

Contemporary Art as a Strategy for Digital Archaeology

In the age of digital innovation, archaeology has embraced tools like 3D scanning, modeling, and printing to uncover and reconstruct the past. But what happens when contemporary artists adopt these same tools? **This project explores the fascinating intersection of digital archaeology and contemporary art, examining how artists challenge the boundaries of archaeology, provoke critical reflections on its practices, and inspire innovative ways to think about heritage and materiality.**

The study focuses on three groundbreaking artworks: **“The Other Nefertiti” (2015) by Nora Al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles**, **“Material Speculation: ISIS” (2015-2016) by Morehshin Allahyari**, and **“Curtain Call, Variations on a Folly” (2021) by Abbas Akhavan**. Each of these works uses digital tools like 3D scanning and printing to confront pressing cultural and ethical questions. In “The Other Nefertiti”, the artists clandestinely scanned the iconic bust of Nefertiti at Berlin’s Neues Museum to create a freely accessible 3D model (and later, a 3D printed version that was deposited in Egypt), sparking debates about ownership and repatriation of cultural heritage. Allahyari’s “Material Speculation: ISIS” responds to the destruction of artifacts in Mosul, reconstructing them as 3D-printed objects embedded with digital archives, blending remembrance with innovation. Akhavan’s work reconstructs Palmyra’s destroyed colonnade alongside a chroma key green screen, merging the digital and organic to reflect on loss and resilience.

This project doesn’t merely analyze these artworks – **it uses them as a framework to rethink digital archaeology itself**. While digital archaeology has revolutionized how we document and preserve the past, it has often been criticized as technocratic and detached from broader cultural and ethical contexts. By examining these artworks, **the project seeks to uncover how art can disrupt conventional archaeological narratives and inspire more creative, inclusive, and reflective approaches.**

The research builds on an interdisciplinary foundation, combining art-based research, critical heritage studies, archaeological theory, and digital archaeology. It employs Doug Bailey’s methodology of “disarticulation, repurposing, and disruption” to interpret how these artworks challenge and reconfigure the tools and practices of digital archaeology. **This analysis aims to develop new theoretical concepts and methods for studying the intersection of art and digital archaeology, enriching both fields with fresh perspectives and practical tools.** The project’s outcomes include a conceptual toolkit for exploring art/archaeology, detailed case studies, and new interpretations of recognized artworks. The research outcomes will contribute to a growing body of literature on the use of art in archaeology, offering innovative ways to rethink both disciplines and their potential for broader social engagement.

The outcomes of this project include a website showcasing the results, three peer-reviewed research articles, and six conference presentations, providing robust contributions to both art/archaeology and digital archaeology. Through its innovative approach, the project aims to redefine the possibilities of interdisciplinary collaboration and the transformative role of art in rethinking archaeology.

The results of this project will have practical applications beyond academic research. By highlighting the interplay between digital technologies, heritage preservation, and contemporary art, the project will provide insights into how museums, galleries, and cultural institutions can engage with the public in new and meaningful ways. As digital technologies increasingly become a key part of museum exhibits, the project offers fresh perspectives on how art and archaeology can inform each other in designing more interactive, thought-provoking displays. The project will also contribute to the growing body of work focused on the ethical implications of digital heritage, ensuring that future generations are able to access, interpret, and engage with cultural heritage in a way that respects diverse histories and perspectives. Ultimately, **this project demonstrates the power of contemporary art to reimagine archaeology, showing how artistic interventions can lead to more sensitive, socially engaged, and imaginative approaches to understanding and preserving the past.**