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## **Title**

The pleasure of the holder: media art, museum collections and paper money

## **Abstract**

When the artist Julian Rosefeldt exhibits video projections of cast Græco-Roman sculptures, exhibition-goers experience a crisis in resemblance and equivalence between a gallery installation and museum artefacts. On the face of it media magic seems to supersede, even eliminate, the experiential force of collection-holding. This article compares media and artefactual exhibiting practices by combining semiotic analysis, art theory and Georg Simmel's sociology of money. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as European museums began to display plaster reproductions of Classical sculpture and historic architectural details, economists worried that paper money would sever the representational force of monetary signifiers from the intrinsic value of the bullion they signify. Perhaps Rosefeldt defers promises like a banknote? Perhaps museums postpone the 'pleasure of the holder' like a bank reserve? In both cases, this article argues, the technologies of reproduction and repetition (old and new) tell us a great deal about the semantics of objects.

## **1        21<sup>st</sup> century art and 18<sup>th</sup> century economics**

The British political economist David Ricardo (1772–1823) argued in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, that the introduction of paper money would lead to uncontrollable fluctuations in the value of currency unless the scope to convert each 'note' into metal was, for the bearer of the new-fangled sheets of printed paper, executed on demand: that is, as Ricardo put it, 'at a moment's notice, according to the pleasure of the holder' (Barry, 2007: 68). My theme is that the provisional attachment of value to a mediating material (such as paper), in requiring a written promise in order to take effect, offers interesting analogies with our enjoyment of media art when the technologies used by those artists are designed to replace, or even supersede, exhibition experiences based on artefactual presence. In this article I will explore what might be called a deferred conversion of aesthetic values occurring between immersive art installations and traditional museum display. The key to this exploration will be the debate about value and mediation in economics. Ricardo's words allow us to consider black box wizardry from a perspective of the philosophy of money. It intrigues me a great deal that the magic worked by media technologies in exhibition contexts might involve an equivalent of a 'promise to pay', a postponing pledge to provide the specificity, tangibility and materiality of objecthood. I have a particular case in mind, and so will make no attempt to generalise from this example, but nonetheless suggest that the discussion that follows solicits a wider critical debate about arts and media aesthetics in relation to exhibiting procedures, especially those forms of display that have been developed through the collection-holding capacity of museums, places where artefactual presence is rather like a bullion reserve.



**Figure 1.** Video 'walk-through' of Julian Rosefeldt's installation *Asylum* (2004). Courtesy of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK.

The online archive of the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art includes a video 'walk-through' of Julian Rosefeldt's 2004 installation *Asylum* (Baltic Library & Archive, 2004) (Figure 1). This artist's cinematic vision was experienced on foot and BALTIC's visitors were required to move between nine free-hanging screens positioned at different angles throughout a large darkened gallery. Films of flower sellers, hospital catering staff and street prostitutes were projected into this space from every direction. *Asylum* is about immigrants in Berlin today and Rosefeldt is an artist who knows what it means to create art in this kind of affluent Western city, a condition that combines social critique with the production values of a media technologist. The results immerse the spectator in the kind of 'black box' experience generated by enclosed environments that are, like a cinema, only activated by projected moving images. It is crucial to my discussion that art galleries designed to house media art are, in effect, rooms without objects, exhibition spaces that cannot 'hold' collections.

On one of Rosefeldt's screens we see men of African origin standing amidst a collection of Græco-Roman sculptures (Figure 2). The ethereal glow of what I take to be museum-quality plaster reproductions is striking, the effect makes a provocative comment on our collection-holding culture. The glowing plaster brings to mind the glass of milk that Johnnie (Cary Grant) brings to Lina (Joan Fontaine) in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Suspicion* (1941). Famously, Hitchcock concealed a light in the milk to make Johnnie's actions more menacing. Similarly, the unnatural luminosity of the casts could suggest toxic radiation. Rosefeldt's scenario is straightforwardly political. His immigrants inhabit our museum world as dislocated exiles and their proximity to the Antique, the public goal of many 18th and 19th century museum builders, does not inspire, it feels dangerous. One cannot help but think of European racism, perhaps even fascism. History has betrayed the confidence of our museum culture and, as a result, we are currently anxious about musealisation, not just of objects, but of whole environments. It would be detrimental to our ability to bestow value, so this debate goes, if everything that we hold in high regard eventually becomes 'petrified memory' (Müller, 1999). For this reason, museums have learnt to love interactive technologies in the same way that art galleries have embraced media art. In conjuring images of plaster casts within a black box environment, Rosefeldt reminds us just how much BALTIC is not built in the likeness of a traditional collection-holding institution, it represents the very opposite of a museum.



