

Carlos Foradada Baldellou y Pilar Irala-Hortal  
(Coords.)

RE\_VISIONES SOBRE  
ARTE, PATRIMONIO Y TECNOLOGÍA  
EN LA ERA DIGITAL



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GOBIERNO  
DE ARAGON



Carlos Foradada Baldellou y Pilar Irala-Hortal (coords.)

***Re\_Visiones sobre Arte, patrimonio  
y tecnología en la era digital***

IAACC Pablo Serrano

**Gobierno de Aragón**

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## 4.4. Mirrors and variations: from digitised portraits to derivative artworks

Helena Barranha<sup>1]</sup>



Noé Sendas, *Goya vs. Hopper*, from “The Collector” series, 2007. C-Print Photograph, 75cm x 75cm. Image: courtesy of the artist.

### 1. Introduction

*“Every face is a collage of faces. Every room of portraits is a room of mirrors. No face ever becomes stable, nor does it stabilise that image of the soul which tradition tells it to reflect”.*

*João Pinharanda (2007).*

In 2007, the Portuguese artist Noé Sendas presented “The Collector”, a solo exhibition in which he appropriated and recontextualised several self-portraits produced by artists, from the Renaissance to the second half of the twentieth century. Revealing a central theme in the artist’s oeuvre – the subjectivity of collecting – the series was inspired by a passage from Walter Benjamin’s *Arcade Project*: “The collector [...] brings together what belongs together; by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time, he can eventually furnish information about his objects” (Benjamin, 1940, p. 211).

The enigmatic double portraits created by Sendas are representative of his research and methodology: collecting pre-existing images and transforming them, through cutting, montage and digital manipu-

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lation, to compose ambivalent pictures that can be interpreted “as reproductions of artworks from museums, self-portraits of the artist or reflections of the spectator” (Barranha, 2013). Although these works are presented as digital photographic collages, Noé Sendas seldom uses pictures found on the Internet, preferring to produce his own images, either by photographing the original paintings displayed in museums or by scanning books, catalogues and postcards.

Talking about “The Collector”, Noé Sendas points out that this project “coincided with the beginning of Google as a research and work tool for an entire generation of artists” (Sendas, 2018) and he remembers that the first time he looked for “artists’ self-portraits” on Google, only 34 images appeared, while today there are thousands. Moreover, and interestingly enough, the results of the same search are currently not limited to digital reproductions of the original portraits exhibited in museums. In parallel to those digitisations, we may also find images of derivative projects inspired by, or based on, the pre-existing artworks. Nevertheless, in spite of the rhizomatic structure of the Web, original and derivative artworks are more often than not unconnected. But are these mirrored and reinvented images condemned to have independent circulations online?

## 2. Appropriation and digital cultures

Appropriation has always been an unavoidable question in art history, due not only to the long academic tradition of copying the work of the masters, but also to the modernist approach to originality, authenticity and authorship, questioning “the nature or definition of art itself” (Tate, 2018). After the ground-breaking experiments of the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, appropriation became equally central to Pop Art and attained the status of a specific artistic practice in the 1980s. More recently, with the development of digital cultures, image appropriation has adopted new methods and media, obtaining an unprecedented visibility and further blurring the boundaries between artistic and non-artistic practices.

Over the last three decades, the systematic digitisation of museum collections has greatly increased public access to high-quality reproductions of artworks from different periods and authors. Through institutional websites, the social media and common or collaborative platforms, such as Wikipedia, Google Arts & Culture and Europeana, museums now promote free and direct contact with cultural contents, and this inevitably paves the way for republications, reinterpretations and remixes. As Boris Groys (2016) observed, “The most interesting aspect of the internet as an archive is precisely the possibilities for decontextualisation and recontextualisation through the operations of cut and paste that the internet offers its users.”

Considering that the “modes of production employed by artists are often a reflection of the larger cultural *zeitgeist*” (Troemel, 2014, p. 42), it is not surprising that new forms of creative appropriation have been developed in the age of digital and networked cultures. This situation has reopened the modernist debate about authorship and also given rise to intense discussions about intellectual property and copyright protection, contributing to a legal definition of “derivative work”:

*A derivative work is a work based on or derived from one or more already existing works. Common derivative works include translations, musical arrangements, motion picture versions of literary material or plays, art reproductions, abridgments, and condensations of preexisting works. [...] To be copyrightable, a derivative work must incorporate some or all of a preexisting “work” and add new original copyrightable authorship to that work. (United States Copyright Office, 2013)*

Just like any other artistic creation, a derivative work presupposes a certain level of originality; otherwise it would not be distinguishable from a mere reproduction of one or more pre-existing works.



Originality therefore appears as the ultimate argument for recognition and attribution, regardless of whether the medium chosen by the artist is analogue or digital, tangible or intangible (Paluzie, 2015).

Although, in his influential essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin argued that the “changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura” (Benjamin, 1935, p. 222), digital cultures have demonstrated that the aura of an artwork may not necessarily depend on its physical presence in time and space. According to Grant Bollmer (2018, p. 162), “rather than aura being destroyed by mass production, we now demand aura all the time.” In fact, the pervasive online circulation of photographic reproductions has increased the value of authenticity and originality. While, on the one hand, mass consumption has led to a trivialisation of images, on the other hand, it has also triggered an inverse phenomenon of giving greater importance to the unique experience of being in contact with the original work, even when that contact is mediated by digital technologies, as often happens nowadays on visits to museums.

