

*Routledge Research in Museum Studies*

# **CURATING LIVELY OBJECTS**

**EXHIBITIONS BEYOND DISCIPLINES**

Edited by

Lizzie Muller and Caroline Seck Langill



# Curating Lively Objects

*Curating Lively Objects* explores the role of things as catalysts in imagining futures beyond disciplines for museums and exhibitions. Authors describe how their curatorial collaborations with diverse objects, from rocks to robots, generate new ways of organising and sharing knowledge.

Bringing together leading artists and curators from Australia and Canada, this volume addresses object liveliness from a range of entwined perspectives, including new materialism, decolonial thinking, Indigenous epistemologies, environmentalism, feminist critique and digital aesthetics. Foregrounding practice-based curatorial scholarship, the book focuses on rigorous reflexive accounts of how curating is done. It contributes to global topics in curatorial research, including time and memory beyond and before disciplinarity; the relationship between human and non-human across different ontologies; and the interaction between Indigenous knowledge and disciplinary expertise in interpreting museum collections.

*Curating Lively Objects* will be of interest to scholars and students in the fields of curatorial studies, museum studies, cultural heritage, art history, Indigenous studies, material culture and anthropology. It also provides a vital resource for professionals working in museums and galleries around the world who are seeking to respond creatively, ethically and inclusively to the challenge of changing disciplinary boundaries.

**Lizzie Muller** is a curator and researcher specialising in audience experience, reflective-curatorial practice and changing disciplinary formations in museums. She is Associate Professor at UNSW, Sydney.

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# Curating Lively Objects

Exhibitions Beyond Disciplines

Edited by

Lizzie Muller and Caroline Seck Langill

We dedicate this book to artist Michael Poulton, the founder of the Museum of Temporary Art in rural Ontario. Visiting Michael together early in our research was a lesson in how a passion for the liveliness of objects can generate a magical museum. Organised through Michael's wayward taxonomy (including such categories as "brown things", "round things", and simply "things"), every object – no matter how mundane – was meticulously labelled with a catalogue number (though no catalogue existed), and treated as a treasure. Assembled to create labyrinths, intricate model cities and visual puns, the "togetherness of things" (in Michael's words) transformed a historic general store into a through-the-looking-glass museum, where curatorial conventions were re-imagined. Michael died in 2019 – we are endlessly grateful for our memories of his museum.

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# Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv

<b>Introduction: how lively objects disrupt disciplinary display</b>	<b>1</b>
LIZZIE MULLER AND CAROLINE SECK LANGILL	

## PART I

<b>Troublesome objects</b>	<b>21</b>
----------------------------	-----------

<b>1 Decolonising archives: killing art to write its history</b>	<b>23</b>
BROOK GARRU ANDREW INTERVIEWED BY PARIS LETTAU	

<b>2 Rendezvous with the Indigenous Art Collection: how to “raise a flag”</b>	<b>36</b>
RYAN RICE	

<b>3 Troublemakers in the museum: robots, romance and the performance of liveliness</b>	<b>49</b>
ANNA DAVIS INTERVIEWED BY LIZZIE MULLER	

<b>4 Curating data-driven information-based art: outlive or let die</b>	<b>59</b>
SARAH COOK	

## PART II

<b>Metabolizing objects</b>	<b>81</b>
-----------------------------	-----------

<b>5 Digesting institutional critique</b>	<b>83</b>
LISA MYERS	

# Figures

1.1	<i>Vox: Beyond Tasmania and 52 Portraits</i> , 2013	26
1.2	<i>Vox: Beyond Tasmania and 52 Portraits</i> , 2013	26
1.3	<i>Aby-kon-uh-klas-tik</i> , 2017	29
2.1	<i>Chiichinuu (Our Home)</i> , 2012	44
3.1	<i>Species Series</i> , 2012	52
3.2	<i>Manoeuvres</i> , 2015	54
4.1	<i>Stutterer</i> , 2014	65
4.2	<i>becoming.a(thing)</i> , 2017	68
4.3	<i>Spirit Molecule I</i> , 2018	73
5.1	<i>Rehearsal for an Endurance Performance of the SCUM Manifesto in C major</i> , 2012	91
5.2	<i>Periodic Intension</i> , 2012	94
5.3	<i>Treaty Card</i> , 2012	95
6.1	<i>The End is a Distant Memory</i> , 2016	109
6.2	<i>The End is a Distant Memory</i> , 2016	110
7.1	<i>Biomess</i> , 2018	117
7.2	<i>Biomess</i> , 2018	118
7.3	<i>Biomess</i> , 2018	119
7.4	<i>Studies for Futile Labor</i> , 2015	120
7.5	<i>Futile Labor</i> , 2015	121
8.1	<i>Trophy Wall</i> , Musée de la Chasse et la Nature	134
8.2	<i>The Life of a Dead Tree</i> , 2019b	139
8.3	<i>Battle for the Woodlands</i> , 2014–2015	141
9.1	<i>Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers</i> , 2017	154
9.2	<i>Hats of Mackay: John Sweet</i> , 2018	160
9.3	<i>Watershed Land Art Project: legumes growing</i> , 2018	161
10.1	<i>A study for collected tools for directions, healings, focusings, reconnections, wayfindings, wanderings, unseeables, wonderings, outsidings, action reportings, future seeings and interconnectivities</i> , 2015	173
10.2	<i>“Lichen” from Carbon Study: Walking in the Dark</i> , 2019	174
10.3	<i>Accretion</i> , 2018–ongoing	175
11.1	<i>Simple Forces</i> , 2013	181

