

One must really be engaged in order to be a painter. Once obsessed by it, one eventually gets to the point where one thinks that humanity could be changed by painting. But when that passion deserts you, there is nothing left to do. Then it is better to stop altogether. Because basically painting is pure idiocy.

—Gerhard Richter¹

Ellen Harvey is a very good painter. She paints all the time, sometimes obsessively. But she probably wouldn't disagree with Gerhard Richter's pronouncement. Harvey has often spoken of her unease with art's essential inadequacy vis-à-vis the world's most pressing problems, not to mention its limited ability to change the fate of mankind.² And yet it's also true that painting—and, by extension, art in general—matters very much to a great number of people. So the interesting question is hardly why she does what she does, nor is it such a mysterious one; it's rather more interesting to ask why anybody else would like it.

In the extensive body of work that she has made since the late 1990s—which, although originating in painting, comprises video, sculpture, installation, and works in public space—she engages with a set of deceptively simple questions: Why art? What does an artist do? And whom is it for, anyway? Through these questions she chips away at something deeper, the exploration of certain cultural and economic relationships between the makers and consumers of art, and between art professionals and the so-called general public. To that end Harvey's work reflects, often humorously, on her own role, in veiled self-portraits or in depictions of her domestic surroundings, but this invocation of the artist's persona is a strategy that takes aim at exaggerated cultural preconceptions of self-evident authenticity

and artistic expression rather than extolling them. Harvey frequently initiates a situation of social exchange that inverts the creative relationship between artist and viewer, either by executing works according to the wishes of her audience, or else venturing into the territory of amateur art or decoration, and thus she approaches the arcane domain of stewardship and taste, of who gets to define what art is and why:

I've been fascinated by the social space that painting occupies. I'm interested in why it's valued so highly when all of the functions that it used to fulfill have migrated to other media—no one would use a painting as documentation of an event anymore, for example. Other media seem to offer a lot of possibilities that painting doesn't and yet for many people painting is still the first thing that they think of when they think of art.³

In training her eye on art's discursive contexts and social functions, Harvey's work is also indebted to what is known as institutional critique.⁴ Andrea Fraser has pointed out that a number of the artists most frequently associated with this term—Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke—did not conceive of their work as simply pitted against the institutional structures that have incessantly co-opted art's subversive and critical functions. Rather, she argues, the "institution" of art in those artists' works is a much larger and more complicated field that encompasses art schools, art history programs, and publications, as well as implicating dealers, collectors, curators, and the artists themselves. Fraser's description of Broodthaers, in this respect, as "a supreme master of performing critical obsolescence in his gestures

of melancholic complicity" is a rather apt explanation of the strategy and tone that Harvey has adopted.⁵

Broodthaers's semifictional *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles* (1968–72) is in fact a key work for Harvey. First staged in the artist's Brussels home, the conceptual museum eventually encompassed prints, photographs, and other eagle-themed paraphernalia. It is not so much the inherent critique contained in Broodthaers's project that makes it germane; rather, it is his suggestion that the bird may be as valid, collectible, and exhibition-worthy an object as any other, along with his evident pleasure in assembling the collection. In her own work, Harvey has rather singularly combined her foray into the institutional frameworks of contemporary art with a realist formal vocabulary, a style conventionally perceived as antithetical to the conceptual approaches usually associated with them. Driven by her love of painting and its history and motivated in part by her interest in its perplexing popularity—which endures in spite of having been pronounced dead many times over—she has remained committed to such representational and occasionally illusionistic techniques.⁶ In this respect she shares a sensibility with a generation of artists who emerged in the 1990s, including John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, Lisa Yuskavage, and Karen Kilimnik, who in their work look backward, toward premodern movements, making irreverent references to Old Master styles and academic tradition. Like them, Harvey has a penchant for genres whose original functions are long obsolete, such as landscape painting (one of the lower rungs even in the hierarchy of traditional academic painting) and portraiture. Far from presenting a kind of contrarian refutation of modernism's tenets, however, her work instead stakes a very matter-of-fact claim for the notion

that there has never been anything irreconcilable about representational aesthetics and conceptual grounding.

These questions of artistic creation and real-world efficacy are made manifest in a number of interwoven and recurring themes or motifs in her work, including ruins, fossils, landscapes, mirrors, and self-portraits. These motifs serve as the organizing principle for this book, and in this essay I have followed suit, rather than charting a chronological trajectory.

