

FROM SPECTATOR TO PARTICIPANT:  
ARTIST COMMENTARY ON MUSEUM EXPERIENCE.

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Sculpture.

By

Zachary Alexander Rogers

Director: Morgan Kennedy  
Assistant Professor of Sculpture  
School of Art and Design

Committee Members: Tom Ashcraft, School of Art and Design  
Dr. Karen Britt, School of Art and Design

April 2018

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank Rachael Denton, without whom I would simply not have been able to survive long enough to earn my degree. You are both my harshest critic and loudest cheerleader, both of which are necessary to grow as a person. I would also like to thank my thesis committee Morgan Kennedy, Tom Ashcraft, and Dr. Karen Britt. Each of these individuals were instrumental in their capacities as mentors to help me achieve and exceed my goals that I have set for myself as an artist. Thank you to all of the faculty and staff of Bardo Art Center at Western Carolina University, who are too numerous to name. Whether its through teaching me a new technique or just a hallway conversation, I truly believe that each person has enabled me to become a better person. I also want to thank my fellow grads, both old and new, for the shared energy needed to create art. Of course I would like to say thank you to my family, my parents Paul and Laurie, and younger brothers, Garrett and Nich, who have always supported me, and my choice to be an artist. And lastly, I want to say thank you to my grandparents, who with out a doubt are my greatest inspiration and benefactors.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .....	iv
Abstract .....	v
Introduction .....	1
The Work .....	2
Conclusion .....	13
Works Cited .....	16

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. <i>Odocoileus virginianus</i> , 2018.....	4
Figure 2. <i>Odocoileus virginianus</i> , 2018 (Detail) .....	5
Figure 3. <i>The Artifactual Collection</i> , 2017 .....	7
Figure 4. <i>The Arm of a Fiji Mermaid. On loan from P.T. Barnum</i> , 2017.....	8
Figure 5. <i>The Artifactual Collection</i> , 2017 .....	9
Figure 6. <i>Found on a Survey</i> , 2018 (Detail) .....	11
Figure 7. <i>Found on a Survey</i> , 2018.....	12
Figure 8. <i>Facsimile</i> , 2018 .....	14

## ABSTRACT

FROM SPECTATOR TO PARTICIPANT:  
ARTIST COMMENTARY ON MUSEUM EXPERIENCE.

Zachary Alexander Rogers, M.F.A.

Western Carolina University (March 2018)

Director: J. Morgan Kennedy

As traditional museum dynamics have shifted from primarily visual engagement with artifacts to a multisensory experience, the interaction between the viewer and the object has changed. On the part of museums, the goal has been to move away from previous conceptions of the institution as an elite environment where touching was forbidden and people spoke in whispers to an inclusive place of exploration and discovery. This has opened up possibilities for more active engagement with the objects, which has encouraged the visitor to become a participant, rather than a spectator. Artists have become increasingly interested in the changing practices of the museum. By incorporating in their work the traditional methods used by museums for archiving, display, and storage, artists such as Hamilton's *Between Taxonomy and Communion* (1990) and Toren's *Safety Regulation Painting No. 10* (1999), use creative means to comment on the changing approach of the museum to the visitor's experience, providing a fresh take on the institution and the role of the visitor. The research presented in this essay examines how, historically, artists have commented on and critiqued the practices of museums in their work, particularly with found object installations such as Dion's *Cabinet of Curiosities for the Wexner Center for the*

*Arts* (1997) and Fontcuberta/ Forminguera's collaboration in *Fauna*. (1987/90) The subject of my research is intimately linked with my own creative work, which uses humor and social commentary as a bridge to connect with a diverse body of viewers. The purpose of the work is to explore how fabricated artifacts along with an invented narrative, when displayed using the techniques employed by museums, might be accepted as authentic due solely to their manner of presentation, which confers legitimacy on the artifacts regardless of whether the work is displayed in a public place such as a museum or library or in a private setting such as clubs or parlors. The research presented in my thesis as well as incorporated in my body of work underscores the need for awareness of the role played by the museum: even when the changes to the visitor's experience are positive, the decisions made by the museum still influence the viewer's assessment of the cultural and historical value of the artifacts on display.