6	<b>Curatorial care and the lively materials of biomedical art</b> BEC DEAN	101
7	<b>Living and semi-living artefacts on display: the monster that therefore is a living epistemic thing</b> ORON CATTS, CHRIS SALTER AND IONAT ZURR	115
8	<b>Troubling (natural) history: Bonnie Devine, Mark Dion, and Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature</b> CAROLINE SECK LANGILL	132
9	<b>Social objects, art, and agriculture</b> LUCAS IHLEIN INTERVIEWED BY CAROLINE SECK LANGILL	147
<b>PART III</b>		
	<b>Energetic objects</b>	165
10	<b>Mineral materialities in contemporary art: between intra- action, discursive magic and grief</b> RANDY LEE CUTLER	167
11	<b>Objects, energies and curating resonance across disciplines</b> KATIE DYER AND LIZZIE MULLER	179
12	<b>Feminist new materialism, religion and perception</b> SALLY MCKAY	195
13	<b>Digital–physical–emotional immersion in country: bearing witness to the Appin massacre</b> TESS ALLAS INTERVIEWED BY LIZZIE MULLER	214
	<i>Index</i>	225

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11.2	<i>Floating Sequence</i> , 2012/2016, Garnkiny Ngarranggarni, 2014, and the Powerhouse Museum's French electro-mechanical pendulum clock	185
11.3	<i>Ballistic Bundts</i> , 2018	191
12.1	<i>The author holding a black and white slide of the Mérode Altarpiece</i> , 2018	196
12.2	<i>Pages 572–573 of Art History</i> , 2018	199
12.3	<i>The author touching a black and white detail illustration of the Mérode Altarpiece</i> , 2018	203
13.1	<i>As Above So Below</i> , 2016	218
13.2	<i>Dharawal kiskisiwin [remembering Dharawal], nîpawiwîn Dharawal ohci, [standing up for the Dharawal]</i> , 2016	218
13.3	<i>Mardgin dhoorbala milgangoondhi [rifles hidden in the cliffs]</i> , 2016	222

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# Introduction

## How lively objects disrupt disciplinary display

*Lizzie Muller and Caroline Seck Langill*

This book responds to the deep sense that curators collaborate in a tangible, passionate, and reciprocal way with things. In this collection of essays, we investigate this dimension of curating through the reflections of practitioners who foreground their relationship with objects in their work. We describe these objects as *lively* in part to convey the feeling that they speak, offer suggestions, make demands, and pose problems. This felt experience of liveliness is a flexible idea that can encompass many different “signs of life” – some of them technical or theoretically loaded. Animism, agency, spirituality, subjectivity, and intelligence are examples of terms that can be implied or included in liveliness. Its ability to exceed them all allows us to come at the idea from many angles. Chapters in the book variously deal with the liveliness of robots, altarpieces, biomedical materials, sugar, rocks, and databases. Each author brings a different nuance to the term, and the result is a multi-faceted understanding of the relationship between curating and object liveliness.

Our interest in liveliness connects to a widespread and growing acknowledgement of the agential life of objects – their physical processes, obscure impacts, and entanglements with other actors – engendered by the recent material turn in philosophy. Liveliness has played an animating role in new materialism, due largely to the influence of two thinkers, Jane Bennett (2010) and Donna Haraway (2016), who have both employed the term to challenge the human monopoly of agency and subjectivity. Bennett uses *lively* to describe the energetic and material impacts that matter makes on the world through its own processes. Recognising the quality of liveliness in things is a way to work against the habit of separating out life from matter, of believing humans to be central actors in a story of *doing to* rather than *doing with*. Haraway uses the term to invoke regenerative amalgamations of humans and non-humans entwined in metabolic processes (enfolding, consuming, excreting) one another. She sees “lively arts” as creative ways of “staying with the trouble” of anthropogenic planetary damage and loss of life (5). Both challenge readers to consider how socio-technical processes and ethical systems must change in response to an enlarged sense of what counts as lively.

In this book, we contend with what we see as the major implication for curators of embracing this expanded liveliness: the disruption of

The liveliest object of the year during which this book was completed was the face mask: at first, combatting the effects of bushfire smoke in Australia, and then countering the global spread of COVID-19. We thank all our authors for persisting with this work during such upheaval and, finally, we thank Heidi Lowther and the team at Routledge for their patience and support in helping us to complete this manuscript during such challenging times.

Lizzie Muller  
Caroline Seck Langill

disciplinary thought, and of the museums and display strategies that embody and perpetuate it. We examine how liveliness works against the disciplinary structures inherent to what sociologist Tony Bennett (1995) calls the “exhibitionary complex”: the range of institutions through which objects in the nineteenth century were made public and became “vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power” (61). The idea of liveliness as a generative counterforce that overflows these persistent knowledge formations – and what is at stake in this – is unpacked later in this Introduction.

“‘Object’ is a sprawling category”, as Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins point out, that “does not convincingly divide the natural from the artificial world, the material from the immaterial, the animate from the inanimate, or the human from the non-human” (2). Likewise, the study of objects sprawls across many kinds of research, and has been growing in popularity (3). Prominent authors, such as sociologist Sherry Turkle (2007) and historian Lorraine Daston (2004), have demonstrated how liveliness manifests in ever-expanding, complicating, and grounding ways once you bring your attention to objects. Their work reveals how an object-centred approach to research confounds disciplinarity, as Turkle writes: “When we focus on objects, physicians and philosophers, psychologists and designers, artists and engineers are able to find common ground in everyday experience” (8). What these authors achieve through their attentive texts curators realise through the processes of collection and display – working materially and physically in space with the things themselves. All curating should be concerned with the liveliness of objects. However, the objects that the artists and curators in this book examine are those that bring our attention to object-liveliness *itself* in specific, highly concentrated, and provocative ways. They address objects whose forms of liveliness challenge curatorial praxis and require far-reaching reflexivity in the curatorial process. They are, in Turkle’s phrase “evocative objects” that trouble habits and assumptions; they are “things to think with”.

## Curating as applied new materialism

Curatorial thinking is embodied in doing and in writing.<sup>1</sup> In this book, curators describe the lively objects they have worked with, and how those objects have worked on them. Cumulatively, this offers both an examination of the experience of curating with lively objects, and a discussion of how curating more broadly may be changed by those experiences.