However, a larger preoccupation runs through Harvey's varied oeuvre: haunted as it is by the notion of art's ultimate futility, her paradoxical stake is in persistently testing art's possibility to do something in the world after all. She often represents subjects and objects that are broken, anachronistic, frivolous, ordinary, unappreciated, or left out; she likes to refer to popular art and to clichéd imagery, from wallpaper designs to chocolate-box pictures to snapshots of sunsets. It is important, however, to note that her approach is never sarcastic or fatalistic. Rather than knowing pastiche or quotational return to a point of origin or purpose, Harvey wittily and obsessively stages displays of failure—failure of aspiration as well as failure of understanding. And yet for the artist there is nothing defeatist in this proposition. Failure in art is inevitable. And what's more, it's necessary.

What Failure?

What kind of failure is it? And how is failure germane to art as a whole? In Western thought, informed by the Enlightenment, the notion of failure is deeply contradictory. It is universal, familiar to everyone, yet it is considered an anomaly, a disruption of the normal course of events, something that is not supposed to happen. The sociologists Matthias Junge and Götz

Lechner have noted the paradox of a contemporary preoccupation with failure: "The concept of failure is in vogue. This is remarkable because failure epitomizes the opposite of modernity's promise of happiness: All problems are solvable, if only one uses the means of reason to address them."⁷ Failure represents an intractable irritant, difficult to reconcile with the rationalist credo of human perfectibility, and this is precisely what Harvey cherishes: in her view, failure connects art to the human condition.⁸ When she describes her work as being defined by failure, she is reflecting on the existential proposition that any artwork will fall short of the artist's intention, inevitably remaining "haunted by a better version of itself."⁹ In summarizing the inverse of failure's necessary place in art, the curator Lisa Le Feuvre has suggested the idea's generative logic: "After all, if an artist were to make the perfect work there would be no need to make another."¹⁰

Such sentiments find an echo in Samuel Beckett's *Three Dialogues*, which posits that painting is fundamentally misunderstood, as is all art, if it is thought of as a means of personal expression. Rather, Beckett contends, to be an artist means above all the risk "to fail, as no other dare fail."¹¹ Making art, he concludes, becomes a sort of Sisyphean task, with the only satisfactory action "to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relations, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, [the artist] makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation." Harvey, too, recognizes the enabling potential of a futile pushing of the rock up the hill (by way of Albert Camus).¹² But for her, art's near-total fallibility is also tied up with the specter of its complete inefficacy, and she in fact draws inspiration from that precise

tension, between art's potential for doing a little, however little that may be, and the likelihood that it will fail to do anything at all.

A Ruinous State of Affairs

Harvey's work is populated by scenes of ruins and disaster. The art historical pedigree of these subjects dates back to the eighteenth century, reaching a pitch in the 1800s, when the cultural obsession with ruins produced its own poetics, spurred by factors such as a rising interest in archeology, the Grand Tour, the Lisbon earthquake, and the philosophical concepts of the sublime and beautiful.¹³ Later in the nineteenth century, as ruins came to symbolize, in art and literature, the inevitability of death and decline of civilizations, they also became an idealized metaphor for artistic practice.¹⁴ The fragment—considered, along with the sketch, an intuitive and therefore superior form of expression—was increasingly preferred over the finished work.¹⁵

Nineteenth-century Romanticism is, of course, the movement that popularized those notions of artistic genius and artistic expression of emotion that Harvey's work seeks to demystify. In *After Petrie* (2010), a series of very small, detailed works in shades of gray, Harvey emulates the Romantic melancholia prevalent in Petrie's engravings of moonlit rocks and ruins. The originals were made during the Industrial Revolution, when the advent of photography eclipsed painting's traditional function as document and record, but Harvey's invocation of that earlier era does not simply assert a contemporary affinity with loss and longing; rather, it allows her to have it both ways: her subject's earlier range of meaning and purposes are invoked and disavowed at the same

time. Although that position may be an endgame, Harvey's answer has always been an exuberant fighting of fire with fire. The expression of failed human endeavor is there, literally, in the pictures. All precious objects created by humans will eventually disappear.

Yet ruins are always less about the past than the present, as critic Brian Dillon has observed: "It is not really until the Renaissance—that is, until the advent of a modernity that conceives itself in relation to the remains of the past—that the ruin becomes an essential aesthetic concept and recurrent image in Western art."¹⁶ Most of Harvey's ruins are a kind of science fiction, imagining our present or future as a past. *I Am a Disaster* (2006) brings Romantic ruins into a traumatic present in a series of postindustrial and possibly postapocalyptic landscapes. In this series, illuminated hand-engraved mirrors show the wreckage of modern skyscrapers being taken back by nature, and as such they resonate with the destruction of the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001—still a recent event at the time they were made.