## INTRODUCTION

The museum experience is changing. The institution itself shifts how the information is presented to maintain viewer interest. Along with that, the viewer's wants and needs are also changing with social and technological advancements. The way many of us have grown up visiting museums to see dinosaurs, has indeed gone the way of the dinosaur. From wandering up to a stale and poorly constructed environment where the exhibit collects dust and becomes derelict with age to a fully- immersive multisensory experience that plunge the viewer into feeling a sense of false authenticity. This has been the steady adaptation of science and history museums throughout recent years, but where does this immersive experience exist in the art museum/ gallery? The answer lies with the artists themselves. Artists are able to bridge the gap between the museum and the viewer with the art they make and present. By using his or her own backgrounds to create and critique the relationship between the museum and the visitor, or the museum practice itself, the artist is able to bring forth into the physical world what is meant, or not to be seen in the gallery scene. Some of the more common ways this has been addressed is by use of key materials and themes in the work. Showcasing the way that the museum commonly put items on display as a critique on the display styles themselves, breaking down identifiable objects and placing inflated value onto them by use of materials, and the use of common found objects as placeholders for stories themselves. The goal of this research is to create and exhibit a body of work that addresses each of these presidents. The reason for creating my own work to serve as a critique on the gallery/museum is not to undermine the institution itself, but to merely comment and bring to light the phenomenon.

## THE WORK

The body of work is made of several key pieces and each piece has its own message. Each message aims to form a critique or make an observation on the workings of the art gallery or museum institution. Everything is mostly made from found materials, which pay homage to the artifacts that have been discovered, studied, and displayed in museums, dating back to the idea of the cabinet of curiosities of the Renaissance. Much like those curiosities, there is a hint of fabrication the authenticity of some (all) of these objects. By using random found objects that have been collected in my own travels, from the streets of New York City, to the mountains under the big sky of Montana, or just outside my own studio, these objects are identifiable, we know what they are, but what they went through to get to where they were found is anyone's guess. It is in this unknown that a story needs to be written, to fill the void. In order for the objects to be "worthy" of collection and display, they have to be special. Each piece's history is just special enough to peek the interest of the viewer. In order to achieve that, humor is used as a bridge to connect the viewer to the piece and perhaps the viewers to each other. As we know culture is something that is shared between people, and since these piece's cultures are all fabricated, they come from no one's specific culture, therefore, they belong to everyone's culture.

Not everything in the body of work is made up from reassigned found objects that have been manipulated to create something new. Some objects are displayed unaltered from how they were when they were found out in the field. These objects were collected via collaboration with an archeologist working professionally on a site. She only collected materials that had zero provenience, along highways, so that the artifacts that were taken in were merely trash thrown alongside the road. However, because these objects were still technically collected during an



archeological survey, they had to be deemed to have no historical value and are otherwise useless to the field of archeology. That being said, these objects are not useless to the field of art. They can be curated and be placed in built displays as to have a critique on the foundations of museum collections, much like Fred Wilson exhibited in his “Mining the Museum” installation in 1992. We can ask ourselves why certain things end up in museums in the first place, what qualities do these items have that allow them to be privileged over others? The act of displaying objects in a gallery setting, placing them on a wall or in well-constructed cases with a spotlight shone directly on them, has the effect of elevating objects so that they seem to exude a sense of importance. Because physical framing and presentation has such enormous influence, it is possible to take an everyday object discarded on the side of the road and give it a new, prestigious life in a museum just by the act of changing its surroundings and conferring authority on the object by providing labels.

One strategy for imbuing discarded everyday objects with importance is to make replicas in a material that changes the viewer’s experience of them. For example, the viewer perceives the value of placing a collection of deer jawbones in a row on a wooden plaque differently, both literally and figuratively when replaced with bronze copies. The idea of bronze itself has a weighted history that can be signified with the general use, especially in the everyday or obscure item.



Figure 1. *Odocoileus virginianus*, 2018

Bronze was a material often reserved for the memorialization of those in power or recognition of accomplishments. On the other hand, the significance of an object can also be diminished by the material choice, for example, in the case of wax replicas, which might be considered a substandard placeholder to the material of the original itself. Often used in mass production, creating replicas in wax and presenting them as a finished product can “cheapen” an otherwise unique object.

These avenues are researched and explored as factors that affect the viewers’ experience in the exhibition. When the viewer surveys the body of work as a whole, s/he sees curated objects inside fabricated display cases and cabinets that have special meaning. In some ways, the artworks can be viewed together as a collection that can be augmented to fit into a non-existent narrative. As the individual pieces of the collection are mostly found objects, their original “lives” are identifiable, but their narratives have changed with the use of fabrication techniques and display practices.



Figure 2. *Odocoileus virginianus*, 2018 (Detail)

The idea of the curated object, which plays a central role in my body of work, is heavily influenced by the “cabinet of curiosities” which originated in to the sixteenth Europe and was

used extensively through the eighteenth century. (Putnam) The adoption of this approach focuses attention on the concept of collection, rather than trying to play museum.

