DIGITAL CURATION: THEORISING THE DIGITAL OBJECT

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Abstract

Digital cultural heritage collections can provide information about, and access to, material culture(s), but as culturally specific *products* themselves, they also illuminate the contextual relationships inherent in those productions. The nexus of the issues in these cultural heritage productions (e.g. the nature of the object that forms the basis of the digital object, namely the analogue photograph, and the nature of the relationship between the photograph and the digital object curated from the photograph, as well as issues like the development of the museums object record database, the thesauri, copyright, etc.) creates a framework and forms a system of governance related to representation and accessibility, which has huge implications for end-users. This paper will explore ideas and possibilities for reflexivity on the part of such digital collections by examining the relationship that digital curation has to cultural heritage institutions as places of remembering, forgetting and, in this instance, re-remembering.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will use the Getty funded Pictorial Collection Project at the British Museum as a case study and point of departure to think through issues of digital curation, specifically addressing the topic of the nature of the digital object, and investigating the notions of 'representation' and 'access' as related to digital curation. The Pictorial Collection Project is based in The British Museum's Centre for Anthropology, belonging to the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. This mostly undocumented collection, consisting of approximately 75,000 images, is now in the process of being catalogued with the support of the Getty Foundation. The first, and current, phase of the project is running for two years during which 25,000 of these images from Oceania and North America, mostly photographs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are being researched, entered into a database and scanned.

These records and images, as part of the Museum's database, will then be made accessible online.

Fig. 1 Three examples of digitally curated images from analogue photographs in the Pictorial Collection of the British Museum's Department of Africa Oceania and the Americas (Left: a man seated playing cat's cradle; Papua New Guinea; Gelatin silver print; assoc. w/ Charles Gabriel Seligman; 19thC[late]. Middle: profile portrait of a man; Papua New Guinea; Gelatin silver print; Francis Rickman Barton, c. 1910. Right: portrait of a Maori woman; New Zealand; Gelatin silver print; unknown [possibly Josiah Martin]; 19thC[late])

There are a multiplicity of issues that could be addressed by focusing on the digital curation of this collection, but for the purpose of this conference and the length of this talk, I will limit the questions posed. Specifically, I will look at the nature of the object that forms the basis of the digital object, namely the analogue photograph, and the nature of the relationship between the photograph and the digital object produced from the photograph [Fig. 1], as a way to begin to understand the nature of the digital object in this particular instance – because of course digital objects differ fundamentally depending on their production and context. From that discussion I will then examine the use of the photograph and the digitally curated object in a cultural heritage institution, in this case the British Museum, focusing on issues of representation, particularly as it relates to both notions of access and governance. Finally, I will address the relationship that digital curation has to cultural heritage institutions as places of remembering, forgetting, and, through the process of digital curation, re-remembering.[1]

[1] See Forty and Küchler (1999), and Derrida (1996) on the archive as a place of forgetting.

THE DIGITALLY CURATED IMAGE AND AUTHENTICITY

"All Media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms"[2]

In Peter Walsh's essay "The Rise and fall of the Post-photographic Museum" the British Museum is characterised as one of a number of "Pre-photographic" museums, which have somehow missed the boat on grasping the importance of photography, failing to utilise it to great purpose as a medium, and to collect photographs appropriately as related to their significance.[3] I will not necessarily debate that point, as there are ideas of interest and usefulness in the argument that Walsh puts forth, but what would be important to know and acknowledge is that the ethnographic photograph collection that the British Museum possesses is one of the four most important in the UK[4], and that it is, admittedly, also a collection that has in many ways been hard to access, and has been therefore, up till this time, underutilized. These two facts make it therefore very interesting to observe what is happening as this collection is being researched, documented and being made available to the public online. This moment presents an opportunity to try and understand what the implications of such a process are - for the public, for the museum, for a collection of images and for the 'image' itself; here I mean 'image' both as concept and as object– the photograph as image-object and the digital image-object.

