Beauty in use

On the things we keep, and the lives we let them have.

STUDIO ISSUE 01

A complete story. Two opposing arguments.

Original studio writing created for this website. These works are creative concepts, not excerpts from Ori Peretz’s manuscripts or statements attributed to external contributors.

The question

A book can be admired across a room. It can also be carried onto a late train, opened beside a bowl of soup, or lent to someone who returns it with a different understanding of its ending. These are different encounters with the same object. This first studio issue asks what we want a beautiful thing to survive for.

The question begins in a repair workshop. A lamp has been removed from the public room it illuminated, and its restorer must decide what a faithful repair would preserve. Two essays then make opposing cases: one for accepting the marks of use, the other for keeping some objects out of circulation. Neither essay is an outside contributor’s opinion. Both are original studio arguments written to make the disagreement worth considering.

Read the story first, or begin with the position you are least inclined to accept. The pocket edition contains the complete story; the issue edition includes this introduction and both counterpoints. No claim about a finished book, real institution or historical event depends on this fiction.

IN THIS ISSUE

The complete story: A light for the lower room

Studio argument A: Let the book be used

Studio argument B: Keep one out of circulation

A light for the lower room

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The lamp arrived in a crate tall enough for a person. Nera helped the driver ease it through the workshop door, then stood watching while he collected the splinters from her threshold. Under the straw lay a bronze stem, three curved arms and a shade assembled from narrow pieces of amber glass. Someone had tied a numbered label around its neck. The cord was new; the lamp had been old for a long time.

The auction house wanted it ready by Friday. Clean the metal, replace the damaged glass, remove the remains of a paper notice from the base. The instruction sheet described a decorative lamp from a municipal interior. Nera knew the room. She had studied there during the winter when the heating in her flat failed. At closing time, its keeper went from table to table with a wooden ruler, tapping once beside each reader’s book.

The reading room had shut in March. A board across its doors announced improvements without naming any. Through a gap, Nera had seen the long tables stacked on their sides. Now one of its lamps was on her bench. Without the room around it, the object seemed almost embarrassingly elaborate. Laurel leaves climbed the stem. A small bronze moth rested beneath the shade, hidden from anyone standing upright. She had sat under it for months without knowing.

The broken glass was at the back. A thin branch of fractures spread from a screw, held together by a film of yellowed adhesive. The patch below it had been made from plain window glass. On the bench it looked crude. When she set a light inside the shade, however, that small clear patch threw a clean rectangle onto the wood. The amber pieces softened everything else. Someone had repaired a reading lamp so that a reader could see.

Nera worked a damp cloth beneath the paper on the base. Most of the notice came away as grey pulp. Four words remained: PLEASE LEAVE THIS ONE. She remembered the table nearest the stairs, where an elderly man used to spread out diagrams of ships. He carried a magnifying glass on a ribbon. Whenever the keeper rearranged the furniture, he would arrive early and move his chair back beneath the same lamp. She could not remember his name.

At noon, the auction house rang. Had she found matching glass? She had found something close. Could she make the repair disappear? That would take longer. The woman on the telephone said the buyer would expect the lamp to be complete. “It is complete,” Nera said, looking at the bright rectangle. The woman waited. Nera heard how unhelpful she sounded and promised to send photographs. After the call, she put the replacement amber beside the clear patch.

She photographed the shade in daylight and with the lamp lit. Then the bronze moth, the worn switch and the remains of the notice. In the final image she placed an open book under the clear patch. She sent the pictures with two repair options and separate prices. One would return the shade to a uniform

amber. The other would retain the clear window and secure the surrounding glass. She expected the first option to be chosen.

The following afternoon, a woman in a rain-dark coat came to the workshop. She had seen the photographs before the catalogue went to print. “Will it stand on an ordinary table?” she asked. Nera measured the base. “A strong one.” The woman looked around the workshop, then at the shade. She said her name was Davin and that she had bought the old bakery on Bell Street. Upstairs would be her flat. The lower room was still undecided.

Nera pictured another immaculate shop: objects positioned far apart, prices written very small. Davin removed her wet gloves. She wanted a table for people waiting while she repaired their clothes. Sometimes they came with children. Sometimes they stayed after the work was finished because they had nowhere they needed to be. A neighbour had offered books, though she was worried about the damp. “I thought a good light might make it a room,” she said.

“You know it has been altered?” Nera asked. Davin nodded towards the plain glass. “That is the bit I liked.” She put her hand under the shade and turned it slowly until the clear patch faced the chair. On the woman’s palm, the light revealed a row of tiny punctures beside her thumbnail. Nera had the same marks from sewing endbands when the workshop still took binding work. She brought out the second estimate.

