Lacuna. Conservation, Law, and the Ethics of the Incomplete (Rome, 5 Dec 26)

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Deadline: May 11, 2026

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In conservation practice, a lacuna is a site of rupture—a gap in the painted surface where figure and ground have been severed, where the material continuity of a work has been broken. Conservators have long understood this rupture as a form of violence, a visual disruption that prevents the viewer from apprehending the work as a coherent whole. Yet the practice they have developed in response is not simply one of repair.

Following the foundational principles of Cesare Brandi (1906-88), the ethical treatment of a lacuna does not seek to erase the gap but to hold it in a condition of productive tension: stabilizing the work, visually bridging the disruption through techniques of abstracted in-painting, while simultaneously insisting that the lacuna remain legible—that its presence continue to testify to the history of damage, loss, and time. This practice demands a particular kind of attention from the viewer. To encounter a conserved lacuna is to be asked to hold a double-visibility: to recognize both the compositional ambitions of the original work and the ongoing life of the object—marked by accident, neglect, structural violence, or iconoclasm. The lacuna does not disappear; it is ameliorated. What remains is neither the fiction of an intact original nor the spectacle of ruin, but something more demanding: a work that carries the evidence of its own history within it.

To the art historian, the lacuna operates as a prompt rather than a deficit—an invitation to do cognitive and historical work. It forces an acknowledgment of the condition of the evidence on which the discipline relies, serving at once as testimony of institutional histories of care and neglect. It also compels historiographical reflection, as it carries direct consequences for canon formation. Lacunose works pose a limit to their display within the museum and legibility within art historical discourse. The lacuna works as a site of interpretation as much as a mechanism of exclusion: it prevents works from entering or remaining within the circuits of preservation, study, and value that constitute the canon.

Recent scholarship has deepened our understanding of how lacunae are produced. Damage is not always the simple consequence of time. As Ann Laura Stoler argues in Duress, the material deterioration of objects can be the legible residue of structures of power—of decisions, explicit or implicit, about whose cultural production is worth caring for and preserving. The condition of works by non-Western, colonized, or otherwise marginalized artists within Western institutional collections is frequently not accidental but structural: the result of acquisition practices, storage hierarchies, and scholarly inattention that reflect deeper ideological valuations. At the same time, a constant desire to repair, stabilize, and conserve for posterity emerges from histories of accumulation

wherein works of art are treated as commodities'— but outside the Western museum model, alternative practices of care exist that do not require an infinite process of stabilization against decay.

The lacuna, in this light, is not merely an aesthetic problem but an archive—a material index of the conditions that shaped the life of the object within institutional care. Stoler's further insight—that the desire to repair carries its own ideological charge—complicates any straightforward narrative of conservation as restitution. To restore without reckoning is to risk a second erasure, covering over the evidence of neglect, or alternative cultural approaches to material decay, in the very act of addressing it. This risk is precisely what the conservation ethics of the lacuna is designed to resist. In legal discourse, the concept of non liquet—literally 'it is not clear'—designates a situation in which a court cannot render judgment because no applicable law exists. The term names a lacuna in the juridical order: not merely an ambiguity to be resolved by interpretation, but a genuine absence, a space where law has not yet formed. As Sora Han demonstrates in Mu, 49 Marks of Abolition, unlike a legal gap that existing rules might fill by analogy or extension, a non liquet marks the outer edge of the legal system itself—the point at which the court must acknowledge that it cannot decide, not because the facts are unclear, but because the normative ground has not yet been established.

If the conservation lacuna is oriented toward the past—testifying to a history of disruption—the legal lacuna is oriented toward the future. It designates a space where law should exist but does not yet, a judgment that is deferred pending the development of adequate concepts and frameworks. In these contexts, as in conservation, lacunae can reveal underlying asymmetries in power, responsibility, and recognition. Legal thinking offers art history and conservation studies a framework for understanding lacunae as structurally produced and politically consequential—not as accidents of time but as indices of systems of valuation and neglect that remain operative and that resist resolution through acts of individual or institutional goodwill alone. The legal lacuna reminds us that making the gap visible is not the same as filling it, and that the absence of law is itself a condition with its own politics and its own beneficiaries.

The Conference

In this conference, we take a materially grounded sense of the lacuna—as a bounded absence produced within specific historical and institutional conditions—as our point of departure. We focus on lacunae as historically produced gaps that are (1) materially or structurally identifiable, (2) epistemically consequential, and (3) ethically and politically charged. This conference brings different definitions of lacuna—conservatorial, juridical, ethical, and epistemological— into conversation. Conservation practice offers a model of how to inhabit incompleteness ethically: how to acknowledge a gap without either prematurely closing it or aestheticizing it into melancholy. The conserved lacuna is neither repaired nor celebrated; it is held, made visible, and integrated into an ongoing relationship between the work and its viewers. Brandi's insistence on double-visibility—and Derek Walcott's warning that civilization begins to fail when it falls in love with its ruins—-together define an ethical posture toward damage that refuses both false wholeness and the seduction of the fragment.

By placing conservation theory into dialogue with legal theory and other fields, the conference seeks to move beyond metaphorical uses of "absence" and "loss," and toward a more precise account of how lacunae function as sites of decision, deferral, exclusion, and possibility. Neither a

fragment nor a ruin, and not an archival absence, the lacuna is its own specific epistemological category. What new analytical tools emerge when we treat gaps not as deficits to be overcome, but as conditions that structure knowledge, value, and responsibility? We return to this question at a moment when the pace of technological change is outrunning both legal frameworks and conservation methodologies. This conference proposes that thinking across these fields, through the shared figure of the lacuna, may open new tools for responding to conditions that neither field is yet equipped to address working alone.

Submissions

We welcome proposals from scholars working across art history, conservation theory, legal studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, digital humanities, media studies, and cognate fields. Papers need not address all of the themes outlined above; we are equally interested in focused engagements with one dimension of the lacuna and in comparative or synthetic approaches. Possible areas of inquiry include, but are not limited to:

- The ethics of in-painting and partial restoration; the politics of making damage visible
- Conservation practice and postcolonial critique; the structural production of lacunae in non-Western collections
- The relationship between lacunae and canon formation: how degrees of material survival condition the ability of works to enter art-historical discourse
- Theories of repair and their limits
- The temporality of the lacuna: ruin, testimony, and the deferral of judgment
- Case studies in the conservation and legal protection of works from marginalized collections
- New concepts and practices of lacuna treatment arising from disasters, whether natural or human-caused
- Non liquet and the juridical management of incomplete legal orders
- Legal lacunae in cultural heritage, including canonical bias, the uneven visibility of world art, implications of artificial intelligence and intellectual property regimes

The conference is convened by Caroline Fowler and Francesca Borgo. Following “Wastework” (2023), “Loot & Repair” (2024) and “Rework” (2025), this is the fourth annual initiative organized by the BHMPI Lise Meitner Group Decay, Loss, and Conservation in Art History, furthering the Research Group’s ongoing inquiry into the consequences that different forms of loss, disappearance, and degradation bear for the discipline. To submit a proposal, please upload the following as PDF documents by May 11, 2026 on our platform: https://recruitment.biblhertz.it/position/21299202

- title and a 300-word abstract of the proposed paper
- brief CV (max 2 pages, including current position and affiliation)

The language of the conference is English. The Bibliotheca Hertziana will organize and pay for accommodation and reimburse travel costs (economy class) in accordance with the provisions of the German Travel Expenses Act (Bundesreisekostengesetz)

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