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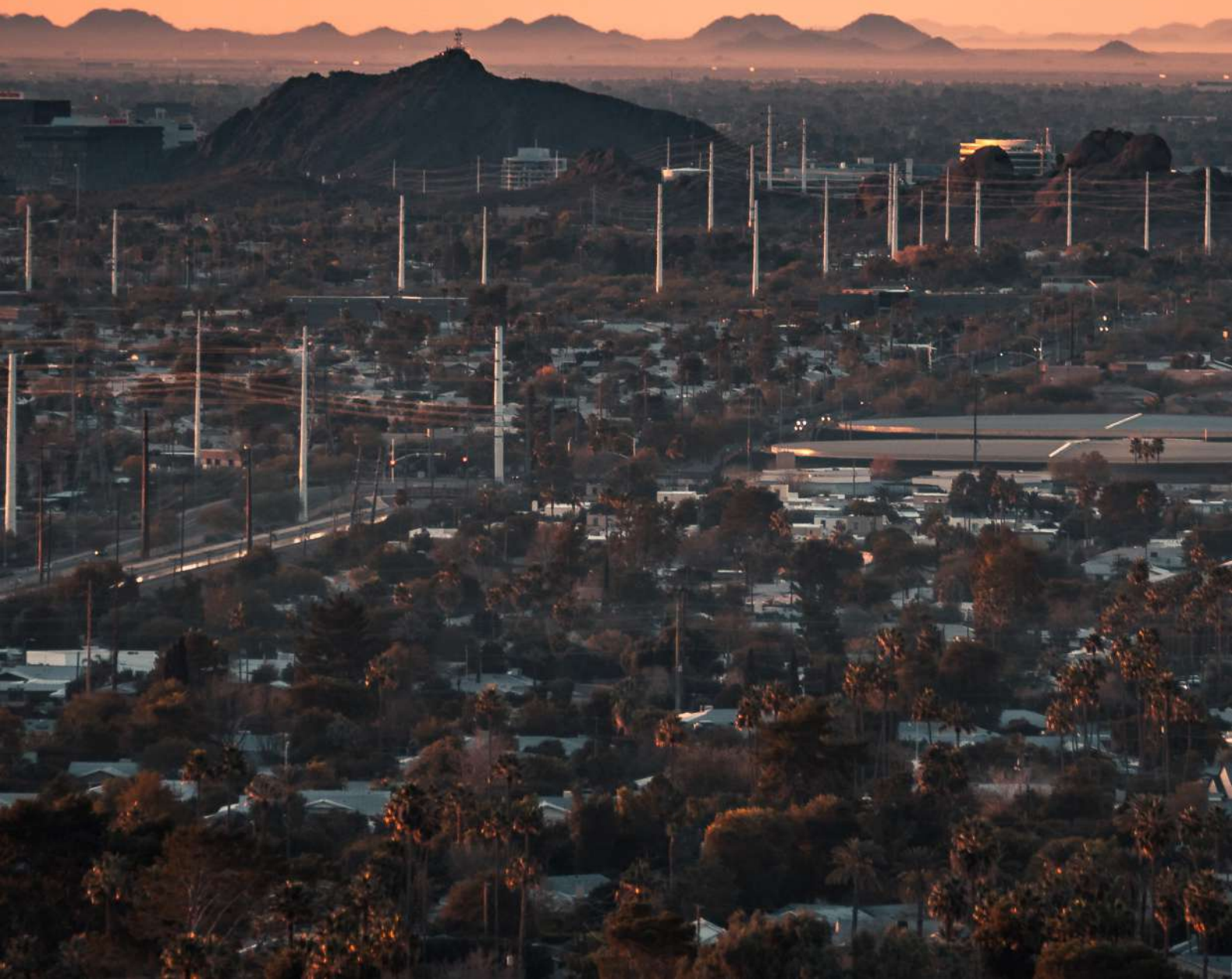