Some of Harvey's scenes of ruins are based on images culled from the Internet; others, reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum, are made to look like a copy of something, even though they are not. The paintings in the *Souvenirs of Armageddon* (2009) works are both: each one depicts a calamity, such as a forest fire or a burning building, found in a Google image search for the word "apocalypse" and painted as a facsimile of a Polaroid photograph, one of Harvey's signature gestures. The preponderance of photography-based painting in recent years has been widely noted, but Harvey's work occupies a particular niche: in exact renderings of Polaroids on canvas she creates an effortless continuity between

painted, analog, photographic, and digital records.¹⁷ In *Internet Reforestation* (2010), she has restored desolate landscapes by painting healthy trees onto images of deforestation, appropriated from the Internet—a kind of hand-made retouching.

In several of her large installations, Harvey has turned the entire exhibition space into a ruin that exists outside of time. In 2006 she transformed the lavish entrance hall of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts into a solemn future bygone, "art [holding] up a tragic mirror," in her own description of it, in four large mirror panels hand engraved to show the building in an imagined dilapidated state.¹⁸ By adopting a technique rarely used in contemporary art, she suggests obsolescence on a basic material level and, further, by engraving on mirrors, borrows from the decorative arts, albeit on a painstakingly, almost parodically large scale. These embellished mirrors were mounted around the museum's hexagonal gallery, while a central video projection played back a composite view of sixteen individual videos of mirrors being engraved, which once complete, were shattered. This is Harvey's most iconoclastic move: the ebullient gesture demonstrates her clear delight in destroying her own work, to dramatic and superstition-defying effect, in spite of (and possibly because of) the incredibly laborious process of making it. Apart from gleefully hastening what would ultimately happen anyway, Harvey here also extols the profound absurdity of her self-assigned task. Critic George Pendle, in a review of the exhibition, pointed out that "the Academy of the Fine Arts is renowned for fostering works of traditional realism, and Harvey's work, which she describes as the 'ultimate representational piece,' initially seems to posit not

only ruin of representational art but also the ultimate futility of its precepts."¹⁹ This point is emphasized in *Burning Academies* (2005), shown together with the *Mirror* installation, which simultaneously pokes fun at the infatuation with the hand of the artist: two videos of Harvey's hand making drawings of the two previous Academy buildings (the first of which was destroyed by fire in 1845), which go up in flames as soon as they are complete. Yet the endlessly looping projections of mirrors and of drawings of creation and destruction paradoxically reassert their representational authority.

Two of Harvey's recent public art projects engage with very different infrastructures and geographical contexts, but like much of her work they reflect on obsolescence. They are also literal ruins. For the first, commissioned for the offices of the Internal Revenue Service in Andover, Massachusetts, Harvey created two bodies of work. *Fossils* (2012) consists of a series of traditionally carved white marble blocks made to look like ancient rocks containing fossils of contemporary civilization. Here Harvey revitalizes one of the oldest sculptural practices, which has been rendered all but moribund in the long wake of Minimalism.²⁰ The computer monitors and keyboards (the "fossils") that protrude from the carved stone, fashioned with a professional carver, evoke a postdigital future, a theme further taken up in *Reforestation* (2013), in the office's interior, where a large mirrored wall depicts the agency's offices as an overgrown ruin. Both works cast an elegiac, if unsentimental, glimpse forward toward the limited knowledge that might be gleaned about our civilization if computer hardware were nothing more than a mute object and, more generally, toward what little meaning may be evident to those looking at our culture's remnants in

the future. In *Repeat* (2013), a public art project using a deconsecrated church in Bossuit, Belgium, Harvey "de-restored" the structure, but she did so permanently, unlike the temporary ruin of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in *Mirror*. The church had been reconstructed after being bombed in World War I, but it had not been used in many years. Harvey's quixotic strategy was to make it into a ruin all over again—by removing the roof, stripping the plaster walls, and more—with the express purpose of handing it back to the town's secular present and to Bossuit's citizens for renewed public use as a park, gathering space, and venue for events.

Sites and Sights

The ways in which the general public (that frequently invoked yet little-understood group) encounters and uses works of art has long been one of Harvey's central concerns. To that end, she instigates social situations that at the same time tease out the underlying norms of class and gender that inform them, as she did in *New York Beautification Project* (1998–2001), one of her early and most widely known works. The project grew out of her suspicion that the controversy about graffiti, a contested art form still ubiquitous in New York City in the late 1990s, stemmed from aesthetic and demographic factors—how it looked and who was doing it—rather than the vandalism it involved. Harvey, a white woman then in her thirties, turned these assumptions on end by working as a street artist herself, painting forty small oval landscapes inspired by William Gilpin's picturesque landscapes of the eighteenth century, among others, on various surfaces in public spaces throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. Over three years of painting, she was

confronted by the police only once. In the catalogue published after the project ended, Harvey details the various reactions of her onlookers, which were sometimes indifferent to her illegal activity but usually complimentary.²¹ She summarized in a 2005 interview: "The answer seemed to be that if the aesthetic was conformist enough and the practitioner conformed at least marginally to people's preconceptions of what an artist should look like—all objections fell to the wayside. Which is a bit sad."²²

