
Chapter Title: Digital object lessons and their precursors

Book Title: Museum Object Lessons for the Digital Age

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Published by: UCL Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xz0wz.6>

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Digital object lessons and their precursors

The fundamental argument of this book is that we need to pay attention to the specific contexts, as well as materialities, of digital objects and that digital media in museums exist in a long-standing continuum or process of mediation, technological mimesis and objectification. In an exchange of comment in the journal *Science*, Franz Boas argued with his colleague O.T. Mason about the purpose and nature of museum collections.¹ The debate emerged from the growing museological tension between the spectacular nature of individual objects and their contextualisation within academic and scientific knowledge systems. Boas, summarising his position later, noted:

*I think no word has ever been said that is less true than Dr. Brown Goode's oft-repeated statement that a museum is a well-arranged collection of labels illustrated by specimens. On the contrary, the attraction for the public is the striking specimen; and whatever additional information either the label or the surrounding specimens may be able to convey to the mind of the visitor is the only result that can be hoped for.*²

Boasian museology started with the spectacular – an object or life group – and moved from there to the labels, the expedition report (on display in the gallery) and, for the truly dedicated visitor, the resource of the museum library. Boas abandoned the museum shortly after these debates, in large part because he perceived his experiments with display to have failed to displace some of the prevailing evolutionary theories of race and culture with which he vehemently disagreed. His creation of life models and groups,

and the layering of different kinds of information around objects, did not succeed in animating objects and allowing visitors to understand them in context. Rather, it created a new, museological context for the collection, whose existential and dusty historicity was at odds with the dynamic fluidity of the cultural processes that he was attempting to present. At the same time, Boas was unaware of some of the implicit narratives his own theory of culture presented in the form of life groups and cultural areas. In undermining social evolutionary understandings of progress and arguments about racial determinism, Boas' dynamic life groups themselves became frozen in time. They presented multiple layers of information – from single object, to tableau, to label, to voluminous text – resulting in the dissolution of the object into an informational domain ignoring or neglecting the ways in which objects could also be seen as compressions of information about collectors and museums as well as their original producers. What kind of a lesson is this for the digital age?

Some of the interpretive problems in moving from objects to anthropological theory are in certain respects built into the very notion of permanent exhibitions, especially for ethnographic collections that aim to present living peoples and which will by definition



Figure 8 *Windows on the Collection*, at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C., 2005. Photograph by Gwyneria Isaac. Reproduced with permission.

be permanently trapped in a present moment that will always be out of date. Film, photography and now digital media have long been used to inject a sense of contemporaneity into this temporal vortex. It is, however, important to unpack how text, images and objects work together to create reality effects. Digital media has the tendency to compress multiple forms of information into a single space, usually apprehended through a screen. Gwyneira Isaac, curator of North American Ethnology at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, has written about the touch-screen displays that give access to collections held within the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). She argues that the touch screens themselves have become 'the objects'. Rather than adding layers of contextual information to the other displays, the interactive screens scattered throughout the displays have themselves become primary objects as vitrines that curate and exhibit the collections. Isaac suggests that these digital screens have become not just the vehicle for delivering information but objects of appreciation in their own right that mimetically appropriate the effects and engagements of glass cases.³ In this way it could be argued that the NMAI took the legacy of George Gustav Heye – one of the most prolific collectors of Native American material culture – and extended his reach into digital space, converting an abundance of objects behind glass into an abundance of digital images on screens.⁴

The questions that were raised in nineteenth-century museum debates about the relation between the singular artefact and more general kinds of knowledge and information have returned full force at the turn of the twenty-first century, inflecting our understanding of the digital domain and the questions we often ask about whether the 'virtual' is 'real'.⁵ The issues, and object lessons, raised are simultaneously epistemological, experiential and political. Drawing on material culture studies we can understand any object as a material, social, political and epistemological palimpsest.⁶ Analysing digital objects in this way can help us to better understand the capacities of digital media to participate in the mimetic and constructed process of producing arguments about the real world inside the museum.

