Digital restitution of expropriated heritage: technological modes of experience

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For more than a century now, Western museological institutions have been exhibiting expropriated heritage across their museum spaces, curating displays which conveyed prescriptive epistemic paradigms, informed by a rigidly imposed notion of primitive aesthetic. As the restitution of physical heritage is at the center of the international political debate, both museums and artists have started to employ digital technologies to engage with the looted heritage, envisioning new paths for access and experience, through projects which aspire to question traditional narratives. Interestingly, digital technologies offer the opportunity to mobilize a very rigid state of affairs, overcoming diplomatic stances and shifting the debate towards questions of identity, values and aesthetics. This paper intercepts the digital repatriation phenomenon, analyzing two case studies which relate to the Benin Bronzes: the international cooperative institutional programme *Digital Benin* and the AI generated work *Igùn* (2020) by artist Minne Atairu. These two projects, in their own media specific ways, create new modes of experience to interact with the Benin Kingdom heritage, operating at the intersection between research, display, creativity and meaning making. As the digital restitution debate becomes more and more pressing in the current scenario, the research offers an analysis of how digital technologies can be used to foster new paths to engage with expropriated heritage, overcoming rigid definitions of knowledge.

Keywords: Digital Restitution, Benin Bronzes, Museums, Digital Technologies.

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«If history is a chronicle of change over time, then how does one tell a historical story for those who endure the *longue durée* of dispossession and the seemingly interminable and unalleviated condition of fungibility?»[1]

1. Digital repatriation and the possibility of new experiential canons

The expropriation of heritage from colonized countries to Western[2] cultural destinations is a historical and contemporary problem, affecting the nations responsible for the spoilage as well as the occupied communities. On the side of the occupied states, having been dispossessed of cultural artifacts entailed being deprived of the possibility of building a personal relationship with one's own heritage, hence compromising the development of identitarian and cultural stances. Wide communities have suffered, for decades, the absence of the material objects which held the binding values of their origins, which Polish museologist Krzysztof Pomian defines as the *invisible* identity of a group, acknowledged and materialized within a collection of objects[3]. The forced absence of the set of artifacts that could have embodied, cherished and made *visible* a shared identity impacted negatively

[1] S. Hartman, *Intimate history, radical narrative*, in "Journal of African Americal History", 106/1, 2021, p. 133.
[2] Through this article, 'Western' will be employed as a geographical yet also conceptual art historical category. This use does not deny the controversial nature of the binary distinction between 'Western' and 'non-Western' throughout the debates which will be referenced. On the contrary, it fully endorses the problematic complexity of this ideological historicised position and the power relations which it makes evident. These terms are hence employed with the awareness of their significance and weight. For an analysis of the use of this binary distinction in art historiography and criticism Cfr. P. Wood, *Display, Restitution and World Art History: The Case of the 'Benin Bronzes'*, in "Visual Culture in Britain", 13/1, 2012, pp. 117-118.
[3] K. Pomian, *L'Ordre du temps*, Gallimard, Paris 1984.

numerous communities, being deprived of the active possibility to engage with their material past and build, through this interaction, an identitarian continuity with their present and future.

The consequences of these spoilages, far from being set in the past, affect contemporary generations. As historian Enibokun Uzebu-Imarhiagbe argues[4], with reference to the artistic practice of contemporary casters in Benin, the opportunity to access the history of their practice in their ancestors' work would be an immensely valuable one, offering a perspective of unity within their craft across centuries. Instead, the entire collection of Benin Bronzes, almost 5.000 artifacts which were produced in Benin before the 1897 British invasion and then spoiled, are today scattered across more than 130 Western museums: they have become a fragmented heritage, accessible to few.

On the side of the colonizing powers, the charge of these actions, which were justified within value systems of previous generations and governments, is also a complex one to bear. The atrocity of collecting treasures in conquered territories, denounced originally by German jurist and philosopher Karl Heinrich Heydenreich, who recognized looting as a «crime against humanity»[5], instead of as a right of the occupying power – who was thought of as being entitled to deprive its victims of their spiritual nourishment – has been illegal since 1899. In that year, a «"Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land", was signed in the Hague by 24 sovereign nation-states to make the practice of pillaging and plundering of cultural artifacts during military campaigns an illicit act»[6]. However, expropriated heritage has been showcased and exhibited for centuries within Western museum settings, justified through anthropological and ethnological stances which positioned their scientific values