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MUSEUM VIRTUAL TOURS AS SEQUENCES OF GAPS: THE RED LODGE MUSEUM

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INTRODUCTION

The webpage of the Red Lodge museum in Bristol invites us to 'look inside' the rooms of the building in a virtual tour. It is one of the panorama-based online tours with click-through hotspots that are widely used in museums, from the Science Museum in London and the Louvre to smaller venues like the Red Lodge. With varying number of source panoramas, functions, quality of the photos and cameras used, and platforms powering the usage of such tours (from Google Maps to separate platforms like Theasys web tool), these tours share the same principles of hotspot-to-hotspot movement, where each spot provides a 360 degree view of the venue.

As we 'turn our heads' around to examine the space reconstructed through panoramic photography, we see blurry areas above and below us, and click through the annotations layered on top of the exhibits in a space that 'has been owned, and lived in, by lots of different people from the end of the 1500s until it became a museum in the mid 1900s'.[1] From the very start of the tour this place is presented as a succession of its possessors and inhabitants. The arrows point towards the next room, skipping the staircase in a fade-in transition: apart from it hosting the portraits of John and Mary Henley, who inherited the Red Lodge around 1727, this isn't a 'noteworthy' place – at least that is how it is presented in the virtual tour.

It is easy to get disoriented in it: the tour is not a 3D model of the space, but a collection of photographs stitched together into a set of panoramas projected onto basic spheres. In transitions from one panorama to another, the interstitial spaces are lost – as not deserving a mention. Intrigued by these gaps and curious about what this place is apart from being a list of its owners, we set off on a physical tour – only to find out that the physical museum also presents a sequence of gaps and omissions, with them being weirdly enveloped by the 'truthfulness' and material richness of the physical encounters with the space. How can we approach these gaps, or 'failures' of the space – both digital and physical – in a way that would suggest different ways to present a historical location?

In our study, we attempt to approach such 'failures', as well as successes, of museum virtual tours from a different point of view: instead of arguing whether virtual tours are doing any justice to the physical experience, we would examine these 'failures' as invitations to rethink the temporal continuity in representing the history of a building. What has been happening between those disjointed moments in time when this space was passed on to the next owner? How can we make a museum experience continuous, not focussed on these possession-oriented moments in time? How can we capture continuity in the museum context, or alternatively – how can we bring the gaps to the forefront in representing history?

VIRTUAL TOURS, PANORAMAS, AND CONSUMERIST GAZE

The museum virtual tours that we are going to examine inherit some of the discourses surrounding panoramic images, which within the context of a museum bear distinctively imperialistic undertones: "The panorama's emergence was intertwined with the onslaught of capitalism, imperialism, urbanism, and, in the long run, the emerging era of the masses".[2] Placing the viewer into the center of the world, it created an illusion of limitless access to this world, and positioned this world as being made for the gaze of the audience. As Tim Barringer puts it, "the panorama provided an insistent, phantasmagorical juxtaposition of "here" and "there" – home and abroad; familiar and exotic; imperial center and periphery; metropole and province; civilization and its alleged others".[3]

Within the context of virtual museum tours, this interpretation of 'access' clashes with the well-intended call for accessibility. The decentralised access to the museum fragments the gaze, dispersing it over an array of private locations, which might seem like a productive step towards accessibility, but the technology itself lends its voyeuristic and consumerist undertones to the experience. Similar virtual tours are being heavily used in real estate marketing. They direct the gaze of the online audience onto a museum as onto an object of inspection in a visually similar way, and likens a museum to a sellable property, an asset, a commodity. And most of all, this commodity resembles a toy - but one which we cannot really play with, like a toy car without moving wheels. The virtual Red Lodge is a 'doll house' with very limited options for interaction – a digital unplayable toy. The promise of 'interactivity' is never fulfilled and replaced with clicking through descriptive texts and flat photos stretched over a basic sphere to appear having depth.

