Geography and the-world-as-a-digital-exhibition at the Google Cultural Institute.

"Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imagings." —Edward Said

"Explore stories from around the world" —Google Arts & Culture

G is for Geography

Geraldine Juárez

Soon after the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, the Iraqi National Museum found itself in the middle of the battleground in Baghdad. The exact dates, sequence and unfolding of events and even the actual number of pieces looted from the National Museum of Iraq between April 8th and 11th of 2003, were subject to much controversy and media frenzy. On April 13th, reports emerged claiming as many as 170,000 objects missing from the galleries, restoration and storage rooms of the museum. The number was eventually brought down to 15,000 artefacts, after some were found in secret vaults where objects had been moved in the weeks preceding the invasion and others were returned through an amnesty program.[1]

Different accounts of the event point fingers at the U.S troops' negligence, the Iraqi militias, other times to the own museum's staff and also, to the institutional failure of the U.S. to protect the museum and other sites before the attack. War under the moniker of liberation is misleading in many ways. As Dario Gamboni describes, cultural heritage acts an ambulance that follows an army and tries to precede it. [2]

The idea of heritage is one decidedly oriented to the formation and preservation of national identity, the concept emerged partly from the destruction encouraged by "colonialism, ethnology, and the development of museums" and the "selective preservation, and the appropriation and concentration in the West of relics from the material culture of the whole world."[3] However, the modern idea of cultural heritage also tries to include the concept that certain traces of human culture are *universal* and therefore, belong to all

of *mankind*. As a result of this, the *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954* was the first official document setting the rules for protection of the world's cultural heritage such as sites, monuments and repositories, including museums, libraries and archives. Since then, policy, studies and related institutions have continued to emerge and expand, often supported by public-private partnerships.[4]

Soon after the international outrage generated by the looting of the National Museum of Iraq, the British Museum and the Penn Museum mobilised to update and match their records in order to catalogue the existing cultural heritage, as some of the inventories located in Iraq were also damaged, destroyed or lost. In 1922, both museums had funded archaeologist Charles Leonard Woolley to conduct excavations in the city of Ur in Iraq. The agreement regulating the destiny of the collected objects stated that "half of the artefacts recovered would go to the future Iraq National Museum, and the other half would be divided between London and Philadelphia."[5] The resulting online catalogue is available at ur-online.org.

The Getty Cultural Institute was also involved in the recovery efforts by developing a geographic information system (GIS) intended for the management of archaeological sites.[6] Other projects include the less corporate (and less successful) *Virtual Museum of Iraq*, a "multimedia exhibition" created by the National Research Council of Italy with the once hip Flash technology.

On November 24th, 2009, Google CEO Eric Schmidt visited the National Museum of Iraq. He announced: *'There is not better use for our time and resources than make the images and ideas of your civilisation […] available to a billion people worldwide'.*

Link to video

He also took the time to pledge for the return of the objects that remained missing, in the same frenzy fashion that news media has used six years before him. Jared Cohen, a former U.S diplomat now working for Google Ideas, defended the move calling it a great example of "what we are calling 21st century statecraft".[7]

Much like the empty promises of democratisation that aided and accelerated the concentration of power and capital in Silicon Valley, the only thing close to what Schmidt promised is the Google Street View mapping of the National Museum of Iraq, which is only accessible through Google Maps.

Today, as the Google Cultural Institute expands at inscrutable speed, there is simply no *partnership* with the National Museum of Iraq listed in their Google Arts & Culture aggregator, nor thousands of images related to their collection available to a billion people worldwide. The only reproductions included are related to Woolley's

excavations and they are presented as assets of The British Museum collection.[8]

The National Museum of Iraq re-opened in 2015 in response to the spectacular video of ISIS smashing sculptures; although versions of the events differ, there is some agreement on the fact that the objects destroyed were mostly copies[9]. The website of the National Museum of Iraq provided by Google Search redirects to a Facebook page. Their own domain, theiraquimuseum.com, contains minimal information and, instead of thousands of images digitised by Google, there are seventeen images in a single low-resolution .jpg file[10] without any information or context.

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Google was only 10 years old when Schmidt visited Iraq in 2009. The Financial Crisis meltdown had started just a year before. The enthusiasm of the imagination[11] produced by such an infrastructure as the internet, might not have been as lively as when it kicked off on a global scale in 2001, but the imaginary of all digital things and solutions was at its peak. Hope as a solution to the crisis and a reburgeoning, of the economy was placed in the revamping of the service economy, thanks to the explosion of mobile devices and a more ruthless networked economy that was about to take off. Why not use art, history and cultural heritage to mobilise the imaginary of digitisation and its urgency?

