

# HISTORICODE

*Scarcity and Supply*

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HISTORICODE  
*Scarcity and Supply*

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Katie Geba

“The world, the real, is not an object. It’s a process.”  
John Cage<sup>1</sup>

A series of photographs by Atlanta artist and writer Michael David Murphy hang in the Atlanta airport on the first floor, below the escalators that deliver passengers to the ticket agents. Rushing by, pulling my suitcase on wheels in what would be my fourth time in that airport in two months—once flying to New York, once to Rome, once to China, and now, on the last leg of my summer tour to visit my parents in Iowa—I stopped, turned around, and returned to better inspect the works. One photograph featured a life-size reproduction of Hans Holbein the Younger’s famous 1533 portrait *The Ambassadors* hung on the streets of London, perhaps a museum advertisement for the National Gallery where it is housed. The wall behind the reproduction is a bright green-screen green, a kind of chroma-key for this centuries-old painting. In front of the advertisement is a pile of blue trash bags, and in front of the bags two figures walk single-file down the street. The image shows a blip in the time scale, a toggling between the past and the present, not unlike what Holbein presented in his original painting.

In that work, a French diplomat and his aristocratic friend stand confidently in front of a lush green drapery, leaning on a set of shelves that display a series of objects; on the top shelf are items said to be related to the heavens (tools for measuring quadrants and coordinates, a sundial), the bottom to earthly entertainments (open books, a globe, a lute). The objects are laid out as if to prove the intelligence of these two worldly men. Recalling the tradition of the Flemish *vanitas*, the items are expertly rendered and detailed, making all the more strange the looming anamorphic skull in the foreground. As if photoshopped on top of the image, the stretched-out skull, as many scholars have remarked, references death or the timeliness of the present moment. Perhaps Holbein created the distortion since the painting was to hang in a stairway, allowing the viewer to approach it from varying angles, always a reminder that death is waiting. Or as Mary F. S. Hervey in her seminal text from 1900 on the work described the skull: “The shadow of the shadow of death.”<sup>2</sup>

Now the image is made even more strange by Michael David Murphy’s recent photograph of two figures (the new, modern aristocrats?) walking with a languid gait in front of that shadow, the blue trash bags piling up. In a moment I had glimpsed that collusion of time made specifically for the impossible term, “contemporary,” something the philosopher Giorgio Agamben likens to a darkness or an obscurity.<sup>3</sup> As I paused in that stale airport hallway, beset with a series of jet lags, the image of that skull appeared to me, lit by harsh fluorescence as a cipher of the contemporary. I saw an illusion of an illusion, specifically of time and its attendant shadow, which is what I believe scholar Allison de Fren had in mind when she described how Holbein places perspective and consciousness in tandem with one another: “By creating a

tension between two perspectives, the anamorphic work underscores the illusionary qualities of all works of art, achieving an allegorical self-referentiality.”<sup>4</sup> Put simply, reality is opaque.

Pulsing in the present, the near and far coexist. Archaic time collapses into present time and to see this obscurity, one must possess an air of self-consciousness, an awareness of being out-of-step. Not unlike the tourist, a role I adopted over the month of July in both Rome for three weeks and then China for two days, to prepare for this exhibition. A fast toggling back and forth, a pit stop in Georgia to do laundry and repack; a round robin of trips to the airport. In Rome, I walked to the bar around the corner in the first days shyly, uttering “ciao” to the kind man who made my morning espresso, and then later in my stay, with more confidence, “buongiorno.” I was certain at first that those shopkeepers must have thought I was a deaf mute, pointing to the crustless sandwich behind the counter, depending too much on head nods and smiles. In both Rome and Nanjing, since I didn’t speak the language and had only a slim understanding of the cultural customs of each city, it was impossible for me not to feel a sense of distance or to inhabit the role of the observer. Even the simplest of tasks made me alert to an ever-present self-consciousness, an inability to fully participate.

A tourist then might be the “contemporary” par excellence, always outside of the culture she inhabits. Impossible to be immersed within the culture, the tourist is constantly out-of-step. And yet, a tourist who engages only in the activities of tourism misses the point. She avoids self-consciousness through the engagement of the very act of tourism. Henry James, in his diaries of travel, *Italian Hours*, describes the change in Rome once the summer tourist arrives: “The city of the soul has become for the time a monstrous mixture of watering-place and curiosity-shop and then its most ardent life is that of the tourists who haggle over false intaglios and yawn through palaces and temples.”<sup>5</sup> James describes the tourist as a figure that changes the tone of the city, one who sees only the surface of the experience; a moment to catch with her selfie-stick. Agamben explains: “Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it: they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it.”<sup>6</sup> James also points out that the tourist is a collector—of experiences or souvenirs (“false intaglios”) or items found and brought back. All those celestial and earthly objects on display in Holbein’s painting; markers of a well-traveled individual as well as tangible proof of one’s travels. The tourist objects hold within them the expression of an experience of time.

