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Mimesis, replication and reality

I started this book with what might be perceived as the most analogue of objects: a wooden box, handmade to contain glass lantern-slides. I ended with a digital rendering of a cloak as a landscape, moving beyond conventional museum imaging techniques that simulate the look of an object to evoke a Māori way of valuing treasured cultural possessions. But working from the first to the last, it seems clear that all of these object lessons demonstrate that there is no clear division between the digital and the analogue. All of the projects described here show a marked continuum between different museum technologies. By bringing together objects such as the Web version of the Malakulan ram-baramp and a pen with which the decorative arts are collected, these objects demonstrate that both knowledge and sociality in museums are



Figure 53 Screengrab from *Bears on Stairs*. This computer-designed animation was printed in 3D and the objects were then filmed using stop-motion animation. Source: <https://vimeo.com/91711011>. Reproduced under fair use.

established by a range of different technologies, which are always culturally inflected and constituted. The digital is but the latest in a string of interpretive and imaging technologies devised to copy, distribute and presence collections. As the still from the animation *Bears on Stairs* demonstrates, digital technologies are deeply entangled in the contemporary production of material culture.¹ Parry's notion of the 'post-digital' museum recognises that the digital has become such an integral part of everyday museum practice that the separation of digital departments from other divisions in museums is fast becoming historical.² Rather, digital skills and practices are entangled in all museum operations – from collecting through to exhibition design and display. This entanglement also needs to extend to the ways in which we appreciate the very nature of museum collections.

In her book, *Material Participation*, Noortje Marres argues for a new way of understanding the interaction between people and digital technologies (among other material forms). She argues that the language of agency reifies a very particular division between the material and the social, the subjective and the objective. Marres suggests that the framework of material participation presents a more hybrid understanding of the entanglement of technology with social action and public engagement. She explores 'device-centred' perspectives on participation that distinguish a 'performative politics of things'.³ This performative politics is very much on display in digital museum projects, which project utopian ideals about technology as much as they do collections.

I have been working with a number of concepts that allow us to bridge the divide between digital and analogue. The idea of the 'contact zone', like Marres' notion of participation, allows us to theorise objects not just in terms of their material qualities but in terms of the social relations and political hierarchies that structure engagement with them. The concept, and process, of design is also often used to explain the ways in which material forms are brought together in particular patterns, which are deeply implicated in the politics of mass production and consumption. Notions of materials, materiality and material culture have some core principles in common that help us to understand the entwined material and conceptual foundations of digital objects. As a body of social theory, these paradigms insist on the mutual constitution between subject and object, person and thing; they challenge any clear-cut border between the cultural and natural world; and they celebrate the vibrant efficacy of form.

As well as arguing for a kind of dissolution of the digital into a broader material world, I am also interested in what objects such as the pen can teach us about the nature of digital objects, and the ways in which the digital form is increasingly built into our definition of the museum collection. The pen itself, as a digital-analogue hybrid, was developed as an interface between the collections, the visitor and the museum database. This interface demonstrates the ways in which the translation of knowledge about collections across and between media has been radically naturalised. This translation is by no means effected only through the digital but has a much longer trajectory within museums in which different representational media have long mimetically worked to destabilise the boundary between representation and reality. As my account of our quest to image the Māori cloak, *Tukutuku Roimata*, in the UCL Ethnography Collections shows, photography in particular has been exploited for its apparent indexicality as a tool of mimetic translation in museums.

The social spaces of exhibition halls and their resolute multidimensionality complicate many of our representational theories that take photography as a template. Consider, for instance, one of the famed diorama in the American Museum of Natural History, this one part of the African People's Hall, curated by Colin Turnbull in the 1960s. It presents a tableau of nomads in the Atlas Mountains at dawn. The caption for the diorama references the exact time of day, the moment of sunrise: *'The Saghru looking north to the Atlas Mountains, Morocco. The sky is as it would have been seen from here on July 18, 1932, at 4am.'*



Figure 54 Berber diorama, Hall of African Peoples, American Museum of Natural History. Photograph by D. Finnin ©AMNH/D. Finnin. Reproduced with permission.

