Defining the Digital[*]

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Abstract: In this commentary, I explore the ways in which digital technologies provide specific forms for the circulation and return of museum collections. I argue that the affordances of continued translation, metadata, and the digital-analog interface constitute a particular sense of recursivity that structures community and museum engagements.

[Keywords: *Translations*, *Digitization*, *Circulation*, *Metadata*, Recursion, *Repatriation*, Return, Digital Anthropology. Keywords in italics are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

In this brief comment, I wish to pick up on an under-articulated aspect of this vibrant ongoing discussion about "digital return," which is, in fact, the very nature of the digital and what may, or may not, be different about digital collections, objects, and forms of circulation.

For most of us, the digital suggests a networked domain that is defined by social media, the Internet, and the World Wide Web; and that is brought into being via mobile and other information and communications technology (see, for example, Horst and Miller 2006; Miller and Slater 2000). Increasingly, our attention has been drawn to the ways in which materiality and infrastructure may complicate this vision of unlimited networking. The form of hardware and software (and the structures of corporations and property regimes that underwrite them); the natural resources necessary to construct wireless networks and the political economies that control their access, conservation, and sustainability; and the social and political inequalities that create a "digital divide" between "digital natives" and those increasingly-invisible others all need to be taken into account when considering the circulation and return of digital collections (see Aneesh 2006; Landzelius 2006; Mantz 2008; Smith 2011).

Building on an anthropological perspective that locates the digital *within* the study of social relationships and cultural difference (see Miller and Horst 2012), I take for granted that the digital exists in a broader framework than one that references solely itself. I also take for granted that we need to consider the persistent inequalities that are maintained within corporate and governmental systems that manage and regulate the digital, and the new inequalities (of access, use, expertise, training, digital literacy, and so on) that the digital brings to our social worlds. However, in the rest of this comment, I want to think about some of the more formal qualities of the digital (many of which are internal to our engagement with digital systems but also some that speak outside of digital domains) and about how these qualities inflect the constitution and circulation of digital collections, and the concept and capacities of digital return.

The qualities of the digital that I shall go on to describe here increasingly form the basis for offline projects, theories of sociality and practice. I am inspired here by Lev Manovich's (2001) definition of "new media," which outlines a series of general characteristics that define the computerization of cultural production.[1] The alternative qualities that I propose to examine are forms that structure engagement and implicitly provide us with the conceptual, often metaphorical, language through which we discuss and use digital technologies. The three qualities that I will discuss are: the digital-analog interface, the process of translation and remediation that digitization effects, and the capacity for lateral connection (usually discussed with reference to the hyperlink, but which I talk about in relation to the effect of metadata).

The Digital/Analog Interface

One of my New York University colleagues, Faye Ginsburg, an influential scholar of indigenous media, once remarked to me that she disliked the term "digital anthropology" because it presumed that there was a prior analog anthropology. Her comment has been helpful to me in thinking about how digital media bring an intensification and complexity to cultural production that are not present in analog media. In our discussions, drawing from her own work (2008) with indigenous film and video production in a number of global sites, Ginsburg commented on the relative stability, accessibility, and access provided by analog film and early video technologies. Their editing technology was easy to master, and the media are relatively stable and easy to preserve. By contrast, the built-in obsolescence and the instability of digital software and hardware require a continued funding infrastructure and continual training (or expensive and politically problematic outsourcing of expertise), and these qualities promote new kinds of technological exclusivity within communities.

Despite the specific problems that digital technologies engender, there remains a general preoccupation with and escalation of digital projects, which increasingly overwrite not only older technologies but the metaphors that structure their meaning in our everyday discourse. For this reason, I think it's productive to move away from reifying the differences between the digital and the analog towards examining how they influence and affect each other. I suggest that we start to consider the digital as the new analog: an *a priori* condition for cultural production. My experiences working in both Vanuatu and Aotearoa, New Zealand (Geismar 2006, 2009; Geismar and Mohns 2011), have shown me that there are surprising similarities in the ways in which people work with digital and non-digital collections but that the expectations raised by digital technologies increasingly inflect all kinds of museum practice.

By suggesting that digital is the new analog, I raise a provocation to rethink the digital/analog interface rather than to obliterate the prehistory of the digital (Gitelman 2006 makes a similar argument). Why is this important? Alongside our nostalgia for the past and our concern about the new inequalities and technocracies that the digital engenders, we need to pay attention to the ways in which digital technologies have become master templates for many kinds of cultural production. In particular, as digitization proceeds within large museums and archives, users increasingly understand collections in relation to their digital catalogues and in relation to objects that are, in fact, born digital.

In Vanuatu (where I have been working for many years), in Aboriginal lands of the Australian outback, and in New York and Vancouver, collections are increasingly born digital. And the accessibility of digital technology, predominantly via cellular telephones and other mobile devices, extends access to collections into people's pockets. The starting point for many research projects with community is a digital catalogue or image that a museum or central institution created. The starting point for publications and exhibitions often is a digital file of some kind. These digital objects then go on to create new materialities (books, exhibitions, websites) and new social engagements (collaborative research projects; processes of consultation; negotiations about access, care, preservation, and ownership). Digital technologies are, in fact, present before and after, as well as during, social interactions between people and collections.