It is somewhat ironic that Harvey began to make large-scale public artworks not long afterward—at the height of the art-market boom of the mid-2000s. The first two, like *New York Beautification Project*, were executed in New York City subway stations: *Look Up, Not Down* (2005) for the Queens Plaza station, and *A Home for the Stars* (2009) for the Yankee Stadium station in the Bronx. Both depict the sky, rendered in large mosaics along the station walkways, and both create views that pedestrians would be able to see were it not for architecture, light pollution, or the passage of time: *A Home for the Stars* shows incremental views of a spectacular Bronx sunset and moonrise; *Look Up Not Down* shows the New York skyline obscured by the ceiling of the underground walkway—a view of Lower Manhattan based on photographs from late 2001 and thus already historical at the time the mosaic was made. While both pieces chart the precarious relationship between nature and the constructed environment, as well as between perception and photographic record, they also testify to Harvey's penchant for making work that people might simply enjoy looking at. "I suppose," she says, "at some bizarre level, a lot of my work is about the artist as public servant."²³

This impulse has carried Harvey through many large installations,

both inside and outside galleries and museums. *Arcade/Arcadia* (2011–12), like the piece made for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, is reminiscent of a house of mirrors, albeit a more quietly wistful one. Rather than depicting ruins, it casts its gaze on the faded glory of Margate, a run-down seaside resort on Great Britain’s Kent coast, and its dated fairground attractions. Harvey made the work for the opening of the Turner Contemporary in Margate, a museum that takes its name from English Romantic painter J. M. W. Turner, who spent periods of his life in Margate and took inspiration from the area’s seascapes and spectacular skies. The Turner Contemporary was founded as part of the town’s renewal effort, and, commissioned to make a piece for the museum’s inaugural exhibition, Harvey wanted to produce a piece that would stake “a claim for the melancholy beauty of its somewhat degraded present.”²⁴ She created a smaller-scale version of the gallery in London where Turner used to exhibit his paintings, but

she rendered the space as a skeletal cottage of bare two-by-fours. Inside she mounted thirty-four hand-engraved images of present-day Margate on rear-illuminated mirrors, all in the style of Turner’s Romantic landscapes. Propped against the wall outside are six-foot-tall letters spelling “Arcadia” in the style of the signs of Dreamland, Margate’s amusement park, which closed in 2005 and is being renovated as part of the same process of renewal. While the seaside town, still dominated by dilapidated housing developments and tatty shops, is a pale shadow of its nineteenth-century halcyon days, Harvey’s luminous, transparent arcade returns it to some of its former splendor.

The Unloved (2014)—Harvey’s most recent installation and her largest piece to date—is driven by somewhat similar motivations. Made for the Groeninge Museum, in Bruges, it comprises a selection of paintings usually confined to the museum’s storage. These were set behind mirror walls and were visible

through various openings cut into the mirrors, so that viewers could see the unfamiliar depictions of their city alongside their own reflections. Such rarely exhibited paintings have their counterparts in all museum collections; these particular undistinguished works consistently lose out to the Groeninge’s masterpieces, but Harvey’s arrangement rendered them a little bit more appreciated than her title asserts. Harvey’s most direct engagement with the idea of failure is the appropriately titled *Museum of Failure* (2007–present). Begun during President George W. Bush’s second term, the project was, Harvey said, “conceived as a despairing tribute to all the urgent and pressing subjects in the world that are so problematically served by art.”²⁵ She describes the museum as an ongoing body of work consisting of many rooms, of which three have so far been realized. The first is *Museum of Failure: The Collection of Impossible Subjects* (2007), a freestanding mirror wall illuminated from behind by neon lights. Hand engraved into the mirror

is an assortment of intricate frames, each displaying nothing but sanded white Plexiglas, positioned on top and next to each other. Where viewers would expect to see their own faces, as a kind of portrait, they instead see only light from the other side; their reflections appear, counterintuitively, around the empty pictures instead of inside them. A single window cut into the mirror looks through to *Invisible Self-Portrait in My Studio* (2008), another large-scale representation of a group of lavish gold frames, these rendered in paint and “hung” salon-style on a wall.²⁶ Each frame contains an image of the artist pointing a camera at a mirror, and in each one the reflection of the camera’s flash in the glass obliterates her face (fig. 1). These erased reflections are part of *Invisible Self-Portraits*, a larger body of work made in 2006 and 2007. Each one reproduces a similarly failed selfie avant la lettre, placing them in the long history of artist self-portraits, a genre that became more common after the Renaissance, in part because mirrors were more widely available. Although they refer to well-known paintings of artists’ reflections—Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), Parmigianino’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524), M. C. Escher’s *Self-Portrait in a Spherical Mirror* (1935)—Harvey’s repeated self-erasure wryly confirms what she has long contended: that any attempt at adequate representation is bound to fail. Moreover, her faithful painting of the photographic flash, an element obviously fixable in both painting and digital imaging, constitutes a more deadpan comment on veracity in representation.

