



The lost and the found: Stories for the afterlife (of objects)

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Abstract In 2004 Liverpool-based artist Tabitha Moses undertook a residency at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery in Greater Manchester. Responding to the small mummy of a young girl in the museum’s Egyptology collection, Moses created *The Dolls*, a series of nine carefully wrapped and bound dolls that she had previously found in charity shops. She placed the dolls in the museum display cases alongside the Egyptian artefacts already in residence ‘for the [mummified] girl to take with her to the afterlife’. This museum intervention, titled *The Lost and The Found*, is analysed as uncanny in the Jentschian sense, for dolls are anxiety provoking; they are neither dead nor alive, yet both dead and alive simultaneously. X-ray images of the dolls, where the pins with which Moses had held the swaddling fabric in place are visible, are considered here within the context of Hito Steyerl’s identification of object forensics as a practice whereby ‘the bruises of things are deciphered, and then subjected to interpretation’. Conceptual links are made between the dolls as x-rayed images and the bodily fragility of the original mummified girl whose desiccated remains have undergone forensic investigation by Egyptology specialists in their quest for heuristic interpretation. *The Dolls* as a museum intervention tells multiple stories; the dolls have become witnesses to their former lives as little girls’ toys, and of their journey from desired object to disposal and reclamation by Moses. As objects for the afterlife of the mummified Egyptian girl Moses’ artwork prompts questions as to the identity of the girl, of how she died, and of how she ultimately came to rest in Bolton.

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I am a sculptor, I am interested in objects. I am interested in the way that objects that have been used and discarded, then found and repurposed, seem to hold within them all their former lives and experiences. Found objects bear traces or scars of their previous existences, not just the marks and scratches on their exterior, but affective traces held deep within their materiality. The found object resonates with a past that can only be imagined as fiction or fantasy.

In 2004 Liverpool-based artist Tabitha Moses made a series of nine swaddled dolls as part of a residency she undertook at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery. *The Dolls* (Figs. 1–3) was conceived in response to Moses' encounter at Bolton Museum with the mummified remains of a small doll-sized girl exhibited as part of the museum's Egyptology collection (Fig. 4). Moses' dolls were all sourced by the artist from charity shops or flea markets; they are toys that have been played with, outgrown, discarded then brought back to life at the hands of the artist. The dolls themselves are all fairly small, some have moulded plastic hair, some have eyes that open and close, all have apple cheeks and pink-stained pouty little mouths. Each of these nine small dolls has been carefully wrapped and bound in fabric, with thread, human hair, and sometimes other small objects embedded or attached. The dolls appear to have been mummified with reverence and consideration to their imagined origins: an African doll with elaborate hair has been wrapped in bright floral cloth reminiscent of Dutch wax fabrics; a blue-eyed Sindy doll sheathed in funereal black appears almost glamorous; an expressionless baby doll, swaddled tightly in what seems to be sheer gold ribbon, has the ambivalent material qualities of a chrysalis or exotic seed pod. Moses has a practice that utilises the language of fabric and stitch to examine the ways in which we navigate trauma and healing. In this context, the



Figures 1–3 Tabitha Moses, *The Dolls* (2004). Dolls, fabric, plastic, thread, human hair, bits and bobs, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of artist Tabitha Moses and photographer Ben Blackwell





Figure 4 The Mummified Girl at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery. Image from the collections of Bolton Library and Museum Services

process of wrapping, binding and pinning the dolls becomes an agentic act of reparation.

That little girls are trained in domesticity and maternal care from birth (the choice of ‘girls’ toys’ in any toy shop bears testament to this gendering of play), in this context takes on a disturbing quality, for what kind of little girl would so carefully swaddle her dismembered doll? Perhaps a little girl who still believed that all things were alive in some way. ‘Think back to the days before you laid aside your dolls, but after you gave up the belief that they were as alive as the family dog. There was certainly a period of uncertainty. Were the dolls alive or dead? Kind or vicious?’ (Heon, 2001). *The Dolls* both mimics the process of wrapping used in mummification, yet also appears as a material metaphor for the inscrutable nature of dolls themselves. As a material response to her emotive encounter with the mummified girl, Moses explained that she made these sculptural objects ‘for the girl to take with her to the after-life’ (Michon & Moses, 2007).