By adopting the format of the *wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosity, one can better cultivate a collection based on personal interest. This approach can be viewed as selfish when compared to the public museum's interest in a broader collection, but this allowed for more self-expression in the artwork. In order for public museums to be credible, the objects that they acquire must be authentic. Whereas the cabinet of curiosity comes from the realm of private collection, so while having authentic items would add appeal, there is room for embellishment. It is in this grey area that the meaning of the objects can be "enhanced."

Within the body of work, a piece that grapples with the issue of authenticity is *The Artifactual Collection*. By manipulating the found objects themselves and through adding or subtracting elements, each assemblage is turned into a precious one of a kind specimen that has a new story. Since each piece is displayed as a one of a kind treasure, the viewer is made aware of what makes it special by the addition of a nameplate below. Each nameplate communicates the object's new found past. For instance, the mounted head of a toy bison becomes *The first bison tried, convicted and executed for treason*, or a found doll arm is now displayed as *The arm of a Fiji Mermaid, on loan from P.T. Barnum*. There are numerous precious objects displayed in this fashion, and to further increase the appearance of archival display, a ladder, influenced by the rolling library ladders, is placed among the boxes forming a physical bridge between objects and viewers by inviting and facilitating closer inspection.



Figure 3. *Artifactual Collection, 2017*



Figure 4. *The Arm of a Fiji Mermaid. On loan from P.T. Barnum, 2017*



Figure 5. *The Artifactual Collection*, 2017

Another crucial component of this series is the piece *Found on a Survey*. This work addresses the ability of the display case itself to heighten the value of the objects placed inside. In this case, the objects are left unaltered, remaining in the condition in which they were discovered by the archeologist along different roads and highways during regular Department of Transportation work. In fact, these objects are indeed artifacts; after all, an archeologist in the field recovered them. However, these items are unprovenanced, which deprives them of archaeological value and relegates them to the status of trash found along the roadway. That does not make them any less interesting or capable of producing meaning, especially if displayed in a custom-built case. The piece asks the viewer to look at what is basically garbage discarded by motorists and find meaning and importance. According to Putnam, “Once placed in a vitrine, the object is perceived in a completely different way by the viewer, as compared with when it is viewed in its original context.” (Putnam) While Dion’s *The Lost Museum* (2014) attempts to bring back to life the residual pieces of the ill- fated Jenks Museum in an art installation, *Found on a Survey* seeks to do the same, but with abandoned artifacts found alongside a highway.





Figure 6. *Found on a Survey (Detail)*, 2018



Figure 7. *Found on a Survey*, 2018

The final piece, *Facsimile*, emphasizes how viewers perceive the value of the objects based on the way in which they are displayed. This piece consists of many wax replicas, all of which were cast from objects in *The Artifactual Collection*. The replicas are housed in a porcelain container cast from a 5-gallon bucket mold. The porcelain bucket casts have been placed atop a pedestal created from faux marble Formica. The work's meaning rests in the material from which the sculptural assemblage is made. Since porcelain and wax have universal connotations of "high" (porcelain) and "low" (wax) value, the appearance of the two materials together strikes the viewer as incongruous. Porcelain is usually reserved for objects of the highest quality and the 5-gallon bucket is a symbol of the common, the laborer, and the workingman. By filling it with wax replicas of the precious objects from *The Artifactual Collection*, the concept of mass-production is evident. By leaving the wax castings in their raw, unrefined form, I further push the idea of precious artifacts becoming cheap replicas. On top of all of this, or rather beneath it, sits a pedestal created from Formica. Formica was designed to replicate the look of precious stone at a fraction of the cost for a wider market, so what better material to display the idea of produced value? These materials used in conjunction with one another serve to represent the idea of the artifice. The "cost effective" replica of the original that is more relatable to the everyman.



Figure 8. *Facsimile*, 2018

## CONCLUSION

By showcasing fabricated artifacts that have an invented narrative using display techniques employed by museums, this body of work aims to critique museum/gallery practices. The idea that these objects may be accepted as authentic due solely to their vaunted setting is integral to the overarching goal of the project. Museums understand that the expectations of visitors today are different from those of a couple of decades ago and that their viability as institutions require adaptation to new realities. The collection and display of authentic objects, such as an artifact recovered from the wreck of the “Titanic,” only goes so far; creating an experience of the object or artifact is what matters, and “the experience might be triggered by a multitude of devices, not all of which are real, or genuine, or a material. Museums today are busily constructing such devices.” (Hein) These “devices” vary depending on the type of museum; in our case, the relevant museum is the art museum. Within the art museum, there still exists the “white cube” mentality, namely that “the ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is “art.” The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself.” (O’Doherty) It can be difficult to imagine the art museum or gallery and not envision these quintessential white spaces. However, the art museum is similar to the others in undergoing a transition, and one of the areas of change is what is chosen for display. By incorporating technology within its walls, art museums are now able to bring to the public works that the museum may not be able to physically house. “Digitized images are useful for educational purposes, historical scholarship, conservation, security, record keeping, and promotion.” (Hein) High-resolution photographs will never catch all the qualities of an original masterpiece, but they can get pretty close. They can be used by museums to show the