The complex, multilayered, often inconsistent space is flattened into a digital 'skin', a smooth uniform photographic surface stretched over a mathematically ideal, abstract sphere. The resulting digital object becomes a 'crystal ball' – a metaphor sending us back to the early days of consumerist viewing associated with mass television – that shows apparitions of spaces, all of them, no matter the differences, conveniently fitting into the magical digital sphere which brings these spaces right to one's device. This logic of convenience and immediate access is a part of what bell hooks called "the culture of capitalist frenzy and consumption that demands all desire must be satisfied immediately"[4]. Further in this work we will attempt to interrupt the smoothness of this consumption process, trouble and complicate it with subtle interventions that deliberately slow this process down and question the value of flawless immediacy.

INTERSTITIAL SPACES AND COLLAGE

How can we be more aware of the technological biases of museum virtual tours? One of its elements where this medium makes itself particularly evident is the transitional and interstitial spaces between the clickable 'hotspots'. These are organised as montaged cuts that omit the in-betweenness, the continuity of both the historical process and the experience of being in the physical location. The fade-in/fade-out scenes, as well as the blurry parts at the 'poles' of the panorama articulate the loss/lack of information, and also - the void of uncertainty in the place where the viewer is supposed to be.

Surprisingly, the physical space of the Red Lodge is also full of such abrupt cuts: each room represents a different time period, and the interstitial spaces between them (staircase, corridors), are hardly ever articulated, resulting in weird omissions, almost transitional 'non-places' within the place of a museum, to use Marc Auge's term[5]. The biggest interstitial space of the Red Lodge, the staircase (Fig. 1), is only explicitly articulated through two portraits of two of the owners.

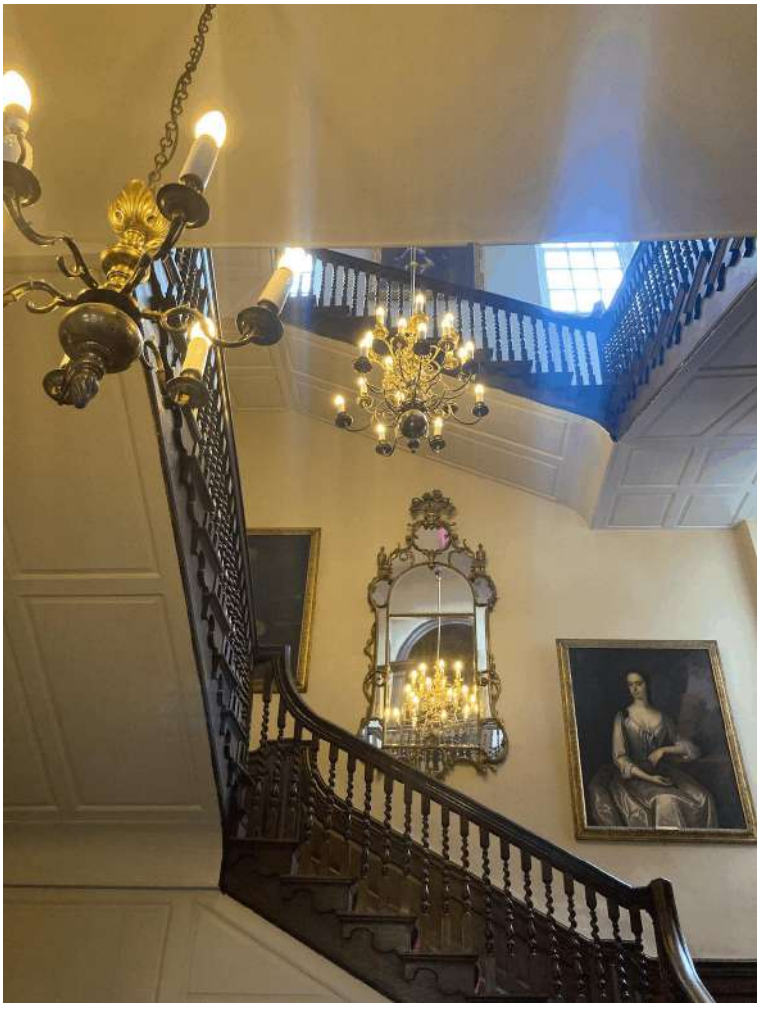

Figure 1. Hall, Kimberly Ellen. The Red Lodge Staircase. September 30, 2024. Photograph.

