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ARTNEWS

THE WHITNEY'S CONSERVATION TEAM IS IN THIS WEEK'S NEW YORKER

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 01/04/16 11:55 AM

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, the Whitney's associate director for conservation and research, at work.
COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

One of the longest articles in this week's *New Yorker* has an unlikely subject: [the Whitney's conservators](#). Written by novelist and MacArthur Fellow Ben Lerner, the piece is about the trials and tribulations of restoring contemporary art. How do you deal with time-based objects that are meant to disappear? What if an artist has intended for his or her object to degrade over time? Or, as Lerner puts it, "should we celebrate the patina of time or what's beneath it?"

Here's how Lerner writes about Josh Kline's *Cost of Living* (*Aleyda*), a sculpture that features a custodian's stand and 3-D printed models of the real-life person who used it:

Standing before the sculpture, I think of how it has long been fashionable in the art world to speak of "dematerialization": the dematerialization of labor in our so-called information-based economy, the dematerialization of the art object in conceptual practice. To confront the severed head and fragmented body of a janitor in a museum space is a discomfiting reminder of the undocumented (in more than one sense) material labor from which such discourses can help distract us. Somebody is still making the hardware from which you upload data to the cloud; somebody is still scrubbing the toilets at the museum that hosts your symposium on Internet art.

[Head over to The New Yorker's site](#) for more about how the Whitney's conservators deal with complicated art-historical predicaments, like what to do when Mark Rothko himself tried (and failed) to properly restore his own painting.