

Article

Dialogues between Past and Present? Modern Art, Contemporary Art Practice, and Ancient Egypt in the Museum

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Abstract: Whenever twentieth-century modern art or new contemporary artworks are included amongst displays of ancient Egypt, press statements often assert that such juxtapositions are ‘surprising’, ‘innovative’, and ‘fresh’, celebrating the external perspective they bring to such collections. But contemporary art’s relationship with museums and other disciplines needs to be understood in a longer-term perspective. Pairings of twentieth- and twenty-first-century artistic works with objects of antiquity is an activity that has been undertaken for more than a century in what has been a relatively long period of mutually reinforcing influences between modern/contemporary art, museum display, the art market, and Egyptian heritage. Together, they have decontextualised ancient Egyptian culture and shaped the language and perspectives of scholars, curators, and artists. In this paper, rather than considering how artists have been inspired by ancient Egypt, I will give a few examples of how more recent art practices from the late nineteenth century onwards have impacted the language and discourse of Egyptology and its museum representation. Then, using more recent artist engagements with the British Museum, I argue for greater interdisciplinary dialogues between artists and Egyptologists, as both take more critical stances towards research that recontextualises the power and agency of collections, representation, and knowledge production.

Keywords: ancient Egyptian art; contemporary art; institutional critique; modernism; art market; archaeology; British Museum



Citation: Stevenson, Alice. 2024. Dialogues between Past and Present? Modern Art, Contemporary Art Practice, and Ancient Egypt in the Museum. *Arts* 13: 99. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13030099>

Academic Editors: Kathlyn Cooney and Alisee Devillers

Received: 29 February 2024

Revised: 20 May 2024

Accepted: 23 May 2024

Published: 30 May 2024



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1. Introduction

On the night of 22 October 1994, the British Museum’s Egyptian statue gallery was a hive of activity. Security guards looked on with bemusement as a forklift truck bearing sacks of golden sand weaved between the ancient statues before emptying its load onto the gallery floor. A team of university students with wheelbarrows and spades shovelled it into piles, while others, on their hands and knees, set about scraping, patting, and smoothing the soft, powdery mass into neat curves and peaks under the guidance of contemporary artist Andy Goldsworthy (Figure 1). They worked through the night and when dawn broke, raking light flooded into the gallery, illuminating the crest of a massive sand snake presided over by the monumental statue of Rameses II.¹ Three days later, it was gone.

Goldsworthy’s *Sandwork* was part of the exhibition *Time Machine*, a major installation of contemporary art placed alongside the British Museum’s Egyptian antiquities (Putnam and Davies 1994). It was installed at the vanguard of a trend that saw museums of all types inviting artists into their galleries in the 1990s. Such activities are frequently accompanied by overtures that the ancient and the modern are in dialogue. However, the vast majority of exhibitions juxtaposing the ancient and the modern focus only on artists’ engagements with the past (e.g., Ferrari and Hinson 2022; Herzer et al. 1986; Humbert et al. 1994). For Egyptology, the interpretive function of contemporary art in this context is to act as a departure point for the performance of pre-existing Egyptological knowledge, concentrating on the inspiration behind the art rather than how that art might fundamentally question the way in which ancient Egypt might be seen or understood.



Figure 1. Photograph of the construction of *Sandwork* at the British Museum in 1994. Photo by and courtesy of James Putnam.

As Christina Riggs (2023) has observed, the alternative perspectives of contemporary art rarely impinge on the authoritative voice of the institution. Yet as I will argue in the first part of this paper, how Egyptologists have seen and constructed knowledge about ancient Egyptian art has already been significantly shaped by more recent art practice, most notably in the context of modernist art of the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. These art movements often emphasised the formal qualities and direct aesthetic experience of sculpture and form, rather than being drawn into historical narration regarding their original cultural meanings or contexts of use as was being developed in archaeology. In the second part of this paper, I turn to a few ways in which more recent art practice can challenge and disrupt these decontextualising frameworks that have dominated Egyptian art discourse as a result of these modernist trends. Their work can help us resist the over-riding dependence upon connoisseurship in ancient Egyptian art studies by revealing the power of institutional structures and encouraging more critical, empathetic approaches to understanding how past material culture was sensorially experienced and thereby comprehended.

