What matters? Returning to perplexity with spurse at the Indianapolis Museum of Art

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Five artists gather around a museum staff conference table, discussing at length the potential inclusion of a piece of chalk in their museum exhibition. In a discussion with museum personnel that preceded this meeting, a conservator suggested that to include the chalk proposed for their working chalkboard would be inadvisable. The reason was explained thus: an audience member could pick it up and use it to draw on other artworks in the museum; plus, if we permit the precedent of interactivity, in the form of drawing on a chalkboard as part of an artwork in the contemporary galleries, how do we draw a line prohibiting similar interactivity with other works on display in the museum’s permanent collection? The curator argued, to the contrary, that to bar the chalk from entering the gallery would be tantamount to a damage to the proposed artwork: the chalkboard was not intended to be demonstrative, but a functional part of a working laboratory-as-artwork. Now the artists have regrouped alone, with camera on and recording, to consider the deliberation over chalk that just transpired. This discussion, and the video that
documented it, would eventually become part of a video library included in their
exhibition and hidden from sight. The chalk was also ultimately included in the
exhibition – tucked inside of a sliding door on a chalkboard cabinet (Figure 1).

This essay reflects on the 2006 exhibition sub-merging: a wetland project that I
organized with the spurse art collective at the Indianapolis Museum of Art (now
Newfields; then, and in this text, abbreviated IMA). With their project that was
equal parts classroom, laboratory, and training grounds, spurse’s self-reflexive
research practice took museum policies and protocols as equal matters of
investigation, sources of content, and elements of form. From planting seeds that
were stored for repairing objects in the African collection to offering mycology tours
of the grounds, the provocations initiated by spurse in this project treated the
museum as a living system, within which, in their words, participants become
involved in negotiations over ‘what matters, and what stops.’ The artists’ project
was oriented to surface the procedures for making those pithy determinations about
valuation and circulation of objects and ideas in the institution, and, in so doing, the
ontical vitality and flux of all matters within that system. How does a museum – as
multitude, as process, and as site – define matters of materiality and matters of
concern? And where do these matters resist such definition? Put differently: how do
the gatekeeping and administrative practices of museum work replicate, or invert,
the procedures of subjecting assemblages of ideas and ecologies to the cūrāre of
everyday life? And how do objects, or any propositions at all, retain attendant
resonance within such systems? These were the polemics of the spurse project at the
IMA, which now, over a decade later, remain vital and urgent.

Before continuing, a contextual sidebar: I was originally invited to contribute
this paper on the occasion of The Resonant Object, a conference in honour of Charles
W. Haxthausen’s work as a teacher and mentor. The conference was set up in paired
sessions inviting voices from the museum to be in conversation with voices of
academic scholarship – an organizational device that made reference (and repair
effort) to the concerns motivating Haxthausen’s 1999 Clark Conference ‘The Two
Art Histories: The Museum and the University.’ In his introduction to the 2002
volume that followed, The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University,
Haxthausen describes a 1998 Getty conference that examined, in the terms provided
by its associating brochure, ‘the productive tension between art and history . . . how
objects are constructed, how they acquire and produce meaning.’

I would like to thank Austen Barron Bailly, Erica DiBenedetto, Lisa Dorin, and Amy Hamlin
for their invitation to participate in the ‘Resonant Object’ symposium at the Clark Art
Institute on 18 and 19 May, 2018; and Amy Hamlin and Robin Schuldenfrei for their
invitation to include that presentation in this special issue for Journal of Art Historiography.
Particular thanks is due to the artists of spurse, for their work which inspired this essay, and
for being available to discuss the project during my research for this paper. Finally, I am
grateful to Dr. Charles W. Haxthausen for his mentorship at Williams and beyond, including
consulting on a chapter of my dissertation, which is referenced here, in tribute. The content
The near absence of any museum professionals in that convening, illustrating ‘tensions between the two branches of the discipline [that] have undoubtedly been exacerbated by the critical spirit of so much of art history’.\(^2\)