**Figure 2.** Projection screen showing a cast collection in the *Asylum* video. Courtesy of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK.

## 2 An ontological communion and a semiotic dislocation

A nervousness about inherited likeness marks contemporary art. The power of the present erases any similarities to the past and mechanical reproduction overlays that which is reproduced. Perhaps our present time cannot emulate the museum world in the same way that BALTIC's grainy video cannot replicate the installation that visitors to *Asylum* actually encountered. Screen-based simulations seem to have eclipsed the fidelity of traditional reproductive techniques such as plaster casting. They have destroyed an 'ontological communion' by which we could once stand meaningfully amidst Græco-Roman sculptures in academies and museums across Europe (Bann, 1996). Rosefeldt's immigrants exemplify our own alienation from this tradition.

Certainly, ours is an age dominated by the dislocating logic of semiotics, by the distinction between a sign and its referent, a difference that feels almost celebratory in the dislocation of the display of casts from the black box installation. However there is a degree of material intimacy in the casting process that confounds semiotic explanation. To make a plaster cast from a plaster mold involves some kind of sign function simply because there is an expectation that one thing can never be reproduced exactly like another. To exhaust the entire process of signification, the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) strove to define the different ways in which signs have 'interpretants'. He noted that sometimes we are effortlessly struck by a sense of similarity and likeness (e.g. a cloud that resembles a human face), whereas on other occasions we have to summon a great deal of prior knowledge to decipher what is before our eyes (e.g. words written on a page). Likeness signs (icons) provide us with the most direct representations possible. As the literature on iconicity makes clear, our physical environment is full of things that remind us of other things. In contrast, Peirce tells us that we use highly conventionalised forms of signification (symbols) to engage with abstract ideas. In this latter category, because the arrangements can be as arbitrary as the communicating community desires, we are able to build sign on sign, notate abstract relations and disseminate ideas across groups of interpretants who share an understanding of the same language (Dorsett, 2011). It would seem that the technique of making plaster casts would fall into the former, rather the latter, category.

The casts in Rosefeldt's video are the product of a mold, a mirroring of a negative in a positive form. This process creates an ongoing physical presence that is concrete enough to revive the lost authority of the original. Thus a sculpture has not just been reproduced to look like a sculpture, it also turns out to function as one as well (however inadequately, plaster surfaces are often lackluster). As a result, we are less likely to treat a collection of plaster casts as mediated objects, even though we know they are not the originals. Clearly casts can never be arbitrary enough to generate transformational effects: they represent, when it comes down to it, a type of petrification. Casting is therefore a matter of intimate surface contact and, as a result, it may be difficult to think of the process as a translational activity in the sense common to media or digital technology. Nevertheless, molds made from existing cast collections in European museums (routine practice in the 19th and early 20th centuries) display the kinds of degeneration one would expect when copies are made from copies. With cast sculpture degradation can be traced in the softening of detail and in an increase of seam lines caused by molding surfaces already marked with seams of their own. Here aesthetic value sharpens the signs of reproduction as it does those of creative origination. Traces of artisanal skill speak of the sculptor's studio with the same force as an artist's thumb-print.

Sculptors do not expect the reproductive qualities of set plaster to bear any resemblance to those of the freshly mixed liquid handled by studio technicians. The sensuous weight of a bucket of plaster at the point it is ready to pour (just a little thicker than single cream) is very unlike the hardened matter that emerges when the mold is removed. Mixing plaster is everything and everywhere in the creation of large objects such as monumental sculptures. For example, modelled clay has to be cast into plaster for the foundry where the final bronze will be produced. In this sequence plaster plays the pivotal role in transforming the artist's work into a permanent statue placed on a city street. The dusty residue left by plaster covers every surface in the various working environments the sculpture passes through on its journey to completion. At each stage this extraordinary casting material has little personality of its own, it simply takes on the characteristics of any surface it comes into contact with. Indeed, one could say that plaster displays an inherent inertness, a laziness that prevents it from maintaining its own qualities. This reproductive capacity has radical implications for our present-day dislike of inherited likeness, it involves prosthetic efficacy – in other words, it is not semiotic at all (Eco, 1997: 361-363).

