Presencing Absence. The modalities of reclaimed heritage in Minne Atairu's *Igùn* (2020) and *To the hand* (2023)

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Abstract

Following the 1897 British invasion of Benin, the artistic production of the Kingdom was interrupted 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 (Atairu, 2024). Today, the 4.000 Benin Bronzes, as they have come to be defined in the international debate, are scattered across 160 western museums. Meanwhile, a blank space is left in Benin heritage history: what would have been produced had the invasion not disrupted the art scene? The practice of artist Minne Atairu starts from this question, operating at the intersection of restitution claims and creative enterprise by using Artificial Intelligence, Augmented Reality, 3D printing and clay to envision how this material absence could be digitally and formally presenced. Her research begins by retrieving photographic documents which represent the original artworks from before 1897, then training an algorithm to identify and combine the more distinctive traits of the statues, which are 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" (Neural website, 2022). The present research investigates Atairu's works *Igùn* (2020) and *To the hand* (2023) assessing the dynamics that occur when digital technologies are employed to creatively engage with restitution and repatriation claims. How do technological domains intercept the physical absence of confiscated heritage, conquering a new spatiotemporal, material and perceptual dimension for the artifacts? What do these operations imply for the representational status of the artworks (Elleström, 2021)? What are the cultural consequences of these projects, linking physical heritage scattered across the globe through an algorithmic interpretation? By answering these questions, the research aims to inform the debate on the digital restitution phenomenon and the mobilization of meaning (Tyssen, Priem, 2013) from an intermedial

perspective, focusing on the shifting modalities that characterize and connect old, and new, artworks.

Keywords
Heritage Restitution, Minne Atairu, Digital Technologies, Benin Bronzes

Bio
Anna Calise is a PhD Candidate in Visual Arts and Media Studies at IULM University, Milan, and a 2022 Visiting PhD at the University of Amsterdam, School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture. Her dissertation project is titled Museum as medium in the digital age, and works to define a new portrait of the museum in light of today's technological development. She has a Philosophy degree from King's College London, and two Master degrees in Arts Management (from Federico II in Naples and SDA Bocconi). Her research spans across museum studies, visual culture studies and media studies, exploring the ways in which the use of digital technologies can empower a more inclusive museum culture. Her recent publications include Calise A. (2023), *Inhabiting the museum: a history of physical presence from analog to digital exhibition spaces*, in "AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images" [ISSN 2785-7433], 2(II), https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19907 and Balbi C., Calise A. (2023), *The (theoretical) elephant in the room*, in "Signata", 14, https://doi.org/10.4000/signata.4757.

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