



# Suturing Collection Wounds

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**Master of Arts (Art and Design)**

**Curating, Managing and  
Mediating Art Major, Master's  
Programme in Visual Culture and  
Contemporary Art**

**School of Arts, Design and  
Architecture**

**Thesis supervisor: Nora Sternfeld  
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# Abstract

This curatorial research emerges out of being affronted by a partial taxonomy of ‘unworkable’ objects paralysed within collection contexts that privilege ‘in perpetuity’ thinking as authoritative. To destabilise this, it employs curiosity, reflection and questioning to acknowledge, reject, rupture and transform the collection logics that condemn the ‘unworkable’ to be wounded objects that remain trapped in sick institutions. It re-understands fieldwork as a treatment of working slowly, in support, and in care; this fieldwork responds to an institutional call to create conditions in which people, objects and institutions can heal. It seeks new understandings of how to act, asking which forms of address can facilitate more sustainable collecting, working and exhibitionary practices. It considers critically what contingencies could emerge from the company we choose to keep.

It comes to understand speculation as a conscious permitting of thinking without (empirical) knowing, highlighting unruly, devalidated, unstable, deviant and undisciplined knowledges as unfamiliar lenses through which to gaze and commune with unworkable matter, dissipate borders, and make muddy dominant ways of knowing. While some diagnose these lenses as pathology, I wish to understand them as forms of knowing that are no longer certified by dominant western and modern thought. This research is therefore a demand to negotiate and transform the default ontologies and gestures permissible when ‘making things public’ within the museum institution.

## KEYWORDS

Curatorial Practice, Collections Logics, Unworkable Objects, Speculative Museology, Undisciplined Knowledges, Communing, Haunting, Immanence.



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—

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# Table of Contents

<u>ABSTRACT</u>	03
<u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u>	05
<u>TABLE OF CONTENTS</u>	06
<u>PREFACE: TAKEN FOR MUD</u>	08
<b>A</b> <u>INTRODUCTION</u>	14
<b>1</b> Locating and Situating	15
<b>2</b> How This Began—Experiences Entering Collections	18
<b>3</b> Aspirational Framework: Imagining a Speculative Museology	23
<b>4</b> Research Question: If Change Can't Happen Quickly Enough, Then What Can Be Done with the Unworkable in the Meantime?	27
<b>5</b> Methodology: Decelerating and Embracing Slowness	29
<b>6</b> Reflecting on Methodology	31
<b>7</b> Re-Understanding Curatorial Research	33
<b>B</b> <u>BEHIND CLOSED DOORS</u>	36
<b>1</b> Institutes of Collecting	37
<b>2</b> Sick Institutions	41
<b>3</b> Working in Support of Collections	44
<b>4</b> Hoarding and the State of Collections	46
<b>5</b> Supportive Storing	52



6	Recursivity Within Collection Work	54
7	Suturing Objects Through Replication, Damage and Deviance	59
8	Listening for Squeaks and Practical Ways to Let Things Speak	62
	Interlude: Questions to Ask of Objects	66
<b>C</b>	<b>UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES</b>	
	<u>AS SUTURING TREATMENTS</u>	70
1	Communing With Mirrors	75
2	(Love and) Object Ciphers	79
3	Dust, A Trace That Speaks	84
4	The Pyramids Were Not Made to be Opened	88
5	Conjuring the Curatorial	91
	<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	98
	<u>REGISTER OF IMAGES</u>	104
	<u>IMAGE APPENDIX</u>	105

# Preface Taken for Mud

*“Sometimes I am taken for granite. Everybody is taken for granite sometimes but I am not in a mood for being fair to everybody. I am in a mood for being fair to me. I am taken for granite quite often, and this troubles and distresses me, because I am not granite. I am not sure what I am but I know it isn't granite. I have known some granite types, we all do: characters of stone, upright, immovable, unchangeable, opinions the general size shape and pliability of the Rocky Mountains, you have to quarry five years to chip out one little stony smile. That's fine, that's admirable, but it has nothing to do with me. Upright is fine, but downright is where I am, or downwrong.*

*I am not granite and should not be taken for it. I am not flint or diamond or any of that great hard stuff. If I am stone, I am some kind of shoddy crumbly stuff like sandstone or serpentine, or maybe schist. Or not even stone but clay, or not even clay but mud. And I wish that those who take me for granite would once in a while treat me like mud.*

*Being mud is really different from being granite and should be treated differently. Mud lies around being wet and heavy and oozy and generative. Mud is underfoot. People make footprints in mud. As mud I accept feet. I accept weight. I try to be supportive, I like to be obliging. Those who take me for granite say this is not so but they haven't been looking where they put their feet. That's why the house is all dirty and tracked up.*

*Granite does not accept footprints. It refuses them. Granite makes pinnacles, and then people rope themselves together and put pins on their shoes and climb the pinnacles at great trouble, expense, and risk, and maybe they experience a great thrill, but the granite does not. Nothing whatever results and nothing whatever is changed.*

*Huge heavy things come and stand on granite and the granite just stays there and doesn't react and doesn't give way and doesn't adapt and doesn't oblige and when the huge heavy things walk away the granite is there just the same as it was before, just exactly the same, admirably. To change granite you have to blow it up.*

*But when people walk on me you can see exactly where they put their feet, and when huge heavy things come and stand on me I yield and react and respond and give way and adapt and*

*accept. No explosives are called for. No admiration is called for. I have my own nature and am true to it just as much as granite or even diamond is, but it is not a hard nature, or upstanding, or gemlike. You can't chip it. It's deeply impressionable. It's squashy.*

*Maybe the people who rope themselves together and the huge heavy things resent such adaptable and uncertain footing because it makes them feel insecure. Maybe they fear they might be sucked in and swallowed. But I am not interested in sucking and am not hungry. I am just mud. I yield. I do try to oblige. And so when the people and the huge heavy things walk away they are not changed, except their feet are muddy, but I am changed. I am still here and still mud, but all full of footprints and deep, deep holes and tracks and traces and changes. I have been changed. You change me. Do not take me for granite.”*

<sup>1</sup> Ursula Le Guin. “Taken for Granite,” in *The Wave in the Mind*.

2



<sup>3</sup> Pierre Huyghe. *After A Life Ahead*, 2017. Installation. Concrete floor of ice rink, logic game, ammoniac, sand, clay, phreatic water, bacteria, algae, bees, aquarium, black switchable glass, Conus textile, GloFish, incubator, human cancer cells, genetic algorithm, augmented reality, automated ceiling structure, rain.

For some weeks, before beginning to write or when I get stuck, I read the aforementioned passage, ‘Being Taken for Granite.’<sup>1</sup> I can’t pinpoint exactly why it calms me, warms me, prompts rueful smiles. I think about matter, the effort to contain the messy material of things. I feel at once more akin with mud than stone, and wonder if this could be forced (pummelled?) into a hopeful analogy for curatorial practice: myself as mud within muddy situations, the footprints of people and things coalescing on my surface, leaving smeared traces of shared experiences behind as they travel along their trajectories, having passed through me. I have time to be impressed and impressed upon by them, I ooze a little with every step, not a solid foundation but firm enough to support. At some point, their traces become microscopic and dry, now dust that drifts, touches upon different bodies, compiling connections I couldn’t imagine. The space in which this is enacted is not precious—hands sans white gloves, the possibility to make mess messier, new forms formed and smooshed. When I am mud, I am also fertile; muddy surfaces ripe for life. I cringe remembering how I was reluctantly moved upon seeing the small patch of green growth<sup>2</sup> under an “automated ceiling structure” that occasionally exhaled in Pierre Huyghe’s Münster project.<sup>3</sup> It was a tender moment within a grandiose gesture of worldmaking. Amongst severed concrete angles and brutalist earth wounds were muddy patches in which you were forbidden to walk. With a little light, unseen things will flourish. I imagine luminous mud.

I remember also that mud heals and nurtures, purifies

## PREFACE TAKEN FOR MUD

and cleanses. Although 'dirtying' a wound initially seems a counterintuitive treatment, it has long been employed for medicinal purposes and in ritual traditions. Sick animals lick clay and roll in mud to treat injuries, a form of geophagia (ingesting soil or earth) that is also emulated by humans.<sup>4</sup> Fermented liquids are purified and clarified with clay. We bath, compress and mask with mud; it does its work upon internal and external surfaces, a means of transferring essential minerals. It's a carrier for potentially potent knowledges that are not currently privileged in conventional medicine, yet have persisted in various forms, in various contexts, instinctive and impulsive, for thousands of years.

I read the passage again and wonder how a curatorial practice taken for mud could act. Certainly, like the proverbial pigs, it could give itself permission to wallow—splash, play, slowly find a form that adapts to the uncontrollable. When things materialise as messy, volatile and fragmented, it would not feel possible to limit and impose a way of dealing with them, but rather embrace the generative potential of our muddy context, be surprised by what could grow if we let it, and happily accept the imprints, residue and traces of this process.

Let us wade into a muddy, curatorial way of being.

<sup>4</sup> Clay tablets were used for anti-inflammatory purposes in Mesopotamia, while more recently NASA prescribed them to astronauts to assist with calcium absorption and counteract osteoporosis while in space.



A.

INTRO

# DUCTION

## A. INTRODUCTION

This is not a methodology or a case study, but a provocation to walk a different pathway towards change. This site for change is invisible and inaccessible to most: the storage depot where the collections of museums, galleries and institutions live. If to live means to be seen and to gaze in return, to make memories, interact with others, have the possibility to speak, transform and be transformed, then the easy joke is that there, things are not living. Perhaps five percent of things in collections have the opportunity to live through being studied, displayed, researched and exhibited. The slumbering 95 percent—the unworked with—includes a curious subset—the unworkable—that fittingly,<sup>6</sup> is neither thought of nor easy to categorise.

This thesis is an attempt to rouse, grapple and work with the unworkable. It moves towards trying to articulate a curatorial mentality that is considerate of how unworkable conditions produce exhaustion, debilitation and stagnation, and in response, strives to find ways to work in support and in care.<sup>7</sup> It is conscious of the necessity of slowing down, and rethinking which knowledges and forms of knowing are employed by default when we listen and speak (make things public<sup>8</sup>) within exhibitionary forms. It acknowledges the mission of museums to collect, preserve, study, exhibit and interpret, and the default logics (grounded in prescribed ethics) that underpin its institutional collections<sup>9</sup> and curatorial work,<sup>10</sup> but in doing so, seeks ways to question, rupture and transform them. It problematises the constituents of paternalistic care enforced by legacies of (colonial) owners, instead seeking unruly, devalidated, unstable, deviant and undisciplined knowledges with which to approach acting with and in care. It also recognises the tensions that arise when balancing and reconciling the intersecting aims of caring for and prioritising objects over people, and storage over access and education—reductively, a split focus between the past, the future or the present. In essence, its aim is to imagine a future of more sustainable<sup>11</sup> collecting, museological and curatorial practices, employing speculative possibilities as a suture to reimagine the lenses through which our cultural heritage collection wounds can be encountered.

<sup>5</sup> Joachim Huber. “How far are cultural goods good for a culture?,” in *Museumsdepots: Inside the Museum Storage*. p 131. In the late '80s, surveys in the US and the UK indicate that on average, 72-80% of collection objects were in storage, and this figure has only increased.

<sup>6</sup> I say fittingly, as both categorisation and insufficiently inclusive subsets are a condition of collections. The category of *varia* immediately comes to mind, its miscellany recursively containing infinite miscellaneous things. This is amplified through the collecting process: continued accumulation spawns more miscellany.

<sup>7</sup> I understand support and care in alignment with Céline Condorelli: as a response to a specific situation that calls for specific actions. This is soon elaborated upon and referenced.

<sup>8</sup> In define exhibiting as an unfolding process of “making things public”, I acknowledge Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel’s 2005 exhibition (*Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*) which I wish I had discovered sooner. I came to the phrase by way of Céline Condorelli’s description of cultural production in *The Company She Keeps*.

<sup>9</sup> “ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums.” International Council of Museums, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> “A Code of Ethics for Curators.” American Association of Museum Curators Committee, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> The sustainability I put forward is an attempt to counteract waste through working slowly and emphatically. It penetrates the institution in an ecological ‘consumption conscious’ sense (of trying to work meaningfully with what exists), and in relation to human resources (re-assessing what forms of care are possible within collection-work based on the capacities of their available labourforce, resources and institutional frameworks).



# 1 Locating and Situating

At the beginning of my Curating, Mediating and Managing Art (CuMMA) studies I was exhausted and burnt out—I'd just finished five years of working with cultural practitioners and commissions within local government, while juggling numerous independent curatorial projects in the evenings, on weekends, and within snippets of free time. I had obediently worked within systems that placed emphasis on the rate of production more than what was produced. I was told my job was to deliver seven projects each year, and I did. Eager to please, I never asked, “why seven?”. I didn't think to give myself time to consider what should be done and how best to do it. At the same time, I wasn't thinking in the way I imagined I should be thinking—I desired criticality, but I didn't really understand what this would mean, how it could be employed in this restrictive bureaucratic context, or where to begin. There wasn't time for doing much more than making things happen, so rather than why, I focussed on how. I figured out how to create spaces that could be temporarily inhabited, and made room for others to respond to them. I forged alliances, conversed with mentors, practiced patience with paperwork, and tried to develop and advocate for an ethics of working that emphasised the rights of the artist and arts worker. Much of my work involved listening and translation—of desires into what was possible, of bureaucratic requirements into working conditions, of ideas into public stagings.

At some point, others named me a curator. I felt uncomfortable and anxious about the label—the work I was doing certainly wouldn't get *e-flux* approval—and so I dutifully tried to understand what this meant and what it could mean, while attempting to reconcile this with how I saw myself and my work. I didn't quite know how to go about this, so I tried to approach it studiously. I subscribed to *The Exhibitionist* for exhibition histories, and to *Cabinet* for its esoteric fragmentation of ‘themes’ (exhibitions always seemed to be striving to navigate uncharted themes); read histories of and by its ‘stars’, its prolific writers, its observers and others; traced its professionalisation through academia and tried to familiarise myself with its different schools; identified its non-institutional, commercial and public forms, then attended conferences that circled and sustained these; and

## A. INTRODUCTION

tried to see as many exhibitions as was possible in an outlier of an Australian city with a museum under renovation, a State gallery, two contemporary art centres, three sleepy university galleries, and a handful of commercial and artist-run spaces. When asked, I proffered curating as a method of forming a conduit between an artist and how their vision was realised; the mediator between things happening and bureaucratic, logistical and promotional demands; the one who maintains the systems others inhabit.<sup>12</sup> I came to understand that when the active part of a project concluded (when to do lists were thoroughly crossed out, when the thing had been staged), it's very important that the people I'd been working with didn't think of the experience bitterly, angrily, or with regret. No experience is ever without conflicts—curating is inherently a process of negotiating conflicts—but my aim became for others to be interested in spending time working with me again. In retrospect, I was practicing care and support without naming them as such, but not yet comfortable with that being a valid position to inhabit. I now work towards an ethics of care that precipitates new approaches to curatorial thinking, a form of self-care in response to the seemingly unworkable.

Since beginning my studies, I have been trying to figure out why to work, and how best to work. I have consciously tried to produce as little as possible. I don't think stopping or withdrawal is the answer, but it was something I'd never had the luxury of trying.<sup>13</sup> I have slept well, read for pleasure, cooked incessantly, exercised regularly, and my stress-induced eczema has all but disappeared. Sometimes my stagnant CV makes me anxious. Of course, completely stopping seems impossible. Conversely, my biography now says: "she has experimented with strategically slowing down to take stock of her methodologies, motivations for producing, and to interrogate the best ways of working in inherently imperfect contexts and conditions", and upon re-reading, this seems only mildly self-deprecating.

I was not a prolific maker in my BA art studies. Newly introduced to conceptualism and dematerialised practices, I would always wonder, "does this have to exist?", invariably talking myself out of producing tangible things. This anxiety about adding things to the world persists, and became heightened when encountering collections. I realised that my past work unquestioningly prioritised producing new things,

<sup>12</sup> Here I invoke Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Maintenance Art Manifesto*: "after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" I seek to understand maintenance not simply as repetitive labour, but affective labour—gestures and actions that can produce (rewarding) emotional experiences within others, to hopefully modify institutional behaviours.

<sup>13</sup> And student life in Finland has comparatively been something of a luxury—free tuition, student meals, affordable health and lifestyle programs, multiple class excursions, malleable deadlines, silence as an expectation, the possibility to float for a while.

rather than considering how to work with objects that already exist. I was particularly struck by the mass of stuff that's held onto but not worked with. It reminded me of hoarding, but its invisibility also troubled me. What would happen if museums put the canonical masters away for a bit, and instead worked with what had never been seen? How would this augment our understandings of history, culture and power? How to even identify this stuff when our frames of reference have been shaped by these ingrained understandings? Are things in collections ever categorised as having never been seen?

<sup>14</sup> “\\_(ツ)\_/” is an online communication shorthand that signifies good-natured resignation and despair, but can also be wielded as a Zen-like tool of acceptance—Sisyphus in unicode. I return to it throughout the text to indicate moments of confronting institutional rigidity, or a general reluctance to engage (confront). It speaks of the melancholy and malaise that comes with recognising something is wrong, in tandem with paralysis in the face of understanding it may be difficult to challenge.

In deciding to address this context within my research, I acknowledge that systemic institutional change to ingrained practices and ways of thinking can be so slow as to seem imperceptible, and there is never a foolproof methodology to agitate towards this. Yes there are legal, ethical, financial and logistical factors to changing thinking, but it is people who dictate the nature of the interpretation and implementation of these. They decide, without questioning,<sup>14</sup> that “this is how things are done” and “that’s how things have always been”; that *these* are our values and *this is how* we enact those values, in practice.

I’m not satisfied with “how things are”. I want to put forward a way of thinking towards change.

## 2 How This Began —Experiences Entering Collections

I came to this topic with a group of MA curator peers invited to work collaboratively on presenting a municipality's collection within an institutional Finnish museum, but I was introduced to some of the conventions of institutional thinking a few years prior in Australia.<sup>15</sup> There was a consistency amongst attitudes within these differing Western contexts, despite geographical distance, and I remember similar moments of bewilderment throughout the ongoing tussles of negotiating with those representing different institutional positions. There was a sense that bending should be possible, but the rigidity of how values and practices were interpreted was what was preventing incremental change. "What could go wrong?" could be a placation, but instead it was interpreted as a provocation, and a challenge to speculate wildly about everything catastrophic that a Risk Management and an Occupational Health and Safety Plan needed to address. I have come to understand that "what could go wrong?" also forms the preemptive thinking behind storing, conserving and maintaining. And I wonder too, if this caring-as-coddling emerges guiltily, in response to colonial spoliations, a form of over-caring while the mechanisms of shifting towards ideas of "patrimonial translocation"<sup>16</sup> —a transnational approach to objects seized during revolution and empire-building—start to shudder into action. It is always difficult to criticise someone who 'cares too much'.

I remain curious about how institutions think about their collections precisely because of the consistency with which we reached these impasses in both contexts. Although my battles were brief, I remember being struck with the realisation that many collection logics seemed irrational and insular in practice, the inflexibility of their interpretation being so dependent upon individual gatekeepers. In this Australian context, I was negotiating particulars around what was welcome to enter the collection, but it wasn't until I was in Finland that I was invited to consider what was already there.

<sup>15</sup> The institution wanted the possibility to acquire new commissions for their collection; I worked with artists throughout the commissioning process to ensure the outcomes were collection-ready. We wrestled with many subjective interpretations of what this comprised: drawings "had to be framed"; a homebrewing project was scuttled because of anxiety about wild yeast "infecting" the air, leaking into the archives and compromising works; a short performance with a live flame was rejected because it was "impossible" to momentarily turn off the fire alarm. There is hope—I've recently found out a sister institution suspended their office alarm systems for an incoming indigenous curator's purifying smudge stick ceremony (luckily the collection store and the offices are linked to separate environmental control systems).

<sup>16</sup> Cristelle Terroni. "The Recovered Memory of Stolen Works of Art." *Books and Ideas*.

