



Theorizing copies

Brita Brenna, Anne Eriksen and Gro Bjørnerud Mo

We live in a world of copies. This is true for contemporary society, experiencing the delights and despairs of the digital age of new available technologies, reaching from 3D-printers to the “like and share” of social media. The “age of mechanical reproduction”, as it was analyzed by Walter Benjamin in the mid-twentieth century, is nothing but a mere shadow of our present way of life where an easy and direct access to copies of nearly everything is more or less taken for granted. But the statement is valid also in a broader perspective. The writer and critic Marcus Boon suggests that making copies defines us as human beings. He asks: “What if copying is what makes us human – what then? More than that, what if copying, rather than being an aberration or a mistake or a crime, is a fundamental condition or requirement for anything, human or not, to exist at all?” His own answers to these questions are “that copying is a fundamental part of being human, that we could not be human without copying, and that we can and should celebrate this aspect of ourselves, in full awareness of our situation” (Boon 2010: 7). We learn by copying, we communicate by it, we build culture and society by exchanging and manipulating symbols and signs that in some way or another seek to mirror – or copy – the objects, activities, ideas etc. At the core of this human endeavor stands our capacity to copy each other and the world around us. From this perspective, then, theorizing copies means theorizing culture, thus addressing fundamental aspects of human existence.

In the present thematic section/issue, the study of collections, museums and cultural treasures represent an attempt to explore some of the theoretical potential of copies and copying practices. At a first glance, this may seem paradoxical. Museums and collections are very much about originals, authenticity and unique objects. Copies on the other hand – particularly those that come in the guise of fakes or forgeries – are threats to be disclosed and rejected. They must be kept at

a safe distance, where they cannot pollute or question the purity of the originals. However, clear cut dichotomies separating originals from copies, and copies from fakes are not self-evident. Over the centuries, art collections and even the very idea of art in the western world have contributed to the development of a powerful semantic field, strengthening the roles of authorship and originality, and identifying authenticity and artistic value with uniqueness. This has not only shaped the art field in itself, but also colonized the general understanding of the nature and value of originals and their copies. The logic of this semantic field, originally (!) centered on the singularity of artistic creation, thus has become valid far beyond the institutions of art. It does not only structure other museum types as well, but also defines more everyday understandings. But despite the amount of energy that is being invested in defining and defending the original in museums and collections, this work is in many ways dependent on the presence and the handling of copies. As the articles in this special issue demonstrates, copies are not only ubiquitous in museums, they are also fundamental to the production of originals and of true treasures.

The idea of the authentic original has changed historically. The same can obviously be said not only of the copy as a related concept, but also of the ways of making copies, of the technologies that have been available and of the quality and nature of the copies that are produced. Modern technology offers possibilities for making copies of nearly everything in an abundance that is historically unknown, but it also allows for making copies of a very high quality and often to very low cost – which again makes copies and copying accessible in new and radical ways. What does this mean to the originals? Will they disappear and the very idea of such objects dissolve, drowned in the surges of ever new and fresh copies? Or will their value be enhanced as their relative rarity grows, increasing proportionally to the number of copies? The articles in this issue do not aim at giving final answers to such questions, but will, through a series of empirical case studies, investigate the changing relations between copies and originals, and between “good” and “bad” copies.

In the first article, Anne Eriksen takes as a starting point that neither original or copy are terms with a natural meaning. They are fundamentally shaped by changing historicity regimes, which simultaneously have transformed notions of originals and copies and are reflected in the relation between the two concepts. This relation is in itself intrinsically temporal: The copy always comes *after* the original, she argues. Eriksen frames her discussion by two theory sets. The first is Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood’s investigation of two kinds of temporality that vied for dominance in works of art in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The second is Walter Benjamin’s examination of artworks in what he called the “age of mechanical reproduction”. The second half of the article seeks to

add to the historical complexity described by the two theory sets by introducing a concept of tradition and discussing the early modern ideals of exemplarity, emulation and copiousness.

