

**Egor Kraft**  
*Content Aware Studies*Mar 09 – Apr 13, 2019  
Opening: Mar 09, 2019 | 7–9 pm**Egor Kraft: Content Aware Studies**

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Across sculpture and video, Egor Kraft's new body of work marshals both emerging visualization technologies and historical source material. The result is a hybrid vision – traversing model and monument, code, the corporeal, and the hyperreal. In *Content Aware Studies* the artist explores the expanded mode of objecthood in the digital era, deploying the new powers of virtual and physical prototyping technology. Performing an archaeology of future-pasts, this new exhibition is an engagement with art history, emerging tools, and the horizons of 21st Century culture.

Within the post-digital condition, a tension plays out. On the one hand, a scientific gaze views any particular 'higher' arrangement of matter as provisional—its elements open to recombination. On the other hand, advanced technologies allow for the preservation and proliferation of information, to an extent never before imagined. Between archival dreaming and cosmic sleep, cultural icons live entirely vigorous, undead, lives. Kraft's current project traffics in this spectral condition to critical effect.

Whenever disinterred from Italian hillsides, Greek fields, caves, or elsewhere, incomplete classical statuary arouses conjecture. The unearthing of the celebrated Laocoön group in 1506 (missing certain figural elements) provoked numerous attempts to 'restore' the sculpture to its original composition—through the addition of new limbs, affixed in various positions. Today, the ensemble bears the scars of this retro-engineering, though the additions have been removed. Other busts and figures remain tantalizingly 'incomplete'. Kraft's recent work partially outsources the speculative-sculptural task of finishing them, deploying the full power of virtual and physical tools. The process yields results that, while ostensibly filling in the blanks, actually undercut the very notion of a complete work.

Indeed, today, interrogating (and policing) distinctions between original and a copy is becoming a moot task. Instead, the prominence—and utility—of the *version* demands consideration. It is within this space that Kraft works through the most contemporary of conditions: In a post-digital landscape, 'final' judgements and questions of connoisseurship—once considered the core of aesthetic enterprise—are eclipsed by the truly 'disinterested' intelligence of the machine, and a surplus of viable possibilities. Against rest, conclusion, and completeness, the robot keeps moving. Against the limited locus of 'real' time, material or energy, the virtual horizon of an artwork stretches into the distance. *Content Aware Studies* explores this expanded mode of objecthood, showcasing only a few of the almost infinite number of 'complete' sculptural options for the missing figural elements—a kind of archaeology from a manifold of (digital) future-pasts.

At the same time, this process demonstrates a number of 'rules' or algorithms implicit in the sculpture's composition. In light of the preceding observations, we observe that Kraft's project is thus both analysis and prosumption.

According to Virgil, Laocoön was a priest who was killed for nearly exposing the warriors hidden inside the legendary Trojan Horse. His ill-advised investigation—tapping the sculpture's body with his spear—called forth the wrath of the gods, who sent a serpent to dispose of him and—for good measure—his sons. It is interesting to consider Laocoön's fate in light of his trespass: daring to entertain the possibility that, behind a seemingly inanimate figure, hidden, intelligent, machinations are at work. With this project Kraft places the algorithm in the position of the legendary Laocoön, testing the sculptures in question with a view to unlocking their secrets or possibilities. Unlike the priest, the computer can never know too much.

In considering the above, one is struck by gulf that separates Laocoön's work of interpretation (and its stakes) from that of Kraft's computer, operating on found sculptures. The algorithm cannot be punished, in any meaningful sense, for its enterprise. Beyond any sort of parlor game take on Barthes' so-called 'death of the author', Kraft's *Content Aware Studies* announces death of the critic (or criticism itself). In fact, it is only when the critic can be put to death that the enterprise of criticism is meaningful. In today's culture-wars a proliferation of bots crowd the scene, creating content and 'fixing' things. Having displaced the priests of high culture, they are set to work, crawling over and through the ruined fragments of a civilization that seems, at once, incredibly near to us, and yet so very far away.

*Content Aware Studies is based on generative and algorithmic reconstructions of the lost fragments in friezes and statues of Late Antiquity and the Hellenistic period. The sculptures are generated by machine learning algorithms, which are designed to fill and reconstruct areas of images as well as 3-D models where parts of sculptures have been lost or are missing. This process constitutes quasi-archeological knowledge production and interpretations of history and culture in the era of ubiquitous computation. **The project was recently exhibited at ZKM, Karlsruhe, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg and MMOMA, Moscow.***