I've since understood that these gatekeepers are sometimes justifiably picky—the Australian conservator later revealed ongoing battles with many dysfunctional objects acquired when past practices were less strict. There's a work permanently in storage—it can't be hung for more than a few weeks because its paint was mixed with a medium submissive to gravity, causing it to slowly melt off the canvas. There's a complex DIY projection structure whose delicate film will self-destruct if its mechanisms are powered. There are fading drawings and cloudy resins and crazing glazes and fraying threads. Then alongside these troublesome cases are the thankless tasks of conjuring space in perennially overcrowded storage rooms; bringing order to the unorderable or rethinking antiqued categorisations; slowing the process of inevitable decay; and battling bureaucracy to liberate collections of acquisitional consequences made by anthropologists, archaeologists, ethnographers, collectors, directors, curators and donors, when the idea of looking after things “in perpetuity” seemed a sensible, caring and accountable approach.

I've read a variety of testimonies about museum work in 1970s and '80s America and the UK, a period of “professionalisation”<sup>17</sup> of collections-thinking, in which “complex legal and ethical frameworks for accessioning and deaccessioning” were devised, and “professional standards’ for collection records, environments and security” were enshrined as “unchallengeable truths”.<sup>18</sup> In retrospect, the naive assumption “that these policies and procedures would last ‘in perpetuity’”, along with the objects they protected, is a key contributor to the unwieldy state of many collections today. I kept thinking it seems unrealistic to universally dictate fixed strategies for dealing with unique things that are inherently subject to volatile and ever-changing conditions, and time itself, in an array of imperfect conditions specific to individual contexts. I refer to this enshrined thinking<sup>19</sup> as collections logics, henceforth.

Returning to Finland, and my first opportunity to consider an institutional collection. How to work with it quickly segued into how it worked; more so than what it contained, I was interested in the ‘logics’ within which it operated. I remembered so many rules laid out by the Australian registrar, and how quickly they'd transmuted when other realities became urgent. Could I question these normalised functions, the compulsion to hungrily acquire, the categories

<sup>17</sup> Which also coincides with the professionalisation of curating, museum studies and arts management through the initiation of accredited courses like *École du Magasin* (1987) and conferences like ‘New Museology’ (1989).

<sup>18</sup> Jim Vaughn. “Foreword,” in *Active Collections*. p xv.

<sup>19</sup> These are formalised in, for example, ICOM's “Guidelines for Loans” (1974), “Labelling and Marking Objects” (1992), “Disaster Preparedness” (1993), “Guidelines for Museum Object Information” (1994), but also relate to acquisition and deaccessioning policies, strategic plans, and process like annual auditing and stocktake requirements; board communication and reporting requirements; and governmental and legal regulations.

## A. INTRODUCTION

of classification, and the parameters around what knowledge is captured and distributed? What are the ways in which I could rethink established frameworks and systems of value to magnify that which is easily ignored, glossed over, and rendered invisible? How to discontinue, rupture and transform the collection's logics? How to understand and redefine what it means to care here? What to do with this vast and ever-increasing amount of stuff, impossible to work with across many lifetimes? And beyond this excess (of objects?), what other legacies were lurking?

While my first collections encounter occurred in Finland,<sup>20</sup> it could undoubtedly have taken place in a myriad of institution or museum collections. Despite nuances specific to the mandates of different institutions—objects and things, art and other, historical, encyclopaedic or contemporary—there are always things that don't fit, that are waiting to fit, that really should leave or be returned, that are forgotten or never discovered, that are things turning into residue turning into dust. So rather than focus on a particular empirical case study, I attempt to address this topic holistically, with the knowledge that, like in any attic, I could flap and throw a blanket in front of me and the forms of certain things would become visible, while others hide beneath. It is the hidden that I'm interested in.

When entering the aforementioned collection's database, language was a barrier (the archiving systems were all in Finnish) and so was, so to say, the freedom of movement of inquiry—access was mediated through the collections registrar, meaning certain undisclosed parts of the catalogue and particular categories remained restricted. The registrar wasn't exactly chatty, or perhaps not practiced with being forthcoming, although I sensed they were not intending to be deliberately obtrusive. I, along with other colleagues, began to question, asking variations on a theme, inching forward then doubling back, gradually prising open narrow points of entry. We agitated and poked around this archiving structure and suddenly a particular perspective became intriguing. Of the 2000-plus objects in the collection, around 25 had been classified using a word that could be translated as "bad", a tedious, difficult kind of bad. Perhaps the word was *vaikea*, which I understand can also mean arduous. These objects were considered burdens that required prolonged, strenuous effort before they could be reclassified as... good? Serviceable? Useable? Feasible? Exhibitable? They seemed not to be so

<sup>20</sup> I have consciously decided to not name the collections I refer to, as unworkable things are something of a taboo and an embarrassment. Staff agree it makes little sense to hold onto them (invest resources in them, when they are essentially unusable in the institutional contexts available to them), but feel their capacity to act is stymied by broader institutional mechanisms that dictate how they work.

problematic as to be uncollectible, but perhaps the possibility to make this transition from collectible to uncollectible was opaque, difficult and buried in bureaucracy. But presently, they weren't allowed to be worked with (exhibited) until they received attention and treatment from conservators and decision-makers. I wondered out loud at what position on a to do list they would fall, and the registrar's resigned shrug confirmed my hunch. For the first time, I let my mind wander through the myriad problems that could weigh down upon an object, tipping it from workable to unworkable; it is no longer tick box collectable, but simply residue of a state to which it can no longer return.

When pressed, the registrar extrapolated on the contexts of tiny thumbnail-image representations of certain objects—here was a painting that required concerted conservation work most likely beyond the time, capabilities and resources of the institution. Here was a wall-work of razor blade carved leaves, exhibited once but visibly decaying, now too delicate to move, let alone loan or display again. And my favourite, an airy sculpture made from delicate woven reeds whose postage box had been mislabelled—“this way up” was actually “this way down”—meaning it arrived to the institution as a mound of broken twigs. A second version was hastily requested and delivered intact, unable to be considered an exact replica of course due to the uniqueness of each strand of material and the nuances inherent within the making process, but an entirely passable facsimile of the original. Perhaps it was an individual's initiative, an overly stringent interpretation of the logics of the institution's acquisitions and collections policies, or a combination of both, that dictated that this 'original' remain in the collection. Here it was, the baddest of the bad, looming large in my imagination, a grouping of interwoven broken twigs destined to remain sequestered into the darkest corner of a space-thirsty collection store, eternally unconservitable. Mouth agape, the questions poured out: did the artist know both 'versions' of the work remained in the collection? That sounds crazy, shouldn't someone call them and let them know, surely they wouldn't want this to be seen as representative of their practice? How could that be considered an artwork given the state it was in? Why not agree to remove it? This was called deaccessioning, right? Has an artwork ever been deaccessioned from this collection? What has to happen to deaccession an artwork? Do you burn things?

## A. INTRODUCTION

The more I pressed, the tighter the registrar's mouth became. Still smiling, sometimes sympathetically at my incredulity, I sensed the absurdity of the situation resonated. But like many employees working long-term within bureaucratic and institutional contexts, a large part of their demeanor seemed weighted with resignation, a shrug and a step towards the path of least resistance.<sup>21</sup> So they seemingly remained faithful to processes with questionable logics, even when the stringent ways of interpreting these logics bordered on the absurd. In wondering if there was a way of identifying when collections exceed their capacity to be understood, I put forward this research in support of registrars everywhere. At what point does it make sense, ethically and practically, to dispose of items rather than keep them in perpetuity? How can we agitate collection systems and understandings of display to siphon out and interpret the unseen? And in the meantime, what to do with all this stuff?

<sup>21</sup> -\\_(ツ)\_/-



# 3 Aspirational Framework: Imagining a Speculative Museology

At the beginning of this process I'm thinking of unworkable things and imagining this is possible: a framework, a toolkit, a methodology made applicable in some way to every situation. Its edges may need to be pulled, its corners tugged, but it can be made to fit. In January 2015, I write:

"It is common for museum work to operate under the assumption that a truth can be found and represented. 'Facts' (or objects) can be discovered, invoked, interpreted and displayed to support 'truths' (the production of knowledges), which in turn serve as foundations upon which more facts (and assumptions based on truths) can be built. Through the compiling and arranging of these truth knowledges, it is thought to be possible to present a complete picture with a resolved narrative within the framework of museological exhibitions.

Within museum work, speculation<sup>22</sup> can be used as a means to reach an end; it is desired that there is a resolution in sight, and speculating functions as a bridge that encloses our path as we inch towards a known destination. An anthropological museum may brandish the aesthetic and material similarities between two objects to put forward a coeval relationship, regardless of their makers' recorded anonymous status. However in summoning the term 'speculative museology', I wish to consider if it's possible to work not by putting forward truths and facts, but speculative statements that can obscure known pathways and instead prompt us to search (without knowing what we're looking for). It is admitting the aforementioned objects might not fit into our existing categories, and require attention from different perspectives that employ alternative knowledges. It means not seeking 'treasure' or objects that embody absolute truths, but embracing and acknowledging that there will always be unknowns. Speculative museology

<sup>22</sup> Speculation is a word that suddenly seemed to permeate many curatorial, exhibition, cultural and philosophical discourses, and by extension, my own thinking too. As shorthand for a particular 'new' creative mode of being, it was wrestled away from science (where it's seen as an easy and non-productive temptation to bypass the implications of evidence, and should only be deployed within hypotheses of measurable experiments) and finance (where it argues for controllable futures, calculating probable scenarios based on empirical data, an affirmative though tenuous position prone to fragmenting catastrophically). *Speculative realism* privileges the fundamentally uncertain, and of thinking towards the limits of 'the potential'. It does not adopt a position of omniscient critique and fixed homogeneity, but rather attempts to engage with the heterogeneous lives of 'things' via non-hierarchical pluralities. To me, to speculate is to permit and embrace an unmoored way of thinking.

## A. INTRODUCTION

searches for the potentiality of these unknowns. This search or curatorial gesture will consciously be based on conjecture—on opinions knowingly formed by incomplete or partial information. The speculative also involves risk, uncertainty and unpredictability, so speculative museology looks to find methodologies in which these qualities can be materialised (in the museum, or elsewhere).

The thesis will reflect upon ideas of the curatorial (as distinct from curating), evoking points of resonance within the various methodological and theoretical positions purported by different thinkers in *The Curatorial*,<sup>23</sup> edited by Jean-Paul Martinon. This compilation urges curators to question the assumptions around professional practices that 'set up' events of exhibition making, and instead consider how curating could operate as a form to produce unstable and unruly knowledges. Some key terms to consider are non-secure knowledges; destabilisation; the coexistence of difference; forms of re-narration; sedimentation within collections and exhibitions; blind spots; losing control; being disoriented; curating being not exclusively about what is visible, observable or even representable; the tension between language entering to explain the visual, and the visual cancelling out what is said; the possibility of producing unresolved and unresolvable exhibitions in which an exhibition's narrative is not bound to its end; and the act of encountering being a key part of the exhibition's story.

The text provokes curators to search for new methodologies and ways to work, and for me, it prompted a consideration of the speculative as a disruptive strategy. How can the speculative be used to interrogate assumptions and rethink the inevitability of collecting and staging events within the museological field? And for those who (choose to) remain as operators within the conventions of museology, how can they find ways to reconcile or work through the challenges inherent within the occupation of curator? A key concern to be explored in light of the speculative is how collection management conventions inevitably result in a proportion of material stranded in a state of limbo, removed from circulation in the world, but unable to be 'exhibited' within traditional conventions—the unworkable and unworked with things. Therefore I seek to propose strategies and guidance

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Paul Martinon. *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*.

for dealing with surplus, residue, detritus and sediment within museum collections.

Museum collections do not just preserve immaculate objects venerated for their capacity to express specific and nuanced ideas about peoples, cultures, ideas and times. Within every collection are miscellaneous things that have found their way into the storerooms, having perhaps at some point been deemed worthy of being kept because inclusion was easier than justifying reasons for exclusion. What else joins the broken twigs on the shelves for bad things? How many bad things rub against the soon to become bad?

Every collection has the unseen and the never to be seen, shrouded and sequestered in dusty boxes in dark corners. Some objects are close to rubbish or refuse-in-waiting, others compile as debris and excess. Some are horrifically dated, offensive even, bound by an unworkable materiality that transcends novelty or kitsch. Some are remains and by-products that bear witness to a past in a manner that, nowadays, doesn't quite resonate as essential. Some are inherently volatile in their materiality, transitioning from object to ephemera. As they decay, they languish on a conservator's endless to do list, damaged beyond repair; an aura that was once almost tangible is now extinguished and unconservatable. And then there are those that have defied categorisation, not quite fitting anywhere, to subsequently remain unconsidered and invisible within systems of categorisation that demand limits and absolutes.

Things become fraught when the possibility of deaccession is raised. There is historical leakage, leftovers that can't quite be contained unless they remain here. Some aberrations from a family bequeathment to a collection, next to oddities expended from another era. Waste, but we cannot call it that. Unworkable works.

So, can we instead speculate about ways to reactivate these objects in limbo? If they can't be exhibited and they arguably hold little 'research' value, then they're anomalies of policy or of personal taste. The thesis seeks to speculate what their position in a museum could be. Can this miscellany and waste be exhibited without being seen or touched? It is here, and it is difficult, so can

## A. INTRODUCTION

it be activated and bestowed 'a purpose'? Are there ways to use these objects, via exhibition writing conventions, collection templates or the exhibition form itself, that could materialise strategies for speculative museology?

Thinking pragmatically, it is easy to comprehend the inevitability of a proportion of objects in limbo and the reticence of registrars, archivists and collection workers to deal with them. Institutions are unlikely to want to draw focus towards the unworkable things within their collection. If we shift our focus to public institutions in particular, there is the added commitment to using public money to benefit the public good. Collecting logics value holding onto everything, presenting the most complete incomplete representation possible of a time or a thing or a place, for an unimaginable public in an incomprehensible future. But if these collections also contain things that can't be exhibited, conserved, touched, or seen, then why should they take up (always valuable, always diminishing) space and the strained resources of understaffed collections? And if one does attempt to wade through the unforgiving deaccession process, then who's to say that today's unimportant waste might one day become important?"

## 4 Research Question: If Change Can't Happen Quickly Enough, Then What Can Be Done with the Unworkable in the Meantime?

This research is a way of situating myself in preparation to work with an institutional collection, a retort in anticipation of the statement, “that’s just the way things are”.<sup>24</sup> This phrase is commonly invoked when I wonder about and gently interrogate the state of collections, and it remains unsettling. I want to be hopeful and active, not resigned and complacent. So I challenge this sentiment by questioning the inexorability that drives collection practices and processes. There is not something beyond human volition that dictates that we should interpret our work as it has previously been interpreted, or what systems and thinking we reinforce through inflexible perpetuation, but we often act as if there is, powerless and hamstrung by ‘the processes’ required by ‘the institution’.

<sup>24</sup> \\_(^▽^)\_/

<sup>25</sup> Paul O’Neill, Lucy Steeds and Mike Wilson (eds). *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*. p 21.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Schambelan. “League of Men.” *n+1*.

Here, I understand the institution as a social construct, an accumulation of patterns of behaviour, repeated until normalised, that implicate, form and confine those who do its work.<sup>25</sup> To work ‘productively’ and ‘efficiently’ within an institutional collection is to enact these practices, habits, models and rhetorics, unquestioningly. A conundrum within collection logics is inherently that they are neither productive nor unproductive, but endless. No endpoint means efficiency becomes impotent. There is no maximum productivity to aspire to; something is better than nothing, is all that can be done. But “institutions, by definition, are not natural or primal. They are not what just happens [...] they are created and sustained for a reason. They do work.”<sup>26</sup>

I argue that currently, the work they do in relation to institutional collections creates a subcategory of objects that I have termed ‘unworkable’, found under the umbrella of the ‘unworked with’. These are difficult things, and in

## A. INTRODUCTION

addressing them via threads collated as a partial 'speculative museology', I wish to acknowledge, reject, rupture and transform collection logics in a way that facilitates more sustainable collecting and working practices in the future, while still supporting institutional mandates of caring for objects, and making them available for study. My hope is that through expanding the epistemic potential of collections by privileging the unworkable, new knowledges can be generated through looking, in new ways, at what hasn't been looked at; institutions will foster a more sustainable approach to their collecting practices by questioning the essentialism of the 'in perpetuity' edifice; and 'the way things are' can slowly change.

## 5 Methodology: Decelerating and Embracing Slowness

Following inexhaustible leads, tracking down references within references, traversing ever-budding branches that mimic collection database structures, I attempt to question every step. I wander through wandering, aiming for spheres that on first instinct seem not validated by the knowledge systems with which I'm familiar. Instead of dismissing them, I try to take them seriously through a process of speaking with them, and with people who inhabit them. It is a gentle forming of allegiances with ideas and things, a gradual unfolding. I am wary of capturing these moments through transcripts that inherently leave out everything that comes before and after the moment of interview, but also miss my lapses in attention, the internal conversation I'm having with myself, and the thinking ahead to moments that go unrealised. I speculate through remembering, enunciating, framing and reframing. I attempt to find a way through writing, not with authority but via a multiplicity of voices that concurrently hover around the same ideas, navigating in parallel, doubting, straying and doubling back, sometimes annotated as a way to return to ideas at different times with different eyes.

This is how I move through the collection storeroom. Its sludginess—the immensity of its contents compounding, contaminating, recurring, becoming murky, polluting each other—is a quality to embrace. Collections are inherently a site for slowness. If the end will never be reached, the to do list is eternal, decay is creeping, and more is acquired than deaccessioned, then what does moving quickly achieve? In the treatise “For Slow Institutions”, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez implores curators to “slow down their ways of working and being, to imagine new ecologies of care as a continuous practice of support, listening, attention, feelings, that arise from encounters with objects and subjects”.<sup>27</sup> Petrešin-Bachelez suggests that through being conscious of what amount and quality of labour is required to move through it, and by purposefully wielding slowness as a strategy, it seems possible to counter the imperatives of the late capitalist and

<sup>27</sup> Nataša Peteršin-Bachelez. “On Slow Institutions.” in *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*. p 38.

## A. INTRODUCTION

neoliberal progress-driven modes of living and thinking, completing and competing.

Even with purposeful slowness, attempting to move through this space is not a straightforward process. Things obstruct, they call out, tentacles grasp, suckers adhere, forces are applied that pull us in different directions. We are marked with the stickiness and residue of objects enunciating at different volumes with different intensities, speaking about partial histories but gesturing towards portals to new possibilities. There is the potential to tell and retell, articulate and re-articulate, narrate while listening, attuned to what is expressed in silences. Not everything sticks, certain calls have to be ignored, we can't move through here unhindered or unmarked; we have to choose what to care about.

Maybe one of the most invoked recent descriptions of curatorial work is caring, via its Latin etymology, which means “to take care”. I also relate it to the word *curación*, which is Spanish for “healing”. The suturing<sup>28</sup> referred to in my title is a deep-rooted and prolonged healing process in which time unfolds while space is reconfigured. It supports and strengthens wounds, so that festering ‘dead space’ ceases to exist. It creates a clean sphere of access in which healing can take place. In summoning this, I point to a caring that should not be understood as the established routine of passive reverence towards maintenance, but an act of support with agency, an active caring that rehabilitates and revives. I want to find ways to communicate caring and its unfolding (before, during, after its exhibiting, its “being made public”); how it layers, complexifies and re-textures encounters and the challenges associated with communicating and coming to terms with this; in acknowledgment that thinking takes time, and this process of thinking-through-caring can trigger significant reflections and new ways to understand how things and people can come together. Ultimately, this is a claim that the act of slowing down and taking time to care can operate as a form of resistance.

28





## 6 Reflecting on Methodology

I've come to understand it's not really a method I'm searching for. Instead I attempt to articulate this condition in a manner that encourages others to think about it too. I haven't been able to approach 'the unworkable' with any conviction that there is a right approach. The temptation, based on the way I was taught to learn, is to prove or disprove a hypothesis, but speculation by its very nature is unverifiable—it exists to mirror<sup>29</sup> us into a future we may not experience, to mentally test things *in lieu* of fixed empirical situations.

<sup>29</sup> The Latin root of speculative means to "look at", "behold", "observe", "explore", "investigate", and "contemplate". It also references the Latin *speculum*—to mirror—invoking reflection and reflectiveness, a type of seeing mediated through other lenses.

30



<sup>31</sup> And then I think of Andy Holden's "Laws of Motion in a Cartoon Landscape", which goes into great detail to extrapolate the rules of this universe—how physics behaves and misbehaves—and wonder again why I thought mapping out a fixed framework, or guidelines to move through this condition, would be possible.