It may indeed be that the enduring stereotype of the museum continues to be that of an entity that is rigid, traditional, inflexible, and not sharing in a ‘critical spirit’. Certainly suspicion of the museum is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it without basis. The introduction of the ‘public’ collection as canonically conceived – as the Habermasian site of structurally transforming discourse among a financially autonomous expanding public sphere – emerged in the mid-eighteenth-century. But as scholars from Andrew McClellan to Carol Duncan to Alan Wallach have shown, collections across Europe, through the mid-nineteenth-century, imposed restrictions on access and behaviours through limits on admission hours, codes of conduct, and required manners of dress (restricting admission to those with clean shoes in the Vienna imperial gallery, i.e., ‘not a trivial matter in a city with lots of horses but no sidewalks’, as James J. Sheehan observes).\(^3\)

Even as the device of the exhibition as site of leisure and congregation rose with World’s Fairs and touring spectacles, and public access became increasingly available, the question of the purpose, and effect, of placing collections in storage and exhibitionary display was a matter of critical writing about museums. Participants in that topical discussion in the flourishing Weimar German museum context included discussants such as Walter Gropius, Alexander Dorner, and even Walter Benjamin.\(^4\) In 1926, on the occasion of the rehanging of the Berlin ethnographic museum, Carl Einstein wrote that ‘entry into the museum confirms the natural death of the artwork’ – in other words, a de-vivifying of the resonance that an artwork or artefact enjoyed when circulating in the lived environment of everyday life – doomed, by the gallery context, to have, in Einstein’s words, a ‘a shadowy, very limited, let us call it an aesthetic immortality’ as a ‘dead fragment, ripped from the soil.’\(^5\) The spurse project for the Indianapolis Museum of Art

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challenged all of these assumptions of the museum as modernist place where art is isolated, limited, and immortalised, proving the spheres between museum and not-museum to be not only blurry, but indivisible. Every step of the way, the questions of ‘what matters’ and ‘what stops’ showed that the very construct of such categorical decisions alienates the possibility of productive address to the urgent realities of their complex entanglements. The questions of who and what may be understood as partaking in a museum constituency, and what kinds of ‘life’ ensue, were core to the conceptual work of the spurse exhibition, from the first stages of its planning.

I joined the IMA during an expansion project in 2005, which saw large increases in the footprint of exhibition space for contemporary art. Around that time, with address to the desire to increase a sense of public stakeholding, the museum rolled out the acronymically-inspired branding campaign ‘It’s My Art’. Among my first tasks was to create an exhibition for a new exhibition space with the title ‘Off the Wall Gallery’. As the museum reopened, that gallery featured a long wall with a vinyl mural by Assume Vivid Astro Focus, a project as literally adherent to being ‘on the wall’ as possible. In programming my first exhibition for this space, I wanted to make good on the expanded field promise of the new gallery title, seeking to use the space, and the museum, in many dimensions.

I sought to commission an art project that might build work literally off of the wall, and additionally make reference to spaces beyond the gallery footprint. For this I invited the art collective spurse, an interdisciplinary group primarily trained in art and architecture that at the time had nearly a dozen core members, geographically dispersed but linked by an active Yahoo group message system with a large constituency of collaborators beyond the core participants. The group was best known at the time for site- and situation-specific research practices that included algorithmic mappings as plans for architectural constructions and recipes alike. Some members made an exploratory visit to the IMA, focusing their time on investigating a one hundred-acre area of lake and wetlands on the museum property being developed as an art and nature park. The exhibition that followed, developed by the artists during iterative visits over the course of a year, was given the title sub-merging: a wetland project early in the planning stages, but morphed into an active laboratory on display with the title ‘Center for the Study of the Collective’.

The foundational concept for this multi-noded project took root almost simultaneously with the invitation and first visit. During preliminary conversations with the exhibition team, which included constituents from the registration and conservation departments, the artists were informed that their original plan to bring materials from the museum’s wetlands into the museum building would entail routine procedures to deactivate potentially harmful living materials. Biological matter is often heavily screened and regulated when brought into the art galleries as
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facets of exhibitions – often frozen to kill off living materials that might threaten artworks (perhaps literalizing the aforementioned Einsteinian anxiety of museum as killing grounds). It merits mention here that this is not an absolute and inalienable practice – for example, then-curator of the Art of Africa, the South Pacific and the Americas Ted Celenko pointed out that certain objects in the collections he oversaw retained living substances that were crucial to their spiritual power, lending ‘value’ to these objects. But, while I, as curator of the spurse project, was prepared to make a similar case for their materials, it was in identifying the conceptual contours and evaluative limits of the procedure itself that the artists were most invested.

