

Intercolonial Technogalactic

by Geraldine Juárez

I.

<http://www.googleculturalinstitute.com>.

I typed the term “cultural treasure” in the search box. The result: three matches. Then I typed nothing and searched again. There are 6,397,590 items at the Google Cultural Institute (GCI). Ninety-four percent of these belong to the *LIFE Photo Collection*, and 164 of the images (0.000027 percent) are related to Indonesia. There are also fifty-three other collections related to the term “Indonesia.” 12,884 of those are images, one is a 3D object, one a video, eleven are exhibitions, and ten are user albums. There is also one collection entitled *Museum Nasional Indonesia*, with about 100 items.

To organize you must first collect. The colonial impulse is a combination of economic and scientific desire. While the British explorer and collector Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) projected this impulse into the future, presently the Google Cultural Institute directs its ambition into the past; both use conservationist ideas to accumulate information and profit, yet animals and data produce different kinds of specimens.

Organizing information is never innocent.

II.

In a press release from 2011, the Head of the Google Art Project, Amit Sood, states that the Google Cultural Institute “started as a ‘20 percent project’ by a group of *Googlers* passionate about making art more

In their promotional video, the Google Cultural Institute define their content platform as a place where one can “Explore art projects, historic moments and world wonders, to experience the art and ideas that

accessible online. Together with our museum partners around the world we have created what we hope will be a fascinating resource for art-lovers, students and casual museum goers alike—inspiring them to one day visit the real thing.”²

“Powered By Google: Widening Access and Tightening Corporate Control,” by Dan Schiller and Shinjoung Yeo, was one of the first texts to historicize the missing bits of history behind the colonial impulse that set the stage for the inauguration of the GCI’s headquarters in Paris in December 2011, which has its origins in a visit of Eric Schmidt to Iraq.³ The authors point to the following paragraph from the *Wall Street Journal*, to situate the first expression interest in the realm of cultural heritage by of Google—from *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 November 2009:

Google’s chief executive Eric Schmidt said during a trip to Baghdad this week that Iraq’s stabilization could lead to business opportunities in the country.

“The creation of a new Iraqi state ultimately means business opportunities for global firms.”

The search giant said Tuesday that it will post thousands of photos from the National Museum of Iraq early next year. The Baghdad institution has an extensive collection of Mesopotamian art but has frequently been closed because of security concerns.

According to Reuters, Google staffers have taken more than 14,000 pictures of the works, and Mr. Schmidt said at a news conference that “I can think of no better use of

shaped our world right from your own home.”¹ Which ideas have shaped our world? Yours? What about mine? Colonialism is one. I am a by-product of colonization. I was born in North America, the continent that unleashed the modern colonization race. I come from a country colonized by Spain: México. I am also a *mestizo* woman and recently, to make it even more complex, became a European citizen. Colonization is a complex concept because it involves many kinds of exploitation, and conflicts past and present have derived from it. Colonization also involves knowledge, trade, and a hell of a lot of violence and archives. There is also another idea that has shaped my world, and yours too: the Internet, the archive of archives. I typed “internet” into the search box of the Google Cultural Institute and retrieved 192 items. The matches include images ranging from contemporary art and author and entrepreneur Paul Otlet, to a copy of a speech written by Eric Schmidt, the executive chairman of Google. There is another idea that has shaped “our world,” and how we scroll through the Internet: Google. I clicked the “About” link of the GCI, where one finds an explanation of the three areas into which the institute is divided: “Art Project,” “Historic Moments,” and “World Wonders.” There is a video about what the GCI’s team of engineers and artists do in their offices in Paris; descriptions of their ChromeCast product, a virtual-reality headset they developed; also a contact form for institutions to get in touch with them. But there

our time and our resources to make the images and ideas from your civilization, from the very beginning of time, available to a billion people worldwide.”⁴

is a crucial bit of history left out from the vast stores of knowledge that the Google Cultural Institute offers to the world: its origins.