There are moments when I feel I'm entangled in a double-bind. I haven't wanted to commit to working with a particular collection ('a case study'), as these conditions that produce an excess of unworkable and unworked-with things seem to exist everywhere, suggesting a universality which should be able to produce a methodology. These conditions are a condition of my work, and it doesn't seem useful to tether them to particular things in a particular place. A case study exemplifies but excludes, setting limits and silencing exceptions, and the condition I'm gesturing towards seems to be caused by exclusions (of things outside categories, systems, knowledges, experiences). But at the same time, I'm stuck on how articulate a way of working with these things that isn't too general, because I've negated the things and situations that could prompt tangible working processes. I realise I'm working un-methodically towards something that I hope to pinpoint through intuition. I want something to pivot off, but my feet touch air. I think of Wile E. Coyote<sup>30</sup> hovering next to a cliff edge in the moment of understanding that the Roadrunner transcends gravity, that the rules of gravity don't apply to it, only to them in this moment of self-awareness.<sup>31</sup> I'm struggling to find something that is not either/or, a way of enunciating or staging multiple contradictory but communicative positions at the same time, falling and suspended and able to observe this impossibility all at once. I gravitate towards exhibiting, conventionally understood as a way of presenting knowledge, of making things public, of framing known things, of dictating, enlightening others—an operation of presenting certainty. But how to exhibit not knowing?

## A. INTRODUCTION

A mirror always distorts in some way, but this mirror-like quality is what enables us to access different perspectives. In this sense, I resolve that speculation is a tool for seeing knowledge production and narrative as intertwined and codependent. They do not place us in a concrete mode of action, so we are unable to see concrete answers. Instead, speculation prompts invention, fabulation and drift.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> | Here I think of drifting as a floating, untethered way of being that's open to deviation, and as a process of bundling accumulations together.

## 7 Re-Understanding Curatorial Research

There is a point within this process where I come to understand that it's not possible to *know* a way out of this authoritatively, that a readymade prescriptive framework of 'useful' speculative bullet points can't possibly fit every situation, and that every encounter with every unworkable thing will require a different approach sensitive to its context, conditions, time and relations—those it has now, and those yet to be. The end of this written research will not be the end of my thinking around it; this is endless research. This aligns with a precondition of curatorial gesture as I understand it now.<sup>33</sup> Having rearranged some knowns, there is a visible end to the process of *curating* in which known knowledges are announced and made public. The *curatorial* is a making public of connections and interconnections, establishing fuzzy relationships, befriending both the outlines and the fog. It is a sphere to test how propositions play out, to question everything, and to knowingly disturb the order of things in a gesture of self-sabotage, revealing that they likely have little order upon closer inspection. In doing so, a context for working and a dimension of production is concurrently set into motion. It reminds me of a childhood game—pick-up sticks<sup>34</sup>—that I tolerated out of thirsty competitiveness. Like emaciated Jenga, a haystack of all needles, its aim was to pluck scattered skewers from a precarious pile, certain colours more desirable than others. Each attempt moved the mass in unforeseen ways, requiring the rethinking of strategies after every move. It is a shared untangling. All pieces have the possibility to surface, momentarily most visible, before being extracted to make ways for others. The game's ending is predictable and of little consequence—a hierarchy of colours, the most points wins—but importantly, at some point, everything collapsed, and everything came to light.

So, I am unsure where this wandering will take us, but I throw the sticks down nonetheless, an attempt at surfacing the unseen.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Paul Martinon.  
*The Curatorial: A Philosophy  
of Curating.*

34



B.

MANIFEST

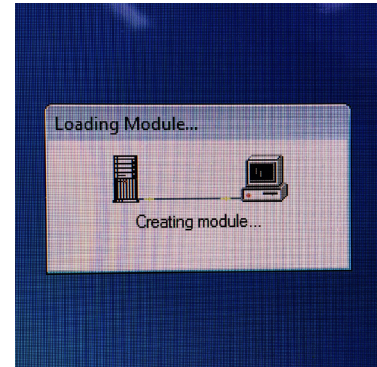
# CLOSED DOORS

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

This is a search for tender, untouched areas to poke. Unworkable things reside in realms that are out of sight, out of mind, and numerous sub-categories of collections labour are ritualistically enacted to situate them there. Becoming part of a collection<sup>35</sup> is to be hoarded, categorised and stored, before the inevitable acts of conservation, preservation and restoration take place in an arguably futile attempt to immunise them against the ravages of time. The act of collecting has ongoing consequences, and the marginalised, invisible and domestic affective labour required to sustain extant things is a largely unarticulated history. Their guidelines and thinking (logics and ethical standards) are grounded in particular wisdoms around how processes of support and care, and of affective and menial labour should be implemented, which I approach curiously, cautiously, in ignorance.

“Ethical standards are policed by peer pressure and the beliefs of individuals within the profession that the standards are valuable to uphold.”<sup>36</sup> In familiarising myself with these standards, I attempt to understand how particularly dogmatic interpretations of these guidelines contribute to or hinder understandings of unworkability. I wonder if speculation instead of stringency can subvert these approaches, and rather than stultify, produce the possibility for the unworkable to speak. But through attempting to understand these rituals, I get stuck on their recursivity. Restoration may seem like a way to redeem the unworkable, but the mandate for it to be “reversible” enables it to be understood as a semantic game—“to what point do we ‘return’ a work of art when we restore it?”.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the endless labour of maintenance is grounded in hopeful repetition. I come to realise that museological collection practices are laden with inherently speculative actions that continue in perpetuity alongside the objects they impact. They sustain each other. Perhaps instead of trying to blanket collections with a new framework, it makes more sense to re-understand the frames (supports) already there, and use them as suturing devices. Here, I first look for entry points to the state of collections, then attempt to partially elucidate this reframing.

35



<sup>36</sup> Anne Stone. *Treasures in the Basement. An Analysis of Collection Utilization in Art Museums*. p 55.

<sup>37</sup> Katy Barrett. “The Changing State of Conservation.” *Apollo Magazine*.

# 1 Institutes of Collecting

Collecting has to do with a need to have object-tools that make visible our own reality. We can get primal and claim it as an animal and human instinct common across many cultures, from hunter-gatherers squirrelling away amber beads and stone tools as a form of scatter-hoarding 10,000 years back,<sup>38</sup> to “bibliomaniacs” in the 1800s who compulsively collected books,<sup>39</sup> to 1990s Beanie Babies fanatics, and the rare whiskey connoisseurs of today. The museum institution created a context in which this impulse was validated, and acquiring one of everything—a complete repository of things and knowledges, a cabinet of curiosities that captured “a universal art history” that “resist[ed] the flow of time”<sup>40</sup>—was the tantalisingly (im)possible aim.

The history of collecting is also a narrative of how humans strive “to accommodate, appropriate and extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they’ve inherited”—“collecting is classification lived”,<sup>41</sup> sustained and constrained. This process of framing and reframing is inherently recursive and incomplete,<sup>42</sup> and creates hierarchical categories that can’t help but normalise and reinforce the biases of colonial hegemonies, silencing other ways of knowing. When things are subjugated under classification systems, these unequal power relations persist and are naturalised so as to not immediately be perceptible. This severs the possibility of reciprocity—that things can both act upon each other, and as *mediums* of their environments.

From an infrastructure perspective, the unreachable desire for collection frameworks<sup>43</sup> is to maintain systems “characterised by perfect order, completeness, immanence and internal homogeneity rather than leaky, partial and heterogeneous entities”.<sup>44</sup> It is often the unworkable things that trouble categorisation, seeping through cracks to end up unworked with and stranded in a grey zone of multiple miscellanies. Curator and educator Nora Sternfeld writes of the potentiality of the collection store’s unspectacular excess, its “*varia*”, a seeping remainder that creates “a hitch in the order—they belong to it, but they don’t fit anywhere”.<sup>45</sup> These things remain difficult to identify; taxonomical branches both guide and limit how we think and search for

<sup>38</sup> Fred Penzel. “Hoarding in History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hoarding and Acquiring*. pp 6-16.

<sup>39</sup> Gail Steketee. “Hoarding and Museum Collections,” in *Active Collections*.

<sup>40</sup> Boris Groys. “Entering the Flow: Museum Between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk.” *e-flux*.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Cardinal. *Cultures of Collecting*. p 3.

<sup>42</sup> It is also ever-shifting—prior to current classifying systems based on representation, systems of resemblance dominated (angels, bats and birds classified as winged things, the mythical finding a place next to the real).

43



<sup>44</sup> Steven Graham and Nigel Thrift. “Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance,” in *Disrupted Cities*. p 8.

<sup>45</sup> Nora Sternfeld. “Doesn’t quite fit. The unspectacular resistance of material,” in *Museumsdepots: Inside the Museum Storage*. pp 108-9.

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

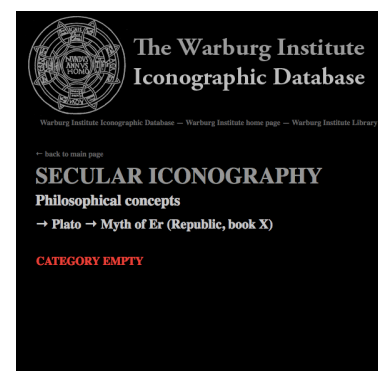
things, making it far easier to find those things we know to look for. Reflecting on the popularisation of the index card and its subsequent use as a tool for racist categorisation practices,<sup>46</sup> I conclude that organising is never a neutral process. And while strategic re-organising is more beneficial than stagnation, it is also an unending task unlikely to be completed in a lifetime,<sup>47</sup> riddled with holes<sup>48</sup> and dead ends. So remaining aware of what is excluded, usurped, or dematerialised through being unacknowledged, is critical for elucidating the hierarchies and assumptions made by those powerful enough to dictate the categories under which our relations are framed. I am thinking towards ways to institute a collections apparatus whose precondition is a loss of control, through understanding as uncertain the naming and containing of things into particular knowledges and lineages. Through cultivating contiguities rather than categories, I hope to make visible the conditions that paralyse and mute the unworkable.

Scattered across the globe are countless collections that belong to museums and institutions. In 2012, the De Gruyter Saur directory estimated 55,000 museums operate in 202 countries (although it is prudent to note individual regions have their own criteria for how they accredit museum institutions, largely based on operating budgets—there's no 'typical' museum). As the International Council of Museums (ICOM) doesn't maintain statistical information about how museums juggle and prioritise their multiple aims of collecting, preserving, studying, exhibiting and interpreting, it is impossible to extrapolate an overview of the amount of unworked with objects in storage, the state of collection databases, the cost of storing objects, and the rates of (uncritical) agglomeration and deaccessioning. Because of this, it is difficult to argue empirically against visibility<sup>49</sup> as a signifier of use. The impetus to be seen to 'have it all' has no doubt influenced the 'comprehensive' approach to collecting today; unending accumulation is defended by defaulting to hazy and unquestionable intergenerational benefits. As journalist Alastair Brown summarises, the thinking seems to be that "we should collect with future generations in mind, and because we cannot possibly know what future generations will value, we should collect as much as possible."<sup>50</sup> Classical wisdom<sup>51</sup> from museum literature would suggest that collections are dominated by an excess of underutilised objects, and passive storing is less beneficial or productive

<sup>46</sup> Daniela Blei. "How the Index Card Catalogued the World." *The Atlantic*.

<sup>47</sup> I think here of Aby Warburg's unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas* project, and my experience finding empty and incomplete categories when exploring its online database.

48



<sup>49</sup> Objects become visible through being made public (exhibiting) and through private research and study.

<sup>50</sup> Alastair Brown. "Out of Sight: Unseen Public Collections." *Apollo Magazine*.

<sup>51</sup> For example, Stephen E Weill's *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations* (1990) traces a history of reticent attitudes towards deaccessioning, advocating for a "living museum" rather than a repository.



than active exhibiting. With the following examples, I hope to illuminate some of the current unsustainable conditions of collections.

Before recounting these, I acknowledge that the concrete examples I use (the verifiable examples with numbers and percentages) exemplify approaches and traditions of European lineage. Museologist and cultural theorist Tomislav Šola describes how this museum “perform[s] a role which may easily be adverse” to other cultures, and as such, are institutions that can be considered “foreign, imposed”<sup>52</sup> bodies outside this context. Their dysfunctions are complex and take on a different pallor when applied elsewhere; they arguably exist more so “among people, but not for them”.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Tomislav S Šola. *Eternity Does Not Live Here Anymore—A Glossary of Museum Sins*. pp 12-13.

<sup>53</sup> Tomislav S Šola. *Ibid.* p 28.

<sup>54</sup> Cristina Bechtler and Dora Imfof. “What is a Museum?” in *Museum of the Future*. p 50.

<sup>55</sup> Nora Sternfeld. “Deprovincialising the Museum,” in *Body Luggage*. pp 158-161.

<sup>56</sup> Cristina Bechtler and Dora Imfof. *Ibid.* pp 49-50.

Regardless, it feels useful to wander towards divergences and potentialities drawn from non-Western contexts. Vietnam-based curator Zoe Butt mentions in passing Philippines-based curator Marian Pastor Roces’ conception of “the museum of chaos” as a sphere of potentiality for Southeast Asian institutions.<sup>54</sup> Here, the museum is a space in which “the history of aesthetic value and function is ultimately declassified, where the idea of the copy is tantamount and essential as a tool of learning, where the idea of “chaos” is discussed as having its own sense of order and harmony.” Rather than oppressing chaos by pretending order is possible, here it is understood as the default condition, the place from which to start. It seems useful to appraise our collections through a different lens, for “is the museum a Western idea, or is the very notion of the museum being a Western idea itself a Western idea?”<sup>55</sup>

I also wish to acknowledge the privilege of grappling with unworkable things that, although often disorganised, forgotten and unknown, are embedded in relatively stable and knowable conditions. Butt describes “museum” in the Vietnamese context as “a misnomer for a site of colonial architecture that is popular for wedding photographs; where its collections of oil paintings and fragmented sculptures languish in decay (often as copies); where government provides little cultural funding; where curators are not employed and visiting publics are few,” asking, “if a museum is without expertise or audience, then what is the role of its collection, of its archives?”<sup>56</sup> I think of my own experiences visiting institutions in the region and it was clear these challenges are vastly different compared to the type of “chaos”

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

faced within Western museum ecologies; it may not be possible to challenge collection logics or storage conditions here, because they don't exist, or don't adhere to conventional understandings of these forms. This is also touched upon by Šola,<sup>57</sup> who speaks of the West's "disadvantaged colleagues" in the East and South, who face "day-to-day difficulties" in contexts of "extreme tension and sacrifice", grappling with "poverty and historical misfortune". I'm reminded of a recent conversation with a Nigerian curator and conservator, who spoke of his dismay at having to receive repatriated indigenous objects into a non-climate controlled Lagosian collection store in which lizards and insects roamed freely, because the windows had to be kept open. He was torn—it was incredible to finally have custodianship of these objects, but his museological training advocated they be kept in conditions that just weren't achievable. The task then was not to preserve and ossify these objects. It made more sense to use them in dialogue with the communities from which they came, a curatorial caring expanding beyond the remit of objects, to encompass individuals and communities.

<sup>57</sup> Tomislav S Šola. *Ibid.* p 8.

So rather than negating these contexts from this conversation, I include them to agitate the sediment, making murky the concept of the authoritative and enshrined "Western" museum. In a practical sense, they operate as a reminder to embrace anecdotal as well as empirical evidence, to speculate about the foundations on which to act, and as a provocation for myself: could chaos and imperfect conditions be embraced in speculative museological practices? Unstable muddy ground calls out for forms of suture-like supportive bodies.

## 2 Sick Institutions

Rather than analysing the museum institution with economic rubrics of productivity, effectiveness, performance and value in mind, I instead think of its caring in holistic terms, speculating about entanglements within an “animist” institution.<sup>58</sup> In an “animist” institution—where objects “speak”—it can be possible to ascertain if there is a “healthy” connection between mind (infrastructure), body (labour) and spirit (ethos).

<sup>58</sup> Here I initially start to consider animism as a non-privileged interface that could operate institutionally. Later, I return to it in more depth, as a de-validated and undisciplined knowledge.

<sup>59</sup> I think of this sentiment when I discover bentonite mud is used as a laxative.

<sup>60</sup> Anne Stone. *Ibid.* p 109.

<sup>61</sup> “Occupy Collections\*,” in *South as a State of Mind*.

<sup>62</sup> “Occupy Collections\*.” *Ibid.*

In reflecting on staff morale within her intensive case study of object use and storage conditions at the Fine Art Museum of San Francisco, researcher Anne Stone articulates how “the ‘constipation factor’<sup>59</sup> of an overflowing museum’, as one individual put it, negatively affects inter-staff relations, the staff’s own appreciation of and creativity in using the collection, and their overall attitude towards work”.<sup>60</sup> Instead of being energised when receiving new objects, museum staff felt objects had “a draining influence” on an everyday existence in which collecting and preserving was privileged to the detriment of studying, exhibiting, and interpreting. They needed the institution to rest, take a break, slow down, and recuperate.

This feeling of malaise extends beyond those working within institutional environments, to the frames of knowledge within which they operate. Curator Clémentine Deliss refers to ethnographic museums in particular as “sick institutions”<sup>61</sup> reticent to address the implications of what it means to own and care for stolen and displaced objects by persisting with the colonial rubrics that informed their seizing. She advocates for a cure in which remediation usurps conservation, arguing that this would enable a type of artistic research as “fieldwork” to happen *within* the institution that can produce “narratological vehicles through which to understand the collection and draw it back into the contemporary”.<sup>62</sup> Fieldwork here is a way of approaching the collection anew, as a malleable, volatile, unknown sphere ripe for interrogation via (re)mediation. It happens slowly, observing, waiting, listening rather than immediately (re)acting. Sick institutions need treatment from outsiders; they can’t heal from within.

To be *in the field* is to be unable to evade or disregard both the conditions that have formed your surrounds,

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

and the implications of working there; it's a direct form of address between active agent and context—each works in support of the other. And this field is littered with looted things, literal and figurative stolen bodies. If we were to try and create a comprehensive taxonomy of unworkable things, these spoliations<sup>63</sup> would no doubt sprout from a weighty branch. I'm sure very few Western institutions could remain unimpeachable in this regard—for example, there are presently “1600 skulls kept in cardboard boxes in the attic of the Natural History Museum”<sup>64</sup> of Finland, that were ‘collected’ by Helsinki University’s anatomy department from 1841 to the 1930s, and remain under the institution’s custodianship. The existence of this cranium collection has been acknowledged by the University, but their response to date has been “to store them behind closed doors”.<sup>65</sup>

Positioned within the field of sick institutions, we can consider treatments attuned to deciphering the voices that speak through these unworkable-objects-as-depredations. In asking who dominates, and who is drowned out, we can approach them in allegiance with professor of art history Bénédicte Savoy, who advocates for a shift in terminology and understanding. Rejecting the term spoliations and replacing it with “patrimonial translocations” is an effort to rethink legitimising discourses and the rhetoric written by the victors.<sup>66</sup> Savoy repurposes the genetic chemistry definition of “translocations”, and its implications of an exchange “provoked by breakage and repair”, to suggest an ongoing mutation in thinking is needed to suture these objects. Focussing on the tenets of “place, wounds and transformation”<sup>67</sup> enables repatriation to be understood implicitly as a process that needs to unfold, respond and transmute.

Having considered how to treat and mediate the return of objects, how then to approach things stranded in institutions in the meantime—what treatments could support them to recuperate through legacies of colonialism? In her work as director of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt from 2010-15, Deliss entered a situation in which the prioritising of conservation meant collaborators from other fields were not able to be given prolonged access to work with objects. The capacity to support objects through proximity—to touch and suture them—was stymied. In many cases, this was due to their ‘required’ storage conditions, and preservation techniques that both ‘preserve’ objects and make them

<sup>63</sup> Objects which have been plundered and taken by force.

<sup>64</sup> Minna Henriksson. “Group Portrait of Institutions,” in *RabRab Journal*, p 47.

<sup>65</sup> Minna Henriksson. *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Cristelle Terroni. *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Cristelle Terroni. *Ibid.*

toxic. Many objects are now considered too toxic to handle, because they've been treated with preservation chemicals. But this causes the object to 'perish' in a different way: for example, certain Native American objects require touch and use to remain 'alive'; storage here is a death sentence. In addition, these stringent interpretations meant that "things can't be touched or placed into constellations that go beyond regional divisions".<sup>68</sup> There are not exactly fixed guidelines around these requirements, but as object analysis technologies advance to create new ways of identifying hazards and restricting use, institutions can justify becoming more risk-averse. In many cases, this essentially quarantines objects and sentences them to a lifetime in storage; here is a sick institution unable to convalesce.