The diorama indexes a specific moment of time – it may very well have been copied from a photograph. It is helpful to think about the capacities of museum displays to mimetically reproduce indexicality, working much like photographs to presence the real. As Jonathan Crary has noted for public spectacles in the nineteenth century, the experience of spectacle was recognised as predominantly visual.⁴ The emphasis on *visual* culture has not only blinded us to the full range of the corporeal sensorium, it has developed an understanding of representation that draws primarily on a two-dimension visual image as a template (of which the photograph may be seen as the perfect example).⁵ Michael Taussig's discussion of mimesis, as 'the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other', might be a better way in which to understand the interfaces I have been discussing here, whereby digital technologies remediate, remix, translate and substitute for older collections, in the process creating new perceptions of the real, new relationships to artefacts, and to the past.⁶

The photographic veracity of museum dioramas is obscured in the present day by our heightened perception of their materiality. It is by now widely acknowledged that displays such as the dioramas at the AMNH were produced by skilled artists, and museum preparators today still delight in inserting small marks of their own craft into the displays at the museum.⁷ As we saw in the case of the Māori cloak at UCL, popular understandings of digital imaging of collections still largely ignore the hand of the technician. Digital images, from 3D screen images to 3D printed scans, are largely perceived to mechanically index the original. This is strange because the materials and media used in techniques such as 3D printing are still generally unlike that of the original and considerable work has to go into both their production and the sense of replication experienced by their viewers. The medium of 3D printing is almost willed away through an interpretive sleight of hand that focuses on the magic of conjuring a solid artefact out of a supposedly immaterial image. This sense of magic will be familiar to many of us who have read Roald Dahl's book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. One of Willy Wonka's most intriguing inventions is a giant chocolate bar that is shrunk in the factory, then teleported into the airwaves to be plucked by the viewer from the screen of their television. This sense of wondrous replacement through replication could be said to be mirrored in the ways in which we perceive 3D-printed museum collections.⁸



Figure 55 3D print of the Arch of Den, Palmyra, installed in Trafalgar Square, London, 20 April 2016. Photograph by Manateedugong. Reproduced under a CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 license. Source: <https://flic.kr/p/Gu7Hqa>.

In April 2016, the Institute of Digital Archaeology, a joint project of Oxford and Harvard universities, printed a 3D replica of the Triumphal Arch of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra, Syria, that had just been destroyed by ISIS militants, and erected it in London's Trafalgar Square. Boris Johnson, London's mayor at that time, heralded the newly printed arch as a 'two fingers to Daesh' gesture, and the arch has now also been displayed in New York.⁹ The media paid little attention to the materiality or formal and aesthetic qualities of the reproduction, focusing on the redemptive power of digital imaging to reproduce lost heritage, a form of salvage not dissimilar to the original urges to collect the material culture of the 'disappearing worlds' of colonised peoples in the nineteenth century. The Institute, working with UNESCO, has also distributed hundreds of 3D cameras to local volunteers, asking them to document as much as possible of Syria's archaeological heritage. The *Million Images Project* aims to create a crowd-sourced databank of images that can be used in virtual reconstruction projects. The *Million Images Project* allows the visitor, wearing 3D glasses, to see images of vulnerable heritage, much of which may no longer be there. Similarly, 3D experiences of sensitive sites such as the caves at Lascaux or the pyramids of Giza, much like the Google

Art Project, are presented as political mediators, ways to side-step unsavoury political regimes and the challenges of the entwined processes of environmental and social degradation.

Like the *Google Art Project*'s vision of Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, these new digital forms contain a politics that re-presents these objects in a digital space, proscribing our way of seeing and experiencing, and overwriting this politics through a fantastical and sensuously overloaded form of mimesis, which Taussig might define as a form of 'mimetic excess'. Yet it is also our responsibility to ask: what kinds of objects emerge as the existing collections are mimetically replaced in such different materials and milieus? What vision of the real world do they produce and what do we do with it?

