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The Art of Copying: Five Strategies for Transforming Originals in the Art Museum

By Hans Dam Christensen

Abstract

This article discusses copies within the field of art museums by way of mapping strategies for copy practices. This mapping leans heavily towards parts of the writings of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Against the backdrop of this theoretical premise, the article distinguishes five main strategies. Firstly, the copies which often are considered to be typical museum copies, characterize the strategy for the disseminating relation between original and copy, that is, reproductions, magnets, etc. This strategy implies how copy practices are closely integrated into museum practices in general. Secondly, the supplementing relation between original and copy will be introduced. This strategy frames, for example, artists' citations of other works and forgeries. Both show that copy practices often lead to new originals, in principle, *ad infinitum*. Thirdly, this leads to the strategy for the displacing relation between original and copy which encompasses, for example, artistic reworkings of other artists' originals and conservatorial restorations. This approach partly excludes the copy and partly displaces the original, while still, unavoidably, referring to the latter. In general, this strategy signifies the latent instability of the original. Fourthly, the strategy for the informational relation between original and copy will be discussed as it has a vital function in terms of talking about museum originals and copies. This is the strategy which grants the original artifacts their status as museum objects. An informational copy is just as unique as an original object of art, and at the same time, it defines the original and is itself defined by this opposition. Lastly, the strategy for the imagined relation between original and copy follows. This strategy is dependent upon several of the previous approaches, and, in addition, handles signs that exist without explicit originals, as the strategy covers copies referring to originals which have disappeared, been destroyed, not seen yet, etc.; that is, this strategy produces images of originals not least by way of the disseminating relation between original and copy from the first strategy.

Keywords: Art museum, Artworks, Original, Copy, Derrida

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Introduction

I

Postcards, magnets, posters, plaster casts, digital reproductions, autographic reproductions, photographic reproductions, “my museum” features on museum websites, selfies, *Google Art Project*, etc., all signify copy practices in the art museum. In a pell-mell, these terms imply a variety of physical objects, media, senders, receivers, ideas, social platforms, and so on; apparently, they whirl around without taxonomy.

In the following, this blurry notion of copy practices will be expanded further, as it, alongside the usual copies, will include, among others, forgeries, inscriptions in acquisition books, conservatorial restoration, and artistic remaking. The art museum field incorporates numerous copy practices.

Thus, this article aims at reflecting on copies within the – primarily – contemporary field of art museums. In order to outline some main strategies, this will be done predominantly by way of conceiving copy practices as more or less delimited strategies. Some of these strategies will be partly overlapping with practices in the overall art domain, as copy practices are also widespread here, as for example, from the magnet in the museum shop to the art history textbook to further the aspiring art student’s application to the art academy. Hopefully, the strategies may also be relevant for museum fields beyond the art domain.

As the present article surfaces in the broader context of “theorizing copies”, it is urgent to stress that the mapping of the strategies in question is not theoretically unbiased. On the contrary, it leans heavily towards thinking in the Derridean vein; that is, as it will become clear very soon, it paraphrases parts of the writings of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004).

Admittedly, one might ask whether Derrida is a pertinent choice as a theoretical underpinning. A facile, but also misleading answer might be that Derrida – in discussing the dispute between the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and the American art historian Meyer Schapiro (1904–1996) about the former’s reference to a pair of shoes, painted by van Gogh, in the mid-1930s lectures known as *The Origin of the Work of Art* (published as *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks* in 1950) – in fact touches upon the relations between the copy and its possible originals (Derrida 1987: 255–382). A more careful answer is that “Derrida” should be limited to early Derrida, in particular his *Of Grammatology* (*De la grammatologie*) from 1967. In this early stage of his critique of structuralist thinking, Derrida introduces various concepts that he employs in later works, e.g., “supplement”, “the transcendental signified”, “dissemination”, and “difference”.

It should be noted, however, that this is not a rigorous Derridean endeavor into museum practices of copying. In the present article, his thinking has been stimulating because it addresses “naturalized” oppositions, but my use of his ter-

minology is a pragmatic interpretation. This approach, hopefully, helps clarifying theoretical positions, rather than performing a strict analysis that walks a line into dissolution and paradoxes, the latter being awkward as the early Derrida launches a critical approach towards structuralist linguistics, not museum practices of copying.

Thus, it should be further noted that the article is not going to discuss or reflect on Derridean theory. Within the current context, there is no room for such an elaboration. However, the use of notions such as “copy”, “original”, “practices”, etc., follows a Derridean manner. Concise definitions are deliberately avoided, typographical neologisms are introduced, and empirical evidence is unspecified and imbalanced. In other words, the following is not a meticulous empirical mapping of the practices of copying within the field of art museums. Nor is it, from a quite different approach, a matter of defining an “ontology” of copies in the philosophical sense, that is, a study of the nature of being or becoming copies.

Copy practices cannot be defined against the backdrop of essentialist definitions. On the contrary, a pragmatic generality is required in order to unfold a series of relevant points. As such, it is the relation between the copy and the original which is in focus, not whether the copy in question is a replica, a variant, a repetition, a reenactment, etc., or the “original” in question is a masterwork or bad work of art, a new or an old work of art, a painting, or a sculpture, etc. This pragmatic approach is a weakness as well as a strength – the former because the reader might launch counterexamples, the latter because, hopefully, the arguments along the way challenge established notions, discourses and practices in order to enlighten the use of copying within the art museum.