2. The Modernist Milieu: Decontextualisation

Egyptologists and artists have long held close relationships, both personal and professional (e.g., see Garnett 2021). As Moser (2020) and Montserrat (2000) have shown for nineteenth-century history painters, this went beyond unidirectional influence or inspiration. Rather, these relationships were implicated within the creation of archaeological imaginaries and the political subtexts of historical narratives. For instance, the attention that painters like Alma-Tadema paid to minor antiquities mutually reinforced archaeologist Flinders Petrie's advocacy of the value of the small and every day in the archaeological record. He is also credited with emphasising the importance of recording the location and circumstances of a find, what we today in archaeology refer to as 'context', which the Society for American Archaeology defines as the 'relationship that artefacts have to each other and to their surroundings' (<https://www.saa.org/about-archaeology/what-is-archaeology> (accessed on 7 May 2024)). Such reference points permit Egyptologists to make informed inferences about artefacts' dates, how they were made meaningful, and how they were utilized by past peoples.

Petrie himself was greatly enamoured by art nouveau, which provided him with a language and comparative philosophy to describe the finds from Amarna in 1892 (Montserrat 2000, pp. 68–69). In contrast, Petrie was averse to many of the modernist approaches that took hold in the 1920s, launching scathing attacks on the artwork of Jacob Epstein, for instance, as it went against what he considered ‘civilized’ (Challis and Romain 2014). Epstein was one of numerous modernist artists who found inspiration amongst the collections of the British Museum and the Louvre, seeking to break free from the pre-eminence of classical modes of representation and finding fresh perspectives in ‘Pre-Greek’ visual culture, including that from ancient Egypt (Ferrari 2022). Here, the focus became the formal qualities and direct aesthetic experience of sculpture and form, rather than being drawn into historical narration as had been the case for painters like Alma-Tadema.

Such approaches to ancient art were not merely intellectual or aesthetic exercises, but commercial ones as well, with influential dealers blurring the boundaries between collecting fields in the 1910s and 1920s. The Brummer brothers’ gallery, for instance, established in Paris in 1909 by Joseph Brummer and taken over by Ernest in 1921 (Figure 2), developed a reputation for promoting material previously not considered central to the Western art canon by intermixing the arts of Africa with those from Medieval Europe, the classical world, the Americas, the Middle East, and ancient Egypt alongside creations of contemporary artists—Cézanne, Monet, Rousseau, and Picasso, amongst others. Their gallery, along with that of Paul Guillaume (Tythacott 2003), played a key role in establishing African material culture as art by considering it through ‘a purely formalist standpoint that ignored their original meaning and function’ (Biro 2023, p. 157). Egyptian material, of which the Brummers were an important supplier for major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was similarly treated. As Hardwick has pointed out (Hardwick 2023, p. 277), the Brummers’ stock books rarely used Egyptological terminologies, preferring instead to employ universal artistic terms, in turn implicitly emphasising their relationship with material from other cultures and art styles, while creating self-referential artworks that stood apart from their original context. This allowed ancient Egyptian pieces to play a key role in establishing the status and commercial value of African material. As these dealers traded in an eclectic *melange* of contemporary art, ethnology, and antiquities, they could leverage their reputations as connoisseurs of modern art to recast the ethnological as ‘high art’ by asserting a ‘very clear relation to Egyptian aesthetics’ (Apollinaire and Guillaume 1972, p. 2).

Paul Guillaume’s 1926 *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, meanwhile, additionally combined the aestheticization of art with the evolutionary psychology of those such as philosopher and ethnographer Georges-Henri Luquet and psycho-analyst Sigmund Freud. By these means, art analysis sought to uncover a universal unconscious and a continuous ‘will to art’, identified as a primal instinct to produce art shared by children, the mentally ill, and ‘primitive peoples’. Such wider cultural dispositions underpin what is considered one of the fundamental treatises on representation in Egyptian art: Heinrich Schäfer’s *Principles of Art*, first published in 1919 (Baines 1985), which also included attempts to understand Egyptian art through the study of children’s drawings. Schäfer’s interest in modern art remained a subtext in this 1919 volume, but it is the explicit focus of his *Ägyptische und Heutige Kunst* (Schäfer 1928), where he gravitated towards the modernist cubist movement as the most appropriate comparative framework. In this, he drew from the scholarship of Hedwig Fechheimer (1914); (see Peuckert 2014), a German Jewish Egyptologist and art historian who attempted to establish a grammar for ancient Egyptian art that aligned with cubism’s formal language of artistic expression, heeding Cézanne’s call to treat nature according to the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone. Similar arguments can be found in Henri Frankfort’s (1932, p. 40) appraisal of the ‘aesthetic significance of the cubism of Egyptian art’ and in his teaching of Egyptian art at the Oriental Institute in Chicago, which included taking his students to see exhibitions of Picasso’s work (Evans 2012).