Robert Smithson wrote: “Size determines an object, but scale determines art.”<sup>7</sup> Nowhere was the scale through time made more obvious to me than during an evening out with two fellow colleagues while attending a seminar in Rome this summer. We watched the Italian soccer game in a square in Trastevere and, giddy from the crowd and beers consumed, we walked down to the Tiber River where the annual festival Lungo Il Tevere was taking place.

My new friends set off to carnival games while I was drawn to a live feed from a 3D simulated ride. Like a surveillance camera, the feed emitted an eerie black-and-white image of people in 3D glasses, grasping the air in front of them. I convinced my new friends to pay the five euros and, after the 3D glasses were handed to us, we entered a dark room with two short rows of theater seats; two sat in front, two in back. The simulation began and the seats moved with a jolt. Was that a rush of air blowing back my hair? Perspective skewed, we seemingly flew over a computer-generated dystopian landscape, some far-off desert with a cartoon-creature guiding the way. So heavily mediated by the sounds and the movements, sensing the simulated three-dimensional debris flying in our faces, we lost all sense of agency. Now we were the people grasping at thin air, fed live to the street from a hazy black-and-white monitor. The ride was ridiculous and it was fun, but mostly it was bizarre to walk out from that future world onto the Tiber. The city made of ruins.

I walked by an advertisement for another simulated experience whose title more fully addressed the sensation I had while exiting our ride: *Time Elevator*. Taking my phone out for a quick search, I found a review on TripAdvisor that rated the experience at three stars. “Island H” from London wrote that the ride was “an interesting if flawed enterprise that attempts to be too many things.”<sup>8</sup> In another context, I wondered, could this not be another definition for the contemporary? “There seemed to be long streets of commonplace shops and houses, such as are to be found in any European town; there were busy people, equipages, ordinary walkers to and fro; a multitude of chattering strangers. It was no more *my* Rome than the Rome of anybody’s fancy, man or boy, degraded and fallen and lying asleep in the sun among a heap of ruins. . . .”<sup>9</sup> How much friction does it take to create a ruin? And are ruins objects, too? Souvenirs?

In China, my kindly guides Lulu and Stephen took me to the Nanjing Museum where we kept a steady pace, chatting and remarking on objects. The museum is made up of two large buildings, the “old” side and the “new.” The old section holds objects like ancient bronze bells, Ming dynasty porcelain, and a burial suit made of smooth jade tiles held together with thin gold thread. The new side, like my 3D ride in Rome, is interactive and full of projections, ancient scrolls remade as animations, digital immersive experiences of the past. While touring the old section of the museum, we observed a series of ancient bones laid out; small figures deeply buried in blocks of sand. Later that day, we saw more bones at the Nanjing Memorial, an extensive museum marking the horror of the six-week rape and slaughter of Nanjing civilians by the Japanese after they seized the city in 1937. The museum adopts several types of memorial making, from archives to interviews to names etched on walls, and perhaps most profound, the bones of the people who were murdered. The museum was built at an execution site, referred to as “The Mass Grave of 10,000 Corpses.” The remains are left out for viewing like the archeological sites they now are. The arrangement of bones is random, as if fallen in collapse

and in stark contrast to the ancient bones viewed earlier at the Nanjing Museum that were neatly re-arranged for display. When entering the section of the mass grave memorial, Lulu interpreted a sign I have already read in English: “They ask for you to be quiet in here.”

The evening before, sitting in my hotel room in Nanjing, I watched a film I had downloaded weeks ago, *Journey to Italy*, a Roberto Rossellini film from 1954 that features Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders as a married couple who go on holiday in Italy only to find their marriage quickly falling apart. In one scene, the couple travel to Pompeii on the recommendation of a local friend, who promises that the excavation team will be revealing the figures that died on the day Mount Vesuvius erupted. When the bodies buried alive at Pompeii disintegrated, pockets were left in the ash, allowing for archeologists to fill the holes with plaster of Paris to recreate the forms. In the film, the excavation team brushes off layers of dirt as dramatic music plays in the background. The lead archeologist excitedly remarks on the proceedings: “There’s the head, you can see the skull with the plaster clinging to it. Now the skull bones and teeth, both remarkably well preserved.” When the cleaning is finished, two plaster figures side-by-side lay in the dirt: “Two people just as they were when they died.” The last bits are cleaned off and the anatomies reveal a man and a woman, perhaps, a married couple, “who may have found death like this together.”

As the out-of-step tourist, the “contemporary” par-excellence, all I could see was how these series of bones, traces of figures long gone clung to one another in a series of moments from the past made tangible in the present. I was reminded all day of the way in which Rossellini filmed the revelation of the figures with close-ups of the archaeologist’s brush swiping away the dirt, the crude figures made out of plaster, the drama of the narration. The ancient past, and even in the case of the Nanjing Memorial, the not very recent past, is laid out to us contemporaries—to fill the role of what a history museum is and does, or to demand we never forget, or in the case of the film, to act as a metaphor for marriage. Oddly, not once did I think of my own bones. Instead, sitting in a bar in a Chinese mall (our last stop of the day), sharing a beer with Lulu and Stephen, I thought only of the layering of bones, the act of excavation for display; bones as objects, debris from the past. When viewed from the right, Holbein’s skull corrects itself.

