OBJECT: TBD A Reflective Essay on the Nature of the yet-to-be-decided Object in Exhibition Design

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Abstract: In the year 2018 the Field Museum in Chicago, in response to the contemporary demands of inclusivity and decolonization, declared that it will redesign its Native American Hall. The developers and curators, in collaboration with Native American communities and curators from Chicago and elsewhere, came up with a list of 6 'truths' about the community. By basing the show on these truths, the aim was to create a plan for an exhibition that can re-educate the public and dispel stereotypes associated with Native Americans. Within the abstract space of the exhibition plan many spots were labeled OBJECT: TBD (to-be-decided), which, in the final show, would be occupied by objects which hadn't been finalized yet. This essay is an endeavor to bring out the attributes of this "would be" category (referred to as OBJECT: TBD) that the yet-to-be- decided objects reside in.

Introduction

Established during the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the Field Museum in Chicago houses one of the better-known collections of Anthropology and Natural Sciences. Past the massive staircase and security checkpoint, its gaping hall invites the public to observe in awe the recreations of fossilized dinosaurs, elephants, and archaeological artifacts. Arches that rise to the ceiling and barricade the hall on both sides hide in their thickness galleries that bleed meaning into objects. Nested in their cool darkness are the academic, managerial, and creative departments which, although often operating as individual cells with internal systems, come together to run the engine of the Museum. Multiple elevators and countless puzzling staircases rise up to the loft of Exhibition Design where, in a tiny cabin, I spent most of my time as an independent research intern. Besides exploring the various exhibitions on display, reading books on the design process, and occasional siestas, my days involved observing inter and intra departmental meetings that discussed the museum's endeavor to redesign its Native American Hall. Since the initial opening of the Hall in the 1950s, its content and display have remained largely unchanged. The objects in this collection have also had a very controversial history. As the museum's repatriation portal notes, many of the items in its possession were unethically acquired if not directly looted (n.d. Field Museum). Responding to contemporary discourses on inclusivity and decolonization, and, in the process, to validate its own existence and that of its collection, the museum decided to alter the Hall[1]. This strategy of the museum to respond to critique on its collection is not particularly new; in the past, it has re-presented its bronze sculptures from the Races of Mankind exhibit of 1933 to either avoid or indulge in conversations around its own racist history (Macdonald 1998:46-66). In the case of the future Native American Hall, this reconfiguration will be facilitated by a shift from an object-based display to a context-based one. In the weekly team meetings to discuss the progress of the development process, this move was quite evident.

The developers, in collaboration with Native American communities and curators from Chicago and elsewhere, had come up with a list of **Six 'truths'** about the community. In the meetings, these truths were described as follows: Our ancestors connect us to past, present, and the future; native people are everywhere; we are deeply connected to the places we come from; we have the right to govern ourselves; should the Field Museum house the works of our ancestors; when we don't speak for ourselves, there are consequences for our communities. By organizing the objects around these truths, the aim was to create a plan for an exhibition that can re-educate the public and dispel stereotypes associated with Native Americans (some of the objects which were considered for the show were jewelry items, native flags, the currency of native nations, models of sacred turtle shells, etc.). In their essay Introduction: Museums and the Educational Turn: History, Memory, Inclusivity, Anderman, and Simine note the educational focus in new museum practices. They say that in "responding to feminist, postcolonial and memorialistic critiques, museums

have over the past decades radically revised their protocols of collecting and display, aiming to register in their own curatorial and pedagogical practice the open and contested nature of the historical and ethnographic narratives on which their object lessons had traditionally conferred the status of hard evidence." They say that this new emphasis on the museum encounter, referred to as the educational shift, has resulted in a new type of "inclusive museum" (Andermann & Simine 2012:1) In the case of the Field Museum, this turn is evident in the organization of the exhibition around the previously mentioned "truths."