Figure 2. Ernest Brummer Gallery, Paris, 1921. Donated to The Metropolitan Museum in 2016 by John Laszlo, nephew of Ella Baché Brummer, wife of Ernest Brummer. Located in The Cloisters Archives. Image in the public domain.

It was not just in the comparative frameworks and language that these Egyptologists echoed modernist sensibilities, but also in the presentation of their scholarship. Fechheimer's publications, for instance, made intensive use of black and white photographs of museum artefacts, which were 'framed in peculiar and unusual ways' influenced by the avant-garde movements of Berlin and Paris (Étienne 2021, p. 33). These modes of presentation are equally evident in lavishly illustrated periodicals of the period such as the one edited by Picasso's publisher, Christian Zervos, *Cahiers d'art*, first launched in 1926, where 'archaic' objects were subject to sumptuous black and white camerawork in full-page reproductions (Kosmadaki 2017), including images provided by Brummer (Biro 2023). Likewise, the short-lived dissident Surrealist magazine *Documents* (1929–30) intermixed photographic collages of ancient material culture, ethnographic objects, and modern art, alongside scholarly articles on archaeology, ethnography, and museums, including contributions by Fechheimer. One of her closest colleagues, the influential art critic Carl Einstein (with whom she visited Egypt in 1910), similarly used striking black and white photos to illustrate his influential book *Negerplastik*, a publication that became a major catalyst for Western avant-garde imaginations and contributed to the establishment of the highly problematic category of 'African art'. And the source of his photographs? The dealer, Joseph Brummer (Biro 2023; Hardwick 2023). In other words, the same sets and styles of photographs were circulated through the Egyptology departments of major museums (as letters from Brummer in archives like those at Penn Museum demonstrate), through the hands of scholars, and through editorial meetings of Surrealist magazines, homogenizing ways of seeing and appraising ancient artefacts. The art market thus fuelled the formalist language of taste and connoisseurship in its mixing of antiquities and modern art, language that survives today entrenched within Egyptological literature and museum catalogues (Riggs 2017; Hardwick 2011).

These decontextualised ways of looking and appraising Egyptian art as autonomous pieces, disconnected from the times and places of their discovery and use, were further shaped by developments in contemporaneous museum exhibition design. Dense and cluttered displays were commonplace throughout the world's museums in the nineteenth century. Museum reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth, however, began to express doubts that these displays served to effectively educate the public. For example, Boston Museum of Fine Art's Matthew Prichard (1904, p. 8), following critics in Europe, advised that the public 'should not be fatigued by being offered too much; for the mere multitude of objects—even of beautiful objects—is exhausting'. Museum leaders in Germany were particularly vocal on these points in their journal *Museumskunde*, arguing that the task of the museum was to create visual tableaux that permitted visitors to hone their aesthetic sensibility and have an empathetic engagement with artworks (Noordegraaf 2004, pp. 91–93). In developing this 'new museum idea' and visual style of display, German art museums followed the lead of commercial galleries with their bright, stylish spaces, together with the modernist design ethos of the famous German art school Bauhaus, established in Weimer in 1919. Such interiors comprised clean lines, simple shapes, and minimal decoration and used modern materials like glass, steel, and concrete (Sheehan 2000, pp. 180–82).

Trends such as these are evident in Heinrich Schäfer's radical interior redesign of the Neues Museum in 1924, which saw the introduction of clean, white spaces in marked contrast to the ornate, Egyptianizing interiors brought in by Karl Lepsius the previous century. The former Greek Courtyard was roofed to form the Amarna Courtyard, providing a plain background with limited labelling for the finds from the workshop of Thutmose. Ninety years before Maurizio Nannucci's ALL ART HAS BEEN CONTEMPORARY bathed the Egyptian antiquities of Munich's Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst in white neon light, the bust of Nefertiti was poised in isolation on an individual plinth, framed primarily as an artwork for visual contemplation as a modern icon rather than evaluation as historical artefact. From here, it has had an expansive afterlife in the world of contemporary art (Brown 2022; Bardaouil and Fellrath 2014).

3. The Rise of Artist Interventions

The power of the museum to frame, mediate, and constitute art objects was famously highlighted by the urinal readymade, *Fountain* (1917), usually, although now debatably, attributed to Marcel Duchamp. In the 1960s, it became celebrated again by artists that came to see museums not simply as a site for artistic inspiration, but also as spaces of critical practice. This was most visibly the case in North American institutions amidst the civil rights movements of that decade. Many of these artists engaged in what was later labelled as 'institutional critique', a method of inquiry that strove to expose the ideological foundations of the museum (Alberro and Stimson 2011; Buchloh 1990; Fraser 2005). The majority of early interventionist exhibitions of this type were staged in modern or contemporary art venues. Placing such works within other types of institutions with permanent collections of natural history, anthropology, fine art, or archaeology did not really feature with any regularity until the mid-1980s.