To begin to think about the significance of this project and to take up the questions posed, it is first necessary to ask, not what kind of object *is* an ethnographic photograph as situated in the context of such a collection, but rather what does an ethnographic photograph in this context *do*? In keeping with Walsh's argument, with obvious references to Walter Benjamin, as an artifact of modernity and a medium of mass production, one thing the photograph can do, and has done, is to conjure and invent the idea of authenticity.[5] The photograph, in its ability to create a ubiquitous presence of an image, by means of photographic, mechanical mass reproduction, has facilitated the birth of the idea of the authentic. It has done this by setting up the binary and mutually dependent categories of 'copy' and 'original', bringing

[2] McLuhan as quoted in Sebastion () p. 593
[3] Walsh (2007) p. 23 and p. 26.
[4] The others being The University of Cambridge collection, the University of Oxford Pitt Rivers collection and the collection of the Royal Anthropological Institute.
[5] Specifically, see Benjamin's essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" in Benjamin (1992)

forth into existence the idea of the 'original' or 'authentic', which before the presence of the 'copy' had not existed as something differentiatable and 'authentic', but had simply existed.[6] [Fig. 2 and Fig. 3]

Fig. 2 The proliferation of images of an object, such as the images of the stone figure carving of Hoa-Haka-Nana-Ia from the Easter Island (Rapa Nui) have authenticated the original object as something to see… (Left: stone carving of Hoa-Haka-Nana-Ia; Albumen print; W A Mansell & Co; 20thC[early]. Middle: the stone statue of Hoa Hakananai'a at the British Museum; Gelatin silver print; 20thC[early]. Right: image of the Hoa Hakananai'a as seen on exhibit in the Living and Dying Gallery of the British Museum, and found on-line in the "Highlights" section)

[6] Many have commented upon this, but specifically see Benjamin (1992), Buck-Morss (1991), Sontag (2001), Walsh (2007)

Fig. 3…or be seen with - many people have their image taken in front of this carving in the Living and Dying Gallery where it is currently on exhibition. (the stone statue of Hoa Haka Nana Ia displayed outside the British Museum, on top of an inscribed plinth; a male British Museum official is standing next to the sculpture; Gelatin silver print; 20thC[early])

Here a point to highlight is that just as the photograph became an authenticator of the thing it portrayed, the digital image has become an authenticator of the photographic object, inscribing an authenticity onto the 'original' photograph, relatively rare and small in numbers as compared to the proliferation of digital images and 'copies'. I highlight the relationship of the photograph-object and digital-object to the concept of 'authenticity', because the concept of authenticity is so important to cultural heritage institutions. In many ways the concept of authenticity is the central issue and foundational concept for cultural heritage institutions, and the fact that digitally curated objects and digitally curated collections throw open new questions about authenticity, and threaten to destabilise this foundation, make this process of digital curation both exciting *and* unsettling. Here I want to draw attention to the idea that what is important about this notion of authenticity is not whether or how it actually exists, but that it has meaning and resonance for many people, and therefore has tremendous agency. If the tendency of the digitally curated object to increase or deepen the sense of authenticity of the originary photograph may be destabilising, it may just as well serve to strengthen and codify the perception (or reality) of the museum as a place that holds and controls the cultural patrimony of various peoples. Or to turn Marshall McLuhan's quote that heads this section on *its* head, new forms of media may act to translate experiences into new forms of power.[7] [Fig. 4]

[7] for related discussions on power and form, see Foucault (1995) and (2002), and for discussions on discussions of power, form and media see Kitler (1992) and (1997).