As much as the Enlightenment was about equality and the power of reason—and has helped us and others before us to enact critiques of colonialism, slavery, and oppression—it was also behind the idea of “civilizing barbarians” *for their own benefit*. There is nothing rare about empires invading and destroying weaker countries, but the way colonization was presented as a civilizing endeavour was unique—and probably couldn’t have happened without the Enlightenment and the archivist impulses that emerged from it.

Colonization without archives is a purely military affair, a barbaric enterprise. How would Google look without a Cultural Institute whose mission is helping to “preserve and promote culture online to make it accessible to the world”? It merely would be pure accumulation and profit. The Capitalocene, as articulated by Donna Haraway, following Jason Moore, is a term that describes the spirit of accumulation on a planetary scale, or “profit above all else” and “the logical extension of the surplus value accumulated through colonialism and slavery.”⁵

Long before Google started archiving *the world’s information*, Derrida diagnosed the spectral messianicity, *the archive fever* behind the idea of the archive: “Nothing is more troubling than the archive,” he wrote.⁷ Archive fever is operative in Google’s new cultural endeavour, but on a completely new scale, which is “nothing short of planetary, but its reach is not merely physical or geographic. The company’s collecting impulse, likewise, evinces a breath-taking cultural and ideological range.”⁸

What is this ideology?

III.

“Today’s undead Internet has a universal interface based on only two functions: the search and the feed. [...] The search is there for you when you already know what you’re looking for. When you don’t know, you can always get fed by your feed, the singular and personalized home feed, whose function is to homogenize time, synchronizing our attention at one singular speed.”⁹

The encyclopedic vision of Google is far from visionary. The use of knowledge for profit is the same kind of business Wallace was in. To explore, discover, collect, and profit from privileged access to certain kinds of information was the motivation for all previous colonial collections. Google, like Wallace, is what Anna-Sophie Springer describes as a “professional measurer,”¹⁰ but the scale of the commercial interests between the two are significantly different: Google is a for-profit corporation of planetary proportions, in constant need of data and standardization to make more efficient what it captures and organizes. Digitization and turning everything into information is a patch for organizing society in a cheap and scalable way: convert all things into data and manage them easily.

Both the search box and the feed are standard features of the web, tailored to appeal to our contemporary information anxieties. The search is the bait and the feed is the switch; both services are free and feed each other, together with us, in an endless loop of corporate feedback. Indeed, the “private and public spheres get entangled in a blurred zone of hyperproduction.”¹¹

The search box is more or less about activity while the feed is about passivity, and it only makes sense that the Google Cultural Institute has developed products under the logic of these two states to interface their company with museums. Take,

In the Google Cultural Institute, I can explore Historic Moments through “online exhibitions detailing the stories behind significant moments in human history and uncover the stories behind history’s most significant moments.” The search box is a blank field through which I explore the GCI. I search therefore I scroll. I can only explore so much; the right-click option is disabled, so I cannot save the images to my hard disk. There is no API to go beyond these thumbnails to the source. I am a peasant user with limited access. The representation of access is a box where you can search. But exploring is not searching... if I decide not to use the search box, there is an endless feed of “Featured Content” available under the “Explore” option. I can scroll and click around the whole Google Cultural Institute without searching for anything. Exploring without direction. *Enjoy culture anytime, anywhere.*

for instance, the Google Cardboard product, a viewer for smartphones that allows users to “experience virtual-reality in a simple, fun and affordable way.”¹² The viewer case is made of cardboard and can be bought or built by yourself. The Palace of Versailles currently offers tours for exploring the castle using Google Cardboard: “Suddenly, exploring the Palace of Versailles [is] as easy as opening an app.”¹³ In order to explore museums in virtual reality, it is necessary to download an app from the Google Store. The mobile phone is thus the bridge between the passive and the active state of content provided by museums via the Google Cultural Institute. It is also the link between the private and the public.