Boas' life groups were active demonstrations of how an embodied experience of objects is literally built into museum object lessons. Boas himself was one of the models for the famous Hamat'sa life group displayed at the Atlanta World's Fair in 1895, which went on to become a permanent display at the United States National Museum of Natural History.⁷ The Hamat'sa life group, produced from photographs of Boas modelling the ritual as he observed and documented it, was replicated in



Figure 9 Franz Boas posing for figure in United States National Museum exhibit entitled 'Hamat'sa coming out of secret room', 1895 or before, photographer unknown. Negative MNH 8300, National Anthropological Archives. © Smithsonian Institution. Reproduced with permission.

1904 at the Chicago Field Museum, and in 1927 at the Milwaukee Public Museum, and also appears on the cover of George Stocking's seminal volume about museum anthropology, *Objects and Others*.⁸ As an object lesson, this installation demonstrates how knowledge is generated not just by spectatorship and visual circulation but through forms of corporeal mimesis that are projected onto and implicate the viewer through imaging technologies of both photography and model-making. It enables visitors to understand the Hamat'sa from inside the display by imagining their own capacity to inhabit the position of the Hamat'sa dancers while also being spectators at the ceremony, and in the museum.



Figure 10 United States National Museum exhibit display case prepared by Franz Boas: 'Hamat'sa Coming out of Secret Room', 1895. NAA INV 09070600, National Anthropological Archives. © Smithsonian Institution. Reproduced with permission.

As Alison Griffiths has argued in relation to a number of compelling examples, from planetaria to IMAX cinemas, bodily connections are implicit within museum imaging technologies and are therefore built into the exhibition experience and technologies of spectatorship. This bodily perspective allows us to relocate our preoccupation with the visual in museums, and in relation to digital culture, in a more complex sensuous and experiential domain.⁹ The visual experience has dominated our discussion of object lessons – for instance, in Tony Bennett's influential description of the ways in which museums exerted governmental power through the 'exhibitionary complex'.¹⁰ Yet the power of looking, and of being looked at, exerted by the curators of museum exhibitions, is only one way in which collections can be co-opted into object lessons. If we shift our attention away from exhibitions to other museum practices of collecting, classifying, storing, conserving, researching and collaborating with communities, we see a host of other experiences in which meaning around objects is negotiated. Clifford's 'contact zone' is useful to suggest an uneven space of (colonial) encounter that increasingly gives meaning to museum collections through the engagement, in the museum, of

stakeholders and communities.¹¹ Seeing exhibitions, and many other activities and experiences within the museum, as contact zones allows us to think about the multiplicity of experience; the varied forms of sociality; and the negotiation of authority that continually takes place around museum collections. Yet the contact zone also suggests a need to think beyond what can be seen evoking a sensorium of contact. There have been a number of important critiques of the ways in which the idea of the contact zone has been disconnected from its original usage as a space of unequal colonial relationality and used instead to redeem the problematic legacy of colonial collections. Robin Boast describes the contemporary museum contact zone as ‘neo-colonial’, perpetuating existing power relations within a new language of collaboration and consultation. Similarly, Nancy Marie Mithlo describes the contact zone as a ‘red man’s burden’, shifting the responsibility of participation onto Indigenous people without changing the conditions that structure museological contact.¹² It is vital to reclaim the notion of the contact zone as not just a space of social encounter but as a political domain in which historical relationships are enacted through physical engagement between people and connections, body with wood and stone; stories and storerooms.



Figure 11 Dr Ludovic Coupaye, Jo Walsh and Rosanna Raymond of Ngāti Rānana (the London Māori Club) in the UCL Ethnography Collections, 25 January 2013. Photograph by Haidy Geismar. Reproduced with permission of all pictured.

