

## **Reanimating Phenomenal Others, or How to bring museum objects back into life**

A proposal to conduct an archival inquiry and presentation  
for the Lost Museums Symposium at Brown University

Coordinators: Emily Avera and Bryan Markovitz

### **Project Objectives:**

This is a proposal to conduct an inquiry into how ‘liveliness’ is expressed in human interactions with ‘passive’ material culture, or more specifically, a museum object, by engaging with it as: 1) a historicized object framed within a system of pre-existing knowledge, and 2) a material object that exerts its own phenomenological presence despite the historical and epistemological frames used to articulate its identity. Our aim is to explore how both contexts co-produce an object’s agency and its meaning in the present, and to demonstrate that ontology and epistemology are not easily divided.

In broad terms, our approach is to engage with the museum collection in ways that attend to the presence and material agency of objects through movement, fabrication, and dialogue. These approaches can all be characterized by their attention to aspects of embodiment, performance and the senses in making and interacting with objects via the semiotics of experience. There is an extensive body of literature in anthropological, archaeological, and historiographic theory that expresses the efficacy of such heuristic approaches (Hodder, Ingold, Taylor, Datson, Haraway, Weismantel, Inomata and Coben, to name a few).

Thus, our intent is to explore the lively potential stored within museum objects by materially interacting with them in contexts that are ethically sensitive to their past producers, and critically attentive to their present-day frames of interpretation. Given the limitations of handling rare objects that are under the stewardship of museum staff, we will interact with them through normal forms of observation and documentation that fits within the parameters of museum guidelines. Beyond the museum, we will expand our inquiry through more experimental and inferential means by making replicas of the objects that will participate with us in real-life scenarios, where they will have the opportunity to express their presence in new ways. As a result, we also hope to explore how distinct disciplines of academic study (archaeology, anthropology, performance studies, studio art, history, and science studies) might correspond with one another

in heuristic modes of compositional practice that are sensitive to how matter and culture mingle in the politics of producing life.

In this instance, our site of inquiry will be the **Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology**, its collections of objects, and the systems of knowledge that the museum uses to track their cultural histories, provenance, and placement in the museum. Our creative work will be conducted in preparation for a presentation at the Lost Museums Symposium, held at Brown University on May 6-8, 2015.

The project's coordinators, Emily Avera and Bryan Markovitz, are second-year graduate students in Anthropology and Performance Studies, respectively. Other collaborators will include fellow students (both graduate and undergraduate) who are affiliated with departments around campus, including Brown's Program in Science and Technology Studies.

We will work with a small group of fellow students and colleagues at Brown to fill one or more roles along the way as Sleuths, Makers, Guides, and Documentarians. The role each collaborator will choose to play depends entirely on their interests during the four stages of creative research that we have planned. A more complete project description and in-progress plan is provided below.

### **The stakes for this kind of inquiry:**

Our project exists in a lively correspondence between archival research, participant observation, and the studio/rehearsal practices of art and performance. We have chosen to intersect these disciplinary vectors because we are interested in learning more about how agency is transmitted and transformed through relations made between material objects and humans. In our effort to demonstrate that ontological questions cannot be divided from epistemological concerns, our inquiry will not simply document an object's material effects and the systems of thought that define it. We will also actively experiment with how both preexisting forms of matter and thought inform the creation of new meaning and experience. We are especially interested in how such correspondences, transmissions, and transformations take place through the replicas that we fabricate—which act as representatives for absent objects. Consider these other examples of substitution from across a variety of social contexts:

When an NGO speaks for refugees displaced by a tsunami, its policies become a substitute for their itinerant bodies. When an immunologist describes how a newly

discovered virus wages war on human cells, her metaphors become a stand-in for the molecular mingling of self and non-self. When a receding glacier exposes a new archaeological site, inert matter is animated with a role in scientific and historical inquiry. In all of these events, two issues become crucial for understanding how we produce knowledge, and how knowledge affects the survival of our species.

First, the world is filled with things that act on behalf of unknown, absent, or irretrievable beings. Custodians, stem cells, caliphates, CT scans, drones, smartphones, clothing, and soil samples—all of these carry out roles that enable us to interact with forces that would be otherwise beyond our reach. These *surrogates* perform in place of others, and they produce real effects in the world.

