itself—is a component of the aesthetic philosophy that forms the foundation of the Victorian Gothic. In *Derenovation* and *New is Old*, Harvey's ruin is more of a reflection of the state of architectural affairs in countries like Poland that until recently were relatively untouched by the major rebuilding that followed the ravages of World War II. As in other parts of Europe, according to Harvey, new buildings in cities such as Gdansk and Warsaw may eradicate ruins, but just as often, they are made to look antiquated.

One of Harvey's other museum interventionist strategies is to copy museum-owned artworks and exhibit them in or even on the museum. In *A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria* (2003) [see page 60] Harvey painted freehand copies of the 394 images illustrated in the Whitney's 2001 collections catalog in an attempt to give visitors what they wanted, "a Whitney Museum at the Whitney at Altria."²⁰ Many visitors to the Whitney Museum branch, expecting to see a museum collection, are dismayed to discover instead a contemporary project space devoted to solo artist exhibitions, so Harvey re-created a miniature Whitney based on its latest permanent collection catalog, complete with a larger-than-life gold picture frame around the perimeter of the entryway.

In *Bad Boy Klimt* (2002) [see page 70], Harvey was invited by the contemporary program of the Vienna Secession, the institution that houses Gustav Klimt's Beethoven Frieze, to create a work in the spirit of her *New York Beautification Project* [see page 76].²¹ The artist again played with public expectations about graffiti by painting in bubble letters "Bad Boy Klimt Lebt!" ("Bad Boy Klimt Lives!") on the façade and in the hallways of the museum. Within the letterforms she painted precisely detailed images appropriated from the Klimt frieze in the Secession. As Harvey worked on the piece, the museum received repeated complaints that someone was vandalizing the building.

My Venus is Better than Your Venus (2003) [see page 58] is yet another example of a Harvey museum intervention in which copying a work of art from the museum's collection plays a central role. For *Shuffling the Deck: The Collection Reconsidered* at the Princeton University Art Museum, in which artists were commissioned to make new works inspired by art in the collection, Harvey selected to copy a painting by Lucas Cranach entitled *Venus and Amor* strictly following the guidelines of the Princeton University Art Museum for copying works of art. She then created a fictional scenario in which everything goes wrong. Harvey replaced the original with her copy and "stole" the original. A security video on view in the gallery alongside Harvey's painting documents her copying the original work and its "theft," and then shows the original hanging in Harvey's studio. To complete the subversion, Harvey "replaced" the postcards in the museum shop with postcards of her copy.

All of these museum-specific installations, including *Mirror*, in some manner fulfill the public's expectations and desires regarding the art experience. *A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria* was ultimately for "the poor, lost tourists" who really wanted to see the Whitney Museum in its comprehensive glory, rather than the enigmatic projects by emerging artists that are the usual fare at the Whitney branch. The Secession in Vienna presents a similar problem for the casual art tourist. While the museum defines itself as a contemporary art exhibition space (that is why Harvey was invited to "deface" the façade), many visitors go to the Secession specifically to see the Klimt Beethoven Frieze installed in the basement. Harvey engaged the museum's dual mission by playing up her "bad girl" role as a contemporary artist and "vandalizing" a national treasure, while simultaneously advertising that the "real" art was inside. Although not a museum intervention, *New York Beautification Project* still underscores public notions of and expectations for art. Looking nothing like traditional spray-can graffiti, Harvey's delicate renditions of appropriated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscape paintings were still illegal under New York law. But because they were "pretty" and because to many members of the public landscape oil paintings equal "good art," most people who encountered Harvey while she was painting loved what they saw. Even Mayor Giuliani, known for his tough stance on graffiti as a quality of life crime, was reported to have said that this was the kind of public art New York City really needed. Once again, Harvey gave the public what they seemed to think they want. Playing more with desire than expectation, *My Venus is Better than Your Venus* fulfills the fleeting fantasies of many museum visitors: for the

viewer, the dream of stealing great works of art and hanging them in their homes for their greedy pleasure, and for the artist, the fantasy of having her own work hanging in the place of a famous painting in a museum.

Mirror also underscores and subverts public expectation regarding the experience of visiting the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Known more as an architectural marvel and as a bastion of traditional realism than for cutting-edge contemporary art, Harvey builds on the aforementioned projects and gives the public an installation that befits the Academy: a copy of the Academy inside the Academy on the most representational substrate possible, mirrors. While there is a degree of homage paid to the Academy's realist tradition and its Victorian Gothic architecture evident in *Mirror*, like all of Harvey's interventions, a transgressive element is at work as well. Sparring with traditional Academy pedagogy, which Harvey distills into the injunction that art hold up a mirror to nature, she, in the end, "ruins" the Academy in her reverse-engraved mirrors and, in the video projection, smashes the mirrors, destroying the Academy. In two other videos, Harvey draws the previous Academy buildings on paper, only to burn them. On one hand, this comments on the fact that the first Academy was partially destroyed in a fire. On the other hand, the burning drawings can be read as a metaphorical attack on perceived Academy conservatism and obsolescence.

