

The aura of the original work of art can accrue to its copy

Last month, leading cultural figures discussed the physical potential of the digitalised world. By Anna Somers Cocks

Instead of Zoom cocktails, Neil MacGregor has been enjoying Zoom picture parties, where he and his friends choose a work of art and discuss it together. This nice insight emerged during the online discussions last month about new technologies and the preservation of the cultural heritage organised by The Art Newspaper and Factum Foundation, with the *Giornale dell'Arte*. A starry cast of museum, cultural- and digital-world personalities agreed to take part at a fortnight's notice, their diaries being much lightened by lockdown (see below).

Since Factum specialises in the high-res scanning and 3D replication of works of art, monuments and archives, the underlying theme for the three discussions was the relationship between the original and the digital, and the possibilities that the digital opens up. At the time of writing, the discussions have been viewed by nearly 18,000 people on The Art Newspaper's YouTube channel.

The first major question was: what is the status of a copy? Mark Jones said that copies were highly esteemed until the third quarter of the 19th century, with the Duke of Bedford designing his house so it could display copies of the *Raphael Cartoons*, but then the Impressionists rejected the study of the past and focused on translating a subjective impression onto canvas. From then onwards, the artist-as-creator became the star, and copies were rejected, but there are signs in contemporary art that this is changing.

Marina Warner took on the question of the aura of the original, pointing out that replication permeates the whole history of religion – for example, the many copies of the *Church of the Holy Sepulchre*, all of which are treated as holy places – and that, depending on the context, digital replicas can also accrue an aura of their own.

The second major question was: what can big data do for the cultural world? The most astonishing statement was by Sarah Kenderdine, who said that, by encoding digital data into synthetic DNA, all the data in the world will fit into a suitcase. In immediate practical terms, Richard Kurin, Carol Mandel and Hartwig Fischer talked about major ongoing projects in the US and UK to digitise and connect up the holdings of libraries, museums and archives. Fischer said discussions have been going on for some time about a global Commons, the sharing of all this information with the rest of the world. The security of this data is also paramount, and the question was raised as to whether some information should be restricted in order to avoid inviting hostile attacks.

Frédéric Kaplan demonstrated the deep-learning approach by keying in the name Tiepolo, which connected up material in the Venetian archives, the manuscripts having been “read” by HTR (handwritten text recognition), with old maps of Venice to show where a cousin of the artist's family lived. Following on from this, it was agreed that artificial intelligence (AI) can extract latent information much faster than humans – for example, it can



Otto Lowe photographing the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (about 1463), by Niccolò dell'Arca, made up of lifesize terracotta figures, in Santa Maria della Vita, Bologna. The *Lamentation* was recorded by Factum Foundation in 2019 using photogrammetry and structured white light, in collaboration with Genus Bononiae

analyse an X-ray better than the human eye – but the thinking by which information gets organised and judged remains subjective, and here the question of the Western-centric point of view was raised; for example, the Eskimos have 28 words to describe ice, while we see just ice.

Bonnie Greer said that museums must not be Renaissance palaces with the common folk tilling the fields outside; they need to bridge that gap. How to do this was implicit in most of the discussions and some immediate practical advice also emerged.

András Szántó said the Covid-19 experience of seeing exhibitions digitally will change the way we plan real-life shows in the future so as to make them digital-friendly, and Kenderdine warned against two digital sins: never animate a great painting, and do not put people into virtual reality (VR) goggles as it goes against one of the main purposes of a museum to be a social place.



Museums must not be Renaissance palaces with the common folk tilling the fields outside

Bonnie Greer, playwright, author and critic, former Trustee of the British Museum

Two important subjects were touched upon, but the nettles remained ungrasped: the effect that perfect replicas have on the art market, and the option they offer for the restitution of originals to the countries from which they were removed to the west.

The second question was cosily wrapped up in the discussions of the sharing opportunities provided by digitalisation, while the first came up, surprisingly, in Jones's account of 19th-century attitudes. More than a century ago, George Wallace, the curator at what was to become the Victoria and Albert Museum, argued that it was better to show copies rather than originals as “the vulgar degrading and factitious admiration of an object because of its costing huge sums of money would be got rid of and the aesthetic qualities of art as a representative of nature and the genius of bygone ages would have a chance of being recognised and appreciated”. Just suppose we were as fastidious today.

New technologies and the preservation of cultural heritage

The three webinars, introduced by Adam Lowe of Factum Foundation and Anna Somers Cocks of *The Art Newspaper*, took place on 1, 2 and 3 May. They were organised while the exhibition in the Palazzo Fava, Bologna, with the recomposed 15th-century Griffoni altarpiece and its facsimile by Factum Foundation, was closed due to Covid-19. It is now open again and has been extended until the end of the year. A book, *The Aura in the Age of Digital Materiality*, has been published to coincide with it.

THE FUTURE OF MUSEUMS, EXHIBITIONS AND THE OBJECTS THEY DISPLAY

Chair: Charles Saumarez Smith, former secretary and chief executive of the Royal Academy of Arts
Participants: Mark Jones, former director of the Victoria and Albert Museum; András Szántó, author and cultural strategy adviser, and founder of András Szántó LL; Mari Lending, professor in architectural theory and history, and founding member of the Oslo Centre for Critical Architectural Studies; Marina Warner, writer of fiction, criticism and history, and president of the Royal Society of Literature; Neil MacGregor, founding director of the Humboldt Forum, Berlin, and former director of the British Museum

THE CIRCULATION OF OBJECTS: THE POLITICS OF RECORDING, TRAINING, PRESERVING AND SHARING

Chair: Simon Schaffer, professor of the history and philosophy of science, Cambridge University
Participants: Anaïs Aguerre, founder and managing director of Culture Connect, and project director of ReACH (Reproduction of Art and Cultural Heritage); Jerry Brotton, professor of Renaissance Studies at Queen Mary University of London; Hartwig Fischer, director of the British Museum; Richard Kurin, Smithsonian distinguished scholar and ambassador-at-large; Bonnie Greer, playwright, author and critic

AN INTIMACY WITH THE PHYSICAL WORLD: NEW TECHNOLOGIES GENERATING NEW KNOWLEDGE

Chair: Ian Blatchford, director and chief executive of the Science Museum Group
Participants: Brian Cantwell Smith, professor of artificial intelligence and the human, University of Toronto Faculty of Information; Sarah Kenderdine, professor of digital museology, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne; Frédéric Kaplan, professor in digital humanities, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne; Carol Mandel, dean emerita of New York University Libraries; William Owen, founder of Made by Many consultants