[4] Cfr the documentary *Looting Back History: How This Digital Project Reclaims Stolen Artifacts* which can be accessed at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tkAb9rzH7E consulted on July 2nd, 2024.
[5] K.H. Heydenreich, "Darf der Sieger einem überwundenen Volke Werke der Litteratur und Kunstentreißen? Eine völkerrechtliche Quästion", *Deutsche Monatsschrift*, II, August, 1798, p. 293.
[6] F. Sarr, B. Savoy, *The Restitution of African Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*, trans. D.S. Burk, Ministère de la culture, 2018, p. 11.

within colonial undertakings[7], part of a culture which wanted to organize a growing worldly knowledge within one universalistic and encyclopedic perspective[8].

As a result, the chance of accessing this heritage has been historically «reserved to the inheritors of an asymmetrical history, to the benefactors of an excess of privilege and mobility»[9], creating an imbalanced world access to cultural heritage. Western museum visitors, representing in this scenario the *fortunate* share of the globe, granted access to artifacts and artworks from the expropriated counties, have had the chance to build a relationship, however ambiguous and complex, with colonial heritage. This dialogue, moreover, has been historically mediated by different museum settings and scripted spaces, each carrying their own civilizing ritual and construction of knowledge[10], displaying specific political and ideological narratives, incorporating cultural cliches and scarcely concerned with «the nature of the societies from which the art arose»[11]. Hence establishing a layered and problematic ecosystem of experience. Well known, in this direction, is Sally Price's fierce critique of the layout of the Musee du Quai Branly in Paris, which she assessed from aesthetic, ideological and political perspectives.[12]

The argument developed in this paper is that today there is a new experiential environment within which the relationship with expropriated heritage can be designed for communities belonging to these two sides of history: the realm of digital technologies. As colonial heritage is being digitally restituted through museum programmes and projects, while artists around

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[7] *Ivi*, p. 12.
[8] P. Findlen, *The museum: its classical etymology and renaissance genealogy*, in "Journal of the History of Collections", I/1, 1989, pp. 59-78.
[9] F. Sarr, B. Savoy, *The Restitution of African Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*, trans. D.S. Burk, Ministère de la culture, 2018, p. 4.
[10] For an account of the construction of knowledge within Western museum spaces Cfr. T. Bennett, *The birth of the Museum, history, theory, politics*, Routledge, London 1995; C. Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Routledge, London 1995 and E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge, London 1992.
[11] L.G. Straus, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly by Sally Price*, in "Journal of Anthropological Research", 64/4 (Winter, 2008), pp. 597-599.
[12] S. Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2007; Id, *Return to the Quai Branly*, in "Museum Anthropology", 33/1, pp. 11–21. For further bibliographical critique of the Quai Branly's story Cfr. H. Lebovics, *Will the Musée du Quai Branly Show France the Way to Postcoloniality?* In "African and Black Diaspora", 2/2, 2009, pp. 231-244; T. Levitz, *The Aestheticization of Ethnicity: Imagining the Dogon at the Musée du Quai Branly*, in "The Musical Quarterly, 2008, pp. 600-642; C. Pagani, *Genealogia del Primitivo: il Musée du Quai Branly, Lévi-Strauss e la scrittura etnografica*, Negretto Editore, Mantova 2009.

the world use digital technologies to engage with the pain of having been deprived of their cultural traditions, a new way to relate to colonial heritage is made possible. Within this new paradigm, shaped by the media specific properties of the different technologies employed, and thus actualized within a digital fabric, new formal, phenomenological and aesthetic traits emerge. Reframing the debate on values, identity and meaning surrounding this heritage in new scripted – or better *coded* – spaces, offering an alternative to the primitivist aesthetic set through modernist museological displays[13].