Dolls are ambiguous objects at the best of times; even when bought new they appear as both dead and alive simultaneously. They are presented and packaged as objects upon which children (predominately little girls) can project narrative fantasies. Yet these very same dolls are somehow closed in upon themselves, they are mute and unresponsive, they stare back without expression, their rigid limbs and bodies do not yield to the love of their possessors, their material blankness perhaps the ideal form upon which to project fantasies. ‘The doll is a dead body, an inanimate child, an unresponsive, rigid corpse’ (Simms, 1996, p. 673). A doll found or bought second-hand holds on to her secrets: did she partake in dollies’ tea parties or dressing up games, was she treasured and permitted to lie in bed alongside her little girl, or was this doll perhaps an object upon which her little girl projected feelings of fear and potential harm? Eva-Marie Simms (1996) in her exploration of the uncanniness of dolls in relation to their role as a material representation of death, explains that in the lives of many children ‘the encounter with the doll is of primary importance and set apart from the play with other toys. ... Part of the terror the doll inspires ... comes from her lifelessness and her indifference and unresponsiveness to the child’s emotions’ (p. 670).



The Dolls as a museum intervention is uncanny in the Jentschian sense due to dolls' appearance of being both dead and alive simultaneously. For although Freud (1919/1955) disputed Jentsch's (1997) earlier proposition that it is the intellectual uncertainty as to whether an object is dead or alive that engenders sensations of the uncanny, proposing rather the uncanny as sensations experienced and repressed in childhood resurfacing unexpectedly in adulthood, both theories, Freud's and Jentsch's, come more closely together when the animate and the inanimate become confused. Freud stated that his own theorisation of the uncanny as uncertainty opens the mind for irrationality and the supernatural belief in the afterlife. That old fears that have been repressed return in the uncanny encounter. Laura Mulvey (2006) proposes that the reappearance of the past in the present materialises as the afterlife of images and objects, that the ghostly presence of the past is embodied in the material present. *The Dolls* and the mummified girl can both be considered uncanny objects in that they paradoxically conceal and reveal at the same time. They conceal in a material sense, for they are bodies wrapped or swaddled in cloth, yet this physical transformation also conceals stories of a life once lived. What is revealed is the material afterlife of objects.

In some circumstances a child may adopt a doll as their transitional object. These objects Winnicott (1953) explains are an infant's first not-me possession and serve as a bridge between that which is comfortably familiar and whatever is disturbingly unfamiliar. The transitional object is 'adopted and utilized by the individual to aid in maintaining a psychophysical balance under conditions of more or less strain' (Greenacre, 1969, p. 144). The transitional object Phyllis Greenacre (1969, p. 145) tells us, 'absorbs neglect and even abuse as well as the most loving closeness; [it] responds sensitively to the impulses and needs of its infant owner; and so in general makes strangeness and solitude more acceptable'. Yet the uncanniness of dolls, their unresponsiveness and indifference to the existence of the child, raises questions as to why these specific objects of childhood play should have come to hold such affective material resonance.

As part of the exhibition *The Lost and The Found* at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery in 2007, *The Dolls* was displayed by placing the individual dolls inside museum cases alongside the artefacts already in residence (Figs. 5–6). Lying prone alongside stone and ceramic, ancient vessels and carved figurines, the little swaddled dolls appear as fetish objects from an unknown realm where femininity was perhaps held in reverence or thought to possess other-worldly qualities. However, as Alix Ohlin (2008) noted when reviewing Mona Hatoum's solo exhibition at Darat al Funun, 'situated with obvious care within the hallowed space of a museum, they could be the preserved artefacts of some deeply disturbed, but possibly fictional, culture' (p. 39). Exhibited in this manner, *The Dolls* materialises in the present a fictionalised history of colonial requisition, yet also can be seen to enact a certain reparation in its relational juxtaposition with the colonial artefacts. 'If the entities that undergo repairs are seen as existing in relational webs of entanglement, rather than as discrete objects, then a repair to one entity in this web may simultaneously enact a repair to several connected entities' (Reeves-Evison & Rainey, 2018, p. 5).