In the wall and floor plans for the show that were presented in the team meetings, many boxes were left empty and were labeled as OBJECT: TBD (to be decided), signaling the future occupation of these spots by yet-to-be-decided objects. Within the abstract space of the exhibition plan, these "objects" were points that "would" complete the story of a specific segment. These placeholders for objects, resulting from the educational turn in museum practices, are the primary focus of this paper. Through interviews with developers of the show, observation of the development process, and a study of decolonial literature, museum theory, and philosophical discussions on the nature of objects, I will try to bring out the attributes of the "would be" category (that I call OBJECT: TBD) that the yet-to-be-decided objects reside in. Instead of emphasizing the materially present objects in realized exhibitions, I will focus on the placeholder category Object: TBD that is used to signal the future presence of a currently undecided/unmaterialized object. By observing the development process in its early stages, I hope to express how the production of a definition of the concept of Object is an active process that is historically contingent. By the end of my paper, I wish for it to become clear how the curatorial and development processes of exhibitions impact the nature of the objects that are included in the show. Hopefully, my work can contribute to the diverse range of literature trying to find ways to decolonize museums and other cultural institutions actively.

Before I dive into the body of this paper, I want to acknowledge several things. First, I am an artist, and my views are influenced by the education I have received at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in addition to the work experience I have had at the Field Museum. Additionally, my work has been significantly impacted by the ongoing Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19), which forced me to leave the US and continue my project from India. I also want to make it clear that I am neither a member of nor an expert on any Native American community. However, I do belong to a community that has similarly suffered at the hands of the European colonizers. Although I can never speak for Native Americans, I can sympathize with many issues that this community has faced. Nonetheless, I have taken care not to overstep my boundaries and discuss sensitive issues that I don't have the authority to speak on. I must also acknowledge that this study was conducted in the very early stages of the Field Museum's reconfiguration project when most things had not been realized; at that point, primarily the larger frame for the show was being determined. Additionally, I was a temporary intern with a non-participatory role. My attendance in team meetings was as an observer and I did not contribute in any way to the development or design of the exhibit.

From Object to objects.

I

Object is a broad category. Almost anything can be included in it. However, none of the things included in it can describe in totality what "Object" is. Nonetheless, each thing included will be an object and will speak to that totality. Thus, each specific object can only hint at a particular (limited) attribute of the "Object"[2]. In a way, specific objects are like fragments of buildings. A building has many parts- walls, stairs, floors, etc.- which form its entire structure. Although these parts are never the complete building, they always make reference to its totality. Thus, a fragment (and the specific object) always refers to the whole while simultaneously failing to be it[3].

While the building metaphor clarifies the relationship between the "Object" and the specific objects, it is still insufficient as it pairs together entities that are not congruent. A building provides experience both in its totality and its fragments (you can touch and see both). The category Object, however, can only be understood through its parts as it can never be seen or felt. Thus, to understand the "Object", or in our case, the yet-to-be-decided Object category (Object: TBD), we must look at its constituent parts, or the specific objects. However, even the specific objects in our case aren't material because they haven't been decided yet. Instead, we have access to the qualities that they will have as the design process sets up criteria for the specific objects to be included[4]. For example, the museum wishes to include video games in the show. Even though we don't know the specific game that will be included, we do know

that there will be a video game. Thus, to understand the nature of the Object: TBD category, I will take these criteria as the defining characteristics of our specific objects.

II

In modern history, popular definitions have often associated museums of anthropology and ethnography with death. They have been described as grave-yards, catacombs, mausoleums, etc. In the paper, The Rites of Things, the author, Gosewijn van Beek quotes the following statement from Hainard and Kaehar: "prestigious places for locking things up, museums give value to things outside life: in this way they resemble cemeteries" (Beek 1990:27). Those who occupy these "cemeteries" tend to be from some communities more than others. Out of the widespread belief in the colonial era that native nations were dying, many cultural objects of Native Americans were looted and stored in museums. The myth of the "Vanishing Indian" pushed anthropologists to "record as many of the old ways as possible before the last instance or even last memory of them disappeared completely" (Weaver 1997:14). However, such beliefs do not reflect contemporary realities as many native communities exist today.

