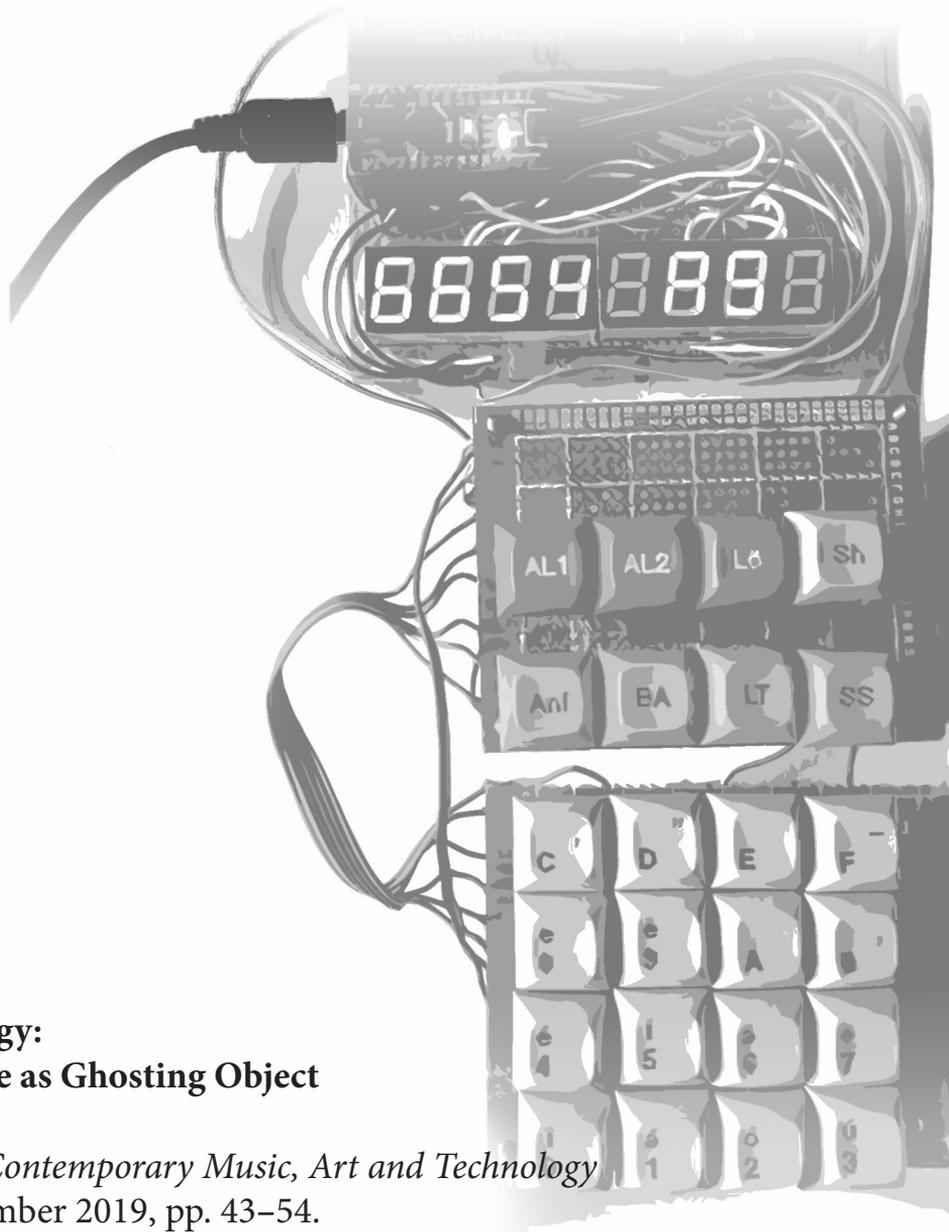


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**Reverse Archaeology:  
Synthetic Surrogate as Ghosting Object**