While the past decade has seen a marked increase in writing about curating (sometimes by curators, sometimes by art historians), as well as the growth of curatorial practice-based research in the academy, there is still a lack of scholarly reflective writing by curators about the actual experience of curating.<sup>2</sup> This collection is dedicated to practice-based curatorial scholarship as a source of new knowledge. Our focus is how curating is done, and how lively objects figure *actively* in that doing. As we have argued

elsewhere (Muller 2011), attention to situated personal experience is central to this methodology, and therefore prominent in every chapter. We have tried to preserve the vibrancy of the authors' voices through first person narratives and interviews in which curators and artists speak directly about their practice and the insights that arise from their experiences. Our concern with objects and experience converges with what Turkle describes as a return in contemporary research to a hands-on form of embodied, situated, and materialised knowledge that *matters* (7).

This kind of reflexive curating with lively objects can be seen as a form of applied new materialism. Jane Bennett sees agency as always distributed and at work in "heterogeneous assemblages". Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, she describes these as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements of vibrant materials of all sorts [...] living throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (24). This description serves effectively to describe the kinds of exhibitions that are discussed by the authors in this book – several of whom use Bennett, Haraway, and others associated with new materialism, to help articulate the thinking behind their curatorial experiments. Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett have argued for art-making as a form of new materialist method through edited collections foregrounding the knowledge created through artists' practices (2013 and 2014). This book develops a similar agenda for curating. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has been the most prominent curator to explicitly examine – both in exhibition making and writing – the implications of new materialism and its intellectual context for curatorial work. She sees a fundamental challenge to art's special and separate status posed by: "a worldly (Donna Haraway) alliance (Susan Buck-Morss) of cosmopolitical (Isabelle Stengers) intra-acting (Karen Barad) and cobbled-together (Haraway) human and non-human agents (Bruno Latour)" (3).<sup>3</sup> New materialism and its allied post- and more-than-human philosophies thwart curators' tendencies to "cut the work of the artists off from the world at large in order to protect it" (3), and disrupt the financialisation and corporatisation of contemporary art that requires this separation.

Drawing from science, design, and ancient collections alongside contemporary art, Christov-Bakargiev curated dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012 as a disciplinarily inclusive exhibition. Reminiscent of Bennett's heterogenous assemblages, Christov-Bakargiev claims that this exhibition was an argument for:

alliances between art and organic life, new materialisms and scientific studies, so that forms of art and forms of life can be combined, sharing architectural and creative knowledge with bees and butterflies and beavers, with bacteria and microbes, with eukaryotic cells as well as with software (12).

For Christov-Bakargiev, exhibitions as more-than-human alliances reflect the instability of existing knowledge formations and the opportunity to

The disciplinary project of the nineteenth-century museum was also a colonial project. In a recent special issue of *Third Text* on decolonising museums, the editors (Giblin, Ramos & Grout 2019) link disciplinarity with imperialism. Museums, they write, were “active tools of empire, showcasing Eurocentric and racialised ideals and narratives that often reflected the disciplinary logic of the imperial state” (471). The “disciplinary logic” of the Western colonial classification system is clearest in the vast collections of universal and ethnographic museums, amassed through a relentless process of violent cultural dispossession. Central to these museums is the distinction between artefact and artwork as an index of the racist hierarchy of cultures. As Christopher Braddock (2017) points out, the distinction between animate and inanimate objects was a similarly central and racist concept in nineteenth-century ethnography, signalling the difference between a “primitive” and “civilised” mind.<sup>5</sup> Clémentine Deliss, an anthropologist and curator with a long history of interrogating the liveliness of objects (1990, 2012), calls for a “post-ethnographic museum” (2020: 6, 24) that merges disciplines and temporalities by gathering artefacts into new “assemblages” that “activate taxonomic transgressions” (29).<sup>6</sup>

While museums of ethnography, as the most obviously anachronistic to contemporary sensibility, receive most attention as the inheritors of the colonial project – all mono-disciplinary museums are palimpsests of its underlying mindset.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary art museums are arguably some of the most resolutely mono-disciplinary spaces of all. In the twentieth century, the discipline of art history reinforced the artwork/artefact distinction through an insistence on art’s autonomy and, as Christov-Bakargiev points out, this continues into the present as “both the autonomy of modern art and the heteronomy of avant-garde ‘art joined to life’ [...] are contingent [...] on accepting that a field called Art exists” (5). Belief in the existence and purity of the *field called Art* is also crucial to its monetary value in the neo-colonial contexts of global capital and consumption.

Decolonising museums requires re-imagining museums beyond, before, and apart from disciplinary structures. Haudenosaunee curator, museum director, and scholar Tom Hill urges “embracing faith, experience, and imagination” to counteract the supremacy of “rational” (i.e. abstract and classificatory) knowledge in Western epistemology, which he argues is critical to ensuring Indigenous representation in museum collections (2002: 10). While we present liveliness as a counter to disciplinarity in this book, it is important to note the limits of new materialism as a decolonising discourse. As Sally McKay points out in this volume, new materialism is itself steeped in Western Judeo-Christian traditions of thought and belief. Indigenous practitioners and scholars, such as Angie Abdilla (2017, 2018), Dolleen Tisawii’ashii Manning (2017), Vanessa Watts (2013), and Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie (2015), have critiqued the limits of vital materiality from the perspective of Indigenous knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Palawa/Trawlwoolway technologist and design strategist Abdilla argues that new materialism has

dissolve the canonical field of art and re-aggregate it with others (12). For us, this reconfiguration of the relationship between art, objects, and knowledge through assemblage is the key opportunity posed by a consideration of curating with lively objects.