Jenkins, in From Objects of Enlightenment to Objects of Apology, says that the term 'repatriation' was initially used in connection with fines exacted among states, and it now refers to "a broader project of making amends towards communities and individuals, as part of what the sociologists Jeffrey Olick and Brenda Coughlin characterize as 'the politics of regret'." She says that the "inclination to repatriate objects, or grant a sympathetic ear to the possibility, comes from within museums and the academy, either because its members proactively attempt to solicit repatriation requests, or because they are unable to argue firmly a defence for retention when they receive them, effectively advertizing for repatriation claims" (Jenkins 2018:82-84) Since many objects in its collection, as pointed out by the Museum's website, were unethically acquired, it can be deduced that such repatriation demands would have been heard at the Field Museum as well. However, the legalities and time involved in NAGPRA and non-NAGPRA repatriations probably mean that many objects will continue to stay in the Museum's possession for a while or until the appropriate people/groups are identified for these acquisitions[5] (n.d. Field Museum). Thus, to respond to decolonization's cultural demands, and to maintain a morally high ground, the museum must respond in some symbolically apologetic way[6]. In order to do this, the museum needs to make a shift from being a "cemetery" and storehouse of objects to what Anderman and Simine describe as an inclusive (educational) museum (Andermann & Simine 2012:1). In the case of the Native American Hall, this happens by moving from an object-centered exhibition to what Alvaro Amat, the Director of Exhibition Design, describes as a Context-based one (PC, Amat, February 17, 2020).

In a personal conversation, Mr. Amat had described to me two main kinds of exhibitions: Collection-Based Exhibitions (these have objects in a collection as their starting point, and the overall narrative of the show is put together afterward) and Context-based Exhibitions (these have conversations in culture as the main inspiration for putting together a collection of objects). In the latter, the focus is no longer the specific object; instead, it has a narrative as its central element. Here fewer objects are used as they are interwoven with texts, and they no longer need to do all the work. Their autonomy is sacrificed for a bigger story[7] (in the exhibition, the objects, as discussed previously, will be organized around the six "truths") (PC, Amat, February 17, 2020). In my conversations at the museum, the developers expressed that objects were not central to the show. They even went ahead and commented that they "don't want stuff" in it[8]. The lesser value given to the possession and display of objects is also reflected in their reduced number in the show. Mr. Amat estimated around 120 in comparison to the thousands in the previous exhibit (Amat).

Within an exhibition that interposes them with text, objects become points in a big nexus of ideas. In essence, they become **conceptual**[9]. Each object becomes an idea that represents a specific object. For example, in Joseph Kosuth's One and Three Chairs (Figure 1), an actual chair is just as much of a representation of a chair as is a definition or photograph of it. What is of prominence is the idea of a chair (n.d. The Museum of Modern Art). Similarly, what is important for the show is the idea that the objects reflect, and not the actual things. Additionally, if we imagine the exhibition as a paragraph, the different segments of it become sentences. Within these, the individual objects become words: alone, they represent something limited, but in a sentence or a paragraph they help express a bigger story than their individual contents.

Now that we've established that our Object: TBD is conceptual (a. because it is a category and b. because the specific objects in it are conceptual), we can also claim that it is **replaceable**. An object in the show can be replaced

by anything that holds the capacity to speak the truth of that specific segment. Once again, the idea is important and not the thing itself: a chair is as good as any other chair to describe what a chair is. The label TBD also elucidates this- it is yet to be decided what object will be used in a segment. Thus, an object that might "fit" better, or can be accessed more easily, can be put in place of another. Further expressed by the fact that the exhibition is rotational, objects can be replaced when the need arises (n.d. Field Museum).

The presence of an object in an exhibition space with other things and ideas also makes it **interactive**. It actively contributes to the meanings we ascribe to other objects and to the show at large. Simultaneously, its own interpretation is determined by the other objects around it, the theme of the show, and the meanings we bring to it. Even the Object: TBD label, which exists in the exhibition plan, interacts with the other images and content around it that influence what specific object will take its place. In a way, the specific object functions like Hans Haacke's Condensation Cube (Figure 2), which depends on elements around it to achieve its actuality. While talking about the plexiglass cube, which responds to changes in light and temperature by either condensing or evaporating water inside it, Haacke makes the following statement:

"The range of outside factors influencing it, as well as its own radius of action, reach beyond the space it materially occupies. It thus merges with the environment in a relationship that is better understood as a system of interdependent processes- transfers of energy, matter or information- evolve without the viewer's empathy… a system is not imagined, it is real". (Tierney 2007:56).