Fig. 4 These two images, in which the subjects, the historical moment, and the photographer are all of note, are currently unpublished photos. The images depict Hemara Rerehau Te Whanonga on the left, and Wiremu Toetoe Tumoheon on the right. These Maori Chiefs joined the Novara Expedition in December or January 1859. This expedition was an expedition of the Austrian Navy, supported by Archduke Ferdinand Maximillian, which circumnavigated the globe between 1857 -1859. It will be the circulation of these images, which are thought to be singular in their existence, through the act of digital curation and further publications that will bestow an authentication on the images. This will in turn establish a mutually reinforcing and dialectical relationship of importance between the images and the place where the originals are held – the Pictorial Collection of the British Museum. (Left: a Maori chief, Hemara Rerehau Te Whanonga,; Gelatin silver print; Antoine Francois Jean Claudet, Vienna, 1859 or 60. Right: a Maori chief, Wiremu Toetoe Tumohe; Gelatin silver print; Antoine Francois Jean Claudet; Vienna, 1859 or 60)

MATERIAL, SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL CONSIDERATIONS OF AN OBJECT

Returning to the question of what the ethnographic photograph is, it is not possible to define with any precision. As with any example of material culture, the meaning of the photograph is highly contextual, slippery, debatable and myriad. However, looking at this meaning in an institution like the British Museum, it is clear that the photograph is an object that is at once reflective of and constitutive of peoples narratives, histories and identities, possessing a significance that can be very personal and emotional, but is also implicitly political – this is also, of course, true of the digital object, and more will be said about this in the next section.[Fig. 5]

Fig. 5 Two images, examples of narratives, histories and identities; personal, emotional and political. (Left: group of six Cree men, five standing and one on horse-back; participants of a two-day Sun Dance ceremony; Battleford; Albumen print; Geraldine Moodie; June 1895. Right: Chief Ologbosheri, standing in front of a mud wall; shackles on his wrists and ankles; Benin Expedition; 1897)

It is also necessary to consider, in relation to digitally curating the photograph, that because it is two dimensional and visual in nature the photograph is conducive to reproduction, and specifically digital reproduction. The relative ease of digitally reproducing a photographic image, coupled with the visual similarity of these two objects, makes it easy to overlook the fact that there are differences between the photographic object and the digitally curated object, these differences being material, spatial and, perhaps above all, temporal.

All material objects possess inalienability, one aspect of this being the unique material makeup of any individual object. The material structure of any given object provides singular forensic information and evidence about itself and the circumstances surrounding its existence. In the case of the photograph this information bearing material structure consists of the frozen image comprised of a top layer of substance that diffracts or diffuses light, suspended in a binding medium, which is bound to a base layer or substrate, and which is different and unique in each photograph.[8] Additionally, in the case of the photograph, there may be much information found in the form of inscriptions and marks, often located on

[8] For information on the materials that comprise the photograph see Bertrand (2003), chapter one

opposite side of the image, on image mounts, or even on the face of the image. These take the form of all kinds of markings and signs, some language based, others mathematical or gestural. [Fig. 6]

Fig. 6 The reverse side of an image showing a hand written inscription, and the front of an image with a barely visible blind stamp, which is difficult to read when digitally reproduced, and a photo-chemical inscription. (Left: reverse side of photo postcard: "This is a photo of an old snider carbine used in early years by native police = the marks on the stock are the 'Tally'". Right: a man posing with his back to the camera in front of a studio backdrop; Sydney, Australia; Gelatin silver print; Kerry and Co; 19thC[late])

While some of this forensic evidence is transferable to digitisation, either through visual reproduction, description in inscription fields of an object record, etc., the actual material of the photographic object delivers something that the digital image cannot. The presence of the originary photograph allows for physical inspection, scientific testing/sampling, an encounter with the unaltered momentary aesthetic of the originary object and the opportunity to experience the authentic 'aura' of the originary object – as contestable and debatable as this concept may be.