The other elements of this space remain either decorative signs of the past, such as a landscape painting by an unknown artist, or anachronistic signs of 'museumness': museum guest book, booklets, fire extinguisher, red carpet with stair rods. Some of the parts of this space are unavailable – notably, both for the visitors and for the museum workers – such as the cellar and the attic. These spaces are annotated, but never shown – which also contributes to the feeling that the largest space of the Red Lodge is omitted as less noteworthy.

Many objects in the hall, such as the chests, remain silent, unmentioned 'props' imported from a variety of other locations (Fig. 2, 3). And if some can be regarded as 'less valuable' items from a corresponding time period or a similar building, others, like the publicly available image of James Millerd's map of Bristol from 1671, with its printouts being dispersed along the walls of Bristol pubs, clearly functions as a decorative prop, only vaguely related to the Red Lodge.

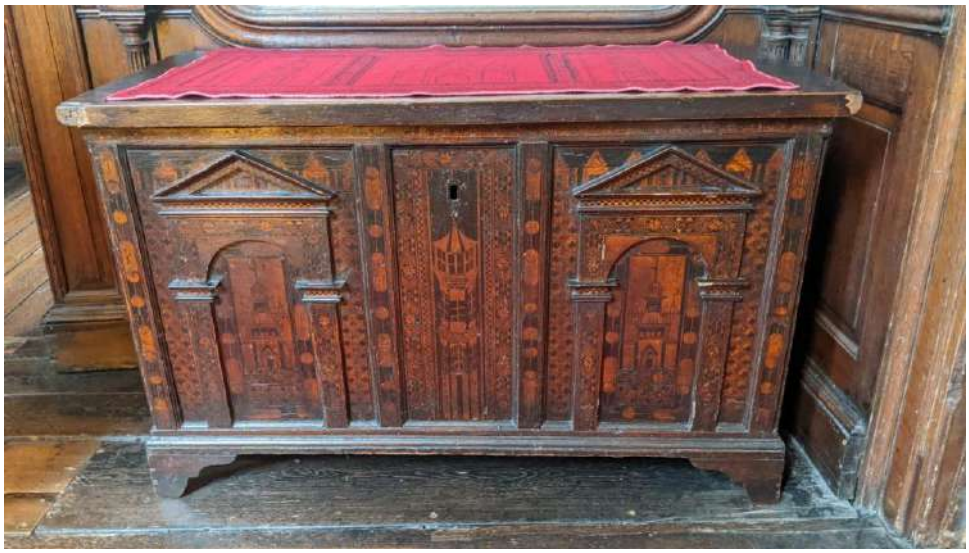

Figure 2. Kopalova, Ksenia. The Red Lodge Chest. September 30, 2024. Photograph.

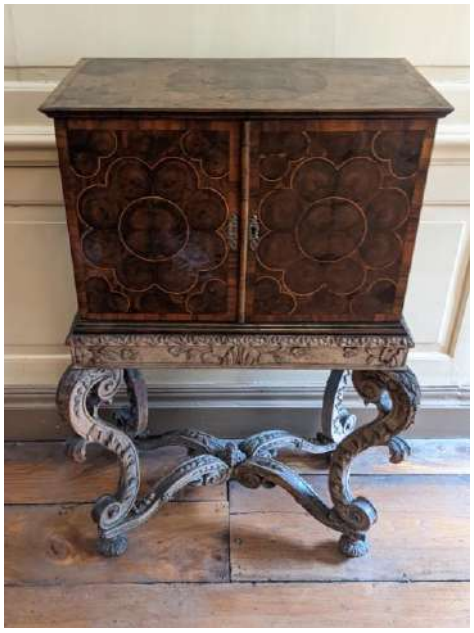

Figure 3. Kopalova, Ksenia. The Red Lodge Cabinet. September 30, 2024. Photograph.