By the late 1990s, artist interventions had become commonplace in the UK and the US, a trend confirmed by the major survey exhibition *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* at New York's Museum of Modern Art (McShine 1999). In 1995, the UK Museum Association's *Museums Journal* devoted its May issue to artists as curators, showcasing the wide variety of initiatives active in museums across the UK, Europe, and the US. The most prominent example included in these pages, and the one that has retained its status in scholarship as the pre-eminent example of institutional critique, was the mixed-heritage American artist Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society (Corrin 1993). Utilizing artefacts from the storerooms, Wilson challenged the comfortable white, upper-class narrative of the historic house, placing silver repoussé collections and nineteenth-

century furniture beside slave shackles and a whipping post, drawing attention to local untold histories of black and Native Americans.

Notably, Wilson has a long-standing interest in Egypt (where he lived briefly with his father) and the representation of ancient Egypt ([Appiah and Wilson 2006](#); [Boudou 2015](#)). One of his best-known installations, *Re-claiming Egypt*, was first produced for the Fourth International Cairo Biennial in 1992, partly as a response to Martin [Bernal's](#) (1987) *Black Athena*, and included multiple Nefertiti replicas in different hues as part of *Grey Area* (1993). In terms of interventions in more traditional gallery spaces, one of Wilson's earliest involved experimentation with the Egyptian collections at the Seattle Museum of Art in 1993 with his installation *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors*. Here, the traditional museum layout led visitors from Egypt, Greece, and Rome; through to Medieval art and the European Renaissance; then to Europe and America of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in an attempt to disrupt this linear history. One key element of the exhibition remapped Egyptian material onto other parts of the museum: juxtaposing a stone Egyptian bird next to a painting of the Christ child holding a bird; situating an Egyptian sarcophagus lid amongst African masks in the African galleries; and placing Egyptian headrests alongside those belonging to the Masai and Samburu ([Wilson 1994](#)).

The following year, *Time Machine: Contemporary Art and Ancient Egypt* opened in the British Museum's Egyptian sculpture gallery, featuring works by 12 artists placed amongst, and in some cases within, the displayed antiquities ([Putnam and Davies 1994](#)). It is one of the first examples of a major artist intervention directly into museum spaces holding Egyptian collections specifically ([Stevenson Forthcoming](#)). The show comprised original paintings, photographs, multi-media installations, and sculptures in a range of organic and inorganic materials, introducing sounds, smells, and bright colours to the otherwise traditional gallery. Many other UK museums with Egyptian collections have since supported artist residencies, commissions, and interventions, including Saffron Walden Museum ([Tully 2017](#)), the Ashmolean Museum ([Palmer 2008](#)), Bolton Museum ([Devey 2007](#)), and the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology ([Stevenson and Challis 2015](#)).

In Europe, such engagements are more limited in number and more recent in curation, as in Italy and France (e.g., [Avanzo and Mimmo 2014](#); [Putnam 1995](#)), and in Egypt there has only been a single such example of a contemporary art intervention: Art d'Egypt's four days at the Egyptian Museum in 2017 ([Elnozahy 2021](#)). As noted in a more detailed study ([Stevenson Forthcoming](#)), it is primarily in Germany that Egyptian collections have seen sustained engagement with contemporary art (e.g., [Förster 2017a, 2017b](#)). Here, under the influence of Dietrich Wildung and Sylvia Schoske, the philosophy 'art for art sake' has underpinned numerous experiments in Munich's Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst and Berlin's Neuse Museum (e.g., [Schoske and Wildung 2020](#)). Most of these have constituted what might be better described as insertions rather than interventions or institutional critique as they have usually comprised pre-existing works brought into the museum, sometimes to resonate with general themes, but more rarely based on research into the collection or to challenge narratives. For many of these museums, the purpose of bringing in artists is to enliven more traditional modes of display, improve their relevance to modern societies, and expand their audiences ([Putnam 2009](#), p. 202; [Black et al. 2020](#)). For others, artists' work 'remediates' and 'recharges' collections with contemporary meaning, allowing forms of experiment with ways of describing and displaying well-known collections (e.g., [Deliss 2015](#)). These are all valid motivations, albeit contested as they are not always effective. For some, interventions can become superficial acts of museum self-promotion or else a tokenistic performance of criticality when there is no longer term legacy (e.g., [Kwon 2002](#), p. 47; [Theuri 2021](#)). Notwithstanding these concerns, might exhibitions potentially offer more than a rethinking of display and presentation? Could they alter interpretative approaches and perceptions of the subject matter itself?