II

In order to vindicate the use of Derrida, it should be noted that in terms of his critique of oppositions in structuralist linguistics, the early Derrida argues, in a simplified manner, that Western thinking considers writing (in French: *écriture*) as merely a derivative form of speech (*langue*). For example, he states: “The system of language associated with phonetic-alphabetic writing is that within which logocentric metaphysics, determining the sense of being as presence, has been produced” (Derrida 1997: 43). In other words, writing is conceived as a “fall” from the “full presence” of speech, an argument that Derrida unfolds in a lengthy discussion of Ferdinand de Saussure’s chapter on “Représentation de la langue par l’écriture” in *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916).

Ignoring Derrida’s otherwise pertinent arguments about Saussure’s notion of the sign, the point is that, for Saussure, speech and writing are two distinct systems of signs, but the second (phonetic writing) exists for the sole purpose of representing the first (Derrida 1967: 46ff). Analyzing this relationship, Derrida sug-

gests that written symbols are legitimate signifiers on their own – that they should not be considered as secondary or derivative relative to oral speech, in particular because speech cannot exist without writing or, rather, arch-writing. For example, in clarifying his argument, he quotes the German polymath and philosopher Leibniz (1646–1716):

Speech is to give the sign of one's thought with an articulated voice. Writing is to do it with permanent characters on paper. The latter need not be referred back to the voice, as is obvious from the characters of the Chinese script. (Derrida 1997: 80)

Later on, Derrida notices that:

... we have known for a long time that largely non-phonetic scripts like Chinese or Japanese included phonetic elements very early. They remained structurally dominated by the ideogram or algebra and we thus have the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism. Writing did not reduce the voice to itself, it incorporated it into a system ... (Derrida 1997: 90)

If one should simplify Derrida's position, it is impossible to make the distinction between speech and writing as writing, or arch-writing, is closely related to the idea of constituting language; pure speech, directly from the mind, is phonocentrism (Derrida 1967: 44–45).

However, Derrida does not believe it is possible to escape from operating with the opposition speech-writing. Instead, he calls for a new domain of "grammatology" that would relate to questions in new ways (Derrida 1967: 74).

III

At the general level, the mapping of strategies, accompanied by the above mentioned Derridean approach, has resulted in five main approaches: "The disseminated original/copy", "The supplementary original-copy", "The displaced originalcopy", "The informational originalcopy", and "The imaginary original-copy" [see Figure 1]. As the labels indicate, Derridean terminology and thinking partly supports this mapping in at least two ways. As mentioned, dissemination, supplement and displacement are important notions in the early Derrida's writings. Moreover, although the use (and non-use) of typographical signs (the slash and the hyphen) specifically refers to W.J.T. Mitchell's variants of his notion of "image-text" (Mitchell, 1994: 89), the use is also an "unspoken" reference to Derrida as the typographical conventions primarily are "writing" and not "speech". In this

case, the slash designates the relation of “original/copy” as a gap, a rupture which constantly is enlarging, the non-use of typographical sign (“originalcopy”) designates composite, joint combinations of originals and copies, while the hyphen in original-copy designates joint relations where the original is missing, absent, etc., but the copy is depending on the now imaginary existence of the former.

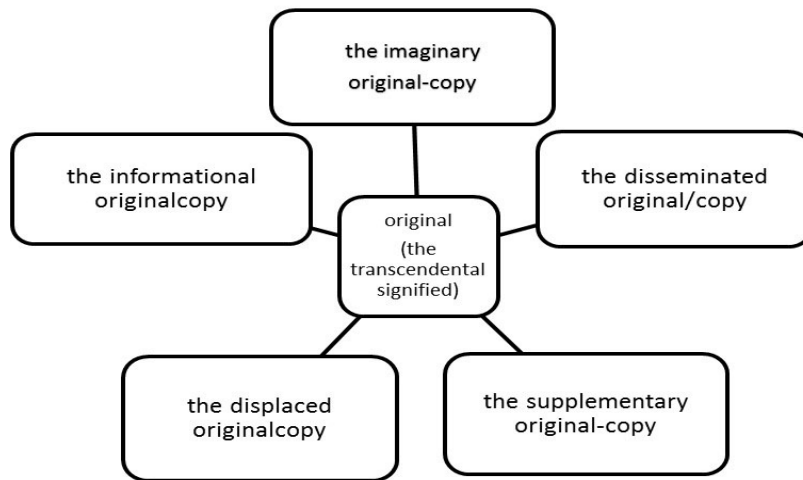


Figure 1

However, the use of theory in the following is more complicated than this. For example, one could readily anticipate that the presence of the hub category “original” in the figure of the main strategies – meaning, obviously, the original work of art – implicitly promotes concepts like “authenticity”, “uniqueness”, “aura”, “cult value”, etc. Moreover, this figure apparently reproduces the dichotomy between originals and copies, although the above-mentioned typographical variants are meant as symbols of the relation between the two. Therefore, the bracketed “the transcendental signified” follows “original”. A clarification is needed:

The hub category of the “original” should rather be considered as “a transcendental signified”, a translation of Derrida’s *signifié transcendantal* (Derrida 1967: 33ff). In other words, searching or referring back to an “original”, the origin of origins, might be deceptive as the status of the original, an external point of reference upon which copies are whirling around (and to which the discursive practices constantly refer back), might be overemphasized or be misleading in the signifying practices.

The “original” does not provide the ultimate meaning as “the origin of origins” (Derrida 1967: 90), nor is it centered in the process of copy making – simultaneously decentering all copies. This is not so, because the original object is not a

unifying element in the signifying process. After the first copy is made, there is only difference (Derrida 1967: 38). In another place, Derrida states with the support of the American semiotician, C.S. Peirce (1839–1914): “From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs*” (Derrida 1997: 48). Accordingly, every copy has in principle an infinite number of possible interpretations without an assumed one signified meaning. In this deconstructivist strain, everything centered has to be decentered.