In the subsequent article, Gro Bjørnerud Mo explores a case from early modern Europe, the lists of the wonders of the world. Such lists have circulated for millennia and been rewritten, re-edited and reimagined. Both the wonders and the lists of wonders, preferably of the seven, have had a profound and long-lasting effect, and have been abundantly imitated, copied and reworked. Renaissance creative thinking was obsessed with the idea of this kind of cultural treasures, in particular the seven wonders of the ancient world. Early-modern Europe experienced a surge of visual and verbal depictions of wonders. Bjørnerud Mo explores such a list of world treasures that was included in one of Joachim Du Bellay's canonical poems on Roman antiquities (*Antiquités de Rome*), published in Paris in 1558. She points out that Du Bellay shaped his list of wonders by exploring patterns of both repetition and mutability and in this way suggested connections between sixteenth-century Rome and distant civilizations. This poetic display of ruins and dust in the Eternal City is nourished by the attraction of the inevitable destruction of past splendour and beauty. In the sonnets, Du Bellay imitates classical models and patterns. While compiling powerful images and stories of destruction, he combines techniques associated with both a modern concept of copy and more ancient theories of copia or copiousness - the idea of rhetorical abundance.

The three last contributions take us to the situation in the contemporary world of museums and heritage. The article by Joanna Iranowska takes as its starting point that paintings in museums on specific occasions are replaced by photoprints mimicking the original. She investigates what constitutes a *good reproduction* of an artwork (oil painting) meant for such display. The article analyses three cases of displaying digitally printed copies of Edvard Munch's oil paintings between 2013 and 2015 in the Munch Museum and in the National Gallery in Oslo. Her approach is that of *Valuation Studies*, which means that the primary concern is with the practice of valuing itself. Her study focusses on how museum experts evaluate reproductions of oil paintings, and is based on a series of semi-structured interviews with the experts, working at and for the museums that were involved in producing and exhibiting of the photoprints: curators, conservators, museum educators, and external manufacturers. The stories told by the interviewees are grouped into five clusters, called *registers of valuing*, following Annemarie Mol and Frank Heuts (2013). The described valuation practices are connected to delivering experiences to the public, obtaining mimetic resemblance, solving ethical aspects and economic issues, and finally, with the time perspective.

Ole Marius Hylland goes into issues raised by the digitalisation of cultural heritage and investigates how a digital turn and digital copies have influenced ideas,

roles and authorities within a national museum sector. He asks whether digital museums and their digital reproductions contribute to expanding a more traditional cultural policy, or rather to challenge it. His discussion is based on two specific cases, the Norwegian digital museum platform *DigitaltMuseum* and Google's *Art Project*. Through his investigation Hylland argues that there is a certain epochalism at play when the impact of a digital turn is analysed. At the same time, some fundamental changes are taking place, even if their impact on cultural policies might be less than expected. One of these emerging changes is the replacing of authenticity with accessibility as the primary legitimating value of museum objects.

In the final article, Hans Dam Christensen goes into the fundamental role played by copies in art museums. His contribution is a mapping of strategies for copy practices, leaning heavily towards parts of the writings of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Against the backdrop of this theoretical premise, Christensen distinguishes five main strategies. Through a pragmatic use of Derrida's deconstructive reading, Christensen categorizes and makes visible the manifold manifestation of copies in art museums. The five strategies that he pinpoints are partly connected, but by keeping them apart Christensen is able to identify a range of different relations between originals and copies, and the shifting hierarchies between them. Christensen shows the unstable and fluid relation between original and copy in the art museum and as such his contribution both shatters and relieves the art museum in its role as the keeper of originals.

What we hope to achieve with this collection of articles is partly to discuss some very pertinent issues in the museum and heritage field. What does the increasing abundance of copies and easily accessible copying technologies mean? Such changes do not only change marketing, communication and documentation, they also challenge the fundamental ideas of museums and collections as sites of unique objects. "Sharing Mona Lisa" – in a number of different materials, technologies and settings – has a profound impact on the original painting as well as on the institution that hosts it. However, this is not our only issue. By presenting historical cases, taken from periods that differ from our own not only when it comes to technology, but also concerning the very idea of copies, copiousness, authorship, authenticity and originality, we hope to be able to show that the present era is not unique. Historically speaking, ways of thinking about copies and originals have changed, as they are changing today. The past may supply examples to learn from in different ways, but the main lesson is that neither copies nor originals carry natural, essential meanings, outside the specific cultural context in which they are working. This point also represents the interface between thinking of copies and originals in museum contexts, and thinking about these terms as more general cultural categories. From this perspective, it is possible to see that what is named copies, originals, imitations, fakes and so on, are the expressions of culturally de-

terminated relations between certain objects, and that these relations represent fundamentally cultural valuations. The “good copy”, to paraphrase Iranowska in her article, is not merely a matter of materiality and technology, but does also represent values, valuations and a number of ethical issues in the cultural contexts that is producing and using it.

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