<sup>68</sup> Clémentine Deliss in conversation with Hanna Ohtonen. "A Sick Venue in Need of Remediation: Rethinking the Ethnographic Museum," in *Finnish Landscape*. p 27.

<sup>69</sup> "Occupy Collections\*." Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Clémentine Deliss in conversation with Hanna Ohtonen. Ibid. pp 25-26.

<sup>71</sup> Céline Condorelli. *Support Structures*. pp 6-58.

<sup>72</sup> What we call 'didactic panels' in Australia are 'tombstone labels' in the US context, a suitably morbid inflection to add to a conversation about dying objects.

<sup>73</sup> Clémentine Deliss. "Dark Venues," in *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*. p 52.

<sup>74</sup> Clémentine Deliss. "Dark Venues." Ibid. p 50-53.

However meaningful recuperation requires a space of retreat. So Deliss' solution was to reframe part of the institution as a sanatorium-like "green room", a domestic space for waiting and rest that served as a place to (re)treat and rejuvenate objects via artistic research. It is not storage, nor exhibition space, but something in between, beneath and behind, a buttressing structure. In doing so, she called for a re-understanding of this area not as "stagnant, unreachable and out of bounds to anyone other than the keepers", but as a site for the production of more inclusive "culturally heterodox" knowledges. Through experimentation and proximity, "the museum becomes the region and the collection the practice".<sup>69</sup> Here, one can go beyond diagnosing objects through the bias of a single discipline, and instead employ collaboration and non-endogamic knowledges to "recharge objects". This form of support would help to heal wounds torn by an omniscient gaze which affirms understandings of cultures through a fixed lens, and reconfirms reductive colonialist discourses that led to their possession.<sup>70</sup>

The curatorial practice of care that I'm imagining towards understands that sick collections and sick institutions need suturing. It hears a cry of necessity, a desire for proximity, and understands itself as supplemental.<sup>71</sup> It transcends diagnosing dying objects with tombstone<sup>72</sup> labels to instead advocate for "heal[ing] the past by producing contemporary interpretations of artefacts" that "implode normativity".<sup>73</sup> This form of remediation enables things to go beyond being understood through active webs of association, instead suturing them to regenerate or heal as they "transform, translate, distort [and] modify".<sup>74</sup>

### 3 Working in Support of Collections

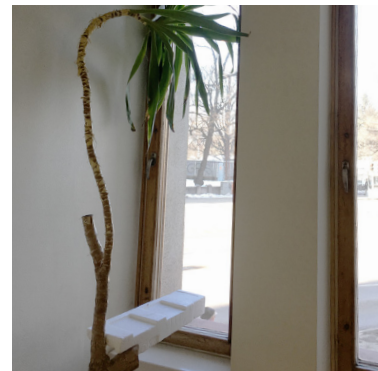
So in thinking of collections as sick, and calling for care and support, I now take a momentary detour to consider, through its mechanisms and gestures, collections as a territory to be supportive in, to, with, and through.

Instead of thinking of collections management practices and the logics around conservation and preservation as a limited set of enshrined movements to be enforced upon institutional bodies, I start to think about their potential as gestures of support. Thinking in support of collection logics involves considering how to hold up,<sup>75</sup> buttress<sup>76</sup> and bear the weight of a collection's accumulative compulsions, repetitive labour, and the resignation that goes with enacting these. It involves wondering what types of foundations could be required for what things, what needs to be sutured, and which practices of suturing<sup>77</sup> could have an impact that outlives that which they surround. Supports do not necessarily have to endorse what they sustain—they are something of an unseen aide.<sup>78</sup> Instead, they provide a service without expectation of acknowledgement or visibility, absorbed into the body like a prosthesis whose aim is to function alongside and unnoticed.

It seems that suturing requires closeness, a willingness to become entangled and implicated with the desire or the plea that emerges from another thing. To support is to be open to intimacy, to let things touch and rest, a form of contact that can violate boundaries, press uncomfortably, weigh down until buckling, a position from which impartiality and objectivity is not possible—“too close to be innocent and too messy to be clear”.<sup>79</sup> Working in support also (re)produces support.

Focussing on support highlights possible alliances with latent structures, inviting a rethinking of to what we position ourselves against, through what means, and with whom. However support is intractable and refractory, hard to think about in a definitive sense; Condorelli proposes to “be supportive to it, and think in support”, suggesting there can be “no discourse on support, only discourse in

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<sup>78</sup> Céilne Condorelli. Ibid. pp 9-32.

<sup>79</sup> Céilne Condorelli. Ibid. p 15.

<sup>80</sup> Céilne Condorelli. *Ibid.* p 13.

<sup>81</sup> Céilne Condorelli. *Ibid.* p 11.

support”.<sup>80</sup> So any attempt to holistically survey approaches within a particular sphere like the collection store, and anoint them as guidelines or suggested tools, would only be replicating the logics of collection management—a top-down approach to a form of building without examining foundations. Condorelli notes a “top-down approach” to support “attempts to flatten difference and corresponds more appropriately to the work of management”.<sup>81</sup> So my aim here is not to better manage how collections logics are enacted, but to take time in their realm in an effort to think in support of them.

## 4 Hoarding and the State of Collections

I've sometimes imagined the TV show *Hoarders* playing out not in a cramped suburban home, but within institutional collections. Hoarding is an obsessive compulsive spectrum disorder, identified when "collecting and saving behaviours become problematic".<sup>82</sup> In its extremes, it is neither healthy nor sustainable, causing distress, anxiety, and impairment in the face of large amounts of accumulated information and goods that are not easily displayed and stored. Hoarders refuse to get rid of things, and attempting to do so causes distress. They hold onto objects of no discernible value, including multiples and duplicates, and the urge to save things, 'just in case' is primary. The realm of archeology, perhaps more than others, places importance not only on the treasure but its surrounding materials, excavation leftovers and "cultural rubbish"<sup>83</sup> that might have zero market value but nonetheless form the patina of an object's history. But this thinking bleeds into contemporary approaches to collections, collections, artworks, histories—remember the broken twigs—supporting the compulsion to accumulate. In other instances, policies that dictate what enters (and leaves) the collection are usurped or ignored for a multitude of reasons (ego, exhaustion, unintentional ignorance, amongst others). Impairment of 'ordinary functioning'—when there's no more room for new things, when things can't be used because they can't be found, when it's impossible to know what's in a space, when it's financially unsustainable to persist with new purchases, when people feel powerless and resigned to this being 'the way things are'—are signifiers of when collecting transitions into hoarding. It's also a condition not easily resolved—its emotion-laden assumptions around 'potential usefulness' need to be challenged, requiring supportive handling of interventions into perfectionist tendencies, control, guilt, and emotional attachment. Furthermore, the mission of museums to collect and preserve easily justifies this impulse; "for the most part, collection growth is seen as a positive outcome"<sup>84</sup> that is both inevitable and desirable. So with this in mind, let's gaze critically in support of collections.

<sup>82</sup> Gail Steketee. Ibid. p 50.

<sup>83</sup> Bernhard Hebert. "Archaeologists and their depots. Drawing on plentiful resources," in *Museumsdepts: Inside the Museum Storage*. p 62.

<sup>84</sup> Anne Stone. Ibid. p 47.



<sup>85</sup> Nick Merriman. "Museum collections and sustainability." *Cultural Trends*.

<sup>86</sup> Nick Merriman. *Ibid.* p 5.

<sup>87</sup> Anne Stone. *Ibid.* p 8.

<sup>88</sup> Benjamin Sutton. "French Museums' Collections in Disarray, Government Audit Reveals." *Artnet News*.

In advocating for more sustainable museums, Manchester Museum director Nick Merriman conducted what is widely referred to as the only thorough analysis of contemporary museal collecting and disposal practices, focussing on seven UK museums from 1990 to 2004.<sup>85</sup> Five of these museums acquired around 745 items for every item they disposed of. Museum collections were certainly growing, though he argues this growth is seemingly proportional in relation to the size of their overall collections. However the ways in which collections transition to future generations has vast resource implications, particularly with the ever-increasing mandate for digitisation in the mix. Merriman notes the inadequate and antiquated intellectual frameworks that dictate how we collect: "Museums still function as repositories of objects and specimens that represent an objective record or collective memory. Instead, they should be seen for what they are: partial, historically-contingent assemblages which reflect the tastes and interests of both the times and the individuals who made them."<sup>86</sup> Rethinking institutional conditions would help to practically address the realities of what is going on in collections.

One obvious condition of this context is that the space required for institutional storage is far greater than that of displays and exhibitions, and that this space is finite, inadequate and full of unknown and unworked with things. While it's tempting to think of storage facilities as a regimented and knowable sphere, the reality is closer to partially organised chaos. Institutions often don't know what exactly is in their collections—collection management is a relatively recent acknowledged responsibility; only in 1984 did the American Association of Museums mandate that written collections management policies were required of its members.<sup>87</sup> More recently, the increasing pressure to standardise and digitise records has resulted in a seemingly insurmountable workload for registrars. A 2014 audit of 1,218 museums from the Musées de France association discovered that 80 percent of museums hadn't completed a mandatory once-in-a-decade inventory of their collections, and those that did, "had done so incorrectly or incompletely."<sup>88</sup> Objects were missing, insecure or stored precariously, and records were partial and incomplete. It is safe to assume that this condition extends to a large portion of institutions, and those not validated by the equivalent of association status (and subsequent access to funding) will

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

likely be struggling even more. Organisations similar to the *Musées de France* can be found in many countries, and it is not difficult to imagine the impossibilities faced by those excluded non-accredited bodies—visit any house museum, or indeed any museum outside of a centre, and you may very well find two-person operations and skeleton staff who somehow keep things ticking over. For the past few years, I have made a habit of asking museum staff if they can comprehend the entirety of their collection, how much of it they have seen (both in collections and on display), and how they feel about working in a realm of never ending tasks. I'm usually met with bemused smiles and resigned shrugs.<sup>89</sup> It is impossible for them to question the meaning of this endless work or the card house would collapse. When I'm told, "that's just how collections are",<sup>90</sup> I want to be able to use this research to say back to them: "that's not how they have to be".

It's also clear that the nature of collection labour is Sisyphean.<sup>91</sup> In the UK, "reports by the National Audit Office in 1988 and the Audit Commission in 1991 found huge backlogs in the documentation of museum collections", and while there was no "clear idea of precisely how many items are held in public collections across the country", in 2015 it was "fair to say the trajectory has only ever been upwards".<sup>92</sup> Museum professionals murmur about the ever-increasing resources required to manage, conserve and store collections of objects,<sup>93</sup> the majority of which will never be seen by public, scholars or staff. There is a lack of human and material resources to complete this task, exacerbated by ongoing budget cuts across the sector, which has prompted the asking of difficult questions such as, "what is the point of indefinitely storing works that will undoubtedly never be seen by the public",<sup>94</sup> let alone museum professionals? In many cases, the institutions themselves haven't thought this through—in 2002, "barely half of even the most elite special collections repositories in the US had formal collection development policies",<sup>95</sup> and although this was justified through lack of time and staff limitations, many respondents also didn't want to be limited by a policy, finding it "not necessary".<sup>96</sup> So reductively, we could say institutions are bound by more bureaucracy retrospectively than prior to an object's acquisition. And it becomes clear that "the current scale and scope of maintaining unused objects in museum collections is unsustainable".<sup>97</sup>

<sup>89</sup> ~\\_(ツ)\_/~

<sup>90</sup> This has been a common sentiment within my informal chats with collections-workers, but it arose again during a March 2018 workshop called 'Adventures in the Archive', led by an artist-curator researcher, and situated within a collection mainly consisting of documents and photographs. When questioned, the archivist acknowledged their storage was full of boxes of unknown material, that it was impossible to process these (and process contemporary acquisitions) within a lifetime, and that this was a distressing, difficult and unacknowledged condition of their work; the researcher shrugged dismissively and said, "that's just how collections are".

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<sup>92</sup> Alastair Brown. *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> In particular, identifying the holistic cost of storage seems rudimentary at best, in "back of the envelope" studies from 1988, effectively obscuring a key indicator of the financial implications of collecting practices (Stone, p 11).

<sup>94</sup> Vincent Noce. "Musées : une note parlementaire pointe la mauvaise gestion des collections." *Libération.fr.*

<sup>95</sup> Mark A Greene. "Four Forceful Phrases," in *Active Collections.* p 72.

<sup>96</sup> Mark A Greene. *Ibid.* p 72.

<sup>97</sup> Kate Howell. "Object Reincarnation," in *Active Collections.* p 160.

So why not just...get rid of some things? Merriman maps out how thinking around deaccessioning has developed. While selling objects was not uncommon from at least the 1950s, if not earlier, the notion of trusteeship over collections became enshrined in museum codes of ethics (such as ICOM) from the 1970s. This was largely related to the museum's commitment to publicness, trust and the public good—if these objects are held in archives on behalf of the public, it was argued, then selling or disposing of them is robbing current and future generations of their “right” to access, study and enjoy them.<sup>98</sup> This clear “presumption against disposal”<sup>99</sup> shaped how a generation of curators and museum professionals were trained. However as the field professionalised and the rubrics of accountability and efficiency infiltrated working methodologies, systems to standardise registration processes were formed, along with acquisition and deaccession policies.

<sup>98</sup> Nick Merriman. *Ibid.* p 7.

<sup>99</sup> Alastair Brown. *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Larry Parnass. “Berkshire Museum Art Sale Timeline.” *Berkshire Eagle*.

<sup>101</sup> Helen Stoilas. ‘Supreme Court Justice Greenlights Berkshire Museum’s Art Sale’. *The Art Newspaper*.

<sup>102</sup> Daniel Grant. “Should Museums Be Allowed to Sell Donated Works of Art?” *Observer*.

<sup>103</sup> Against guidelines set by, for example, the Association of Art Museum Directors.

<sup>104</sup> The Delaware Art Museum was a commonly invoked example.

<sup>105</sup> Blacklisting other museums from working with them, and preventing the loaning of objects.

<sup>106</sup> Tim Schneider. “The Gray Market: Why We Shouldn’t Punish Small Museums for Deaccessioning.” *Artnet*.

<sup>107</sup> Michael O’Hare. “Museums can change—will they?” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*.

Perhaps the collection logics that puzzle me most relate to deaccessioning. Its processes are enshrined in collection management plans, but based on my imperfect methodology of conversational hearsay and reading lots of (admittedly American-skewed) opinion pieces, it seems cumbersome and rarely enacted. Here is a simplistic summary of the conundrum—it takes ages, and for many institutions it’s commensurate with reputation suicide. For example, in attempting to deaccession and sell objects that no longer support its mission to raise money for much-needed renovations, the Berkshire Museum faced two lawsuits<sup>100</sup> and a trip to the Supreme Court<sup>101</sup> when trying to change the conditions of a bequest, while Fisk University waded through six years of bureaucracy to deaccession a painting to bolster their endowment fund.<sup>102</sup> Deaccession “incorrectly”,<sup>103</sup> and the museum will be punished and pariah-ed.<sup>104</sup> The American Alliance of Museums places sanctions to debilitate<sup>105</sup> museums that resell or release objects, unless the funds go towards purchasing new works or caring for their existing collection, regardless of their financial situation.<sup>106</sup> And generally, as Public Policy professor Michael O’Hare points out, museums and institutions don’t ascribe collections a financial value as a whole (important and expensive works may be valued for insurance purposes); their art collection doesn’t appear on their balance sheet.<sup>107</sup> This is justified by the overwhelming predicted resources and labour required to appraise a

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

collection, which supposedly can't be used as a financial resource anyway, (but as O'Hare asserts, simply saying artworks "have no monetary value doesn't make it true—in the case of bankruptcy, a City's art collection<sup>108</sup> is most definitely considered an asset—and not every object needs to be individually accounted for to obtain a workable estimate of market value). Additionally, objects in collections are not understood as (disposable) financial assets for the museum, but they do transform into taxable assets when donated by a collector, who in many cases receive "a tax refund or credit up to double of what they paid",<sup>109</sup> along with dictating stringent and in many cases ultimately untenable conditions for the object's future use.<sup>110</sup> So the museum keeps acquiring as the collector offloads objects to receive a tax break, producing financial, storage and labour implications when they have to care for and maintain the works.<sup>111</sup>

O'Hare's case study—the Art Institute of Chicago—is estimated to have a collection of 280,000 objects that he values at between 26 and 43 billion dollars. He argues that selling just one percent of the collection (based on value) would enable the institution to provide free entry "forever", and an additional percent could hire approximately "200 more full time researchers, educators, designers" and audience engagement workers.<sup>112</sup> While he's not explicit about his definition of "forever" (in perpetuity?!), or the specificities of how he arrived at these estimations, he does make a strong argument in favour of rethinking deaccessioning codes of ethics to be more responsive to today's institutional conditions. He also notes that prestige institutions like the Met and Stanford University have "violated these rules spectacularly and haven't been excommunicated", so these ethics shouldn't be understood as "the moral absolutes they claim to be".<sup>113</sup>

Unsurprisingly, collections remain bloated with objects. Museum Studies scholar Stephen E. Weil summarises the challenges of large collections (and I'd argue many collections are large, if we think of largeness as not simply numerical, but relative to its accompanying infrastructure): "a large collection will often include much that may be of little or no long-term interest. Not every object ever evolved or created can justifiably be preserved in however close to perpetuity we can manage. Beyond that, collections are demanding. They cost time and money to care for, they require space for storage, they need documentation and study, and, above all,

<sup>108</sup> He points to the Detroit Institute of Art as an example; they subsequently managed to raise enough funds to prevent items within the City's collections from being seized by creditors.

<sup>109</sup> Tim Schneider. *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Daniel Grant. *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Tim Schneider. *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Michael O'Hare. *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Michael O'Hare. *Ibid.*

they demand to be seen. Collections, moreover, tend to be static. The more heavily a static collection may weigh in the life of an institution, the greater the danger that the institution itself may become static as well.”<sup>114</sup> So size should not be equated with quality, and acquiring more, newer things is not a guarantee of increased relevance. It’s understandable that not everything should be archived forever, and the focus should be on how to use things, not just own them. A shift is required—“we need to change the conversation from caring about artefacts to caring about people”.<sup>115</sup> Many institutions justify the behaviour of holding onto everything in case it’s needed by the people of the future, because it’s impossible to ascertain what might be useful—a hoarder’s mentality. To care about people in this context is an act of agency. It is a way of destabilising the rationalisations of institutional thinking, of rejecting codes and conventions of behaviours to instead spend time asking what is meaningful and potent and worth working with.

<sup>114</sup> Stephen E Weil. *Rethinking the Museum*. p 28.

<sup>115</sup> Trevor Jones and Rainey Tisdale. “Active Collections Manifesto,” in *Active Collections*. p 8.

## 5 Supportive Storing

If objects are intrusions as well as assets, then collections storage is the space conventionally assigned to dealing with their messy overflow. Reimagining the basic tenets of storage is one way to make visible the unseen. Some institutions have attempted to rethink the traditional parameters ascribed to collections (locked away, out of sight, non-public) by integrating storage into museum exhibition architecture<sup>116</sup> — storage in the expanded field?! This repositioning enables audiences to face and be overwhelmed by this sheer amount of stuff—a peek into the registrar’s everyday. Former Brooklyn Museum director Arnold L. Lehman notes this is a way of “making a public institution more public”. While increasingly common, “the trend is not totally new: it began in the 1970s at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, as an effort to ‘democratise’ museum shows, and was embraced in 1982 at the Strong Museum in Rochester.”<sup>117</sup> In addition to drawing attention to the hoarding tendencies of institutions, visible storage may also operate as a democratising force, prompting questions about why certain objects are anointed on pedestals while other almost-clones are destined to a lifetime underground in temperature-controlled darkness. Museums such as the Victoria & Albert in London, the Aan de Stroom in Antwerp and the Larco in Lima, amongst others, have joined the Brooklyn in opening their stores to the critical public gaze via visible storage wings. The Schaulager in Basel has gone one step further, developing a museum architecture that enables the storing, studying and presentation of artworks in an open storage environment. There is no behind the scenes, and object hierarchies are negated (apart from the hierarchy of the hang); their mandate is everything is on display. With nowhere to hide surplus things, visible storage is one practical way of ensuring collections don’t overwhelm their institutions.