As a parallel, the theoretical argument in the present article asserts that one cannot ignore the opposition of original and copy, but copies should not be considered as secondary or derivative to originals. Instead of highlighting that there are no copies without originals, one should be painstakingly aware that upon encountering a copy, the original is seldom present. Sometimes we even do not know we are encountering a copy, and not an original. Even if we know about the relationship between the original and the copy, the last-mentioned is a part of discourses that the original does not necessarily take part in. In addition, as several studies show, the concepts of copy and original are fluid and dynamic (see, for example, Boon 2013).

Thus, the copy might refer “back” to the original, but it might just as well, and at the same time, refer to other signifying practices and meanings, which are more important in the given context. The point is that copies are “legitimate signifiers” on their own. They take part in signifying systems that also endow the originals with new meaning, e.g., granting the original a “museum status” (we will come back to this pivotal point when discussing “the informational original-copy”). Moreover, knowledge about the original might come from knowledge of the copy, as for example, when the art history student is gaining his or her knowledge of the traditional art history corpus. This is primarily done by way of reproductions in books, not by encountering originals positioned in museums and churches all around the Western world; in discourse, there is no origin of origins.

IV

Against the backdrop of these theoretical premises, the following sections distinguish the five main strategies; the Derridean predispositions will be further elaborated underway. Firstly, the copies which often are considered to be typical museum copies, characterize the strategy for disseminating the original/copy, that is, reproductions, magnets, etc. This strategy will be thoroughly presented as it implies how copying practices are closely integrated into museum practices in general. Secondly, partly derived from this approach, the strategy for the supplementary original-copy will be introduced. This strategy frames, for example, artists’ citations of other works and forgeries. Both show that copying practices often lead to new originals, in principle, *ad infinitum*. Thirdly, this leads to the

in-between strategy for the displaced originalcopy which encompasses, for example, artistic reworkings of other artists' originals and conservatorial restorations. This approach partly excludes the copy and partly displaces the original, while still, unavoidably, referring to the latter. In general, this strategy signifies the latent indefiniteness and instability of the original. Fourthly, the strategy for the informational originalcopy will be discussed at length as it has a vital function in terms of talking about museum originals and copies. This is the strategy which, as mentioned previously, grants the original objects their status as museum objects. An informational originalcopy is just as unique as an original object of art, and at the same time, it defines the original and is itself defined by this opposition. Lastly, the strategy for the imaginary original-copy follows. This strategy is, on the one hand, dependent upon several of the previous strategies, and, on the other hand, handles signs that now exist without explicit originals, as the approach covers copies primarily referring to originals which have disappeared, been destroyed, not seen yet, etc.; that is, this strategy produces images of originals not least by way of the disseminated original/copy from the first strategy, but the gap is not enlarging as the original has disappeared, been destroyed, etc.

The five strategies will show that art museums are unavoidably involved in copy practices, which have an impact on the understanding of their collections of original objects. In numerous coincidences, the copies surface in discourses and practices as "legitimate signifiers" of their own without the company of originals, but nevertheless with an effect upon the perception of these originals.

The strategy for the disseminated original/copy

I

Broadly speaking, the term "the disseminated original/copy" signifies reproductions which the museum, as the holder of the "the transcendental signified", in one way or another distributes. This strategy is easily recognized as covering museum copies. From a theoretical point of view, "dissemination" is also the title of one of Derrida's books (*La dissémination*, 1972), a collection of various texts. The last section of this book, which repeats the main title, in particular is considered as partly operating at the very limits of intelligibility. Suffice it to say that "dissemination" signifies the:

... impossible return to the rejoined, readjusted unity of meaning, the impeded march of any such reflection. But is dissemination then the loss of that kind of truth, the negative prohibition of all access to such a signified? Far from presupposing that a virgin substance thus precedes or oversees it, dispersing or withholding itself in a negative second mo-

ment, dissemination affirms the always already divided generation of meaning. (Derrida 1981: 268)

Derrida hints at the Latin roots of “dissemination”, that is, the scattering of seeds/ semen or transport of seeds away from the parent plant (the origin) or male organ. Thus, “dissemination” refers to the idea of scattering and spreading, but also impregnating. In this sense, “dissemination” suggests manifold meanings which, once underway, run out of control. As such, “dissemination” also has a purposely sexual connotation. It suggests a free play which is joyous, unstable and “excessive”. Paraphrasing Derrida, “copies” also refers to the “surplus” or excess of meaning which is inherent in the copy making.

II

Upon closer inspection, a tentative diachronic approach might structure this strategy for disseminating the original/copy. Early ways of multiplying artworks were plaster casts and prints. In particular, European art academies and 19th-century museums applied these technologies for learning purposes. For a very long time, printmaking was also the predominant means of distributing masterpieces to a general audience, and even though photography surpassed printmaking during the second half of the 19th century, the importance of the latter should not be underestimated (see e.g. Ivins 1982; Bann 2001). By way of 3D print, plaster casts (in their modernized form) might have a comeback in the near future.

In developing art history as a scientific discipline, photographic collections of artworks clearly have prevailed. In the early days of photography, the developing of both the commercial connoisseur practice and the scientific art history became dependent upon photographic reproductions. In general, gaining visual knowledge of the corpus of the history of art required photographic collections, cf. the proposal for a cooperative *Negativzentrale* at the International Congress of Art Historians in Darmstadt in 1907 which was supposed to make the ordering of photographic prints easier and more scientific feasible. (Dam Christensen 2010).