The political effect created by the imaginary of digital preservation of cultural heritage following the looting from the National Museum of Iraq proved to be powerful regardless of the different degrees of success. In the same way that today the efforts for the protection of Palmyra and the cultural heritage endangered by the war in Syria are focused on 3D printing and drones, it should not be surprising that the focus was placed on digitisation and web access to collections and catalogs in the case of Iraq. It was simply where the new economic horizon, which included the cultural sector, was being traced.

Museums, especially the super brands among them, are not new at trying, using and discarding web technologies as marketing and exhibition tools to attract audiences to their buildings, exhibitions and ticket offices. Just for perspective, the first Tate website was launched in 1998, soon after the museum received a grant to digitise their entire collection under a program called *Insight*, creating "virtual" access to the entire collection. Tate Online was developed as a product of the first British Petroleum sponsorship in 2001. Two years later, BP donated two million pounds to further support digitisation.[12]

In April 2000, MoMa and The Tate announced *Muse*[13]. *"New Company Will Draw on Museums' Unrivaled Collections and Intellectual Capital to Expand Global Audience for Modern Art, Design, and Culture. Dot.com is the First Project in Wider Collaboration."* The joint business venture – which sounds strikingly similar to Artsy.com – was never in fact realised. As Hito Steyerl argues, one thing that internet access actually democratised is

the neoliberal view of the cultural institution as primarily an economic one.[14]

Reacting to the momatate.com announcement, Douglas Davis –author of "The World's First Collaborative Sentence", regarded as one of the first pieces of net art accessioned by a major museum – wrote for The New York Times a survey about the state of the "virtual" versions of museums populating the web.[15] His account – very hopeful about the imagined radical potential of the web – used research conducted with "Yahoo, the popular search engine". He found 5000 museums online and visited hundreds of websites already collecting net art, like "The Whitney, the Modern, the Walker". The Hermitage was using a "nifty 3-D camera, courtesy of IBM, that lets us zoom in on a fine microscopic level to an exceptional art-historical smorgasbord, a tool lately matched by the Met, whose zoom feature, a digital camera in combination with FlashPix software, is quick and razor-sharp". In the Fogg Museum, you were able to "X-ray a masterful 16th-century 'Portrait of a Man', wielding your browser to peel away the surface coating and find the anonymous 1540 master daubing, marking, erasing, perfecting his man."

Around the same time, Andrea Fraser wrote *'A museum is not a business. It is run in a businesslike fashion'*[16], an essay about how institutional critique and reflexivity aided the legitimisation of the *new, bigger and better* corporate museum: one that over-emphasises educational activities, useful forms of art, audience outreach, social forms of engagement beyond the exhibition, and other activities that assume
that *social plus change* equals political emancipation. Invoking these strategies while embracing extreme forms of administrative curating and organisational management results not only in leaving institutional structures intact, but actually serves to reinforce them.

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Two years after Schmidt's visit to Iraq, Google published a press release announcing a new project: *"Explore museums and great works of art*

with the Google Art Project".[17]

The Google Art Project was presented as the result of a project by some "googlers" – meaning employees in Silicon Valley lingo –, who use 20% of their paid working time in a side project, in this case the digitisation of art collections. Since then, hundreds of museums, cultural and memory institutions with a focus on art, archaeology, natural history and material culture including fashion, as well as performing arts venues have partnered with the Google Cultural Institute to make use of its free services and technical possibilities, such as: the *Art Camera* to capture works in ultra high-resolution; a *Street View* cart to create 360 degrees virtual tours of the architecture of museums or custom exhibitions; a *Collection Management System* with unlimited storage of assets, publication of exhibits and access to *statistics*; *Storytelling Tools and Platforms* to add different types of media and to *curate exhibitions*, meaning adding content to the pages on which the collections are presented.

As the economic and political power of Alphabet Inc. keeps growing, Google's cultural agenda does too, hence the tone and mission need to be carefully calibrated. First, the name of the website changed from Google Art Project to the Google Cultural Institute. After opening their offices in Paris in 2013, a distinction was established between their offices and "The Lab". Recently, the website was rebranded as Google Arts & Culture, an umbrella project under the Google Cultural Institute at large.