Both the active and passive states of content generate more data than can be processed to fine-tune tastes, target advertising, and augment the capabilities of the algorithms at the core of Google. Even more interesting is that it is the passive state that most profits from public—albeit institutional and managed—culture.

When artistic expression is turned into mere content, images become mere *assets* that can feed any application. *Android Wear* offers the possibility of installing different artworks as faces for digital wristwatches. Also, through a browser plug-in, it is possible to: “Breathe a little culture into your day! Discover a beautiful artwork from the Google Art Project each time you open a new tab in Chrome.”¹⁴ Perhaps the most passive form of the content collected from Google’s partner museums, and the one that reveals most clearly the for-profit agenda behind the GCI, is the *Chromecast Backdrop*, a thumb-sized media streaming device for displaying “Everything your love, in your TV.”¹⁵

For thirty-five dollars, it is possible to plug the Backdrop device into an HDTV, connect and “cast apps from your phone to your TV.” When our relation to networked information is completely passive, we start *casting*. Again, you need the Chrome extension for the browser, or an app for the phone. A promotional video of Backdrop shows Google’s product manager, Duncan Osborne, explaining that when a user is not casting content to the TV, “it runs passive content, so it becomes a

<https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/google-art-project/akimgimeeoignljfchpbkpfbmeapk?hl=en>

beautiful background for content, including artwork. With Backdrop, Chromecast users can explore and learn more from works by iconic artists like Monet, Van Gogh and Degas right in their living room. Our goal at the Cultural Institute is to expose as many people to as much cultural content as possible, which is right in line with Google Cultural Institute's mission of democratizing access to the world's culture."¹⁶

It is necessary to note that the only people benefiting from the products derived from Google's democratization of institutional culture are users of Chrome®, Android®, and Backdrop®.

I do not have an Android phone.

IV.

The interface replaces the conflict behind the construction of the collections and the violence of taxonomy. The interface is the opposite of complexity; its goal is to make the exploration of information convenient. An interface will always fail at communicating the context of the information it displays, in other words, its history. Interface simplicity as a new type of colonial monumentality. What's behind the interface is the database.

Mike Pepi asks in an essay in *e-flux*: Is the museum a database?¹⁷ No. Is the Google Cultural Institute a database? Yes. The impulse driving the database is that of the archive. The database does not replace the archive or the collection; it merely evokes it, to paraphrase art theorist André Malraux. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, knowledge was centred around the *table*.¹⁸ The database—full of tables—is still the centre, and like the

I am tired of scrolling. And clicking in the box for more information. I can zoom into some images. I keep scrolling. At the Google Cultural Institute, my body collapses in my fingers. I am scrolling the Museum Nasional Indonesia right from my own home. Scroll. I keep looking at these images, comparing them, and there is no sense of hierarchy among the images, only between the collection, museums, their brands, and their representations. The images representing the collections are trapped in CSS boxes, and the output of the tables in the database is contained in fields labelled *More Information*. Click. I am strolling a visual database. Where is the server storing this database? Where is the data-centre storing this server? My body collapses in my fingers, the museum collapses in a server somewhere. The sense of hierarchy that my body follows when I stroll through a museum: still here. The interface defines how my fingers should stroll the *information* in this collection. A database.

archive “is very much a human problem, not a system problem.”¹⁹ Pepi also elaborates how the neoliberalization of information of public culture is transforming the museum as an institution: “Though we often use the term ‘memory’ to measure the storage capacity of a database, this is far from the same type of memory that the museum constructs and preserves. It is not passive data collected and stored by virtue of its a priori importance but instead material that achieves utility only through its potential to unequivocally deliver a command to an actor with a specific intent, an intent to which the database delivers unmatched efficiency and competitive advantage.”²⁰

A clear example of this cultural appropriation as economic opportunity is Europeana,²¹ a “knowledge-sharing platform” funded by the European Union that offers images, texts, sounds, and videos about European cultural heritage, with the mission of “bringing Europe’s vast wealth of cultural heritage to the world. The Europeana Foundation exists to promote this digital cultural heritage, and to unlock it for future generations. For change. For ideas. For progress.” Its language and function is very similar to those of the Google Cultural Institute, for whom digital collections are *data*, and museums are called *partners* and *memory institutions*. However, the difference is that through Europeana, users that find something they like can “download it, print it, use it, save it, share it, play with it, love it!” Plus, there is “no need to travel the continent, either physically or virtually!”