The phrase 'presented as a cast' (used in the refurbished Ashmolean Museum in Oxford when examples from its extensive collection of cast plaster reproductions are displayed alongside original Græco-Roman sculptures) follows this idea by asking the viewer to ignore the mediating process of production and the exclusively reproductive medium used.

### 3 Sculpture in the expanded field

Therefore casting is a special kind of repetition, the original object is destined to return time and time again. Collection-holding is also an example of ongoing replication. When collected things are conserved and displayed, they remain themselves in a very emphatic way. I am reminded of an archive of photographs held by the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds which document the studio life of the monumental sculptor Thomas Mewburn Crook. As a young man he is busy carving a large reclining figure in marble. Many years later he sits beside the same sculpture: he has grown old but the sculpture has stayed put – presumably because it failed to be commissioned. And so, in this particular photographic archive, it is the object that remains crisply in focus, not the artist. Only the long-term storing away of things draws our attention to the inanimate in this way. The message here is that we do not need to treat every object in the world as if it is a hand grenade suspended in the seconds before it explodes.

Whilst Crook is entirely at home amongst the sculptures in his studio, Rosefeldt's immigrants stand uncomfortably amidst alien objects that have been collected and displayed in an alien land. The Africans have been relocated to a European museum, a forgotten world full of monumental Græco-Roman sculptures that was consigned to oblivion by Rosalind Krauss in her influential essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* (1986). Whilst walking across open country towards a new earthwork by the sculptor Mary Miss she notes that 'surprising things' have recently come to be called sculpture (Krauss, 1986: 277). During the two decades preceding this publication Krauss had watched artists like Miss excavate subterranean passages, or walk across deserts (Richard Long), or physically cut buildings in half (Gordon Matta-Clark). The choice of sculptural site contrasted emphatically with the sedentary nature of the monumental tradition. And yet, as Krauss makes clear, these artists knew very well that

sculpture was a ‘historically bounded category’. They were purposefully subverting the type of public statue that marks, as major museum buildings often do, the precise location where civic power exerts maximum authority over everyday metropolitan life. The significant fact to bear in mind here is that Krauss built her argument in favour of the expanded field around the creative crisis that followed the failure of August Rodin’s major public commissions. This was not simply a turning point in the sculptor’s career, it was also a watershed in the history of European art. After 1898 Rodin no longer believed that his memorial to Balzac would find a permanent site where it belonged in the Boulevard de Montparnasse, Paris. In Krauss’ account, from this key moment, the sculpture became a non-sedentary object that could be shipped off to galleries anywhere in the world. The historic connection between a monumental statue and a significant civic location had been severed. Eventually, multiple versions of the Balzac figure would become ubiquitous representatives of this artist’s oeuvre in major art collections across the globe. This initiated new sculptural practices that, free of any obligation to what Krauss calls the logic of the monument, expanded to embrace the site-specific marking of locations, places made relevant by personal or artistic convictions rather than civic history.

Interestingly, the disillusioned Rodin understood and accepted the change – he believed that Edward Steichen’s 1908 photograph of the Balzac statue, standing in his moonlit studio, captured the essence of his thinking as a sculptor. It is not just that this image shows a glowing plaster version of the statue waiting forever to be sent to the foundry, but also that, in the mind of this maker of monumental bronzes, a photographic print could be an equivalent of the object itself. Krauss’ expanded field unfolds according to the logic of opposites, an exchange across a grid of opposing possibilities. If, for example, sculptors create imposing figures, elevated on hefty plinths in city centers, then they can also invent constructions that are not statues, have no elevation and are remote to any kind of civic space. Across this network of radical divergence, the emulative function of replication and repetition is negated, likeness is stalled.