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## **REVERSE ARCHAEOLOGY – SYNTHETIC SURROGATE AS GHOSTING OBJECT**

**Abstract:** In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the great technological innovation of synthetic plastic matter as a natural materials surrogate created a major shift in postmodern fine arts as in total civilization. Initially invented to preserve endangered natural resources, overtaking the salvific role, fine arts technologists began to make substitutions and copies of artifacts which needed to speak for the original in their protected absence. For the past several decades it has been scientifically proven that these synthetic masses are not biodegradable. They achieve an aura of endurance and become “super-originals”. Where there is a substitute, a synthetic surrogate, the original is in its absence what I call the “ghosting object”. This principle of the indirect comprehension of life and anthropogenic alternations will deeply influence human communication in general. Living in such a mediated, time-relational reality, one of the tendencies identified and presented here is the reverse archaeology approach—making a past-related artifact from the future. Reverse archaeology is about using fragments of past eras to deduce an image of the vanishing world which produced them and generate a fragment of the world to come.

**Keywords:** reverse archaeology, copy, post-artifact, ghosting, shift, boomerang, synthetic, contemporary fine arts

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## I. Modern 1-2-3, post-modern 1-2-3-2-1-3, altermodern 1-2-3-2-1 flowcharts

In the history of art, the epochs of modernity, postmodernity, and the ongoing contemporary period emerging after postmodernity—the “altermodernity”, according to French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (2009)—have had certain overall characteristics which need to be angularly classified here for the sake of the inter-historical and further more trans-historical topic. My point of view in this introduction is (time)relational.

1. The modern period is marked by the prioritization of individualism, originality, the belief in progress and moving forward, or, as the Canadian philosopher Nikolas Kompridis (2006) writes, “a particular relationship to time, one characterized by intense historical discontinuity or rupture, openness to the novelty of the future, and a heightened sensitivity to what is unique about the present” (32).
2. The Postmodern questions and even rejects these grand modern narratives, directly looking back and pointing to them, targeting socially-conditioned value systems and truth for a state of hyper-pluralism and hyper-production on a globally informed level, inevitably meeting and also producing similarities or hybrid identifications by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
3. Then the Altermodern comes as a reaction to global standardization, which is not sustainable in different contexts. This whole idea came with group migrations - through a global path, to exile. *No terra incognita*, so altermodern is now exploring time but in a well-known site-specific manner, thus becoming time-specific.

The modern pursuit of progress can be imagined as a 1-2-3 path, where the cause-and-effect chain is reliable. The “1” stands for the beginning, the early period of the 19th century, “2” for the main or mature period of the 20th century until 1930, and “3” for the late period, from 1930 until the end of the World War II. The advance of thought as a form of liberating enlightenment is the main purpose, installing artists as masters even though the whole world is radiating from the world wars. Being art-referential, consciously and at many points intellectually targeting turns and turn overs, the flowchart remains linear, streaming forwards.

The postmodern critical position includes the previous, counting on it to reject it, looking back and reacting. A 1-2-3-2-1-3 flowchart is a diagram that shows quotation, but characterized by irreverence and the intentional breakage of consistency.

A correlative radical postmodern approach to citing, to 1-2-3-2-1-3 calling in references from pre-contents is the “Noart” concept of Croatian artist and art historian Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos. The line, “Going out or going into the past

who knows if there was any” (Image 1), written with distemper on a panel in the 1970s, depicts the global climate of a certain worried disclosure, the content breakage based on the post-World War II horrible reality. Mangelos’ work is a brilliant reference to this stage of thought; “Noart” is an engaged negation of the past in order to create—painting black globes on globes used in schools for learning geography and painting lines like those in a notebook on wooden panels, and writing on them in cursive, symbolically showing the process of learning how to write (history) again.