Europeana Labs²² is a section on the platform that welcomes the user with: “This is your code, this is your heritage, these are your labs,” and the first project featured under the “Inspiration” section is a pilot project developed with “Google’s Niantic Labs and three partner memory institutions—the Swedish National Heritage Board, the National Heritage Board of Estonia, and the National Heritage Board of Poland.” Also, Google’s Field Trip[®] tracks the location of the user to offer a feed of content about the surroundings, ranging from art and historical landmarks to shopping and lifestyle options. The Europeana website highlights the economic advantages that data offer “to enable and promote the creative re-use of cultural

content in the tourism sector,”²³ and how they have managed to identify “potential project content partners, worked closely with them on the curation and enrichment of their collections and facilitated the data integration in Google’s Field Trip by supplying an Europeana API-enabled content feed,” in order to offer to providers extensive branding by including their logo and “a short profile and links to their website.”²⁴

I am not saying that there was a pure art history free of profit before this type of database embodied in the Google Cultural Institute. Institutional culture is part of a specific way of “seeing art,” and museums have always organized information in an imperial way. In Wallace’s period, objects brought to Europe from the colonies were used to create museums filled with what colonizers considered “cultural treasures” and “heritage.” Google is merely the techno-colonial version of this same spirit, offering “tools” to preserve and make accessible their particular version of art and history, organized in their own way through their own agenda for their own purposes, which happen to include economic benefits for their “partners.”

The Google Cultural Institute and related products that act like tour guides (such as the Field Trip app²⁵ and the features of their cultural platform more generally) are based on the visual capabilities of the user—it’s about viewing images. But a virtual tour is the opposite of situated knowledge, as the database “represents while avoiding representation.”²⁶ Even if Europeana uses the collections provided by publically funded institutions to feed the Google database with the goal of promoting places and boosting digital tourism, and Google’s Art Camera strolls museums to copy their structure digitally and create three-dimensional representations so users can take a *virtual tour, any day, any time*, let’s not forget that “stuff that can be copied tends to become superabundant, which means that it is only valuable by virtue of its interconnection to stuff that *cannot* be copied, like space and time.”²⁷

Viewing the screen, scrolling the page, comparing images, and casting content is a specific way of *accessing the world’s culture* that, in the words of feminist artist and researcher Femke

Snelting, “ignores the destabilizing and critical potential of culture, let alone invests in a platform for people to think their place in the world.”²⁸ For Snelting, the Google Cultural Institute has nothing to do with what we should expect from culture, nor what we should demand from an institution, since “from the perspective of Google, culture is just another type of information to be accessed, whereby access means allowing people to call up an image in a slick interface, hopefully with an infantile description attached.”²⁹

For the official launch of the Google Cultural Institute in 2011, the American company had digitized collections of seventeen art museums, including the Alte Nationalgalerie (Berlin), The Freer Gallery of Art (Washington DC), The Frick Collection (New York City), Gemäldegalerie (Berlin), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City), MoMA (New York City), Museo Reina Sofia (Madrid), Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza (Madrid), Museum Kampa (Prague), the National Gallery (London), Palace de Versailles (Versailles), Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC), The State Hermitage Museum (St. Petersburg), State Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow), Tate (London), Uffizi (Florence), and Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam).³⁰

Although the collections digitized by the Google Cultural Institute have grown and diversified since then, the collections of Western institutions and Euro-American museums are disproportionately represented in relation to the Global South. This could perhaps be seen as an interesting movement inwards, an introspective look that accidentally highlights the cultural legacy of colonialism.