Figures 5–6 Tabitha Moses, *The Dolls* (2004) exhibited in the museum cases at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery. Dolls, fabric, plastic, thread, human hair, bits and bobs, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of artist Tabitha Moses and photographer Harriet Hall

Bolton Museum houses a world-renowned collection of ancient Egyptian objects and artefacts, including the mummified girl that Moses encountered during her residency. Many of these objects were donated by Miss Annie Barlow, the daughter of a wealthy local cotton mill owner. Annie Barlow was an educated woman with a keen interest in archaeology and Egyptology; she was secretary of the Egypt Exploration Society and helped to raise funds for expeditions and excavations. In 1892 Annie donated many objects from her collection to the Chadwick Museum, the Victorian forerunner of Bolton Museum and Art Gallery. One of these discoveries, still on display at Bolton Museum 130 years later, is the mummified remains of the small girl that so affected artist Tabitha Moses.

The girl's body and coffin measure just under a meter long, small enough to be almost doll-sized. The coffin itself is plain and undecorated, and there were no objects or amulets enclosed in the girl's wrappings. Ian Trumble (personal communication, 27 May 2020), Curator of Archaeology, Egyptology and World Cultures at Bolton Library & Museum Services, notes that very little is known about this girl other than that she dates to about 332BC – 30AD and that she probably came from one of the cemeteries at Gurob or Illahun in the Faiyum region of Egypt. The museum label gives no further information yet it is assumed, I was told by Trumble, that she was from a fairly wealthy family as she had a gilt cartonnage mask covering her face. But as there are no markings on her wrappings, cartonnage or coffin we do not know her name, who her family were, or anything about her life. In the 1970s scientific tests were carried out on the remains of the girl and it was concluded that she was approximately eight years old when she died and that the cause of her death was probably tuberculosis, this being the reason that she was so small for her age. In 2014 the girl was flown to Florida as part of a touring



exhibition, and whilst there she underwent further scientific investigation including x-rays and a CT scan. These tests revealed that the girl was in fact about four years of age when she died, and the cause of her death was appendicitis.

What kind of stories can be read into this information which appears at first to tell us quite a lot, not just about the mummified girl from Egypt, but also about middle class ladies in late Victorian Britain? Actually, it tells us very little about either the mummified girl or Annie Barlow. It is perhaps too easy to conjure up stories of a loving family grieving the loss of a beloved daughter, or of an audacious Victorian spinster bravely defying the social conventions of her time. Perhaps there are other stories to be told, stories more nuanced, less heroic, stories of the afterlife of objects that can be deciphered by paying attention to what objects might have to say in the present.

Displayed in the hallowed spaces of glass vitrines, both *The Dolls* and the mummified girl are presented as objects that have the material and visual qualities of the fetish object of anthropology. Fetishism can be understood as the overdetermination of the social value of objects. In anthropology the fetish is an object imbued with animistic properties and supernatural powers and is considered to determine actions (Dant, 1996). The fetish is a material mediator between the human world and that of the divine, it acts as a talisman, an object to be carried with one always – even to the afterlife. The objects and artefacts of ancient Egyptian burial practices, extracted by British archaeologists in the late nineteenth century were considered to be fetishes from a mysterious and romanticised oriental past. Displayed in a contemporary museum situation, *The Dolls* and the mummified girl now act as material mediators between girlhood past and the present, each in their own way bridge the uncertainty between the living and the after-life.

Moses' exhibition *The Lost and The Found* also included x-ray images of *The Dolls*. In each image the pins with which Moses had held the swaddling fabric in place are startlingly visible and bring to mind practices of forensic investigation

Figures 7–8 Tabitha Moses, *The Dolls (x-ray)* (2004). X-rays, lightboxes, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of Tabitha Moses



(Figs. 7–8). In these images the dolls, some with limbs missing, now appear as victims of torture, murder, or of some voodoo-like ritual. The mummified girl too has been subjected to forensic style investigation by archaeologists and Egyptologists with the intention of finding evidence of a life lived in a time and place culturally distant and materially uncertain. The forensic quality of the x-ray images of Moses' *The Dolls* and the actual investigative process undertaken on the mummified girl materialise an embodied violence that Hito Steyerl (2012) connects to forensic science:

Objects increasingly take on the role of witnesses in court cases concerned with human rights violations. The bruises of things are deciphered, and then subjected to interpretation. Things are made to speak – often by subjecting them to additional violence. The field of forensics can be understood as the torture of objects, which are expected to tell all, just as when humans are interrogated. Things often have to be destroyed, dissolved in acid, cut apart, or dismantled in order to tell their full story. (pp. 52–53)

The little Egyptian girl must have died painfully if not violently, for appendicitis is an acute condition even with modern medical intervention. A ruptured or gangrene appendix from which the girl must have died is not an instant death, but one that can linger over several days. Moses' x-rayed dolls also imply temporal violence, perhaps the methods of dissection and torture inflicted by the girls who previously possessed these objects, and also the time-consuming processes undertaken by the artist as she tightly pinned fabric wrappings to the partially dismembered dolls.