The mirror, both actual and painted, itself a key motif in art history, has appeared in Harvey’s smaller pieces such as *Welcome to My Home* (2005), an illuminated oval glass with an engraving of her apartment at the time; *Vanity* (2012), a mirror so heavily



fig. 2: Harvey holding a Claude glass. 2015

scratched that it obscures the viewer’s reflection; and the major installations *Mirror* and *Arcade/Arcadia*. Like her predecessors, Harvey reflects on herself (the maker), her spectator (the viewer), and the relationship between them. *Broken Claude Glass* (2010) also depicts a useless mirror, in this case a nearly forgotten eighteenth-century fad once used to create pleasant views while strolling in nature. In *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (2009), Harvey distributed Claude glasses to viewers who had been invited to take a tour admiring sites in a Belgian park. If the irony of looking into a glass rather than the sites themselves wasn’t lost on eighteenth-century commentators, Harvey’s resuscitation of the dark mirror clearly links it with the habits of our screen-saturated present. Claude glasses also can be understood as precinematic devices that forecast photography and the ultimate disconnection of painting from its earlier function as document—and thus part of the continuum that Harvey returns to time and again in her work (fig. 2).

In *Invisible Self-Portrait in My Studio*, the failed images are thrown into relief by painted gilded frames

and a faux period room with paneled walls. In a similar fashion, *The Room of Sublime Wallpaper (I)* (2008), Harvey’s subsequent iteration of *Museum of Failure*, displays deceptive vintage splendor: what seems to be a slightly off-kilter arrangement of paintings of snowcapped mountains against a glowing pink sky turns out to be a group of mirrors reflecting sections of a large wall painting opposite. In such over-the-top send-ups of crowd-pleasing genres—majestic landscapes, exalted portraiture—Harvey delivers her critique sweetly but laced with a bit of poison.²⁷ These works are, quite literally, all frame. There is nothing inside them but blank space, failed photographs, or the viewer’s reflection. For all their lighthearted humor, they tackle Harvey’s deep sense of frustration at art’s ineffective response to social and political conflict, not only in general but also particularly at the time many were made, in the immediate run-up to the financial crash of 2008. *Museum of Failure* is thus partly a reaction to the skyrocketing economy and concomitant social polarization: as contemporary art commanded unprecedented prices, Harvey increasingly was embarking on large-scale installations, such as these rooms, which emulate forms of interior decoration yet are less than ideal for domestic display.

“Megalomania Is an Uncomfortable Position”²⁸

Harvey’s preoccupation with failure dovetails with her interest in interpersonal relationships and the role the artist plays within them. This is, in fact, another version of romanticized social failure. Failure, either individual or collective, presupposes someone having already acted, as Junge and Lechner argue, with “normal” social



fig. 1: Photograph of Harvey in her studio, reflected in mirrors (source image for *Museum of Failure: Invisible Self-Portrait in My Studio*). 2007

behavior driven by the effort to avoid it, yet artists tend to be considered exempt from at least some of the rules.²⁹ Harvey's work takes apart the coded dynamic between artist and viewer and at the same time debunks the popular stereotype of the artist as misunderstood outsider. The myth of the genius misfit, which the curator Gabriele Spindler has traced back to the "individualizing tendencies of the Romantic movement," takes a repertoire of maladjusted social behaviors (ranging from substance abuse to mental illness) as symptoms of existential alienation from the ordinary world—and, as such, as conducive to art making.³⁰ This Romantic construction goes in tandem with the notion that art's principal function lies in the expression of intense emotion or psychological interiority, an idea that Harvey's work has slyly and consistently subverted in understated self-representations and shrewd disappearing acts.

ID Card Project (1998), an early group of self-deprecating paintings, makes a point of representing the artist as a person just like anyone else. In twenty-five small painted panels, Harvey depicts photographs from every identification card she held between 1981 and 1998, reproducing each self-conscious facial expression and mercurial teenage metamorphosis. *After Pollock* (2010), on the other hand, presents a more pointed spoof of the outsized artistic persona, mocking the gestural hubris of Abstract Expressionism in general and Jackson Pollock's brand of hard-drinking masculinity in particular. The ten-minute video shows a drip painting being made on a studio floor, next to a bottle of whiskey. At the end of the video, the dripping white paint is revealed to be breast milk, a material that suggests a playful yet bold juxtaposition of consecrated high modernism with the corporeal specificity of motherhood.

