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**Time and value at Bath Abbey: Erosion, fragmentation and the
role of the replica**

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ACHS Futures 2020 conference_UCL_David Littlefield_Time & Value at Bath Abbey_final voiced text

SLIDE 1

My research addresses issues of time, change, authenticity and representation.

SLIDE 2

My work includes the use of photogrammetry to capture historic surfaces at Bath Abbey, enabling the creation of replicas of fragments of the Abbey's floor. This surface is perhaps unique in that it's comprised almost entirely of "ledger stones" - horizontal burial markers located above, or near, the human remains they record. The Abbey is undergoing a substantial programme of change called the Footprint Project, designed partly to rectify the subsidence caused by the decay of those remains. This includes the removal, repair, reinstatement and even replacement of its 891 ledger stones.

SLIDE 3

Notably, these stones were removed and repositioned in the 1860s, also to address subsidence. They no longer directly mark the remains of those buried beneath the floor. The stones' relationship to authenticity, then, is already interesting.

SLIDE 4

Present works will result in further repositioning. Stones which are characterised by fracture, erosion, staining, and delamination are scheduled for repair and will be returned to the floor in a very different condition to their pre-Footprint state. Some may not be reinstated at all.

SLIDE 5

I argue that the replicas of these stones record their pre-Footprint state as an authentic expression of their place in time. And I suggest that it's important to consider the status and cultural value of the replica, especially one of an eroded and fragmented artefact undergoing change.

SLIDE 6

My work is therefore located within a wider inquiry concerning the networked and contingent nature of authenticity; its representation; and the notion of pastness. The work of Rodney Harrison, Cornelius Holtorf, Sian Jones and Bruno Latour are key reference points, though not the only ones. If time allowed, I'd more deeply reference Actor-Network Theory. I'd also question my work through Catherine Malabou, whose writing on the nature of metamorphosis, essence and "destructive plasticity" is thought-provoking.

SLIDE 7

Harrison has written on how society selectively remembers pasts in order to produce and reproduce heritage, including the "creative potential" to be found through loss and change. There are useful echoes here of the work of Michael Shanks, in considering the past as a "resource" subject to "creative process". Christopher Tilley and others explored this 20 years ago in their paper *Art and the Re-Presentation of the Past* by considering the extent to which the representation can be deployed to "play tricks, to distort, to emphasize" in order to best convey an interpretation. [pp 59-60]

SLIDE 8

I note, too, the increasing interest in the role the replica can play in constructing a sense of authenticity. This is not a new subject of course, but the ease with which increasingly powerful digital tools enable the swift and accurate replication of surfaces continues to prompt questions. Latour and Adam Lowe have considered the facsimile of Veronese's *Nozze di Cana*, arguing that the replica is the most fruitful way of interrogating the original – *and* can help redefine what the original really is. Melanie Duval and others end their 2019 paper on the partial replication of the Chauvet cave system

with a provocative question: “Is it not time also to ask... if pretence, illusion and appearance are not sometimes more efficient or significant, and in the end, more real than the original?” [17]

SLIDE 9

Holtorf, in a 2017 paper, argued that the distinction between the original and replica is an unhelpful dichotomy [512].

Foster and Jones, last year, called for a new theory of replicas in the production of authenticity. What happens, they ask, “if people allow for the possibility that a replica is a thing in its own right, albeit a thing that stands in complex relationship to another thing?” [17]

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To contribute to these themes, I suggest:

1 – the notion that authenticity can be found in the relationship between people, places and things is persuasive, but I suggest the representation should also be factored into this network of relationships. The representation is, in fact, a kind of place. It is through the representation that value systems can be explored, emphasised or inferred;

2 - that the replica need not and cannot be perfect. The replica is one form of representation, is its own thing with its own place in time, has its own purpose and its own technological signature. The replica can only ever be a partial copy. What is copied, what is not, and why, is crucial to an understanding of the efficacy of the replica;

ALSO – that the *undesigned* is a productive source of scrutiny and worthy of record. It is often through the undesigned character of an artefact that the passage of time (its pastness) can be detected. These characteristics, which might even *enhance* the original, have cultural value;

AND that, drawing on Ingold’s consideration of maps and mapping, surface features are not just tangible properties of objects but *narrative devices*. “Things of which the story tells,” writes Ingold, “do not so much exist as occur; each is a moment of ongoing activity. These things, in a word, are not objects but topics.” [92-93]

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Bath Abbey was preceded by Roman, Saxon and Norman structures. Today’s abbey has, like any church building, been the subject of much essential change and architectural fashion. The building’s floor has always been a surface in flux. When the abbey served as an intra-mural burial ground both floor and sub-floor were subject to constant change, re-arrangement, re-inscription and decay. Any sense of an authentic “original” is always hard to locate, and the abbey floor is testament to that.

SLIDE 12

Holtorf, more than once, has invoked the finale of sci-fi movie *Planet of the Apes* as an example of the power of pastness. Charlton Heston’s encounter with a ruined Statue of Liberty along an empty coastline is an arresting image of the *sudden appearance of the past* into an unsuspecting present. It’s of course implausible that this monument could survive in recognisable form while all around it sinks into oblivion, but *the ruin’s task is to provide a narrative jolt which reframes all that has gone on before*. The appearance of this monument tells protagonists and audience that time has been cruel.

