

Artifacts: Displacements of Technological Culture and the Concept of Foreignness

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Artifacts are the residue of culture; they are abandoned objects that have been displaced across time, places and contexts. Technology also leaves its artifacts – errant materials and digital noise. Some technologically produced artworks explore this dual sense of artifact to engage questions of otherness. A characteristic of an artifact's foreignness is its displacement: the artifact is an object out of context.

The Foreign Object

The word, artifact, first appears in the nineteenth century coinciding with the creation of museums designed to collect ethnological and historical artifacts such as the Smithsonian and the creation of disciplines that study artifacts such as archeology and anthropology. Did the drive to archive the artifacts of the world (and its fast-disappearing cultures) reflect a Western pre-occupation with otherness or did the collecting of artifacts from distant times and places serve as a trope by which the West could understand its own, increasingly industrial and technological conditions? Probably both possibilities are true, and certainly both were in the minds of many of the Cubist, Dada and Surrealist artists of the modern period who used foreign artifacts such as African masks as mirrors by which to gaze upon the West's industrial age predicaments.

Theorists like Pierre Bourdieu (1984) have pointed out ways in which individuals collect objects to evoke culturally constructed narratives and tie themselves to groups. Documentary films like Dennis O'Rourke's *Cannibal Tours* (1988) have demonstrated some ways foreignness and artifacts can function as triggers to aid Westerners in playing-out fantasies. Artistic appropriations of artifacts occurred throughout the twentieth century, most famously in the works of post WW1 avant-garde artists. Collages and strange collections by artists like Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Georges Bataille, Joseph Cornell and Marcel Duchamp drew attention to the fragile relation between the surface qualities of material objects and their significations; many of their works also raised questions about how exotic objects related to Western desires and fears of difference.(1) They explored Western cultural clichés of the primitive, raising questions about ethnographic intentions involved in the desire to collect and exhibit objects from other cultures. Further, many explored relationships between artifact and travel by incorporating foreign objects in their works that harkened back to other times and places – times and places once ripe with their own possibilities. Artifacts used in these ways conjured both the aura of ruins and the uncanny – the meeting point of the effigy and the automaton, raising challenging questions about individual consciousness and industrial culture.(2)

Anthropologists have also struggled creatively to find a balance between the arts and sciences in how they think about artifacts through countless and wide-ranging approaches, from studies of re-occurring visual patterns that connect (3) cultures to each other to research in the traffic in culture(4) that looks at how the commercialization of objects masks cultural differences or imposes new cultural forces. In *Aesthetic Experience*, Jacques Maquet analyzes the relationships between artistic creation, individual appreciation, and social function. In his examination of what happens to non-indigenous objects such as African masks or Aboriginal sculptures in Western museums, Maquet discovers that foreign artifact is an object twice removed – once from its original cultural setting, and twice as it is inserted into the commercial and social networks through which validated art objects transit.(5) The transformation of the artifact often accentuates its displacement – a sense of loss; transformation is similarly

articulated in Alain Resnais' and Chris Marker's film, *Les Statues Meurent Aussi* (1953) and, more extensively, in the exhibition, *Art/Artifact* (1991).

In *Art/Artifact*, curator Susan Vogel raised questions about the display of anthropological artifacts in art museums. Discovered, sold or distributed, collected, and placed on view, historical and cultural artifacts follow trajectories similar to those of Western art objects. At the same time, the exhibition revealed institutional divisions in how social sciences, humanities and arts define and use artifacts; the institutional and conventional function of the object could often be as provocative as the object itself. In his commentary on Vogel's exhibition published in *Art/Artifact*, Arthur Danto develops a circular argument that expands on Vogel's challenging notions of the art/artifact dichotomy. Danto writes:

...(O)rdinary English retains a sense in which someone exercises an art in producing what we might as well class as artifacts...An artifact implies a system of means; to extract it from the system in which it has a function and display it for itself is to treat a means as though it were an end. The use of an artifact is its meaning...and artworks have, by contrast with artifacts, some of the structure human beings are supposed philosophically to possess in virtue of which it is an abuse, a moral abuse, to seek to reduce them to the status of means and to disregard those components of their being through which they have dignity and worth.(6)