Second, surrogates are called upon to represent agencies that do not fit easily into ontological categories. Across specialized disciplines, debate ensues about the strange ways that *phenomenal others* shift between qualities of mind and matter, human and non-human, animal and material, living and dead. What is becoming ever more apparent is that nothing is just a person, just a body, just an idea, or just an object. We are singulars who express ourselves through multiples. To transmit agency from one domain to another is a mediated act in which the insistences of phenomenal others converge. When they converge, their diverse expressions of form (material, ideological, behavioral, etc.) are either entertained or rejected by others. This interval of formation is where surrogates can be found corresponding with their originals, performing for their audiences, and transforming both through their own distinct powers. A surrogate always retains some degree of its own independence.

The truth is, only a few scholars have discussed how, when or where surrogation works (Roach 1996, Weiss 2002). Even fewer have tried to model, or perform acts of surrogacy in compositional experiments. If we think of surrogacy at all, it is usually as a kind of passive representation—an iconic replica of a lost ideal form, a mere carrier of a concrete disposition, or a conjuring act—rather than a creative reconfiguration of distributed agency. What does surrogation offer that existing notions of mimetic representation do not? What agencies do surrogates mobilize that their originals cannot? How might agency flow through surrogates in ways that exceed our present faculties for interpretation? How do surrogates benefit us, and how do they produce deleterious effects? By performing inquiries into the lives of surrogates, we believe that more can be learned about how they transmit their motivations and actions.

### **The site of inquiry:**

As with other kinds of surrogates, we believe that museum objects do not merely represent evidence of past relations in human culture. Rather, they make unusual topological linkages between different times, spaces, and contexts that include and exceed human objectives. They also exceed categories and classifications that we use to explain or organize material culture within a broader *mise-en-scène* of phenomenological experience.

To learn what a museum object can do in its surrogate form, we will utilize what we know about their past *and* present situations to focus our attention on how they perform and affect others in direct experience. Our approach will be heuristic—through movement and sleuthing, observation and fabrication, performance and presentation. Thus, we offer a methodological intervention that, while hardly novel, is rarely pursued in scholarly research—we will add something new to our knowledge of the world by re-composing it.

### **Summary of the process:**

Our inquiry will unfold across four modes of activity (though they need not necessarily operate in a totally linear fashion): **Search, Surrogation, Scenarios and Staging**. Here is a summary of the stages (a more complete description appears in the project plan further down in this document):

**Step 1, Search:** We will begin in the last week of February at Brown's Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology in Bristol, Rhode Island. With the help of museum staff, our **sleuths** will walk among the vast collections and search for five phenomenal objects. By 'phenomenal,' we are referring to the objects' ability to resonate with a set of 'clues' that the sleuths will use to conduct their search. These clues will be drawn from the sleuth's own creative or research interests beyond the museum.

During this process, our **documentarians** will capture the process through a variety of media—from sketches and photographs, to go-pro cameras attached to our moving bodies—or possibly within the constraint of one type of media. For example, what if we had to document the experience with sound alone? We will decide this together. Once the objects are chosen, our **sleuths** will observe and engage with their material presence on site, and collect additional archival evidence about their past.

**Step 2, Surrogates:** In early March, we will shift our attention to the art studio, where our **makers** (in dialogue with the **sleuths**) will replicate the objects with whatever raw materials respond best to their originals, and possibly with new technological attachments (such as microphones for hearing, or cameras for seeing). Meanwhile, our **documentarians** will continue to capture the work in progress.

**Step 3, Scenarios:** Over spring break, our **guides** will bring the newly made surrogates along with them into real-world scenarios—from field trips at science labs and libraries, to train rides and walks in the city, to ceremonies and spectacles. Our **documentarians** will follow along when possible, and the surrogates themselves may keep a record of their experiences. Our goal will be to explore how our surrogates enact their powers, and to pay careful attention to how those powers might mingle with others.

**Step 4, Staging:** Finally, during the month of April, we will bring the surrogates back to the studio, where our **documentarians** will help us reassemble the experience as a media installation for the Lost Museums Symposium that we will present on May 8. The installation's form and content will depend entirely on the interests and abilities of our team, the surrogates themselves, and the paths that our adventure took.

### **Approach:**

Our inquiry is highly relational and mediated. We will use the methods of anthropology to describe how difference is made in relations, those of archaeology and history to relate the past with the present, and those of art to emphasize meaningful similarities between all relations.

We believe that our approach, through its emphasis on enacted experience, will be highly attentive to the multiple historical meanings that museum objects might contain (particularly those that only become apparent in their interactive surrogate bodies). Our inquiry may also illuminate distinct abstract inferences, compelling indexical relations, and overlooked layers of reality that only become apparent in the combining of disciplinary practices.