However not all institutions have the possibility to modify or reinvent their spaces in this way, and the question remains of how to indefinitely store unseen objects, while making room for urgent new acquisitions. The challenges of dealing with growing collections, stagnant storage spaces and questions around resource-use continue to perplex. Journalist Christopher Groskopf reflects on why,

<sup>116</sup> A recent example is Sydney’s Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

<sup>117</sup> Celestine Bohlen. “Museums as Walk-In Closets; Visible Storage Opens Treasures to the Public.” *The New York Times*.

<sup>118</sup> Christopher Groskopf. "Museums are keeping a ton of the world's most famous art locked away in storage." *Quartz*.

<sup>119</sup> Jan Verwoert. "Personal Support: How to Care?." *Support Structures*. p 172.

<sup>120</sup> Condorelli refers to the *parergon* in a Derridean sense, a frame for limits to press against to dissolve the boundaries of inside and outside.

<sup>121</sup> Céline Condorelli. *Ibid.* p 17.

in amassing vast collections in the name of public good (and with public funds), do state institutions show only a fraction of their assets, usually around 5 percent?<sup>118</sup> Putting aside fragile works for whom exhibiting would enhance or speed up the inevitable process of decay, and those objects considered more apt for study than display, there are still masses of duplicates, unknowns and so-called minor works that join what is understood as 'the highlights' in the collection store. While there is certainly a discursive shift towards dismantling categories such as major and minor, which brings to light alternate frames in which the unseen can be valued, there are still so many things of mystery or mundanity, untethered, unknowable and probably never to be prioritised enough to be seen.

In open storage, architectural openness can be seen as a form of care in that it responds to a call,<sup>119</sup> a need to be seen, albeit one delivered via voices indiscernible to most human ears. The threshold quality of this form of display (encompassing both outside and inside) produces an exposed visibility and the potential for things and people to exist together, ungoverned by the usual museal orthodoxies. Here, open storage can be seen as a *parergon*,<sup>120</sup> its work taking place as a supplementary frame of support that nonetheless requires "uncomfortable proximity" to function.<sup>121</sup> Practically, open storage enables a rearticulation of how knowledge production is understood—instead of gathering and stagnating, it positions objects to prompt knowledges that are made and remade.

## 6 Recursivity Within Collection Work

Working in support of collections through conservation, restoration and maintenance is a protective act of care “that involves a considerable amount of unspectacular work”.<sup>122</sup> Unsurprisingly, institutional histories of cleaning and restorative (preventative) repair, though fundamental, are rare and mostly overlooked. The more I trace them, and learn about what underpins them, the more overwhelmed I become by their recursivity and un-verifiability. I think of Graham Harman’s *Third Table*, of the object not being reduced to its particle components via scientific thinking, or understood simply in terms of its effects, but instead that it should be grasped in its state of emergent wholeness between these two spheres, its autonomous reality operating beyond its causal components.<sup>123</sup> Is there an interpretation of collection labour that can understand objects in this way? Prioritising acts of care that are largely cosmetic in lieu of caring for the object’s “third table” potential, and limiting its use (imprisoning it within the collection) until these subjective cosmetic standards are reached, both mutes and paralyses, rendering the object unworkable. I thus search for understandings of collection labour that care for objects through nurturing the potentiality of their ‘voice’, in addition to maintaining their outward appearance.

Maintenance can be thought of as preservation labour (not work)—never-ending, futile, and not conventionally productive. Museologist Martina Griesser-Stermscheg points to Hannah Arendt’s separation of labour, work and action within human activities, drawing an analogy between agriculture and collection work, both of which require a similarly endless tilling of soil to lay the groundwork for fundamental maintenance.<sup>124</sup> The majority of labour associated with collections is maintenance—paperwork, organisation systems, cleaning, restoring, repairing, polishing, preserving, transporting, photographing, cataloging, organising, reporting, repeating—a largely unacknowledged, unglamorous, unending and thankless task.<sup>125</sup> This labour simultaneously unfolds through unseen infrastructure that scaffolds institutions and temporarily

<sup>122</sup> Samuel Alberti. “Preparing and Conserving,” in *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. p 92.

<sup>123</sup> Graham Harman. “The Third Table,” in *100 Notes—100 Thoughts*. pp 4-15.

<sup>124</sup> Martina Griesser-Stermscheg. “How Don Quixote tilts at UFOs,” in *Museumsdepts: Inside the Museum Storage*. p 96.

<sup>125</sup> In her manifesto, maintenance is to Mierle Laderman Ukeles a “direct feedback systems with little room for alteration”; enacting it is to “keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight”.



prevents the inevitable entropy and decay—suspending it will not immediately produce signs of neglect, amplifying the need for strength of conviction to carry on. These tasks become even more Sisyphean if the question of disposing or deaccessioning items is not institutionally supported.

It can easily be argued that maintaining an excess of unworkable objects is detrimental to an institution's bottom line, and that reallocating these resources to working with objects would better serve institutional mandates. A 1988 US-based study used conservative and idealised calculations to estimate that collections across the country were maintaining an average of 2 million unused objects, at a cost of 63 million dollars (30% of federal funding, and 20% of the sector's annual earned income). Objects serving no purpose thus represent “a significant drain on resources”<sup>126</sup>. These estimates only took into account operating and building costs related to storage space, and not the human maintenance and conservation labour that takes place within these spaces. Conservation labour is speculative and anticipatory, a guessing game of what preventative measures should be taken to counter the wrongs of an unknown future.

<sup>126</sup> Anne Stone. *Ibid.* p 10.

<sup>127</sup> Gregory Williams. “Conserving Latex and Liverwurst: An Interview with Christian Scheidemann.” *Cabinet Magazine*.

If we understand the present we inhabit as mostly past, not purely present, we are faced with multi-temporality that extends as every second ticks by, an inevitable accumulation of evidence of how things interface with the world, along with the world's ever-unfolding impact on its materiality. Conservation is a simultaneously hopeful and futile form of protection, of keeping things together in the face of damage, change, loss and decay. In anticipation of this futility, conservators now focus on preventative measures in an attempt to minimise future labour.

To paraphrase contemporary conservationist Christian Scheidemann, “conservation comes second—saving materials and improving structures—while restoration is cosmetic, making something look well-maintained. But first is preventing damage: controlling environments and climate, proper handling, packing and transport, and ensuring the nature of the work is understood and respected.”<sup>127</sup> For materials with storied histories like paint and bronze, restoration techniques began to be formally encoded through conservation departments alongside scientific thinking and discourses, becoming enshrined within the

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

encyclopaedic museum.<sup>128</sup> This was further formalised in the forties with the use of “radiology, ultraviolet light and infrared photography”.<sup>129</sup> Within a contemporary art collections context, the expansion of volatile materials used within artworks (“dust particles, toenail parings, chocolate”)<sup>130</sup> has meant a shift towards preventative restoration, in which conservators are often consulted to undertake scientific materials research before an artwork is produced. In the case of paintings, varnishes are used to isolate the restorative layers from the originals. Artefacts, as mentioned, are often ‘treated’ with chemicals to prolong aspects of their materiality. When related to conservation and maintenance, the phrase ‘original condition’ seems problematic on an entropic molecular level, and this can be further complicated when the desire is to enhance inherent vice.<sup>131</sup> In this case, it’s not helpful to want to “bring a work back into its original state”, but rather “accompany it through its period of existence.” And in some cases, this may mean to “let the object die and not try to reanimate it.”<sup>132</sup> From a third table perspective, this more contemporary understanding of conservation makes more sense than the conventional idea of restoration to maintain objects ‘in perpetuity’, but it also seems more easily applied to newer objects whose lifespan can be dictated in dialogue with their makers.

Operating alongside this is the current prevailing code of restoration ethics: that any decision should be “imperceptible and reversible,”<sup>133</sup> with each step thoroughly documented. The more I mull over it, the more the ‘reversible’ part of this statement seems counterintuitive, unrealistically laborious, and quite frankly impossible—why go to the effort of carefully returning something to an imagined and subjective ‘original’ only to undo this at some point in the future? And how to reverse actions that by definition seem transformative? In the face of endless and overwhelming collections labour, this reversibility dance seems farcical. When I start to explore this through codes of ethics and testimonies,<sup>134</sup> I quickly become lost and overwhelmed by all that I don’t know, and the impossibility of comparative generalisations. Generalised ‘ethical’ guidelines cannot possibly have general applications.

I retreat, starting to understand collections as sites littered with disjointed speculative processes. Here, futures are imagined in which technologies progress in a way that their implications and cumulative effects can be reversed; an

<sup>128</sup> In 1888, Friedrich Rathgen was the first chemist to be employed by a museum, and he wrote the *Handbook of Conservation* ten years later.

<sup>129</sup> Rebecca Mead. “The Art Doctor,” *The New Yorker*.

<sup>130</sup> Rebecca Mead. *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Inherent vice recognises the material constraints of preservation efforts, and refers to the tendency of objects to deteriorate and decay due to the fundamental instability of their materials.

<sup>132</sup> Gregory Williams. *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Rebecca Mead. *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> “Ethical Issues in Conservation.” *Conservation Online*.

object's idealised state can be worked towards and obtained; time is inexhaustible and can endlessly double-back; things will and can be looked after indefinitely; everything could one day be useful; what is understood as precious will persist occupying this categorisation indefinitely; anything that is difficult and unworkable can be pushed aside for someone in this imagined future to deal with; there will be time for this then, it's inexhaustible.

Shifting momentarily into future-facing contemporary art collections, for every organisation and collection attempting to sensitively archive volatile digital works,<sup>135</sup> there are hundreds more floundering challenges that go unmet—works intact that require outmoded computers to function, or ageing machines that require restoration outside the skills of most repairers.<sup>136</sup> New chasms in collections form and are also reformulated when digital production technologies have advanced further than what they can tangibly embody.<sup>137</sup> Objects can be digitally rendered better than they can be physically produced, flipping the usual issues with collection databases insufficiently articulating the real thing—while some information loss will always occur, hi-res images and detailed descriptions are preferable to subjective handwritten notes and drawings. So while some museums struggle to transfer piecemeal paper records to their digital counterparts, some artists are purposefully working not with unrealisable forms, but forms that will one day be realisable. This creates new challenges for how museums claim and manage custodianship of works, and add another permutation to the partial taxonomy of unworkable objects.

In pondering the Whitney Museum's recent acquisition of Josh Kline's 3D printed *Cost of Living (Aleyda)*, writer Ben Lerner notes the artist's purposeful employment of a "resolution gap" between the work's digital files, and its current inadequate 3D printed state.<sup>138</sup> Kline has pointedly made the museum commissioner a custodian of the unknown—the work is digital but an insufficient physical version presently exists, so it is to be remade at intervals until the digital and tangible align. Until then, the museum is tasked with waiting—the 'real' work will arrive at some point in the future. At the time of the article's publishing, the museum hadn't figured out how to communicate this, so none of these details are included in the didactic panel that accompanies the work. Lerner asks, "How does the museum

<sup>135</sup> Running for two years and starting from 27 October, 2016, Rhizome is restaging and contextualising 100 artworks from internet archives, grappling with outmoded infrastructure by creating emulators to run versions of browsers and programs no longer supported.

<sup>136</sup> I was reminded of this at a recent visit to the Zabludowicz Collection's Sarvisalo premises in Finland, in which a Nam June Paik work was labelled with an 'under maintenance' sign. The invigilator said they were struggling to find someone with the skills to undertake repairs of older technology.

<sup>137</sup> I stare at the cascading thumbnails that litter my desktop and think about how easy it is to become paralysed by these same collection logics—so many of us have hard drives full of unorganised image files named IMG\_098668 and IMG\_002345 that we vow to one day go through, while knowing that at a certain point, undertaking this organisation will become at best improbable, and more likely, incomprehensible.

<sup>138</sup> Ben Lerner. "The Custodians." *The New Yorker*.

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

determine when to reprint the objects? And, once you start replicating parts, when is the work no longer the work?”. My critical concern also stretches to, what to do with the past iterations of the work? The default (unquestioning?) position would be to keep every version—every broken pile of twigs—to archive the complete history of the work as it unfolds, regardless of their inbuilt defects. Something makes me wish the artist had stipulated that previous iterations of the work be destroyed, the ‘true’ identity of the work transferred like the new planks added to Theseus’ ship.<sup>139</sup>

Lerner notes that talking to restoration staff has enabled him to acknowledge intellectually what is “more difficult to feel: that a piece of art is mortal; that time is the medium of media; that one person’s damage is another’s patina; that the present’s notion of its past and future are changeable fictions; that a museum is at sea”.<sup>140</sup>

In anticipation of challenges like this increasing, the Whitney formed a Replication Committee in 2008, comprised of conservators, curators, archivists, a lawyer and a registrar, who collectively decide what to do when a part or entire work of art can’t be restored or fixed in a traditional manner. Replication is a choice, and their conversations deal with how ongoing maintenance, descriptions and classifications are undertaken. However in returning to ‘reversibility’, the guiding principle of restoration, we are faced with a future in which it becomes possible to present multiple restagings of the past. An artwork that provokes us to remake, over and over, letting technology acquiescence to the limits of its form, ensures that it is “impractical to privilege rehabilitation over replication”.<sup>141</sup>

So then, do we understand the medium of this work as conservation itself, further tangling the messy logics that dictate how we deal with things over which we stake a claim of custodianship? Lerner evokes the need for a new *tratteggio*, a cross-hatching technique used in painting conservation that merges the hand of the maker with that of the conservator. In thinking how to privilege conservation decisions as integral to shaping our understandings of artworks, not a band-aid applied (off court) in the background, can we then talk of curatorial conservation practices, another pathway we tread when caring for artworks, and another essential topic to discuss with those who create those things?

<sup>139</sup> The ship of Theseus is a long-pondered paradox: can an object be considered authentic or fundamentally the same (can its essence hold) if the entirety of its components or elements (in this case, the wood of the ship) are gradually replaced?

<sup>140</sup> Ben Lerner. *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Ben Lerner. *Ibid.*

# 7 Suturing Objects Through Replication, Damage and Deviance

Curatorial conservation strategies can be understood differently outside the Western context. In Japan, the drawcard of the Ōtsuka Museum of Art is a vast bunker whose walls comprise thousands of specially-prepared ceramic tiles depicting iconic Old Masters paintings. Produced to withstand earthquakes, fires and pollution, their colours supposedly not fading for at least 2000 years, it is a claim to permanency stretching more than four kilometres, “simultaneously anticipating and defying destruction”<sup>142</sup> of an art historical canon ripe for the rethinking. While its conclusive and exclusionary rendering of art history in this stubborn form is almost fantastical in its absurdity, it nonetheless puts forward an understanding of (art) objects as auraless and replicable surfaces, dismissing the sanctity of “the unrepeatable, inviolable, unique original”,<sup>143</sup> and proposing xeroxed ceramics as a fine alternative. A tangible depiction of a thing is seen as more primary than the thing itself, negating the weight usually given to object authenticity. I imagine how these could be understood removed from the museum-context—as souvenirs, home decor, the backdrop to an art history amusement park ride? A newly cultivated sub-category of unworkable things?

<sup>142</sup> Amelia Groom. “Permanent Collection”. *e-flux journal*.

<sup>143</sup> Byung-Chul Han. “The Copy is the Original”. *Aeon*.

<sup>144</sup> Elka Krajewska. “Short History by Elka Krajewska, SAI President and Founder.” *Salvage Art Institute*.

Meanwhile in New York, artist Elka Krajewska’s Salvage Art Institute takes as its material “total loss” artworks that have been declared by insurance companies to have zero value. The artwork may have been vandalised, damaged in transit or from natural disaster, or suffered a careless encounter with a member of the public, but its condition is such that both owner and insurance appraiser agree that restoration is either not possible, nor financially viable if the cost of restoration outweighs the assigned value of the item. The owner receives an indemnification payout, while the object is legally removed from the market but often not destroyed, inhabiting a limbo state in a warehouse somewhere. Krajewska founded the nonprofit institute to “develop an arena of discussion” that “confronts and articulates the condition of no-longer-art-material”,<sup>144</sup> naming the institute after the term used

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

by insurers. After fortuitously meeting with sympathetic staffers within the AXA insurance company, she was able to broker an agreement in which they donated a selection of their total loss artworks. A shattered ceramic Jeff Koons balloon dog<sup>145</sup> sits alongside a torn 18th century pastoral landscape painting and a Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph with seemingly no discernable damage. In losing their value and pedigree, theorist Jane Bennett argues these “radically demoted objects” shrug off “the grasp of established norms and judgements” to paradoxically acquire the “capacity to affect and be affected.”<sup>146</sup> From the wound of damage is a liberatory potential—these things can be understood not just as signifiers, but as causative agents.

The imperative to own and wield unique, unsubstitutable things was a factor in accumulating the archive hoards, so it seems counterintuitive to consider embracing auraless replication and damaged objects in a context of too much stuff. But can we free objects from unworkability when rethinking the authority prescribed to the original state, and through a speculative museology, could we augment a desacralisation process of sorts?

Cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han testifies that in China, *fuzhipin* is an exact reproduction that’s considered of equal value to the original<sup>147</sup>—a different way of understanding conservation. The replications are not thought of as lesser. Rather than de-legitimising, restoration through replication is understood as returning an object closer to its original state, for the older an object is, the more the patina of decay has caused it to move away from what it once was. With this understanding of restoration, Theseus’ paradox is easily resolved. Rather than authenticity, the emphasis then becomes on objects assuming the characteristics of living things, responding and adapting to their environment through a process of regeneration. Han speaks of the belief that re-making the object ascribes it life and amplifies its capacity to communicate and transform. Thus things are not unequivocally collected, but gathered together to commune, converse and quietly change together, unfixed but existing in Harman’s space of emergent wholeness.

This slipperiness around authenticity could be a form of deviance to embrace when approaching objects in collections. I am reminded of an unconventional approach to restoring a series of faded Rothko murals<sup>148</sup> in the Harvard Art Museum<sup>149</sup>—in lieu of physically altering the works, the

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146 I will soon return to this idea in more detail. Jane Bennett. “Encounters With an Art Thing.” *Evental Aesthetics*. p 79.

147 Byung-Chul Han. *Ibid*

148



149 Narayan Khandekar. “How to Restore a Rothko: With Light.” *The Atlantic*.

<sup>150</sup> Louis Menand. "Watching Them Turn Off the Rothkos." *The New Yorker*.

conservators devised projections to restore their colours, which are ritualistically switched off at 4pm every day. This "compensating illumination" <sup>150</sup> can be reinscribed as a speculative curatorial gesture, untethering the object from a conventionally fixed state, and giving us the possibility to witness the compression of accumulated histories—oscillating between how things were and how things now are. Light sutures the painting. It's a way to layer experiences to articulate the temporality of objects and the impossibility of consecrating and returning to a particular moment in their lifespan. It writes and rewrites an unfolding of history through residue and apparitions, disorienting absolutist understandings of authenticity that underpin the usual approaches to restoration.

In this way, the aura of the object is produced as well as protected. Rather than understanding conservation as a process of embalming, it is reframed as an interpretive and evocative curatorial act. Through integrating fluctuating mimetics, the third table voice of the object seems graspable.

## 8 Listening for Squeaks and Practical Ways to Let Things Speak

How to register and decipher an object's third table voice? When I think of things speaking, I think of the potentiality of what they have been unable to enunciate, and all the things that prevent this from happening. With time and attention—caring and listening—a cacophony of voices can emerge. Fred Wilson's slave shackles<sup>151</sup> amongst silverware in the Maryland Historical Society's vitrines were seismic. Variations of this gesture—different objects unearthed and brought to light in different contexts—remain potent. But this does not need to be limited to institutional contexts. Things that make us uncomfortable, things that have been repressed, can do more than just be seen. Those that have never spoken and will probably never have the opportunity to speak can do so by being liberated from the collection store context.

Museologist Kate Bowell's text "Object Reincarnation" imagines different scenarios of extracting objects from permanent collections—"the unloved objects that exist on the fringes of collections",<sup>152</sup> passively persisted with but understood as challenging in some way. It's not that they have no potential, but the context in which they are situated will not easily be able to ascribe them value, and it's a struggle to find ways to relate them to missions and mandates, or create situations in which they can be worked with; these "leftovers" don't easily fit a purpose, and are kept because of protocol and resource restrictions. To think collections sustainably is to find ways to let more things flow out than flow in, and seize this flowing out as an opportunity for experiments with active discarding. Institutions can create new spheres in which people and communities can probe without consequence, supporting and understanding objects anew, and enabling the institution to adopt a more vulnerable relationship to authoritative colonial knowledges. Things can be made sociable, flexible, improvisable and formative, not through a dictatorial process, but through creating

151



152 Kate Bowell. *Ibid.* p. 154.



scenarios in which the lives of ideas can be followed through inter-thing dialogues. Doing so will expose the difficult bottlenecks that regularly arise in this work, recalibrating our expectations and slowly shifting our assumptions of what it is these institutions (can) do.