Their slogan began by inviting users to "Explore Art, Historic Moments and World Wonders" and quietly shifted to "Explore stories and collections from around the world". By now it is just: "Explore stories from around the world". Since the recent aggregation of fashion collections, the Google Cultural Institute has signalled a new stage focused on storytelling.[18] Their new editorial features, such as *'The Real Meaning Behind Taylor Swift's 💪 From ancient Mesopotamian fertility myths to feminist art'*[19] and *'The Surprising History of Dragons. Before Game of Thrones, there were these South Asian and the Middle Eastern monsters'*[20], simply frame U.S. American culture in relation to cultural heritage narratives and use the visual material collected from their partner institutions as illustrations and source material for edutainment videos.

Link to video

The emphasis on publishing tools means that the distribution of a museum's content increases the traffic to their sites via the custom apps offered as part of the services bankrolled by the Google Cultural Institute, but also feeds the content offered in Google products like the Chrome browser, which display "masterpieces from Google Cultural Institute as your wallpaper".[21]

Where does Google end and the Google Cultural Institute begin? As a Google project manager affirms, the material they collect stays "ring-fenced" in their site: "as a non-profit, we have to keep it quite separate from the rest of Google. We are also applying some of the things we're working on with machine learning to this rich new set of content. But it has to stay within the safe space of Google Arts & Culture." [22]

However, as their VR business takes off (recently Google was referred to as the Adobe of VR[23]), the offering to museums relies more and more on 360° experiences using their Google Cardboard. While their machine learning and artificial intelligence divisions are also expanding, promotion is given to the experiments conducted in "The Lab", where computational power and programmers' skills (their "creative coders") are used to generate visualisations and find different ways of classifying massive amounts of images and metadata. As 20 million users know now, their cultural mission also includes a feature to match

selfies with the data accrued from museums so their users can find their "art twin".[26]

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The decision to locate Google's offices in France seems very calculated given the Sarkozy's nationalistic reaction to Google Books in 2009[26]. Google's legal problems in Europe became more serious than copyright infringement lawsuits when Germany found illegal data collection in the Street View's mapping process. By 2013, the European Commission was already investigating their anti-trust practices in relation to their dominance in the search market, as well as the manipulation of the results offered in their shopping recommendation service.

Recently, Google was hit with a symbolic €2.4 billion fine, as the commission concluded the illegality of their activities. Alphabet Inc., of course, claims innocence, Amit Sood asks us to close our eyes and imagine that the Google Cultural Institute has nothing to do with Google and just think of it as "culture and art". We must understand this is not a top-down strategy of Google to digitise the cultural world.

However, organising information is never innocent, and fortunately, a spokesperson from the company clearly explained the genesis of the project for the Financial Times on 2012:

"It is clear that the internet is disruptive to many traditional content industries, and that culture is a particularly sensitive topic in many areas of Europe. We had publishers who were suing us in France and we needed to reach out and invest in Europe, and invest in European culture, in order to change that perception and establish constructive working relations".[27]

The choice of Paris as the headquarters of the Google Cultural Institute, and the corporate over-identification with French waltz and camembert cheese clichés, was not accidental.

Link to video

Alphabet Inc. projects its ambition into an exhausted European modernity to find a narrative beyond Silicon Valley, a story able to give a specific kind of cultural relevance to their endless data gobbling. Their search for narrative is manifested in their association with the Mundaneum and the legacy of Paul Otlet, credited as the father of the field of information science. Otlet was an entrepreneur of information, much like Bryn and Page were once before turning into moguls, but the re-presentation and re-framing of 'The Origins of the Internet in Europe 1895-2013'[28] in Google Arts & Culture conveniently omits important political and economic context within that timeline. As Femke Snelting remarks: "There might be a superficial visual resemblance between rows of wooden index drawers and the blinking lights of servers lined up in a data centre, but to conflate the Utopian knowledge project with the capitalist mission of Alphabet Inc., the umbrella company that Google belongs to, is an altogether different matter".[29]

In 2009, months after Schmidt visited Iraq, Le Monde Magazine published a feature titled 'Le Mundaneum, Google de Papier'[30]. Later in 2012, Elio di Rupo, former prime minister of Belgium, announced a collaboration between the Mundaneum and Google, citing Le Monde's article as context. Saint-Ghislain, the town near Mons where the Mundaneum was relocated, is also the location of a large Google data-centre, negotiated by the same Di Rupo[31].

