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A postdigital history of museum replicas: reclaiming the imitative, the illusory and the uncanny

For most of its history, a dominant empirical tradition in museums has equated ‘real’ with ‘original’, ‘authentic’ with ‘present’, and ‘trustworthy’ with ‘genuine’. And yet, another contrasting tradition (less acknowledged, but as old as the museum itself) has persistently enjoyed imitations as real objects, has embraced illusory spaces as authentic, and has allowed the uncanny to be trusted and to carry its own accuracy. This paper proposes that our modern postdigital condition (the condition of digital maturity and of digital embeddedness in thought and practice) has provided the means for this new perspective on the history of museum and collections to be seen. It is argued that our recent experience of digital (specifically our new sensibilities to and confidences with communications media) now enable us – finally - to notice (and to celebrate) this defining tradition of artifice in the museum.

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