With reference to this scenario, the paper wants to contribute to the assessment of the heterogeneous and complex phenomenon of digital restitution, addressing how these new modes of familiarizing, learning and connecting with expropriated heritage offer a new opportunity to experience it. Two case studies will be analyzed, one from the museological sphere and one from the contemporary art one, ensuring that an institutional perspective, as well as an activist one, are taken into account. As with the physical repatriation phenomen, also with digital repatriation it is important to factor in the layered complexities of a contentious scenario, with diverging interests. Attempts to digitally restitute, as an example, can very easily be initiated as a way to avoid physical restitution, trying to diverge public attention and avoid the true issue at stake: the ownership and location of the expropriated heritage. Moreover, it can happen that the projects designed by museums end up replicating the same violence that characterized the expropriation, study and exhibition of heritage in the first place[14]. By analyzing two projects coming from very diverse stakeholders – the first a group of renowned international museums, the second an artist – the research wants to open the analysis to different interests and perspectives. Both projects, moreover, deal with the same series of artworks which have, through time, come to be known as Benin Bronzes. By doing so, it shows different ways to digitally engage with expropriated heritage, using the two case studies to compare different, yet akin, restitution experiences.

[13] Cfr. P. Wood, *Display, Restitution and World Art History: The Case of the 'Benin Bronzes'*.

[14] For an insightful discussion on the multifaceted aspects of the digital repatriation phenomenon, a very interesting conversation can be found on the Delfina Foundation website between invited guests Chao Tayiana and Molemo Moilo (founders of Open Restitution Africa) who discuss the subject of the digital restitution of cultural heritage from colonial collections, titled "Digital Restitution and its Discontents" and recorded on the 21st of December 2021. Accessible at the link https://www.delfinafoundation.com/whats-on/digital-restitution-and-its-discontents/ last accessed on July 13th.

Firstly, the *Digital Benin*[15] project will be analyzed: a research platform which «brings together all objects, historical photographs and rich documentation material from collections worldwide to provide a long-requested overview of the royal artifacts from Benin Kingdom looted in the late nineteenth century»[16]. This research, by connecting data from 5,285 objects across 136 institutions in 20 countries has a truly comprehensive and international scope, employing digital means to create and make available new knowledge on this precious series of artifacts. It should, therefore, offer an interesting space for analysis on how major museums are dealing with the digital repatriation of Benin Bronzes. By investigating it, a series of questions can be answered, relating to the modes of experience that are made available: which technologies are being used in this project? Which resources have been collected? How have these been organized? Which narratives are conveyed through the platform? Which audience is the platform directed to? Which cultural or political interests does this project serve? Which new values and identities can be developed through the relationship that intercurs in this digital space? By addressing these questions, a clearer picture of the experience encouraged through this technological repatriation can be offered.

Secondly, a project by artist Minne Atairu will be analyzed: *Igùn* (2020). Atairu is a «researcher and interdisciplinary artist interested in generative artificial intelligence. Utilizing AI-mediated processes and materials, Atairu's work critically examines and illuminates understudied gaps in Black historical archives»[17]. In her research for *Igùn* the artist begins by investigating a gap in art production in the Kingdom of Benin following the 1897 British invasion which lasted for 17 years, up to 1914. While a great amount of artifacts were being spoiled from the royal court and auctioned to museums and collections in Europe and the United States, the deposition of Oba Ovonramwen, the king and sole patron of the arts, forced the artistic ecosystem into recession. Meanwhile, a blank space was left in Benin heritage history: what would have been produced had the invasion not disrupted the art scene? Atairu's practice starts from this question, using Artificial Intelligence, Augmented Reality, 3D printing and clay to envision how this material absence could be digitally and

[15] Accessible at https://digitalbenin.org/ last accessed on July 15th, 2024.
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] Accessible at https://minneatairu.com/ last accessed July 17th, 2024.

formally addressed. In her work, she relates to the Benin Bronzes heritage in a unique and creative way, interrogating the original series and using digital media to produce new artworks, creating a direct connection between her own creative practice and the historical artifacts. This digital restitution project, as well relating to the Benin Bronzes, welcomes a new set of questions. How can digital technologies help develop an artist's relationship with her own heritage? In which way the media specificity of each technology affects and guides the creative project? Which information about the museological and mediated history of the Benin Bronzes emerges from this research? Which are the institutional environments supporting and showcasing this interpretation of the Benin Bronzes history? Through Atairu's work, a different perspective on digital restitution projects can be introduced, one which also informs the way in which digital media are redefining the relationship with heritage.

The analysis of these two projects, which address the field of digital repatriation from very different perspectives yet both reacting to the Benin Bronzes history and cultural definition, can therefore offer a multifaceted enquiry on the modes of restitution in the digital era[18]. Before addressing them, however, a brief introduction of the history of the Benin Bronzes is required.