In its fullest sense, as a way to explore power, politics, relationships and physical points of connection, the contact zone is a productive way to understand our relationship to museum collections, and can help us to figure out the entanglement of social and material contexts. In [Figure 11](#) you can see one of my colleagues, Ludovic Coupaye, welcoming representatives of Ngāti Rānana, the London Māori Club, into the storeroom of the UCL Ethnography Collections, in order to celebrate the return of a Māori *poutokomanawa*, or carved ancestor figure, to Bloomsbury after having been on display in an exhibition at the Horniman Museum in South London. You can see Rosanna Raymond, a New Zealander of Pacific Island descent, an artist and performer and an important interlocutor for Pacific collections in London, and Jo Walsh, representing Ngāti Rānana, reading out a poem to thank the figure for his work in the exhibition and to lay him to rest for a while at UCL. You can also see the feather earrings that Raymond made for the *poutokomanawa*, which are now a permanent part of the object.¹³ Taking a step back from the overpowering influence of the ‘exhibitionary complex’ as an interpretive framework for understanding museum materialities, the concept of the contact zone encourages us to think about how information is encoded in objects in other ways: in an experiential domain, within social spaces as well as zones of political encounter.

The interpretive tensions that arise when exploring collections require us to think carefully about where information resides and how knowledge is generated. The digital domain provokes a similar interpretive slippage to any other form of material culture:¹⁴ do we look through digital media to the worlds that it contains and represents, or do we zoom both in and out to examine the platforms and the material affordances of the technologies themselves in structuring these worlds? And like museum collections, digital media in its broadest sense polarises the ways in which we think about the process and practice of interpretation and the mediation of social and political worlds. For every digital utopianist who celebrates the capacity of digital technologies to liberate us from past inequalities of access to knowledge, forging new communities unstratified by class, race or gender, there is a digital dystopianist who emphasises the entanglement of corporate projects of monetisation and state projects of surveillance now reaching into our most intimate moments.¹⁵ We know that digital infrastructures perpetuate existing inequalities of access and ownership as much as they disrupt them, and that for every grand project to digitise the world’s books there are at least a million images of cats.

Where, then, do digital museum collections fit into this continual back-and-forth movement between categories of object and information or knowledge and the continued relocation of material forms within other representational technologies, particularly the visual? Digital objects are often described as being pure information, floating somehow in immaterial space. At the same time, their materiality is in fact continually shifting as electrical circuits pass through cables, into hardware, through the interfaces of code and, at the moment, primarily onto screens. As Hui comments, digital materiality has its own sets of material constraints and affects:

*Digital objects appear to human users as colourful and visible beings. At the level of programming they are text files; further down the operating system they are binary codes; finally, at the level of circuit boards they are nothing but signals generated by the values of voltage and the operation of logic gates. How, then, can we think about the voltage differences as being the substance of a digital object? Searching downward we may end up with the mediation of silicon and metal. And finally we could go into particles and fields. But this kind of reductionism doesn't tell us much about the world.*¹⁶

It might be helpful to see digital materiality as 'an unfolding process', not simply as an end product or a finished object.¹⁷ Yet, despite this complexity, we generally apprehend digital museum collections via screens, which constrain and define our experience of them as objects. Despite the capacity of digital technologies to be experienced through multiple senses, and to be understood as complicated material connectors linking hardware and software often across global networks, a visual image is by far the most prominent mode in which we experience digital collections, a trajectory that links the screens of computers and mobile devices to the glass cases of a conventional museum display.

The object lessons I have been discussing so far raise a series of questions about the politics of access, and the tension between the visual or other senses as the primary museum experience. Museum object lessons also provide an interpretive shift back and forth – from understanding objects in terms of materials or culture, from the singular to the collection, from the collection to the institution, and from the collection to the world. Thinking about digital within these terms allows us to make sense of both the resonance and wonder of digital mediation.

There are a series of ideas about the digital that emerge from our engagement with digital technologies and which resonate with

pre-existing object lessons in museums to produce what we might understand as a series of digital object lessons. For instance, a dominant idea about the digital is the assumption of its ubiquity and uniformity – the notion that an undifferentiated, ill-defined ‘digital’ is now the dominant form of contemporary mediation, and the primary mode of cultural production.¹⁸ Another dominant idea is that the digital is fundamentally reducible to a conceptual logic of code, which allows it to exist as an immaterial concept that is separate from the material networks of hardware and screens that so often instantiate it.¹⁹ This notion of the digital means that for many, the digital becomes visible, and therefore somehow material, only when it stops working, like many other kinds of infrastructure.²⁰ A third discourse that surrounds the digital is that of inauthenticity: the presumption that digital objects are defined by their capacities to be endlessly replicated, losing sight of any discourse of originality.²¹ Finally, there is also a powerful discourse regarding the assumption that digital technologies are fundamentally social – that they are created not only to produce networks, but also are themselves networked, facilitating the production of networked public spheres, forms of communication and modes of collaboration and participation.²² The social network is not simply a metaphor. Digital networks and social networks are often conflated or at least understood to be in a direct, mutually constitutive relationship. For example, in Chris Kelty’s discussion of free and open source software projects, he argues that the open source project brings new publics, new codes and new legal systems into being simultaneously and as one and the same thing, which he describes as a ‘recursive public’.²³ The social theory of digital networks argues that digital networks are not mere representations of social networks, but that they create, constitute, facilitate and perpetuate them.