Classical studies has a burgeoning field of scholarship on the intersections of classical and contemporary art (e.g., [Gallo and Storini 2018](#); [Kiilerich 2021](#); [Squire et al. 2018](#)). Simi-

larly, theoretical trends around questions of agency, materiality, the senses, and memory in archaeology have facilitated a variety of engagements with contemporary art and artists. This includes considering the role of contemporary art as a means of not only communicating the results of academic work to the public and colleagues (e.g., [Cochrane and Russell 2007](#)), but also as a way to produce relevant disciplinary knowledge about the past ([Renfrew 2003](#); [Renfrew et al. 2004](#)). Goldsworthy's artworks, similar to the one described in this paper's opening, for example, have been of particular significance to archaeologists in challenging understandings of art and materiality due to their ephemerality, organic nature, and processes of creation ([Renfrew 2003](#); [Pollard 2004](#); [Mithen 2004](#)). Likewise, for Egyptology I would argue that the primary themes of Goldsworthy's work—growth and decay, construction and deconstruction—form valuable counterpoints to an image of Egypt defined by the endurance of monuments and 'timelessness' and can provide a productive fissure in staid interpretations. Egypt's archaeological record is just as subject to the vagaries of site formation processes as elsewhere, thereby rendering vast swathes of material evidence of past life elusive, particularly organic materials, when not in ideal conditions for preservation. Similarly, the need for perpetuity did not necessarily define all Egyptian monumental construction, and, like Goldsworthy's *Sandwork* in the British Museum, immense amounts of labour could be invested in building projects that were actively decommissioned, as the First Dynasty (c.2900 BC) enclosures at Abydos attest ([Bestock 2008](#), p. 47). Finally, the finished installation was itself a product of the labour of many anonymous individuals, much like the monuments of the pharaohs and the field teams of the archaeologists that removed them ([Quirke 2010](#)).

By examining the work three further artists—Rita Keegan, Gala Porras-Kim, and Sara Sallam—who have also variously engaged with the British Museum's collection like Goldsworthy, I suggest that there are similarly useful prompts that might help us rethink Egyptology's approach to ancient art.

4. Counterpoints in Egyptology: Recontextualisations

4.1. Rita Keegan

As a form of museum intervention, *Time Machine* has been characterized as more 'benign' and 'poetic' than the more radical or critical intentions of institutional critique such as that presented in Wilson's work ([Robins 2013](#)). From the perspective of the twenty-first century, that may indeed seem to be the case, especially considering the more recent reliance upon artists to critically address the 'imperial encasing of the world' by museums ([Sieg 2021](#), p. 207). Nevertheless, within the historical context of London in the early 1990s, this portrayal does not do justice to some of the intentions and effects of elements of the installations which did challenge and disrupt museum regimes of representation. Here, I will focus on one—Caribbean-American Rita Keegan's *Girdle of Isis*—since it provides an example of how artworks might challenge museum presentations and offer an understanding of ancient Egyptian material themselves.

In 1994, the British Museum's sculpture gallery occupied a central location in the museum, with all visitors having to pass through it to access other areas of the collection. The main Robert Smirke gallery, which had provided a grand vista for the display of the largest of the British Museum's Egyptian monuments since the 1830s, including the Rosetta Stone, had been redesigned in 1981, employing a modernist design ethos of granite plinths with grey, sand-blasted concrete for the sculpture bases. The redesign also incorporated side annexes, ones that are no longer present today having been sacrificed for the construction of the Grand Court at the end of the millennium. These alcoves were 'designed primarily to give a more intimate setting allowing smaller objects to be incorporated in the exhibition' and were constructed to 'have a tomb-like character' ([Robert Wade Design Associates 1981](#), p. 6). It was this space that Keegan selected to install her contribution to *Time Machine* as it gave her a 'sanctuary sort of feeling' ([Ovenden 2003](#), p. 357).