We envision this project as an adventure in which unquestioned knowledge is put to the test, and the emotional qualities of sensory experience are drawn out

through material relations. We acknowledge that our inquiry is flawed and contingent, as all experiments must be. Our conceptual aims for the surrogates may be very different from their actual effects. Regardless, our task will be to learn more about how material objects stand in for our desires, and how we stand in for theirs, by making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. If our inquiry succeeds, then we will have a better understanding of the connection between representation and composition, mind and matter, and what is at stake in surrogative acts.

### **Project plan (in-progress)**

As described above, our project will travel through four modes of activity: *Search, Surrogates, Scenarios, Staging*. Throughout the process, we will document our experiences, and record the movement of people and materials that seem appropriate to the time and place.

Our work will mingle research and practice in ways that:

- Emphasize modes of inference drawn from phenomenological experience: material qualities, historical evidence, thoughts and ideas, senses, actions, etc.
- Activate the speculative qualities of scenario-based performance and aesthetic fabrication,
- Trace systems of knowledge and interpretive meanings that objects transmit for others,
- Articulate various stages of semiosis through the artifacts, while paying particular attention to the distinct qualitative features and possibilities that their presence provides.

Further development of this plan, along with a work plan for implementation, will be created once our final team of participants are assembled. In collaboration with our reading group, we have a small amount of budgetary assistance from Brown's Program in Science and Technology Studies.

### **Stage 1: Search**

1. **Assemble the Team:** Currently, we are in conversation with other students at

Brown to help us as participants in various roles. We are looking for a small group of participants to join us as sleuths, makers, guides and documentarians. Some roles may overlap, while others may be dedicated to a specific task. It will depend on the interests of our final team. We imagine that everyone will have a part to play somewhere along the path outlined below. We hope to have commitments from participants by the first week in February.

2. **Coordinate the Plan:** Once our team comes together, we will work with them to refine this plan and determine the roles of each participant. During this step, we will select a short list of key theoretical and creative constraints (rules of the game, as it were) that will guide our search and the making of surrogates. These constraints will serve as a conceptual measure against which we can creatively respond to, and critically reflect on, our inquiry during its stages of activity.
3. **Coordinate with the Haffenreffer:** Through Kevin Smith, Deputy Director and Chief Curator, we will work with the staff at the Haffenreffer to coordinate the dates and logistics of two visits. The first visit will be a 2-3 hour trip (of a smaller group of 2-3 participants) in early February to test our search procedures with Kevin and museum staff. We will also go over any logistical issues that need to be determined, and respond to staff questions, concerns, and ideas.

In late February or early March, we will conduct a second trip to perform the actual search. We anticipate that our group (4-6 people) will visit on a weekday during normal staff hours. We will stay for approximately six hours, which will probably include a break for lunch. Some of that time may require more staff assistance during the search. Later in the day, we anticipate doing some observational work with the objects found (sketching, photographing, discussion) that may only require assistance from one staff person. We will provide our own prepared lunches and beverages, and would be happy to bring along additional lunch kits and goodies for the Haffenreffer staff who will be helping us.

To facilitate the search process, our team will draft sets of “clues” for each of the search team members to use in finding their artifact. These clues will be based on the creative constraints of the project, but each sleuth in the search team will alter the clues to make them relate to their own creative and research interests beyond the museum. Some of the clues’ constraints will also be

informed by the museum terrain itself, the opportunities and limits presented by the museum's cataloging systems (which are currently in transition), as well as the interests and expertise of Haffenreffer staff. On our first visit, we will invite museum staff to beta-test these search clues with us in a simulation of the search process.

4. **Conduct the search:** Once on site at the Haffenreffer, the search team's sleuths and documentarians will be given a selection of documentary tools to trace their movement through the collections. This might include cameras, audio recorders, cameras, notebooks, sketchbooks, or other media. The constraints we establish as a team at the outset will determine which documentary media we will use. Prior to our visit, we will also work with our team of documentarians to design a unified recording/documentation process for the visit. This will ensure that we create a cohesive body of media evidence that will be used as creative assets in later phases of work.

Once the search team has selected five objects for the surrogation project, we will conduct an onsite exercise to document them including:

- Their form and appearance (photos, video, sketches).
- Information about their origin, provenance, and the museological metadata associated with them.
- The history of their use, and interpretations about their meaning (if any).
- Evidence of their agency prior to acquisition (broadly defined).

After our visit to the Annex, we may request that museum staff transfer the artifacts to the Haffenreffer's Culture Lab in Manning Hall on campus (depending on space availability, size of the objects, and their ability to travel). If they can be moved, we will invite relevant members of the team (such as the makers) to visit them for one or more sessions to focus on specific aspects of their phenomenological presence, and to make notes on what they observe. For example, they may wish to attend to the object's history; its material composition; how people handle or react to it; what it sounds, smells, or feels like; how it differs according to time of day or the weather; how to best sketch it, or draw a plan of it; etc.