In the essay titled "Artifact as Art"(7), James Clifford defines artifact within the discourse of art connoisseurship, and in particular with regards to the idea of the "masterpiece". He concludes that for the artifact to become art it must be validated by the art world(s); not all artifacts become art without relation to aesthetic concerns of Western Worlds. As part of his post-colonial critique, Clifford exhorts his audience to engage in a self-reflexive and conscious engagement when he signals the inherently problematic Eurocentric roots of the term: the artifact, as a category, "belongs to the aesthetic-anthropological systems of the West". As Clifford famously points out in his essay "On

ethnographic surrealism" – an article that resonates with Vogel's exhibition, the 1920s artists rendered familiar objects strange just as museums attempted to make strange objects familiar. Both artists and ethnographers articulate foreignness as a coefficient of context.

The Technological Artifact and The Foreignness of Found Footage Films

According to Webster Dictionary, the artifact is: "1. a: something created by humans usually for a practical purpose ; especially : an object remaining from a particular period <caves containing prehistoric artifacts> b: something characteristic of or resulting from a particular human institution, period, trend, or individual <self-consciousness...turns out to be an artifact of our education system — Times Literary Supplement>." Webster's Dictionary also contains another definition of artifact that pertains to technology: "2. a product of artificial character (as in a scientific test) due usually to extraneous (as human) agency."(8)

Technological artifacts are markers of mediation. Even technologies that are designed to create perfect reproductions sometimes add information to works of human creation. In the case of the ethnographic artifact, the foreignness is subtractive -- something is missing. With the technological artifact, the foreignness is additive. The reproduction or reconstruction may contain elements that did not exist in the source material -- the added elements may be actual or virtual and alter one's anticipated outcome. In film, for example, such artifacts are sometimes marks, chemical elements, and foreign materials gained through processing, editing and projection. In digital image-making, technological artifacts sometimes include pixilation caused by digital video compression or faulty transmission. In science lab-work, artifacts can include elements appearing in electronic magnification that do not exist in the object of observation. A technological image without artifacts suggests a timeless reproducibility, and, in essence, a timelessness. Artifacts draw attention to a moment of construction: to a history. They are records of time.

Some recent found-footage films, notably Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002), bridge these definitions. Found footage films are constructed out of the remnants of other films -- out of celluloid artifacts of a mostly twentieth century culture. The materials are the residue of some process, project or historical change. Found footage points to its moment of production but the original intention of the moment of production is frequently lost; like other kinds of cultural artifacts, it is what is left behind. Source materials are wide-ranging and can include laboratory rejects, surplus prints, and studio outtakes as well as home movies and films owned by individuals and institutions that no longer have value as whole works (for example, films that have become too damaged to show). For a period in the 1990s, many institutions also dumped their collections when film archives were replaced by cheaper and more practical DVD libraries. Early Found footage films include Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936), which is a reassembly of the 1931 film *East of Borneo* that trims a narrative into snippets of action and voyeuristic gaze. Art films, such as Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958), exploit editing techniques that raise questions about narrative conventions and expectations.⁽⁹⁾ The works cross genres. Vincent Monnikendam's film, *Mother Dao The Turtlelike* (1995), uses footage from the Dutch colonial occupation of Indonesia, and Alain Resnais' documentary *Night And Fog* (1955), edits footage recovered from the Holocaust, including films made by Nazi's, to raise questions about intent and culpability. These films draw attention to the aesthetic eye of the filmmakers - the eye of the colonialists and of the Nazi's who were recording their own actions.

What is different about films like Morrison's *Decasia*, is the attention given to both content and medium. With the aging and deteriorating supply, found footage contains within it artifacts of its (increasing historical) technology: of its chemicals and their instability as well as of its use. Chemicals change over time, and as the chemicals change, so do the images. Further, Morrison adds destructive chemicals that accelerate the process; the films bubble and burn with new artifacts that are then re-recorded.