What does this mean for digital return? By provocatively suggesting that digital is the new analog, I am drawing our attention not only to the ways in which the digital structures our expectation of access, flexibility, and circulation; of the capacity to edit, the capacity to incorporate multiple layers of information, and the capacity to share information. It is important to also consider the ways in which the digital in communities might accommodate or even transform digital content from elsewhere (for example, in the migration of images from high resolution files onto the screens of smartphones). Speaking of digitization as *a priori* rather than as emergent signals a need to reconsider the concept of return. More often than not, the digital also permits a return from communities back into museums. The return of digital information from museums into communities entails digital returns from communities back to museum catalogues and databases in the form of local knowledge and protocols and collections documentation. Digital return is cyclical in ways that repatriation (the restitution by ceding formal title and returning objects from museums to communities) is not conventionally understood to be.

The Digital Defined by a Continual Process of Translation

This ever-intensifying reversal of the relationship between analog and digital speaks to a broader mechanism of translation that defines the digital as a "reflexive historical subject" (Gitelman 2006:20). The translation of images, words, sounds, and objects into binary code and their retranslation (through the recursivity of code) into representational effects and outputs underscores *all* digital technologies, from mobile phones that translate our voices into code and back again to museum catalogues that translate objects into coded images of objects and, by definition, into new objects (often equipped with their own accession number or code). There seems to be a recursive trap in many conversations about digital technology that oscillate between, (1) celebrating the capacity of the digital to facilitate and promote difference, and (2) worrying about the hegemony of the digital as a representational frame that limits difference or at least renders it a little bit less different. The dominance of code and questions about its malleability or flexibility inflect discussions around indigenous database projects, for instance (see Christen 2005, 2006, 2009; Glass and Keramidas 2011; Thorner 2010). The struggle to represent difference using a standardized toolkit defines the tensions around power relations, the capacity of the digital to overwrite the analog, and therefore, the form of digital return (see Povinelli 2011).

Writing on translation, Walter Benjamin commented:

> Translation is a mode. To comprehend it as mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability…. Translatability is an essential quality of certain works…; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability…. By virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original. We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital connection. [1992(1923):71-72]

In this theory of translation, the capacity to be translated becomes an inherent part of rather than a supplement to the work itself. Manovich's principle of "transcoding" maps this vision of a universal language onto computing, in which all data is converted/translated into computer data: "Because new media is created on computers, distributed via computers, and stored and archived on computers, the logic of a computer can be expected to significantly influence the traditional cultural logic of media; that is we may expect that the computer layer will affect the cultural layer" (2001:46). However, rather than being an external universal language undergirding all forms of culture, for Manovich, the "computer layer" and the "cultural layer" are in continual dialogue, each altering the other; this is the reason that he considers the database to be a symbolic form. Translation is a useful process with which to think about the meaning of digital collections because it suggests a recursivity that undermines distinctions and hierarchies around the original and the copy, that is, around the authentic object and a representation of it. The process of translation, rather than simply presuming a baseline of comprehension, is a creative act that works to play with difference, yet by definition also eradicates it. The standardization, multiplication, and recursivity of digital forms constitute the image of the network and a flattening of media (for example, rendering wood, wool, paint, and pencil into pixels). This flattening, or translation, blurs the distinction between original and copy. Once more we see the ways in which the idea of digital return challenges the concept of repatriation. Repatriation relies on a singular artifact that can exist in a singular moment in time. Digital return speaks to the possibility for multiplicity, yet dilutes the efficacy of repatriation. The decision in this working group and project to use the term "digital return" rather than "repatriation" signals the politics of translation, which speaks to those who hold the authority to replicate. We need to pay attention to the implicit power relations that permit digital returns and to the hierarchies that "keeping-while-giving" (Weiner 1992) establishes, in which objects may circulate but title, or ownership, remains centralized. Current controversies around intellectual property in the digital domain signal that the ownership of digital objects is by no means consensual, stable, or fully understood. At first glance this seems to be an issue of political economy, but in fact, the tensions around ownership, possession, and circulation effected by the digital are also produced by the blurring mechanism of translation.

Metadata

Alongside the politics and practices of translation, "metadata" is a concept and form that is useful in defining and rethinking the implications of digital return. Translation, the digital-analog

interface, and metadata all blur conventional distinctions that identify collections, that make them discrete, ownable, and inalienable in the context of museums. The concept of metadata (data about data) is not new. It has long been instantiated in forms of documentation such as card catalogues and collections binders that, during the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, have become an increasing part of museum collections (see Edwards and Hart 2004; Geismar 2006). And one might recognize this understanding of metadata in other analog forms, not just in museum catalogues but in ethnographies with indexes that link photographs and drawings to passages of text and images of museum artifacts (see Herle 2010:119). In digital form, metadata becomes infinitely more powerful, for its attachment to the object becomes almost as indelible as those early markings in pen and pencil of catalogue numbers onto the body of an object. In a digital museum catalogue or database, it is impossible to view any artifact as fixed and bounded. It is impossible to create a digital object without metadata: GPS data, place names, time, and date are now automatically a part of a digital photograph, for instance. The networked relationship between objects and information is imploded, becoming part of every object.