Later on, for example, André Malraux’ *musée imaginaire* and UNESCO’s projects on color reproductions of masterworks, as well as travelling exhibitions in the period 1949–81 which pursued Malraux’s ideas of a museum without walls in order to popularize art and by this means to elevate democracy and human values, are worth mentioning (Håkansson 2007).

Today, the multifaceted digital reproduction practices present in the museum shop demonstrate the commonness of photographic reproductions. This practice, today involving postcards, magnets and posters, encompasses, for example, commercial reproductions, affective reproductions (memorabilia) and didactic reproductions in museum catalogues, among others.

In addition, due to the development of technological means, visitors are increasingly distributing their own reproductions via social media platforms such as Flickr, Instagram, YouTube, etc. The museums themselves also distribute parts of their collections on these platforms. In other words, museums can meet potential audiences in social spaces created by others, including commercial services (Bearman and Trant 2009). In fact, these copy practices more or less have replaced features such as “my museum”, where the virtual user could enter the museum website and collect his/her own collection of digital reproductions within the virtual space of the museum in question guided and lured by slogans such as “Make and keep your own art collection”.

When museums and visitors take their own shots of museum objects and upload them to social media platforms without copyright restrictions, this is in contrast with former days. This is so because Creative Common licenses are gaining influence in the museum world (Bearman and Trant 2009; Hylland in this journal). These licenses help to clarify the intellectual property status of, e.g., museum online collections in ways that apparently encourage reuse of their possessions. At least, it seems that a free commons model increases visits to online platforms. Moreover, Creative Common licenses might even be more profitable than business models in which museums require payments for access and reuse of reproductions – in particular because “... often managing revenue-generating rights-and-reproductions requests brings less income than the resources used to do the managing” (Edson and Cherry 2010).

III

An important branch of this strategy for disseminating the original/copy is the development of extended virtual museums via websites and social media platforms. For example, one can point to the early phase of virtual museums. In 2007, Dresden Gemäldegalerie's Alte Meister became accessible in the online 3D virtual world *Second Life*:

Starting off with a classical approach towards museum communication, the Dresden Gallery shows a detailed reconstruction of the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in the Sempregalerie at the Zwinger in Dresden, Germany. ... Inside the Dresden Gallery, the reconstruction of the environment is continued as the paintings of the original gallery are shown at a position that corresponds to their placement in the real world gallery. Furthermore, the environment integrates the existing audio guide system, by mapping audio-tracks that were created for the real world exhibition to the virtual counterparts. (Wieneke 2010: 132)

According to its own information, the Dresden Gallery became the first museum visualized and accessible in *Second Life* (Rodríguez-Echavarría and Wieneke 2010). The project ended in 2011.

An even earlier layer in developing virtual museums is MUVA: Virtual Museum of the Arts, *El Pais*, first launched in 1997. Today, this still exists as a dynamic, interactive museum exhibiting works of modern and contemporary Uruguayan artists. Due to the socioeconomic situation of Uruguay in the early 1990s, the art historian Alicia Haber took the initiative to develop a purely virtual museum that has no counterpart in reality in terms of the museum institution. The virtual artworks are, however, existing in the real world. MUVA is located in a virtual building designed by architects, and the settings could be built at any time as the museum strongly endeavors to display the artworks in a virtual realm that strengthens the sensation of reality (Haber 2000).

Alongside these examples, the progress of *Google Art Project* has opened new ways for museums' dissemination of digital copies of artworks (see also Hylland in this issue). The almost seamless connection between *Google Street View* and the *Google Art Project* parallels a physical reality in a way in which artworks and buildings correspond to their placement in the real world gallery. This approach was anticipated in a former version in 2004 when the restoration of the main building of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam started. In the period 2004–2012, a 3D interactive panorama of the Philips Wing, where the museum displayed highlights of the so-called *Golden Age of Dutch Painting*, was accessible online and offered a unique opportunity to view all the highlights of the Golden Age in one place.¹

IV

These various examples, which obviously are gathered without taking further account of systematic chronological transferences and evidence, underline the impression that art museums take part in new media practices in entrepreneurial ways. In the vein of a Derridean approach, one could argue that this strategy is defined by the pains of the museums to make copies in order to disseminate as much visibility as possible of the artworks in question; in general, museums constantly pursue new means of spreading reproductions of their holdings.

In the beginning, museums were in control of the copies due to copyright and methods of reproduction. As time passed, they more or less voluntarily and joyously have lost the control and increasingly permitted the scattered digital copies to make the origin of origin non-present. Historically speaking, there has been a dilemma surrounding copyright and dissemination, not least reinforced in the 1990s by museum websites with accessible digital reproductions that could be disseminated in an abundance of copies. Currently, the implementation of Creative Commons licenses, however, seems to solve this limiting side of dissemination practices.

The strategy for the supplementary original-copy

I

In *De la grammatologie* (1967), Derrida discusses “supplement” by way of the Genevan philosopher and writer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). According to Derrida, the distinction between oppositions such as nature and culture, speech and writing, object and image features, is for Rousseau a matter of a hierarchical relationship between the double elements where the latter supplement the insufficiency of the former. However, this insufficiency of the former does not suggest an equal status with the latter. Instead, culture, writing, and image of representation play a subsidiary role to enhance the presence of nature, speech and object. That is, the supplement is instrumental to promote the natural and original “essence”, although again, both, according to Derrida, define each other on an equal basis (Derrida 1967: 142).