Figure 1. Kosuth, Joseph. 1965. Wood folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of "chair". (n.d. Museum of Modern Art).

Here, Haacke recognizes that an object that responds to its surroundings exists in an interactive system. While he also claims that a thing that responds to its environment doesn't stay an object anymore, we can still argue that it does (Tierney 2007:56). It seems, based on his preoccupation with physical interactions, an object for him is primarily a physical entity. However, an object also holds the capacity to interact socially. This is exemplified in the media interactives that the developers plan on including in the show[10]. While discussing the nature of interactive media in exhibitions, the editor of Politics of Display, Sharon Macdonald, writes, "Both human and machine act as sources and receivers of information thereby functioning as part of an interacting system" (Macdonald 1998:85). By following the statements of both Haacke and Sharon we can claim that an object in an exhibition is not restricted to its physical confines, for it also interacts in a social space.

Since interaction, in the case of existing objects, involves experience, it unfolds in time- it happens in a moment in the present. But what about the specific object that hasn't been experienced yet and hasn't even been put in the plan? Where does that exist temporally? Specifically, what is the temporal location of Object: TBD? I would argue that it is located in the **future**. In Making Time: Temporality, History, and the Cultural Object, Georgina Born talks about Husserl's model of time (which according to him has been drawn on by Gell and Munn as well) in which

"past and future are continually altering in cognitive time as they are apprehended from changing present." Central to his model are retentions (memories or traces of the past) and protentions (projections or anticipations). The author says that the past is experienced through retentions of previous events, just as the future is experienced through projections of possibilities (Born 2015:368). In our case, the materialization of Object: TBD is based on projections and anticipations that are made in the present. There are various conditions that *project* what that object will be (for example, it is projected that there will be interactive video games in the show), placing the realization of the Object category (TBD) in the future. Further, the label *TBD* signals the future occupation of a spot by a yet-to-be-decided object. Even the existence of the Object Category in an exhibition *plan* suggests that something needs to happen that hasn't occurred yet, signaling a future- a future exhibition. In On Futures: Multi-modal Reflections on Studying the Anthropology of the Future, the authors describe the future as impinging upon the present, "shaping its material, social and affective contours" (Silke et al. 2020: 127). They point out the connection that the present enjoys with the future and claim that the future is a "transitory object, one that we [are] constantly moving towards but which [is] difficult to interrogate." Through the study of three books[11], the authors concluded that "the future is evident in the present and [it] impacts the everyday" (Silke et al.). For the Native American hall, this future is evident in the realized/ materialized objects in the present (or the present that will happen when the show is put together) as they are informed by the conditions that the Object: TBD category, which embodies that future, sets up.
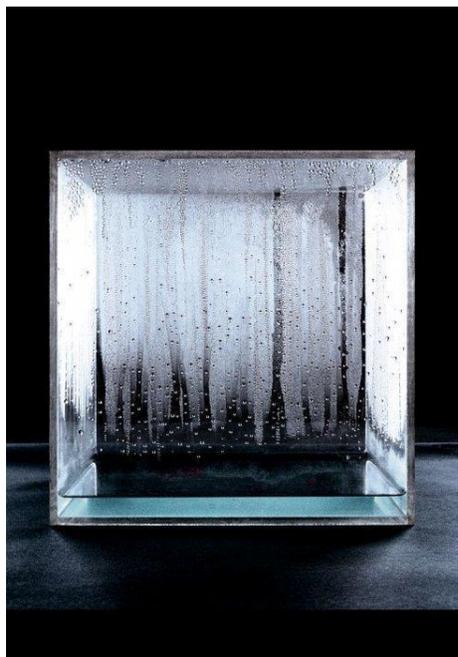
Figure 2. Haacke, Hans. 1965. Plexiglass and water, 76cm x 76cm x 76 cm. (n.d. Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art).

