

VALUE OF THE COPY: HYBRID PEDAGOGY, REPRODUCTION, AND INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART EDUCATION

Authors:

MICK FINCH, MARTIN WESTWOOD, ELIZABETH WRIGHT

Affiliation:

CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS COLLEGE OF ART, THE UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

INTRODUCTION

This article examines *Value of the Copy*, a hybrid pedagogical initiative in fine art education that rethinks international exchange, reproduction, and the contemporary studio. Initiated at Central Saint Martins (University of the Arts London) in collaboration with Beaux-arts, Paris, and realised with the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, and the Glasgow School of Art, the project emerged in response to restricted international mobility following the COVID-19 pandemic and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Erasmus programme.¹ Rather than replicating mobility-based exchange, *Value of the Copy* develops an expanded studio model that operates across institutions, collections, physical sites and digital platforms.²

Through a combination of online studios, locally embedded site-based teaching, and experimental engagement with analogue and digital reproductive technologies - plaster casts, copies, scans, paper squeeze casts, photography - the project positions reproduction as both a pedagogical tool and a critical object. In doing so, it reframes debates around originality and aura, most notably articulated by Walter Benjamin, while reframing these concerns within a pedagogical rather than purely aesthetic register.³ The article argues that *Value of the Copy* offers a scalable and sustainable framework for international art education, aligning teaching, research, and knowledge exchange while foregrounding questions of heritage, decoloniality, and the politics of reproduction.

Value of the Copy ran for two successive academic years between 2022 and 2024. It has produced several splinter projects that run through Central Saint Martins' BA Fine Art course and its Research and Knowledge Exchange departments. The authors wrote an internal report in mid 2025 and the project is currently being considered for scaling up within University of the Arts, London.

ORIGINS AND CONTEXT

Value of the Copy emerged in 2022 at the intersection of immediate institutional pressures and longer-term pedagogical concerns.⁴ While pandemic-related travel restrictions and the loss of Erasmus funding provided the immediate impetus, the project was shaped equally by three ongoing conditions within fine art education.

First, it drew upon a legacy network of Erasmus partners, developed through the BA Fine Art course at Central Saint Martins. This network reflects what Etienne Wenger describes as a "community of

practice,” in which shared activity over time produces common values, methods, and tacit knowledge.⁵ Second, the project responded to increasing uncertainty surrounding the status of plaster cast collections - once central to academic training, but increasingly marginalised as museums and art schools reassess Eurocentric canons and colonial legacies. Third, it acknowledged the continued importance of reprographic processes within contemporary art practice, aligning with Rosalind Krauss’s argument that modern and postmodern art is deeply structured by logics of repetition, indexing, and reproduction.⁶

The Copy in Historical and Contemporary Perspective

Historically, plaster casts functioned as pedagogical surrogates, enabling access to canonical forms without the need for travel. As André Malraux famously proposed in his concept of the *musée imaginaire*, reproduction allows artworks to circulate beyond their original contexts, reshaping art history itself.⁷

Contemporary digital facsimiles perform a comparable function. Advances in three-dimensional scanning, photogrammetry, and digital modelling have renewed debates around authenticity, access, and conservation. By linking historic casting practices with contemporary digital reproduction, *Value of the Copy* positions the copy as an active agent within pedagogy mediating between past and present, material and virtual, local and international.

STRUCTURE AND METHODS

A Hybrid Model of International Exchange

Rather than attempting to replicate traditional exchange programmes, *Value of the Copy* adopted a hybrid structure combining remote international collaboration with locally embedded, site-based teaching.⁸ This model aligns with emerging research on hybrid learning, which emphasises the value of combining synchronous digital interaction with materially grounded, situated learning.

Two interconnected modes of engagement structured the project. Monthly online studio meetings brought together students, academic staff, technicians, and curators from all four institutions. These sessions functioned as shared critique spaces, emphasising dialogue, peer learning, and non-hierarchical discussion. Alongside this, each institution organised in-person workshops, site visits, and teaching activities grounded in their own collections and facilities whilst ideas of the copy and reproduction provided a conceptual framework uniting dispersed and different local contexts.