It is important to emphasize that digitization doesn't take away the physical elements of a certain culture. It just makes a copies of it, which can be reframed independently from the way the originals are interpreted in specific collections to hopefully create new readings and understandings, or as with Google Cultural Institute, use these copies to strengthen the cultural authority sought by certain institutions. As an example, let's take The British Museum, the colonial museum par excellence,

which is described in the GCI as “the collection of every citizen of the world” and “the most comprehensive survey in existence of the material culture of humanity.”³¹ What happens when The British Museum is digitized by Google?

Is it a re-colonization? Or is it a decolonization followed by a techno-colonization?

V.

The relation between Paul Otlet, the Mundaneum, the city of Mons, and Google was non-existent until the arrival of a data centre in the city of Saint Ghislain, right next to the current Mundaneum archive centre. Elio di Rupo, former prime minister of Belgium and chairman of the Socialist party, was in charge of the relocation of the Otlet archive from Brussels to Mons, as well as the agreement between Google and the Mundaneum Archive Centre, signed in 2013, based on future opportunities for that region.

In a press release from 20 March 2014, posted by William Echikson, Head of Community Relations, Europe, Google expressed its plans to support the city of Mons during their role as European Capital of Culture in 2015: “One of Google’s two major European data centers is located just down the road from the city, making us a major local investor and employer. It is only natural that we want to help put some sparkle into the city’s ambitious capital of culture plans.”³² Those plans include the digitization of architectural *treasures* using their Street View cars and trikes, as well as

There is an app of the Mundaneum in the Google App store, as well as an exhibition in the Google Cultural Institute. I scroll around. “Brussels, Belgium, Europe, 1895: two men shared a dream of ‘indexing and classifying the world’s information.’ Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine’s work foreshadowed the network of knowledge that a century later became the Internet with its search engines! Otlet and La Fontaine aimed to preserve peace by assembling knowledge and making it accessible to the entire world. They built an international documentation center called Mundaneum. They invented the modern library Universal Decimal Classification system. La Fontaine won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1913. By 1935, their Mundaneum grew to a staggering 16 million cards covering subjects ranging from the history of hunting dogs to finance! World War II and the death of both founders slowed down the project. Although many Mundaneum archives were stored away, some even in the Brussels subway, volunteers kept the dream alive. The French community government of Belgium brought most of the archives to a beautiful Art Deco building in the heart of Mons near Brussels.”³² There are some accompanying pictures.

32 <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/mundaneum>

support for the Mundaneum and their planned exhibition “Mapping Knowledge.”

Snelting has been following the relation between the city of Mons and Google in relation to the legacy of Paul Otlet: “From the side of the Mundaneum, there has been a lot of work in pursuing or even staging the story that ‘Otlet invented the Internet’ and, subsequently, that ‘Otlet was the visionary inventor of Google’.”³⁴ In their own press release, Google clearly communicates its own narrative: “Together, we are bringing high-level speakers to the city to explore Internet issues. Our own chief Internet evangelist and ‘father of the Internet’ Vint Cerf recently visited and presented his vision of the future to a packed audience at the city’s 600-seat Manege Theater.”³⁵

Snelting also points out that the Google Cultural Institute section on the Mundaneum is published under their own URL, “maintaining the draconian terms and conditions of Google and erasing all sense of distance between the public and the commercial ‘institute’: <http://digitalarchives.mundaneum.org>. As far as I know, the Mundaneum does not make any other efforts to publish digital documents online elsewhere. Well, on YouTube and Facebook, of course.”³⁶ It is not clear if the GCI contributes money to the Mundaneum. According to Snelting, it all seems to be a case of exposure and “communication opportunities” solicited by the Mundaneum itself. However, the intervention of Google in cultural politics comes at a time when cultural institutions are short on funding and have to deal with the economic and access demands of a networked culture.