### Curating beyond disciplines

Since the nineteenth century, curators have played a crucial role in forming and policing knowledge boundaries through the classification of what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls “disciplinary objects” (2006: 362) – things that are both subject to and carriers of disciplinary thought. This inheritance still structures the way objects are collected and displayed in Western museums and galleries despite the fact that traditional disciplinary divisions (such as between art, anthropology, natural history, and the physical sciences) no longer reflect the production of contemporary knowledge. Ever-increasing trans-disciplinary collaboration and micro-specialisation mean a growing proportion of new knowledge is generated in the blurry areas between previously distinct disciplines, or in new hybrid fields such as the environmental humanities or neural engineering. This is an epistemological moment that exceeds disciplines, one that we have previously described as post-disciplinary in that it continues to carry the imprint of disciplinary structures in the machinery of knowledge institutions such as universities, funding bodies, and museums (Langill & Muller 2016). Of these institutions, it is museums – as historical repositories of disciplinary objects – that cling most to outdated disciplinary divisions. This is why Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes some museums as “doubly and even triply museological” (361). Not only do they display objects of the past, but also preserve (with more or less commentary and self-awareness) historic ways of presenting and organising those objects, becoming “museums of themselves” (361). In their materialist history of exhibitions, Tristan Garcia and Vincent Normand point out that museums, and the “apparatuses of exhibition” (2019: 16) create disciplinary objects through a combination of killing, and synthetically reviving them:

acting as a global isolator [the museum] de-animates previously animated entities by uprooting them from their “milieu”, and reanimates “dead” objects by over-determining their signification and projecting them in a restricted field of attention (16).<sup>4</sup>

Lively objects, such as those considered in this book, offer a conceptual counterpoint to such dead or narrowly reanimated disciplinary objects. The central question addressed in the chapters that follow is: How can we attend to objects curatorially in ways that invite forms of knowing beyond disciplines?

much to learn from Indigenous Knowledge Systems, which offer a challenge to Western thought:

[Indigenous Knowledge Systems] can nudge the existential compartmentalism of Western techno-science into another realm of interrelationship and interconnectedness; indeed, the current wave of “new materialisms” bears striking resemblance to, and could benefit from, indyamarra [from the Wiraduri language: a sense of the sacred; to give honour to; show respect; and to do slowly].<sup>9</sup>

(2017: 30)

Manning describes how Ojibwe philosophy “recogniz[es] the agency not only of humans, but, also of plants, inanimate ‘objects’ and invisible and intangible forces” (1). She is “critical and cautious of the tendency to valorize otherness and to anthropomorphise object consciousness in efforts (often unwittingly) to mimic the Indigenous perspectives from which these ontologies derive” (27). Her research on mnidoo-worlding, and Abdilla’s work on “Indigenous techno-animism” (2018: 68) in technology design, are examples of a growing body of Indigenous scholarship establishing the primacy of Indigenous philosophies of liveliness.<sup>10</sup>

First Nations artists and curators in this book, including Tess Allas, Brook Garru Andrew, Lisa Myers, and Ryan Rice, describe how their own understandings of liveliness underpin radical curatorial approaches that foreground Indigenous experience. Recently, as the artistic director of *NIRIN*, the first Indigenous and artist led Biennale of Sydney, Brook Garru Andrew deployed what he called “powerful objects” throughout the numerous exhibition sites of the biennale. Drawn from many public and private collections, Andrew inserted these objects, including ethnographic photographs, kitsch memorabilia, and ceremonial items, to “reconnect with histories disrupted by colonialism” (*Powerful Objects* 2020). He describes how these objects function in relation to each other and the exhibition “in corroboration or through contradiction” to “reveal history to be a tactile, alive and sensuous material, beyond language and shaped by our emotions and desires” (*Powerful Objects* 2020). Curator Stephen Gilchrist, who belongs to the Yamatji people of the Inggarda language group of northwest Western Australia, describes the Indigenous practice of “waking up objects” (2016: 114) through touching, looking, smelling, and listening, in contrast to the way museum interpretation limits thought and behaviour:

You read a label that has an authoritative, omniscient voice that is based on the assumption that we’re all children of the Enlightenment, and that we want to have these rational, scientific labels. I’m not suggesting that there is no reason or intellectualism in Indigenous culture, but I am much more interested in different philosophies of perception. There are ways of understanding these objects that aren’t necessarily cognitive (114).

For Gilchrist, “awakening objects” is part of what he calls “Indigenizing” the museum – a process of “un-assimilation” (109) that evades colonisation

as “the meta-narrative of Indigeneity” (109). Not all curating that challenges Western knowledge structures can be understood as decolonising, and we unpick some of the pitfalls of such assumptions in the final section of this Introduction. However, Indigenous authors in this book demonstrate what can be at stake when artists and curators collaborate with objects to forge new more-than-human alliances with lively objects.

Often these alliances are led by artists working in meta-museological modes; practices that explicitly quote from, call attention to, and disrupt museum traditions and assumptions. This follows a long tradition of artists as curatorial innovators stretching back to (and beyond) Duchamp (Filipovic 2014, Kachur 2001). Fred Wilson’s legendary *Mining the Museum*, 1992, is the keystone example, where objects previously buried in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society Museum (such as shackles and whipping posts) were inserted into displays in eloquent juxtapositions that exposed the suppressed histories of slavery, and ongoing white supremacy. As Wilson has noted, “what they put on view says a lot about the museum, but what they don’t put on view says even more” (Karp & Wilson: 255). Wilson’s intervention demonstrates how artists do things with exhibitions that curators often cannot or will not – either because of the restrictions of their institutional positions, or an inherent conservatism that results from their training.

Artists are also often required to innovate curatorially when their practice exceeds the capacities of existing curatorial structures. Many of the authors in this book are artists reflecting on the curatorial aspects or implications of their own work (Brook Garru Andrew, Oron Catts, Lucas Ihlein, Lisa Myers, & Ionat Zurr). Of those authors that work primarily as curators, several more originally trained as artists. In this volume, then, we foreground a creative (albeit pragmatic), rather than a professionalised notion of curating, that blurs the distinction between artist and curator. The curatorial experiences described involve a range of contexts – including museums of many kinds, art galleries, laboratories, farms, and classrooms. Across all these contexts, lively objects – and the curatorial responses they demand – reveal the limits and tensions of existing knowledge structures, epistemic assumptions, and conventions of display.