Where is the line between nature and culture? Is upholding that boundary not the very premise of the museum construct? spurse pointed to the arbitrariness of enforcing such a distinction, even pointing to contradictions within our own protocols. They noted that a number of living beings already existed in the museum through the institution’s everyday transactions: insects, microorganisms, dirt and seeds on the shoes of audiences, tracked through the museum doors, and a lavish bouquet on a pedestal in the entrance hall, refreshed weekly through an endowed fund. The artists proposed to occupy this liminal space. They requested permission to explore and augment the ecosystems of living materials already extant within the museum, which would include broadly sampling, cultivating, and identifying microscopic organic materials. On principle, the registration ambassador to the exhibition team could find no guidelines barring such an exploration of already-existing biomaterial transgressors, and our generous and supportive collections support team gave their blessing for this to begin in an exploratory fashion.

The artists set forth in earnest. They investigated museum spaces from the water fountains to objects in collection storage, from the roof to interstitial spaces between the museum walls, and made at least one visit to a gallery that was being treated for pest control (against a ladybug incursion) (Figures 2a-d.). In these spaces, they gathered samplings of bacteria and fungus that were placed in petri dishes for later identification (Figure 3). This study led quickly to an expanded inventorying of living beings in and on the museum grounds, at that moment and in history. The artists surveyed Protection Services and Visitor Services staff about living beings in the museum (one map of the museum by spurse included notations about a kitten sighting in a gallery and a favourite red-tailed hawk that made its nest in a piece of outdoor sculpture), and requested that collections of dirt be made from custodial sweepings of the lobby at the end of each day.

What transpired in the investigations that followed was a process of staging a series of tasks of consultation loosely (but explicitly) modelled after Bruno Latour’s proposal for collective ‘searching for the common world according to due process’ in his roughly contemporaneous Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy (2004). The artists’ adherence to (and deviations from) Latour’s

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propositions can be tracked in their diagrams that associate with the project. In the chapter ‘Skills for the Collective’, Latour proposes a series of ‘tasks’ that lead to the becoming of collective knowledge. Latour’s task of ‘perplexity’ looks to ‘external reality’ to sense ‘invisible entities’; in this task, scientists, for example, use instrumentation to detect ‘excluded voices’ in the collective commons of knowledge. Through the task of consultation, the decision of what is ‘relevant’ is asked of all parties. Politicians, in this task, ‘produce’ stakeholders while moralists defend the rights of each party ‘to redefine the problem in its own terms’. For the artists of spurse, the inventory of living and non-living entities at the museum, and inquiries
into the procedures for discerning their recognition and treatment by the institution, were pursuits of perplexity and consultation as defined here.

For Latour, these tasks come prior to the task of establishment of ‘hierarchies’ (coded by the artists, in a diagram that evolved over the course of the project, as the decision about ‘What Matters’ and ‘What Stops’) (Figures 4a and 4b). Hierarchy results from the earlier tasks, through the production of common language (in economics), the election of representatives (in the political sphere), or the use of scientific innovations that consecrate levels of importance insofar as they focus on some aspects with the exclusion of others. The museum was both implicated in, and recruited as partner to, the artists’ challenges to this procedure along with Latour’s fourth task of ‘institution’ (a ‘requirement of closure’). In

Note: all spurse drawings from the IMA project described and illustrated here can be accessed on the Indianapolis Museum of Art collections page at http://collection.imamuseum.org/results.html?query=spurse&has_image=T. There they can be zoomed-in to make texts and details legible.
Latour’s proposal, the procedure of institution coalesces, attributes, distributes, distinguishes and designates the knowledge produced through the first four tasks. Readers closely tracking this set of procedures alongside the artists’ coffee-stained diagram (which can be zoomed-in and navigated at the link in footnote 7) will note annotations about the methodology including caveats about not retreating from institutional mediators, objections to the ‘limited idea of institution composition’ and extensive notes on entrance portal as ‘event’ and evaluations of ‘what is living’.