If Google bankrolls the digitization process, public institutions do not need to rely on public money. This pathological relation is also the core tenant of *welfare capitalism*, “where people are referred to corporations rather than states for such services as they receive; where corporate capital routinely arrogates to itself the right to broker public discourse; and where history and art remain saturated with the preferences and priorities of elite social classes.”³⁷

The exhibition is vertical, though still a feed; however, it feels more like a PowerPoint.

VI.

In the images of the GCI, every pixel is charged with meaning. But wasn't this what museums have been doing forever? Charging each material quality of an object with a meaning determined by a certain context? No matter its resolution, information is a different version of the thing it represents; objects in museums are different from the digital copies of them, but a dematerialized art object, as Hito Steyerl tell us, "turns out to be perfectly adapted to the semioticization of capital, and thus to the conceptual turn of capitalism."³⁸ According to Google, such images contain around seven billion pixels that "enable the viewer to study details of the brushwork and patina beyond that possible with the naked eye. Hard to see details suddenly become clear, such as the tiny Latin couplet which appears in Hans Holbein the Younger's 'The Merchant Georg Gisze.' Or the people hidden behind the tree in Ivanov's 'The Apparition of Christ to the People'."³⁹

I search for "gigapixel" in the Google Cultural Institute. There are 155 images available in gigapixel quality, that is, bitmap images composed of a billion pixels. Another search: "gigapixel, Indonesia." No results. Clear all Refinements. I start exploring, scrolling, clicking on Manet's *In the Conservatory* (1879). I zoom to the limit. It may very well be the case that I can discover much more about a picture in ultra high-resolution brush pixels than from one meter away behind a bouncer. Granted. The details on the cracks are pretty neat, but half of the eye area in the man's face I am exploring is pixelated. It might be my Firefox. I switch to Chrome. Same error. All the images available in gigapixels represent the so-called "canon." High resolution for high culture, gigapixels as the gateway to these *masterpieces, gems, and national treasures.*

This also makes it possible to identify errors in the mosaic that compose gigapixel images, a find which can be considered positive as it helps us to understand the material basis that sustain the narrative around high-resolution culture. On the one hand, this narrative divides art from technology through the material process of digitization—which relies on energy, light, photographic equipment, dead and human labour; on the other hand, it insists on the "great things" that happen where art—as digital copies—and (information) technology—as database—meet.

"The digital is a regime of energies: human energy and the energy needed for technological machines."⁴⁰ For this, we must consider that encoding information—digitizing, archiving—is

not an activity that takes place in a distant future, since “it produces as much as it records,” as Derrida once told us⁴¹; it is a present and continuous task, as well as mundane and repetitive labour, far away from preservationist ideas of culture. And one that in the case of Google will go on forever, since the mission of organizing and archiving the “world’s information” will never be completed. Now, the words of Friedrich Kittler resonate: “All these immense flows of modern media ... can be reduced to two numbers, zero and one, [...] and we can digitalize [...] paintings, and movies and symphonies, and pop songs, and the rest of the forms of yesterday and tomorrow, and tsunamis, and what else. Everything which is beautiful can be encoded [...] but it does not make sense to encode for eternity.”⁴²

VII.

In France, an acronym is used to describe the “American cultural imperialism” fuelled by Silicon Valley: GAFA (Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple).⁴⁴ The Palace of Versailles and the Musée d’Orsay were among the first institutions to join the Art Project. The Google Cultural Center Headquarters in Paris was inaugurated on 10 December 2013, though the highlight was the last-minute cancellation of an appearance by Aurélie Filippetti, the former French Culture Minister.⁴⁵

On the jobs page at google.com, the French headquarters is described as “a brand-new office in a renovated *hôtel particulier* on the Rue de Londres. We enjoy the same Googleyness you get in Mountain View—check out the giant cow in the courtyard—but with distinctly Parisian touches like wine and cheese for TGIF meetings, a Citroën deux chevaux-turned-

