
The Annotated Friends of Interpretable Objects by Mariana Silva
Space: www.tenstakonsthall.se
1.6–3.9 2017



To visit large museums often involves encountering flashy animations and opportunities to experience art digitally. Many museums have been making art work accessible two-dimensionally for a long time, but now they increasingly scan in and construct three-dimensional archives. This is a modern way of reaching the public. But what actually happens in the transition from physical object to mobile animation? And how do we visualize works of art, objects and artifacts?

In Space, Tensta konsthall's platform online, the artist Mariana Silva (Lisbon/New York) examines the second wave of digitalization that is sweeping through western museums. Silva filters them through both fact and fiction and poses timely questions about digitalization in a time when we are being confronted by the destructive consequences of climate change and war. Crucial are questions concerning how digitalization distorts ideas about ownership in relation to the acquisition of main attractions in museum collections which are coloured by circumstances now viewed in terms of colonial encroachment. Critics mean that such objects are stolen goods and should be returned to their country of origin.

Two video works are included in the exhibition: *First Digitalizations of Specimens from Nature* and *First Digitalizations of Museological Artefacts*, which deal with how the relationship between nature and culture is comprehended. Also questioned are the mechanisms framing the historical borders between objecthood and personhood.

At www.tenstakonsthall.se, we first see a small plastic skeleton of a mammoth on the computer screen,

and then go on to other displayed objects: digital 3-D scans of the remains of the super nova Cassiopeia A and the bee species, *Eulaema*. In the next video, uneven shiny silver sculptures rotate, for instance of the Roman emperor Caligula and the sphinx in Hatshepsut, whose chrome-like surfaces reflect both people and traffic. The animations consist of objects taken from museological and anthropological case studies. These animations and objects prompt questions about what happens when art objects are appropriated by museums, but also how the objects are classified and what significance economic and environmental issues may have.

Silva traces two tendencies in the creation of these institutional 3D archives: that large technology companies become active partners through sponsoring necessary technology; and that such 3D representations are built up through the museum visitors being encouraged to take their own mobile photos, which, when uploaded, create virtual panoramas. The irregularities in the textures visible on many of the objects are the result of unfinished models of the originals. The files that come from visitors' scans become imprecise copies of the original and affected by limited access to equipment and limited knowledge of these specialized techniques. When efficiency is prioritized and outsourcing becomes a tool, the traditional work of museums carried out by specialists is given over to external actors who lack the required qualifications. What happens then with museums' collections and representations of objects?

The title of the exhibition shares its name with the book, *Friends of Interpretable Objects (2001)* by Miguel Tamen. The book takes up

theories about how we create so-called “friendships” with inanimate objects and how objects come to life through people’s interpretations. What structures lie behind these interpretations?

Mariana Silva’s contribution to Space is divided into two parts and relate to her ongoing installation, Friends of Interpretable Objects (2013–). Four out of seven animations are exhibited in Space. The piece has previously been accompanied by contributions from invited guests and ha included a sound station beside a wooden chaise longue, which contains an interview with Miguel Tamen. For Space, the videos are presented together with an explanatory text.

Wednesday 5.7, 19:00

Artist presentation by Mariana Silva

First Digitalizations, Specimens from Nature: Scan eyes, 2015
Vitrine 3-D models in order of appearance:
Mammuthus Primigenius
CasA Supernova Remnant
Eulaema Bee

First digitalizations of Museological Artifacts: Scan eyes, 2015
Plinth 3-D models in order of appearance:
Marble portrait bust of the emperor Gaius, known as Caligula
Head and Shoulders of a Sphinx of Hatshepsut
Slit Gong (Atingting kon)

Conversation between Mariana Silva and Asrin Haidari

Asrin Haidari: What was the process of making the animations we see in *First Digitalizations*, *Specimens from Nature* and *First digitalizations of Museological Artifacts*, and why were these specific objects selected?

Mariana Silva: Over the last few years I've worked with João Cáceres Costa, a digital animator, on these animations and together we decide on how to display the objects and the space around them. To be brief, I've decided that to speak to these objects' institutional context a CGI representation of the institution was still required. Yet, the exhibition space that you can see surrounding the objects plays with the verisimilitude of CGI, yet although realistic is often generic and sometimes nonsensical. Some objects float, deflate, and are inexplicably animated in ways that I wouldn't know how that could be achieved in an actual exhibition with factors such as gravity to compute. As for the objects themselves, some come from pre-existing museum collections that have been digitized, but in other cases they are fictional objects or objects that would be too hard to procure, which made us work through archival images to get to know and animate them.

AH: You are in dialog with professor Miguel Tamen and his theories. Are there any other references that you want to share?

MS: I wouldn't be able to compress Tamen's thought, but to give an example, Tamen traces brilliantly how in Europe there were historically different modes of dealing with objects, of considering their agency, and their autonomy. For instance, you would not say art objects were autonomous in medieval times—that

is we consider them integrated as part of royal or religious systems. Yet, counterintuitively for our conceptions of objecthood, some objects were understood to have literal agency under the court of law. Tamen recounts a statue that was trialed in court for murder because it fell and killed someone, and a bell in Siberia whose sentence was respected until the 19th century, when it was released from its sentence of exile and finally dug up (its punishment was to be buried). Modernity and modernism in particular invented the idea of autonomy, but to put it simplistically the reading of these and other types of agency and intentionality were removed from the objects. I feel museums may have been important in this transition, that affected both western objects and nonwestern objects, and in the process they created a canon that conceals colonial violence.