Usually, however, Harvey takes herself out of the picture in the literal sense. In *New York Beautification Project*, Harvey assumed the role of an anonymous artist and placed something normally reserved for private homes or museums into public space. The status of art as a gift is a critical element in Harvey's work, expanding on her belief that art as a means of personal expression is unsupportable: "The point at which you become a mature artist," she says, "is when you think about who it's for."³¹ The tactical gift is part of her strategy in rendering transparent the social and economic relationships encompassed in the making of art and, as such, is wrapped up with her investment in excessive labor. Many of her projects are marked by a spirit of generosity that masks the sheer level of daunting physical work involved. *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris* (2003, fig. 3), for example, is made up of scrupulously executed reproductions of all 394 works illustrated in the

museum's then-recent guide to the collection.³² Harvey's was a radically democratized version of the collection: all the works were rendered in the same medium at a similar size, and the public could view the collection highlights without paying admission—unlike the small selection shown at the Whitney uptown.

For the 2008 Whitney Biennial in New York, Harvey worked in front of the public for two weeks, during the museum's open hours, to draw portraits of a hundred visitors to the exhibition, in *100 Visitors to the Biennial Immortalized* (which revisited a performance from 2001). Upon completion of a portrait, Harvey asked each subject to rate its success in a questionnaire; they later received the portrait in the mail. Devoting an excessive amount of her time, as well as putting herself at the mercy of a live audience's aesthetic judgment, implicates the viewer in a kind of trade: a lot of my effort demands a little of your time in return. This is, of course, the point at which her gift

is not completely free, as sociologist Marcel Mauss demonstrated in his anthropological studies: the gift serves as a building block for social relationships and creates a sense of obligation to reciprocate.³³ Harvey may give you something, but she retains an element of control, not only because you owe her (just a little) but also because she ultimately makes the gift exactly how she wants it. Even so, she simultaneously orchestrates the possibility of her own failure, the possibility of creating a gift that nobody wants.

Harvey has made numerous works expressly according to requests, creating a homemade chain of supply and demand that pointedly undermines the doctrine of art for art's sake. In *The Wallpaper for the Rich* series (2003–05) she makes literal the charge that paintings are just that, in a series of paintings based on wallpaper patterns and mounted on the same wallpaper. This is a pill with only the barest coating of sugar, but the spirit of the work is amused rather than ironic. In *Beautiful/Ugly Palm Beach* (2006) Harvey solicited snapshots that showed a "beautiful" and an "ugly" view of the town and then created pairs of paintings based on them. The beautiful images showed, more or less predictably, beach scenes, landscapes, and children; the ugly views were just slightly more diverse and included the Florida license plate and Jeb and George Bush. Although the pictures displayed together might be read as an indictment of bourgeois aesthetic conformity and unsophisticated taste, Harvey's agenda is rather more populist: what we all find beautiful and what we all look for in art is ultimately much more similar than distinct. She therefore emulates the visual language of forms on the so-called low end of what may qualify as art—forms that often do not qualify, depending on who is



A detail of *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris* in the studio. 2002

making the art and who is looking. (The snapshots, after all, are not in themselves considered art, but her painted copies are.) Harvey admits to loving that "in-between space inhabited by things that are either art or not art depending on context and the eye of the beholder: graffiti, street portraiture, chalk pavement drawings, Sunday painters, hand-painted signs on a hot dog cart."³⁴ She has worked in all of those forms herself, but knows that by doing so she reinforces the dynamic of high and low as much as she exposes it: within the discursive and economic contexts of art, an artist can test those professional boundaries but not step outside them. Harvey, as despairing as she is appreciative, declares that, by the very definition of the field, her work will always be art. As Fraser has explained:

The institution of art is not something external to any work of art but the irreducible condition of its existence as art. No matter how public in placement, immaterial, transitory, relational, everyday, or even invisible, what is announced and perceived as art is always already institutionalized,

simply because it exists within the perception of participants in the field of art as art, a perception that is not necessarily aesthetic but fundamentally social in its determination.³⁵

The Irreplaceable Cannot Be Replaced (2008) is one of Harvey's most poignant tests of the limits of art's efficacy in the real world. After New Orleans was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2008, Harvey asked residents to send her images and descriptions of people or things that they had lost to the storms. These ranged from a snapshot of someone who died in a hospital during a power outage to a small box of mementos passed down by an immigrant father to his children. Harvey created paintings based on some of these items, in straightforward depictions that clearly articulate how far short they fall of the real losses: the artwork is an inevitably defective act. But however inadequate they are as replacements, the paintings, which Harvey gave to the people at the close of the show, may also be cherished and meaningful keepsakes. That small gesture—toward the possibility of real impact made by symbolic action—is at the root of Harvey's persistent tempting of failure. The work may always fall short, but perhaps next time it can fall less short (or, as Beckett puts it, "fail better").³⁶