2. Benin Bronzes: historical and museological context

In 1897 the British, after having been in economic relations with the Benin Kingdom since the 16th century[19], decided to lead a punitive invasion of the country, as the economic policies choices of the ruling king, Oba Ovonramwen, no longer suited their trade interests[20]. Trough terrifying atrocities[21], the expedition also led to the theft and vandalization of Benin artistic

[18] As Harrison Adewale Idowu argues in his study, for the Binis (the people of the ancient Benin kingdom in present day Nigeria), the «quest for restitution is still very much on course and even after several decades, they still feel aggrieved over the forcefully migrated Artefacts», making this debate as necessary and pressing as ever. H.A. Idowu, *The Migration of Benin Artefacts and the Quest for Restitution*, in "CIHA World Congress", pp. 1332-1350.

[19] J. Olaosebikan Aremu, M. Ediagbonya, *Trade and Religion in British-Benin Relations 1553-1897*, in "Global Journal of Social Sciences Studies, 4/2, 2018, pp. 78-90.

[20] P.A. Igbafe, *The fall of Benin: A Reassessment*, in "The Journal of African History", 11/3, 1970, p. 387.

[21] For an account of the British brutality Cfr. E. Barkan, *Aesthetics and Evolution: Benin Art in Europe*, in "African Arts", 30/3, 1997, pp. 36-41. Minne Atairu, citing Omo n'Oba n'Edo and Akpolokpolo, 1997, writes: «the British delegation, "burnt every house in the City, exiled Oba Qvonramwen to Calabar, which was the

heritage[22]. «Cultural objects made of bronzes, ivories, beads, and other objects, which were produced since the 1st century AD to commemorate historical moments, political transitions, and ritual purposes»[23] were plundered, through a theft which «dishonored the spiritual and ritual significance of these living cultural objects, and has turned them into museum artefacts»[24]. The artifacts which have been expropriated, more than 5.000 pieces, are today scattered within 136 institutions across 20 countries, mainly in the Netherlands (almost 100 pieces), Austria (167 pieces), Britain (more than 1.000 pieces across 3 museums), Germany (more than 1.100 pieces between 6 institutions) and the United States (above 700 artworks between 5 museums)[25]. The history of this specific kind of expropriated heritage is not a contentious one: «there are no gray areas, no dubious contracts, no questions about whether those who were doing the selling knew what they were parting with. The Benin bronzes were stolen pure and simple»[26].

Within this geographic motion of cultural objects which from Benin come to be dislocated throughout the West, a shift in meaning also takes place: «it is their defining moment, the moment of their theft, and the moment, as it were, of their symbolic death within one form of life. It is also, of course, the moment of their emergence onto a world stage, and of their rebirth into another form of life. It is the moment of their passage from religion into art»[27]. Not only religious artifacts, the bronze casted objects had often also the function of being historical records, commissioned when an important event took place and acted as reference

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furthermost town in the territory within the British sphere of influence. Finally, set fire to the Oba's palace after carting away about 3000 pieces of our valuable bronze and ivory works of art which now adorn museums and private collections in Eng- land and elsewhere», Id., *Reimagining Benin Bronzes using generative adversarial networks*, in "AI & Society", 39, 2024, p. 93.

[22] For a comprehensive account of the royal art of Benin across Western scientific literature Cfr. R.E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973; P. Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1980; N. Barley, *The Art of Benin*, British Museum Press, London, 2010. For challenges to the dominant view, Cfr. J. Picton, *Edo Art, Dynastic Myth and Intellectual Aporia*, in "African Arts", 30/4, 1997, pp. 18–25; C. Gore, *Art, Performance and Ritual in Benin City*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2007.

[23] O. Sogbesan, T. Laotan-Brown, *Reflections on the Customary Laws of Benin Kingdom and Its Living Cultural Objects in the Discourse of Ownership and Restitution*, in "Santander Art and Culture Law Review", 2/8, 2022, p. 30.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] H. Adewale Idowu, *The Migration of Benin Artefacts and the Quest for Restitution*, in "CIHA World Congress", pp. 1337-1338. For an even more detailed account of the distribution of Benin Kingdom artifacts in Western museums Cfr. the "Institutions" page of the *Digital Benin* project.

[26] P. Wood, *Display, Restitution and World Art History: The Case of the 'Benin Bronzes'*, p. 121.

[27] *Ibid.*

points, libraries or archives[28]. When welcomed and exhibited in Western museological contexts, however, these artworks come to be resignified: their cultural history is canceled in favor of the pursuit of an aesthetic standard.