In terms of this strategy which partly overlaps with the previous strategy, given that the visual references to the “original” are obvious, there are two or perhaps three particular interrelated features: first, this strategy requires deliberate human intervention in the production of each copy; that is, it requires artistic agency. One could argue that the making of plaster copies and prints from the previous strategy requires artistic skills as well, but the main difference is then and thereafter that this strategy for the supplementary original-copy typically avoids remediation. In disseminating reproductions, the museum typically remediates the original from, e.g., painting to photography. In making supplementary copies, one has to stick to the original media. Thirdly, the supplementary original-copy tends to produce new originals. The strategy includes both copies and new originals — in principle new originals *ad infinitum*.

II

In the field of art museums, this strategy for the supplementary original-copy frames the work of art citing another, if only in part, and following the iconographical scheme for a certain motif. In the French sense of the word *supplément* one can find a double meaning as it means both “an addition” and “a substitute”. Thus, the copy potentially institutes both meanings. The mentioned variations are often considered original works of art in themselves, but they also add new meaning to the implied original.

The 19th-century art student who copies a work of art in order to learn the skills of the older master or an artist who sketches artworks in order to support his or her visual memory also contribute to this strategy. In each case, the original and copy are intertwined in the signifying processes, although the latter case might touch upon remediation, e.g., when J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) in 1819 copied Claude Lorrain’s (1600–1682) oil painting *Seaport with the Villa Medici*,

1637, in his sketchbook (Moorby 2011); it is, nevertheless, an original work of art.

In addition, artists can produce remakes (e.g., Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, Donald Judd's *Untitled Boxes*, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, etc.) and variations of his/her own works (e.g., identical motifs rendered from slightly different angles or in slightly different compositions). In both cases, additions and substitutions are in play.

Historically speaking, one could further argue that from the outset this strategy is separated from the control of museums, but the shadowy side of the supplementary original-copy is, nevertheless, a severe threat to museum practices due to the risk of acquiring forgeries. In fact, this sort of supplement is akin to Derrida's supplement of supplements which endangers the hierarchical relationship between, for example, the abovementioned oppositions such as nature and culture, speech and writing. He also writes "...the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace" (Derrida 1997:145); that is, there is a "danger" of inverting or destabilizing the hierarchy of original and copy since the center is being decentered.

This, in particular, is the case with forgeries within the art world, which include two variants of the supplementary original-copy. The one suggests a smooth transition from the abovementioned art student repetition or replicas to forgery, that is, the copying of specific works of arts. The other might often be considered a deliberate fake as, for example, in the case of simulating an artist's style. This might be labelled a generic forgery in the present context.

On the one hand, it is vital for art museums to not end up acquiring forgeries because the phenomena of authenticity and aura still carry with them a certain idea of art. In addition, the failed acquisition displays the responsible curators' lack of competence. On the other hand, the copy in question might be confused with either a specific original or a generic, imaginary, original. In both cases, the copy is nevertheless a new original, although untouched by the hand of the "original" artist. This field of tension destabilizes the opposition between original and copy. The copy is framed by the original (or the imaginary idea of an original), but cannot be detached from it as the original reinforces its status and meaning by way of the copy in question. The specific and generic fakes might even be perceived as origins of origins.

The strategy for the displaced originalcopy

I

This in-between strategy puts copies in parenthesis. This is the case because the original is still present, but not as *the* original. Instead, it has become unstable and transient as, for example, it has become part of a *new* original which, nevertheless, unavoidably refers to the bygone, or displaced, original, which now might only

exist in copied versions of the transcendental signified. One could perhaps also argue that this is a double original without copies where the original is the same without being the same.

Thus, in the context of Derrida, it is tempting to launch his notions of “difference” and “différance”, a word that he coins himself playing on the double meaning of “to defer” and “to differ” of the French word *différer*. In his essay “Différance” (1968), Derrida recaps the subverting of the hierarchical opposition between speech and writing as following:

Now, in point of fact, it happens that this graphic difference (the *a* instead of the *e*), this marked difference between two apparently vocalic notations, between vowels, remains purely graphic: it is written or read, but is not heard. It cannot be heard (Derrida 2004: 257)

The sound is the same when pronounced, but when written it is a matter of at least two words combining partly overlapping, partly with different meanings. Thus, the *a* is an intentional misspelling that can only be seen and, further, be sensed visually before it intelligibly makes meaning.

Among other things, the point is that meanings of words and signs can only become clear from differences from similar words; that is, there is never a moment when meaning is complete in itself. Meaning is always “deferred” through the infinite chain of signifiers.

In the current context, this sameness without being the same summarizes the objects in this strategy. Moreover, the strategy also plays on the Lacanian understanding of “displacement”. The word is derived from Freud’s *Verschiebung*, a defense mechanism whereby the unconsciousness replaces desires, which are felt to be dangerous or undesirable, with new objects. In 1957, the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), linked displacement to the poetic function of metonymy, in which an object or idea is not addressed by its own name, but the name of something from which the part is taken for the whole (Lacan 2006: 421). In other words, the new object is the same without being the same.