These nascent theories of the digital, often emerging solely in dialogue with digital culture, share many key frameworks with material culture theory, much of which has emerged in museums. Both digital media and material culture theory posit that the ‘object’ of study – open source software, art, a pair of denim jeans – make people as much as they are made by people.²⁴ One of the fundamental arguments I am making here is that museum dialogues between digital technologies and museum collections allow us to both historicise and complicate many of our assumptions about digital technologies. We need to explore how digital objects are used to constitute reality effects, creating object lessons by altering and participating in how we both see and understand the world. This perspective allows us to unpack these assumptions of immateriality, abstraction, inauthenticity and sociality, leaving space to understand the politics

of circulation, the material infrastructures and experiences of the digital, the challenges of obsolescence, and the inequality of access to digital worlds, among many other issues. Similarly, the work done to expose the authoritative epistemologies that are enshrined in museum technologies of collection, archiving and exhibition can help us unpack the ways in which social networks, collaboration and participation are curated by technical experts within digital platforms.

To bring this home, we might return to the American Museum of Natural History's Hall of Northwest Coast Indians. The oldest of the anthropological halls in the museum, it was originally conceived by Franz Boas in 1887, who drew on his experiences at the Chicago World's Fair and the Smithsonian Institution, as well his extensive field research on the Northwest Coast and collecting as part of the Jesup Expedition. Many visitors today assume the hall to have been preserved, almost unchanged, since then and, like the Pitt Rivers Museum, it has become an archetypal representation of a particular kind of early museum anthropology.²⁵ In fact, the display is now far removed from Boas' original conception of the hall as a palimpsest of different informational systems and forms of knowledge, in which singular objects, life groups, labels, photographs and expedition reports were presented in a multilayered way. Boas' vision was re-curated and significantly altered after he left the museum in 1905 by his successor Clark Wissler, who stripped out many of the objects to create a less cluttered style of display. Over the years, the famous canoe was moved from the ceiling to the floor outside the hall and was populated with life models, moving only recently back to the ceiling. Between 1910 and 1927, a series of romanticised murals depicting American Indian life painted by William S. Taylor were added to the walls. The Hall as we see it today seems to have changed little, its outdated spelling of tribal names and its dusty cases provoking both nostalgia from New Yorkers and frustration from many native peoples, but in fact it signals numerous interpretive and technological shifts over time. Over the years, the museum consistently prioritised other halls for refurbishment, rendering these halls and collections an outlier in a museum dedicated to geology, zoology, biodiversity and so on (missing an opportunity to narrate the human experience of the natural world). Yet the Hall has also been the site of an intensification of collaboration. Over time, the museum's anthropology department has developed its relationships with communities on the Northwest Coast, working to co-produce exhibitions, and on many other educational initiatives that are not visible within the exhibition halls.²⁶ Recently the museum launched an initiative, *Digital Totem*, an interactive screen aiming to 'bring contemporary Northwest

Coast voices and new interpretation into this historic gallery'.²⁷ Through the Web interface present in the gallery, visitors can meet native people through photographs and interviews, zoom into thirty objects from the collection, listen to local languages and create their own soundscapes drawing on sound recordings from the Northwest Coast.

