

Copies as Transitional Objects: Loss, Grief and Reckoning after the Fire of Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro (Brazil, 2018)

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Abstract

Digital 3D reconstructions are increasingly common practice to restore lost or damaged historical artifacts. Notwithstanding the concerns related to the unequal distribution of power and technology in the contemporary world, such projects also pose questions related to the status of objects as “originals” or “copies.” This presentation studies the 3D models produced after the 2018 burning of Museu Nacional. Its main argument is as follows: first, these objects are neither copies nor forgeries, but a third class of objects; namely, they are transitional objects that make possible to mediate loss and grief regarding historical heritage.

September 2nd, 2018. Soon after closing hours, an overheating air conditioner in the Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, started a fire that ended up consuming most of the 20 million items in its collection, as well as causing major damage to the historic building that housed it. The fire and the loss of many unique pieces of the collection would be deemed as symbolic of the darker turn Brazil was taking: after years of neglect and diminishing funds for the maintenance of such a central site to Brazilian culture, the incident revealed a nation that was proceeding aimlessly towards the future by stripping itself of its past (Beiguelman 2019).

Immediately after the burning, discussions were held over the fate of Museu Nacional and the prospects of its reconstruction. Many of these discussions proposed the donation of collections from other museums and its reconfiguration as a modern technological museum, not unlike the recently opened Museu

do Amanhã (Museum of Tomorrow). Others, such as anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2018), proposed that the Museu Nacional remain in ruins, as memento to the displacement of historical memory in Brazil. Still, besides a restorative nostalgia (Boym 2001), which assumes that the past could be overcome through technological advancement, more subtle framings of the relationship between technology and heritage did not try to overcome the losses, but to intervene upon it.

The foremost example was the initiative led by Laboratório NEXT, at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, together with the National Institute of Technology (INT), to create 3D models of the pieces previously held at the Museu Nacional. This project started in 2009 under the guidance of Professor Jorge Lopes, and aimed to introduce 3D imaging practices initially applied to fetal medicine into heritage studies. The project took a turn after 2018, when the usage of 3D techniques went from prospective research into the restoration practices of heritage. This involved the construction of 3D replicas using the ashes of the actual objects as the material for the soft plaster used in 3D modelling (Lopes et al 2019). Thus, original and copy mingle into something that is neither one of the two, but is also beyond merely a reconstruction of the original. These are, after all, new artifacts made from the raw materials that resulted from the burning of the originals.

These practices are part of a trend of applying 3D imaging and printing techniques to the reconstruction of lost heritage. Most examples focus on the recovery of objects destroyed by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Although

these practices come with positive and negative traits, specially the incidence of what artist and activist Morehshin Allahyari calls “digital colonialism” (2019), I want to highlight how they trump definitive distinctions between original and copy, authentic and forgery.



Fig.1. Reconstructed face and restored cranium of Luzia, the oldest human remains ever found in Brazil, destroyed at the 2018 fire but remade with the ashes of the original. Photo by Fernando Frazão/Agência Brasil

Copies emerge at the intersection of techniques of representation and technologies of media (Weizman 2013). In this way, the reconstructions made by NEXT at the Museu Nacional are, in fact, a third class of objects besides original and copy. The question has been asked: “how do the concepts of uniqueness and iteration, of authenticity and counterfeit [. . .], change when the binary opposition between ‘authentic’ vis-à-vis ‘copy’ no longer appears to be anchored in the distinctive materiality of the sign?” (Neef, Dijck and Ketelaar 2006, 10). These 3D printing techniques supersede the frontier between material and digital, at the same time confirming the copy as a “medium form” (Weizman 2013).

Here, I propose that the troubled materiality of these objects shows that heritage loses its main thrust of conserving authentic artifacts and becomes something else. If heritage studies have long transitioned from a focus on objects to the focus on practices, what does it mean when these practices are mostly—or solely—enabled by technology? What *are* the objects produced by these practices? They are neither original nor copies, but adapting Donald Winnicott’s concept, they could be viewed as transitional

objects, that is, objects placed to facilitate a process of mourning, of reckoning with a loss.

Thus, if all museum collections are defined not only by what they present, but also by what they don’t show, as its objects are remains from another era, these practices demonstrate the coming together of past, present and future to mediate the continued overlapping of presence and absence in museum collections.

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Biography

Pedro Telles da Silveira is a post-doctoral research fellow at Unicamp, with a grant by FAPESP. He studies the relationship between the production of material and visual evidence through technical media and key concepts of historical practice, such as historical sources, authenticity, memory, and heritage.