The auction was on Thursday. Davin was outbid twice and stayed on the telephone longer than she had intended. The next morning she returned without the lamp’s receipt. “Too much,” she said. Nera felt foolish for having imagined the whole lower room. Together they looked at a plain iron task light hanging above the bench. It was for sale, though Nera had never labelled it. Davin asked whether it would illuminate a table. Nera switched it on.

The bronze lamp’s buyer selected the uniform amber. Nera removed the clear patch, wrapped it in tissue and included it with the completed repair, along with a note explaining where it had been. She retained the outline of the paper notice in her condition report. By four o’clock the crate was closed. The workshop seemed smaller with its iron task light gone. She worked beneath a bare bulb until the following Tuesday.

On Tuesday evening she walked to Bell Street carrying a small box of books. The old bakery window had been cleaned, but the painted letters remained above the door. Inside, a boy was doing arithmetic beneath the iron lamp. Two women were sorting buttons into saucers. Davin had found a table with one short leg and folded a square of cardboard beneath it. She looked up from a coat and asked Nera to hold its sleeve.

For a while they worked without speaking. The boy pushed his exercise book aside to make room for the box. Nera thought of the bronze moth travelling somewhere she would never see, and of the clear glass enclosed with it. She hoped the note would be read. Then Davin turned the lamp a little, bringing the torn seam into focus. Nera threaded the needle. Outside, the remaining light drained from the bakery letters. Inside, there was enough.

End.

Let the book be used

The case for circulation

Imagine an edition whose owner is afraid to open it. The binding is admired, the slipcase is kept square, the corners remain sharp. Years pass. The object has survived, but the experience it was designed to make possible has been deferred so thoroughly that it may never happen. For an ordinary reading edition, that is a peculiar kind of success.

A beautiful book should encourage attention. Good proportions can make a page less tiring to follow. An illustration can hold a reader at a difficult moment. A cover can make someone pick up a work they would otherwise overlook. These choices earn their place through an encounter with a person. Treating every sign of that encounter as damage confuses the preservation of an object with the preservation of its purpose.

This is not a licence for carelessness. Lend a book to someone who will return it. Keep the paper away from a wet window. Repair a loose hinge before the board detaches. Care makes continued use possible. What deserves resistance is the idea that only an untouched copy can be respected. A pencilled question may record more attention than a sealed wrapper ever will.

The harder case is scarcity. Some copies carry information that cannot be replaced: an annotation, a particular state of the text, a maker’s intervention. Those need another standard of care. Yet rarity should be established rather than performed. A publisher need not manufacture fear of use around every attractive edition. It can make an object honestly, explain its materials and allow a reader to inhabit it.

In the story, the grand lamp travels elsewhere. The room still comes into being beneath an ordinary light. That ending matters because a good experience cannot always wait for the most impressive object. Make the object as well as the work requires. Then put it within reach. A book that is opened, argued with and lent has begun the life for which its pages were joined.

Keep one out of circulation

The case for restraint

The invitation to use a beautiful object sounds generous until the person using it is making an irreversible choice for everyone who comes later. A flattened fold, a removed label or a replaced piece of glass can make an object easier to handle and harder to understand. The present owner’s pleasure is one claim among others. It should not automatically become the final authority.

A book carries information beyond its sentences. The way its sheets were gathered, the colour beneath a faded spine and the pressure of a former reader’s hand can disclose different parts of its history. A reading copy may preserve the words while losing those particulars. Saying that an object has fulfilled its purpose because someone enjoyed it is therefore too narrow. Sometimes the purpose includes remaining available for questions we have not learned to ask.

Restraint does not require putting everything behind glass. It requires choosing. Keep a reference copy when the material warrants it. Make a usable reading edition beside it. Offer a clear image or transcription when the original cannot safely travel. Access can take more than one form, and the most immediate form is not always the most generous across time. A reader today should not have to destroy another reader’s evidence tomorrow.

There is also a danger in romanticising wear. A stain may record an encounter, but it can equally record neglect. A pencilled note can be valuable, banal or actively misleading. The marks do not become meaningful simply because they are old. Someone must examine them, describe them and accept the inconvenience of leaving a question unresolved. That slow work rarely produces the most persuasive sales photograph.

Nera’s useful act is the note she packs with the lamp. She cannot choose its destination. She can keep a discarded piece intelligible and record the alteration before it disappears from view. Use and preservation will not always agree. When they do not, a deliberate refusal to change something can be an act of hospitality towards a person who has not yet arrived.