In what looked to be some hollowed-out old ancient ruin of a room, Mark Leckey’s exhibition *UniAddDumThs* was on display at Gavin Brown Enterprise’s Rome location this summer. The site in fact, is the eighth-century church Sant’Andrea de Scaphis. In the small space, seemingly untouched since the eighth century, large inflatable lights hung from the tall ceiling. On either side, a series of stepped pedestals displayed a taxonomy of objects, as if arranged and left by some ancient civilization. Valerio Mannucci, in his terrific review of the show, identified many of the objects: “A copy of a hand reliquary (circa 1250) mirrors a 2D reproduction of the i-limb ultra prosthetic hand

designed by Touch Bionics; a 3D printed version of a Hapi canopic jar faces a video display reproducing Chris Cunningham’s music video for Aphex Twin’s *Windowlicker* (1999) with no audio; a rare example of the Wurlitzer Sideman drum machine shares the same shelf as a 3D copy of Miroslav Tichý’s home-made camera.”<sup>10</sup> Several of the objects were familiar to me, though not all. I recognized on one side a series of cats: a Felix the Cat head, a photograph of a black cat on green background by Elad Lassry, an old poster for the Mike Myers’s film *The Cat in the Hat*. On the other side, an iPad played a video of Jordan Wolfson’s freaky masked animatronic female robot, forever gyrating in front of a mirror, demanding “Touch is love.”

The installation derives from two earlier Leckey shows, curated exhibitions of objects loaned to him from museums that he then arranged for display, creating his own grouping or as he called them “leaky topologies,” such as *Man/Bodies*, *Animals*, and *Machines*. Of the objects in those shows, he said: “I just want them to do things to each other and I want to do things to them. So they transform, or transcend their objecthood.”<sup>11</sup> As such, the placement of the objects from various times and contexts placed in proximity to one another produces anachronisms, or change. For this exhibition, Leckey reorients their objecthood, destabilizing the notion of a referent or an origin as he remade the objects that were no longer available to him via loan. Either through video documentation or 3D printing, these new objects act as replicas or, as Leckey explains in an animated video at the entrance of the gallery: “A show populated by things that have one foot in this world and one in another.”

Agamben argues that the origin is not only in the chronological past: “It is contemporary with historical becoming and does not cease to operate within it, just as the embryo continues to be active in the tissues of the mature organism, and the child in the psychic life of the adult.”<sup>12</sup> Leckey’s objects laid-out, like the aristocrats’ objects in *The Ambassadors*, present the origin as a thing that evolves. Or, as in Michael David Murphy’s photograph, sediment of the past in the present; those blue trash bags piling up. Holbein’s skull is also an anachronism, a time traveler, the tourist in the picture. From another period it reached out to me in that airport, perhaps also to every viewer who has ever encountered it through time; both as a marker of the archaic and the modern, death, bones, and as an index of the contemporary—that which cannot be fully explained—existing in spite of time, like an object.

<sup>1</sup> John Cage, *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles* (London/New York: Marion Boyars, 1981), 162.

<sup>2</sup> Mary F. S. Hervey, *Holbein's "Ambassadors": The Picture and the Men* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), 284.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?," in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Allison de Fren, "The Anatomical Gaze in Tomorrow's Eve," *Science Fiction Studies* 36, no. 2 (July 2009), 250.

<sup>5</sup> Henry James, *Italian Hours* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1995 [1909]), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?," *Op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson:*

*The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 147.

<sup>8</sup> "Time Elevator Rome Experience," Tripadvisor, 2016, accessed August 15, 2016, [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g187791-d538099-Reviews-The\\_Time\\_Elevator\\_Rome\\_Experience-Rome-Lazio.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g187791-d538099-Reviews-The_Time_Elevator_Rome_Experience-Rome-Lazio.html).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Dickens, "Pictures from Italy," in *American Notes, Pictures from Italy, and A Child's History of England* (London: Chapman and Hall, Limited, 1801), 288.

<sup>10</sup> Valerio Mannucci, "Mark Leckey's 'UniAddDumThs'," *Art Agenda*, 2016, accessed August 20, 2016, <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/mark-leckey>.

<sup>11</sup> Lauren Cornwell, "Techno-Animism," *Mousse* 37, 2016, accessed August 20, 2016, <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm>.

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?," *Op. cit.*, 50.



The Lehman Brothers' name is lit up at the headquarters of Lehman Brothers Holdings, Inc., New York, September 15, 2008. Photo Mario Tama.