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Jean Boyd
jboyd@glos.ac.uk

Thinking with the work: art practice and digital cultural heritage

To consider art practice a laboratory for the generation of knowledge is also, of course, to ask under what circumstances, in what new imaginaries, that knowledge will be applicable.

We are familiar with art as an exploration of technically mediated, temporal relationships between perception and representation, data and memory: ways of recording, storing, retrieving and then making present. The role of the work is often to counter the supposed 'transparency' of this mediation, to throw it into relief so we see its texture.
Art practice has been engaging with the digital for some decades, not only as ways of making and distributing, but as a set of concerns that the digital foregrounds; coexisting temporalities, the archival, the participatory.[1] The image document, its veracity or falsehood, has seen much interrogation.

But the digital increasingly renders former categories unstable or mutable, a theme this conference explores.

I have chosen to focus on a 2016 digital artwork by Belgian artist David Claerbout entitled 'Olympia: the Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years.'
To try to *think with* this work is of course to reflect on the themes of mutability: but more than this, it is to destabilise classification of the image and therefore the familiar conditions for its legibility.
In the hands of artists the simulation is rarely a descriptive tool, almost always a critical one.
Not intended to simply inform, but to make visible its precarious or indeterminate nature.

On a two-screen projection we see, on the largest screen, a slow gliding panning shot that circles the exterior of the Berlin Olympic Stadium in a continuous, impassive anti-clockwise sweep. Our view moves through stable, perspectival space. A circuit takes an hour.
We would assume we are watching a seamless loop of film.
The projection is silent, the scene devoid of human presence. The viewer who lingers for just a little of its thousand year span may notice the light subtly changing. On the smaller screen the 'camera eye' brings us in closer and we see details of the scene, a cinematically familiar gesture of the cross-cut: foliage agitates slightly, barely perceptible movements of weeds and grass occasionally glitch in our peripheral vision.
If we were viewing the work at its original showing at Kindl in Berlin, we might also notice that as it starts to snow outside the gallery, so the snow is falling too, in the projection.[2]
But in what sense *is it happening now?*

What appears to us in a cinematic form is of course a simulation: built using game software, a contemporary architecture of image production. Extensive research was done into the plants and trees that would colonise the space, where the moss would grow, how the limestone façade would erode. Time, at all scales, is rendered as change: vegetable, mineral, digital.
Data renders the illusion of, and allusion to, this passing of time as material and observable.
Yet a speculation on what is to come.
The program, the generator of the work, runs continuously, constantly fed information on the Berlin weather, now, in real time. Thus the time of day and weather conditions are synchronous to the production of the image, synchronous across the actual and the virtual, synchronous with the viewer.
Here now, for the viewer in the gallery, is also *there* now.
The slipperiness of indexical terms reveals the ontological slippages the work registers so effectively.

What appears as a simulation of a building is rather a simulation of the building as a cinematic object, available to us as a cinematic event. What is read as the time-image and movement-image familiar to us as film is actually the constant *refresh* of screened data.

We can only view this in the moment of its projection (save for a few gallery recordings): we can neither go backwards nor forwards in time. We can only be in the work's, and our own, present moment.

Perhaps it is closer to the live broadcast: now, but from where?[3]

As the building's zoetropic form spins slowly in front of our gaze: other image-memories emerge, of Riefenstahl's films, of fictions, of documentaries. Images that inform, deceive, and make various claims to truth: ideology as image. We are reminded that monuments are always actual *and* virtual, projections of futures as much as markers of pasts.

As a virtual object imagining another virtual object, what is the status of this digital 'ruin'?

Precariousness and duration are not only key themes in the work but integral to the very being, the on-going existence, of the work itself. Just as future climactic conditions, perhaps already inevitable, may accelerate the building's decay, so too must the technological present be creating the conditions of its own future obsolescence.

The vertiginous temporality – a 1,000 year work, so far beyond human capacity, so unimaginable as a span of technological advancement – belies *and* makes explicit its extreme digital fragility.

Is what is 'falling into ruins', before our eyes, the generative technology itself?

The work will be maintained, as far as is possible, for the next twenty-five years. What will disintegrate is the capacity for informational data and the generative image software to communicate with each other (and so with us). This is what will determine the lifespan of the work.

As a digital cultural object is this a flaw: an ontological instability that will prevent its continued becoming? A temporal fragment, a fleeting manifestation of data *as* image, its presence withdraws from us just as it makes itself present. The synchronous, unarchival nature of the work renders it especially vulnerable. What could possibly be retrievable in a thousand years? In fifty?

Just at the moment when the work seems both wilfully, and technologically, designed to evade preservation, so it forces us to consider again what we *can* apprehend.

Some of its allegorical force, as an artwork, lies in its refusal of stability: it tells us present conditions will not endure. And meaning must always be worked for in the encounter of viewer and image.