The material nature of the digital object, often referred to as 'virtual', is harder to talk about, as it seems harder to locate. At this juncture, however, it is necessary to trouble the misleading nature of the word 'virtual' in this context, as it is important to observe how the digital object is or will be encountered, which will be in a real way, and not virtually. Users will be sitting in real chairs, in real spaces, using real devices to view or experience the actual transference of coded ones and zeros through various mediums and technologies to encounter the digitised object. All of this has meaning and is contextualising, as none of this, the chair,

the space, the device, the digital coding, is without meaning, although it is naturalised and overlooked in most instances. In keeping with Marshall McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message"[9] or Barbara Stafford's assertion that "form …[is] figuring it out",[10] it is imperative, as Friedrich Kittler insisted, to consider"…the material and technical conditions that permit discourse storage in the first place." – here the photograph is the 'discourse' of Kittler's contention.[11]

Here I will not follow up with an analysis of the material and technical conditions of digital technologies beyond considering what it means that the experience of these manifestations and technology can be dispersed over time and space. That the digital image object can be many places at the same time – the actual object, not just a copy of such – makes clear that the very materiality of the digital object is comprised of the spatial and the temporal and not just the mechanically physical; or, as Lev Manovich might have it, the digital object presents : "…a new functioning of space and time, info-subjectivity, new dynamics of cultural production and consumption…"[12] The fact that the digital object is so slippery and broadly present allows for possibilities that the originary photographic object cannot. The digital object is easier to manipulate, as an image itself, but also the context and location of the digital object are easier to manipulate, allowing for relationships and juxtapositions that were previously not possible. Such possibilities, as theorised by Kittler, in allowing for the technical manipulation of the material world, could actually allow for the altering of the course of history.[13] [Fig. 7 – 16]

[9] McLuhan (1964)
[10] Stafford (2007) title of chapter one.
[11] Sebastian (1990) p. 584
[12] Manovich (2002)
[13] Sebastian (1990)p. 586, specifically talks about Kittler's belief in the altering of history by being able to technically manipulate a materiality of language.

Fig. 7 – 12 Relating these digitally curated images fluidly by viewing them on a computer gives a sense of the action that took place when the photographs were originally taken (portraits of a Papua New Guinean woman, throwing a clay pot; Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea; Gelatin silver print; 20thC[early]).

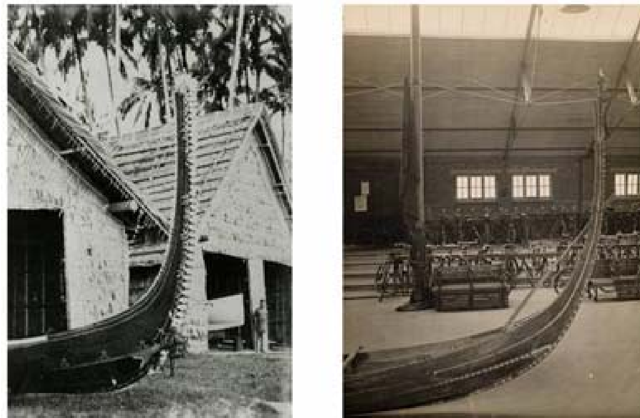

Fig. 13 Being able to juxtapose digitally curated images, such as these images of the same canoe as it was collected in situ, and stored in a bicycle shed, allow for interesting possibilities of comparison and thought. (Left: canoe with anthropomorphic carving attached to the prow; Vella Lavella, Solomon Islands; Gelatin silver print; R. Broadhurst-Hill; 19thC[late]. Right: view of a canoe from the Solomon Islands inside a bicycle shed at the Lady Lever Gallery in Liverpool, with rows of bicycles and benches; Lady Lever Gallery, UK; Gelatin silver print; 20thC[early]).