When describing the display of Benin Bronzes at the British Museum in London, Paul Wood writes: «A selection of the unique two-dimensional plaques are, however, arranged in a grid format attached to vertical steel poles – a design which manages simultaneously to allude to the original presentation of the plaques on the pillars of the Oba's palace in Benin City and to connote a minimalist-grid cum contemporary-art installation in which the balance of display tilts decisively from the ethnographic to the aesthetic»[29]. As this section highlights, the art historical analysis and display of non-Western artifacts, and Benin Bronzes specifically, has been characterized by a very specific aesthetic: «Modernism constructs the category "Primitive Art", determined principally by concepts of "form" and "expression", fuelling the core value of "autonomy". Resulting displays were organized under the sign of the aesthetic»[30].

The question at stake, in the analysis of these new digital environments, is to what extent, through displays and modes of experience which differ from the scripted spaces in which the knowledge around these artworks has been more customarily organized, a new path can be created for meaning makings[31].

3. Digital restitution of the Benin Bronzes: museological and artistic enterprises

The *Digital Benin* project, conceived in 2019, developed in the following 2 years and launched in 2022, is a collaborative initiative between Western (both European and

[28] E. Akenzua, *The case of Benin*, The UK Parliament Publications, accessible at https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmcumeds/371/371ap27.htm, 2000, last accessed 18th July 2024.
[29] *Ivi*, p. 116.
[30] *Ivi*, p. 118.
[31] As Wood continues to argue, not with reference to digitization but to the decolonial approach which has emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century: «the translation of the non-Western into the terms of a Western aesthetic under the universalizing rubrics of form and expression came under attack as part of the wider critical and art-historical move against the precepts of orthodox "modernism" mounted by the so-called "new art history"», p. 118. An analysis of how digital technologies partake in the creation of new aesthetic and value paradigms with reference to expropriated heritage, therefore, should be understood as part of a wider phenomenon, through displays which understand «cultural diversity and the relation of art to ways of life» (p. 119) as the governing virtue, not aesthetic autonomy.

American) and Nigerian curators and researchers, bridging oral history, research and museological knowledge of Benin Kingdom artifacts[32], hosted by the Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK) in Hamburg and financed by the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung[33]. As anticipated, the plundering of Benin's cultural heritage not only deprived an entire community of its heritage, but also caused the dissemination of it across a number of different institutions. The artifacts, hosted within a cultural climate which imposed its own interpretation and canons on them, have been also difficult to study as they are scattered in numerous different places.

«The digital platform introduces new scholarship which connects digital documentation about the translocated objects to oral histories, object research, historical context, a foundational Edo language catalogue, provenance names, a map of the Benin Kingdom and museum collections worldwide. Digital Benin connects data from 5,285 objects across 136 institutions in 20 countries» states the museum website. As this brief outline summarizes, the information offered through the platform is richer and more complex, divided in 8 main sections. These comprise of: a catalogue of all the objects, a list of the institutions which host them, an analysis of the provenance data which accompanies them, an archive where all archival documents are digitized, a map which shows in one united space both the landmarks of the ancient Benin Kingdom and the current locations of the artworks, a learning space about the objects and their Edo designations[34] named *Ẹyo Otọ*, a *Oral History* section where recorded contributions by Benin people can be viewed to learn about their knowledge transmission practices and a *Itan Edo* section, with the story of the Benin Kingdom.

As this choice of content organization testifies, especially with reference to the last platform items mentioned, there seems to be a clear intention to offer a new framework within which to learn about this heritage. One which disregards the primitivist aesthetic that has

[32] F. Bodenstein, A. Doquet, A. Galitzine-Loumpet, *Conversation avec Felicity Bodenstein à propos de la base de données Digital Benin*, in "Cahiers D'Études Africaines", 251/252, 2023, pp. 953-969.
[33] As stated on the project website: "The Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung (Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation) generously funded the project with more than 1.5 million Euros for the initial two years (2020–22) and an extension for one more year (2023). The Gerda Henkel Foundation has also supported digitization measures in Nigeria as part of Digital Benin with 25,000 Euros. Since December 2023, the new project phase of three years funded by the Mellon Foundation continues with a grant of 2.6 million Euros".
[34] The Edo language is spoken by the Edo people, an ethnic group located in the southern area of Nigeria, where the Benin Kingdom was originally located.

long framed Benin Bronzes in their museological history and tries to present them within a wider knowledge system, introducing new content and perspectives. Moreover, a *Sensitive Content* alert is advertised inside the landing page, declaring how the materials digitized are inherently colonial and contain words, terms and phrases which are inaccurate and harmful towards African and African diasporic communities. Sensitive-content warnings, it is specified, are being implemented throughout the different platform spaces, declaring a clear distance from colonial narratives.