Rethinking who is allowed to act in support of collections, and in what contexts their care can be enacted, is an important part of this. The codes and conventions that mediate interactions with objects largely serve to protect them—a type of policing-caring implemented through sensors, vitrines, barriers, security systems, surveillance. The very act of sequestering an object into an archive removes many possibilities of support that are dependent on presence and proximity. Trust can go two ways—amongst the leftovers are many objects that don't necessarily need to be protected from publics, interactions, conditions and situations. What about considering those things that would speak anew through the circulation, use, sharing and touch that comes with different forms of custodianship?

Bowell proposes numerous experiments which employ trust as a critical support structure: identifying public and semi-public para-institutional sites of origin, in which objects can be returned close to where they were sourced, displayed and mediated in dialogue with collaborator custodians; understanding objects as transformable materials for change rather than things to exist in perpetuity by embracing acts of destruction, deterioration and decay, be it by artists working with and through collections, or through public 'deconstruction' workshops that reduce objects to their elemental components in dialogue with curators and conservators, active tools to better understand their making process; and objects temporarily adopted by community members who mediate how they are understood and circulated, in dialogue with their networks.

These unloved, unworked-with things would now have the possibility to be heard via the forming of new relationships through strategic proximity to different contexts. Newly visible and deterritorialised,<sup>153</sup> they acquire new agencies through rubbing up against fresh scenarios and enunciating about new encounters from different positions. Bowell notes that this process is “by its very nature, dramatic, monumental, emotional and daunting”<sup>154</sup> and to me these seem like apt harbingers of

<sup>153</sup> I made a note of this word, feeling it had a certain potency, and then discovered its connection to Deleuze and Guattari. While they use it to express how human subjectivity operates within globalised culture, but I was particularly attracted to its signalling of dissipating and borderless borders. I use it now to introduce an impending shift in my understanding of human-object binaries; applied to the object-subjects of my research, it signifies their untethering, an escape from realms that once previously confined.

<sup>154</sup> Kate Bowell. *Ibid.* p 160.

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

the kind of change I'm imagining. Coming to terms with how to address these difficult moments bring with it both insights and blindness. It's a process of making a trace more visible, and annotating memories with counter-memories; to use sociologist Avery F Gordon's term,<sup>155</sup> it's a conjuring: "a particular form of calling up and calling out the forces that make things what they are in order to fix and transform a troubling situation" through merging "the analytical, the procedural, the imaginative and the effervescent".<sup>156</sup>

<sup>155</sup> Whose thinking will be explored in more depth in the following section.

<sup>156</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. p 22.

# Interlude Questions to Ask of Objects

There always seems to be a point in research and reading when you come across someone who has done the work you are trying to do in a succinct and seemingly uncomplicated way. I came across this when struggling to articulate what questions could be asked of objects that would start a conversation about their unworkability. I then learned that this list was itself based on an activity, “50 Ways to Look at a Big Mac Box”,<sup>157</sup> designed to assist people in teaching themselves to teach with objects. The following is a concession to my initial aspiration of a useful “blanket” to flap and throw onto objects in the collection store, albeit one which prompts speculations of a more practical and less metaphysical nature. So rather than write anew, I alter the form of address.

<sup>157</sup> John Hennigar Shuh. “Teach Yourself to Teach With Objects,” in *The Educational Role of the Museum*. pp 80-91.

# 51 Questions to Ask an Object

## VALUE

- 01 **Are you** visually interesting?
- 02 How does **your** condition affect **your** ability to be active?
- 03 Could **you** be put on display? If so, for how long?
- 04 Could people handle or use **you** ?
- 05 What is the cost of gaining intellectual control **over you** ,taking into consideration staff time and materials for research, cataloging and inventory?
- 06 What is the cost of preserving **you**, taking into account conservation, housing materials, climate-controlled storage, and staff time, for a month? A year? A decade?
- 07 **Are you** worth the carbon footprint?
- 08 Does your museum have the resources to digitalise **you**?
- 09 How would that digitalisation change **your** experience?

## YOU AND THE COLLECTION

- 10 Does **the** institution own multiples of **you**?
- 11 Is **there** a duplicate of **you** in other institutions' collections?
- 12 How **do you** support **the** current collecting scope?

13 How **do you** support **the** institution's mission?

14 Where **do you** fit into **the** collection? **Are you** merely filling a gap within an encyclopedic collection? **Do you** illuminate a human story?

15 How **do you** align within the interpretive goals of **the** institution today? What is **the** education staff's perspective on its interpretive value?

16 **Do you** fit more with the "here and now" of **the** institution or with the undetermined future?

17 Who accepted the donation/purchase of **you**? Why?

18 What was the collecting vision of **the** institution when **you were** acquired? Has the collecting vision changed since then, and if so, how?

19 Who **donated you**? Did they donate other items in **the** institution as well? What were **their** motivations? What does this donor history reveal about the museum as a collecting institution?

20 What does the donation record reveal about **you**? About **the** greater community?

### UNCOVERING **YOUR** MEANING

21 **Were you** mass-produced?

22 What is **your** unique human story?

23 What other uses or purposes did **you** have beyond **your** original intended use?

24 **Do you** reinforce racial, gender, class or other stereotypes? How so?

25 What do these stereotypes reveal about **the** institution? **its** community? **its** collecting policy?

## B. BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

26 **Are you** commonly associated with people of privilege? Can **you** be used to help public audiences explore and question systems of privilege?

### REPRESENTATION

27 What need in **the** community **do you** fill?

28 Where could **you be placed** in communities?

29 What interpretation would that placement reveal?

30 Is there a community organisation or group that **you could be loaned to** ?

31 What potential connections or new life could **you** have within this community organisation?

32 How could **you** serve the public outside the museum walls?

33 Could communities be brought together by **your** interpretation? By **your** destruction?

34 Would **you**—and communities—be better served if the museum did not own **you**?

### INTERPRETATION

35 **Do you** evoke sensory experiences, memories, emotions, or universal human themes? What potential interpretive strategies do such connections reveal about **you** ?

36 How many humans have had contact with **you** ?

37 Aside from actual contact, what are the broader human connections to **you** ?

- 38) How could **you** be used to illustrate a person's story?
- 39) Who could relate to those stories?
- 40) Who couldn't relate to those stories?
- 41) Could another object in **the** collection tell **your** stories better?
- 42) What community's stories could **you** highlight?
- 43) What individual, ethnic groups or community groups could participate in **your** interpretation?
- 44) How would these groups interpret **you** ?
- 45) In what way could visitors interact with **you** ?
- 46) How could you **be** situated **d** so **as to** inspire an "aha moment"?
- 47) In what ways could the stereotypes **you** imply be used to share stories of the current time or the historical past?
- 48) Could **you** inspire visitors to grow in their relationships?
- 49) What sort of relationship with objects is **the** museum modeling with **you**? Hoarding? Perpetual preservation? Acknowledging the natural life cycle of collections?
- 50) Beyond display, is there another way that **the** institution could use **you**? Could **you** be given away to serve a great purpose? Allowed to decay?

### AND FINALLY...

- 51) Why **are you** still in **the** collection?

C.  
UNDISCIPLINED  
PLANNED  
KNOWLEDGE-



# ES AS SUTUR- ING TREAT- MENTS

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

Having altered the form of address in this example of a starting point for speaking about unworkability (an object-interview structure), I now consider how to work with its responses. I look to unruly, devalidated, unstable, deviant and undisciplined knowledges<sup>158</sup> as suturing treatments, tools that support us to interrogate the limits of our understanding through occluding borders and deteriorating binaries. Asking questions of objects is fundamentally a listening process, an attempt to ascertain the nature of their call, a museological methodology of suggestion that can activate a shift from their preservation to their use. But it is also implicitly an act of care that destabilises the paternalistic ‘caring’ logics of (colonial) ownership and its claims to authority through subjugation and segregation of its subjects—in this case, objects in collections. In the collection store, its bordering processes are never “natural”<sup>159</sup>—they are always the products of practices that organise and rank knowledges to maintain power and the status quo. I propose that these borders can be made porous through searching for forms of care and support that address and understand (unworkable) objects, and I test if this can be made applicable through the exhibition form.

Caring and working in support of objects does not mean reaching out to extract them from the spheres in which they circulate, subjecting them to a one-way examination of showing, interpreting and dictating fixed meanings (ostensibly, classical museology in exhibition form). Rather I want to take seriously the agency of their life as “things”—as “vibrant materialities colliding with, conjoining with, enhancing, competing, or harming the vibrant materialities we are”,<sup>160</sup> while also acknowledging that they encompass something beyond the tangible, “the sedimented conditions that constitute what is in place in the first place [...] an ensemble of social relations”.<sup>161</sup> I also scrutinise philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour’s expansion of cognisant subjects to include not just humans but, for example, “objects, pictures, rocks, animals, natural systems”, that “won’t simply sit still under someone else’s microscope, on someone else’s terms”.<sup>162</sup> Artworks can of course be in allegiance with these things, everything understood as having lives animated by needs and wants, as having effects in the world, albeit ones that “require a more robust vocabulary for marking [their] material vibrancy and vitality”.<sup>163</sup> And it seems the default place to stage and test their effects—make them public—is the exhibition. “The suspicion that objects can become

<sup>158</sup> While Avery Gordon understands Michel Foucault as aspiring for collaboration and equality between the “subjugated knowledges” repressed by institutions and archives but operating below and outside of official knowledge production, and dominant institutional discourses (p xviii), I remain suspicious (or, “\\_(ツ)\_/”) of the likelihood of equality being actualised in this sphere. Instead, I advocate for a knowing that is undisciplined, supportive and nurturing; and that with indisputable closeness, strains to become proximal in an effort to dematerialise borders that demarcate the below and the outside. To that end, I employ a multiplicity of interchangeable terms to disrupt binary understandings.

<sup>159</sup> A Franke, Anselm. “Animism: Notes on an Exhibition.” *e-flux*.

<sup>160</sup> Jane Bennett. Ibid. p 73.

<sup>161</sup> Avery F Gordon. Ibid. p 4.

<sup>162</sup> Anthony Huberman. “Take Care,” in *Circular Facts*. p 11.

<sup>163</sup> Jane Bennett. Ibid. p 76.

<sup>164</sup> Wilk, Elvia. "The Grammar of Work." *Frieze*.

<sup>165</sup> Verwoert, Jan. "Why is Art Met With Disbelief? It's Too Much Like Magic." *Cookie!* p 101.

<sup>166</sup>



<sup>167</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p 22.

<sup>168</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p 24.

<sup>169</sup> Not acceptable as wholly mandated by the institution, but an acceptable attempt, as John Berger anointed of images, to "conjure up the appearances of something that is absent".

inflected with affect and take on strange powers through human interaction" is understood by writer Elvia Wilk as being foundational to the exhibition experience, and I agree with her that "the desire for contagious magic is part of the aspiration of being in the world with artworks; it's the basic reason I still go to art shows".<sup>164</sup> Or, as critic Jan Verwoert remarks, this "mimetic magic is a relational force" that "only comes into effect when it can resonate with other things, people, qualities and states within an environment".<sup>165</sup> So where and with whom can the unworkable resonate? Reductively, am I speculating about how best to exhibit magic?

I remember that a self-imposed limitation to how the unworkable can be addressed in exhibitions was defined following my discussions with the Finnish institution—bad *vaikea*<sup>166</sup> works were inherently unexhibitable, only able to leave the collection store through deaccessioning processes (which were enshrined in policy documents but never enacted). The faux pas of storing (resourcing) unworkable things is not usually something the institution will readily draw attention to, so speculating about how to exhibit (make public) these institutional logics without relying on the presence of objects is something I felt compelled to consider throughout this process. Here too, I recognise the inflections of my language become at times florid, leisurely and meandering. I hark back to Petrešin-Bachelez's call to slow down, and acknowledge that these experiments in retelling speculative wanderings are a way to address how "we do not usually experience things, nor are affects produced, in the rational or objective ways our terms tend to portray them";<sup>167</sup> there is a need to experiment with ways to express that which is "partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory [and] ambiguous".<sup>168</sup>

My looking to undisciplined knowledges as suturing treatments also relies on making the institution uncomfortable, and finding acceptable<sup>169</sup> ways to make public this discomfort. It asks of it to inhabit a non-authoritative position in relation to its collections, not dictating and mollycoddling with the assumption of knowing best. In moving towards strategies for publicness, I explore how an object's agency can be leveraged by animism; wonder if those who identify as objectum sexual are uniquely positioned to communicate with non-human things; and seek new speaking positions within an exhibition by re-

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

understanding the primacy of an object's physical matter, looking instead to dust as a speaking-device. I acknowledge the dominance implicit in constructing human-centric exhibition understandings, and attempt to find ways for this to not preclude other positions. But I follow Wilk in noting that this is a double-bind: "if I take this belief to its final logical conclusion, if I allow my desires and affections for things to become fully abstracted, I wind up prioritising the sanctity of objects above the lives affected by their making and maintenance."<sup>170</sup> This touches on two easy critiques levelled at object-focussed thinking—firstly, its languages are unverifiable and beyond comprehension, so why bother (my response: isn't that conceit foundational to metaphysical thinking?). But secondly and more pertinently for the anxious human subject, it's inherently dehumanising<sup>171</sup> (and anyway, why spend time pondering the inner lives of objects, is this really a useful strategy in the face of already proliferating inequality and human suffering?). At its core, this second statement leads me back to the question of "why to work", and I resolve to no longer let it paralyse me. I believe in the pursuit of a curatorial practice predicated on destabilising and questioning dominant knowledges and ways of knowing. With this in mind, the following is an attempt to muddy humanisms, and dissolve dualistic and hierarchical ontologies and knowledge practices, so as to speculate about the exhibitionary capacities of the unworkable.

<sup>170</sup> Elvia Wilk. *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> JJ Charlesworth. "The End of Human Experience." *ArtReview*.

# 1 Communing With Mirrors

When I speak of becoming entangled with an object's agency, I speak of acknowledging a form of animism that extends beyond a thing simply having a 'life', to encompass its communicative and transformative potential. Conceptualising animism—the belief “that things act, that they have designs on us, and that we are interpellated by them”<sup>172</sup> in the same way that the milieus in which we operate animate us—is something that both bewilders and threatens Western modernist epistemologies, who frame it as “the primordial mistake of primitive people: the attribution of life and person-like qualities to objects in their environment.”<sup>173</sup> The process of becoming and being understood as “modern” is a process of ceasing to be animist; those distinctions on which modernity rests (and which the museum institution reinforces)—human authority and subservient non-humans; interior and exterior natural worlds; organic life and inorganic matter; culture and nature; natural things and social signs; valid and de-validated languages; linear and non-linear time; what can be controlled and uncontrolled—become nebulous through an animist lens. Instead, “each materiality conveys a specific degree or kind of animacy, even if not all qualify under the biological definition of life.”<sup>174</sup> Within the staging and unfolding of an exhibition, it therefore seems essential to gather testimonies of “societies and people enthralled by magic, enchanted, possessed and entranced, disappeared, and haunted because, well, it is more common than you might have considered [...] all these ghostly aspects of social life are not aberrations, but are central to [understanding] modernity itself”<sup>175</sup> as a construct that represses those revenant rejoinders, now seeking permission to approach.

<sup>172</sup> Anselm Franke. *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> Anselm Franke. *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Jane Bennett. *Ibid.* p 76.

<sup>175</sup> Avery F Gordon. p 197.

<sup>176</sup> Jane Bennett. *Ibid.* p 74.

<sup>177</sup> Jane Bennett. *Ibid.* p 73.

<sup>178</sup> Anselm Franke. *Ibid.*

Animism is also not simply the belief that “things are enchanted with personality”,<sup>176</sup> but that every thing has the potential to be an active subject capable of re-orientating relations—to “reform others and be reformed”.<sup>177</sup> In challenging Western hierarchies and binaries of animate and inanimate; primitive and civilised; subjective perceptions and objective qualities; and what is real, imaginary, fictional and sited in our interior world, indiscernible to others;<sup>178</sup> animism has the potential to be destructive, mischievous and

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

subversive, causing indignance in the face of a given reality in which colonial mechanisms are “deeply ingrained in our everyday perception and our capacity to make sense of the world”.<sup>179</sup> Here we can think of a life of objects that bear the traces, and are inseparable from, those humans involved in their production.<sup>180</sup> Animism lets us speak into mirrors, audible to other selves, sound waves vibrating into other pasts and other realms.

By extension, it also calls for a re-understanding of the positions from which the ‘dominant’ human subject is located and speaks, a seemingly illogical unsettling of human primacy that opens its advocates up to ridicule and claims of self-sabotage—why destabilise those hierarchies from which you benefit? And it seems that here, what unsettles human authority can also be used to unsettle institutional authority, for “what is a museum if not a grand de-animating machine?”<sup>181</sup> that conserves and ‘protects’ to prevent the constant transformation that is inherent to things with life, truncating their ability to enunciate claims and new positions arising from this transformation. In putting forward which silenced voices should seize the opportunity to ‘speak’ in the contemporary museum, Savoy advocates for adopting “the perspective[s] of the objects themselves” as a way of transforming how they are defined by the “logics of appropriation or identification, [...] intellectual, aesthetic and symbolic dynamics”.<sup>182</sup> In this way, animism becomes a way to implement a “logic of ‘cultural transfers’”<sup>183</sup> fundamental to decolonial museological practices, a form of “aesthetic pollinations, [...] formal or conceptual fusions, transformations and hybridisations”<sup>184</sup> that howl in the face of the “imperturbable museum”, draped in institutional silence and the forgetfulness of its own origins.<sup>185</sup> For unworkable things, animism is a way to both interrogate and support objects quarantined in collection stores—they can speak from outside mandated communicative realms.<sup>186</sup> Rather than understanding display and research as the sole signifiers of use, we can privilege an object’s immanence—its presence manifested within the material world—as a fundamentally active and open form of relationality. Here, we become attuned to listen for claims made from “the site of desires, fictions, divinities, symptoms, or ghosts”.<sup>187</sup>

I intuit traces of these sites when I return to Mbembe’s lecture notes on what is excluded within hegemonic “traditions in which the knowing subject is enclosed in itself

<sup>179</sup> Anselm Franke. Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> In the 2013 lecture “Democracy in the Age of Animism”, philosopher and theorist Achille Mbembe uses the contemporary example of phone and computer components, and the violence and exploitation of people and land in Central Africa, in an animist critique.

<sup>181</sup> Anselm Franke. Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Cristelle Terroni. Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Savoy refers to Michel Espagne and Michael Werner’s term for things which are stimulated outside of the territories from which they originated.

<sup>184</sup> Cristelle Terroni. Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Cristelle Terroni. Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Like exhibitions, and related research and promotional activities like symposiums, talks and workshops.

<sup>187</sup> Anselm Franke. Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Mbembe, Achille. "Decolonising Knowledge and the Question of the Archive."

<sup>189</sup> Jane Bennett, *Ibid.* p 78.

<sup>190</sup> Ben Lerner. "Damage Control." *Harpers*.

<sup>191</sup> Ben Lerner. "Damage Control". *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> Lerner mentions red lipstick smears on a Cy Twombly painting, and an aggressive outburst of kicks, punches and spitting in response to the "overwhelming fear" felt in front of a Barnett Newman canvas.

<sup>193</sup> Jane Bennett, *Ibid.* p 78.

<sup>194</sup> And to descry is to make out dimly, to reveal, a root of describe.

<sup>195</sup> Links, Crystal. "Scrying—Oracles of Divination." *Crystal Links*.