II

Figuratively speaking, displacement is the case when a person makes an artistic intervention towards an existing work of art. The American artist Robert Rauschenberg’s (1925–2008) *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), today in the collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, is probably the best known work of art within this genre. Although the drawing initially was not a museum piece, but was donated to Rauschenberg by the famous older artist Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), Rauschenberg’s idea was to “purge” himself of the admired de Koo-

ning's teaching. Apparently, he spent four weeks erasing the senior artist's drawing (Scott 2013). A newer famous example of this practice is the British artist brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman's reworking of thirteen Adolf Hitler water drawings which they brought themselves. The remake drawings were displayed as *If Hitler Had Been a Hippy How Happy Would We Be* in 2008 (Chapman 2008) and imply a collective preconception of the historical Hitler.

In both cases, one could argue that the involved artworks were not part of museum collections to begin with. However, numerous cases demonstrate that museum pieces also belong to this strategy. In her article, "Iconoclasm as Art: Creative Gestures and Criminal Acts Inside Museums and Galleries" (2013), Helen E. Scott mentions a series of intentional artistic acts of vandalism against museum pieces: e.g., Picasso's *Guernica*, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (even twice by the same artist) and Malevich's *Suprematism 1920–1927 (White Cross on Grey)*. Of course, it might be a matter of degrees whether an act is an artistic performance or explicit vandalism:

Every so often an individual will attack a work on display and insist that this action constitutes a piece of conceptual or performance art. The phenomenon has blurred the boundaries between criminality and creativity, and proved remarkably difficult for museums and galleries to suppress.... (Scott 2013: 78)

This is so, because:

On the one hand, it seems hypocritical for museums to reject the legitimacy of iconoclastic gestures that are the progeny of theories and formal experiments celebrated as milestones in the history of modern art. Yet, on the other hand, if museums recognize such assaults as innovative art, they undermine their custodial responsibilities and risk the future safety of collections. (Scott 2013: 82)

Often conservatorial practices "restore" the artwork in question back to its "original" state. Several of these restoration practices are also included in this strategy as it includes originals that either vandalism without artistic intentionality or the ravages of time have changed. In these cases, conservatorial restoration normally takes place. When the ravages of time bring about the restoration, this explicitly displaces the origin of origins as the restoration wants it to be present now as it is/was when it became present as a museum piece for the first time, ignoring the decay of time which in fact would recognize the original's being. Thus, restoration produces a tension of sameness without being the same. When vandalism or

the intentional damage of art without artistic intention, which has a long history within the art world (Gamboni 1997), cause restoration, the original is also displaced. This is so both as a disregarding of the present state of the (wounded) original, as in the previous case, and in addition, of the prior attack on the original.

The Lacanian associations are perhaps also strengthened by the fact that artworks have a certain aura as “originals” that attract potential vandals. Some very celebrated works of art, such as Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (1503–06) and Rembrandt’s *Night Watch* (1640–42) have been deliberately damaged several times. As museum pieces, the attraction might even be amplified on account of their placement in regulated museum spaces which ought to uphold their status as everlasting originals.

Thus, the actions in this strategy displace the originals while unavoidably referring to them at the same time, for example by way of traces in the new original, existing reproductions, memory, etc. This tension makes us acutely aware of the fluidity and instability of the originals, even, or in particular, when it comes to museum pieces.

The strategy for the informational originalcopy

I

Following along the lines of Derrida, the informational originalcopy lingers in several of the previous approaches. As will become clear, the informational originalcopy easily supplements the supplement as it inverts the hierarchical opposition between original and copy; it is the same without being the same and so on. In addition, the informational copy grants vital meaning to the original.

This strategy for the informational originalcopy is important because it challenges the hierarchical opposition between “original” and “copy” in museum practices; that is, there is again a “danger” of inverting the hierarchical opposition between “original” and “copy”. In any case, this strategy indicates a systematic logic which clearly illustrates the mutual interdependence between original and copy.

As with the strategy for the disseminated original/copy, this approach might also be conceived as partly following a diachronic structure with distinct phases, however, not by erasing earlier phases. It is more like a palimpsest, on which practices have changed over time, but still show evidence of previous layers.

Upon closer inspection, the motivation for outlining “the informational originalcopy” as an autonomous strategy is caused by the fact that from the moment a new acquisition enters the museum, experts examine it and accumulate information to be recorded according to a variety of ordering operations. In fact, the object is granted its specific meaning as a museum artifact by way of its informational twin, the unique inventory number in the physical or virtual ledger, otherwise,

it would just be an ordinary object. The unique code parallels and simultaneously represents the work of art in question as without this codification, the work of art is not a museum original. A copy of this code might even be inscribed, stamped or written on the reverse side of the object, invisible to the general audience.

In the “ledger”, signifiers (partly as metadata) helping the identification of the signified accompany the code: for example, information about media, size, motif/theme, provenance, visual representations, literature referring to the object in question, and, not least, a reference to its current location in the physical world.

Thus, this informational twin presupposes an “original” (an origin of origins), but the “original” is “musealized” by way of its informational shadow. Moreover, this twin might even survive its physical counterpart if something happens to the original object.

II

Broadly speaking, the first layer of the “informational originalcopy” was characterized by the traditional physical acquisition register, ledger, inventory, catalogue, protocol, list of collection items and the like. In this sense, the items of a collection are listed according to an ordering system which produces the informational originalcopy.

In the current context, modes of doing the formative registering, e.g., according to various epistemes (cf. Foucault 1967), do not matter. Suffice it to say that one way of exemplifying the inventory is to refer to a common way of registering new items in a collection, as for example:

..., if Mr. Smith donated three paintings, all given on a particular day in 2009, and it is the fifth gift the museum has received from all its donors that year, the number for the gift would be 2009.5. Numbers are assigned within that gift, to each individual object. Painting one will be designated as 2009.5.1, painting two will be 2009.5.2 and painting three will be 2009.5.3. (Neilson 2009: 3742)

Another example might be the code NN-12/2016, meaning acquired item no. 12 in the year of 2016 in the collection NN. Again, the object will perhaps be briefly described in terms of registration date, object name and description (including size and media), acquisition method (e.g., donor, trader, and price), reproduction numbers, location, etc.