"Metadata" is not only a bibliographic or representational schema but may be expanded to present a theory of personhood. Roy Wagner's notion of the fractal (and later, holographic) person is "never a unit standing in relation to an aggregate, or an aggregate standing in relation to a unit, but always an entity with relationship integrally implied" (1991:163; and see Strathern 1988). An anthropological perspective on personhood that is heavily influenced by Marcel Mauss's theory of *The Gift* (1990[1925]), and by Melanesian ethnography, complicates the relationships between people and things, emphasizing their interdependency and interconnection. Alfred Gell, in his influential essay (1999 [1992]), has translated these theories of personhood into a theory of art, proposing that we understand art as a network of effect, understood as a "technology of enchantment" (and see Gell 1998; Pinney and Thomas 2001). These investigations into the blurring nature of persons and things also may be described using the trope of metadata, in which objects and voices, information, experience, knowledge, images, and sounds become part of the same "thing."

As I have explored in my own fieldwork, in Vanuatu, processes of digitization may also be understood through this lens (Geismar 2012; Geismar and Mohns 2011). Local perceptions that objects are instantiations of practice and cannot be divorced from them embed objects in a system of metadata that is *a priori* to the relational database used to construct the new digital museum catalogue. In this way, digital technologies in Vanuatu fit into a continuum of object management and a preexisting understanding of how materiality and sociality are mutually constitutive. Going back to our rethinking of the digital/analog interface, "metadata" becomes another word for epistemology.

In its capacity to define the practice and process of digital return, the role of metadata, as it is defined seemingly anew in the digital world, is to break down the conventional hierarchy between object and information, rendering them equal to one another. "Metadata" also explodes conventional epistemologies that might hold certain categories of things as separate, taxonomically and in meaning, from other categories. "Metadata" provides an incomplete snapshot of an interconnected reality that can be apprehended only by the "surgical" practice of classification (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991). This perspective on objects and materiality is by no means unique to the digital but provides a place where the digital expansively forces a critique of

object-status and its limits. It does so within "traditional" environments such as museums and archives as well as within hegemonic property regimes that imagine ownership to be similarly objectified and delimited.

Final Thoughts

Jannis Kallinikos et al. (2010) develop a theory of digital objects in which they define all digital objects as editable, interactive, open, and distributed. I consider all of these concepts to be dependent upon rather than inherent to digital technologies. Many users may find it impossible to interact with digital objects (as they may not have the requisite expertise or access to electricity or the necessary hardware). The openness of digital objects that Kallinikos et al. describe depends on other issues (for example, infrastructure, national security, property regimes). By describing the digital in relation to the more general qualities I have explored here, I do not mean to simply essentialize the nature of the digital but rather to use the qualities of translation and metadata and also the disruption or reversal of the digital/analog divide to suggest that we understand the digital as a process rather than as a fixed materiality. Indeed, here I am building on my own training in material culture studies that insists on the co-constitution of object and practice and resists a narrowly formalist analysis in favor of one that is simultaneously functionalist and phenomenological. I hope that by bringing these three qualities—a disruption to the analog/digital divide, the practice of translation, and the formal qualities of metadata—to the notion of "digital return" that I have drawn out some of the key issues of digital replication and circulation that might allow us to develop a more general template through which to think about the process and practice of bringing digital collections "back" into communities.

When people in communities contest the linkage of the discourse of repatriation to the circulation of digital objects, they are refusing the flattening and translation effects of digitization that have confused this issue for many others involved in the process. My perspective on metadata has been drawn from the object theories and art histories of ni-Vanuatu, Maori, and indeed many other communities with which I have had the privilege to work, who insist on the primacy of social interconnection between people and things and who have had no trouble in coopting digital objects as active participants in social worlds without worrying about their originality or authenticity (see Brown 2007). These issues speak directly to the politics of replication but from a very different direction. Those who contest the legitimacy of digital repatriation counsel us that replication and circulation are not governed by the same conditions of ownership, entitlement, and accountability, indeed, by the same property regime, as those that govern other collections. Others who work with digital copies of masks, hand axes, and songs insist the opposite, that the digital may be a meaningful translation of the analog regardless of property and title. The idea of metadata as an epistemology for collections management, as a system for linking information about data to data, should enable the linking of different kinds of power relations to objects. Only by positioning the digital as a continuum in a much longer history of power relations, technological affect and effect, and classification can we truly understand the capacities and contradictions of digital return.

Note

1. Manovich (2001:chapter 1) outlines the principles of New Media as: Numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding. Media is transformed into new media when "all existing media are translated into numerical data accessible for the computer. The result: graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces and texts become computable, that is, simply sets of computer data" (2001:25).

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