Keegan's *Girdle of Isis* comprised three interlinked elements: *The Goddess*, a linear video piece set between a Sekhmet and Tawret statue (Figure 3) using photographs of wall

paintings, tomb paintings, and statues; *Interactive Mummy and Daddy*, responding to the Old Kingdom (2300 BC) statue of Kaitep and Hetepheres (2300 BC) in which she saw a likeness of her parents and beside which she placed family artefacts and photographs; and *Real Time*, which comprised surveillance cameras around the gallery, linking to a split screen monitor showing people interacting with the Egyptian collection to bring the outside of the gallery to the inside of the installation. *The Goddess* was particularly critical. Not only was this a statement by Keegan on female empowerment—‘even though Egyptology and archaeology has had amazing women. . . we just see Indiana Jones’ (Keegan, pers. comm)—it was also a vital rupture in the ocular-centric, decontextualised mode of experiencing Egyptian art cultivated in museum and commercial gallery environments:

. . . what happens in a museum is that you don’t smell it, and life stinks and life smells, like, you know, life smells good, life smells bad and a culture that was so involved in perfumes, to walk through the British Museum and the Egyptian collection and you smell nothing you don’t even smell humanity. (Keegan interview, [Ovenden 2003](#), p. 357)

To redress this, she introduced a bespoke scent based upon recipes from the *Book of the Dead*. This was infused as *pot pourri* scattered on the gallery floor amongst sand that collected around the bases of the Sekhmet statues, filling the space with the smell of frankincense, myrrh, and other spices.



Figure 3. Rita Keegan’s *Girdle of Isis* installation for *Time Machine* at the British Museum in 1994. Courtesy of the artist and photograph by James Putnam.

In a review of the 2014 volume *The Companion to Ancient Egyptian Art*, [Riggs \(2017\)](#) notes the problematic methodological emphasis throughout upon *viewing* works of art via stylistic or semiotic analysis, rather than considering the social dimensions of aesthetic experience: who, where, and under what circumstances viewing ‘art’ occurs. Keegan’s work is a dynamic disruption in the museum context for the ocular-centric encounter with Egyptian material that museums have normalised, drawing attention to the experience of visual culture, many examples of which would have been animated in enclosed, sacred spaces infused with the aromas of unguents and offerings ([Strong 2015](#); [La Nasa et al. 2022](#)). In these ways, contemporary art can be a reminder that analytical, disembodied approaches to interpreting the past are limited unless room is given to understanding other

intangible elements of human experience. It is here that experiments with artistic practice and interventions can also offer a personally and socially engaged approach to Egyptology.

4.2. Gala Porras-Kim

Residencies are another means by which artists have sought to challenge the British Museum's approach to displaying ancient Egypt. In 2020, Gala Porras-Kim undertook a residency at Delfina Foundation in London where she focused on the museum's funerary art of Egypt and Nubia, spending time in the British Museum's galleries and speaking to staff and curators. Her artistic response, *Out of an Instance of Expiration Comes a Perennial Showing*, was installed in a small contemporary art space, Gasworks, in Southeast London, for two months from 27 January 2022. The artworks variously put forward suggestions for the improvement of the material and spiritual conditions of the artefacts held by museums, accompanied by letters addressed to staff regarding institutional policies and the conservation of human remains. One example, *Sunrise for 5th-Dynasty Sarcophagus from Giza at the British Museum*, took the form of a replica of this object (EA71620) set upon a compass dial, drawing attention to the cardinal directions in which the original would have been placed to allow the dead to face the rising sun in the east (Figure 4). In her letter to the head of the Egyptian Department, displayed in the exhibition, she wrote: 'since we cannot yet be certain of the mechanics of the afterlife, we could consider the perpetual plans of the persons under your charge as a guide for their care and, as such, in their display'.



Figure 4. Gala Porras-Kim's *Sunrise for 5th-Dynasty Sarcophagus from Giza at the British Museum*, 2023. Replica of sarcophagus EA71620 with Mastaba scene, 2022. Graphite on paper at the London Gaswork's *Out of an Instance of Expiration Comes a Perennial Showing* exhibition. Commissioned by Gasworks, London, UK. Photo: Andy Keate.

Porras-Kim's work, therefore, can provide not just institutional critique and a suggestion for stronger, more culturally specific museum interpretation that acknowledges an ancient individual's rights and agency, but also a disciplinary challenge that is of relevance to how we approach ancient societies. Egyptologist Rune Nyord (2018, p. 73) has asked very similar questions to those raised by Porras-Kim; 'How could we, and why would we, take Egyptian mortuary religion seriously'? For Nyord, frameworks for interpreting ancient Egypt emerge less from the sources than from earlier deductive Victorian categories that have imposed a view of the 'afterlife' and a 'quest for eternal life' upon Egyptian material. Instead, he argues, Indigenous conceptions of the nature and role of material should form the basis for interpretation. Anthropology, equally, has seen an 'ontological turn' prompting scholars to transcend representationalist frameworks, whereby cultures are treated simply as systems of beliefs. Proponents of this turn see this as a methodological intervention to challenge presuppositions or the danger of predetermining interpretations by taking seriously questions about what sorts of things might exist and how (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). For Egyptology—whose gaze has been so profoundly conditioned by modern art historical discourses and museum presentations—contemporary art can be utilized to disorientate that easy acquaintance with ancient Egypt that we have established through acts of classifying and describing, toward more penetrating questions about the ancient world. The efficacy of Porras-Kim's work, however, was muted by its physical separation from the British Museum itself and the fact that the letters to the curators were never sent; they were just part of the exhibition's performance.