At the same time, digitisation facilitates the creation of new meanings and situations associated with a specific artwork, widening the range of possible interpretations and therefore enhancing the cultural relevance of derivative works. Nevertheless, many of these alternative narratives and artistic projects tend to remain outside the institutional spaces, including museum websites and other digital platforms.

### 3. Beyond the institutional space

The exponential growth in the reproductions of artworks available on the Web is undoubtedly a consequence of the huge investment that many museums around the world have made in digitising and disseminating their collections. However, today the online circulation of those images is also fuelled to a large extent by non-institutional agents. This trend is particularly evident if we search on Google for “artists’ self-portraits”: among the first results we find not only reproductions of masterpieces from museum collections, but also many images which correspond to republications or reconfigurations of those works on personal websites, blogs, video channels and social media profiles.

*With Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter’s emphasis on sharing, and the ease and speed of reblogging, images of artworks can travel as far and fast as an audience commands. Throughout this process, contextual information is divorced from the artwork. The name, title, and date are often the first data to get lost. Like a wheel’s tire, the image gets stripped of its own form through its continued use. This creates a peculiar, inverse reaction: the more famous an art image becomes, the less its author will be attributed. (Troemel, 2014, pp. 39-40).*

The lack or ambiguity of attribution is only one of the many questions raised by the segregation of images and data that occurs with the free online circulation of photographic reproductions, and this may affect both original and derivative artworks. Moreover, this new social and cultural dynamic undermines the institutional authority of museums. But are museums really prepared for, and interested in, mapping and analysing the ways in which their picture collections are being used by audiences and, more importantly, by contemporary artists? Are these institutions exploring the possibilities of building bridges between their heritage and independent derivative projects?

Apparently, the significant investment that museums have made in terms of digitising their collections and updating their communication strategies through digital platforms has rarely been accompanied by a comprehensive follow-up of the subsequent reuses and reinterpretations made of images and data made available on the Internet. Over the last few years, leading institutions and organisations, such as the Rijksmuseum and Europeana, have developed interesting initiatives with a view to promoting the creative appropriation of digitised artworks, without any copyright restrictions. Nevertheless, these

competitions and programmes were mainly geared towards educational purposes or towards the creation of design products, namely merchandising articles, and not so much towards contemporary artistic practices.

As Manuel Castells (2008) insightfully anticipated, within digital cultures creativity is intrinsically connected with the “capacity to reconfigure all configurations creating a new meaning in the different multilayers of the communication processes”. However, the author also warned that “transformation of creativity in our digital culture is limited and contradicted by cultural institutions that were born from the domestication and marketing of creativity and innovation during the Industrial Age” (Castells, 2008). This might explain why many museums have tended to favour the so-called “creative industries” in detriment to developing strategies aimed at mapping, referencing and incorporating derivative artworks into their collections and digital platforms.

The artistic appropriation of images from museum databases offers a vast and largely unexplored field for curatorial research. Furthermore, museums should consider developing a curatorial approach to online reinterpretations of their collections, selecting and adding links and references to their digital platforms as a way of effectively including the diversity of networked cultures in institutional discourses.

#### **4. Conclusion: mirrors and ambivalent portraits**

Going back to Noé Sendas’s project “The Collector”, it is curious to observe that even though the artist has not used images retrieved from the Internet, both the portraits he appropriated and his own derivative works are currently circulating online. Notwithstanding this common digital existence, the association between the original artworks and Noé Sendas’s dual portraits is difficult to discover through specific links. Taking the work *Goya vs. Hopper* as an example, it becomes clear that on the websites of the institutions that own the two pre-existing paintings – Goya Museum, Zaragoza, Spain and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York – there is no reference or link to any reinterpretations of the artworks. Conversely, it is also relevant to note that the same thing happens with the works from “The Collector” series which have been acquired by cultural institutions, such as the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT) in Lisbon. Here again, there is no online connection with the related paintings and the respective collections.

This lack of hyperlinks suggests that the two original paintings and the derivative portrait might have a parallel online circulation with virtually no points of intersection. However, the variable geometry of the Web frequently provides alternative ways to connect seemingly independent realities. Either through image recognition enabled by artificial intelligence or as a result of “the decisioning power of the Algorithm” (Pepi, 2011), the relationship between the three artworks is likely to emerge. As often happens with Google browsing, understanding the reasons behind the association of certain images requires further interest or knowledge on the part of the user. Assuming, as mentioned earlier, that image appropriation and circulation imply the gradual disappearance of contextual references, Noé Sendas provides minimal information about the pre-existing portraits in the titles and captions of his works.

If recognising is searching for meaning, all the portraits eventually reflect the observer’s intention to find similarities. By gathering online information about these autonomous yet related images, the observer engages with the artist’s process, adding new pieces to a visual and subjective puzzle and projecting his or her own image onto the digitised picture which, regardless of all possible reconfigurations, becomes the mirror of an unfinished and ambivalent portrait.

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