Activating Historic Study Collections

A defining feature of *Value of the Copy* was its engagement with historic study collections composed of reproductions. Each partner institution worked with a distinct collection shaped by its own institutional history. Rather than treating these collections as obsolete remnants of academic training, the project reframed them as sites of critical inquiry.

This approach aligns with recent scholarship in museum studies that argues for the activation of collections through use, reinterpretation, and artistic intervention.⁹ Scholars such as Elizabeth Edwards have emphasised that reproductions are not secondary objects but have their own material, social, and affective lives.¹⁰ By situating cast collections within contemporary studio practice, *Value of the Copy* challenged distinctions between original and copy, archive and studio, preservation and production.

Pedagogy

The pedagogy of *Value of the Copy* was organised around three central components. Monthly international studio meetings provided continuity and collective reflection; contextual lectures and object-based learning introduced students to historical, theoretical, and ethical frameworks surrounding reproduction; and technical workshops supported skill development in analogue and digital processes, including casting, photogrammetry, and printmaking.

This structure reflects principles of object-based learning, which emphasise close engagement with material artefacts as a catalyst for critical thinking and creative production.¹¹ By combining object-based pedagogy with digital platforms for collaboration, the project extended the studio beyond a single physical location, aligning with expanded studio models increasingly discussed within art education research.¹² The flexible framework enabled adaptation to each school's pedagogical approach, from the atelier system at BA to the modular system at CSM.

Through site-responsive learning, local, site-specific resources functioned simultaneously as research material and expanded studio environments, fostering the synthesis of object-based and spatial practices and enabling a methodological shift from object-focused study to architectural and organisational scales of inquiry. Within this structure, the project framework also operated as a model for collaboration across specialisms, recognising and activating intersections between fine art, curation, museology, technology, social practice, and heritage.

STUDY COLLECTIONS

Victoria and Albert Museum and Beaux Arts, Paris

Across the four partner art schools, the material character and institutional histories of their collections varied significantly, and this diversity is worth expanding upon here. During the first phase of the project, Central Saint Martins worked with the Victoria and Albert Museum's Cast Courts and reprographic collections as its primary point of reference. Alongside plaster casts, these holdings include metal electrotpe reproductions, underscoring the V&A's long-standing engagement with multiple reproductive technologies.

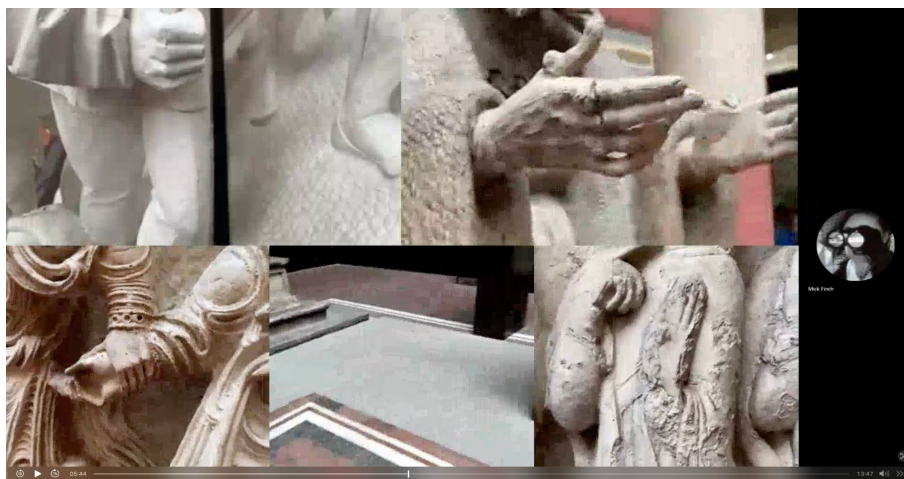


Figure 1. Victoria and Albert Museum livestream/remote workshop. Mosaic of participant's call-windows using Microsoft Teams, 22nd February 2025

Opened in 1873, the Cast Courts provide a crucial historical lens through which to understand why and how copies became central to nineteenth-century museum and pedagogical practice. The Courts served not only a museum public - many of whom lacked the means to undertake the Grand Tour - but also functioned as a study collection for what would later become the Royal College of Art, whose

studios were housed within the same building. Early curatorial strategies reinforced this pedagogical role by displaying photographs of original works in situ alongside their casts, foregrounding both origin and translation.