These medically forensic looking specimens are chilling. Powerfully evocative of bodily fragility they have a visceral, painful quality which defy their prosaic origins...The pins so clearly illuminated by the photographic process are mere sewing tools, yet it is extraordinary how gruesome they appear. (Michon & Moses, 2007)

Steyerl's (2012) proposition that forensics is a form of object torture also suggests that objects themselves are somehow implicated in the original crime. The objects that make up Moses' *The Dolls* appear as evidence of a secret or repressed crime with the implication that the criminal agency of girls has become manifest in the objects of these artworks. As Steyerl writes: 'Things condense power and violence. Just as a thing accumulates productive forces and desires, so does it also accumulate destruction and decay' (2012, p. 53). Forensic investigation is a painstaking ritualistic search for evidence, but here in relation to *The Dolls* and to the mummified girl we might ask, evidence of what? X-rays and CT scans can show us the internal workings of objects, but tell us little about lives lived or experiences had. These stories are lost to us however hard we look at the material evidence.

Moses' dolls as they lie in the museum display cases are inanimate objects in all their plastic inscrutability. Viewed as museum interpretation, the dolls become witness to their former lives as little girls' toys and to their journey from desired object to disposal and reclamation by Moses. The process of mummification is mirrored in Moses' *The Dolls*, through the care and reverence with which the artist



attended to processes of wrapping and binding the small found dolls. Colonial and postcolonial fascination with Egyptian mummies lies in their uncanniness, and in a veneration for the ancient Egyptian materialist commitment to a belief in the afterlife. In ancient Egypt the soul of the departed was thought to be reconnected with the body in the afterlife in an act of restitution. *The Dolls* brings to life stories of loss and repair. The little girl in Bolton had no possessions interred with her, she is silent and self-contained, doll-like in her unresponsiveness.

The great fear which the doll inspires is the fear of a silence and emptiness at the heart of our existence. It grasps the possible absence of transcendence, the possible unreality of a spiritual invisible realm, the possible meaninglessness of our life beyond the fragile clearing of the present...the doll, in her small and silent way, denies being itself. (Simms, 1996, p. 673)

Did the mummified girl have her own transitional object, I wonder? If she did, at four years old she was about the right age to be discarding this, as ‘when infancy is past, the investment in the transitional object generally is gradually dissipated’ (Greenacre, 1969, p. 161). Moses’ declaration that the dolls were made as objects for the girl to take with her to the afterlife implies that the small mummified girl displaced and alone was perhaps still in need of a doll to comfort her against the distress of unfamiliarity (Michon & Moses, 2007). Transitional objects bear the material traces of the transition between infancy and childhood, while Moses’ *The Dolls* acts as the mediator between life and death, between the lost and found. The dead and unresponsive doll becomes an entirely appropriate transitional object for the dead and unresponsive mummified girl at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery.

The Dolls and the mummy materialise the uncertainty inherent in the uncanny, but differently. The mummy is organic but offers the possibility that it might come back to life (Freud’s proposition is that the uncanny arises from a superstitious belief in the afterlife). The dolls are inorganic but equally might take on the appearance of life (become animated through play, or in their juxtaposition with the museum objects) and, as such, manifest the intellectual uncertainty of Jentsch. If, as Greenacre (1969) proposes, the transitional object can be seen as a material bridge between the comfortably familiar and the disturbingly unfamiliar and as such makes strangeness more acceptable, then Moses’ intention that *The Dolls* acts as transitional objects for the mummified girl is unsettling in its failure or refusal to comfort. *The Dolls* is an artwork that mediates between life and death: it is an uncanny go-between whereby the museum visitor’s encounter with it destabilises expectations of both the museum experience and the historical context of museum collections. As x-rayed images, *The Dolls* resembles the fetish object of anthropology, and at the same time it resonates with the bodily fragility of the mummified girl from Egypt. Moses’ reparative gesture materialises something of the uncertainty of the uncanny and also, perhaps, of the ongoing trauma of colonial requisition: *The Dolls* simultaneously conceals and reveals stories of the after-life of objects. Despite forensic and archaeological scrutiny, both girl and dolls remain silent.

Declarations



Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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