**Figure 3.** Blank screen in the *Asylum* video. Courtesy of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK.

#### 4 Inventorying efforts

Rosefeldt’s approach to media art also seems to operate in the aesthetic space created by the failure of monumental sculpture. In the BALTIC’s video walk-through the darkened gallery and the archivist’s hand-held camera result in a low-grade experience that contrasts starkly with the contemporary artist’s dazzling cinematic installation. Whilst this short video has none of the production values of the artist’s film-making, it is surprising how well the impromptu recording captures the moment when one of the projections cuts out in order to restart (Figure 3). Amidst the flickering screens, an image suddenly disappears in the cavernous space. At this point hesitation prompts a level of disorientation more familiar in cinemas than galleries. When a film ends and the lights go up to reveal the environment in which we have been sitting, there is a momentary puncturing of spectral engagement. Viewing *Asylum* involved a similar jolt into bewilderment. Once one screen had gone blank others rapidly followed suit leaving absolutely nothing to respond to until one’s semiotic faculties were able to engage with the gallery interior. Thus the viewer, now deprived of any secure basis for their spectatorship, was left with a sense of ruptured consciousness. The content of the installation disappeared, other gallery visitors looked strangely insentient and distorted, and an overwhelming

sense of blankness detached us from our capacity to comprehend. Viewers were, at this point, beyond the reach of Rosefeldt's imagery but also aware of a type of experience excluded from BALTIC's sense of black box aesthetics: the darkened room, its concrete floor, inactive light fittings, and so on – everything, that is, which was not a video projection (Dorsett, 2012). On reflection, I am inclined to treat this experience as uncharted semiotic territory. To the best of my knowledge, there is no critical literature (theoretical or otherwise) that accounts for the rupturing effect of extinguishing media magic in a black box environment.

In contrast, the same is not true of artefactual presence in museums. In *The Plates of the Encyclopedia* (1989), Roland Barthes does describe an experiential blankness occurring through the 'inventorying efforts' of enlightenment figures such as Denis Diderot's (1713-1784) who sought, in a museum-like way, a comprehensive knowledge of European material culture. The illustrations in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* are divided into a lower section featuring equipment or raw material laid out in inventorial rows and an upper 'vignette' in which the same items are shown in use within lively scenes of human productivity or consumption (Figure 4). Barthes does not reproduce examples of these beautiful engravings but the compositional style developed by Diderot's artists is familiar from countless instruction manuals and technical drawings. In the lower section it is as if a universe of disconnected mechanical parts exists independently of any obligation to a mechanistic whole. We are shown nothing but inventoried details – component after component, cog by cog. However, in the section above, we view the productive utilizations of parts; we see what happens when all manner of thing is gainfully employed in busy rooms or cavernous workshops. Diderot's plates insist on the separation of these two domains. If one scans each illustration from bottom to top one follows a trajectory in which the material world is transformed into social and cultural significance. This is Barthes bottom-to-top perspective in which the world of mute objects is transformed into social and cultural meaning, swept up into the narrative of everyday use. However, in scanning from top to bottom, one descend through the realm of instrumental value into a zone of disconnected, non-compliant 'thinglyness'. Nothing makes sense anymore and the vignette above appears to be too full of meanings for its own good (Dorsett, 2011).



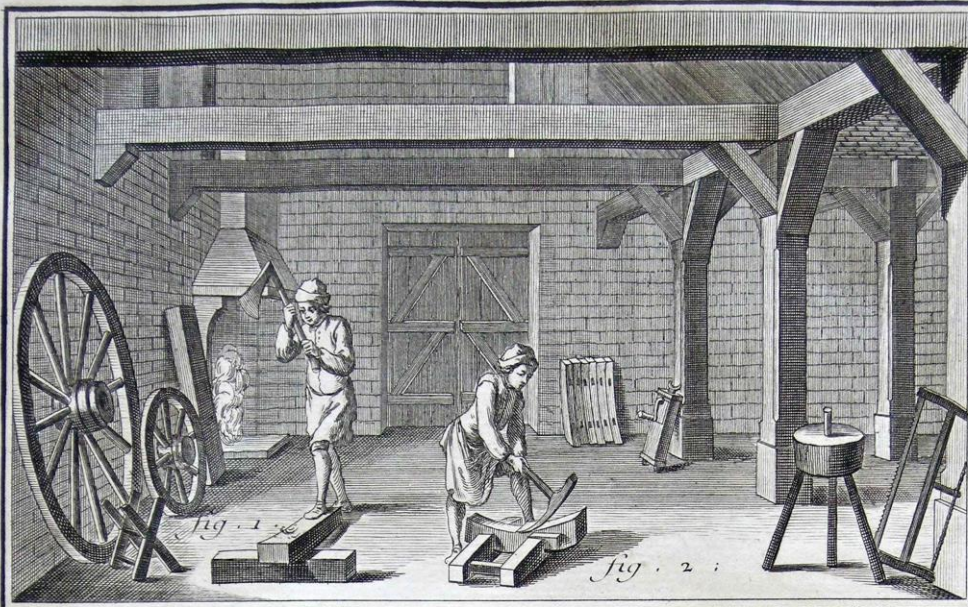


fig. 1.