<sup>196</sup>



<sup>197</sup> *Crystal Links*. *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> Jane Bennett. *Ibid.* p 78.

and peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge of those objects"; here, it can "know the world without being part of that world" and "produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context".<sup>188</sup> While I learn much from Mbembe's expansion into how the hegemony of this enclosed gaze operates within the concept of decolonising post-Apartheid education institutions, I nonetheless keep returning to the mental image of this peeking subject, wondering if peeking really is the best word to describe this dynamic—it instinctively does not seem furtive. What approaches could usurp the authority of its objective knowledge—how to direct and understand its gaze differently? I ruminate upon 'ill' looking-practices, and recall hyperkulturemia, a "culturally constructed psychosomatic illness"<sup>189</sup> in which the act of staring at an object-artwork's seemingly heightened aesthetics renders the subject incapacitated, disoriented, panicked, breathless, or overwhelmed.<sup>190</sup> This object-gazing-back induces a frantic kind of sublime terror, "the sensation of being undone",<sup>191</sup> that has been known to result in acts of vandalism or passion.<sup>192</sup> Within these retellings, Bennett helpfully seeks a shift in perception that could "uncover a different etiology of its affectivity"—one in which the object "makes an actual contribution to the swoon", and the peeking person is forced to rearticulate and take on "new shapes for the 'self'" to "try to inhabit something of the lived space" of the object.<sup>193</sup> I think of the mutual peeking and inhabitation inherent to scrying,<sup>194</sup> a divination method reliant on obtaining a trance-like state through an active gazing into an object, traditionally depicted as having a reflective or translucent surface like oil, water, glass or mirrors. I discover<sup>195</sup> that scrying can also take place via cloudier surfaces like wax, quartz or beryl,<sup>196</sup> and swoop upon the idea of object-artworks as museological scrying agents. In scrying, enunciating is used as a repetitive strategy to deepen the trance, accumulating into a feedback loop of sorts in which the human subject reaches a state of communion with the object, understanding its call via the conjuring of an "inner movie" of images and stories.<sup>197</sup> To use Bennett's terms, this peeking-as-gazing produces "conative bodies, sometimes sympathetic to each other [...] sometimes not—but always affective and being affected".<sup>198</sup> It's a form of animist relationality that can muddy the mirror-gaze and reposition the peeking colonial subject.

My instinct is that animism can therefore be wielded in

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

speculative museology's frontline, pressing against the borders of colonial modernity and subsuming through suturing its residue within contemporary politics and aesthetics. It's a demand to transform and negotiate the default ontologies and permissible gestures that shape a sphere in which "claims to reality and the ordering of the social world are at stake".

<sup>199</sup> It puts forward a social world that no longer insists on the distinction between "subject and object of knowledge, between fact and fiction, between presence and absence, between past and present, between present and future, between knowing and not-knowing". <sup>200</sup> It pleads for practices of care and communication that involve touch, gazing, and reciprocal engagement, and insists upon the expression of relations as essential to making decipherable the positions of silenced objects.

<sup>199</sup> Anselm Franke. *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p xvii.



## 2 (Love and) Object Ciphers

When I'm trying to find ways out of concentric thinking around objects and their voices, capacities and tensions—of use and usefulness; unrealised and unrealisable potentials—I seek respite in wondering about the parameters of object-human relationships. Here I am, trying to figure out what is best for the unworkable object—how best to use it—while denying it agency and autonomy. In what way can we understand and translate the non-human forms of communication that advocates of object oriented ontology<sup>201</sup> claim are present in our every encounter? I stare at a recently yellowing plant and wonder how exactly to respond to its call, and hear its diagnosis suggestions. I gaze into the eyes of my friend's newborn and they're as waxy as the plant. Over the course of a few hours, I watch them try to intuit the guttural little groans and gurgles that emerge as the digestion machine croons. These creatures react to our cues and provide us with clues; we form a language together through trial, error, and response. If we struggle to communicate with things evidently alive, then how do we approach things that move only in a molecular way, invisible to the naked eye? In what ways do animists foster languages with non-living inanimate things, and how are they not simply projecting<sup>202</sup> internalised desires—attuned only to certain voices, deciphering the things they want to hear? And although the sentiment of challenging the supremacy of human experience may be admirable, how do we non-hierarchically facilitate a re-centring that would let things on the margins of human experience speak?

<sup>201</sup> Harman led the charge here in 2011, advocating for what has been referred to as posthumanist egalitarianism in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*: "The world is not the world as manifest to humans; to think a reality beyond our thinking is not nonsense, but obligatory." Meanwhile in 2015's 'Charisma and Causality', Timothy Morton expands the operation of Max Weber's idea of "charisma" beyond societies of human subjects, applying it to capture the paranormal "causes and effects" of objects, their effects on us which we can't control.

<sup>202</sup> Franke argues against an unequivocal critique of projection, noting that colonial theorists narcissistically and ignorantly employed the very approach that they critiqued when 'projecting' their normative notion of 'objective' reality onto animist colonial subjects.

203



I attempted to broach this subject during a recent exhibition at Helsinki's Creat space, *The Untold Iron Lover* (9-14 January 2018), which narrated an individual's experience of identifying as objectum sexual (those who sexually desire objects, in lieu of people<sup>203</sup>). I wondered if someone encountering the world in this way could help me in how I approach collections—could they act as a mouthpiece, a translator of silenced voices?

In recent years I've read stories of people consecrating their love of train stations, roller coasters, chandeliers and the Berlin Wall with weddings, or more accurately, non-legally

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

binding commitment ceremonies. I'd always considered them little more than 'human interest' clickbait gifts for time-poor news editors, so I was curious to meet Erika Eiffel, an advocate within the objectum sexual community. She was exhibiting her lover, a guillotine nicknamed Fressie, alongside charred remnants of a previous iteration of Fressie, small portable replica models, and photographic documentation of her past relationships with a sword, a compound bow and the Eiffel Tower. While not overtly framing herself as an artist (in lieu of a 'professional' CV, a biography was being promoted), she was nonetheless in a gallery, and did adhere to many exhibitions conventions: making a room sheet, giving guided tours, and producing a narrative film of slideshow images that extrapolated, in first person, Fressie's grateful retelling of their tumultuous relationship in a manner suitably melodramatic, heartfelt and flattering to her as a partner. The authoritative computer-generated voice-over was instantly recognisable as a lazy trope of post-internet video art—the clunky, not-quite human tones perhaps a winking reference, or sincere mimicry of Hito Steyerl, whose video Eiffel may have seen when performing for Lindsay Lawson's *Choreography for Crane*, commissioned for the 9th Berlin Biennale. I mention all this because I'm still confounded by my experiences with Eiffel, and uncertain about her self-awareness in situating herself and her lover in relation to the exhibition context.

Although the theories and philosophies that underpin objectum sexuality—the agency of non-living things, new materialism, speculative realism—have been readily discussed in exhibition contexts of late,<sup>204</sup> I haven't come across any artists that identify as objectum sexual. I do remember reading Tracey Emin married a stone,<sup>205</sup> but that seemed to be a mix of marketing for her *Stone Love* solo show and provocation couched as a self-imposed respite from more conventional relationships, rather than a declaration of objectum sexuality as its community understands it.<sup>206</sup> Despite the marriage, Emin considers herself single and waiting for the right person, stating, "It [the stone] is not going anywhere: it's a metaphor for what I prefer to live with. I prefer to be single, doing everything I want to do and how I want to do it." That Eiffel brandishes this position within an exhibition context is interesting to me, as I ponder how (and with whom<sup>207</sup>) a curator could approach a institution to find ways to make public the unworkable.

So in Creat, Eiffel adopted the discourse of exhibitions to

<sup>204</sup> High profile examples include Franke's *Animism* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's edition of dOCUMENTA (13), both in 2012.

<sup>205</sup> Alex Needham. "Tracey Emin: "The stone I married is beautiful and dignified—it will never let me down." *The Guardian*.

<sup>206</sup> A desire for objects, in lieu of people (<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org/>); Emin's rock is a placeholder until the "right person" comes along.

<sup>207</sup> I follow Céline Condorelli's definition of the making of culture: "the question of what one wants to be associated with, and surrounded by recalls, of course, friendship at a higher level of association, but also how Hannah Arendt defined culture: in terms of the company one wants to keep." *Support Structures*, p 188.

translate the voice of the object, presenting herself as a very eager performative subject at the opening. She was practiced and conversational in the retelling of both her and Fressie's biography. Fressie was gendered as male, and at times anthropomorphised, Eiffel gesturing towards "his head" as she explained what a good fit they were, height-wise. I started to wonder how they communicate, and how to avoid projecting—through the 'voice' of the object—only the most idealised version of yourself? Are you ever not adorable, and adored? What about the power dynamic between you—does Fressie enjoy your choice to display him?<sup>208</sup> Do you ever feel he wants you to communicate certain things, but you choose not to express them? And how is it to identify in this way, and be in the world; how different is your daily experience from mine?

<sup>208</sup> With this question, I wanted to prise open a way of understanding Eiffel's authoritative position of exhibition authorship as counter to the innate agency she ascribes to her lover-subject, whose wants, needs and desires she is attuned to hear and translate—a "knowing what's best for you" that regularly emerges in classical exhibition displays. However it was difficult to be affirmative about her authorship and the potency of this choice; she doesn't identify as an artist. So perhaps Fressie is not passively subject to artistic impulse, but simply a supportive partner, and Creat is a venue-for-hire to promote Eiffel's biography, with a complementary aim to "make public" the objectum sexual community. The devalidated knowledge uses the validated context to emerge, but nonetheless is forced to wrangle with its conventions.

When questioned about the nature of the language and communication strategies she used with inanimate things, Eiffel deflected to the inherent inexplicable nature of love, saying that she feels and senses the object-being in a way she can't explain, but nonetheless feels very real—nervousness, breathlessness, hairs standing up on her arms with the shiver of excitement of being in a lover's presence. She testified that while living in Japan, scientists had attached nodes to her head to measure her cognitive responses to her lover, and found them to mimic those of 'regular' human relationships. Synapses flickered, things were happening that she struggled to describe. And of course this doesn't happen with every object. Just like I pass hundreds of people daily on the street and feel no emotional connection, so too may Eiffel when faced with a room of objects.

I then asked her how she approached cultivating the first person voice of Fressie in the video slideshow: how does the object speak through her, did she need to create a ritualistic situation to 'channel' it, was there a discussion between them or a review process about what she had written, and did they ever disagree with how she and they were represented? Eiffel mostly sidestepped my questions, but spoke about the impossibilities of solidifying a 'truthful' articulation of how someone you love sees you; you can never be sure of how you're understood in another's eyes, but part of love is being subject to, and open to another's understanding of yourself. Here, it perhaps doesn't matter if this moment of mutual recognition is with a living or non-living thing, as it's a moment of unverifiable self-consciousness, not just a

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

relation but a process—of trust, and letting go. I was reminded of Jan Verwoert’s re-reading of Hegel’s master and servant as *Masters and Servants or Lovers*,<sup>209</sup> and its questioning of the dynamics around love, power, recognition and desire as a means to understand each other and the self. New days and new experiences mean we are constantly re-understood and remade anew in another’s eyes, and while we can never be certain of ourselves within this state of flux, we rely on the knowledge of the other to recognise the self, while not knowing the nuances of this recognition. Relinquishing this power to another, and accepting being understood partially, is a form of radical love that goes “beyond recognition”.<sup>210</sup>

While I reach these understandings after my conversation with Eiffel, at the time I am softened by the sincerity of her telling and retelling of her relationship through exhibition form. It is common accusation—that “animists ‘project’ their sense of self into the environment”, but it is also true that the very process of labelling someone is a form of projecting one’s “own normative distinctions onto others and the world”.<sup>211</sup>

We then speak briefly about the sensation of being in museums, being overwhelmed by the weight of history, and feeling mournful about the excess of unspoken stories that will never be told. I don’t think you need to be inclined to objectum sexual or animist ways of thinking to reach similar conclusions. Eiffel isn’t repulsed by the overwhelming mass of trapped object-souls in museums, but rather considers it the desirable resting place for her partner(s), if and when she is not around to care for them. When I gently start describing the state of archives as I understand them, her eyes start to glaze, so sensing her waning interest, I propose to return later with a coffee, and some prepared questions—an interview of sorts. She agrees readily, then pauses. “Are there donuts in Finland? Maybe when you get the coffee you could bring a donut too? I don’t like sweet things, but Fressie has a real sweet tooth.”

The earnestness of her delivery floors me, but I also can’t help but glance around in search of a security camera recording a very elaborate joke. I don’t dare ask what would be the lifespan of the donut. Would it sit atop Fressie’s bench, becoming stale but emitting vibrations, a conversation between pastry and guillotine only registering through the medium of his human lover, who could appreciate and translate the eating experience but resists because of an aversion to sugar? Would she eat the donut and not enjoy it

<sup>209</sup> Jan Verwoert. “Masters and Servants or Lovers.” *Gas Fanzine*. p 8-11.

<sup>210</sup> Jan Verwoert. “Masters and Servants or Lovers.” *Ibid*. p 11.

<sup>211</sup> Anselm Franke. *Ibid*.

as Erika, but transcend this through transmitting the eating-pleasure to Fressie? If I can trust that an object might need love-vibrations, why am I reticent to believe it would also require sustenance-vibrations? Why does this now seem like a prolonged game of make-believe, and why does this make me uncomfortable? Rather than dismissing this discourse outright, can I instead speculate about what unnamed knowledges it could unearth?

As I write and reflect back on this, I've been reading a conversation between Céline Condorelli and Avery F. Gordon about discourses of friendship from the viewpoint of the excluded, and they touch on imaginary friends. "We would both agree that all friendships involve a degree of fantasy or imagination, and some might say that the best friendships are those where the attachment to the fantasy is greatest."<sup>212</sup> In line with this, those who identify as objectum sexual may well be understood as useful object-ciphers. As Gordon notes, what is usually dismissed as "childish" and later as a pathology is important, because it raises the question, "when you are thinking, to whom are you talking? Who is your audience, who is your immediate interlocutor?"<sup>213</sup> Animists and those who identify as objectum sexual anthropomorphise this thing that operates in us all as a form of "between-speaking" (the root and origin of interlocutor). Instead of dismissing this as child's play, let us try to take it seriously as a strategy to reveal the enunciative potential of objects and embrace unruly knowledges. Could speculative museology suture, support and make space for an object-speaking cipher within exhibition-making?

<sup>212</sup> Céline Condorelli.  
*The Company She Keeps*. p.43.

<sup>213</sup> Céline Condorelli.  
*The Company She Keeps*.  
Ibid. p 43.

## 3 Dust, A Trace That Speaks

In thinking about unworkable things in archives, and possible strategies to display but not exhibit them, I started to consider non-object non-things that could provide alternative means by which to trace and follow un-enunciated histories within collections—a medium which questions the primacy and authority of the object as the thing that speaks.<sup>214</sup> Rather than a non-object, dust is perhaps a quasi-object or anti-substance, existing in a liminal state between matter and nonmatter. As the smallest particle visible to the human eye, it hovers phantom-like between the threshold of the visible and invisible. It is formed through the accumulative touching of many objects, things and beings, and their encounters with environments in flux. Its dance between these things is somehow romantic, elusive, whimsical and volatile—in a state of constant becoming, it simultaneously disperses and becomes concentrated, amorphous but able to articulate another's form, a homeless thing that always leaves a trace. It comprises parts of things that have long ago lost their identity,<sup>215</sup> matter that has shifted in ways to now be indiscernible to the naked eye but remains elemental, waiting to be unlocked.

In the collection store, particles brush against surface after surface, accumulating exterior residues which bear witness to what the object-things have experienced. While some well-resourced collection environments employ sophisticated dust extraction infrastructure, for many others this mantle rests on the shoulders of human labour. We can think of collections as tombs which breed and contain the dusty evidence of objects. In getting everywhere, dust can initiate exchange and transformation between things that would not happen otherwise. Its capacity to merge the residue of people and things creates a corporeal form that has encountered mixtures of evidence and history, steadily and unstoppably accumulating. The study of objects yields answers about their histories, whereas the study of their associated dust fragments these histories into more primitive components. So dust is disclosive, recording and witnesses histories, but silently, penetrating without disturbing. Its

<sup>214</sup> In retrospect, I wish I had asked Eiffel how she understands and encounters dust.

<sup>215</sup> This reminds me of experiencing a lecture by anthropologist Póra Pétursdóttir, who thinks about how to approach drift matter—stuff that washes up along coastlines, rubbed bare of aesthetic signifiers—in relation to desires for objects to provide authoritative understandings of time and history.

unique alchemical potential can cover, conceal or cohere into a form, but it's also potent when diffuse and scattered. It has the potential to operate as an everyday interface that materialises and animates suffocated histories.

I also can't help but briefly think about magic, an unstable knowledge if ever there was. In *Kalevala*, the wizard Lemminkainen overcomes a fire-breathing eagle by rubbing chicken feathers into a powdery dust that satiates its hunger. In *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, the "powder of life" is thrown into eyes to animate or devitalise. The Amazonian Yanomami tribe ingest cremation ashes mixed with fermented banana leaves to keep the spirit of the deceased alive.<sup>216</sup> In the Japanese art form of *dorodango*,<sup>217</sup> wet dust (mud!) transforms when moulded, shaped and polished until it forms a shiny sphere.<sup>218</sup> Dust has long been aligned with metamorphic possibilities and the capacity to conduct a "surge of transformative power".<sup>219</sup> I read of dust in relation to Mierle Laderman Ukeles' maintenance art practice, how she ceremonially appropriate cleaning materials from a worker, dusted a museum vitrine, authenticated it as a dust painting—an official maintenance artwork—then presented the dusty cleaning materials to the museum conservator for archiving. To access the realm that art inhabits in the contemporary requires a form of "magical thinking", of believing that things can transmute, that value can shift, that menial labour can transform into an art practice.<sup>220</sup> Maybe some form of "magic" is what's needed to act upon the unworkable.

Of course within institutions, dust is usually considered a bane, "a particular bugbear".<sup>221</sup> Every visitor carries dust into the museum, and efforts to control it are futile, but conservators persist with a variety of techniques to help them work towards the unachievable goal of a dust-free object. In Hartmut Bitonsky's 2007 film *Staub [Dust]*, we meet a conservator removing dust from a painted wooden medieval statue who acknowledges that materially, the pigment itself behaves like a type of dust. She dutifully persists in dipping her cotton swab into artificial saliva and rolling it along the statue's surface while noting that her presence in this environment, and that of museum visitors, is irrevocably integrated into the fibres of the surrounding cultural history. Dust can't be eliminated, just unsettled, but can it also be used for *unsettling* and troubling our default understandings of objects as perceptible things whose matter doesn't cross thresholds?

<sup>216</sup> Zoe Byrne. "Yanomami Death Ritual of Endocannibalism." *Seven Ponds*.

<sup>217</sup> "Dorodango Shining Mud Ball". *Kyoto University of Education*.

218



<sup>219</sup> Steven Connor. "Pulverance." *Cabinet Magazine*.

<sup>220</sup> Elvira Wilk. *Ibid.*

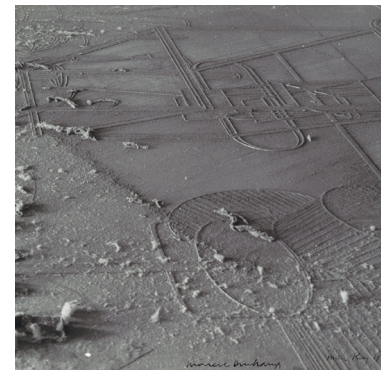
<sup>221</sup> Steven Connor. *Ibid.*

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

I spend some time researching how to collect dust (electrostatic foils are a good way to gather it into more discernable forms) and start to imagine how an exhibition of dust could be. Gathered from unworkable things, it stands in for objects unable to leave the archive. It shouldn't be presented via easy scientific tropes like sample jars and magnifying glasses; it's not a medium of authoritative truths. I think about how to talk about the display with artists, how maybe dust could be absorbed into other materials that invoke its source forms: finally, a transcriptive painting with a purpose. I try to remember connections to art historical references, Duchamp's *Bride*<sup>222</sup> and Man Ray *Breeding*<sup>223</sup>, and then a little googling and the contemporary examples pile up: Catherine Bertola, Robert Filliou and Paul Hazelton using it as a material; Alison Knowles' poem *House of Dust* alluding to recursivity and interchangeability; Roe Rosen conflating fear of dust with xenophobia<sup>224</sup>; Jenny Holzer invoking *ghubar* in recent paintings<sup>225</sup>; a brief sweep of a finger across a vast surface of potential, so to say. And oh, perhaps there's a dust analysis lab somewhere close, and the samples of intermingling particles will write a partial but incomplete history that can form the basis of speculative didactic texts... but how to not speak at people and over the objects, but to let them speak? Nina Katchadourian's audio guides about MOMA's dust<sup>226</sup> could be a model, a soundscape of questions, anecdotes and provocations, but is it possible to usurp the passive listener in this context? Hmm this idea of exhibition eavesdropping

<sup>222</sup> Marcel Duchamp. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. 1915-23. Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels. Man Ray. *Dust Breeding*. 1920. Silver gelatin print.