The *Digital Totem* is part of a series of digital interventions in the hall, including the use of a *Video Bridge* robot that can bring native peoples from the Northwest Coast today into the hall and allow them to use the mobile robotic screen to move around while interacting with visitors.²⁸ Other projects include *Dreams of a Haida Child*, a collaboration with Haida artist Shoshannah Greene to develop a colouring book that uses augmented reality to link museum artefacts to Haida stories and landscapes.²⁹ These projects, at first glance, seem to fundamentally contrast with the unchanging character of the hall: the screens and apps render the collections that are scanned, augmented and socially framed more colourful, brighter, more tactile and more accessible than the same objects that lie still, either in their cases, hidden away with low lighting, or in the museum storerooms barely accessible to the public. These digital interventions seem to transform, improve, correct, enliven; yet they also depend on these collections for their existence, emerging from a deep engagement with the collections and their history, and from the recognition that the collections are vital and valuable cultural resources



Figure 12 Hall of Northwest Coast Indians with *Digital Totem*, 20 June 2017. Photograph by Matthew Shanley. ©AMNH/M.Shanley. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 13 Sean Young, collections curator at the Haida Gwaii Museum, engaging with visitors in the Hall of Northwest Coast Indians at the American Museum of Natural History using the *Video Bridge*, January 2016. Photograph reproduced with permission of Barry Joseph using a CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence.

for contemporary Northwest Coast peoples. Rather than assuming the digital to be a simple form of remediation and translation, we need to understand the complex processes of indexicality, mimesis and materiality that underscore these new museum practices, processes and cultural forms and understand the web of social relations that emerge between old and new forms of collections.

In October 2017, it was announced that the museum had finally decided to dedicate funds to comprehensively reconceptualise and reinstall the Hall. The efflorescence of digital projects, coupled with long-standing and sustained critique from native peoples was finally acknowledged by the museum as grounds for reinvestment. Peter Whiteley, curator of American Ethnology at the museum commented for the museum’s press release: ‘We eagerly look forward to working with First Nations communities to create a modern exhibition hall that we hope will serve as a new exemplar ... We want to build on a long history of dialogue with Native experts as we develop an updated installation with new understanding, transcending the boundaries that have too often divided museums and Native communities.’³⁰

Cultural theories of digital objects

Our explorations of digital objects are often hampered by a series of assumptions about the digital that obscure its more ‘ethnographic’ realities. Part of the remit of the nascent field of digital anthropology is to denaturalise the digital, troubling the normative assumptions that tend not to be unpacked in other fields of enquiry. For instance, when we are told by Lev Manovich that software is ‘a layer that permeates all areas of contemporary societies’ and that it is increasingly constitutive of all cultural production, digital anthropologists might ask how this relationship could vary from place to place and be built up in very particular kinds of context.³¹

Jannis Kallinikos *et al.* argue that ‘digital artefacts are intentionally incomplete and perpetually in the making’ and that they have an ambivalent ontology.³² I do not attempt here to rigidly define either digital media or digital objects, but rather aim to construct a more methodological argument around how to look at and understand the digital in context. This methodological blueprint should last far beyond the time specificity of any of the projects I will discuss in the book and can transcend the built-in obsolescence that defines many of the digital products and practices with which we are currently familiar. Kallinikos and his co-authors have set out in two papers a blueprint definition of digital artefacts. They argue that digital artefacts are characterised by being editable, interactive, open, reprogrammable and distributed, and that they are fundamentally granular and modular.³³ In an earlier article, I suggested that digital objects should be understood as situated within a continuum of mediation defined by an ongoing process of translation and remediation and a fundamental capacity for lateral connection.³⁴ We need to empirically explore these emerging forms and practices in order to recognise how many of Kallinikos’ criteria are cultural values rather than intrinsic properties of the media or technology itself.