## Technologies of enchantment

Our own interest in and understanding of lively objects as engines of disciplinary change stems from our shared experiences as curators of media art during the 2000s. Born as much from techno-scientific innovation as from artistic experimentation, the digital objects of media art cannot be properly accounted for as the “disciplinary objects” of art history. Their lively computational characteristics – such as interactivity, autonomy, or generativity – challenge category distinctions based on subjectivity, consciousness, or agency. We have argued at length elsewhere that, as a result, the “undisciplined” objects of media art have primarily existed in a parallel exhibitionary

## Situating liveliness: Australia and Canada

To investigate this wider question from multiple perspectives, we organised a group residency “Curating Lively Objects” at the Banff Centre.<sup>11</sup> The residency brought together researchers from Australia and Canada, and involved many of the authors whose work you will read in the following pages. Our conversation there has shaped the structure and scope of this book. For Australian and Canadian practitioners, shared historic and contemporary conditions lend a particular traction to the collaborative re-thinking of the legacy of the disciplinary museum. As constitutional monarchies, still structurally and ideologically in thrall to British divine authority, the colonial reality of both countries is imprinted on our symbolic objects – as a glance at our currency reveals. At the same time, our geo-politically peripheral positions offer a sense of latitude regarding art-world and museum conventions, creating space for locally driven and idiosyncratic innovations. As several authors in this book address, the intersection of Western techno-scientific epistemologies and Judeo-Christian traditions with Indigenous Traditional Knowledge in Canada and Australia create a specific cultural context for understanding liveliness. Our large, lightly populated land masses foster a particular relationship to wildness, where the liveliness of the land, flora, and fauna is still readily experienced. Concurrently, the contemporary coloniality of resource extraction in both countries destroys vital ecosystems and continues to dispossess Indigenous people. Our focus on Australian and Canadian authors in this book allows for a deep and nuanced investigation of a shared, but fraught and contestable, notion of what it means for an object to be lively. These texts demonstrate that the knowledge that informs and that is generated with lively objects draws its strength and relevance from its situatedness. This bi-national approach fosters both depth and dialogue, contributing to global topics in curatorial research including time and memory beyond and before disciplinarity, the complex relationship between spirituality and animism across different ontologies, and the tension between Indigenous knowledges and disciplinary expertise in interpreting museum collections. With international recognition of the need for decolonial approaches across the museum sector, and the leading work of Australian and Canadian practitioners in this space, this collection offers a valuable grounded perspective to the international curatorial community.

In our conversations at Banff, three leitmotifs emerged that have evolved into the sections that comprise the book. First, an idea originally raised by gender studies scholar Robert Diaz of whether and how an object could be “resistant”: this captured the sense that some objects refuse to submit to human will. As the book developed, some authors (see particularly Tess Allas in Chapter 13) noted the conceptual limits of the “resistant object” that is necessarily trapped in relation to whatever it is resisting. Resistance morphed into the more productive and multi-directional descriptor “troublesome”. Picking up on Donna Haraway’s thought, that to make trouble and to “stay with the trouble”, is a vital (both lively and important) way to

universe systematically sidelined from contemporary art history and display (Muller 2015).

In 2015, we curated an exhibition that aimed to demonstrate the productive possibilities of integrating media art with other kinds of objects. In *Lively Objects: Enchantment and Disruption* at the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) we inserted 15 media artworks that “vibrated with mechanical, digital and magical forces” (Langill & Muller 2015) into the existing permanent displays of Canada’s largest civic museum. The museum’s design follows a chronology of historical dioramas moving from pre-settlement to contemporary Vancouver. We imagined each artwork as a visitor or interloper, who would begin new conversations with the objects inhabiting the diorama into which it was introduced. We hoped audiences would be drawn into the dialogues that unfolded between these unruly artworks and the surrounding tea-sets, garden tools, Egyptian mummies, and industrial models, and begin to experience all these objects as lively agents with something new to say (Langill & Muller 2016).

Our notion of liveliness in this curatorial experiment drew on anthropologist Alfred Gell’s idea of artworks as “technologies of enchantment” (1992: 74) – both tools for thinking through, and “social agents” participating in cultural practice (5). Art objects as enchanted tools are both *useful* and have their own form of agency. This concept suggests that the liveliness of media art objects (or, in fact, all art objects), is most productively disruptive when integrated, or *socialised*, with other things. Several chapters in this book share our special interest in an integrative approach to exhibiting digital objects, including data-based objects (Sarah Cook), robots (Anna Davis), and bio-technologies (Oron Catts, Chris Salter, Ionat Zurr, and Bec Dean). Tess Allas describes technological artworks by Indigenous artists Cheryl L’Hirondelle and Adrian Stimson that emphasise interconnectedness with country and continuity of memory. But, while digital objects are powerful examples of the kind of “liveliness” that we saw counteracting disciplinarity, we became increasingly aware during our work on the Vancouver exhibition that considering the liveliness of *all objects* had even wider implications. This expanded view is increasingly necessary as ubiquitous connectivity, the proliferation of AI in everyday activity and the Internet of Things means that any object can now easily become digitally lively. Angie Abdilla points out that the contemporary phenomenon of widespread technological liveliness is a recent and relatively limited echo of the deep and ancient understanding of “Indigenous Techno-Animism” that has informed the human relationship to “innately spirited and conscious technologies” in Australia for millennia (2018: 68). Our enquiry expanded from a focus on the digital to question how the broad acknowledgement of the agency of objects on one hand, and the emerging notion of a post-disciplinary epistemological moment on the other, is changing the relationship between objects, knowledge, and human experience in exhibitions. This question, and our awareness of other curatorial colleagues engaging with it, became the starting point for this book.

respond to troubling times, the term “troublesome objects” for us conveys a vitally self-determined way of being difficult.