In other words, the artists borrowed these procedures from Latour to reflect critically on the institution’s codifications of itself as an entity through acts of gatekeeping and mediation. Their objective was to keep these categories in open flux – both an act of resistance and recognition of un-recognized beings in the museum ecosystem. An amalgamation of subsequent tasks outlined by Latour (‘separation of powers’, ‘scenarization of the whole’, and the ‘power to follow through’) were interpreted by the artists through terms of notions of ontology that could be re-interrogated by the negotiations of ‘What Matters/What Stops’ and the reintroduction of things/propositions through acts of ‘problemitization’. The artists set as their task a return to a state of ‘perplexity’ at the close of every cycle of discussion about what lives in the museum.

In Politics of Nature, Latour proposes to ‘extricate ourselves from the former logic of spheres of activity’ and coalesce a process that is inter-positional (involving participants from disciplines of science, ethics, politics, and economics). ‘We can no longer go back to modernism’s old bipartite division’, Latour writes. ‘No entity is now asked to declare, before its propositions are taken seriously, whether it is natural or artificial, attached or detached, objective or subjective, rational or irrational. …Nothing is better articulated than the notion – at first glance too unitary, too totalizing, too undifferentiated – of the collective.’ By sampling on the microscopic level, spurse not only pointed out that the same fungi and bacteria existed inside and outside of the art museum, but also moved the museum process of acknowledging this material through a parliamentary process, working from a paradigm for collective knowledge extrapolated from Latour. In this way, using Latour’s paradigm as a guidebook (rather than simply an argumentative proposition), the artists of spurse set out to investigate a process for knowledge production that begins with a status of perplexity and never resets at a point of closure, maintaining perplexity through on-going problemitization. A sampling of microbial entities in the museum was the first instance of this discursive process in the project: From the IMA’s ‘closed’ system, with clear mandates about which types of life were permitted to exist where, spurse opened (or renewed) a state of perplexity around the actual living (and non-living) constituents of the IMA community – this was the state of perplexity that the artists wished to retain throughout their examination of museum and its constituents, writ large.

Clearly, the ecosystemic inquiries that transpired over the course of the project were almost immediately not simply about finding the ‘invisible entities’ of bacteria, but much more about interrogating the decision-making apparatuses of the institution itself. Each challenge to the museum’s limits was an opportunity for the system of decision-making itself to become a subject of examination. Problems began to arise when the bacteria being collected and stored in a lab that was built adjacent to the conservation laboratory began to emit an odour that was obtrusive to the conservators that had to use the space. At the same time a museum intern working on the project expressed concern about a lack of oversight with (scientific) ‘expertise’, forwarding a protocol sheet outlined by a Toronto medical laboratory. In light of the discomfort of my colleagues, and thanks to the generosity of a willing friend, I temporarily moved the petri dishes to an offsite laboratory at Purdue University, where the artists and their local collaborators (including graduate students of studio art and botany) could continue to work with the materials, in a location more conventionally acceptable for scientific activity. It could be observed that in this event of decision-making, I performed the hierarchization of what matters and what stops. Also notable (particularly within the Latourian purview) is the issue of the perception of expertise through its performative gestures and locations. Though the protocols outlined in the Toronto tearsheet were identical to our own (i.e. keeping specimens in leak-resistant containers in plastic bags, wearing gloves and lab coats, and practicing meticulous hygiene); and an off-site microbiologist, who had provided some of the laboratory equipment, had offered to identify the fungal and bacterial substances remotely; the very siting of the laboratory in the museum, and the framing of the project as ‘art’, became grounds for the kind of concern that can quickly lead to a full impending halt of a project by a liability-wary institution.