The postmodern diagram has many combinations: 1-2-3-1-3-2, 1-2-3-2-1-3,

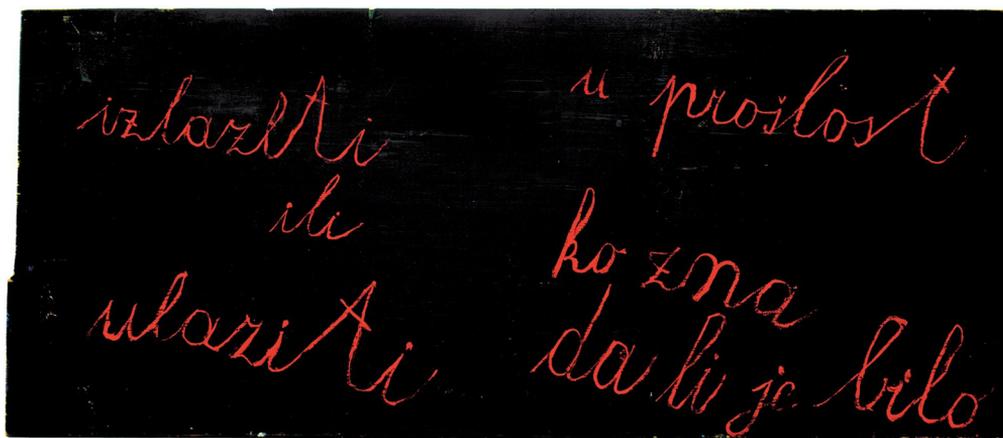


Image 1. Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos “Going out or going into the past who knows if there was any”, opus 1971-1977, distemper on panel. Marinko Sudac Collection

1-2-3-2-3-1, 1-2-3-1-1-1, 1-2-3-2-2-2, 1-2-3-3-3-3, 1-2-3-1-2-2, 1-2-3-1-3-3, 1-2-3-2-1-1, 1-2-3-2-3-3, 1-2-3-3-1-1, 1-2-3-3-2-2, 1-2-3-3-1-1, 1-2-3-3-1-2 and 1-2-3-3-2-1 (which I use as the backbone flowchart for the altermodern). What this short algorithm game depicts are the possible referential variables of three modern periods: early, mature/main, and late, where the information from the past is taken from a given order and problematized/questioned on all possible levels. To be more precise with this flowchart idea, I’ll use very precise examples, focused only on painting to be consistent. The principle works so that 1-2-3-1-1-1 could stand for postmodern 70s minimalism that has taken elements from the early modern period. The combination 1-2-3-2-2-2 is the same, but refers to elements from the mature modern period, and 1-2-3-3-3-3 refers to the late modern period. A precise postmodern flowchart example, 1-2-3-3-3-2, could stand for a postmodern 80s hard-edge painting by Sean Scully, where he links with the late modern painter and printmaker Giorgio Morandi—not only his palette, his silent but sensual brushstroke technique, but the complete atmosphere. Combinations such as 1-2-3-3-2-2 communicate with phenomena of the late modern period, that is linked to (grown on) some mature modern practice, technique, or any part of the approach. Here I can give the example of the whole Pop-art period, that takes popular subjects from the late modern period, and uses printmaking techniques and comic book

fragments invented in the mature modernism period. Another one closer to the painting technology itself is the 1-2-3-1-2-2 example of Yves Klein developing the International Klein Blue color with the French paint supplier Edouard Adam in 1960, which was basically a mixture or rather a modification of a blue synthetic pigment, invented in the early modern period of the 19th century, called ultramarine. International Klein Blue or IKB color is basically the ultramarine pigment mixed with the polyvinyl acetate resin binder, marketed as “Rhodopas M” at the time. The invention of the color and very beginning of its use occurred in the last modern period, so the recipe was a secret and even mystified as a whole new kind of color, which was very appropriate for Klein’s transcendental work. It seemed very different, because the polymer resin made it matte, unlike the glossy surface of oil paint with the same pigment.

This relational web of mine could go on forever, but the main purpose of pointing out the *time-relational perspective* post-festum is clear. This point of view is a throwback-type analysis from the present, a compressed referential comparison, to point out the timeline of periods or individuals *in relation* to some or any other, forming the ground for the view into contemporarity that is a reaction on past orders.