Second, the notion, originally raised by Brook Garru Andrew, of the ways in which our bodies and experiences are imbued with imperialism and colonialism. This anchored our discussion of all things bodily and visceral, and particularly influenced our understanding of the processes and institutions of disciplinarity as fundamentally made by and manifested through living beings. Lisa Myers developed this significantly in this volume with her idea of the “institution-as-digester”. We have used the term “metabolic” to capture this sense of liveliness as an existential process of interaction between things organic and non-organic. Recently, Clémentine Deliss (2020) has used the metaphor of the “metabolic museum” to convey the toxic effect of colonial curatorial regulation. “Vital relationships” are her prescription for healing this sick body (106). For us, metabolism conveys both the physical processes by which things stay alive, but also the processes of digesting – working through and transforming – information and ideas.<sup>12</sup>

Our final leitmotif is the relationship between potential and kinetic energy. Proposed at the residency by artist Lucas Ihlein as a way to understand the change in state between an object displayed in a gallery or operating “in the wild”, this metaphor captured the idea that lively forces cannot be extinguished, but only transformed. The idea of potential and kinetic energy appears in several chapters in different sections of the book, including those by Brook Garru Andrew, Anna Davis, Lucas Ihlein, and Katie Dyer and Lizzie Muller. The broader idea of “energetic objects” developed from this leitmotif into the core theme for the final section of the book, where it expresses a sense of liveliness through the many connective forces that flow within and between all things.

## Troublesome objects

Part I begins the book with an examination of the disruptive potential of troublesome objects that challenge museological, disciplinary, or social categories. These things create productive discord for institutions and their publics. In Chapter 1, *Decolonising archives: killing art to write its history*, Brook Garru Andrew, in conversation with Paris Lettau, describes how stolen objects including human remains have been rendered “harmless” by ethnographic research and curatorial processes. Brought together in his sculptural installations, objects and images are re-empowered and become vitally “harmful” again, creating experiences “where history speaks back”.

In Chapter 2, *Rendezvous with the Indigenous Art Collection: how to ‘raise a flag’*, Ryan Rice considers “the visual sovereignty of objects as a decolonizing strategy”. Describing his curatorial approach to an exhibition drawn from Canada’s National Indigenous Art Collection during the 150th anniversary of Canada’s confederation, Rice explains his efforts to trouble the celebratory tone of this controversial anniversary. Prompted by Cree elder Walter Bonaise’s description of the collection as “a sacred bundle

because of the power it holds and generates”, Rice reflects on the political and spiritual responsibility of the many curators, administrators, and artists who have cared for it.

Both Anna Davis and Sarah Cook consider the kinds of trouble that technological art objects make for museums and galleries. In Chapter 3, *Troublemakers in the museum: Robots, romance and the performance of liveliness*, Davis argues that liveliness is not a category, but a process or performance made up of micro-behaviours. The behaviours of robotic and media artworks cause them to be labelled “troublemakers” in contemporary art museums. Davis reflects on why she is drawn to such artworks, and the important role they play in slowly shifting museum practice. Through an examination of “informational artworks” driven by computational biology, in Chapter 4, *Curating data-driven information-based art: Outlive or let die*, Sarah Cook argues for the liveliness of data itself. Considering the lifecycles of a series of emergent, data-based systems, Cook reflects on how, as a curator, she is always concerned “with the artwork’s own process of transitioning”.

Cook’s reflections on the unfolding ethical implications of the liveliness of data-objects resonates with Brook Garru Andrew’s consideration of the impact of data technologies on the museum’s treatment of sacred objects. Through the example of a 3D scanned and printed Dendroglyph – a highly symbolic carved tree removed from its meaningful context – Andrew casts such data objects as both solutions to troubles and troublesome themselves. As poet, filmmaker and educator Jazz Money asks in her essay *Sacred Data* (2020): Who owns the data of digitised sacred objects, and who gets to access or reproduce it? Together, the chapters in this section address the effects of liminal objects that exist between worlds, classes, or orders, that expose power structures and destabilise fixed assumptions about knowledge.

## Metabolic objects

Part II deals with the fleshy beings of medicine, cookery, biotechnology, and natural history. Authors here examine the metabolic processes and porous boundaries of bodies that eat, respire, and reproduce, and the transformational effect they can have on institutional structures. In Chapter 5, *Digesting institutional critique*, Lisa Myers describes her experience of curating *Night Kitchen (Under the Tabletop)* for Nuit Blanche 2012.

Myers describes the installation as “a series of installations that re-imagined OCAD Un or digestive tract”. Seeing the art and des ingests, digests, and then excretes its pro itself as a kind of metabolic process within the “institution-as-digester” allows audier inner workings and structures”, including institutional processes”.

Bec Dean examines the physical and it ing artists engaging with biomedicine in C *the lively materials of biomedical art*, Dea

labour is entangled in extensive networks of care involving clinicians, scientists, friends, family, and lively materials – such as drugs, organs, cells, and medical equipment. Looking in detail at the work of three artists from her exhibition *The Patient*, Dean reflects on how the “life and death implications and entanglements” of biomedical art demand new interpretations of curatorial care.

In Chapter 7, *Living and semi-living artefacts on display: The monster that therefore is a living epistemic thing*, Oron Catts, Chris Salter, and Ionat Zurr investigate the “taxonomic and curatorial “messiness” of the living artefact” on display. They examine the “ontological politics” raised by the monstrous hybrids of art and science, and the “unknowingness” that they produce. Drawing from historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, they describe their “semi-livings” as “epistemic things” – “question generating machines” that have not yet stabilised into fixed roles in knowledge structures.

Caroline Seck Langill discusses flora and fauna in the museum, dead and alive, in Chapter 8, *Troubling (natural) history: Bonnie Devine, Mark Dion, and Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature*. Using the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris as a frame for considering the lure of “life-like” displays of dead things, she goes on to examine two artists, Dion and Devine, for whom organic materials have more lively implications. Langill explores counter-narratives to the natural history museum wherein the related stories of imperial and corporate disregard for the rights of living beings are told.