SLIDE 13

In similar vein, architect Bernard Tschumi famously declared Le Corbusier’s Modernist masterpiece the Villa Savoye to be at its “most architectural” in its 1960s state of decay. In this case, it was undesigned characteristics, or what is otherwise called dirt (graffiti, urine, excrement and falling plaster) which lent the building its transgressive appeal.

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The Abbey floor has this same entropic tendency, though the Footprint Project is designed to arrest or reverse the worst of it. The repaired and re-laid ledger stones remain clearly old (the dates on them, where visible, tell us so) and evidence of surface change remains. Yet the stones are, contrasting with other signifiers of pastness, levelled and aligned; fractured stones are repaired; the most fractured, removed. I suggest the age value of the floor has been diminished, or at least tempered; here, after an interruption, time continues, less dramatic, better-mannered. Time has become not cruel, but benign.

SLIDE 15

In capturing the form of those stones most likely to undergo significant change, I've created, sometimes with student help, a record of undesigned change *before these changes are redesigned or curated away*.

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What these 3D representations capture is the authenticity of centuries of surface change *at a moment in time* – a moment in time that was a record of all moments in time that were capable of the agency of surface change. Here, the replica does not arrest the passage of time, but notices it; like that unlikely Statue of Liberty, *it provides a trace of the past against which a re-ordered present can be read*. The replicas therefore make what Latour and Lowe termed the “trajectory” of selected stones more complete.

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This work bears comparison with the St John's Cross on Iona, theorised by Foster and Jones in 2019. The curated remains of this 8th century cross can now be found within a local museum, while a 1970 concrete replica stands in its original position outside. Each cross is doing what might be called “work”. The original fragments, now *out of place*, provide a material connection with the past and a sense of “the real thing”. The replica, *in place*, provides the form, mass and response to sun path that enables an authentic experience of an artefact in landscape. Foster and Jones argue that “the replica acquires aura and authenticity because it replaces something important that is lost” [12-13]. There will be here what Latour calls “entanglements” zig-zagging between original and replica.

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Eventually, the Abbey's reconfigured ledger stones and the replicas of their former state might form their own entanglements which make a difference to the comprehension of the original stones as authentic objects.

The stones and their replicas may come to be seen as layers within a plural authenticity; both authentic, but *differently authentic*.

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I also share Foster and Jones' consideration of the replica as a manufactured artefact. The concrete cross they describe contains a deliberate seam to make its replica status clear; my own physical replicas contain technological signatures such as CNC routing paths and use contemporary materials which communicate the processes by which these things are made. I prefer the term *representation* to replica – the term “replica” is evocative of the fake, or the cheap substitute. These digital and physical representations are designed as *tools by which surfaces can be interrogated and experienced, in a way that the reworked originals no longer allow*. They are at the same time relative objects, in that their meaning is tied closely to something else, and things in their own right.

SLIDE 20

Roland Barthes described cameras as “clocks for seeing” [15]. He also described photography as a way of exploring his own humanity: “I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think”. [21] I suggest that the “repli-sentations” which have emerged from my looking at Bath Abbey perform the same role

as outlined by Barthes for photography. Creating a replica is a very immersive and special way of looking, thinking and understanding.

SLIDE 21

The ledger stone to Walter Borlaise, shown here, is replicated because the stone will change. It will be repaired, though the extent of repair is unclear. These images, extracted from the replica, are not true likenesses. They are selective representations of surface change, demonstrating that undesigned texture has become an integral part of the stone, that a 2-dimensional surface is now quite hard to locate as inscription takes its place alongside a more complex, yet still authentic, topography.

SLIDE 22

Here, we see the ledger stone to Captain Boland. These fragments, now removed from the Abbey, are unlikely to be returned. Possibly they will go to long-term storage, or even disposal. The replica is revealing – not just of physical form but of a situation. This replica may soon become the only evidence of the original, preserving the forms and textures of the stone at a particular point in time.

SLIDE 23

Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt have described “moments of representational plenitude” [p41], by which they consider those flashes where a culture’s experience of reality and its representation of reality “converge”. Might the replicas of the Borlaise and Boland stones represent such a convergence? Not only do the representations capture the form; they exist *only because of the imminent change to the stone originals – their form and their contexts*. The representations therefore tell more than one story, including one of heritage values and power structures.

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What can the changed original and earlier representation tell us about authenticity? These images, and the *topics* they embody, capture the ledger stones (if they are still ledger stones) at a particular “now”. The authenticity of these stones becomes, to borrow a phrase from Jane Bennett, an “intricate dance” [31]. It is process-based, distributed and emergent; possibly plural; possibly less certain.

Slide 25

To conclude. Rodney Harrison cautions that society has a tendency to over-accumulate due to loss aversion. Society *should* be more open to loss; and remembering does indeed entail a degree of forgetting. I don’t offer replication as a giving in to temptation to accumulate ever more material. These replicas are tools which provoke a remembering, a chance of noticing or valuing, before change or even disposal. Here, the aim is to highlight the authenticity of textures which are in danger of being forgotten before they are even remembered.

THANK YOU