The end of postmodernity arrives as an exhaustion of (artificial) resources. This ultra-loud era of the possible-done principle adopted from the quick and easy use of new synthetic super-handly materials and an urge towards the immediate that it has created; the instant networking it has tremendously helped to develop; the omnipresence of the legitimacy—have quickly imposed matchings and look-alikes everywhere, copies and doppelgangers. The main ambitious global purpose of this—let’s call it “auto-exile”—comes from decentralization, traveling, and hyper visibility, to inject an idea in a body in motion, elsewhere-everywhere. The structure between the origin, the body, and the content then holds a gap. It’s an absent-minded matter: artists have a tendency to orbit rather than touch down and create a central hub. As noted, the French curator Bourriaud calls this era “altermodern.” He wrote a manifesto and curated the Tate Triennial, with the works of 28 artists, ten years ago in 2009. The altermodern thinks in terms of hyperlinks, continuous updating in migrations and travelling; it is most definitely postcolonial and transitional. To try to sum up his Manifesto in few key ideas and terms, that are important for the rest of the article, according to Bourriaud (2009), the new modernity is emerging, the new universalism based on translations, subtitling, migrations, creolization, transpassing, “materializing trajectories rather than destinations” (34), and most importantly, it is a time-specific era rather than a site-specific work of the 1960s. Artists wander in this historical web of observations, putting only the viewer in the center. Travelling in time makes time-referential trans-context which is the main framework in which reversed archaeology is possible.

We are facing the many outcomes of globalization, the problem of identifying, implementation, standardization, where the body and local reality cannot hold the

same injected idea within. Traveling, wandering in time and space, many artists point out this condition, leaving it open, simply marking it, but there is also an evident stream in this global school movement, in this sort of international art, that criticizes standardization and commercialization in the craving for originality, authenticity, focus, relevancy, importance, endurance (clearly elements of modernity); a visible tendency of the contemporary feedback or boomerang profiling, the 1-2-3-2-1 flowchart. In the Tate Triennial 2009 exhibition, artist Walead Beshtley's glass boxes, Fed-Exed across the globe, broken in transit, and exhibited out of function as sculptures, can assure us of the meaning of this reaction. Going further and then taking it back engaged in novelty is the approach in the core of my interest among altermodern phenomenon here – the reversed archaeology.



Image 2. Jean-Léon Gérôme "Pygmalion and Galatea", 1890. oil on canvas.  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City  
Collection

The painting, "Pygmalion and Galatea," by Jean-Léon Gérôme (Image 2) is about an artist falling in love with his sculpture, the ideal woman, white as milk, that he has created for himself. Even though it is a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting, the image is somehow striking in this decade, not only due to its context of an artist falling in love with a classically made piece of art, a motionless stone that contains future emotional ideals within. But, if we briefly pull it out from its origin, it's an image of "transcoding" (Bourriaud 2009, 14), an altermodern image of trans-contextualism and the imposed question of converting formats.

The tremendous impact of science in the third millennium, especially of

informational technologies and molecular chemistry and physics, has given us a profile of the global condition, and I will try to offer some possible reasons for the genesis of this reverse archaeology phenomenon in the fine arts—this future past situation from my point of view as a fine arts technologist—regarding the life of the matter itself, the synthetic surrogate outcomes.

## II. The Anthropocene age – plastic age

Since 1945, the tremendous, invasive increase of synthetic plastic inventions, production, and usage (Image 3), with its countless variations and extensions, has been the direct cause of the emerging new age called Anthropocene (Haraway 2016)—the proposed geological epoch in which human activities have come to dominate the planet.