4.3. Sara Sallam

The institutional critique that developed in the latter part of the twentieth century engaged with Egyptology collections quite early through Fred Wilson's work, but this has largely been overlooked in the discipline itself. However, with the turn to the question of 'decolonisation' in the late 2010s and early 2020s, together with the spread through the museum sector of an interest in collections' histories, there has been a greater receptiveness amongst curators of Egyptology collections to creative programming. This is notably the case with Egyptian artist Sara Sallam, whose work has been embraced at several institutions from 2022 onwards, including artist residencies at the Sainsbury Institute (Ferrari and Hinson 2022), commissioned interventions in Egyptological exhibitions (Delvaux and Caelenberge 2023), and the invitation to show her work at the Museo Egizio and Rijksmuseum.

On 2 February 2022, Sallam participated in a live panel discussion, *Ancient Egypt and Modern Identities*, a public event held as part of the British Museum's *Hieroglyphs: Unlocking Ancient Egypt* exhibition events programme. Her presentation opened with an account of how her interest in ancient Egypt first developed only once she had left her home country to live in the Netherlands, where she projected her feelings of homesickness onto the antiquities she encountered in European museums. Employing photography, film, and writing—often re-appropriating archival material, materialising personal memories, and self-publishing handmade books—her artworks critique colonial attitudes embedded in archaeology, museum practices, and photographic archives. Amongst the images she discussed were four of linen bandages taken in the British Museum, reflecting her long-standing concern about the dehumanisation of Egyptian mummified remains (Sallam 2019). In the photographic essay *At Last I Hold Your Gaze* (2018–2020), as well as in her video installation *I Prayed for the Resin Not to Melt* (2022), such images and archival photographs from museum catalogues, archaeological journals, and newspapers are covered by collages of linen and sand to bring back something of their dignity. These are accompanied by monologues spoken from the perspective of the deceased lamenting their treatment by museums and scholars.

Sallam's work is timely. Despite the vast scholarship, the sheer number of film documentaries, and the extensive back catalogue of museum exhibitions on the themes of death, 'mummies', and the afterlife in ancient Egypt, the narratives surrounding these

exposed remains in reality continue to fundamentally misrepresent ancient Egyptian beliefs. That these were secret and sacred entities subject to taboo (Riggs 2014) is overlooked entirely when presented within Western frameworks that privilege interpreting these practices as primarily being about preservation of the body or as subjects of scientific investigation into health and identity. Some museums have begun to reorientate their displays to acknowledge ancient attitudes, removing bodies from display, but leaving coffins in place. Such an approach has been adopted at Munich's Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, providing an opportunity to communicate details concerning ancient cultural approaches to dead bodies as opposed to modern demands (e.g., Schoske 2019). At a time when Egyptologists and museum curators are intently debating the ethics and morality of displaying mummified remains, artistic interventions might present alternatives to the perceived need to reveal mummified bodies. What Sallam's work also potentially does, however, is expose the museumification of Egyptian human remains in an empathetic rather than accusatory way, revealing the extent to which Egyptology and museum practices have transgressed the ontological status of mummified bodies. Moreover, it speaks not just to ancient communities, but also to modern Egyptians' concerns, many of whom have expressed unease at the location of the ancient dead so far from the site of their burial in Egypt's landscape (Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson 2023).

5. Dialogues between Past and Present?

The very word 'dialogue' presupposes that there is a two-way exchange of ideas. However, it is more usual for Egyptologists to respond to contemporary artistic expression with how it compares with the 'real' interpretation of Egyptian visual culture (e.g., Spencer 2015). In these instances, contemporary art simply serves as a creative foundation for the communication of historical facts and the performance of Egyptological expertise, rather than also being seen as an opportunity for interdisciplinarity and to speak back to how we understand the past. Another oft-repeated cliché regarding the 'dialogue' between past and present art that surfaces in all manner of writing on antiquity is that it demonstrates how ancient Egyptian art is 'timeless'. This is not necessarily a transcendent value, however, but an artifice produced through the decontextualisation of artworks across modernist ideologies, art market strategies, and the new museum idea discussed in Section 1 above. What is left unsaid in praise of timelessness is placelessness: the implication that these artworks can belong anywhere. But those modernist practices are themselves now being challenged by today's artists and are manifest in all the exhibits so far mentioned.