As the curator in charge of the project, I did what I would usually do in such a circumstance, which was to attempt to facilitate the artists’ work. Specifically, I argued for a way to continue the on-going samplings and identifications, sending the petri dishes and some of the lab equipment to a university laboratory setting, where they continued to be sampled, photographed, and identified by students and museum volunteers, including one of the preparators (who later became a member of spurse). In my own haste to facilitate one portion of the project, I did not consider that the impending ur-stop might have been of even greater interest to the artists in their overarching experiments with the ‘What Matters/What Stops’ discursive pattern. This is a clear example of the ways in which the proxy position of curator, and other institutional collaborators operating in the artists’ absentia, can affect a project significantly. The stakes of such delegated decision-making agency are high: as artistic intent has become a core concern of collections care, such that artist interviews are increasingly common procedures in contemporary art acquisitions, the deputizing (or self-deputizing) of museum intermediaries to speak on behalf of
artists’ projects may steer a conceptual artwork in a new or unintended direction, even in the name of defending artists’ rights and decisions.

The artists of spurse suggested re-introducing the bacteria to the museum and into their forthcoming exhibition by embedding it in mixed-culture environments, modelled after culturing devices developed by Russian microbiologist Sergei Winogradsky (1856-1953), known as ‘Winogradsky columns’ (Figure 5). These had the benefits of being easily produced with non-specialist practices and materials (the exhibition used a number of donated Jarden Home Brands mason jars, with a sludgy mixture from the lake on the museum premises as the host environment), and, despite hosting more living organisms than the isolated petri dish environments, were more palatable to the risk assessment team at the museum. In alignment with their collectivist proclivities and inquiries, spurse was particularly interested in these devices because of their historical relationship to philosophies of simbiogenesis, making a nod towards such thinkers as the anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), whose 1902 Mutual Aid collection of essays considered evolutionary development as a product of collective engagement rather than Darwinist species survivalism.⁹

Although my decision to remove the biological materials off-site may have diverted one thread of a potential discursive process (or debate!), the artists’ move to engender a permanent state of unstable ‘perplexity’ as a strategy in their artwork was certainly felt in the course of on-going internal discussions about institutional liability related to this project. Safety officers at the museum required the

production of Material Safety Data Sheets (identifying each material and its degree of toxicity) for the Winogradsky columns prior to their entry into the museum (a requirement not associated with most exhibited materials). Materials such as corn husks, garlic mustard, water, and inoculated microbes transferred from petri dishes were included in these jars. The Winogradsky columns, in form and implementation, came to be illustrative microcosms of the museum ecology, including the polyvocality of its decision-making apparatus. While the conservation department concluded that Winogradsky columns would be preferable for the museum display to petri dishes, the registration department insisted on a protocol for (necessary) aeration of the jars that would place the jars generally out of reach of gallery visitors. This necessitated a ladder being included in the display, so that research assistants could regularly retrieve and move the jars outdoors (imagine if this procedure had been evaluated as setting a precedent for visitor behaviour with as the chalk!) (Figure 6). The ladder construction was submitted by the artists as part of their final construction proposal. Later, the Protection Services department of the museum brought the non-Occupational Safety and Health Administration-compliance of the built ladder to Human Resources, and ultimately the Chief Financial Officer of the institution requested that the ladder not be used by anyone, for fear of various liabilities. (A variety of approaches to resolving this were attempted and implemented for varying periods of time, including signing waivers and storing a second OSHA-approved ladder under the desk in the installation).