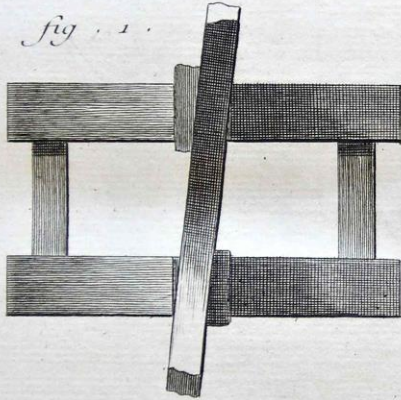


fig. 4.

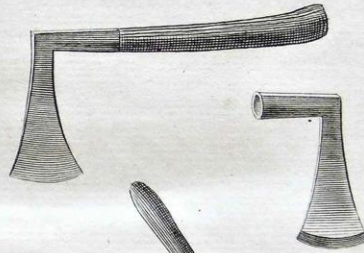


fig. 2.

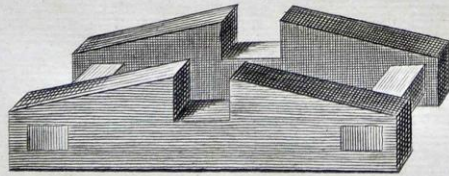


fig. 5.



fig. 3.

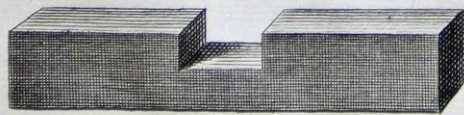
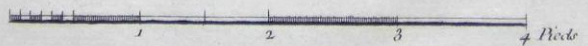
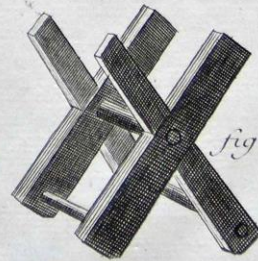


fig. 6.



Boussier del.

Dejeux sc.

Charron.



**Figure 4.** ‘The Wheelwright’. Illustration from *Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, (1751–1772), Plate 1 Vol. 3. Photograph by Chris Dorsett. Courtesy of the Taylor Institution Library, University of Oxford.

When the projectors cut out in Rosefeldt's installation the immersive magic of the black box environment was replaced by the ‘nuts and bolts’ interior of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art. Semiotic incoherence followed and this dislocation of meaning accords, I contend, with the subversive non-compliance of things in Barthes formulation. This is the main point of my article. The difference between black box immersion and artefactual presence is the over-narrated character of the former and the bewildering resistance of the latter. A sense of ontological dislocation (rather than communion) confirms the experience of having exhibited objects before one's eyes; a value that collection-holding, like the casting process, reproduces again and again over extended periods of time. Indeed, long-term collecting, in its inventorying of once-animate objects, may be the closest we can get to being outside of our own skins, outside the confines of performativity. I speculate that the cinematic blankness experience in Rosefeldt's installation offers a way of thinking about the special value of exhibition environments that have been dedicated to durational engagements with artefacts.

## 5 The semiotics of paper money

In Georg Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* (2004) the mediating value of paper money noted by Ricardo becomes entwined in the issue of artefactual presence. Once again, Rodin plays the key role. Simmel believed that this sculptor's radical use of oscillating modelled surfaces, and the vibrating physicality of the resulting bronzes, embodied transformation and movement. His sculptures captured both the flux of modern life and, by implication, the loss of all that is solid and secure in contemporary economies. David Frisby, in his preface to the third edition of Simmel's book (2004), notes the philosopher-sociologist's ‘ingenious eye for relationships and intermediate spaces’, an inclination that makes him ‘predestined to see money as the relation of relations’ (Frisby, 2003: xvii). The notion of an autonomous cultural sphere with its own ‘immanent developmental logic’ is, for Simmel, Marx's conception of commodity fetishism, where everything is no more than the ‘semblance’ of exchange and circulation (Frisby, 2003: xxv). Thus financial transaction enters a state of perpetual uncertainty because the actual value of what is exchanged does not match the appearance of the symbolic currency. The sphere of paper money acquires an autonomy in which exchange ‘is not the mere addition of two processes of giving and receiving’ but an end in itself (Frisby, 2003: xix).