What is the nature of the artist-museum/museum-artist relationship that the museum asks an artist to engage? It is a complicated one in which the historically omniscient and authoritative voice of the museum is publicly explored and called into question. As radical as it may seem, institutional critique as a subfield within contemporary art came to the fore in the 1970s, but was recharged again in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the advent of identity politics and poststructuralist deconstruction. In the beginning, artists were the primary proponents of this critical mode, rather than art-world institutions, and much of their early work focused on debunking the capitalist exchange in art. Robert Smithson predicted in 1972 that the best art of the 1970s would investigate the "apparatus the artist is threaded through" because "whatever a painting goes for at Parke Bernet is really somebody else's decision, not the artist's decision... the artist is estranged from his own production."²² For Smithson and others, a distrust of institutions led them outside the confines of the gallery and museum. But as Marxism waned as the theory of choice, and multiculturalism and postmodernism took center stage, museums began critiques from within, exhorting artists to perform their critical services in the belly of the beast. The politics of display, interpretation, and the self-reflexive imperative prompted many museums to consider the relationship between what they do and the historical, political, and social contexts in which they operate. Artists have played important roles in institutional self-scrutiny, from Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society to Andrea Fraser's mock-docent tours of institutions such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the New Museum.

By commissioning Ellen Harvey to make an installation that might be interpreted as critical of itself, the Academy proves that it is not as traditional or conservative as it has been portrayed. *Mirror*, in this case, can be understood not as narcissism but self-reflection. Artist interventions in museums are in and of themselves a hall-of-mirrors phenomenon, not unlike the experience of Harvey's installation itself. Just as it may be difficult to determine who is the real person and what is a reflection in a hall of mirrors funhouse, it is difficult to determine what is the "real" Pennsylvania Academy: the traditional temple of representational art or the risk-taking institution that is complicit in its own re-presentation as a ruin, or somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. Harvey's artistic practice generally, like her Academy project, treads such anxious ground. While she admittedly embraces "retro modes of representation"²³ (landscape painting, portraiture) in order to deconstruct them, she also embraces these modes because she still believes in their continued hold on the viewer, including herself.

The interventionist gesture is in and of itself tempered by the dynamics of power. An artist's site-specific engagement within the museum is always filtered through institutional authority. But if the institution is complicit in its own critique, what is the nature of this critique in the first place? Harvey, with tongue not quite completely in cheek, uses the metaphor of sado-masochism to get at the heart of this relationship: "The person with all of the power says 'hit me'; the power does not reside with the girl holding the whip, but with the person making the request. The same holds true for the museum/artist relationship. Ultimately, it is still the museum more or less calling the shots"²⁴ because it is the institution that commissions the artist, requests to be subverted, and is metaphorically

flagellated. Despite such power plays, according to Harvey, transgressing the institutions of the art world has become increasingly safe since “nothing bad will really happen to you there”—the rules of engagement are firmly established, even institutionalized, in the post-avant-garde era.²⁵

However, Harvey is not interested in endgame strategies. Rather, she sets out to explore how different contexts—the museum, outdoor public sites, even the relationship between art-maker and viewer—create artistic meaning. Harvey acknowledges and at times honors the myriad ways that art is envisioned outside the confines of the art world or notions of “contemporary art.” From drawing sidewalk chalk carpets or playing the role of sidewalk portrait artist to painting a palm reader’s booth on Coney Island or proposing to collaborate with museum security guards to create their favorite painting, Harvey is as comfortable *outside* as she is inside the museum. While *Mirror* is undeniably a museum-specific project, this artist seems to come from another place than what we are accustomed to in critical interventionist practice. Drawing on popular culture ideas regarding the artist as obsessive and non-rational, Ellen Harvey has created in *Mirror* a fantastic space that not only comments on the Pennsylvania Academy, but on her own compulsion to copy it, make it her own, and, finally, ruin it.

NOTES

- 1 Ellen Harvey quoted in Shamim M. Momin, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003), 4.
- 2 All quotes in this paragraph were elicited by the author in a conversation with Harvey, July 22, 2005.
- 3 The second, rebuilt Academy building never burned, despite Harvey’s video conflagration.
- 4 Conversation with Harvey and the author, July 8, 2005.
Ibid.
- 6 Michael J. Lewis, *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 8.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Michael J. Lewis, “The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as Building and Idea” in *Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1805–2005: 200 Years of Excellence* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2005), 72.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ronald J. Onorato, “‘Exciting the Efforts of Artists’: Art Instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,” in *Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1805–2005*, 54–55.
- 11 Ibid., 57–58.
- 12 Lewis, “The Pennsylvania Academy,” 66.
- 13 Lewis, “The Pennsylvania Academy,” 70–71; and Lewis, *Frank Furness*, 101–3.
- 14 Michael J. Lewis, *The Gothic Revival* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 113–15; and Lewis, “The Pennsylvania Academy,” 70.
- 15 This discussion on the new polychromy techniques in nineteenth-century architecture draws on Lewis, “The Pennsylvania Academy,” 70–71.
- 16 Lewis, *The Gothic Revival*, 13–20.
- 17 Ibid., 115–116.
- 18 John Ruskin, “The Lamp of Memory,” quoted in John D. Rosenberg, *The Genius of John Ruskin* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 134–35.
- 19 Paul Zucker, “Ruins: An Aesthetic Hybrid,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1961), 127.
- 20 Although *Mirror* and *A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria* are site-specific installations, Harvey envisions them as “portable museums” that can be installed in other contexts and still remain meaningful.
- 21 See Ellen Harvey *New York Beautification Project* (New York: Gregory R. Miller and Company, 2005).
- 22 Robert Smithson quoted in Craig Owens, “From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After ‘The Death of the Author’?” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, et al. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 122.
- 23 Conversation with Harvey and the author, July 8, 2005.
- 24 Conversation with Harvey and the author, July 22, 2005.
- 25 Harvey quoted in Ana Finel Honigman, “Art Criticism,” *Artnet* (July 7, 2004).
www.artnet.com/magazine/features/honigman/honigman7-7-04.asp.