I searched for videos related to the Google Cultural Institute to discover more about its history. I had to go to YouTube. There is a “behind the scenes” of the Art Project: images of cities like Paris, Mexico City, Vienna, and their museums. Two men sitting at a table with computers command the gigapixel camera. There are ladders and scaffolds. Impressive and professional illumination sets. Assistants unfolding works for the Google gaze. Dollies and tripods. The video also shows the trolley that creates the 3D spaces of the museums. The time lapse conveys dynamism. Activity. There are no visitors around this activity. The digitization process seems to be an activity isolated from the public. I imagine this spectacular process may well happen at night, when the museum is ironically *empty*. There is also a video about the Google offices in France entitled “Inside Google Paris.”⁴³ A man is very happy about the meaning of the institute as a long-term

phone booth and a cafeteria nicknamed Les Deux Algos (short for algorithms).”⁴⁶

Paris is also the capital of the first country in Europe that launched an offensive against “googleyness” by proposing a greater taxation on search engines. While Sarkozy’s arguments were extremely nationalistic and reactionary, of importance is the reaction by Google, who appealed to that same sentiment of cultural nationalism in order to sustain their economic expansion of the company by invoking “culture as data.”⁴⁷

In Wallace’s time, a similar transformation occurred: “In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “Nature” is increasingly replaced by “Natural Resource,” focusing on those aspects of nature that can be appropriated by human use—on a large, industrial scale.”⁴⁸ For Google, too, culture is a material that can be replaced by the notion of data.

Nature turned into Culture turned into Data.

VIII.

Free access to information is a good principle, but it will always require us to understand the contemporary conditions, meanings, and different contexts under which “free access” takes place—as well as its limitations. Access to information is not much without making collective sense of it. As Jussi Parikka reminds us, “Freedom, communication and the intelligence of the crowds—direct democracy—are such lovely aims that no one expects a horrible dictator would dare to object but at the same the actual technologies and techniques that sustain those ideas are more complex.”⁵⁰

The context of the GCI is very

investment in France. Employers praise the free food, especially the tea. A close-up of a table with different kinds of cheeses. You hear both French and English. “It really is an international environment,” someone says.

I can't save the images of the Google Cultural Institute, but only re-organize them within their interface to create “galleries.” A disclaimer is displayed in the beginning of a gallery made by a peasant user: “This user gallery has been created by an independent third party and may not always represent the views of the institutions, listed below, who have supplied the content.” I don't want to make a gallery inside the Google Cultural Institute, I want to make my own collection. I want to save the images, print them, and create a copy of the information. I will print my own labels. I've been exploring some options, and I need to Wget, which is a command line

complex—institutional and corporate, public and private, planetary and local. Given the proportions of its political, economic, and now cultural agenda, it also generates many grey zones. In between the “free” and the “access” there is a space, a grey zone for action, a place to “remind institutions,” as Femke Snelting emphasizes, “of their own potential. To imagine that institutions, infrastructures, practices of archiving, and the materiality of the documents themselves might act differently.”⁵¹ It is a grey zone “between the private sphere and the public sphere” that requires communities to engage with “a common selection, indexing, re-situation and actualization.”⁵²

At the moment, the Google Cultural Institute still follows the Eurocentric logic that gave birth to the nineteenth-century museum. Does “free access” make the GCI a critical public institution? Perhaps it is more relevant to ask: Would a publically funded institution that gives its visitors the same “free access” granted by the GCI be more critical? A possible answer, as well as a remaining problem we still face, is “abundance, not scarcity. What counts in the end is action, not access.”⁵³ Similarly, the Spanish philosopher and curator Paul B. Preciado has questioned how a museum can act not “as colonial technology but as a critical and reflective apparatus proposing other ways of managing the archives, other forms of representation, other world-fictions.”⁵⁴

Institutional museum culture never decolonized itself; it just globalized, and is now Googlified.