Throughout this process, the artists drew from a variety of sources in science studies and evolutionary biology, including Stephen Jay Gould and Elisabeth S. Vrba’s concept of ‘exaptation’, proposed (contra adaptation) as a term for features of
organisms used toward purposes not anticipated by processes of natural selection. spurse borrowed the term for use in application to improvisational usages of materials against their intended function. For example, in their algorithmically-derived construction plan for The Lost Meeting (2005, produced with artist J. Morgan Puett), spurse first built a stochastic construction form, and then derived use from its features (a jutting ledge might become a shelf, for example). In this process, as with the Latour, the objective was not to find fidelity in reading source texts, but to find opportunities for productive re-readings or misreadings of texts. This type of artistic practice has meaningful purchase within discourses around the historiography of art and theory. When I recently asked spurse member Matthew Friday about how the collective continues to utilize ideas that it finds troublesome (such as Garrett Hardin’s ‘Tragedy of the Commons’), he responded, ‘concepts are tools, and we are interested in how those tools leverage actual change. A tool is what it’s doing in the world. Each time it is deployed it is going to have a different effect that it will be producing based on the context and the partners that are involved.’ How does such a practice successfully untether itself from reifying the values of a knotty historiographic lineage? For the artists of spurse, this is achieved by deep engagement with concepts and their histories. ‘While certain conceptual tools may come with problematic historical baggage, we feel they still have the potential to creatively engage the world…. [This requires being] sensitive to the dynamics they might produce but to not attempt to reproduce – in some weird sense of honor to lineage – the same type of research. … It’s important to know that lineage.’

Figure 7a spurse, The Center for the Study of the Collective, 2006, Installation, Indianapolis Museum of Art Off the Wall Gallery. Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.

Figure 7b spurse, The Center for the Study of the Collective, 2006, Installation, Indianapolis Museum of Art Off the Wall Gallery. Photograph by spurse.

11 Author interview with Matthew Friday, 15 August 2019.
12 Interview with Matthew Friday.
spurse, and the group’s snowballing cohort of witting and unwitting (human and non-human) collaborators, took this practice of ‘exaptive agitation’ to a variety of encounters and propositions. When electricity did not exist in the gallery to power the laboratory on view, rather than agreeing to embed electric wiring in the ceilings, the artists made grand sweeping forms with blue electric cords strung across the museum atrium, powering the laboratory from available power outlets (and also illustrating the omission of electricity in the planning stages for the gallery during the museum expansion – a choice that, the artists suggested, revealed both expectations and guidelines for the contours of ‘Off the Wall’ projects to follow) (Figures 7a and 7b). They created audio guides that toured the museum in new ways, focused on insects, ventilation valves, and views out of windows. (The audio guide was hosted on the museum’s ‘ima-digital’ website prior to the Newfields rebranding; it is currently available in a personal cloud storage drive available here: https://my.pcloud.com/publink/show?code=kZrGVc7ZT6TR9JIYfWYeUfBekJg mWMX).13

![Figure 8a spurse label in the Art of Africa gallery. Part of sub-merging: a wetland project by spurse. Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.](image)

13 This is archived by PCloud, accessed 15 August 2019.
They inserted labels with poetic provocations throughout the museum galleries, as well as bathrooms, hallways, and the gift shop (Figures 8 a, b, and c). They offered mycology tours of the grounds. They planted a Garden of Historical Surrender, which included a planting of abrus seeds that had been sourced for repair of objects in the African collection, and gardens of battling native and invasive species. They identified an Entropy Garden ‘In Memoriam of R. Smithson’ in a found embankment in tenuous balance with the river oxbow that defined the museum property line (Figures 9a and 9b). All of these interrogations, postulations, productions, and
records of institutional dialogues moved beyond provocative critique and actually forced awareness of, and discussions about, incongruities our departmental or disciplinary philosophies and methods within in the institution: the museum is *not just one thing* and also not just one body of things, nor one hierarchy of decisions buttressed by these definitions. It is vastly complex in its composition – as the artists proved, even unknowable in all of its complexity – and therefore implicitly contradictory, resistant, and ungovernable. As Iain Kerr reflected later, during a May 2009 class visit to MIT, this catalysing of questions implicit to the institution-building event form of the museum was ‘not quite a Trojan horse strategy’. He reported that the group asked of themselves, ‘How do you move away from critique, which imagines you can stand outside of something and say what’s wrong, to methods of critique that are constructing something?’

A final example of the consultation cycle rendered evident by the spurse project occurred in the discussion about chalk that opened this reflection. As recorded on the video that was documenting that conversation:

Stan Pipkin: The balls in play have spoken loudly. It’s like you pinch your skin, your reaction is to scream loudly from your personal territory. It hurts, you know. You speak out, lash out. And so it relies on a very concrete invested – almost vehement – defence of each per-[stops himself] each force, we’ll call it, their agency. …So the conservator can’t say ‘well this is a great piece, I’m gonna just cut you some slack on this one.’ This relies on those fixed notions of, you know, how things work.