Another reference is the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli who writes beautifully about what it might mean to create a postcolonial archive (and I think you can think of museums here too): "If an archive is a power to make and command what took place here or there, in this or that place, and thus what has an authoritative place in the contemporary organization of social life, a postcolonial digital archive cannot be merely a collection of new artifacts reflecting a different, subjugated history. Instead, the postcolonial archive must directly address the problem of the endurance of the otherwise within—or distinct from—this form of power. In other words, the task of the postcolonial archivist is not merely to collect subaltern histories. It is also to investigate the compositional logics of the archive as such: the material conditions that allow something to be archived and archivable; the compulsions and desires that conjure

the appearance and disappearance of objects, knowledge's, and socialites within an archive; the cultures of circulation, manipulation, and management that allow an object to enter the archive and thus contribute to the endurance of specific social formations.”

AH: Thinking about the museum and cultural heritage raises questions about art, history and our use of them. Can contemporary art express questions around cultural heritage, identity, affiliation and conflict in ways that the art history museum world can not?

MS: What an incredible question! I think that is a lifelong investigation. I don't think contemporary art is particularly better equipped, and there is no reason why the effort shouldn't be done across the board, in museums and archives beyond contemporary art. Perhaps contemporary art has a longer history of looking at the underlying codes of power that organize its institutions, but it also enacts neoliberal powers in other ways that it cannot escape or at least does not know how to at this moment—so it is definitely not an ideal candidate. On the other hand, I've wondered what it might mean and how one might organize an exhibition that annuls the distinctions between art and natural history museums, for example. If we want to explain climate change and try to move away from ideas of nature as immutable and inalterable by humans, then perhaps this distinction between museums should no longer be there.

AH: Your animations in museum contexts becomes like a representation of a representation... of a representation. Now it's taken in to a digital exhibition space. What does it mean to show the work at

Space when the installation and the museum context seem to be important to you?

MS: Well, the museum website is now very much part of its institutional space and is normally a highly thought-out aspect of it; perhaps more so than the reception or ticket desk for example, that receives people in the physical space. Certainly the maintenance and work involved in keeping a dynamic, well thought-out website is much bigger. For instance, why did you decide to name the online work section of the website Space? Having not been in the museum in person the website is also a big part of what I know of Tensta too. The main difficulty I've had was finding a new frame for these videos outside of the context of an exhibition so I've tried to create a loose number of footnotes around it. While you don't get a bigger picture of the work—and the layered meanings that an exhibition space allows to build over time—you get a more detailed presentation of some of the references behind it. It also tries to speak to the website as a space of mediation.

AH: These irregularities on the 3D scanned objects makes one think about badly done taxidermy,,as if they where reflections on the blurring of the nature/culture dichotomy.

MS: Bad taxidermy, yes! The little I know about taxidermy was that it took a while to become scientific and enter, for instance Carl Akeley of the Museum of Natural History in New York, said to be the father of modern taxidermy. When it did, the rigorous anatomical study of the animals had to be undertaken to simulate them alive. Like so much of CGI and VR today, it strived to be scientifically accurate and at the same time life-like. Scientists of the

early conservationist movement in the US were in fact reformed hunters that instead shot pictures of wildlife or went on safaris for the sake creating taxidermy animals for educational purposes. Not unlike the Louvre Museum which accepted the Napoleonic pillage that was done under the pretext of the museum being open to all citizens and distributing knowledge democratically. In the case of the Museum of Natural History in New York's collection in New York the animals in its diorama were still hunted, displaced (one of the elephants seen in this museum in a savannah backdrop was actually a circus elephant that lived in the US—yet it is not represented as such) but it was done in the name of a higher common good, that now seems at best quaint.

AH: Another video as part of Friends of Interpretable Objects is Pointcloudfallout, that work that reflects upon vandalism and ruination of object due to war and conflicts, (recently we have seen Daesh destruction in both Iraq and Syria).

MS: Pointcloudfallout, mentions it amidst a larger discussion on how the digitization of museum collections might impact the objects that museums collect—whether they are art (art and crafts museums), specimens (natural history museums), or artifacts (craft and anthropology museums)—and the monuments we consider as heritage and culture. Much of the rhetoric around 3-D scanning justifies its usefulness in terms of allowing for “digital preservation.” In my attempt to historicize this western infatuation with preservation, Tamen pointed out to me that in, fact digital copies respond to the fantasy of iconophilia, the opposite of iconoclasm. That is, they may not be the original object,

but they have the advantage of being indestructible in their perpetual reproducibility. While I cannot speak to the motivations behind Daesh's destruction (there are many different perspectives on this), the acts of destruction are extremely mediatic, and the videos nevertheless are designed to circulate, just as the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue by the American troops was meant to signal the end of the regime and military invasion and is in itself another act of iconoclasm. Western iconophiles destroy objects too, sometimes to preserve other objects: take for example the Palast der Republik in Berlin, the former GDR parliament that destroyed to reconstruct the Prussian palace that was there before, and had been severely damaged during the Second World War.

Asrin Haidari works at Tensta konsthall.

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