Semiotically speaking, this emergent phenomenon is a ‘symbolic’ value in the particular sense meant by Peirce. The pioneering semiotician's thinking was very much along the same lines as Simmel. Certain signs fall into a relational category that embraces the autonomy of a constructed language, a category that escapes the requirement of an irrefutable point of reference in the concrete world. As we learnt above, the type of sign that Peirce called the ‘symbolic’ involves knowledge that can only be acquired through particular forms of socio-cultural immersion (family, community, education, and so on). Such signs are always based on agreed (or enforced) convention and so have to be learnt rather than cultivated within our perceptual experiences. Here the referential significance between a sign and its object is always a matter of interchangeable equivalence. As a result, there is a continual inventing of signs out of other signs that parallels the financial autonomy created by the deferred ‘promise’ found in currency systems. Simmel pictures it as a perpetual motion machine. What was once a bartering of objects, or precious metals such as gold, has been objectified as a pure act of exchangeability. As Frisby observes, our participation in a money economy necessitates entering a sphere of circulation in which Simmel believes we are forever distanced from the world of objects by a dynamic mediator of value (Frisby, 2003: xviii).

The continual oscillation of the modern financial environment, was for Simmel already evident in Rodin's sculptural practices. That this artist was chosen to represent such an acute critique of the social construction of monetary value is a powerful driver for this article. Steichan's photograph of the failed Balzac commission showed us that a temporary plaster sculpture defers the permanence of a bronze statue and that a moonlit studio suspends the hard daylight of the Parisian street for which it was intended. In the photograph the rejected work is oscillating with instability: soon it will be touring to different museums and galleries, sold in editions to private and public collectors, and placed on public exhibition in a manner closer to contemporary installation art than museum display. Following Rodin's example, one might wonder how media artists like Rosefeldt could ever negotiate the possibility of stable value. Viewing *Asylum* is like Thomas Hardy's Tess and Angel who, whilst fleeing the police on

a pitch-black moonless night, can only sense, rather than know, that they are near the brooding hugeness of Stonehenge (Hardy, 1992). It is something like this powerful artefactual presence that Rosefeldt's installation defers. The physicality of the cast sculptures sits out of sight, at a distance, like reserve bullion.

Ricardo argued that our participation in a modern economy entails a promise – the 'bearer' must be able to, at some point, receive precious metal on demand. Paper can only be money if our handling of banknotes is a authorized action. The promise to pay 'at a moment's notice' has to convince every person using the currency that they could, if they want to, end up with the designated amount of gold. For this reason the guarantee has to be serious (an example would be the early pound notes printed in colonial North America which carry the warning: 'to counterfeit is death'). Thus the printed promise to pay, even when the bearer knows that it is indefinitely postponed and an end in itself, can only realize its meaning through the action of using the note. The oldest form of paper money, the Ming Dynasty circulating treasure note, was in effect a written 'speech act' by which, according to an influential theory from J. L. Austin (1911–1960), declared actions generate meaning entirely within their own linguistic utterance. The examples offered by Austin ('I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*', 'I give and bequeath my watch to my brother', and so on) do not describe what is being done, the words actually make it happen (Austin, 1976: 4-7). Thus the financial promise to pay the bearer on demand is a textual declaration in which the pledge is accepted as a 'semblance' (Simmel's word). We accept that the realization will be forever deferred, eclipsed in favour of the vertiginous pleasures of on-going exchange and the continuous circulation of value. Here Simmel looked beyond the convenience of printed currency to identify unprecedented opportunities for autonomy within financial processes; that is, for money to make more money (Frisby, 2003: xxv). The semblance that generates this autonomy is, of course, a continual repetition of the promise, not the pay off. Think of the two lovers in Bruno Latour's example of Austin's concept (Latour, 2010). As long-term partners the couple declare their affection to one another again and again, day after day, year after year. Despite the banality of the endlessly repeated 'I love you' the response is never 'you have told me this a hundred times before' because the lovers are using. As Latour explains 'forms of speech that are evaluated not by their correspondence with any state of affairs but by the quality of the interaction they generate in the way they are uttered' (Latour, 2010: 102). Simmel celebrated this kind of performativity in our financial sphere and Kevin Barry (2007), an historian of Victorian literature, claims that the desire to create fictional realities in the arts is linked to the deferred 'promise to pay' propagated by the advent of paper pounds in the 18<sup>th</sup> century English-speaking world. The provocative irony of the artist J. S. G. Boggs seems to fulfil the creative potential Barry is describing. Ricardo would have been appalled by the uncontrollable level of financial fluctuation generated by Boggs as he creates detailed drawings of US banknotes in order to buy air tickets and pay hotel bills. His practices result in transactions that have, on occasions, led to the artist receiving real money as change (Velthuis, 2002). Clearly counterfeiting now leads to artistic fame rather than capital punishment in North America. Thus both paper money and contemporary artworks sever the representational force of a signifier from the intrinsic value of that which is signified and, for Barry, the Modernist cannon is founded on a perpetual distancing of the fictional from the actual.