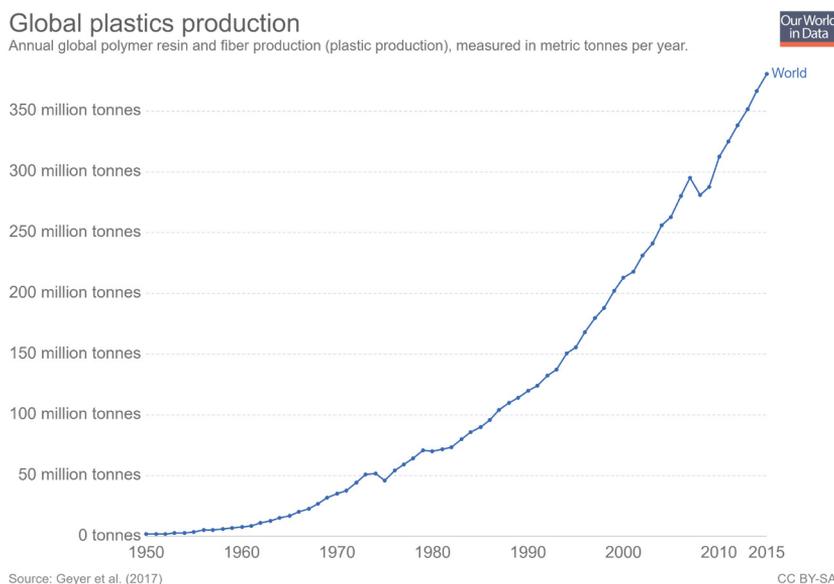


Image 3. Plastics production volume in million metric tons (Geyer et al. 2017)

It is very important to comprehend the enormity of this production in order to understand its impact and ongoing effects. Science gives us incontrovertible signals; there is so much plastic in our waterways and oceans that microplastic particles are now virtually ubiquitous, and plastics will likely leave identifiable fossil records for future generations to discover. Many millions of tons of plastic are discarded every year, and it is broken down into small particles and fibers that do not biodegrade (they stay). Microplastics have been found everywhere, from the deepest oceans to highest the mountains, even the Arctic air. It has a pervasive presence on the planet.

Brandon, Jones, and Ohman (2019), found that since the 1940s, the amount of microscopic plastics in coastal ocean sediments has doubled about every 15 years. In 2010, the most recent year analyzed, the residual content had reached

almost 40 particles per 10x10cm patch of ocean floor. The amount of plastics has reached the fossil record (it is an important issue of 'pollution' in ecology, but here this fact of record quantity in such short period simply empowers the argument of the tremendous impact plastics make worldwide, taken here as a basic premise triggering the shift towards reverse archaeology.) This might be referred to as the *Plastic Age* one day.

In just 50 years, humankind will be dealing with the overwhelming consequences of a new recently invented material; the fact that it is non-degradable means that it has a completely new aura of lasting. When it breaks down into particles, it remains in particles, a phantom taking over. Why a phantom? It doesn't communicate, doesn't engage, and doesn't involve itself in the circulation. But it's there. So here we are again with the problem of altermodernity and globalization, injecting an idea into a body that can't stand it. Synthetic plastics were invented as a replacement in the first place, to preserve the natural resource of ivory; nitrocellulose was invented for piano keys and then later film tapes, and polyamide was invented to replace the silk used for parachutes in the World War II etc. So the outcome is utterly opposite, a paradox according to its reason for being.

We are witnessing the plastic age, which is, as I have hopefully pointed out so far, not only a matter of science and ecology, but, in our interlinking times, a core trigger for the grand shift. The main tendency of recent times is to avoid fuel exploration and the pollution it creates in the process of making. The biodegradable substitutions so far have been corn, potatoes, pines, and even cow manure, used to extract the cellulose and make fibers. The expertise on the negative experience does come from that direction to the international artist's preoccupation. The phenomenon of bio-plastics is a retro-tendency *per se* – taking actions from this point of view, with present knowledge about synthetic plastics but with an urgent need to reengage with natural, organic, classical materials. We wonder if this production of plastics in the last 50 years has produced such an impact after which our state is forever unchangeable. Even if, by magic, all the materials we use are suddenly organic, the residual matter remains.

This prevailing synthetic matter phenomenon is evidently shifting the set up. The surrogate is an imitative artifact, a post-original with the primary role of a super-original, which is confirming the existence of the past-mentioned content only in its absence, thus generating a future image. The accumulation of synthetic matter that is not usable anymore, non-rotting but not circulating, present but not engaging, should be noted and understood within a broader context. Contemporary programs of everyday content/informational sorts call in references from the past into the body of the work, even when it is not applicable; a certain content subaudition, the implying character of things as if understanding it is the function of it (Image 4).