viewer what the piece looks like and are able to give the viewer as close to an experience of the original work as possible without actually being in its presence. Everyone has seen the *Mona Lisa*, but not everyone has been to the Louvre. Now this is an exaggerated example, but it quickly gets the point across: digital reproductions serve as a quick way to get an image out to the public, even if that image is not the authentic work. Another instance of using reproductions to bring art to the masses is older than high-resolution photography, casting. This method is often used for three-dimensional works, such as casting parts of large-scale carvings and changing the size of the object. This allows for mass production and easy portability. As technology advances, so does the ways in which the visitor views artwork. 3D printing has brought replicas of works to new audiences, and in some cases, replaced the originals. The artwork being discussed here does not aim to comment on the ethics of these developments, but merely to consider those actions.

Much like Bott's *Trouser Pocket Collection* (1996), *Found on a Survey* seeks to display seemingly unimportant objects in a way that confers significance on them. This relationship between the artist and museum raises the question of art or artifact? The works discussed here are about presenting an object for study, much like museums do. The vehicle for that is simply the manner of display each work is given, whether individual shadow boxes, one large display case, or mounted on a fabricated pedestal. Each of these methods are commonly used by the museum to raise the level of importance of the object being examined by the viewer. "As anyone who has gone to a contemporary museum or gallery will attest, if an object is on a plinth, hanging from a white wall or placed in a Plexiglas vitrine, we are much more likely to see it in new ways and to contemplate it as art." (Balzer) The responsibility for determining how the viewer will engage with works of art by making decisions concerning the arrangement and

presentation of objects arranging and presenting objects falls to the curator. The curator is the puzzle maker, the artworks are the pieces, and the viewer is the puzzle solver.

Within the ever-shifting parameters of museums' efforts to keep up with the times in order to remain financially solvent as institutions, some artists are grappling with the merits of these rapid changes in their work. . By using some of the traditional methods employed by museums for archiving, storage and display, these artists have shifted the materials in which they create as well. My body of work was created to draw attention to the ongoing debate about the choices museums make about their collections and the decisions made by the curators. Both the curator and the artist each have expectations for what the spectator's experience of the work will be. However, it is entirely up to the viewer to decide how they will interact and appreciate what is put on display before them.

## WORKS CITED

- Adamson, Glenn. *Thinking Through Craft*. illustrated, reprint ed., London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2007.
- Balzer, David. *Curationism. How Curating took over the Art World and Everything Else*. First ed., Ontario, Canada Council for the Arts, 2014.
- Brilliant, Richard, and Dale Kinney, editors. *Reuse Value. Spolia and the Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*. Surrey, England, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011.
- Burns, Steph. "Considering the glass case: Material encounters between Museums, Visitors and Religious Objects." *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2016.
- Buszek, Maria E., editor. *Extra/ Ordinary. Craft and Contemporary Art*. Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2011.
- Chua, Liana, and Mark Elliott, editors. *Distributed Objects. Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell*. First ed., New York City, NY, Berghahn Books, 2015.
- Coles, Alex, and Mark Dion, editors. *Archaeology*. London, Black Dog Publishing, 1999.
- Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, MA, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996.
- Gell, Alfred. "Vogel's Net. Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps." *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1996.
- Heath, Chistian, and Dirk vom Lehn. "Configuring Reception (Dis-) Regarding the 'Spectator' in Museums and Galleries." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 21, no. 6, 2004.



- Hein, Hilde S. *The Museum in Transition. A Philosophical Perspective*. Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution, 2000.
- Lubar, Steven. *Inside the Lost Museum*. First ed., Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2017.
- O'Doherty, Brian. *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. San Fransisco, The Lapis Press, 1986.
- Putnam, James. *Art and Artifact. The Museum as Medium*. Second ed., New York City, NY, Thames & Hudson Inc., 2009.
- Reno, Joshua. "Your Trash is Somone's Treasure. The Politics of Value at a Michigan Landfill." *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2009.
- Rubio, Fernando D. "On the Discrepancy between objects and things: An ecological approach." *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2016.
- Weschler, Lawrence. *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*. First ed., New York City, NY, Random House, 1995.