<sup>223</sup>



<sup>224</sup> Roe Rosen. *The Dust Channel*, 2016. Video installation, 23 mins.

<sup>225</sup> An Arabic term for writing with/in dust.

<sup>226</sup> Nina Katchadourian. *Dust Gathering*, 2017. Audio Guide.



has been hovering with me for a while, a staging of dialogue within the exhibition-as-stage, invigilators casually conversing within earshot of visitors. It could seem forced, and it's very dependent on personalities, ways of being in the world, and confidence, but if done well it's a potential invitation to engage in shared dialogue, or dialogue as disruption. It breaks those ingrained exhibition behaviours that niggle at me, the silence, the solitary staged contemplation, moving at a particular pace that signifies the appropriate level of interest and attention. An exhibition should permit other ways of being. It feels a bit deviant. And it also doesn't fail without additional participation—seeds are planted regardless of if people observe or engage, noise is *made*. Maybe noise is what's needed, and visibility is ejected from the space. And in this way, the exhibition form isn't putting forward fixed ways of understanding, you're in the tremulous dark, and there's a conversational discourse that can meander, backtrack, and drift around multiple positions. It can be confused, provocative, partial and contradictory, mimicking the thinking process. It forges new possibilities for communality, communion and shared knowledge creation...

## 4. The Pyramids Were Not Made to be Opened

This is a curatorial thesis, so I guess I had to speculate about the exhibition form at some point. What possible curatorial approaches to dealing with the unworkable within the exhibition sphere could be enunciated? The previous text was largely unedited and written as an associative and intuitive thought exercise; it was an attempt to wander into exhibition-thinking as automatic writing, acknowledging but unhindered by its tropes and demands. I'm uncomfortable exposing my unresolved thinking, but I'm trying to approach it as a form of thinking through pronouncing. I follow Condorelli in saying an exhibition is "having a public conversation with the world",<sup>227</sup> although I'm usually not so enamoured with having this conversation within the borders of an institutional context.<sup>228</sup> But here, the context perpetuates the condition—the unworkable is bound to the institutional—so it seems the obvious choice. I'm certainly not dismissive of the entire project of exhibition-making, but am reticent to replicate institutional tendencies towards passivity, certainty and irrefutable knowns. In line with Gordon, I seek "a new way of knowing [...], a knowing that is more a listening than a seeing, a practice of being attuned to the echoes and murmurs of that which has been lost but is still present among us in the form of intimations, hints, suggestions and portents".<sup>229</sup> Although rudimentary and unresolved, this exhibition exercise is a beginning that aspires to be more than just imagining through forecasts and projections. It consciously permits thinking without knowing, a suppositional wondering unbound by the usual regulations, limitations, practical concerns, translatability and communication considerations I would usually carry with me during a visioning process. Here, I could mould a transformative approach to institutions and exhibition-making that probably can't or won't be realised. Speculation taken to its extreme is a way of teleporting beyond ideal conditions into a phantasmic sphere.

While this sentiment may seem counterproductive to actually *getting things done* in a context in which limitations and practical concerns are often tantamount to the exhibition

<sup>227</sup> Céline Condorelli. *The Company She Keeps*. Ibid. p. 115.

<sup>228</sup> I get stuck thinking about which public is able to access this making public of things, within which world, and under what conditions...and I don't like white surfaces.

<sup>229</sup> Janice Radway. "Foreword," in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. p. x.

<sup>230</sup> If successful, it will persist as the longest lasting evidence of human civilisation.

<sup>231</sup> I won't pretend to understand this position in relation to its political, diplomatic, economic and environmental implications.

<sup>232</sup> They speculate to commit to a future predicated on some part of our language and communication tools remaining legible enough to convey that nuclear waste is *here*, that it's dangerous and should not be disturbed.

<sup>233</sup> \\_(ツ)\_/

<sup>234</sup> Although as folklore has it, when they were opened, it was unruly knowledges—curses—that were released.

<sup>235</sup> Not naughty, but departing from the norm.

itself, it has been used within governmental spheres to justify the putting into practice of infrastructure untethered from verifiable contexts and conditions. In the 2010 documentary film *Into Eternity*, scientists, legislators, bureaucrats and technicians explain a series of interrelated hypotheses that enabled them to commit to building potentially volatile infrastructure—the Onkalo nuclear storage facility will burrow and secure nuclear waste deep into the earth; its planned lifespan is 100,000 years.<sup>230</sup> To its supporters, it's a shining example of Finnish pragmatism,<sup>231</sup> but it soon becomes clear that speculation was a way of transcending its unknowns; collectively, it was agreed that many doors to questions and doubts simply shouldn't be opened. As well as physical, this infrastructure is institutional—collections of paperwork, workflows, plans, predictions, explanations and decision-making processes. These systems need to be both maintainable and *understandable*<sup>232</sup> for thousands of generations. Interrogated by an off-camera presence, the interviewees squirm and stutter as it becomes apparent that there is no way to ensure collective accountability for maintaining and encountering in perpetuity infrastructure; as one interviewee wryly notes,<sup>233</sup> “the pyramids were not made to be opened”.<sup>234</sup> Additionally, each generation is to decide what archiving and communication methods fit their needs, and they're responsible only for their moment of history. The unknowns of this future are staggering and incomprehensible, but through speculation, it seems possible for some ineffable truths to be spoken. Or perhaps, that they won't be present to take responsibility if these truths becoming untrue means it's easy to rationalise the risks as worth taking, a way of justifying recklessness and couching it in terms of hopeful experimentation. I wonder how these decision-makers sleep.

Perhaps speculation can be liberating, something to do when things seem hopeless, a wilful imagining out of a present-day bind. Which is not to say it's a way of escaping reality, but more a way to work in tandem with a deviant<sup>235</sup> form of bureaucracy to create a system of interrelated claims that are harder to disprove when taken collectively rather than individually. It's a layering of incantations that can make doubts disappear and grind institutional guiding systems to a halt. It can momentarily distract from the stubborn realities, the impossibilities and the disappointments of this moment of greeting a difficult, paralysed and rigid situation

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

in which the unworkable nests. It's not the sole response, but in an exhausted institutional context faced with "a past that won't pass",<sup>236</sup> it's something to do in solidarity, to mix-up momentum and attune the ear to less audible calls. Here, finding ways to work in tandem—*para-* to<sup>237</sup>—enables the simultaneous occupying of two positions, rubbing up beside something, bearing its weight in a gesture of support. With speculation, this could be a seizing of *paranormal* lenses to momentarily gaze anew at institutional logics—those unruly, devalidated, unstable, deviant and undisciplined knowledges that emerge from what has been excluded, quashed and silenced by modernity.

<sup>236</sup> Cristelle Terroni. Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> *Para* is also a term for object-workers used by Kati Koppala in a text about traditional Finnish healing magic. To make a *para* is to "do something about it"—incanting the object is believed to address anxiety and solicit good fortune—most commonly to improve caches of milk and butter (p 67-70).

## 5 Conjuring the Curatorial

For months I haven't worked directly with a collection, but have contemplated and conjured many through testimonies and conversation. I have steered dialogue towards stuff long-ignored for reasons which may be as innocuous as a lack of time, or as insidious as the purposeful obfuscation of things that challenge the status quo; act as evidence of wrongdoing; or signify uncomfortable and unaddressed histories. I have tried to understand the implications and the thinking behind wounds wrought by collection logics and festering within sick institutions. I look for the gaps between idealised outcomes and the lived consequences of how these logics are interpreted, and point to the potentiality of embracing deviant, defective and irreverent approaches. I note that the nuances of accumulation, storing and preservation strategies often mimic compulsions and fixations deemed pathological in human behaviour, but intuit that what some want to diagnose as pathology is for others a form of knowing that no longer fits<sup>238</sup> into understandings certified by dominant western and modern thought.

238



To this end, I have pursued the unfamiliar lenses of animism, objectum-sexual ciphers and archival dust in an attempt to pinpoint fertile conduits for the challenge of exhibiting (things, conditions) without showing them, a self-defined conceit of exhibition-based speculation. Reflecting again, this conceit now seems tenuous, or perhaps beside the point, in ways I will soon signal. Sheltering this thinking and developing concurrently is an articulation of a curatorial practice that privileges slowing down; ponders how to press forms of caring and support up against sickness and hereditary syndromes; and considers critically what contingencies could emerge from the company we choose to keep.

This company is not just who we work with, but who we spend time with through our forms of address. Here, I sense a shift in the parameters of my audience, from an every-person public to institutional personnel themselves. The fieldwork we collectively undertake cannot be mediated through classical methods of display, but is inextricably linked to a call for caring within the collection store. I browse

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

through prefixes: de- invokes removal, reversal, a departure; un- stands in for “not”, a reversal and removal with a certain intensity; re- a repetitive “again”, a withdrawal or backward motion, a return to a previous condition. I decide that my unworkable objects form an un-collection of sorts—things that have been gathered together under the refusal of intent, stubbornly unacknowledged—that perhaps best fit into a non-exhibition which rethinks foundations of engagement, and displays depth not breadth. Within this context, acts of care and support can be reframed as forms of “sympathetic magic” that translate “hauntings, ghosts and gaps, seething absences, and muted presences”<sup>239</sup> into understandable forms.

Seeking ghost seers<sup>240</sup> and “companions in thought”,<sup>241</sup> I turn to Avery F Gordon. Her work has been lingering, quite aptly, like a ghost around my research, but only recently have I become entranced by her *Ghostly Matters*.<sup>242</sup> My instinct is that conversing with her ideas will help me to undertake a spectral wandering towards a conclusion of sorts: a concession to the requirements of the thesis form, but certainly not a signal to stop considering what urgencies should be addressed within exhibitions and institutions.

My research has indicated that while many things are rendered unworkable because they can't surface from drowning in institutional logics, it is not, as I'd hoped, simply a problem to be solved by demarcating its parametres and applying a one-size-fits-all framework; nor a question of amending, rewriting or loosening interpretations; nor a case of writing regulations and guidelines anew. That is not to say these aspects shouldn't be an ongoing consideration when enacting the work of the institution—a large part of this thesis is an attempt to no longer avoid this conundrum, to acknowledge it, and to consider what forms of address it calls out for.

However I've come to understand there is a more difficult conversation at hand, and its being made public—its aparatitions solidifying, its tremors reverberating, its force felt like a gale not a breeze—could foster changes that would arguably catalyse the liberation of objects from collection stores to not just be seen, but to act as tools, ciphers and agents with which to rewrite institutional understandings anew. To begin this conversation is to ask what assumptions (Western) institutions should make in order to speculate

<sup>239</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* pp 20-21.

<sup>240</sup>



<sup>241</sup> Janice Radway. *Ibid.* p xi.

<sup>242</sup> Tfw, in the final weeks of a research project, you find the 🙌🙌 text that helps “to articulate what were initially stammering and inchoate suspicions and disappointments” (194). Gordon's three case studies are close readings of texts I haven't read, so I have limited myself to the foreword, first and fifth chapters of *Ghostly Matters*.

about approaching a future in which their dominance will no longer continue *in perpetuity*. In doing so, it is necessary to question which knowledges—which ways of encountering the worlds they have wrought, which frames and forms of inquiry and making public—should be employed in this approach, and how this museum can be addressed through the exhibition form.

Troublingly, it is more often framed as “an answer than a question” that “dominance and resistance are basic and intertwined facts of modernity”<sup>243</sup> and its colonial legacies, so in explicating this, it is essential that our intonation remains one of inquiry. Critical discourses need to acknowledge that “the power relations that characterise any historically embedded society are never as transparently clear as the names we give them imply”,<sup>244</sup> and that naming often truncates discourse through dismissal or silencing. Instead, seeking a responsive, questioning and speculative exhibition language that works in kinship with modernity’s fluctuating after-effects—“displacement, projection, denial, rationalisation, and wishing”,<sup>245</sup> is the task of a curatorial practice seeking to do more than precipitate action, but to effectuate that “the very tangled way people sense, intuit and experience the complexities of modern power and personhood has everything to do with the character of power itself and with what is needed to eradicate the injurious and dehumanising conditions of modern life”.<sup>246</sup> It is perhaps simplistic to claim that power can be renegotiated through redefining how knowledge and knowing is understood, but I instinctively feel like this is a step in the right direction—an alternative to power is found in the dynamics themselves.<sup>247</sup>

I wonder if animist perspectives could be employed to remove the notion that characteristics of life are innately human characteristics, a way of re-understanding the idea of a dehumanising context as one in which many things have a role to play. Can we then think of a museum that no longer produces power but vulnerability through hushing its classical authorial voice, and asking that it searches for new languages with which to speak to us?

In the collection store, suppressed ghosts are writhing, mouths agape. How to amplify, translate and act upon their inaudible howls? How to utter a language of haunting?<sup>248</sup> To search through storerooms, archiving systems, dusty corners and forgotten boxes is to seek “the evidence of things not seen [...] that paradoxical archive of stammering memory

<sup>243</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p 193.

<sup>244</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p 3.

<sup>245</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p 196.

<sup>246</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p 194.

<sup>247</sup> I think back to Fressie in *Creat*, and the act of bringing devaluated knowledges into the exhibition space seemed fruitful, however the exhibition outcome seemed to mimic too closely classical institutional power structures in that they displayed and dictated a fixed way to understand.

<sup>248</sup> Which, “unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done”. Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p xvi.

### C. UNDISCIPLINED KNOWLEDGES AS SUTURING TREATMENTS

and witnessing lost souls”,<sup>249</sup> the stuff that haunts, lingering incognito in our consciousness. Gordon invokes haunting as a way to acknowledge when “the trouble [ghosts] represent and symptomise is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view [...] and what’s being concealed is very much alive and present”.<sup>250</sup> If we understand our collections as haunted, then exhibitionary haunting is a way to mediate the disjunctures that link “an institution and an individual, a social structure and a subject, and history and biography”, and their “articulation[s] in everyday life and thought”.<sup>251</sup> Haunting is usually associated with fear, so the task of the uncomfortable institution is to find a method that is not violent and wounding (an exorcism) but instead renders the ghosts friendly enough to work with. How then to ascertain what methods, positions, tactics, and techniques can be used in support of approaching haunting, that could be rendered usable within curatorial practices today? How to speak with ghosts?

In a moment of distraction I revisit a text about hungry ghosts,<sup>252</sup> and while its momentum is in the direction of addressing problematic and racist curatorial collaborations, it takes seriously the idea of ghostly communication. Automatic writing is coincidentally one approach, like entering a dream while awake. I’m also reminded of Dodie Bellamy’s writing about orphic poetry<sup>253</sup> as a form that implies “an openness to listening, to what speaks through you. She notes that the point is to greet rather than capture and contain”;<sup>254</sup> meaning can’t be forced from this process, and it can’t be understood as something that can be revealed, grasped, or penetrated, but the task is to find ways to let it speak on its own terms. It’s a process of support that acknowledges then invites the proclamation of a call.

Then the character of ghostwriter<sup>255</sup> manifests<sup>256</sup> when I’m searching for images of scrying,<sup>257</sup> and I’m back compacting spherical mud, a *dorodangic* meditation of willing something to appear within its mirrored surface. Gordon writes of looking for a “language for identifying hauntings and for writing with the ghosts that any haunting inevitably throws up”<sup>258</sup> and I’m reminded of a recent gift to my brother’s children, pens for writing ‘invisibly’. Their markings are a becoming, only evident when touched with flames or illuminated with black light, ghost-calligraphy for ghostly utterances straining to come to light.

<sup>249</sup> Avery F Gordon. Ibid. p 195.

<sup>250</sup> Avery F Gordon. Ibid. xvi.

<sup>251</sup> Avery F Gordon. Ibid. p 19.

<sup>252</sup> Su-Ying Lee. “Ghost: How I Learned About White Feminism.” *Dilettante Army*.

<sup>253</sup> She practices object-speaking with a dress in an attempt to convene with her deceased friend.

<sup>254</sup> Dodie Bellamy. “Digging Through Kathy Acker’s Stuff.” *Literary Hub*.

<sup>255</sup> Eric Grundhauser. “Everything You’ve Ever Wanted to Know About Ghostwriter.” *Atlas Obscura*.

<sup>256</sup>



<sup>257</sup>



<sup>258</sup> Avery F Gordon. Ibid. p 7.



<sup>259</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p 8.

<sup>260</sup> Avery F Gordon. *Ibid.* p 12.

<sup>261</sup> Céilne Condorelli. *Support Structures*. *Ibid.* p 11.

I step again into the speculative exhibition space of dust and darkness, invoking its pressing blackness, neck hairs prickling in response to sounds transmogrifying, invisible evidence of “a seething presence”.<sup>259</sup> I seize these tools here, and they join the others I’ve discovered along the way. I open wounds to see ghost-bones, in preparation to practice a way of writing and welcoming anew “the ensemble of cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence”<sup>260</sup> into a sphere of “transformative recognition”. Here they are rendered spectral, sutured by a curatorial approach haunted with “critical collaborative positionings; equalising processes; collection action; re-inventions of models of articulation, organisation and display; actively politicised subjects; re-appropriation of labour processes; re-evaluated means over ends and... supportive subjects”.<sup>261</sup>





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# Footnote

## Image Credits

- 02** Pierre Huyghe. Installation view, Skulptur Project Münster, 2017. Image courtesy of Bertus Pieters.
- 28** Surgical Suture Commonly Used Techniques. Image courtesy of *RNpedia.com*.
- 30** Wile E Coyote. Image courtesy of Warner Brothers by way of *The Fiscal Times*.
- 34** Pick Up Sticks. Image courtesy of Marbles the Brain Store.
- 35** Collection Database. Image courtesy of Gemma Weston.
- 43** Database Categories. Image courtesy of Gemma Weston.
- 48** Aby Warburg Collection. Image courtesy of Katie Lenanton.
- 75** In Support of Growth. Image courtesy of Katie Lenanton.
- 76** In Support of Wood. Image courtesy of Katie Lenanton.
- 77** Medical Student's Suturing Sampler. Image courtesy of Øystein Horgmo.
- 91** Sisyphus. Image courtesy of Max Aristov.
- 145** SAI 0015 from Salvage Art Institute archives. Image courtesy of Salvage Art Institute.
- 148** Senior conservation scientist Narayan Khandekar demonstrates how a perfectly aligned compensation image is projected onto Rothko's faded murals to restore them to their original colors. Image courtesy of Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and Peter Vanderwarker, President and Fellows of Harvard College.
- 151** Fred Wilson, *Metalwork 1793-1880*. 1992-3. Installation view. Image courtesy of Elisabeth Ginsberg.
- 166** Vaikea. Image courtesy of *Peda.net*.
- 196** Beryl. Image courtesy of Crystal Classics.
- 203** Object Love. Image courtesy of *The New Yorker* and Sam Gross.
- 218** Dorodango. Image courtesy of Bruce Gardener and *Resobox.com*.
- 223** Man Ray. Dust Breeding. 1920. Silver gelatin print. Image courtesy of Barbara Fässler.
- 238** Moving Ghosts. Image courtesy of Charles M Schultz.
- 240** Surface Ghosts. Image courtesy of Amy Sedaris.
- 256** Ghostwriter. Image courtesy of DVDtalk.com
- 257** Scrying. Image courtesy of *Spookyisles.com*.

# Image Appendix

43 Database Categories, expanded. Image courtesy of Gemma Weston.



10 COPIES. Printed on Munken Polar 150g by Copy-Set Oy.  
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Thoughts, feedback and  
conversation beginnings to [katie.lenanton@gmail.com](mailto:katie.lenanton@gmail.com)



Sick institutions that privilege 'in perpetuity' thinking as authoritative also produce largely unacknowledged residue—'unworkable' objects. *Suturing Collection Wounds* employs curiosity, reflection and speculation in an attempt to rupture and transform collection logics. It re-understands museological fieldwork as a treatment to be enacted slowly, in support, and in care, and wonders how to enunciate more sustainable collecting, working and exhibitionary practices. Unruly, devalidated, unstable, deviant and undisciplined knowledges are proffered as unfamiliar lenses through which to gaze and commune with unworkable matter, dissipating borders and making muddy dominant ways of knowing. They also prompt a critical consideration of what contingencies could emerge from the company we choose to keep. The demand of this research is thus to negotiate and transmute the default ontologies and gestures permissible when 'making things public' within the museum institution.