Lucas Ihlein ends the section with Chapter 9, *Social objects, art and agriculture*, in which he discusses his social and environmental artwork *Sugar versus the Reef?*. A long-term project engaging sugarcane farmers and other communities working in the water catchment area of the Great Barrier Reef, Ihlein considers the reef as “a mega-scale lively object” that “cannot be perceived... with your own eyes”. He describes how he and his collaborator, artist Kim Williams, worked to reveal the human processes affecting the reef through slow, embedded social interactions, including growing and harvesting soil remediating crops and staging celebratory events. All the authors in this section trace relational processes from the micro scale of cellular organisms to the macro scales of institutions and the environment. They examine the ethical and experiential dimensions of curating with such lively bodies, and the dynamics of care and collaboration that are implied and required. Together, these chapters speak of both the resilience and the fragility of carbon-based life, and the urge to extend beyond its limits.

## Energetic objects

Part III examines the vibrancy of things that concentrate, transmit, and transform energies – including spiritual, magical, psychological, and physical forces. In these chapters, authors discuss objects that manifest or

materialise temporal processes such as grief, memory, growth, trauma, and regeneration. Drawing deeply from vital materialism in Chapter 10, *Mineral materialities in contemporary art: Between intra-action, discursive magic and grief*, Randy Cutler weaves Indigenous Traditional Knowledge with Western philosophies to consider “mineral specimens as lively objects [that] disrupt the mono-disciplinary structures of conventional research”. Through an examination of the work of three artists, Cutler argues that geological objects “entangle aesthetic wonder with environmental grief” to reveal how we are “connected and implicated in the world we have inherited”.

In Chapter 11, *Objects, energies and curating resonance across disciplines*, Katie Dyer and Lizzie Muller trace the theme of energy as an interdisciplinary force through various of their curatorial projects. Understanding forces such as gravity and electromagnetism as ways to conceptualise the attraction between things and people, they imagine artworks as “resonant instruments that not only register energies but transform or amplify those energies into a powerful experience for the audience”. Discussing their co-curated exhibition *Human non Human*, they consider the way social, political and evolutionary forces determine “how liveliness is shared out”.

In Chapter 12, *Feminist New Materialism, Religion and Perception*, Sally McKay offers an in-depth account of her experience of the medieval Mérode Altarpiece across several contexts. Arguing that new materialist theory has tended to sideline religion in its discussion of vitality, she calls for a “more fulsome exploration of Western religion” in “academic and curatorial investigations into the liveliness of objects”. Looking at this sacred artwork through various lenses, McKay argues that medieval theories of vision “coincide with theories in contemporary neuroscience” in a shared understanding of “intellect as a material process”.

In the final chapter of the book, Chapter 13, *Digital-physical-emotional immersion in country: Bearing witness to the Appin massacre*, Tess Allas discusses her exhibition *With Secrecy and Despatch*, co-curated with David Garneau, which commemorated the 200th anniversary of the Appin Massacre in which at least 14 Aboriginal People were murdered. Working with Indigenous artists from Canada and Australia, the exhibition addressed the shared history of genocide “through the act of colonization, and the continual brutality of the ongoing colonial projects in both countries”. Allas describes the ways the Canadian artists were able to “bear witness to the event so that Australian artists didn’t have to carry that responsibility alone”. She describes how the exhibition was saturated with the colour red to symbolise passion, blood, anger, love, and earth, and how artworks confronting death “channelled and harnessed energy... to connect with emotions, with life”.

Cast within the context of the Anthropocene and irreparable losses of colonial dispossession, this final section of the book examines the entanglement of humans and objects at personal, social, and geological scales. The

There is also a strong temptation to see curating beyond disciplines as an emancipatory force – able to rescue, free, or revive objects from their imprisonment. Among many examples, Clémentine Deliss (2020) quotes ethnographer Michael Oppitz saying: “Objects sit silently in repositories, the information about them lies asleep in the archives. They have to be opened up with cosmopolitan flair and with money to support the researchers who want to work in the bowels of the museum” (90). Curator Jean-Hubert Martin (2012) compares the *docile museum*, where works of art are categorised through a “positivist taxonomy” (11), with the *museum of enchantments*, in which a highly sensitive curator creates evocative, analogical relationships that “shape and express the kind of visual thinking that underpins artistic creation” (19). We have noticed our own language slip towards this sleeping beauty narrative, where objects await the reviving kiss of the curator, claiming, for example, that: “A post-disciplinary approach [...] offers curatorial strategies for ‘waking up’ objects through mutual enchantment” (Langill and Muller 2016: 47). The curatorial rescuer or explorer fantasy re-enacts a colonial narrative, which continues to cast objects as subject to human agency. As artist and curator Lisa Myers asked during our residency in Banff, might objects chose to resist or refuse the kind of agency expected of them by humans? And why would we assume that “agency” is emancipating for an object anyway?

The notion of post-disciplinarity is a provocation with pitfalls. It demands that we recognise the finitude of disciplinary structures, but does not posit anything specific in their stead. This collection of essays responds with an array of examples, each of which holds open a space beyond disciplines for curating to move into. In this unsettled epistemological moment, there is much at stake in the way we chose to re-organise systems of collection and display. Curators have a greater responsibility than ever to interrogate their own assumptions and privileges. Reflexivity is a crucial tool in this endeavour, and this volume provides a forum for curators to reflect rigorously and openly on their decisions. Opening-up curatorial processes in this way invites feedback and debate, and involves readers in an ongoing process of holding curators to account. The twin provocations of new materialism and post-disciplinarity require a renewed critical liveliness around the practices of curating, alert to the possibility that curatorial privilege steps into the vacuum left by the disciplinary regime. In this book, we hope we have created a space for such vibrant criticality, where the liveliness of objects allows us to glimpse creative, ethical, and inclusive ways of curating after the end of disciplines.