A growing body of digital anthropology is attentive to the situated ways in which technologies are located and co-produced by alternative preoccupations, sensibilities and cosmologies. Jennifer Deger’s work within a media collective situated in the Northern Territory of Australia explores the ways in which Yolngu media practices instantiate Indigenous aesthetics, understandings of affect and world-making. The production and circulation of cellphone images, the repeated playing of Mariah Carey’s ‘All I Want for Christmas Is You’ and the decoration of family graves and homes with store-bought stockings and tinsel

at Christmas all enact Aboriginal forms of memorialisation, memory and ancestral form, co-opting these outside forms into an insider cosmological, discursive and aesthetic frame.³⁵

Looking ethnographically at how people use and engage with digital objects makes it clear that these perceptions are not inherent to the nature or form of digital technologies alone, but also emerge from the ways in which these forms are appropriated and given meaning within very specific cultural locales. Ethnographic work can destabilise the certainties around the meaning of things, decentring the museum in favour of localised sites of interpretation. Compare two ethnographic accounts of the return to Pacific Island communities of 3D digital images from museum collections. In Graeme Were's account of the return of 3D Malanggan carvings to New Ireland (Papua New Guinea), the recognition that digital objects could not be touched or sensed in the same way as other collections facilitated a form of distancing that allowed Nalik people to internalise the images in order to reproduce them again locally and facilitate 'the reclamation, recovery and reintegration of cultural knowledge'.³⁶ Malanggan carvings are supposed to disappear after use, within what Susanne Küchler calls a 'sacrificial economy', which is why so many of them are now in museum collections.³⁷ Digital versions of Malanggan enable their reactivation within carving traditions, but they are not recognised as real enough to produce spiritual dissonance or to reawaken local knowledge claims.

By way of contrast, Deirdre Brown's account of several different projects to bring Māori *taonga* (which can be loosely translated as cultural treasures) into the digital domain demonstrates a dominant Māori discourse that insists on a seamless continuity between digital objects and their predecessors. Images of Māori ancestors, whether they be materialised in wood, stone, paper, on screens, in songs or in landscapes, are all valuable, existing within a shared cultural continuum.

In both New Zealand and New Ireland, digital collections are used to activate social relations and the transmission of cultural knowledge.³⁸ But the object worlds with which these digital platforms are understood to reside are very different. In a New Ireland context, the material form is less important than the knowledge that it inscribes. In a Māori context, each material context is considered as equal to any other, as Ngata *et al.* comment:

For people in Hauiti, however, the taonga-ness of an object, digital or otherwise, is determined by the quality of its relationships, so that something that to one person might appear as 'just an artefact'

could be a taonga [cultural treasure] to someone who knows and/or is part of its history and kinship networks... Any artefact is a potential taonga, in the sense that it can be woven into the fabric of Hauiti whakapapa and knowledge, and any artefact creatively generated out of these relationships can be a taonga, no matter what its form. This includes digital objects: a hologram of the ancestral house Te Kani a Takirau is as much a taonga to people who know and/or are related to this ancestor and his or her history as the carved wooden panels from which it was made, that are now scattered among museums in New Zealand, the US and Europe. Reassembling these taonga digitally is therefore just as important – if not more so – as bringing them physically together.³⁹

The return of a 3D digital version of a Malanggan in the British Museum therefore means something quite different in New Ireland to the return of a 3D Māori club from the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch. Nalik in New Ireland carefully kept the local property regimes that surround Malanggan away from digital images. Māori in the Northeast Coast of the North Island of New Zealand inscribe digital files with the same propriety and property relations as any other object. In both of these examples, digital media may be understood to oscillate between cultural worlds, bringing together multiple ways of knowing and being. Both of these examples provide different lessons in the cross-cultural interpretation of digital objects.

My perspective on interpreting the digital itself has emerged ethnographically, and has developed out of an involvement with many digital projects.⁴⁰ Questions of radical difference are at the heart of anthropology, and underpin the experience of numerous Indigenous peoples especially those living in settler-colonies.⁴¹ Many of the most provocative interventions into the normativity of digital media and its effects started as political projects to ‘decolonize the database’ by co-opting digital media into projects not just of self-determination but of Indigenous world-making, where the Indigenous emerges as a foil for the production and recognition of radical difference.⁴² For instance, it is no coincidence that many of the most creative refigurings of digital collection management systems have emerged in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, specifically to unsettle the archival imperatives, collecting paradigms, representational inequities and intellectual property claims of settler-colonial states. The Reciprocal Research Network (RRN), based at the Museum of Anthropology of the University of British Columbia, has created a consolidated collections database, drawing together collections

from the Northwest Coast held in numerous museums around the world into one 'site' constructed primarily for Northwest Coast communities (and to a lesser extent, researchers) rather than an undifferentiated universal public.⁴³ Knowledge about artefacts can be shared and discussed, and then uploaded back into the original museum catalogues, potentially reconfiguring what is known, providing context, and in some cases new protocols for the care and management of objects.