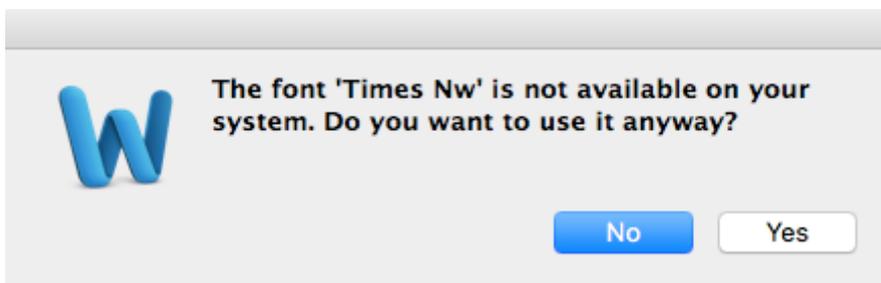


Image 4. MS Word for Mac 2011 pop-up window message to an experiment of typing in an imaginary name of a writing font “Times Nw”, September 2019, screenshot

### III. Reverse archaeology – the contemporary shift

Jumping straight to the most important contemporary, third millennium, civilizational event—the creation of the complete pre-historical cave Lascaux facsimile. It is a brilliant, unrivaled civilizational shift that, in my opinion, is officially a manifestation of reverse archaeology. As conventional archaeology digs into the past, from a fixed point in time, dating the discoveries and placing them in time, reverse archaeology takes the artifact from the past and into the present, and all further investigation continues from this point, in analepsis chronology. How much more exile does it get when you replicate the oldest trace of art in Europe with new technologies to a facsimile in 1:1 ratio, 200m away from the original, physically blocking the original, de-functioning it to a preserved corpse and injecting the ghost of it into a new, synthetic body? The original artifact, thanks to synthetic materials and techniques, has a stuntman now! How was this done?

The cave was closed to the public in 1963, highly endangered after only two decades. It was devastated by millions of visitors changing its conditions of temperature and humidity. The light levels had been stable for millenniums due to the only entrance being closed off by heavy rocks, naturally conserved and thus preserved. Lascaux suffered multiple recent pest attacks, the first in 2001 and the second in 2007. Experts claim that the first emergence of mold was due to an inadequate artificial ventilation system set up in the year 2000. Specifically, the first ventilation system was installed in 1967 and operated successfully until the year 2000, when a new system was installed. The first system had no negative effects due to the lower voltage (100W), and therefore lack of change to the ecosystem of the cave. The second, from 2000, was evidently overpowered, leading to the disruption of conditions and mold appearance after only few months operating. Expert microbiologists from the *Laboratoire de recherche des monuments historiques* (LRMH) worked on eliminating microorganisms with fungicides, but due to poor selection of fungicides (*Devor Mousse*) in 2007, black mold spread in the form of stains in multiple places within the cave, covering segments of the image. A study published in 2012, in the journal “Fungal Biology,” classifies pests as fungi, called *Ochroconis*, *O. lascauxensis* and *O.*

*Anomala*, similar to molds in the bathrooms of today's households, which feed on carbon and nitrogen. *Devor Mousse* is a concentrated solution designed to radically remove moss, lichen, and fungus, especially in the long-term treatment of roofs, walls, floors, stairs, and playgrounds, as the product ad states. But "this fungicide does contain benzalkonium chloride, which degrades the form of nitrogen and carbon and promotes the development of these fungi" (Martin-Sanchez, Nováková, Bastian, Saiz-Jimenez 2012, 574). The conditions are stable to this day. The fungi do not spread, but only specialists are allowed to enter.