Although the Cast Courts were designed to house monumental works such as Trajan's Column - famously divided into two sections to be accommodated by the architecture - their curatorial emphasis increasingly included a constructed narrative of a British Renaissance. Following the Great Exhibition of 1851, the transfer of artefacts into the V&A further reinforced this shift. Reproduction thus operated not simply as a tool of access, but as a means through which national cultural identity was inserted into a broader narrative of European civilisation.

A comparable yet distinct logic operates within the plaster cast collection housed in La Chapelle des Petits-Augustins at the Beaux-arts, Paris. Here, casts are shown alongside copies of paintings, with French Renaissance works curated in proximity to those of the Italian canon. The synoptic power of reproduction is evident in the way figures such as Jean Goujon and Michelangelo are positioned as conceptual peers, collapsing geographical and historical distinctions through curatorial adjacency.

Beaux-arts, reconstituted as a republican institution in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and later operating across successive political regimes - including the Restoration, the Second Empire, and subsequent republics - used these collections as instruments for training artists within aesthetic frameworks that aligned with shifting state ideologies. In both Paris and London, cast collections functioned as pedagogical engines through which political authority, imperial ambition, and cultural hierarchy were reproduced and naturalised within national institutions.

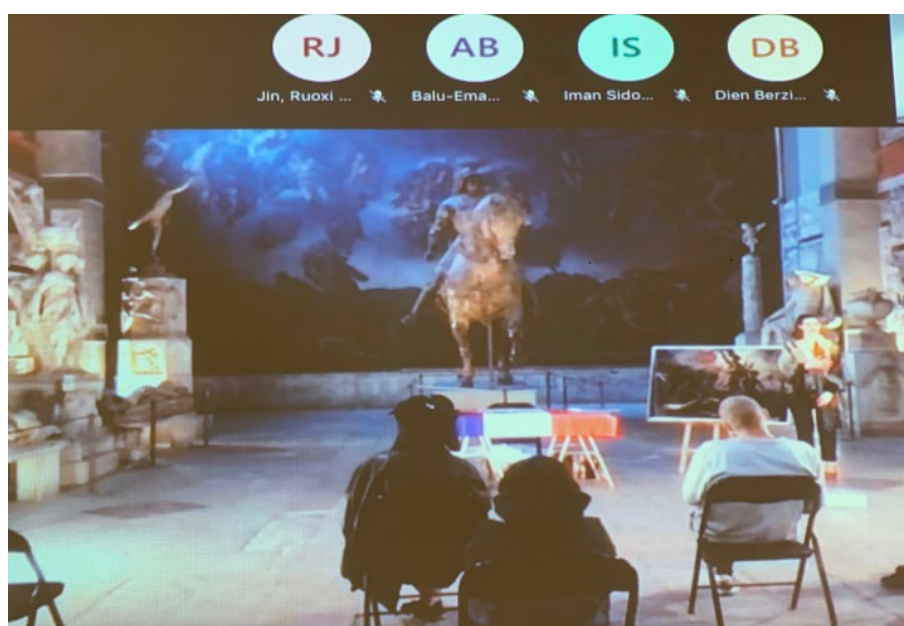


Figure 2. Video-call window from Microsoft Teams facilitated livestream/remote workshop: performance at Beaux-art livestreamed to 'Vestibule' exhibition event at Lethaby Gallery, Central Saint Martins, 19th January 2023

Contemporary processes of decolonisation invite a critical re-engagement with these collections, not as obsolete teaching tools, but as contested sites of historical and ideological production. Within *Value of the Copy*, the Victoria and Albert Museum's Cast Courts and La Chapelle des Petits-Augustins emerged as complex pedagogical terrains, offering insight not only into how imperial cultural representation was historically constructed, but also into how these artefacts continue to operate - and be reinterpreted - within the present.