In her research related to the 'Fathers of the Internet'[32] which later expanded into a collective

research project under the moniker of Mondothèque, Femke Snelting traces the geopolitical context behind the re-branding of Paul Otlet as a 'founding father of the Internet', which attracted international attention to Otlet's legacy, and at the same time made possible the association of Vint Cerf with a historical timeline of patriarchs of the internet and the permission to digitise and publish documents from the Mudaneum's archive in their cultural aggregator. All of this occurred at a time when the city of Mons was getting ready for its stint as European City of Culture in 2015, an event that captures the neoliberal instrumentalisation of culture for tourism while offering a showcase for national cultures.

Again, geography is not about soldiers and cannons, it is also about narratives merging data-centres and national heritage, "where geographically situated histories are turned into advertising slogans, and cultural infrastructures pushed into the hands of global corporations."[33]

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Cultural institutions have experimented with many transformations regarding their own understanding of their roles and missions, which originated in Colonialism, but they have never, ever, overcome their alliance with the rich and powerful. Elites, in fact, created the museum institution during Colonialism and did so not by mere chance, deciding to open the doors to the public as part of the imperial strategy to conform the European identity. Colonisation without archives, knowledge systems, cultural heritage and museums would be regarded as a purely military affair, a barbaric enterprise.

Derek Gregory's work on the concept of the world-as-an-exhibition – following the Tony Mitchell's account of the European World Exhibitions in the 19th century and the construction of 'the Other' as way of affirming own superior identity[34] –, offers a geographical framework to understand how the Google Cultural Institute produces a specific version of the world by seeking detail, organization and exploration.

As Davis' survey shows, museums and cultural

institution had for a while been toying with web technologies and gadgetry for exhibition making. As much as Google is seeking to portray itself as innovative, their gaze into the past reveals how the technologies offered to museums are nothing but a more advanced version of techniques used in the World Exhibitions, such as the panorama and the narrative and spatial techniques associated with it, as in the case of 3D Street View for museums: an example of what Gregory identified as the evolution from gazing at the *world-as-exhibition* to travelling through the *world-as-an-exhibition*.

Alphabet's political and economical power is based on the accumulation and organisation of data. Imaging the world *as-a-digital-exhibition* is their way to frame, organise and spatialize it as mere data-set. For the Google Cultural Institute, the world itself is *something other* that needs to be synthesized in data form, and just like during the 19th century, it is presented as an *endless exhibition*.[35]

The services of the Google Cultural Institute are nostalgic impulses replaying what Ravi Sundaram calls the "monumental dream-like wonder of industrial reality"[36] of the 19th century world's exhibitions. The same is true for the Google Cardboard 360° views, dioramas created for a passive observer, who in the words of Crary is simultaneously the magician and the deceived[37]. The form of the dream-like wonder aspect is different – computational –, but the established relation remains intact.

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The implications and effects of the activities of the Google Cultural Institute have been addressed in different ways. Positive views are promoted by the beneficiaries of their services, their chief *evangelist* Vint Cerf and their director, Amit Sood (described in Swedish news media as the *curator of the world*).[38] TED talks, press releases, promotional videos and interviews repeating the byliners of the Google Cultural Institute's PR are abundant.

In contrast, positions countering tailored narratives

around *digital heritage* and democratisation of *high-culture* used for promoting the cultural agenda of Alphabet are more scarce. Notable scholarly work such as *'Evangelizing the 'Gallery of the Future': a Critical Analysis of the Google Art Project Narrative and its Political, Cultural and Technological Stakes'*, by Alana Bayer and *'Googling Art: museum collections in the Google Art Project'* by Alexandra Lussier-Craig, offer a perspective from the angle of museum studies and valuable contributions regarding the examination of the representation of historic canons through data and the way in which museums internalise the corporate language of the press releases of the Google and its cultural institute.

Some institutions have featured projects about Google's cultural agenda, but a critical position has never been addressed institutionally. In 2013, the Intellectual Property Manager of the Art Institute of Chicago recognised that in their partnership with the Google Cultural Institute, "Google's strictly enforced confidentiality agreement. […] They are a large company and they are aware of their bargaining power."[39] The fact that Google uses non-disclosure agreements to broker partnerships with museums is widely acknowledged by curators and administrators who *just can't tell you*. Institutional criticality does have limits. As Marina Vishmidt explains in *The Cultural Logic of Criticality'*, it is just a very effective strategy to make sure things stay the same while remaining open to multiple opportunities for business.[40]

Being the promotion of attendance to museums to see the *real thing* one of the most repeated byliners of the Google Cultural Institute to prove their point, it is interesting to find statistics about the on-going decline of attendance at the same time that Google is hailed as a power house of cultural content. The alliance with the British Museum and Google, is not only the most telling regarding the historical continuum in the imperialist organization of cultural material, but one of the most publicised as a successful case. Google even has its own branded space under the domain of the British Museum.[41]

Statistics are a game that museums decided to join a while ago, a game that Google knows, exploits and profit from. Within the rules of this game, for

instance, the British government indicates a decrease of 5.1 percent in the attendance to public funded museums from 2016 to 2017.[42] Last year, Louvre reported 15 percent less attendance than in 2015 and the German governement reported a 2.5 million drop in attendance to their museums.