Fig. 14 Digital curation allows for the bringing together of these three different images of Te Paea Hinerangi taken at different points in her life (Left: Te Paea Hinerangi, a well known guide; New Zealand; Gelatin silver

print; Josiah Martin, 19thC[late]. Middle: same woman, by Iles Photo. Right: same woman, unknown photographer)

Fig. 15 Digital curation allows for the bringing together of digitally curated objects from different collections, such as these historically significant related images of Maori women performing poi (a Maori dance). The image was taken in the 1890s in Parihaka, a small Tarinaki settlement in New Zealand, where political activity related to the wars of 1860-1900 was taking place. The images are from the British Museum Collection, and the Alexander Turnbull collection from the Library of New Zealand (Left: group of nine Maori women standing in a row outside for the purpose of performing poi ; Parihaka, New Zealand., by William Andrews Collis; 1890s. Right: group of poi dancers, Parihaka, 1890s; William Andrews Collis; Reference number: 1/1-012050-G; Permission of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, must be obtained before any re-use of this image.).

ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION, ACCESS AND GOVERNANCE

> *"Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still revelling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth."*[14]

Having arrived at the notion that the medium of an object, or its technical manipulation, could potentially alter the course of history, I proceed to consider the use of the digital object in a cultural heritage institution, focusing on issues of representation, particularly as it relates to notions of access and governance. Digital cultural heritage collections can provide information about, and access to, material culture(s), but as culturally specific *products* themselves, they also illuminate the contextual relationships inherent in those productions, which, as mentioned earlier in this paper, are implicitly political. That cultural heritage institutions either wish to be, or wish to be seen as institutions above or beyond the realm of politics is understandable, perhaps necessary, but ultimately, I would argue, not possible. Nowhere does this become clearer than when dealing with matters of representation and access, and I use the Sontag quote at the beginning of this section as a sobering referent to this fact. An image may seem 'real' and 'true', but this is not necessarily the case, as

[14] Sontag 2001: p.

intentions of the maker of the image, the intentions of the figure in the image (if there is one), the framing of the image - intentional or happenstantial - etc, are all at work in any image, offering the chance for multiple interpretations. And just as an image may not be revealing of truth, per se, our efforts to neutrally curate the digital object are also not representative of a truth, but rather of a position, or series of positions – just like the analogue photograph, the digitally curated object is a nexus of relationships and negotiations.[15] If the digital object in question is curated from a photograph, then the digital object takes on board all of these original negotiations, and adds layers of new negotiations on top of those. When institutions take responsibility for making decisions in the process of such negotiations, they are also acting, to varying degrees, as governing bodies. These new layers of negotiation take the form of the formatting and framing of the digital image and the content and formatting of the integrated attendant information, in this case the museum database object record, as it gets reconfigured to travel with the image. [Fig. 16]

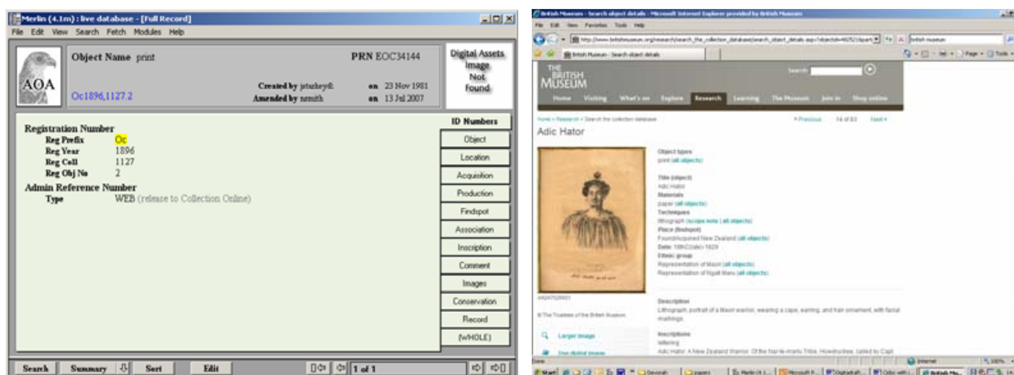

Fig. 16 two screen grabs of a records from the British Museum Pictorial Collection, one with formatting from the internal museum database, and the other with formatting from the online version.