Hardly the End of All Things

Tempered as they are by her self-deprecating sensibility and sense of humor, Harvey's omnipresent scenes of ruin, decline, and disaster might belie somewhat darker and angrier sentiments. If this is true, she marshals them in the service of a kind of "creative nostalgia" characterized by scholar Svetlana Boym as one "that



fig. 3: Harvey with *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris* outside the artist's studio. 2002

reveals the fantasies of the age, and it is in those fantasies and potentialities that the future is born. One is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future.”³⁷

In *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington D.C.* (2013), created for the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Harvey has fast-forwarded into the future and dispensed with human civilization altogether. She literally takes a view from outer space, looking at our imperfect human efforts to build monuments and leave visual testimony for future generations. Venturing out her furthest yet in a popular vernacular, Harvey has envisioned a set of ruins par excellence: a futuristic scenario of a postapocalyptic American capital, razed and depopulated, and out of its rubble protrude the remnants of Neoclassical buildings, distinguished by their ubiquitous columns. The installation includes a stand peddling souvenirs and visitor guides to the Pillar-Builder Mystery for alien tourists—pillar-building apparently being humankind's central activity, the function of which merits much speculation. The somber ruins, reproduced in the memento paintings, call to mind disaster movies in which ecological calamity had brought down humankind, as curator Sarah Newman has pointed out, but in the visitor guide, distributed inside the museum and in real tourist offices during the run of the exhibition, Harvey strikes a different tone.³⁸ A map details the most important sights, providing visitors with a wildly mistaken and humorous account of the most impressive pillar remains, based on the aliens' complete misreading of the ancient earth's inhabitants and architectural legacy. The Pillar-Builders are thought to have been a

“remarkably gentle and egalitarian” society of cellulose-eating water dwellers, coming to land seasonally for mating rituals and building. The wreckage of the Library of Congress—distinguished by its massive amounts of cellulose residue—is believed to have been used for food storage.

This (literally) outlandish project is Harvey's most audacious test of the boundaries of good art versus bad, tempting failure all over again. In this case, what pushes at the margins of sanctioned museum display is not so much science fiction (itself a genre that has been elevated from its pulp fiction provenance to serious literature) as her use of kooky storytelling and the installation of a hilarious column-shaped spaceship in the Corcoran's rotunda. Although the opposition between high and low forms has ostensibly collapsed, Harvey reveals, through the genres in which she works, the fine distinctions that are nevertheless operative in class-stratified, canonical tastes. Here, as elsewhere, she demystifies the metaphysical, the Romantic, and the Expressionist while using precisely the visual vocabulary of those ideas and styles. The art historian Charles Harrison has asked “whether illusionistic techniques and critical demands can still be reconciled under the conditions of the present.”³⁹ Harvey's work presents us with a resounding “yes.”

The *Alien's Guide*, in proposing the disappearance of humanity (quite possibly by its own doing), can be read as the artist's preliminary summary on human folly and fallibility. As far-fetched as the aliens' interpretations are, Harvey's mock-scholarly jargon reminds us that our own interpretation of ancient history may well be as conjectural and that, with enough hindsight and divorced from context, every aesthetic creation will become hieroglyphic. Failure, then,

is a given, a fundamental condition of art. Yet the aspirations of Harvey's ancient humans to leave monuments, and the endearing efforts of her aliens to decipher their meaning, stand in for the overriding desire to create and understand in spite of this. In her work, Harvey continues to circle around that very distance between desire and its fulfillment: “If art is all about desire,” she says, “then like all desire it's impossible to satisfy.”⁴⁰ It's perhaps our ultimate failure. However, the fact that the desire for the extraordinary can never be fulfilled has never stopped anyone from trying. Least of all Harvey herself.

- 1 Gerhard Richter, quoted in Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), p. 88.
- 2 Ellen Harvey, artist's statement, Whitney Biennial 2008.
- 3 Ana Finel Honigman, “In Conversation with Ellen Harvey,” *Saatchi Art*, November 16, 2006, http://magazine.saatchiart.com/culture/reports-from/los-angeles-reports-from/ellen_harvey_in_conversation_w_1 (accessed February 26, 2015).
- 4 See, for example, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).
- 5 Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 280.
- 6 See, for example, Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Crimp, “The End of Painting,” *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 69–86.
- 7 Matthias Junge and Götz Lechner, “Scheitern als Erfahrung und Konzept: Zur Einführung,” in Junge and Lechner, eds., *Scheitern: Aspekte eines sozialen Phänomens* (Wiesbaden, Germany: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), pp. 7–13. Translation by the author.