## Notes

- 1 For two books that deal with the relationship between doing and writing in curatorial thinking, see Smith (2012) and Martinon (2013).
- 2 With the growing recognition of practice-based curatorial research in the academy, there are signs that this is now flowing through into publishing and that reflective writing by curators is becoming more common. Martinon’s

authors examine the curatorial challenges of working over expansive time frames and landscapes, of channelling powerful emotions, and sensitively responding to subtle resonances.

### **Conclusion: Beware the curator**

Invoking the power of lively objects to move beyond disciplinary thought involves dangers and limitations. In the absence left by disciplinarity, what new forms of authority do we entrench? What organising principles do we erect? In dismantling disciplines, do we risk handing unbridled power to curators to determine the way we make sense of the world through material culture?

Around the world curators and museums are making post-disciplinary moves: many of these manifest as a fascination with the *pre-disciplinary* display strategy of sixteenth- and seventh-century wonderchambers and cabinets of curiosity.<sup>13</sup> This “return of the wonderful”, as we have called it elsewhere (Muller 2015), invokes the “curiosity cabinet’s epistemic organisation”, described by Barbara Maria Stafford as the “juxtaposition and superimposition of heterogeneous elements” (2001: 2). Contemporary cabinets revel in idiosyncratic organisational principles, where delightful new interpretations arise from unexpected relationships between objects. Tony Bennett (2013) has pointed out that curators draw inspiration from the pre-disciplinary forms of the curiosity cabinets partly to escape the “blinkers” imposed by disciplinary ways of seeing the world, but also so that:

the logics governing disciplinary based museum practices might themselves be made strange so that we might, in almost a Brechtian fashion, say – well, imagine seeing the world that way, how strange, and let’s make sure we see it differently so that we can act within it differently.

But, while pre-disciplinary displays may offer a liberating alternative to what, by contrast feels like the straitjacket of disciplinary object separation, they are imbued with their own baggage and blind spots. Arguably as much a product of global exploitation by Western elites as nineteenth-century museums, cabinets of curiosity were highly rarefied and esoteric spaces. Requiring a privileged eye to supply the necessary connections between its objects, cabinets served as compelling proof of the exploratory reach and integrative power of their creators. Curators invoking these pre-disciplinary forms risk defaulting to their own privileged perspective as the organising principle for their post-disciplinary experiments. There is a similar temptation to imagine that inviting an artist to intervene in museum displays will necessarily disrupt categories and boundaries. Bennett has also warned against the temptation to contrast the “guided freedom” of aesthetics with the strictures of disciplinary regimes. As Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (2014) points out, “art” alone cannot counter disciplinarity, for the belief that such a thing as “art” exists as a separate and discrete domain is itself a product of disciplinary thought (3).

- (2013) collection is one example; another is an issue of art history journal *RACAR* guest edited by Fraser and Ming Wai Jim (2018) *What is Critical Curating?*, which includes articles and short reflections by contemporary curators in Canada.
- 3 In addition to this overview of key thinkers in the materialist turn in philosophy, Christov-Bakargiev states her influences in this argument as being from ethology, feminist science studies, and ecofeminist alliances, Arte Povera, Jacob Johann von Uexkull, Alfred N. Whitehead, Vandana Shiva, Gregory Bateson, Jane Goodall, Judith Butler, Jane Bennett, Elizabeth A. Wilson, and Elizabeth Grosz.
  - 4 Fiona Candlin (2013) notes that small, idiosyncratic local museums are often able to keep objects “live” in ways that major museums cannot. Her work draws attention to the valuable counterpoint that such museums offer to more mainstream museum practices. A wonderful example is the Museum of Temporary Art in rural Ontario, created by artist Michael Poulton, which we describe in the dedication to this book.
  - 5 Braddock writes that in terms of the “evidently racist and evolutionary theories” of nineteenth-century ethnographer Edward Burnett Tylor, who introduced the term “animism” in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871), “‘spiritual animism’ crosses into a problematic lack of distinction between subjects and objects” (4).
  - 6 Deliss’s book details the conservative forces both within and without the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt that troubled her tenure as Director, which ended abruptly in 2015.
  - 7 Art historian Ruth Phillips has argued that the power exercised in the museum through its classificatory systems must be dismantled and that, until these systems are redesigned, they will “continue to have a representational force that overrides and undercuts the revisionist approaches to museum representation in which many academic and museum professionals are engaged” (2011: 95).
  - 8 We are indebted to geography scholar and artist Gwen MacGregor, who drew our attention to this issue. In her research on the installation work of Anishnaabe artist Bonnie Devine, she notes a “lack of citation of Indigenous scholars within scholarly papers on vital materiality perpetuating an erasure of Indigenous knowledge within the academic literature in this field”.
  - 9 Abdilla attributes traditional knowledge discussed in the article, including the understanding of “Indyamarra”, in the following way: “Mukgrngal, an initiated lore man, otherwise known as Wayne Armytage, who is by bloodline a Wiradjuri man. He is the “claimed one” by his traditional father, Peter Costelloe, and his traditional grandfathers Mukgrngal George Musgrave and Tommy George. Mukgrngal is the custodian of this traditional knowledge I am sharing, which is from a long line of Kuku Thypan Elders from Cape York, FNQ, going back to Mukgrngal from its very beginning. I attribute this traditional knowledge to Mukgrngal as my Elder throughout this article, if not otherwise noted.” (Abdilla & Fitch, paragraph 50)
  - 10 In *Animism in Art and Performance*, editor Christopher Braddock, working from an Aotearoa NZ perspective, has compiled a collection of writings in which a number of chapters “reinforce how indigenous world views and approaches are significantly inflecting and subtly realigning current non-indigenous debates and discussions around material vitality” (3).
  - 11 Convened by the editors, with a grant from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.
  - 12 See Froggett, Muller & Bennett (2019), for another way in which the term “metabolic” has recently been applied to the civic psychosocial work of museums as spaces where difficult ideas can be “worked through” collectively.
  - 13 For a description of this phenomenon and a survey of contemporary exhibitions that draw from cabinets of curiosity, see Muller (2015).

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