A recent exhibition at the Venice Biennale, curated by the Victoria and Albert Museum, *A World of Fragile Parts* (2016), presented different efforts to reproduce collections, including a 3D print of an illicit scan by the artists Nora Al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles of the bust of Nefertiti held at the Neues Museum in Berlin.¹⁰ This is the final object lesson of my book and is also pictured on its cover. In December 2015, the two artists released 3D scanned data into the public domain along with a video showing how they had clandestinely stolen the data during museum visits by walking around the bust with Kinect scanners hidden under their coats.¹¹ Alongside the open source provision of data and the video, the project has also included a true-to-original 3D print of the bust and a discussion hosted by the artists in Cairo of the relationship between contemporary art and heritage.¹² The artists called their project *The Other Nefertiti* and used the hack to propose both a virtual repatriation of Nefertiti, allowing a printed version of the bust to be made visible in Egypt for the first time since her removal, as well as drawing an analogy between the subversive way in which the data was collected and the original collection of the object, which has long been seen by the Egyptian government as emerging from illegal tomb-raiding, and illicit archaeology in Egypt by European archaeologists.¹³ This, however, was not the end of the story. In the wake of *Nefertiti 2.0*, a series of enquiries raised by technologists and journalists raised the question of whether or not it would have been possible for the handheld scanners used by Al-Badri and Nelles to have captured the data released by the artists. Journalists traced a probable source of the data to a much higher-resolution scan commissioned by the Neues Museum itself, made by a private company, which has not been made available to the public. The website of this company presents a scan of Nefertiti that is uncannily like the image released by Al-Badri and Nelles. The artists responded by claiming that they had no specialist

technical knowledge and were using data and resources managed by hackers whom they refused to name. If the sceptics are right, then the project is in fact a double hack: drawing attention to museum hoarding not just of ancient collections but of their digital doubles and using the tools of data collection and presentation to undo the regimes of authority and property over which the museum still asserts sovereignty, mocking the redemptive claims of so-called 'digital repatriation'.¹⁴

Questions of authenticity of the data, of museum sovereignty, of distribution and access have been extended into the digital domain – even within the journalistic obsession with the 'real' origins of the data co-opted by Nelles and Al-Badri for their project. I propose that we follow Taussig and understand these technical interventions as a form of 'sympathetic magic for the postcolonial age', a way of capturing the real as a form not of simple replication but rather as a kind of mimetic excess in which the technical practices of mimesis constitute not just a version of objectivity but a form of politics itself.¹⁵ As a form of mimesis, *Nefertiti 2.0* draws our attention to the work that the digital does to construct media



Figure 56 *The Other Nefertiti*. 2017. 3D print and digital file. © Nora Al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles. Reproduced with permission.

ideologies, both in reifying existing conceptual and material orders and provoking a radical re-examination of their future.

All of the object lessons I have presented here contain an implicit provocation about circulation and return. As objects are transformed from one medium into another, what opportunities, and challenges, does this process of mediation raise for conventional museum discourses of ownership and to the politics of deciding where collections should be? Why, within the context of the largely celebratory discourses of digital technologies, are museums still reluctant to let go of their collections and, in some instances, their data? The proliferation of new digital objects of circulation provokes an anxiety in both museums and communities that contradicts many of the utopian discourses of openness that characterise the age of Web 2.0.¹⁶

The mimetic faculty of digital renderings (visual or otherwise) has shifted the weight of intellectual authority away from collections into their digital counterparts. Yet, as all of the projects here have shown, the digital is dependent on existing and multiple forms of collections. It is better to think about the interface between different material forms, and between objects and people, than it is to think about either the digital or the analogue in isolation from one another.¹⁷

This last point could take us to a central argument that has been salient throughout these different object lessons – to posit that *the digital does not exist*. There is no essential quality of the digital that links all of these projects. Rather, by observing the digital as another kind of thing in the world, we may begin to understand how the digital encompasses a plethora of different representational forms, techniques and technologies that work in different ways to develop different kinds of object lessons. By asserting that the digital does not exist, we must not however assume that there is no such thing as a digital object. The politics of ‘material participation’ that the digital effects in our understanding of the real world as a set of refractions from one kind of object to another are yet to be fully uncovered. As I have explored here, the digital is a complex artefact that, like any other, renders knowledge and information material in ways that have profound effects, emphasising ‘a digital terrain that is enmeshed with the everyday practical and often-times messy and contradictory fields of relation, respect, and reciprocity that cannot be reduced to a singular metaphor’.¹⁸

Ending here with the contentious statement that the digital does not exist is of course a provocation. I do not intend to negate all of the complex thinking, collaborative work, material infrastructures and financial investments that have been put into digital museum projects. Rather,

I have been questioning how our assumptions about how the material, social and political foundations of digital media establish an important object lesson for the start of the twenty-first century. We – museum visitors, curators, scholars, artists, activists, members of the public, members of counter-publics and citizens – as both producers and consumers of digital content, are also the custodians of digital culture. We have a responsibility to engage in the infrastructures of law, ethics, care and attention that structure our digital lives. We play a part in generating the knowledge fields and informational networks that constitute a large part of digital collections. Only by understanding where these objects come from can we influence where they will go in the future.