Browsing through the platform, different media are used to provide information on the artifacts: videos, audio recordings, drawings, photographs, archival documents digitized, written texts and interactive maps. Nothing particularly advanced from a technological viewpoint, yet the platform hosts a series of very different products. A system of signifiers which grant a varied and heterogeneous mode of interaction with the artifacts, giving the viewer the possibility to undertake a wider set of learning paths. The rigidity of the museological experience, with displays so heavily enforced by aesthetic positions, is substituted by a more open environment, where the different resources offered (the 8 sections) are presented with the same hierarchical order and through a homogenizing interface[35]. Overall, the project seems to offer a very different space through which the Benin Bronzes can be experienced, one which endorses a wider set of values, interests and stakeholders, lowering the prescriptiveness of aesthetic claims in favor of a more open interaction. In the following paragraphs, Minne Atairu's work will be analyzed, in order to offer a second, a different, means of reimagining and repatriating the same heritage via digital technologies.

As anticipated in the first paragraph of this research, Atairu's work investigates a hole in Benin's artistic production, which lasted from 1897 to 1914[36]: the 17 years in which, without a ruling king who would commission art, the casters of the Kingdom stopped making their

[35] In the platform landing page, the 8 sections are advertised through the icons of 8 identical squares, which provide access to the individual spaces. In the team section, moreover, it is possible to observe a very heterogeneous list of professionals, functioning as principal investigators, researchers and consultants, many of which are from Lagos and Benin City.

[36] For a comprehensive account of the political consequences of the British invasion of 1897 Cfr. O. Benson Osadolor, *The Benin Royalist Movement and Its Political Opponents: Controversy over Restoration of the Monarchy, 1897-1914*, in "The International Journal of African Historical Studies", 44/1, 2011, pp. 45-59.

craft altogether[37]. What Atairu asks herself is what kind of art would have been produced had the colonial invasion not disrupted the chain of artistic production in that territory. Her creative response begins by retrieving photographic documents which portray the original artworks from before 1897, in order to collect images which represent them. As the artist has testified this activity was not simple to perform as it is difficult to find digitized images of these artworks through popular search engines such as Google[38]. This depends on the biases working through these platforms, where images which belong to Western cultural traditions have a higher success rate in being identified and correctly tagged by the algorithms[39]. Atairu created her dataset searching both online museum collections and scientific publications, selecting only images which would have a sufficient quality (all above 300px). She then trained an algorithm to identify and combine the more distinctive traits of the statues, which were then reassembled to materialize a "statistically predicted past that is thus induced and somehow also imaginary, but generated in a dynamic present where it can trigger awareness and acts of repatriation"[40].

The new images generated by a series of StyleGAN models (Generative Adversarial Networks), coded by the artist and fed the images of the original artworks, are a way to imagine the art that was prevented from being produced, also thanks to the creative contribution of a technological eye[41]. «The resulting prototypes do not suggest any fidelity to the truth but simply point to an experiment that gives visibility to objects that could exist

[37] Then, in 1914, the Benin Monarchy was restored, and the practice of casting started again.
[38] *Art History 2060* Conference at Davidson College in March 2022, accessible at the link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd2PXvL9deI&t=2s deI last accessed July 17th, 2024.
[39] For an account of biases in image recognition softwares and Google Cfr. I. Kizhner, M. Rumyantsev, V. Khokhlova, *et al.*, *Digital cultural colonialism: measuring bias in aggregated digitized content held in Google Arts and Culture*, in "Digital Scholarship in the Humanities", 36/3, 2021, pp. 607-640; J. Sachs, *The algorithm at work? Explanation and repair in the enactment of similarity in art data,* in Information, "Communication & Society", 23/11, 2020, pp. 1-17; J. Craig, *Computer vision for visual arts collections: looking at algorithmic bias, transparency and labor*, in "Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America", 40/2, pp. 198-208; I. Santos, L. Castro, N. Rodriguez-Fernandez, *et al.*, *Artificial Neural Networks and Deep Learning in the Visual Arts: a review*, in "Neural Computing and Applications", 33, 2021, pp. 121-157; C. Balbi, A. Calise, *The (theoretical) elephant in the room. Overlooked assumptions in computer vision analysis of art images*, in "Signata", 14, 2023, pp. 1-14.
[40] "Minne Atairu's Igun" in *Neural. Critical digital culture and media arts*, accessible at https://neural.it/it/2022/11/minne-atairu-igun/ last accessed July 8th, 2024.
[41] As the artist specifies, it was necessary to use a specific type of GANs, Style- GAN2-ADA, which reduces the need to operate with larger datasets. M. Atairu, *Reimagining Benin Bronzes using generative adversarial networks*, p. 95.