Central Lettering Record at Central Saint Martins



Figure 3. Reflectance Transformation Image of paper squeeze cast from the Central Lettering Record, Central Saint Martins

In the second year of the project (academic year 2023-24), Central Saint Martins shifted its engagement from the Victoria and Albert Museum's Cast Courts to the Central Lettering Record. Established in 1963 by Nicholas Biddulph, the collection comprises over 13,000 artefacts - primarily photographs - documenting diverse lettering styles organised by function and is now housed within the Central Saint Martins Museum and Study Collection. It also includes paper squeeze casts of ancient Roman stone inscriptions made by Nicolette Gray in the 1970s. These lightweight casts were intended to challenge the dominance of Trajan Roman as the perceived epigraphic ideal of antiquity, and to broaden typographic histories through processes of collecting, categorising, and reclassification. Produced by pressing damp paper into carved stone inscriptions and allowing it to dry, squeeze casting offered students both a rapidly adaptable reprographic technique and a model of historical research grounded in material translation and critical reinterpretation.

Glasgow School of Art and The Royal Academy of Art, The Hague

Glasgow School of Art's collections offered a markedly different perspective from the more normative conditions found in London and Paris. The School's iconic nineteenth-century Mackintosh Building was severely affected by two fires, events that fundamentally reshaped both its physical fabric and its study collections. The first fire caused significant but localised damage, prompting the building to be comprehensively documented using photogrammetry. During this period, the cast collection was dispersed: intact works were relocated to temporary teaching spaces, while damaged casts were moved into reserve.

The condition of the casts following the first fire varied considerably, ranging from undamaged to smoke-affected or partially fire-damaged. While restoration and conservation work on the Mackintosh Building was underway, a second fire occurred, devastating the structure and leaving only the external walls intact. As a result, the photogrammetric scan produced between the two fires has assumed an unforeseen significance.

Within *Value of the Copy*, this digital record functioned as a contemporary addition to the School's study collection, providing students with access to a version of the building and its collections that no

longer physically exists. The catastrophe thus transformed the status of the reprographic: the scan does not merely document loss but operates as a pedagogical artefact. As such, it constitutes an extraordinary resource whose potential for future teaching, research, and artistic practice warrants sustained exploration.



Figure 4. Basement of The Royal Academy of Art, The Hague in 2024 with remains of casts vandalised in student protest of 1968

The Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, offers a further variation on the relationship between reproduction, institutional ideology, and catastrophe. Its Functionalist building, opened in 1938, was designed with dedicated spaces for a plaster cast collection. At the time, the Academy's director opposed the inclusion of this nineteenth-century pedagogical apparatus within an institution that sought to align itself with modernist cultural values. Although his objections were overruled, the collection remained marginalised, perceived as a residue of an earlier academic model.

The subsequent occupation of the Netherlands by Nazi forces in May 1940 marked a sharp ideological reversal. Modernist values were displaced in favour of classical Greco-Roman aesthetics, and the Academy's cast collection - unlike those in London or Paris - contained substantial classical holdings that aligned closely with the cultural ideology of the occupying regime. During this period, reproduction was reactivated as a tool of ideological formation, demonstrating how the pedagogical status of casts could be rapidly reconfigured in response to political power.

A further rupture occurred in 1968, when a significant portion of the cast collection was destroyed during a protest organised by the Provos, a Dutch anarchist activist group. For decades, the event persisted within the Academy as rumour: fragments were said to have been buried somewhere within the building, possibly beneath a courtyard. This narrative resurfaced prior to *Value of the Copy*, when discussions between Mick Finch of Central Saint Martins and staff and students of Beaux-arts prompted renewed interest in the collection's fate.

The story gained material confirmation when an Erasmus student on exchange from Beaux-arts, Robin Whitehouse, located a substantial cache of cast fragments buried beneath an earth-floored basement at the Academy. Following formal permission to excavate the site, these fragments became both the material basis of Whitehouse's degree exhibition and a focal point of collaboration across the four institutions participating in *Value of the Copy*. The rediscovery transformed what had been an

institutional myth into a tangible pedagogical resource, foregrounding destruction, recovery, and reproduction as central themes within the project.

Across the case studies, a recurring pattern emerges in which study collections move cyclically between phases of pedagogical utility, marginalisation, neglect, and, in some instances, destruction. Their reappearance within the present - as reactivated or recontextualised resources - reveals a significant but often overlooked pedagogical potential. *Value of the Copy* demonstrates how such reactivations enable historic collections to be read not as static remnants, but as participants within an unfolding temporal continuum.