Necessarily, every object is assigned this unique and permanent identification number which distinguishes it from all other items held in the collection. Over time, this registration documents (and constitutes a “copy” of) the entire collec-

tion.

Since the 1990s, digital register practices increasingly supplement or replace the acquisition book. In days past, the book was almost as important as the objects themselves as this is/was the sum of knowledge and the most important primary reference of the collection. It might even have been stored in the safe repositories which also held the most precious and valued artworks of the collection and, not least, the former acquisition books.

Tentatively, a distinction might be drawn between “acquisition book” and “museum catalogue”. This is, however, a random division. In practice, there is a smooth transition from the register to the catalogue. “Catalogue” derives from the Greek *katalogos* meaning, among other things, “list” and “register”. In this context, the distinction suggests a distinction between the register as part of the internal apparatus and the printed catalogues presenting information and knowledge to the visitors.

Obviously, collection registers existed before the 19th-century museum (in churches, private collections, etc.). However, ideas about the printed art museum catalogue arose towards the end of this century, most likely in order to systematize the collections and disseminate knowledge. From a critical point of view, it was a matter of establishing an order, the history of art, at the same time as making this system, promoted as a “universal” system, in the process.

This is so because even though the basic principles for the scientific collection catalogue seem obvious today, it was once a matter of “naturalizing” a system. For example, at the first congress for art historians in Vienna, 1873, the principles were subject to negotiation (*Erster Kunstwissenschaftlicher Congress in Wien 1874*: 445–455). A draft for cataloguing painting collections was presented by a speaker. He stressed the importance of the catalogue by stating that this was one of “der wichtigsten Verpflichtungen” for the museum. After proceedings and voting, the principles were determined.

Upon a closer look, it appears that the debates were at times very meticulous concerning, for example, the physical format of the catalogue among other things, and specifying that it should be moderate-sized with blank end pages as the visitor might take his own notes during the exhibition walk. Moreover, the catalogue should be sold at a modest price:

It must be an honorable duty of the experts concerned to ensure that the catalog is available in the best form. However, because the catalog is a teaching tool one has to supply the catalog as cheaply as the production costs make possible. (*Erster Kunstwissenschaftlicher Congress in Wien, 1874*: 459)

Otherwise, the basic codification resembles that of modern catalogues.

III

Although the preliminary steps were taken long before, the phenomenon of digital databases *in* the museum became visible during the 1990s and exemplifies, broadly speaking, the next layer of the informational originalcopy. (cf. e.g. Parry 2007; Bearman and Trant 2009). At this time large museums had to make important decisions in terms of which software to use in developing internal databases, not least in order to make retroconversions of old registers, exchange updated information with other museums, and foresee future migrations.

These databases became online accessible towards the new millennium which signals the third layer of informational copies; for example, the American Museum of Natural History made its collection catalogue searchable on the Web as early as 1996. However, museum collection catalogues were difficult for non-specialists to interpret as these text databases often only included rudimentary data without any images. Thus, non-specialist seldom appreciated this prominent online access (Bearman and Trant 2009).

Concurrently, museum organizations, cultural agencies and the like negotiated and developed national and international principles for software protocols, etc. Among other things, centralized databases were developed.²

This development was followed by a fourth layer in which museum websites and digital platforms within the museum increasingly allow users to become producers of content and to interact and collaborate with other users in a social media dialogue. Thus, the traditional role of the museum expert is weakened, and in terms of informational shadows (here, social metadata), the users contribute to meaning making by way of, for example, crowdsourcing, tagging, etc.

As many museum collections contain huge numbers of items not indexed, inadequately indexed or indexed using older methods that need to be converted into new modes, professionals will never be able to secure metadata. Therefore, users are involved in these processes. In fact, this involvement can be tracked back to the 1990s. The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, for example, had early success with volunteer keywording of its Thinker database which was launched in 1997. As social tagging increased in the new millennium, studies of the potential for folksonomy came in focus (Bearman and Trant 2009). In addition, *the steve.museum. The Museum Social Tagging Project* (2006–2010), headed by the Indianapolis Museum of Art, examined the use of social tagging for art museums at an early stage in the emergence of crowdsourcing (Trant 2006).

The question of user motivation, however, has been a recurrent issue. Almost simultaneously with the *steve.museum* project, Ahn and Dabbish introdu-

ced labeling images with a computer game in 2004 (Ahn and Dabbish 2004). This extra sensory perception model became a forerunner for the *Google Image Labeler* (2006–2011), a gamification with the overall purpose of improving Google's image search by way of user-generated metadata (Jafarinaiimi 2012).

This, and similar approaches, have been implemented in a variety of museum projects, but the duration seems in each case to be limited. Apparently, museums and other image base providers do not always have the resources to maintain interest in tagging by way of community building and/or the development of tagging is taking a different route. (Bernstein, 2014; Simon, 2014). These obstacles are important to overcome if tagging is to ease the burden of professionals in terms of informational copies.³

From an analytical point of view, this potential use of crowdsourcing has a dimension which is in contrast to the early registration. Although the preliminary listing still takes place more or less in front of the object which is to be granted museum status, the crowdsourcing does not need to take place in the same way. On the contrary, most collective projects are implemented by way of internet participation; that is, each user accesses the activities via digital copies.