Iain Kerr: But only for that one first moment…. Our goal, our job, strategically, is to abstract [things].

Pipkin: precisely. That’s where this activity has to be, in its own way; it has to come in from the outside. …It’s the kind of lubrication and the friction that’s making this thing happen.

Kerr: Suddenly the chalk is no longer fixed. It’s this pulsating thing where everyone’s kind of wondering where, how, can we make it sit or stop. Like, is it in a drawer, is it on a string. You know, because it would finally give it a status, where suddenly at that moment in the dialogue the chalk is unfixable, unlocalizable. You know, one person’s saying ‘well, put it everywhere. …And [the other person says put it in] the back of the drawer, you know, inside another drawer…

Pipkin: … and paint it to look like a piece of wood.
Kerr: Yeah, and then it [will be] attached to a piece of string! You know, each of those have very serious 'no's' or footnotes attached. You know, if it’s a string, somebody could still make graffiti on the chalkboard. And if it’s in a drawer, nobody would understand that the chalk is an active part of the piece. And if it’s everywhere, you know, the meaning would just disappear.¹⁴

The spurse project was one of finding and retaining the resonance in objects. How, the artists asked, can we keep the chalk ‘pulsating’ rather than silent and dead? This was not a project about simulating experience but about revealing an experience that is the museum – including tracing and exploring its limits, but also replicating, extending, and constantly probing its procedures of self-definition. spurse’s activities intended to produce hybrid categories of knowledge and productions of truth, through strategic artistic claims to experimentation forged with and alongside scientific collaborators, landscapers, students, museum workers, and others from various disciplinary sites of expertise. Without the impulse to decide ‘what stops’ – that is, without the disciplinary boundaries defining expertise, or what a museum is and what belongs in it, this also would be an irrelevant project. After all, as spurse pointed out, if the chalk were everywhere in the museum, it would be normalized and diminish its efficacy, agency, and meaning.

In their focus on the complex negotiations surrounding a piece of chalk, or a bacterial sample, or an institution, the artists literalized Actor Network Theory approaches to the museum that have been attempted in theorizations of museum practices by scholars such as Albena Yaneva and Fernando Domínguez Rubio.¹⁵ In this sense, the artists succeeded in transcending that boundary between the museum institution and art historical scholarship set up in the dichotomy challenged by Haxthausen, in their act of purposing a ‘critical spirit’ as medium, within an institutional context bound to present, maintain, and support artistic media and practices. The effects and machinations of their strategic perturbations of the IMA become evident when the spurse exhibition is compared with a scenario that unfolded in another exhibition shortly thereafter. sub-merging: a wetland project by spurse officially opened to the public in the Off the Wall gallery on 11 June 2006, with chalk available behind a sliding chalkboard panel (following extensive discussion and negotiation, some of which were extensively documented on the day after the opening in their drawing towards the ontology of the thing, IMA. The Center for the Study of the Collective (Research of event “what passes” June 12, 2006, Version 2)) (Figure 10).

Nearby, in the museum’s Forefront Gallery space, the traveling exhibition *On the Edge: Chinese Artists Encounter the West* opened shortly thereafter on 30 June, including artist Xu Bing’s installation *Square Word Calligraphy*, which presents English-language words laid out with formal similarities to Chinese characters (Figure 11). Part of this installation included a chalkboard with chalk pieces fixed to a rail with wax. When, in August 2006, an audience member used the chalk on the chalkboard (which was not intended by the installation guidelines), team members conversed over email in search of a clear guideline about the appropriate response: what were the instructions of the ‘Organizer’ (the curatorial agency that organized the exhibition and its tour)? What had the curator at another venue done in response to chalk ‘graffiti’? In this case, the ‘grey area’ of the maintenance of the chalkboard in one static form was discussed with recourse to precedents and instructions. It was in the resisting of the fixity of established guidelines that the *spurse* chalkboard interrogated – and illuminated, in regenerating cycles of discussion – ‘what passes’ (Figure 12).
For their part, the artists of spurse retooled their diagrammatic notes of their experiences at the IMA and brought this inscription device – both a guide to a process and a record – into future projects, including the diagrammatic materials produced for their 2008-2009 ‘Deep Time Rapid Time’ project for Grand Arts in Kansas City (Figure 13). The group’s exploration of the ecosystems of a multi-scale spatial commons continues to this day, with the publication of a Kickstarter-funded Eat Your Sidewalk Cookbook that encourages exploring and knowing local environs through perambulation and taste and an upcoming Orono Maine residency project titled Future Waters Shanty Boat, which proposes to ‘catalyse a new form of ecological community using the concept of living-of-a-watershed-commons [to] foster a multi-species environmental urbanism that stitches together currently disparate communities’.16