This digital artwork is not concerned with being judged as a visual copy. Its commitment to truthfulness is to the future, to the imagined object's loss, faithful to its undoing as per the best predictions of science.

It is virtual not because it is made of software, but because it can help us imagine an 'otherwise'.[4]

It is important to note that we are seeing the imaged objects *again;* there must be a re-cognition.[5]

We must *recognise* the past in the present. The observant will note that this virtual stadium has no actual equivalent: it is as the artist remembers it, before the roof was added in the mid 2000s.

We must access and question the database of our cultural and individual memory: this is what makes the stadium legible to us, not the game software.

This comes at a time when the digital re-presencing – the virtual re-presentation of lost objects - has significant political charge: we might think of the work of the Institute for Digital Archaeology or of Iranian-American artist Morehshin Allahyari.[6]

The object circulates, disperses and regenerates in new ways, suggesting the exchange of its files in new forms of cultural economy. Retrievable latent resources give rise to new objects and new readings of those objects in the present.

The Olympia simulation, the Arch of Palmyra or a 3D printed statue from the Mosul Museum are not copies or re-presentations of the past.

They are entirely *new objects that act to unsettle the present*.

As both spectral presences and real effects, they ask us to reflect on what is lost and under what circumstances that loss occurred: what histories led to that moment of destruction or imperceptible decline. They ask to reflect on what is redeemed, saved, who by and to what ends.

And these 'virtual' objects, in all their latent potentiality, change the objects they refer to.

The museum artefact is always produced by the ruin of its context. It is the trace of that ruin. In turn this trace produces other archival traces: in catalogues, photographs, digital files: searchable, retrievable. The object is arrested in time, but from this ruin, futures are anticipated in the form of its *data.* The database, as a form of knowledge, must always be in anticipation of a searcher, of the one who will retrieve. This future anterior of retrieval, when paired with the arrested past of the object, is

itself a manifestation of the complex temporal convergences of our digital present. Simulations of 'heritage' objects, their digital spectres, make this clear. Both old, and entirely new, unprecedented.

So how might we think with this work?
We might look again at that gliding viewpoint, circling tirelessly. Who or what is this observer?
A familiar 'camera' view becomes a stranger presence in this virtual space. Before its impassive gaze the ruin unfolds, imperceptible and inexorable.

It seems to be not a question of who has agency in the Claerbout work, but *what*.
Is it the software that renders the incoming data into visible image, a program the artist has set in motion, a generative production of the present, yet indifferent to human time.
Climate, or perhaps 'Nature', equally indifferent, enacting this destruction as the trees grow tall and obscure the building?[7]
But as we view the work, perhaps the critical gaze suggested is, after all, our own?
We have noted that the simulation is not so much concerned with mimetic description, but with how we (the viewer) supply the narrative, the embodied meaning of the image.
If we were to see the work itself as an epistemological tool, then perhaps we the viewers are given agency; it's a tool that we might build with, or dissect with. A forensic tool, with which we might reveal the relationship between what can be seen and what can be said, what the object is and who the observer is; more importantly in what ways observed and observer constitute each other in this encounter.

As a knowledge object what is this artwork making visible?
The many information registers it makes available are calibrated to micro and macro scales – cultural, historical, scientific, imaginative. We see atmospheric conditions, rates of growth and decay, and the fall of light at *this* moment, were we to be observing the building from *here,* as we are *now.*

At the same time visibility is being given to the conditions under which we generate 'knowledge', through observation, through data collection, through the visualisation of that data, through material evidences, through reflection on the past, through speculation on the future.
Olympia does all of these things. And thinks on all these things, with us, in each moment.
This might be the work this work encourages *us* to do.

Notes

1 a few examples: Burnham 1968, Lippard 1973, Lyotard 1985, Ascott 1990, Virilio 1997, Bourriaud 1998, 2002, Ernst 2012, Steyerl 2012. Recent considerations of the virtual image include Homay King 2015, Hoelzl and Marie 2015, building on Deleuze' and Bergson's variants of the term.

2 Kindl Berlin 11/9/16 – 28/5/17 http://www.kindl-berlin.com/kesselhaus/

3 A spectral echo perhaps: the 1936 Olympic Games were the first live sports television broadcasts http://sdtb.de/museum-of-technology/exhibitions/2575/

4 Boris Groys mobilises the terms metanoia to suggest art's renewable potential to provide counter narratives from the *ruin* of the present http://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/

5 Lawrence Weiner, quoted in Obrist's 2007 *The Future Will Be* reminds us 'The future is what we construct from what we remember of the past - the present is the time of instantaneous revelation'. Also evokes Benjamin's use of the constellation and the ruin.

6 Institute for Digital Archaeology http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/, the Million Image Database http://www.millionimage.org.uk/ Morehshin Allahyari's Distributed Monument (2016) available at Rhizome, questions what is at stake in these re-presencings http://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/feb/16/morehshin-allahyari/

7 Perhaps a 'grey ecology' at work (Virilio 2009)