It is this capacity of the Object: TBD to embody a future that also makes it **political.** The presence of multiple parties and their claims in the present determines what specific objects will be put in the Object: TBD's place and how. In an attempt to represent diverse voices, the institution brought together both Native and non-Native members to help actualize its project. An article on the museum's website notes that on its team is an advisor from the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, the tribe on whose land the Field Museum stands, and a representative from the Chicago American Indian Community Collaborative. This group brings together most of the Native American organizations in the Chicago region (Wali et al. 2018). Along with them, there are also Native curators, developers, and engagement coordinators on the team. While it might be naïve to assume that a Native/ non-Native divide in the development process would cause strife, especially since the museum has advertised giving expression to native voices as its primary goal, a previous incident narrated to me by Mr. Amat might indicate otherwise. According to him, a Native American musician had requested to play a flute in the Museum's collection for an event. His argument was simple- the flute was alive if it was used. This was, however, countered by anthropologists and conservators who felt that the act could damage the object (PC, Amat, February 17, 2020). A conflict arose in this situation as two differing definitions of Object faced each other. The conservators saw the object as a defined, autonomous entity with walls that contain its entirety. A collapse of its autonomy for them would mean the destruction of its objecthood- even a symbolic act of breaking its walls could compromise its existence[12]. This view, which is rooted in a colonial past, holds that the essence of a culture is housed within the confines of an object, and to preserve the culture, the object must be protected (hence, as noted previously by Weaver, the rush to collect objects in the colonial era). For the Native performer, however, culture exists in the interaction. The object comes "alive" when the presumed walls between itself and the actor are breached[13]. The presence of such opposing opinions makes the development process a contentious one where different parties make claims to the same object. In the Wiley- Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements, contributor Lasse Lindekilde describes claims-making as follows: "Claims-making refers to the process of performing or articulating claims that bear on someone else's interests. In its simplest form an instance of claims-making includes two actors- a subject (claimant) and an object (addressee) – and a verbal or physical action (demanding, protesting, criticizing, blaming, etc.)" (Lindekilde 2013:1). This claims-making is at the heart of what Tilly and Tarrow describe as 'contentious politics'. They say, in Contentious Politics, that "[i]n the simplest version of contention, one party makes a claim on

another. The parties are often persons, but one or the other can also be a group or even an institution…In the elementary version, we can think of one party as a subject (the maker of a claim) and the other as an object (the receiver of a claim)." He further adds that "[c]ontention always brings together subjects, objects, and claims" (Tilly & Tarrow 2015:8).

If the inclusion of objects causes such strife, why does the museum choose to display them? What leads to the desire in the first place to even have objects in the show? If we follow Nelia Dias' view, this desire can seem to emerge from the object's capacity to speak the "truth". In the chapter titled The Visibility of Differences, from Macdonald's Politics of Display, Dias, the author, expresses how "truth" historically became associated with museum displays and anthropology. She discusses the obsession of nineteenth-century French Anthropologists with facts, and distinguishing facts from interpretations (objective from the subjective). She says that these anthropologists repeatedly expressed their distrust of theory. The author quotes Paul Toninard (an anthropologist from the 1800s) commenting on his master Broca: "Repudiating all theory, relying completely on work, he patiently amassed numbers, let them speak for themselves and made craniometry a mathematical science." According to Dias, if facts were regarded as objective, they must not be contested. The main points of disagreement, she says, were on interpretations of facts and not facts themselves. "'Interpretation' was regarded as separate from facts themselves, which were regarded as not properly disputable." The author further adds:

> As anthropological facts were seen as 'objective realities', the way was open for their display and exhibition. Exposing facts to the scrutiny of a community of scholars, and to the general public, provided anthropologists with a means of demonstrating the objective status of their knowledge and moreover, doing so in a public arena in which it could be seen to be openly available for inspection and verification…Displayed artifacts were thus subject to witnessing, and this endowed them with 'truth' and the capacity to serve as instruments of knowledge (Dias 1998:34-35).

Additionally, Macdonald, in her introduction, recognizes that museums were a "means of casting newly realized nations, and cultural, racial and class differences as facts". Per her, they were effective in doing so as "they not only provided a picture, but also objects and other tangible evidence" (Macdonald 1998:9-11). Thus, in an exhibition space, objects become indispensable as they prove the museum's statements as valid. Even the "truths" become truer as they have "evidence" to back them in the form of objects.