The concept of semblance, as employed in everyday English, confuses Peirce's separation of icon from symbol. To point out that reality is different from appearances introduces arbitrariness into a sign function that should really be a straightforward matter of awoken familiarity, of re-semblance. Nevertheless, the term works very well when applied to the actual experience of viewing *Asylum*. Rosefeldt's screen-based installation detached ocular-centric appearances from the space in which the projections were viewed. His approach accepts that a media representation necessarily entails a loss of attention in relation to the non-technological world that surrounds and contains the artwork. The inanimate environment is eclipsed by the animate mediation, actuality is replaced by fiction. In this sense, a special kind of promise experienced by all exhibition-goers is indefinitely withheld.



**Figure 5.** ‘An Antiquary’s Billiard Table’. Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

## 6 Numismatic extinction: a conclusion

Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers (1827-1900), founder of a celebrated museum in Oxford, understood the value of immersing himself in the presence of large quantities of objects. There is a photograph of his billiard table covered with specimens (Figure 5). It shows the chaotic sorting and grouping of future exhibits. Perhaps this informal assemblage of archeological specimens shows the ‘inventorying efforts’ of Pitt-Rivers in progress. One can imagine the collector’s eyes sweeping across individual items, noting similarities, improvising possible combinations, speculating on how emerging typologies demonstrate theories. A cluster of glass vessels at the back of the table and a pile of stone tools at the front, like the ethnological objects that crowd the cases in his museum, become examples of a preponderance of similar forms of production, manufacture and use – perhaps evidence of the survival of the fittest technologies, the Darwinian paradigm which is said to have influenced Pitt-Rivers’ approach to material culture. Here a Barthes-like bottom-to-top theoretical speculation wants to ascend vertiginously above the non-compliance of recumbent things. These are speculations informed by multi-sensory experiences – we touch surfaces, we ‘handle’ a shape, sense its weight. Making meaning is, in this sense, straightforwardly a matter of holding things and learning from this experience. The handling process enables types of vignette that are particular to the liveliness of museum life. The process weaves together new equivalences between things that would never occur to anyone outside the collection-holding environment. In the process of arranging and comparing objects, in scanning one cluster after another, one’s attention is drawn to certain things rather than others. Perhaps a nearby tall object is noticed because there is another tall item at the other end of the table. Thus an overlapping property can take us beyond our established taxonomic procedures. Indeed, collection-holding can generate coincidences and commonalities that do not exist outside the museum.

Such overlaps play key role in Douglas Hofstadter’s *Fluid Concepts and Creative Analogies: computer models of the fundamental mechanisms of thought* (1997). The origins of this book are in computer science research where analogy construction is a way of understanding human cognition and the kind of computational processes needed to model artificial intelligence. Hofstadter uses everyday items spread across a table for his experiments. This is not so different from a collector noting likeness (cups go with other cups) and the results of his research demonstrate the mental capacity we have to