- 8 It is no accident that numerous recent historical publications and self-help books attempt to recast failure as a mere stepping stone in a larger narrative of forward movement. See, for example, Megan McArdle, *The Up Side of Down: Why Failing Well Is the Key to Success* (New York: The Viking Press, 2014); and Ralph Heath, *Celebrating Failure: The Power of Taking Risks, Making Mistakes and Thinking Big* (Pompton Plains, N.J.: Career Press, 2009).
- 9 Harvey, conversation with the author, New York, January 8, 2013.
- 10 Lisa Le Feuvre, “Introduction: Strive to Fail,” in Le Feuvre, ed., *Failure* (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), p. 17.
- 11 Samuel Beckett, *Three Dialogues*, (1949), in *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition*, vol. 4 (New York: Grove Press, 2006), p. 563.
- 12 See Emma Cocker, “Over and Over, Again and Again,” in Le Feuvre, ed., *Failure*, p. 154.
- 13 See Peter Wagner, Frédéric Ogée, Robert Mankin, and Achim Hescher, introduction to Wagner et al., eds., *The Ruin and the Sketch in the Eighteenth Century* (Trier, Germany: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008), p. 9.
- 14 Writing on Schopenhauer, Danto remarked, “The move from symmetry to ruin marks the transition of the history of taste from neoclassicism to romanticism.” Danto, *After the End of Art*, p. 97.
- 15 See Brian Dillon, “Fragments from a History of Ruin,” *Cabinet*, no. 20 (Winter 2005–06), <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/20/dillon.php> (accessed February 26, 2015).
- 16 Dillon, “Introduction: A Short History of Decay,” in Dillon, ed., *Ruins* (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), p. 11. Dillon has also pointed out the preponderance of landscapes of decay, engagement with failed utopias, and visions of environmental disaster in much of the art made in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Ibid., p. 10.
- 17 See, for example, Jerry Saltz's polemic “The Richter Resolution,” *The Village Voice*, March 2, 2004,

- <http://www.villagevoice.com/2004-03-02/art/the-richter-resolution/full/> (accessed February 26, 2015).
- 18 Harvey, artist's website, www.ellenharvey.info/Projects/mirror.html
- 19 George Pendle, “Ellen Harvey: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts,” *Frieze*, no. 98 (April 2006): 176.
- 20 Trisha Donnelly and Giuseppe Penone are two other rare examples of contemporary artists who have made works in marble.
- 21 Harvey, *New York Beautification Project* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2005).
- 22 Honigman, “Good Artist/Bad Artist: An Interview with Ellen Harvey,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 106.
- 23 Ibid., 111.
- 24 Harvey, artist's website, www.ellenharvey.info/Projects/Arcade_Arcadia.html (accessed March 14, 2014).
- 25 Ibid., www.ellenharvey.info/Projects/museum_of_failure_at_whitney.html (accessed December 12, 2013).
- 26 This painting was made for the installation in the 2008 Whitney Biennial; in an earlier version the artist mounted a group of framed paintings onto the wall.
- 27 Another version, *The Room of Sublime Wallpaper (II)* (2008), retains the basic arrangement but shows a blue sky.
- 28 Harvey, conversation with the author.
- 29 Junge and Lechner, “Scheitern als Erfahrung und Konzept,” pp. 8–10. Junge has further elaborated that complete failure, such as insanity and death, represents the implosion of autonomous social action and as such finally eludes sociological analysis. Junge, “Scheitern: Ein unausgearbeitetes Konzept soziologischer Theoriebildung und ein Vorschlag zu einer Konzeptualisierung,” in Junge and Lechner, eds., *Scheitern*, pp. 17–18.
- 30 Gabriele Spindler, “Failure: Languages and Images,” in Spindler, ed., *Scheitern* (Weitra, Austria: publication N 1; Linz, Landesgalerie Linz, 2007), p. 24.
- 31 Harvey, conversation with the author.

- 32 The Whitney Museum at Philip Morris was located in the lobby of the Philip Morris company headquarters, at 120 Park Avenue in New York, from 1982 to 2008. Along with a change in the name of the sponsoring company, the name was changed to the Whitney Museum at Altria during the run of Harvey's show in 2003.
- 33 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1954; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).
- 34 Harvey, in Sarah Newman, *Ellen Harvey: The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington D.C.*, exh. brochure (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2013), p. 4.
- 35 Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” p. 281.
- 36 Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 1983, in *Samuel Beckett*, vol. 4, p. 471.
- 37 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 30.
- 38 See Newman, *Ellen Harvey*, p. 1n1.
- 39 Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 178.
- 40 Harvey, conversation with the author.