In 1983, the artificially replicated Lascaux, called Lascaux II, was opened to the public, 200 meters from the original cave. Lascaux II is truly a technical feat. The walls of the cave were reproduced in 3D, in millimeters of exactness. The modeling of the cave took many months at the *Atelier de Fac-Similés du Périgord* (AFSP), on the outskirts of Montignac. For a full impression of authenticity, a mineral layer was also applied to the concrete base, and the patina was made with a mixture of clay and powdered glass. Around 90% of the wall paintings of Lascaux were replicated. The Bulls Hall and the Axial Gallery were convincingly reproduced by the painter Monique Peytral, with earth pigments from the Régourdou site in Montignac, and using the primitive techniques of Lascaux. The *Atelier de Fac-Similés du Périgord*, organized by the General Council of Dordogne and composed of 25 experts, produced new parts of the Lascaux replica (as well as the Ekain cave paintings in Spain), and, since 2012, there is the traveling exhibition "Lascaux III - L'exposition Itinérante." This exhibition shows a 1:10 model of previously unreproduced parts of Lascaux, and a new 3D technique called stone veil where the base is made of synthetic resin polystyrene and glass mineral wool and then painted. Each panel requires several months of work. This impressive exhibition (planned to be active at least until 2020) shows 15 tactile installations, 3DHD projections, maps and other elements for exploring Lascaux.

Since 2014, the same Atelier have been making a replica of the complete Lascaux cave, with all the wall paintings, called Lascaux IV. Selected from over 150 teams from around the world, this AFSP team created this facsimile, and it was opened in June 2016 as an essential part of the Montignac-Lascaux Parietal Art International Center (CIAP) complex. Stages of this process were shown on the official website [www.projet-lascaux.com](http://www.projet-lascaux.com).

As the original Lascaux (do notice how artifacts can take this prefix "original" today) is the beginning of civilization, the articulation-creation, now the surrogate Lascaux is a perfect image of the shift (intentionally avoiding the term "beginning" of something new). The synthetic Lascaux is there as a stuntman, proving the protected-excluded existence of the original from the past, with the promise of resistance to tremendous consumption. The Lascaux IV is illustrating the thesis of the Plastic Age, nevertheless of the consequences of its use and scientific alarms that are surely already modifying the idea of synthetic materials, even though stable hard biodegradable plastics like polystyrene here haven't been invented yet.

In my recent paper, “Analepsis Chronology: How Did Development of Technology Lead to the Future Past,” I wrote about how our key need is a structural source investigation of the state of mediated experience. Such a floating placement of content, meaning, and appearances, has relativized the beginning. Such an order is the basic postulate of analepsis chronology.

The sense of this shift has been present throughout the last several decades, in many artwork preoccupations. It is not only a concept in fine arts preservation technologies. The impact of synthetic matter and the development of consumerism leads to understanding effects its effects in different context; it is not necessarily about synthetic matter reproducing or imitating the natural one. It would even be boring to talk now about organic plastics in art and the use of biodegradable materials as a future projection of a happy end. I deliberately avoid any allusion to solutions. It is far more interesting to look into examples where the impact is more second-hand, informing the bigger picture: our present reality. One of the most interesting and direct reverse archaeologist-artists is the Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone (Image 5), originating from the Italian Arte Povera. Penone uses various materials that imitate others, with the actual original material displaying the simulation. His most explicit series of works as an artist-reverse archaeologist are those in which he uses wasted old trunks of wood (waste is a well-known global issue of consumerism and capitalism) and sculpts or carves trees inside of them, as if he is going back in their timeline, reaching their core, their past, their youth (“Cedar of Versailles” comes from this series of many works). He goes in to reach their first formed rings, which are the oldest, to point out the issue of an absent soul. He purely displays his efforts, trying to raise an image of life within. Carving (an image of) life back into a corpse is the boomerang 1-2-3-2-1 flowchart.