The project of spurse did not simply chronicle the IMA protocols – it changed them, even in the simple act of surfacing them as cultural matters (and artworks). After the exhibition closed, and without spurse in the IMA ecosystem, our negotiation processes continued and the polyvocal nature of our conversations were even more pronounced – and recognizable as such. Following our work with

Figure 13 spurse, towards the ontology of the event version 2, 2008, courtesy of spurse.
the artists, it was ever more evident that the institution of the museum was and is not a monolith, but a complex of multiples and multitudes, biological and political, with different approaches to setting priorities, negotiating mobilities, and claiming territories – just as spurse had pictured it in their series of maps and drawings that were acquired by the museum at the close of their exhibition (Figure 14). With this on-goingness of the institution and its discussions in mind, when writing this essay, I asked spurse member Iain Kerr about the nomenclature of ‘stopping’ that they had used when charting their methodology in 2006. He responded that in their usage, stopping was not a moment of fixity, but more like ‘when you stop over for lunch. It doesn’t mean that you are frozen in place. All of these dynamic things [that are]
circulating...have joined in a little loop or a pattern, and that pattern is staying together.’17 This philosophy evokes the kind of ‘process ontology’ advocated by such thinkers as Rosi Braidotti, who, in the same year as spurse’s IMA exhibition, published her advocacy for the posthumanist work of Donna Haraway that is (in her framing, distinct from Latour’s in being) crucially feminist, affective, contaminated, unfixed, nomadic, transformational, and accountable.18 In recent years, with the acceleration of popular discourse around climate change and the Anthropocene, Latour has defended himself against interpretations of his work and method as suggesting that scientific ‘matters of fact’ are open to process-defined interpretation. His recent Down to Earth crucially describes the planet as a ‘common world’ wherein the ‘wicked’ universal human condition is tethered to real, data-verified shared environmental threats across borders.19 In other words, Latour himself, in this newest work, is calling for a return to earth to confront an ontology of the real that is a tangible, actual product of power constructs, not simply an interpretive one.

In the course of closing, and invoking the lessons learned from spurse, I wish to suggest not a tidy hierarchization of ideas but some provocations that aspire to productive perplexity. Here are some questions for our pitstop away from fixity: How is it that we define our disciplinary boundedness? How many art histories are there? Where else are art history’s sites, other than the academy and the museum? What does the museum do with the formulation of itself as a traditional keeper of facts and objects, in a post-truth era? How does one remain open to confronting the terrestrial crises of our time, as overwhelming as they are, while also investigating and changing the procedures and conditions of knowledge and power that got us here? How can we tweak the algorithm to change what matters in our scholarship and curatorial care?

* * *

Indigenous People’s Day, 2019 – a coda: I am in the audience of a presentation by the director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in which he is seeking to grapple with colonialist institutional histories and questions of belonging. He asks, ‘What do we recognize? What histories do we represent?’ I am reminded of the spurse project, with its assertions about the fluidity of such categories as native, invasive, inside, outside, nature, and culture. I feel gratitude for having been part of these conversations, while also keenly aware of the massive work still to be undertaken by museums that wish to more courageously interrogate their own histories, audiences, and constituencies, and to evaluate how they wish to matter going forward.

17 Author interview with Iain Kerr, 1 March 2019.
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