The project also traces shifts across successive phases of reprographic technology, foregrounding how digital methods intersect with and extend analogue holdings. Through processes such as scanning, photogrammetry, and digital modelling, artefacts are not simply preserved but re-membered - reassembled and reactivated - within new pedagogical and conceptual frameworks. In this sense, reproduction operates as a temporal bridge, linking past educational practices with contemporary modes of learning and collaboration.

OUTCOMES

Peer Learning and Cross-Cultural Exchange

One of the project's most significant outcomes was the formation of international peer networks. Pairing students across institutions fostered collaborative relationships and frequently produced hybrid works combining different cultural and pedagogical approaches. Such peer-to-peer learning aligns with constructivist models of education, which emphasise knowledge production through social interaction rather than didactic instruction.

Students gained insight into differing pedagogical traditions: the atelier model in Paris, study-group structures in The Hague, workshop-based extracurricular cultures in Glasgow, and digitally oriented object-based learning in London. This comparative awareness reinforced the project's emphasis on pedagogy as culturally situated rather than universal.

Sustainability and Future Models of Exchange

Whilst this teaching model was developed as an Erasmus alternative it offers distinct differences and advantages over Erasmus and, upon the UK's re-entry into Erasmus, the model should be considered as developing a complimentary form of remote institutional and cohort to cohort engagement that exceeds the individual student exchange of the Erasmus programme. By reducing reliance on physical travel while maintaining meaningful international collaboration, *Value of the Copy* offers a sustainable alternative to traditional exchange programmes. Its cohort-to-cohort model shifts emphasis from individual mobility to collective exchange, aligning with calls for more ecologically responsible approaches to international education. *Value of the Copy* provides an in-house alternative to conventional internships, extends student's continuing professional development and mitigates financial, geographic, visa and disability-related barriers to participation.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE, RESEARCH, AND TEACHING

Value of the Copy exemplifies an integrated approach to teaching, research, and knowledge exchange. Knowledge exchange, understood as a two-way flow between universities, cultural institutions, and wider publics, is increasingly recognised as a core function of higher education.¹³ Through exhibitions, public programmes, and collaborations with curators and technicians, the project embedded this principle within its pedagogical design.

All partners used the project to integrate public-facing and research-oriented work. The project offers increased potential for community engagement: Beaux-art's use of La Chapelle for public

presentations; The Royal Academy of Art, The Hague's integration of *Value of the Copy*'s thematics within a study group and Central Saint Martin's use of the Lethaby Gallery to host an active place of experimentation, collaboration and inter-connectivity. These approaches united remote partners and local publics offering models for embedding this work beyond the immediate institutions.

Toward the end of the project's second phase, Central Saint Martins initiated contact with the Accademia di Brera in Milan. Professor Nicoletta Leonardi, whose research focuses on the history of photography, has been working extensively with Brera's photographic study collections. Of relevance is a portfolio of photographs historically used by architectural students as drawing references, a practice that closely parallels the use of photographic sources at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

These photographic portfolios also played a significant ideological role during the Risorgimento, functioning as synoptic tools through which typologies of landscape and architecture were mobilised to construct narratives of national identity. As such, they extend the project's broader inquiry into how reprographic media have historically served both pedagogical and political ends.

Although *Value of the Copy* did not engage in direct pedagogical collaboration with Brera, the project contributed to a subsequent funding bid: *Taxonomies of Catastrophe*, led by Central Saint Martins, through which several of *Value of the Copy*'s core concerns were further developed. These ideas have since been integrated into an initiative led by Leonardi entitled *L'ArtNet*, which focuses on the future value of study collections embedded within cultural institutions. The initiative foregrounds the continued pedagogical relevance of such collections and will culminate in a conference at the Accademia di Brera in May, extending the project's network and research trajectory beyond its original framework.

CONCLUSION

Value of the Copy demonstrates how reproduction can serve as a powerful pedagogical framework for contemporary art education. By activating historic collections, integrating digital technologies, and fostering hybrid international exchange, the project reimagines the role of the studio, the museum, and the copy itself. Rather than positioning the copy as secondary to originality, the project reveals reproduction as a site of critical inquiry, cultural negotiation, and pedagogical innovation.



Figure 5. Students participating in an activation event at Beaux-arts, Paris, 2022

NOTES

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5. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
6. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
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11. Helen Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan, eds., *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2016).
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