However, the main point of this strategy which makes it particularly important is that the code of the informational twin is closely related to the museum original as it grants the latter its privileged museum status. In the process, the informational code itself becomes unique as each object in principle has its own code. As mentioned in the introductory remarks, this code might even be copied onto the original artifact.

The strategy for the imaginary original-copy

I

The strategy for the imaginary original-copy comes last. Although the title might have poetic connotations, it is, in fact, on the one hand, dependent upon some of the previous categories, and, on the other hand, a strategy that might exist without originals as it includes originals that have disappeared, been destroyed, not yet seen by the art lover, etc. Thus, the imaginary original-copy heavily depends on its copies.

Some examples might illustrate the latter. Due to the abundance of disseminated copies, most artworks are encountered for the first time by way of reproductions. In the previous discussion, the study of art history has been underlined as depending heavily on these copies. The numerous copies might even cause people to doubt whether they have seen the original in question *in situ*. The copies could have an impact on the beholder; that is, they might displace the recollection of the specific encounter with a work of art, and furthermore, they can impact the future

encounter with a yet unknown work of art (à la “isn’t it bigger?”). In each case, the mind of the beholder in question produces the imaginary original-copy.

II

In terms of destroyed and disappeared artworks, disseminated reproductions help keep the original alive in the memory. Thus, an imaginary copy might be a demolished museum piece, such as Gustave Courbet’s *Les Casseurs de Pierres* (1848–50) which was destroyed by the British bombing of Dresden during Second World War. Nevertheless, most art historians can produce an imaginary copy supported by old photographic reproductions (some even with blurred and faint colors) from before the demolition.

Disappeared originals imply stolen museum pieces or objects that are being hidden from the public domain, although still present in the acquisition books, and still visible in catalogues, etc. They might even be implicitly present in the museum display, e.g., the four empty frames at Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, since 1990, where thirteen artworks were stolen. Due to the bequeath of the former owner nothing must be changed in the display, although the museum by way of *Google Art Project* offers a guided tour that compares the present display with former photographs of the display and specific photos of the thirteen stolen works of art.⁴

Other famous examples are: Monet’s *Impression, Soleil Levant* (1872), absent from the Musée Marmottan, Paris for years, but which has now been returned; *Mona Lisa*’s disappearance from the Louvre 1911–1913; and the copy of Goya’s *Portrait of the Duke of Wellington* (1812–14) which appeared in *James Bond’s Dr. No* (1962), suggesting that Bonds’ rival had stolen the original after its loss the year before. This piece is still hidden from the public gaze.

The necessities of several of the previous strategies are visible not only in the use of disseminating the original/copy, but also in the informational original/copy which granted the original its museum status and thus from the beginning, incorporated the original in the copying practices of the museum. Last, the imaginary original-copy is also a supplement to the original, even a supplement that supplements, because it might be the only way the origin of origins is kept alive; in other words, as mentioned, the imaginary original is subjugated to its copies.

Conclusion

It is important to ask again whether Derrida has been an appropriate choice as a theoretical approach for the present article. As has been seen, definitions of notions such as “copy”, “original”, etc., have been implicit, the use (and non-use) of hyphens and slashes might have been annoying and the use of empirical cases has

been, more or less, random. This vagueness is partly akin to Derrida's own application of various concepts. In addition, the use of Derrida's terminology above was addressed as a pragmatic interpretation, which, hopefully, could help to clarify or make distinctions between the allegedly copious (!) copy practices within the art museum field in order to map them.

In addition, the use of Derrida was encouraged in particular by his critique of "naturalized" opposition which in this case paralleled the opposition between original and copy. Thus, by way of the Derridean motivation, the *relationship* between the two came to be emphasized.

As a result, this article maps out five approaches for copy practices. The first strategy for disseminating the original/copy indicates that museums in general are very keen on copying and in applying new technologies and exploiting legal opportunities in order to make the best use of dissemination practices. The next strategy for the supplementary original-copy demonstrates how a variety of copy practices produces new originals which might even become a threat to the museum. The third strategy for displacing the original/copy eliminates the copy and the origin of origins showing the potential fluidity and instability of the original. The fourth strategy for the informational original/copy underlines the deep interdependence of originals and copies, but also confirms how the informational twin or shadow, the unique code in the "ledger", made the original a museum artifact. The fifth and last strategy for the imaginary original-copy implies how originals might be totally dependent upon their copies, in particular due to disseminated copies from the first strategy.

These five strategies clearly show that art museums are deeply involved in copy practices which have an impact on the understanding of their collections of original artifacts. In an abundance of situations, the copies take part in discourses and practices as "legitimate signifiers" of their own without the presence of originals, but nevertheless with an effect upon the perception of the originals.

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Notes

¹ See <http://www.euromuse.net/en/museums/museum/view-m/rijksmuseum-amsterdam/content/en/zid/142/>

² For example, in the same period every state-approved and state-owned museum in Denmark was requested to provide relevant collection information to the Agency of Cultural Heritage which then developed its own software and which, as technology improved, functioned as a portal to each museum database. In Denmark this database for art museums is Kunst Index Danmark, a centralized “offline” database from 1984 that became online accessible in 1996.

³ In contrast, an apparently successful, ongoing project is the German ARTigo which is continuing the gamification of tagging in order to motivate users, see <http://www.artigo.org/>.

⁴ See <https://gardnermuseum.culturalspot.org/exhibit/gAIyZKoNat4oLA?position=0%3A0>.

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