The extremity of this collaged theme park-like nature of the Red Lodge is best illustrated by the room with a well, where the wooden panelling is 'imported' from a neighbouring building, creating a visible gap of a bare wall between the ceiling with unpolished wooden trusses and more refined wooden panelling (Fig. 4). The gap between the panelling and the ceiling again resembles a 'skin', a mask, like the flattened photographic file stretched onto a digital sphere of the panorama, revealing surprising similarities between the virtual tour and the actual physical space.

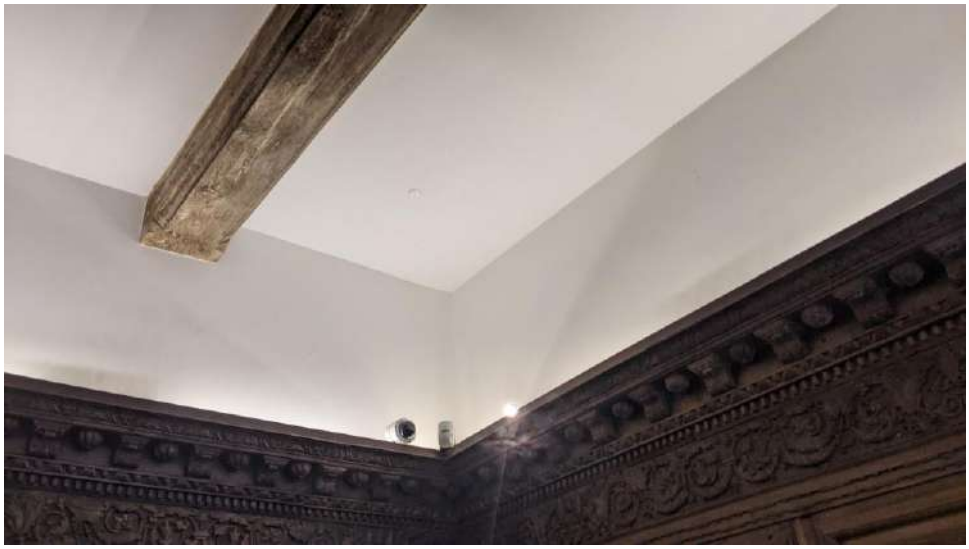

Figure 4. Kopalova, Ksenia. The 'Collaged Well Room' at the Red Lodge. September 30, 2024. Photograph.

(DIS)CONTINUITY AND DELIBERATE FAILURE

Like many historical museums, the Red Lodge is an attempt to construct a space of 'what it might have looked like', a speculation using collage and montage as its primary instruments. There is something self-contradictory about this intention: the physicality of the space aims to present it as continuous, just like the digital blurry approximations do – both calling to imagine the missing bits. But the real museum experience is quite a bumpy, discontinuous journey where the gaps are unintentional. What if these 'bumps' and gaps were made deliberate? Or – what if the continuity of the museum experience did not rely on the continuity of facts, which it is aiming to reconstruct?

Paul Virilho and Sylvère Lotringer treat failure as "active production of the 'accidental potential' in any product".[6] For us, the discontinuity of the museum's virtual and physical spaces creates potential to engage with it that a really flawless continuous experience would not invite. In discussing failure's potential, Jack Halberstam goes on further to point out that "failure is not a bad place to start for a critique of both capitalism and heteronormativity" [7], and argues that failure can be a conscious radical artistic practice aimed at disrupting capitalist modes of existence. With this in mind, we see active, deliberate failure as a strategy to question the consumerist modes of spectatorship and usership embedded into panoramic virtual tours. Stressing the gaps and discontinuities of the museum's virtual tours can be a way to be conscious about their technologically embedded biases. As bell hooks suggested, "we may learn from spaces of silence as well as spaces of speech",[8] and we suggest that the 'language' used by the museum's virtual tour is that where silences, gaps, and failures are the most productive spaces of discovery.