Additional layers of negotiation take the form of related issues such as copyright, web access policies and designs, etc., and the institutions attitude towards such issues. Some of the specific areas of concern and potential contention have to do with some very basic questions, such as what is the object, what or who is it for, how shall it be used or made accessible, etc.? Beyond the discussion above there are contextual concerns that relate to the question of what or who the digitally curated object is for. For example, there are questions about how to curate and make accessible culturally sensitive images. [Fig. 17]

[15] For a discussion of the photograph as dynamic social relations, and the importance of the social or political meaning of photographs, see Edwards (2001) and Pinney (1997)

Fig. 17 An image containing culturally sensitive material, two toi moko heads, which for the purpose of this presentation have been edited out of the image. This same image, however, is reproduced un-edited in Elizabeth Edwards *Raw Histories*. (Maori objects on display in Auckland Museum, including a portrait of King Tawhiao and other Maori objects; Albumen print; Josiah Martin; c. 1885)

But even beyond the question of what might be considered sensitive or taboo, there may be those outside the museum who have feelings about what information is important to curate and present, which may by no means relate to the information that the museum finds important to curate. In some instances access provided through the proliferation of such digitally curated objects may be antithetical or undesirable to various individuals and communities, as current debates over copyright and indigenous rights reflect.[16] This point is also made by Matthew Rampley, who by picking up on Walter Benjamins point about cult value being related to keeping works of art out of sight, makes an example of the Baule culture, and their belief that "what is most significant is what is least visible, and what is most visible is least significant."[17] [Fig. 18]

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[16] For current discussions of these issues see Eckenrode (2008), First Archivists Circle (2007), Indigenous People's Issues Today Blog (2007), Wardrop (2007)
[17] Rampley (2006) p. 44

Fig. 18 An image, which is unclear and hard to read, and where it is also uncertain how much participants would want the action made visible. (large group of people performing a dance; Papua New Guinea; Gelatin silver print; Charles Seligman; 19thC[late])

To illustrate this point I will briefly focus on the issues of the content and format of the information that attends the digital image to form the digitally curated object, to investigate the ways in which these issues are governed in the museum setting. I offer a few examples of images where the issue of identity in the digitally curated object has raised interesting questions or issues.

IMAGES AND IDENTITIES

There are many recognizable individual, personal, identities to be found in the Pictorial Collection. There are portraits of well known leaders and recognizable figures of various communities and groups, as well as colonial officials or representatives, missionaries, anthropologists, etc. The histories and stories that accompany these identities may also be known, but the stories they tell may be told from many perspectives, and how to indicate this, or sensitively illustrate this in the digitally curated object can be difficult. [Fig. 19]

Fig. 19 The young man depicted in this image is the son of a Chief who was connected to, and in various tellings, implicated in the death of Reverend James Chalmers, a story that in its complications is challenging to sensitively illustrate within the parameters of the current formatting of the digitaly curated object (Rabu Banaky, son of Chief Koapina, posing in front of a painted backdrop; Papua New Guinea; Albumen print; G H Woodelton; 19th C[late])

Another complication in the creation of the digitally curated object is the use of language and thesauri, in trying to convey in a straight-forward manner information about the complex and more fluid ordeal that is identity. Particularly in images that portray relationships that would not be considered, in the traditional sense, ethnographic, but which are more reflective of the contentious relationships of things like colonialism, efforts to clearly elucidate who is in the image, and what their identity(s) might be make clear how inadequate the common language we tend to use can be. [Fig. 20]

Fig. 20 In this image a White woman, possibly British entomologist Robert Lever's wife, with a woman who can be supposed to be her maid, and whose ethnic identity may or may not be inferred from the location where

the image was taken. It is the way that this image is different from many ethnographic images in the collection – the question of the ethnic identities of the women; what the women are wearing and their relationship to one another, which brings up so many questions. (a White woman smoking a cigarette, standing beside another woman holding a dog; both wearing western-style dresses; Suva, Fiji; Gelatin silver print; Robert Lever[?]; 1945)

