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A Story of Time Keepers

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One day in 1965, at 10:49 am, in the heart of Paris, the Wagner clock which has been standing over the Panthéon's mausoleum for national heroes since the middle of the 19th century stopped. It would seem that she was sabotaged by the very person who was then in charge of winding it every week, and who, probably tired of this task, hit it with an iron bar until it passed away. The clock remained inert for 40 years, its mechanism slowly oxidizing, until September 2005, when members of a group of clandestine explorers (called UX, for "Urban eXperiment") who had made a habit of wandering the Panthéon for years fell on it and decided to restore it. A confirmed watchmaker who co-founded the group, convinced the members of Untergrünther, the branch of UX dedicated to the restoration of what they call the "invisible or abandoned cultural heritage sites"¹, to embark on this adventure. This was hardly their first project. Among the few they agreed to make public, we know that they previously rebuilt an abandoned 100-year-old bunker and renovated a 12th-century crypt.²

One year after they decided to take care of the Panthéon's clock, its mechanism was shining like on the first day, and the clock was working again. To achieve this spectacular result, the group built a secret workshop, hidden in the heights of the Panthéon, in which they brought the clock mechanism and subjected it to a series of delicate operations. They notably soaked it in a bath, polished all its surfaces, replaced a few cables and pulleys, repaired the mechanism's glass cabinet, and completely restored the sabotaged escapement.³ The intervention cost them 4.000 euros in all.

What can be learned from this repair story, this "preservation without permission" as Steward Brand called it, introducing the *Long Now* seminar dedicated to Untergrünther?⁴ First, it reminds us that an object as visible as the clock of the Panthéon, a site emblematic

¹ C. Murray, "Clandestine encounter: the AJ speaks to guerilla restoration group, the Untergrünther", *The Architects' Journal*, February 20, 2008.

² A. Sage, "Underground 'terrorists' with a mission to save city's neglected heritage", *The Times*, September 27, 2009

³ J. Lackman, "The new French hacker-artist underground", *Wired Magazine*, January 20, 2012.

⁴ S. Brand "Preservation without Permission: the Paris Urban eXperiment", *Introduction to the Long Now Seminar*, November 13, 2012.

<http://longnow.org/seminars/02012/nov/13/preservation-without-permission-paris-urban-experiment>

of Paris and all France, can be neglected and wither away. It comes after all, with no surprise: not all cultural heritage is preserved and, most importantly, there is no consensus on what is considered as heritage and what therefore needs special attention.

Second, and consequently, this story highlights the crucial role of very particular protagonists. Indeed, one could easily imagine that repair is an activity that involves only two types of people: specialized professionals who deal with the objects for which they are responsible and amateur tinkerers who repair their own things. In this case, however, it is a bunch of clandestine repairers who decided to take care of the clock. This actually shows that repair can involve a technical but also a moral distribution of work, which summarizes in one simple question: *who cares?* Who wants, who can, who should, and even sometimes who is authorized to repair a given object? This is very clear from the various statements that Untergunther members made in the media back then: it's all a matter of responsibility. They felt obliged to repair the Panthéon's clock because, at that time, no one considered themselves responsible for this piece of cultural heritage. Untergunther managed to "replace the state where it was incompetent."⁵ Nowadays, many situations remind us how challenging this distribution of repair work can be, whether it reinforces inequalities between Northern and Southern countries, or it results in controversial claims for the establishment of a "right to repair" in various domains.

But let's go back to the Panthéon. If you come to visit the mausoleum today and raise your head, you will probably be disappointed to discover that the clock is not on time, and that its hands remain motionless. What happened? In fact, the clock didn't work for long. Once their operation was over, the members of Untergunther were faced with a major problem: for the clock to continue to work, they had to find someone in the Panthéon who would agree to wind it up each week and take care of it. Someone who would be responsible for it. They had little choice but to notify Bernard Jeannot, the Panthéon's deputy administrator, with whom they arranged an informal meeting. He was enthusiastic and admiring of the group's efforts. Unfortunately, once informed, his hierarchy within the *Centre des Monuments Nationaux* did not share his euphoria, quite the contrary. Outraged at the repeated intrusion of the clandestine repairers into the public building, Mr. Jeannot's superior fired him and brought suit against Untergunther. The court stated that clock fixing could not be considered a crime, and the case was dismissed. Yet, Pascal Monnet, the new deputy administrator, did not stop here. He hired a clockmaker to bring the clock back to its previous condition: sabotaged. Refusing to break any parts, the clockmaster eventually agreed to remove the escape wheel, the very part that was rebuilt by Untergunther, consequently stopping the clock mechanism.⁶

What does the conclusion of this story tell us? An important clarification, to begin with: repairing is not maintaining. The mere fact that the clock mechanism is restored does not mean that the clock can operate on a daily basis and keep time for the next decades. The repair operation, however important it may be, does not replace the need to take care of the clock and to identify a responsible person who is engaged to maintain it. This simultaneously shows that breakdown itself is not a univocal phenomenon that would systematically call for repair. Objects may actually remain in intermediate states, in which they are neither properly broken nor fully functional.

⁵ É. Boyer King, "Undercover restorers fix Paris landmark's clock", *The Guardian*, November 26, 2007.

⁶ J. Lackman, "The new French hacker-artist underground", *Wired Magazine*, January 20, 2012.

Is the whole operation a failure for Untergunther then? Not necessarily. Among the sometimes contradictory and deliberately misleading statements of the group, one can find this one, made by Lazar Kunstmann, its representative: “The goal wasn’t to make the clock work, but rather to make sure it didn’t disappear.”⁷ If we agree to take this sentence seriously, we can better understand what has actually been repaired through the action of the clandestine restorers. As the same Kunstmann explains during his talk at Steward Brand’s Long Now seminar, what is most important to Untergunther is to “preserve traces of our past” and to “conserve things as numerous as possible and as direct as possible in their testimony.”⁸ From this point of view, the mere existence of the Panthéon’s clock, which the rust was gnawing away and was threatening to disintegrate, is a success.

But perhaps we can go a little further by trying to understand more precisely what the new deputy administrator sought to do when he asked for the clock to be sabotaged again? Didn’t he want to go back in time as well? Didn’t he engage himself in some kind of restoration, as he attempted to recover the state in which the clock mechanism had been for forty years, before intruders came to disrupt its peaceful existence? Maybe that’s why today, the hands of the Panthéon’s clock indicate 10:51, as if only 2 minutes had passed since 1965.

⁷ Interview in *Article 11*, December 1, 2009.
http://www.article11.info/?Lazar-Kunstmann-porte-parole-de-l#a_titre

⁸ *The Long Now Seminar*, November 13, 2012.