In a digital experience, flaws and interruptions are normally seen as unwanted, but also – as revealing the constructive elements of this digital experience. Looking into noise and glitch can be ways of being conscious about the digital medium used to convey the experience. Writing on the nature of analogue noise, Horst Bredekamp notes: "Ideally, the medium used to render the object visible is present only as an absence; image noise occurs when it becomes visible".[9] Digital glitches and mistakes make the viewer/user aware of the functioning of a given digital environment.

We tried to reflect upon the workings of a technology used to 'stitch together' discontinuous moments in history and make them intentionally, visibly patchy, so that the gaps and omissions in the history making process are technologically admitted, rather than disguised. Thus, we created a version of the

Red Lodge virtual tour,[10] where glitches are deliberately used to stress the unknowns, the discontinuous, the unmentioned.

In this version of the tour, the locked cellar is glitching, emphasising the impossibility of entering the space: it is impossible to enter it because digitally this is a surface impossible to navigate and have a sense of depth within, and physically this space is locked even for the museum workers. The portraits of the owners are omitted through a Google panoramas-like glitch, a digital 'black hole', revealing the stitched nature of a fabricated continuity, disregarding the possession-focussed elements of the history of the location, and being deliberate about its unknowns, such as the locked attic, which the navigational arrow now points towards.

(IN)ACCESSIBILITY AND PARTICIPATORY ARCHIVE-MAKING

Apart from stressing the mistake we suggest that one of the strategies to question the technological biases of the panoramic virtual tours would be including the voices of the visitors into making them, as records of the lived experience of the place. Including records of affective and 'insignificant' experiences could be a way to make this virtual tour a 'living archive': an archive "not designed for long-term storage and memory, but for reproduction, for endless circulation between different levels, people, networks and locations".[11] What if it captured affective encounters with the museum space? What unofficial, insignificant, fleeting, and even 'silly' experiences populate this place? What kind of Red Lodge would we see, if we were to rethink it as a 'silly archive', to use Halberstam's phrase[12]?

The squeaky floors, the dust on the windowsills and withering plants in the garden, the smell of old wood, the eeriness of the repetitive recording playing every 10 minutes to recreate the sound of a muted harpsichord with a "Please do not touch" sign on it are all continuous affective experiences. They do belong to the present moment of connection with this collaged space, but what if they were brought to the forefront, rather than being by-products of the visit?

In the reimagined virtual tour we made we tried to highlight the richness of sensory experiences in the physical museum: the smells of the old wood, the squeaky floors, the echoing sounds of footsteps. We looked at the experiences of other people in the guestbook, observed the textures, felt the sounds and smells, collected the ambiguous names of the flowers from the museum's garden (Fig.5), and tried to highlight those, intertwining it with our own 'garden' of experiences of this space (Fig. 6 and in the virtual tour[13]).