Who will colonize the colonizers?

Who will loot the looters?

used to get stuff down from the world-wide-web.⁴⁹ I asked a friend to help me sort it out. I copied the HTML source. It is huge, approximately 65,000 lines. I manually removed everything that was not useful for me, until there were left about 100 sections each containing five lines. In them was the Title, Date, Location, Parter and Image Url. This is enough to create the labels of my collection. Save file: Indonesia.Txt. Then, I run a command line in my terminal: `wget -i indonesia.txt`. Maybe I need some other options: `wget -content-disposition -trust-server-names -i indonesia.txt`.

Something like this: <https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/61132/how-do-i-use-wget-with-a-list-of-urls-and-their-corresponding-output-files>.

IX.

Hierarchies always exist in culture. In the Google Cultural Institute, museums are “partners” with different hierarchies. The more access you give to its team, the more data the museum will have in its database, the more “visible” it will be: “Power solicits communication. [...] In communicative capitalism, images and signs acquire value and/or power by means to be seen.”⁵⁶

Many have made comparisons between the Google Cultural Institute and art theorist André Malraux’s *Le musée imaginaire*, based on the fact that the capabilities of image reproduction shape the visual elements that define our understanding of art. The colonial impulse that often attends archival practices was also present in Malraux’s *Musée imaginaire*. Much like Google, Malraux used photography techniques, as well as biased selection and post-production processes, to capture reproductions that stripped the resulting images from their contexts in order to compare them by direct juxtaposition. For, in the mind of Malraux, “the great work of art belongs to history, but it does not belong to history alone.”⁵⁷ One could be lazy and easily imagine Malraux excited about the Google Culture Institute.

Looking back from the present, the *Musée imaginaire* could also be seen as a grey zone—almost literally—between the nineteenth-century colonial museum and the twenty-first-century techno-determinist Google Cultural Institute: it was not an institutional collection but neither was it a

While comparing my indonesia.txt file with the information on the Google Cultural Institute, some words related to certain objects from the Museum Nasional di Indonesia—like *kris*⁵⁵ begin to become more familiar, as do their images. I note too that many of the images were created by “Unknown.” Some of them have no specific date in their description. The images have good resolution, but no gigapixels for peasant users like me. I opened all the images in Photoshop, erased the background and resized them to fit the archival labels I bought in *OfficeMax*. I organized them into different sheets to print all ten of them at once. I then printed the images, cut them, glued them. I also compared the text file with the GCI content, before printing the tables I prepared in *OpenOffice*. Check again, and again, I only have so many labels. I organized them in the same order as the interface shows them to me in the Google Cultural Institute. I copied the collection. I am working with it. No more scrolling. Some colour palettes start to emerge, the statues have a distinct grey. Other statues are made of wood; the forms of these objects are more linear, dominated by a reddish wood tone. My favourite object is this beautiful water dipper in the form of a shell, made of gold. When you stop scrolling, you start to learn. I already assigned hierarchies: the shell vessel, the Rangda mask, and the Jambhala statue. These are my favourite images from the collection of the Museum Nasional di Indonesia.

database; copies were used, yet they were not digital. But mostly, Malraux's "museum without walls" was indeed imaginary, without built architecture, without terms of service, without an interface, and free of marketing and branding.

Let alone stored in a data-centre owned by a Silicon Valley company.

X.

I found a small grey zone in between the archives and the networks, the peripheries and the centres, culture and data, the Google Cultural Institute and the Museum Nasional di Indonesia, Alfred Russel Wallace and Google, México and Sweden, information and technology, the Eurocene and the technocene and the distance between you and me. I am a peasant user and this is my imaginary collection, a strategy for turning the techno-colonial archive against itself.

Intercolonial Technogalactic.
Organizing information is never innocent.

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