In another example, Mukurtu is an open access collections management system that was developed by American anthropologist Kim Christen (now Kim Christen Withey) and colleagues out of her work with Warumungu Aboriginal communities in Tennant Creek, Australia. Starting as a digital project to think through the protocols around knowledge access in that specific community, Mukurtu now presents itself as 'a grassroots project aiming to empower communities to manage, share, and exchange their digital heritage in culturally relevant and ethically-minded ways'.⁴⁴ Local Contexts is an offshoot of Mukurtu led by Christen and Jane Anderson.⁴⁵ A hack of Creative Commons (itself a hack of copyright), Local Contexts produces licences and labels that facilitate both public awareness about, and allow for, the management of community protocols in relation to access and circulation of cultural expressions and knowledge. Labels such as TK Women Restricted, TK Attribution, TK Secret/Sacred and TK Commercial allow communities to appropriate representational, political and economic authority around the circulation of digital and digitised culture.⁴⁶

These projects each demonstrate the ways in which digital tools allow communities to re-imagine museum protocols of knowledge management and circulation, redefining the social relations of entitlement and obligation that constitute archival property and propriety. They implicitly recognise the complicity of digital technologies within broader projects of colonial appropriation, in which archives have become vehicles of dispossession, and a space in which to negotiate sovereignty. As projects of resistance, then, these projects knowingly connect to broader discourses that frame the digital as open to remix and remastering, and link these to questions of accessibility and accountability. On the surface, these projects align with digital movements such as WikiLeaks and digital practices such as remix in that they appropriate digital capacities for circulation to challenge a singular point of curatorial authority.⁴⁷ The forms of cultural inflection I have been discussing also complicate the flattened 'public' constituted through projects such as Creative Commons. These projects raise an issue that Faye Ginsburg has described as a 'Faustian contract', as new media may bind Indigenous people to particular

traditional identities, a bind Nancy Marie Mithlo has described as a 'red man's burden' (placing the burden of responsibility onto native peoples within museum collaborations).⁴⁸ Mithlo and Ginsburg have sensitively evaluated the role that Indigenous peoples play in institutional settings, recognising that new media does not necessarily entail new social and political relations and can in fact perpetuate old forms of inequality as well as producing new ones.

What compromises are necessitated through participation within these powerful zones of material engagement? How much are communities able to reconfigure not just the form but the structure of these complex assemblages that define both digital media and museums? Digital resources are currently creating new and complex materialities and permitting new kinds of access to collections. The opportunity to 3D print from high-resolution digital files has been picked up as a form of cultural return, for instance, in the case of the Tlingit, who have collaborated with the Smithsonian to print several objects from the collection of the National Museum of Natural History, allowing them to be recirculated and used back in communities.⁴⁹ In this context, 3D printing allows for objects to return simultaneously to several different communities. In other contexts, different forms of engagement are emerging surrounding the authenticity of these collections, contesting the status of digital files as museum or community property.⁵⁰

A comparative, ethnographic approach, taken alongside the sensibility of material culture studies and museum anthropology, is very helpful in discussions of the otherwise amorphous and vast world of interest in digital media. This is but a single route into understanding the interpretive dilemmas and aesthetic sensibilities provoked by digital technologies, techniques and forms in museums. However, it is productive in that it allows us to challenge assumptions about the digital from the perspective of situated experience, and to understand this experience as produced by systems and structures that exist outside of the digital. By thinking of digitisation as a cultural process of interpretation and meaning-making, we can open up what has often been radically naturalised in both museum and digital environments. It is this naturalisation that creates what I call throughout the volume 'reality effects' – the perceptions of the real that are actually carefully constructed and produced through a wide range of media. In museums, reality effects are vital to the production of object lessons. The rest of this volume is dedicated to an exploration of these issues as they ripple across the surface of, and reverberate within, a series of objects that themselves refract across different media, and take multiple forms.