Public memory institutions by mandate need to account for the funding received to perform institutional duties regarding the accumulation of artefacts and other types of records, including their own history. In contrast, the Google Cultural Institute does not have this requirement nor do the archives record their institutionality: instead, they have an "About" section on their website. The interface of Google Arts & Culture is central to conveying the merely performative institutionality of the Google Cultural Institute and an interface will always fail at communicating the context of the information it displays, in other words: its history.

So how does one enact a critique addressing the convergence of the ambiguous legacy of institutional critique and new institutionalism with the different iterations of web-museality and related networked marketing anxieties provoked by cultural policies conflating tourism and entertainment industries that normalised public-private partnerships – that which set the conditions for Google to apply their data extractivism disguised as the Google Cultural Institute?

Critics and artists have responded to the Google Cultural Institute in different ways. Jon Rafman fed back a remediation of giga-pixel reproductions provided by a partner museum of the Google Cultural Institute on the Google Arts & Culture website[43]. Erica Love and João Enxuto[44] capture the current anxieties of web-museality and speculates on the aftermath of the public-private partnerships, when Google finally takes over with all the assets accumulated through the Google Art Project to perform a function reserved to institutions formerly known as public. Rasmus Fleischer's review of Google's *'Digital Revolution'* exhibition[45] and his writing on the production of hegemonic culture under the search logic identifies the cultural heritage activities of Alphabet Inc. as a central part of their corporate image that is both evaded and promoted as it fits[46]. Building on *'Powered By Google. Widening Access and Tightening Corporate Control'* by Dan Schiller and Shinjoung Yeo, the first account of the

political economy behind the cultural agenda of Google, I myself have worked on assembling a pre-emptive history of the Google Cultural Institute and the way their colonial impulses manifest in techno-scientific capitalism.[47]

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Museums and collections are the result of the convergence of scientific and economic desires configuring the colonial impulse. In the text *'On a Possible Passing from the Digital to the Symbolic'*, Yuk Hui reminds us that the melancholic impulses of modernity together with the need to preserve collective memories gave us both museums and collections, but also the digital tools to preserve the symbolic through the digital, as in the case of "digital heritage".[48]

The result of a lack of plurality in mediation techniques is that technological systems end up acting as a "whole set-up always evoking somehow some larger truth."[49] Hui addresses the contradiction found in technology as the support for symbolic reproduction. Yet at the same time the speed with which de-symbolization and new specific efficiencies are produced increases in line with the ever greater efficiency of the technical systems of recollection. He asks, first, if all symbols can and should be reduced to a digital state; and second, which kind of sensibilities are needed to create a condition to pass from digital to the symbolic?

The technical possibilities of the Google Culture Institute define the way in which they perform their institutionality, how order, meaning and re-presentation is produced within their interface, as well as its relations with memory institutions convinced that they can "digitise the rest of the forms of yesterday and tomorrow, and tsunamis, and what else."[50]

"Do you believe the world of culture is organised?" And he said, *"No, I don't."* I said, *"Do you think it's accessible, then?" And he said, "Well, no, not really."*[51] In words of Amit Sood, these questions were asked to Eric Schmidt to get him behind the idea of the Google Cultural Institute. However,

organising the world's information and making it accessible, searchable, immersive and in high-resolution, is a task that will never be completed. As Kittler also said: everything which is beautiful can be encoded but it does not make sense to encode for eternity.

Imaging the world as something else than overflows of data digitally re-presenting *the world-as-an-exhibition* might be something that memory institutions have already given up to imagine. As the Google Cultural Institute shows, their museality and institutionality has been colonised by the culture-as-data sensibility and now is just up for grabs.

Breaking with the totalising form of the *world-as-a-digital-exhibition* will require an insistence on the demand for more plurality in the production of geographical sensibilities. Ideas, forms and imagings, and its preservation, will always involve technological interventions but the ones provided by the Google Culture Institute through its performative institutionality and technological gadgetry, should not be the dominant form. Rejecting their technical and financial favours is not impossible.

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