Take Keegan's installation in *Time Machine*, for instance, which was in part a reaction to the sterile environs of the museum space:

When the cabinet was closed. . . you have that separation if only through glass but the whole way museum artefacts are show they become artefacts they are no longer art: they become facts not human. . . it was quite painful. (Keegan cited in Ovenden 2003, p. 356)

Elsewhere in *Time Machine*, the lone Egyptian artist, Lilliane Karnouk, offered an untitled installation that surrounded the 27th Dynasty granite sarcophagus of Nesisut with gothic, black-iron cemetery railings. Test-tubes containing miniature palm-trees were suspended between each railing, evoking the ancient Egyptian practice of placing germinated grains of corn in tombs to symbolise rebirth. In so doing, she brought something of Egypt to the British Museum as she felt that the artefacts needed to be 'in their original burial grounds' (Wattie 2019). Meanwhile Porras-Kim's exhibition included a graphite and colour pencil drawing, *Sights Beyond the Grave*, a response to the Old Kingdom funerary statue of Nenkefta on display in the British Museum. Porras-Kim's drawing depicted a desert landscape around where his tomb was located and was designed with his vitrine in mind so that when his soul might enter the statue, he could gaze out on a more familiar view than the present-day museum gallery. Strongest of all in this vein is Sallam's *Home Outside of Home* (2017–ongoing), comprising a series of photographic prints portraying Egyptian artefacts in dull grey tones decontextualised in European cities and museums,

expressing their nostalgia for their places of origin. Warm coloured images of sand drift into the frames, sweeping up beside the bases of statue plinths while the ruins of ancient elements still standing in Egypt merge into view and surround the orphaned antiquities. Potentially, such pieces can speak to Egyptological interpretations that have explicitly confronted long-held assumptions about famous museum objects by recognising the role of place and landscape in meaning-making and human experience (e.g., [Richards 2002](#)).

What is further significant about all three of these examples are the elements of an 'archival impulse' that characterizes a significant portion of twenty-first century contemporary art ([Foster 2004](#); [Callahan 2022](#); [Godfrey 2007](#)). Artists here adopt modes of practice more akin to those undertaken by scholars and curators: researching collection histories, examining photographic archives, scouring accession registers, and searching museum databases to trace new paths and possibilities for interpretation. Artists like Keegan and [Sallam \(2019\)](#) are, moreover, well informed about and critically engage with Egyptological scholarship. Such approaches offer considerable scope for interdisciplinarity since museum staff can play an active part in the process, exploring alongside artists archival traces and absences.

6. Concluding Thoughts

[Moreno García \(2014\)](#) has queried why beautiful objects and monuments have a disproportionate weight in Egyptology. He convincingly argues that the 'preferential attention devoted to works of art' ([Moreno García 2014](#), p. 52) is a consequence of the social and political worlds of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which forged a myth of eternal Egypt. This paper complements García's conclusions, arguing that the preferential attention to works of art is equally a product of developments in the contemporary art market and its institutionalization within a museum sector that has increasingly prioritized the aesthetic over the contextual. On the other hand, more recent contemporary art installations have challenged the 'museum affect', a phenomenon in which there is 'the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus transform it into art like our own' ([Alpers 1991](#), p. 27). Such artistic practice can intervene in productive, meaningful, and engaged ways with Egyptological visualization, representation, and interpretation.

This is not to say, however, that such interventions are always effective. The superficial, tokenistic, and over-celebratory uses of contemporary art remain common critiques of such engagements with museum collections (e.g., [Geismar 2015](#); [Theuri 2021](#)). Artists do not necessarily bring an external perspective to museums since their practice is often pre-informed by and shaped by museum structures, with Egypt being a well-established 'museum culture' ([Stevenson Forthcoming](#)). Contemporary art, like Egyptology or archaeology, is itself a form of culturally situated production that is neither ahistorical nor self-explanatory ([Geismar 2015](#)). Nevertheless, as museum curators increasingly start to undertake more urgent research on provenance; as they recognise the value of their photographic, archival, and replica collections; and as they broaden the range of communities they work with, artists can potentially become valuable interlocutors and collaborators.

Funding: This research was funded by the British Academy, grant number MCFSS22\220026.

Data Availability Statement: Data are all subject to ethical restrictions.

Acknowledgments: Interviews with artists were conducted in accordance with UCL Ethics procedures and approvals (approval number 2022.013).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

Note

¹ The installation of this exhibition was recorded by the British Museum's Education Department as a 42 min silent film. I am grateful to James Putnam for sharing his VHS of this with me.

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