

# WHAT LIES BENEATH

Creating exact replicas of works of art allows Adam Lowe and his team to get under the skin of some of the world's greatest masterpieces – with incredible results. At his Madrid studio, he explains his approach to Anthony Sattin

Photographs by Salva López

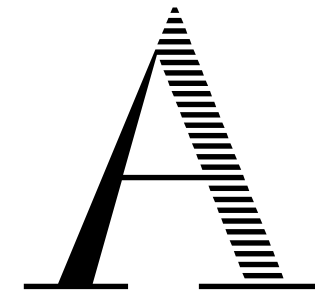


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Adam Lowe in Factum Arte's workshop. Opposite, the Veronica Chorographic Scanner designed by the photogrammetry team





adam Lowe is a copyist. The term has unfortunate connotations, implying an inability to create original work. It is attached to Lowe with justification, though, because he is a man who makes copies, or reproductions. But there is much more to his work than the word 'copyist' suggests.

One of his core projects was a replica of the burial chamber from Tutankhamun's tomb, which opened in Luxor in April 2014. With Factum Arte, a team of artists, technicians and conservators brought together by Lowe and a colleague, he conceived the replica and created it using scanners and flat-bed printers.

The lure of the tragic young pharaoh ensured that the project had great exposure. Interest spiked when British archaeologist Nicholas Reeves published an academic paper suggesting that Tutankhamun's tomb was originally the burial place of Queen Nefertiti. The day after the story ran, in August 2015, Factum Arte's website had almost two million hits. Reeves's argument is credible. For one thing, Tutankhamun's tomb is laid out unlike any other royal burial chamber in the valley, and some of the treasures we associate with the boy king originally carried the queen's name. If Reeves is right – and this is what has caught the public imagination – there might be another tomb

beyond the burial chamber's north wall. Discussions are now under way with the Egyptian authorities to test the wall in the hope of finding what lies beyond.

Lowe is particularly delighted by the attention because Reeves reached this conclusion by using Factum Arte's scans of the original tomb. 'What we are doing is a form of archaeology,' he explains. 'We explore the surface of things. Our scanners and the technology we have developed allow us to see the surface as the eye sees it, but also some of what lies beneath.' The scans of the chamber show that one wall is painted using a different technique from the others, with a different background, and there appears to be the outline of a doorway or opening. But Lowe's delight also stems from his obsession with the relationship between reality and appearance: for years he's been trying to work out how to map the physical presence of objects, how to create an image of something that cannot be photographed but can be seen, how we understand the reality behind images. Now he has created something that allows us to look at things that cannot be seen but can be photographed, or revealed through 3D scanning.

Lowe studied at the Ruskin, then spent three years working for a Masters in Fine Art at London's »

Right, a view of the office, including Adam Lowe's desk. Opposite, a Factum Arte workshop containing facsimiles of the British Museum's two sculptures of human-headed, winged lions from Nimrud





One of Factum Arte's studios; among the many objects are images of a brass tree made for The Connaught hotel in London and an alabaster section of the world without water







Royal College of Art, where he graduated in 1985. 'I went to university because I got a full grant, and so I had time – paid-for time – to explore.'

One of his influences was the French artist Peter de Francia, who was Professor of Painting at the Royal College. Lowe was painting on canvas and board, but also 'exploring' with photography. His fascination with how things transform led to a series of exhibitions at the Pomeroy Purdy Gallery (now Purdy Hicks) in London's Bankside. The catalogue for his 1992 exhibition, *Registration Marks*, included essays by the academics Bruno Latour, Adrian Cussins and Brian Cantwell Smith, whose expertise straddles philosophy, anthropology, sociology and cognitive science. These essays were the result of a series of conversations between the four men, and although such interdisciplinary collaborations are now commonplace, a couple of decades ago they were cutting-edge. Lowe remembers having the sense that he was hitting his head against a wall at the time. 'By then, modernism had played itself out,' he says. Convinced that art was not about self-expression, Lowe worked away at the connection

Above, Adam Lowe in the Factum Foundation space looking at his work *Littoral Deposits*. Opposite, photographing a 3D-printed polyhedron derived from a book by Wenzel Jamnitzer published in 1568

between objects and how we perceive them. Or, as he put it in the *Registration Marks* catalogue, 'how we register a world... we can no longer assume has given edges, boundaries, objects and truth'.

Two years later, his exhibition *Littoral Deposits* perfectly expressed this fascination with surfaces and with ways to record what cannot be seen. The title refers to what lies on the Thames foreshore between high and low tide and to the 36 images that formed the core of the exhibition. These images were created by fixing etching plates onto the foreshore and leaving them there as the river rose. The plates had a range of different grounds, from very soft to extremely hard, and they recorded the passage of the river and what was dragged along its bottom. Images from the plates were then printed into one long, folded strip and augmented by images of the detritus that remained. 'One thing I like,' Lowe notes as he looks through the print version of the plates, 'is that sometimes nothing very exciting happens.'

Some of the key moments that have led him to where he is now have been conversations. One was at a meeting with Latour at the ICA, following the publication of the sociologist's book *We've Never Been Modern*, and another with Cantwell Smith to accompany Lowe's *Registration Marks* show. 'That was when I realised I couldn't do the things I wanted to do alone,' says Lowe. A major turning point was a conversation in London with the Spanish painter and engineer Manuel Franquelo. Franquelo's main concern has been the re-materialisation of objects in paint – he creates hyper-realist images – and through various other types of mediation. After that initial encounter in London, Lowe moved to Madrid in 2000 and together they created Factum Arte.

Factum Arte occupies several warehouses in the eastern district of San Blas. Seated at his desk in the back of the office, with half a dozen people around him, Lowe looks like the manager of a small factory. Then I notice the assembly of objects here and in the meeting room behind him, where replicas of some of the British Museum's sculptures from Nimrud line three of the walls. The fourth wall has huge scanned images of Leda and the Swan, by Leonardo and others; some pieces of a reproduction of the tomb of Seti I in the Valley of the Kings; an analysis of the Institute of Ecotechnics' research vessel *Heraclitus*, which Lowe is helping to restore; and life-size photographs of an olive tree which was dug up and cast in bronze. But none of this comes close to reflecting the range of Lowe's interests or the scope of Factum Arte's activities. 'Come,' he says with undisguised excitement, 'let me show you the place.'

As we walk, he is eager to tell me that Factum is not about him. It is a collaboration of artists and technicians that has happened organically, without any clear plan or obvious management structure, although at a certain moment he was persuaded to »

*Lowe has created something that allows us to look at things that cannot be seen*