Found footage films are unique in the ways they can hold in simultaneity both aspects of artifactual foreignness. On the one hand, the films show images that are disconnected from their original time, culture and context. On the other hand, found footage works may also gain artifacts transformed through technology. Decasia (2002) features numerous images of foreign cultures – exotic images that gain second level of strangeness. The chemically deteriorating qualities of the films heighten a sense of strangeness – images are increasingly detached from what they were originally meant to show. Film signifies through the likeness of its images to an original source, but, here, the likeness is unlike anything in the physical world except deteriorating film itself. People, trees and buildings all dissolve or evolve into strange new forms due to chemical transformations, some of which Morrison helps along through the addition of acids. The clips are edited for the artifactual qualities of their visual content and of their decay. A Turkish dancer dissolves as he spins; a Japanese woman transforms into a ghostly negative image of herself; people who come together seem to bubble and burn away. The film captures a sense of temporal instability in the technologically produced image. The dissolving images have nostalgic qualities. The material quality of the decay – the chemicals by which the images are fabricated – draws attention to the passing of film and the time period of which it was such an important part. Born at the dawn of the twentieth century and largely replaced at its dusk, film remains a specifically twentieth century medium. Its images – at the time, seemingly more stable than memory, are now, like memory, dissolving.

Like and unlike memory...these memories were captured as chemicals and will evolve as chemicals. How digital images will enter into artifactual transformation may be quite different. The dissolving films recall the temporal essence of film – a linear medium born in a period of rapidly changing notions of time – and its relation to concepts of time established by national and colonial forms of commerce, assembly line industry, universal time, radio and telephone communications, broadcast media and so forth.(10) Digital media also contains artifacts, but these may be less tied to issues of time (chemical transformation) than transmission; it is soon to know.

Like ancient ruins of stone, the technological artifacts of the chemical age are taking on qualities of their own. The spectacle of technological decay in *Decasia* may offer a eulogy to modernity's fascination with the foreignness of times-past – Morrison's film strives to capture what technological-industrial culture also seems to so effectively erase: its prior selves. Such a goal is not so different from the anthropological urgency to grasp an understanding of disappearing foreign cultures through the residue of their objects. The camera, turned inward, finds the images that are displaced by time and their own fragility. Vanguard artists of the 1920s took an interest in how images of ruins articulated relationships between memory and decay.⁽¹¹⁾ Now, in Morrison's film, the ruins are the images. In *Decasia*, the desire to see – to grasp something of the Other through its image – comes up against the increasing impossibility to see what is there in moments (and their cultures) that are, in fact and of course, never truly retrievable.⁽¹²⁾

Endnotes

1. Much has been written on the relationship of vanguard arts practices of the 1920s and anthropological interests in objects, cultural practices and methods of collage. See for example, James Clifford, *The Predicament Of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, And Art*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) and on the relation between collage, technology and the individual, see for example, Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, And The Language Of Rupture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

2. See for example Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 1993), 193–206 and Michael Taussig *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular Study of the Senses*, (London and New York: Routledge), 189–254.

3. See for example Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *PATTERNS THAT CONNECT*, (New York: Harry Abrams, 1994).

4. See for example George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, eds., *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

5. For more see Jaques Maquet, *Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology*, (Lancaster: Udena Publications, 1986), and *The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks At The Visual Arts*, (New Haven: Yale University Pres. 1979).

6. Susan Vogel, Ed., *Art/Artifact: African Art In Anthropology Collections*, (Munich: Prestel Press, 1991).

7. Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins, Eds., *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2006).
8. Merriam Webster Dictionary: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artifact>
9. The list of filmmakers who have experimented in found footage is significant. Some prominent makers include Ernie Gehr, Ken Jacobs, Stan Brackage, and Craig Baldwin.
10. For more on the impact of technologies on concepts of time and space, Stephen Kern, *The Culture Of Time And Space 1880–1918*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).
11. For more on the relation between aura and images of ruins in surrealist art see Hal Foster, 1993: 184–206.
12. My thanks to Anabelle Rodrigues, a graduate student at Temple University, for her research assistance.

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