outside verifiable facts in Benin's art historical archive»[42], Atairu says. The artist's project, she remarks, is informed by Saidiya Hartman's formulation of "Critical Fabulation", a form of historical inquiry which uses speculation, fiction and imagination to attend to what, and who, the conventional archive cannot capture[43] and that prompts Atairu «towards the artistic and scholarly need to reimagine unknown, absented, and forgotten objects in my people's art historical canon»[44].

The series *Igùn* draws the name from the Igun Eronmwon—the royal guild of bronze casters, who had been in charge of cast production, operating inside the palace complex, under the monarchy, and which dissolved when the Oba was exiled. Within the series, the artist created different prototypes (named Prototype I, Prototype II and so forth), working with different datasets moduled by her every time, to obtain images which would represent different cast types – commemorial heads, children – experimenting with possible facial expressions. In creating these artworks, the artist is asking herself whether Benin casters, having lost the commission of the Oba, continued to produce their works and, in that case, what would have they have made. The Prototypes are an answer to this question, exploring shifts, ambiguities and contradictions, mixing terracotta images and bronze ones in the datasets, investigating the encounter between multiple traditions.

With this project, Atairu is shifting the discourse on the Benin Bronzes towards a creative and artistic perspective. She is operating as an artist who interrogates another generation of artists, employing digital technologies to enquire into a production void created by political interests. In her research, she explores and studies the history of the British invasion and of casting practices during the monarchy, facing the difficulties that accompany a search of artifacts who have been stolen, displaced and attributed a value system which completely disregarded their origins. She offers, to those who engage with her art, a new sphere of meanings and questions, opening the experience to marginalized and censored perspectives. Her account, by closely addressing the casters viewpoint, radically enriches the way Benin Bronzes can be thought of, contextualized, and understood.

[42] *Ivi*, p. 91.
[43] S. Hartman, *Venus in two acts*, in "Small Axe", 12/2, 2008, pp. 1-14.
[44] M. Atairu, *Reimagining Benin Bronzes using generative adversarial networks*, p. 91.

Digital Benin and *Igùn*, in their very different ways, attest to how digital technologies can be employed to reshape the discourse around looted heritage. They offer a unique opportunity to mobilize images, research and most of all meanings, creating a more open space of encounter for those who want to learn about this heritage.

Surely, projects like these do not happen within a vacuum, and carry their own contextual questions and consequences. Concerning the museological project, as an example, one could wonder who is the effective target of the digital restitution. Granted the geographically well distributed nature of the organizing team, how is the project trying to reach the communities that were originally deprived of the artworks? Is this even part of the goal, or is this new learning space designed for a Western audience? And if so, how does this relate to the project objectives? With reference to Atairu's work, one could also wonder which are the institutional settings that have been welcoming and showcasing her art. How do major museums who own Benin Bronzes relate to her practice? Recently, the artist has exhibited at The Shed, a prominent contemporary art space in New York, with the installation *To the Hand* (2024), which recontextualized Benin history through oral traditions and quotidian rituals, building on the research started with *Igùn*[45]. However, projects like hers still struggle to be endorsed within a museological system where they can be seen in dialogue, and opposition, to the historical artifacts and their display.

Overall, it can be concluded that digital technologies present an opportunity, both form museum practitioners and artists, to engage in innovative ways with expropriated heritage, and imagine new paths for their experience and restitution, thus overcoming historically set and prescriptive aesthetic paradigms.

[45] Information accessible at the link https://www.theshed.org/program/374-minne-atairu accessed on July 30th, 2024.