The global movement of applying content in different contexts has encountered



Image 5. Giuseppe Penone working on his work “Cedar of Versailles”, Turin, 2000. Photo: Penone Archive for Art Basel Unlimited, June 2019, catalogue Messe Basel

problems of sustainability. This is why the postmodern shifts to another era in which humanity criticizes standardization and neglectful consumerism, consulting some portions of previous times, mostly modernity. There is a certain freedom in travelling in time to create the future past. Giving an example of the climax of understanding context as orbiting content, the phenomenon of a flashback object (related to the great usage of synthetic materials), I take the core example of copying the whole prehistorical cave Lascaux in France as artifact to variations of substituted stuntmen versions of it, where the whole content of an art piece is meant to be injected in a new body. But is it fairly implemented? This represents the peak of a consumption mentality and standardization as well as a threshold for the world to come for its informative offer.

The key present issues to think about now in this field of thoughts, and act on in art practice, are the phenomena of noted looping, boomerang, flashback objects, problematizing the orbiting status, the deport, the hi-tech promise and the feedback, the appeared merging and what remains aside, the hybrid flattening and what to do about them. Artists in exile are becoming aware of the shift from artwork to alter-artwork. It is a very interesting and relevant contemporary subject of incorporating, whatsoever, or as Donna Haraway suggests “making kin” (Haraway, 2016). The reverse archaeology boomerang, one of the noted major tendencies, lies in the feedback use of fragments of past times, with different proportions of the time-arc, deducing an image of the vanishing world which produced them and presenting it in the present to generate a fragment from the world to come.

To remain in a 1-2-3-2-1 time-relational loop that relativizes the beginning, I will now quote myself constructing the thought about the reverse archaeology ghosting object: “It holds a known, absent being,  $n+1$ ” (Kuštrić 2019, 237).

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## **REVERSE ARCHAEOLOGY - SYNTHETIC SURROGATE AS GHOSTING OBJECT (summary)**

Reverse archaeology is a term inaugurated in this paper that marks a certain time-relational concept in the 21st century art, especially in the ongoing decade. Researching the development of synthetic matter from the second half of the 20th century, I tracked the line of the tremendous impact it has created in art as well as mass media and everyday life. Synthetic plastics were invented in late modernism in order to substitute endangered natural resources and then broadly applied worldwide through postmodernism, in such record amounts that it has created a certain civilizational shift towards a new period, the altermodernism according to N. Bourriaud. The record widespread utilization of these materials with fast and easy usage has led to creating shortcuts in our everyday communication, an imperative toward the instant. An indisputably wonderful, sophisticated contemporary feat is the making of synthetic facsimile of the whole prehistoric cave Lascaux in France in 2016, copied in 1:1 ratio, with less than 1mm deviations from the original, whereas the access to the original cave itself is closed for public from 1963. I call this contemporary relation of calling in a certain content that is known indirectly and realized in its absence: a flashback, orbiting; and this synthetic post-artifact: ghosting object. The Lascaux facsimile is surely a crown for the salvific role given to synthetic plastics in substituting endangered natural materials, facing one of the first known human habitations and works of art. It has clarified many previous aspirations regarding synthetic technology, showing the ultimate status of the contemporary society, of the Anthropocene age. Explaining the genesis of the beautiful “Lascaux case”, I take this post-artifact as a manifest of the reverse archaeology.

I also point out that this impact of synthetic technology has evidently created a massive imperative of standardization. This standardization in mass culture practically means being under a consumerist imperative to apply contents in different bodies elsewhere to be broadly consumed. Today we live in times questioning fair implementation and whether different life circumstances can sustain the content in exile, can it be effective in different body performances and contexts. Having tremendous control in communication, mobility, data access, travels, artists-nomads are familiar with the spatial territory and worried about the time-related issues of consumption and endurance. This approach has created time-specific works, unlike site-specific works created in the 1960s onwards. As an example, I take sculptures of Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone, but also less obvious and more intriguing trans-disciplinary examples, regardless of belonging to an actual discipline and period, pointing out the content availability, its mobility and relationism.

Unlike futurists who were streaming forward, amazed by new technologies no matter what, reverse archaeologist manipulates time as well as space, using contemporary technologies, but engaging vital fragments from the past, creating a future past. Getting critical reports on many instances of global standardization: material but also spiritual limits, artists express their ethical concerns. Reverse archaeologist speaks from today, engages fragments from the vanishing world of the past to deduce an image of the world to come.

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