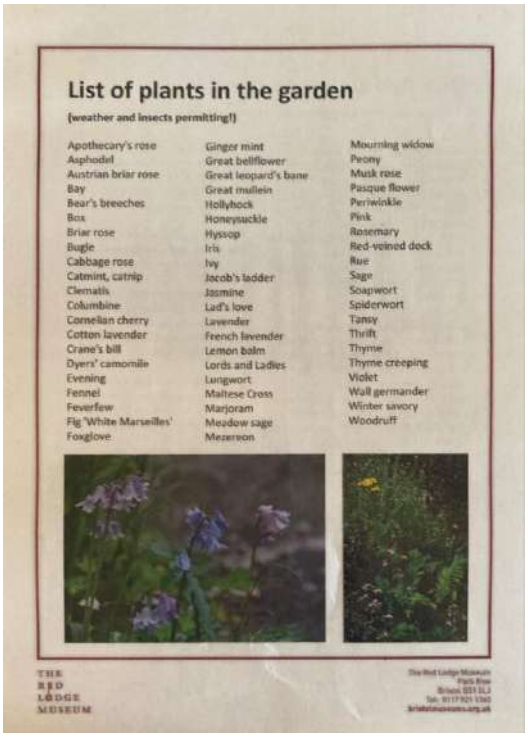

Figure 5. Hall, Kimberly Ellen. Sketches made after the visit to the Red Lodge. October 10, 2024. Ink drawings.

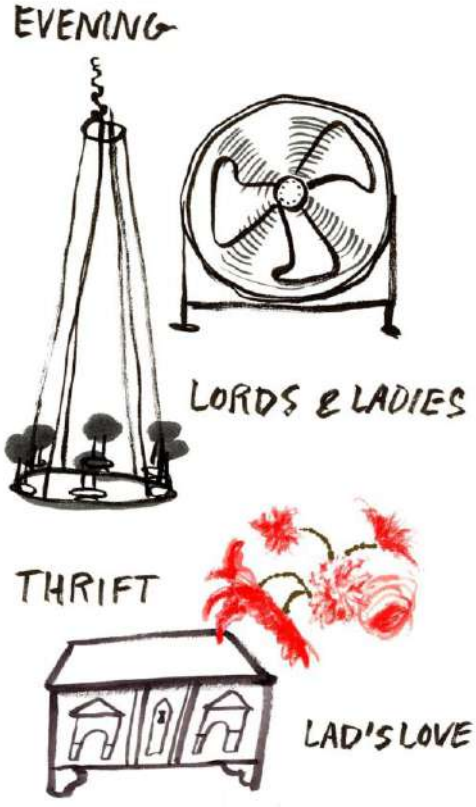

Figure 6. Hall, Kimberly Ellen. The list of plants in the garden at the Red Lodge. September 30, 2024. Photograph.

The ornate ceiling looks like a marshmallow and a mattress. The wooden panelling is almost glitch-like, obsessively repetitive. These sensations – especially if coming from multiple people of different backgrounds, if recorded and updated, can form a collective living archive that could recalibrate the focus of the technology. Whilst acknowledging its histories, it can be used as a way to invite engagement with its weird mixed (im)materiality, challenging the ways virtual tours present the idea of 'access' to archival material.

INTERRUPTING OPERATIONAL IMAGES WITH DRAWING

Finally, we have tried to interrupt the original panoramic photos with our own drawings. We deliberately juxtaposed the sketchy, quick drawings made with traditional materials to the technological smoothness of photography. Exposed imperfection, immediacy, and subjectivity associated with a trace of the hand left with traditional materials was what we felt was in sharp contrast to the qualities of the photographic panoramas in the tour. As Gemma Anderson outlines it, "Drawings not only represent the subject they describe but also the embodied human experience of the seeing process itself".[14] In this respect, including the drawings into the panoramic tour was our way to manifest individual 'insignificant' presence – a way to locate the body within a digitally constructed 'flawless' continuity that feels somewhat static in its commodified state.

The diary-like quality of observations, handwritten and scattered around the digital rooms, are also an attempt to personalise the space, to encounter it on equal terms, to locate the viewer that is otherwise replaced by a blurry void at the poles of the panorama. In our tour, we are trying to emphasise our own presence: through the trace of a hand in the sketchiness of the drawings, noted sounds, and literal depictions of our own bodies in this space, such as a sketch of a leg in a shoe stepping on the squeaky floor.