However, isn't the exhibition in our discussion a context-based one? Weren't the objects less important? It seems to me that this exhibition, once realized, would reinforce the centrality of objects to the museum-going experience. While trying to provide a formal, simple, definition of context, Goodwin and Duranti make the following statement: "The context is...a frame (Goffman 1947) that surrounds the event being examined and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation." They further add that the notion of context "involves a fundamental juxtaposition of two entities: (1) a focal event; and (2) a field of action within which that event is embedded." The author describes a focal event as the phenomenon that is contextualized (Goodwin & Duranti 1992:3). As we can see, such definitions reinforce the binary of object/ context, and place the object once again at the center.

Concluding thoughts

From the above discussion, we can note that the decisions made by museums like the Field to change their existing exhibitions and to develop new shows are historically contingent and respond to the larger socio-political climate of decolonization. In the case of the Native American Hall, by shifting from an object-centered exhibition, which prioritizes the autonomy of individual objects, to a context-based one, a new category of Object emerges, that is, Object: TBD (to be decided), a placeholder in the exhibition plan for objects that have not been decided/ materialized. By focusing on the conditions that were considered for the items that need to be included in the show, we can deduce five attributes of this placeholder category: it is conceptual, replaceable, interactive, present in the future, and political. The conceptual nature of the category, lending to its interaction with text in the show, means that it operates primarily as an idea (Cray 2014:235-245). The specific object's individual existence doesn't matter as much in the show as each can be replaced by any other that exemplifies the intended idea. The proposition that the Native American Hall will have rotational displays also indicates that Object: TBD is replaceable (n.d. Field Museum). Additionally, the existence of the specific object in a show with other objects also makes it interactive as it responds to their meanings and to the meanings the viewers bring to the space. Even the placeholder Object: TBD in the

exhibition plan is interactive as its realization is based on the meanings that objects/ texts around it offer to it. This interactivity is also embodied in the characteristics required of the specific objects, some of which will be actual interactable displays like video games. While the specific objects involve experiences that unfold in the present time, the placeholder category, Object: TBD, resides in the future. Since it hasn't been actualized, and because its realization is based on anticipations, it embodies a yet to be realized future (Born 2015:368). The presence of multiple claims in the present, which decide how it will be materialized in the future, also makes Object: TBD contentious and political (Tilly & Tarrow 2015:8).

This placeholder Object category and its attributes emerge in the condition of collaboration that the museum has set up to actualize its desires for a redesigned Native American Hall. The 'truths' about Native communities, around which the show is being organized, are also a result of this collaborative effort (PC, Amat, February 17, 2020). However, it is yet to be seen how effective this endeavor will really be. To what extent will the opportunity to choose the objects in the exhibition contribute to the outcome? More importantly, is an exhibition sufficient in undoing the wrongs unleashed by museums upon Native American communities for centuries? Or is it just an easier way to avoid actions around more pressing issues like repatriation and making material amends? The answers to these questions will be answered when the Native American Hall reopens.

Endnotes

1. Andermann and Simine point out that in the climate of feminist, post-colonial and memorialistic critiques, museums over the past decades have taken an "educational turn" and are moving towards being inclusive institutions. This idea is discussed in depth later-on in the essay (Andermann & Simine:1).

2. Here, the Object Category is understood as a Formal Ontological Concept. In the essay, Is Object Concept Formal? Roberto Casati distinguishes between Sortal, Mass, and Formal Concepts. While quoting Strawson, he says that a Sortal concept supplies "a principle for distinguishing and counting individual particulars which it collects." A Mass concept, like the color *red*, "does not 'divide reference' and hence does not provide criteria for counting and delineating individuals." The third kind are Formal Concepts, more specifically Formal *ontological* concepts (distinguished from Formal logical concepts). The Object category (or how the author writes it- OBJECT) and PART are described as these concepts. Casati says that these are "the concepts of entities ontologists are interested in: events, objects, states of affairs, but also of relations such as parthood." He further adds that these cut across sortal classifications. He says that "the relation- and the corresponding concept- is formal insofar as it is alleged to abstract from whatsoever type of individual can stand in the relation" (Casati 2004:384)