## Stage 2: Surrogacy

1. **Make the Surrogates:** In early March, the makers on our team will come together at the John Street Design Studio (part of the TAPS department, this is TBD) on Brown's campus to construct surrogates for the museum's objects. This period of making is very open, and may include any variety of makers, sleuths and documentarians, as well as other artist colleagues that we may want to involve.

The studio team will be provided with materials appropriate to our project budget and the creative constraints that we mapped out at the beginning of our collaboration. We hope that the materials may significantly differ from the artifacts, perhaps in deliberately crude ways (materials from the dollar store, salvation army, scrap heap, or other seemingly ersatz sources), with the idea being to avoid the artistic aura of the object (to the extent possible), so that they will be less precious and more interactive in the world.

We also anticipate the possibility that the surrogate objects may be outfitted with technologies or media that can record experience from their perspective in scale and proximity, and/or that changes the surrogate's ability to interact in the world (ways to record, or ways to produce sensory phenomena). We will plan this with the team.

2. **Enliven the surrogates:** Once the surrogates are made, we will conduct a small ritual ceremony to symbolically (or perhaps literally) animate them. This ritual will draw inspiration from our selection of texts, and may include a variety of activities, such as music and movement. This ritual will also involve bestowing upon each surrogate a scenario (see below) that will guide its entry into the world. Markovitz and Avera will help the team develop the finer points of the ritual once we know more about the artifacts that have been procured. This ritual will also be captured by the documentarians through the appropriate media that corresponds with the projects' overall aesthetic constraints.

## Stage 3: Scenarios

1. In late march (possibly during the week of spring break), we will **send each surrogate out into the world** with a member of our team (a guide) who will help it perform in a given scenario. Below are some broadly framed scenarios that we might create based on our research interests, as well as the possibilities presented by the artifacts. We believe that the artifacts and their histories might have much to say in this regard, as will the interests of the original sleuths who found them. It is also likely that there may be people on campus, or elsewhere, who would have an interest in the original meaning and history of the objects that the surrogates represent. We may open this stage up to their influence.
  - *Possible Scenario 1 (Identity Craft)*: The surrogate would be set on a course to encounter others who make and/or receive the effects of identity as a primary category of differentiation. This could include issues of intersectionality, or a particular identity concern, such as queerness, race, or bio/technical type.
  - *Possible Scenario 2, (Witch Craft)*: The surrogate might interact with mediators who use shamanism or withcraft to account for unexplained agencies (this might extend into contemporary versions of these practices that are not typically labeled “occult,” or to questions of scientific verifiability: true things and false things).
  - *Possible Scenario 3, (War Craft)*: The surrogate might visit a place of securitization, surveillance, or “defense” broadly defined (e.g. in medicine, law, military enforcement, or places where difference provokes instability, fear, or violence).
2. **To play out each surrogate’s scenario**, the guides may interact with it, use it, change it, or be affected by its potential agency in any way that seems fitting. They may also explore the embodied and/or inscribed history of the object as enacted in the present, or pose practical questions about the variability of the object’s performance of self and non-self, mind and matter, nature and culture through their interactions with it.
3. As part of the scenario process, team members will devise a **shared documentary and creative process** to capture the surrogates’ progress through its scenario experience. Based on the form of documentation selected, we will provide the appropriate media and materials to each documentarian team member, guide, and/or the surrogate itself (see prior sections above).

#### **Stage 4: Staging (presenting and/or reenacting our inquiry)**

1. **Review the evidence and create a representational format:** This phase will be the most overtly aesthetic, and theatrical, of our inquiry. Given the level of creative interaction that will lead to this point in our process, we assume that we will have much more intimate knowledge about our artifacts and their surrogates at this stage of our inquiry. With this in mind, we will begin to assemble a format through which we will frame a narrative (linear, and/or nonlinear) about the artifacts and our experiences with them.

Part of this process will include responding to the interests and logistical constraints of the Lost Museums Symposium itself, in order to determine how to present the work. This will include sorting through the documentary products generated from prior stages of the project, and responding to the overall aesthetic and conceptual constraints of the whole project.

2. **Present our work at the Lost Museums Symposium.** As noted above, the form of this presentation is currently contingent on a number of factors. However, we do anticipate presenting some kind of installation or mediated sensory experience that does more to re-create our inquiry as an experience, than it does to describe it in words. As part of this presentation, we may also conduct a final ceremony in which we reunite the surrogates with their originals at the Culture Lab in Manning Hall.