Interestingly, the source panoramic images are hardly ever viewed separately, as self-sufficient images. Even though they are technically accessible and possible to edit, the way they are used within Theasys web tool, the virtual tour making platform used by the Red Lodge museum, does not suggest such modifications: these panoramas are clearly supposed to move almost instantly from a camera to the virtual tour making app. In other words, they resemble what Harun Farocki and Jussi Parikka call 'operational images': visuals participating in machine-to-machine communication, visuals "drawn from machine-vision systems of perception, embodied and embedded in autonomous or remote systems, working through an artificial environmental relation where the image is a crucial part of movement and guidance".[15]

In our version of the tour, we wanted to interrupt this guidance negotiated between the machines with evidence of embodied presence, flawed and imperfect, inconsistent and patchy, personal, 'unimportant' and ultimately 'silly', but purposefully so. The machine-to-machine procedure, if uninterrupted, creates an opaque technological solid block that is difficult to question, and we tried to make an initial step at unpacking it.

CONCLUSION

Technologically, the virtual tours seem to amplify the biases already present in the museum histories, but what if these technologies were used more critically and transparently, so that these biases are exposed? We tried to interfere into the fabric of panoramic virtual tours and make the collaged, often incoherent and patchy nature of the museum experience more prominent, mixing it with 'less significant' ephemeral personal experiences and observations. If we invite more voices into creating such a virtual tour, maybe it can become more of a 'living archive', rather than a static one.

This proposal of a 'silly archive' can be a way to reimagine the ways virtual tours are used in the museum context and be transparent about the biases associated with technology. Bristol Museums aim

"to have open, honest conversations about the complex histories behind our objects, archives and spaces",[16] and maybe this work could be continued in the online spaces as well.

NOTES

[1] The Red Lodge Museum, “Theasys: The Red Lodge Museum Virtual Tour,” *Theasys.io*, 2025, https://www.theasys.io/viewer/0aWhcBuvQuUXQGxvNmHBu3s0TKqsdH/.
[2] Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion*. (MIT Press, 2023), 5.
[3] Tim Barringer, “Empire and the Origins of the Panorama,” *Yale University Press*, January 14, 2021, https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2021/01/14/empire-and-the-origins-of-the-panorama/.
[4] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 167-175.
[5] Marc Augé, *Non-Places : Introduction to an Antropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London ; New York: Verso, 1995), https://monoskop.org/images/3/3c/Auge_Marc_Non-Places_Introduction_to_an_Anthropology_of_Supermodernity.pdf, 78.
[6] Sylvere Lotringer and Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art* (Semiotext(e), 2005), 2.
[7] IPAK Centar, “Jack Halberstam ‘on Behalf of Failure,’” *www.youtube.com*, October 2, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZP086r_d4fc.
[8] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 167-175.
[9] Angela Fischel et al., *The Technical Image: A History of Styles in Scientific Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 19
[10] Ksenia Kopalova and Kimberly Ellen Hall, “‘The Red Lodge Museum’. Theasys Customised Virtual Tour,” *Theasys.io*, December 5, 2024, https://www.theasys.io/viewer/t8XdeQ7XCAb3uapBUMkWAqd0KfPn8z/.
[11] Annet Dekker, *Lost and Living (In) Archives : Collectively Shaping New Memories* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 17.
[12] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham [Etc.] Duke University Press, 2011.
[13] Ksenia Kopalova and Kimberly Ellen Hall, “‘The Red Lodge Museum’. Theasys Customised Virtual Tour. ,” *Theasys.io*, December 5, 2024, https://www.theasys.io/viewer/t8XdeQ7XCAb3uapBUMkWAqd0KfPn8z.
[14] Gemma Anderson, *Drawing as a Way of Knowing in Art and Science* (Bristol: Intellect, 2017), p.21.
[15] Jussi Parikka, “Operational Images: Between Light and Data - Journal #133,” *www.e-flux.com*, February 2023, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/133/515812/operational-images-between-light-and-data/.
[16] Bristol Museums, “Decolonisation,” *Bristol Museums*, n.d., https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/collections/action-on-decolonisation/.

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