In addition to recognizable figures in images, there are many anonymous portraits, basically the majority of the images from the late 19th and early 20th century, where the individual in any given image is meant to stand in for the group, or to typify the collective. [Fig. 22]

Fig. 21 and 22 These images of anonymous Motu people, exemplify this idea of 'the one standing in for the many'. The image on the left is also found on the front cover of Elizabeth Edwards *Raw Histories*. (Left: a Motu woman posing with her back to the camera in front of a neutral backdrop; Papua New Guinea; Gelatin silver print; William G Lawes – printed Henry King; 1881-1889. Right: "Three old men", three men posing in front of a neutral backdrop; Papua New Guinea.; Gelatin silver prin; William G Lawes – printed Henry King; 1881-1889).

This manner of classifying and ordering the world is in many ways the original thought behind most of the images in this collection, the whole of the British Museum collection, and collections of its type; to use such examples of material culture as 'proof' of some theory of the way things are. This is, on the one hand, one of the troubling legacies of such collections. On the other hand it is what also makes the process of digitally curating such a collection – of re-remembering it - and bringing it together as a *whole,* so valuable, because much information and many questions are embedded in the spaces between images, in their relationality. This thought also illuminates the idea that these images, as individual images, or as collections of such, have as much to say about those who collected them and those who continue to hold them, as they do about those pictured. Again, it is this process of digitally curating and re-remembering such a collection that provides and opportunity to recognize and validate this notion.[Fig. 23]

Fig. 23 Images from digitally curated collections say as much about those curating such collections, as those pictured. (Cellulose nitrate negative of a British Museum guard with caste from Copan; British Museum gallery, 20thC[early]).

THE ARCHIVE RE-REMEMBERED: CONCLUSION

Having explored some of the issues concerning the creation of a digitally curated collection from a photo archive, I have reached several conclusions and formulated questions. I have also illustrated that there are fundamental differences between the original photograph and the digitally curated image/object, these differences being material, spatial and temporal, but also conceptual, particularly in relationship to the concept of authenticity. The change in the degree of perceived authenticity bestowed on the originary photograph by the digitally curated object could have an impact on cultural heritage institutions that is at once destabalising, just as it may also be reinforcing the idea or the reality that such institutions continue to hold and control the cultural patrimony of various peoples. I have further illustrated that although museums may endeavour to be neutral in their curation of digital objects, such neutrality in reality is not possible, as is particularly clear when talking about issues of representation and access. Having indicated that it is in many ways hard to define and locate the edges of the digital object as a bounded entity, it is clear that the digital object,

not unlike the originary photograph object, is a nexus of multi-layered relationships and negotiations. This is perhaps easiest to see when looking at the issue of identities as they appear in such objects. These negotiations, which are often situated in the process of choosing terms and language as framing, have implications –cultural and political. The implications impact both the institutions making these choices and the users encountering these choices through encountering the digitally curated object.

If this much is true, that such digitally curated objects are relational and negotiated with cultural and political implications, then the most crucial point to be made is that it is paramount that cultural heritage institutions be reflexive in their processes of creating and maintaining such objects. Reflexive in the sense of being cognizant and thoughtful about such issues in these endeavours, but also in their attempts to include those with vested interests in the process of curating such objects. Such reflexivity should be a part of the planning, and implementation process, as well as the feedback process, as it would seem that it is in the feedback process where we could have the most to learn. And here is the point of the archive re-remembered, if the museum and the archive have been places of forgetting as much as remembering, as has been postulated most famously by Jacques Derrida, what happens when such institutions, through the act of digitally curating collections and making them accessible on line, are re-remembered? I have illustrated that, although it may be unclear what the outcomes of such re-remembering are, the museum can expect an increasing flow/ network of engagements with the people and issues implicated in digitally curated objects.

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