3. Speaking of parthood as a formal concept, and as being different from generalization, Casati makes the following statement: "the hierarchical relationship between the concepts DOG and ANIMAL is a case of generalization. The hierarchical relationship between the concept HAND and HUMAN BEING captures the relation between a hand and its owner, the relationship of parthood. You do not generalize from being a hand to being human. However, the relation- and the corresponding concept- is formal insofar as it is alleged to abstract from whatsoever type of individual can stand in the relation… Put otherwise, PARTHOOD is a formal concept insofar as it is (relatively) *topic neutral*." The example of a BUILDING is also similar to the concept of a HAND. A building has parts, but that part is not the whole. You cannot generalize a building from its parts, but you can say that they are parts of the building. These parts, like stairs, can also form part of other classifications due to their (relative) topic neutrality. (Casati 2004:384-385)

4. In the article *The Place of Objects and Things in the Age of Materiality,* Martin Brückner describes how "objects become material signs capable of jumping interpretive frames or representational grids" and how they "emerge from the triangulation of materiality, participation, and representation". While giving an example from an advertisement in an American gazette from the 1700s, he discusses how the word "leghorn hat" written in the ad functions as a "metaphoric placeholder" for the materially absent object. In my paper, I've attempted to uncover the qualities of such placeholder object categories that function as metaphors for objects that *would* gain materiality through descriptions and interactions. The emphasis on verbally described qualities of these future objects is backed by Kenneth Haltman's idea (quoted in Brückner's article) that material culture "begins with a world of objects but takes place in a world of words" (Brückner 2019:494-502).

5. the repatriation portal lists a seven-step process that can take months before any physical repatriations are made. To view the process, go to the following link https://repatriation.fieldmuseum.org/narrative/6534. (n.d. Field Museum)

6. For the museum to stay relevant in today's time, it must apologize in some symbolic way. While speaking of the benefits of restitution, Jenkins in her chapter quotes Elazar Barkan noting the emergence, in the 90s, of a "new world opinion in which appearing compassionate and holding moral high ground has become a good investment." She further adds to Barkan's statement by saying that "repatriations are acts that bring moral credibility to the elites of today, by drawing a contrast with the morally dubious actions of their predecessors" (Jenkins 2018: 88).

7. While quoting Harman, Niels Wilde in his paper *Burning Bridges: The Problem of Relations in Object-Oriented Ontology* argues that an object cannot be reduced to its relations alone because "if an object's reality depends on whatever relation it might have to something-other-than-itself, it cannot exist without such a relation and hence, it cannot be an individual subsisting entity after all". For Harman, as noted by the author, the autonomy of objects emerges from their being "over and above their pieces, while also partly withholding themselves from relations with other entities" (Wilde 2020:1-12). Instead of arguing why objects must maintain this autonomy, in this paper I try to emphasize how a new object definition emerges when we consider placeholder categories for materially absent objects existing in a network of ideas.

8. This statement was made during a personal interview with developers who haven't yet declared their wish to be named.

9. Wesley Cray in the article Conceptual art, Ideas, and Ontology feels that an idea (or concept) is a spatially discontinuous system of token mental states (Cray 2014:235-245).

10. Based on a meeting that I attended, these can take the forms of mechanical interactives, touchable things, replications of landscapes, video games, etc.

11. These books were- Arjun Appadurai's The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essay on the Global Condition (2013); Anna Tsing's Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins (2015), and Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight's The Anthropology of the Future (2019) (Baas et al. 2020:123)

12. An understanding of objects as autonomous can be developed by looking at the work of Graham Harman. In his book, Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things, he makes the following statement- "…the substance or object is the carnival tent itself, apart from any of the relations or effects that link it to the rest of the world… [It] remains a unitary substance beyond its impact on others…" He further adds that "[t]hey are not ultimate materials, but autonomous forms, forms somehow coiled up or folded in the crevices of the world and exerting their power on all that approaches them. This is [his] definition of substance, a term well worth salvaging: an object or substance is a real thing considered apart from any of its relations with other such things" (Harman 2005:19)

13. While it is not known what community the musician belongs to, and neither should it be assumed that all native communities think alike, the idea that objects are alive is a belief held by other native American communities as well (possibly different from that of the musician). An article published by the Smithsonian Magazine in 2008 spoke of a repatriation of sacred Apache objects by the National Museum of the American Indians to their native community in Arizona. It was stated in the article that the shipping crates that carried masks and other artifacts featured breathing holes for the Apaches believed they were *alive*.

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