recognize equivalence (the tall cup in this group goes with the tall glass in that group). As artefacts are grouped, vignettes fall into place – this is ‘the pleasure of the holder’, of collection-holding. Pitt-Rivers sorted many table-loads of items in order to accumulate the collection now on display in Oxford. His aim was to map (demonstrate similarities and equivalents) human innovation in the widest geographic and historical contexts. The museum environment he created is very dark but does not generate anything like a black box encounter: the multitude of objects he brought together is emphatically present even though every item has been relieved of its duty to provide meaningful solutions to life’s many problems (how to lock a door, how to trap a mouse, how to cast a spell, how to shrink a head). As one would expect, the numismatic dimension of Pitt-Rivers’ activities offers an extraordinary survey of pre-industrial and modern modes of financial exchange. There are bartered objects and lumps of precious metal, string money from the Pacific island of New Caledonia, woven braid made of hair from the ear of a fruit bat, and safety pins that were used as small change in Oxford market. Both Ricardo and Simmel would have learnt a great deal here. The knowledge stored at the Pitt Rivers is an attribute of both conventional museum typology and the power we have, following taxonomic processes of the kind we saw on the billiard table, to discern new equivalences between things on display. This latter capacity is a product of the abiding ‘thingyness’ of collecting. Nevertheless, a high degree of non-compliance is built into this entirely artefactual procedure. The provisional nature of all curatorial decisions stay clearly in sight, the resistance of collected objects is not withheld from view. The kind of semiotic disruption experienced as the projected images disappeared in Rosefeldt’s installation is encountered readily, and without contradiction. The items held in the Pitt Rivers Museum will always outlive the associations and links that the curators identify. This is the pay off – a reality check is not simply promised, it is built into the fabric of the experience. Thus the durational understanding of objects we gain through a lifetime of movement in and out of a museum environment such as the Pitt Rivers is built upon the way objects stay put, the way the displays stop us reducing the value of an exhibition to the process of mediation. It is significant that the critique of musealisation is built on the assumption that the inanimate nature of a collection is a negative property, it is as if museum accession can only destine objects for extinction.

Genomics experts talk about ‘junk’ DNA in the same way I am writing about institutionalised collection-holding (Dorsett, 2013). To begin with, scientists thought that the presence of non-coding sequences in the human genome was something of a mystery. The inactive parts were, perhaps, a residue (dangerous because unpredictable) or an archive from which (more hopefully) new generational strategies for survival could be drawn when needed. A further interpretation was that the genome itself needs inactive gaps in order for the coding parts to be read. As a result, in the right kind of critical debate, analogies could be made with the types of reserve collection we associate with the development of our museum culture. This possibility, to my mind at least, links Pitt-Rivers’ Darwinism to the futuristic tilt of synthetic biology. Is a museum like a frozen zoo? Certainly scientists think that genetic technologies could, at some future point, extract DNA from museum specimens in order to bring extinct creatures back to life. Just imagine the implications for all the biological material we preserve (especially religious relics and medical specimens). Such thoughts, too far-fetched for this kind of article, nevertheless remind us that inactivity can shape the active world. By comparing the archival significance of DNA for science and the experimental values of reserve collections for every type of exhibition-maker, we could initiate rewarding debates about the value of objects currently regarded as inert, perhaps even inconsequential, because they are ‘in reserve’ – a scenario with implications for our assumptions about the inherited past.

It will be clear by now that the discussion in this article is entirely provisional. My thinking about gallery installations and museum collections has encompassed a motley range of explanatory disciplines: the semiotics of Peirce and Barthes, the sociology of Simmel, the philosophy of language developed by Austin, the museological practices of Pitt-Rivers, and the far-reaching art criticism of Krauss. The original impetus for the article, a DeSforM conference on the continuing significance of objects for industrial designers (i.e. product semantics), underlines the degree to which this association and combination of ideas is focused on conversations with practitioners and theorists from many different disciplines. Indeed, my conversations with economists and geneticists suggest that room needs to be made for cross-disciplinary negotiations in the widest spheres of theoretical research. On the face of it I have been proposing the parameters for this discussion on a simplistic analogy between cultural collection-holding and state gold reserves but why assume that black box magic replaces, or drives into obsolescence, the powerful presence of artefacts? Instead, why not think of the process of exhibiting media art as a promise? Black box installations are not at variance with the intrinsic value of ‘things’, they simply postpone our encounters with the ‘actual’ non-performative world.



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## Keywords

Media art, museum cast collections, semiotics, sculpture in the expanded field, sociology of money, numismatics, museology.