Ethnographic Experiments with Artists, Designers and Boundary Objects

Exhibitions as a research method

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What technologies, spaces, materials and social relations are bundled together in the production of method? Who gets to question our methods, when and in what terms, and do our methods have the capacity to incorporate such voices? – Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2018, 124)

Assuming this is desirable, and that documentation should be easily accessible, what should we call this thing? Not a handbook ... An inventory or list, taxonomy even? An archive? A library of how-to manuals or toolkits, even a protocol? A recipe collection or a cookbook? – Eeva Berglund (2018, 10)

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Epistemic generosity

When I was a child, I liked to imagine 'what if' interventions. From time to time I would dare to explore the 'but then' consequences and failures, ending up with a few bruises on my knees and hands, maybe even some scratches on my face – nothing irreversible, though such trial and error often entailed painful consequences. Nevertheless, such lofty, explorative games expose us to great heights, thus making their appeal all the more fun. They are challenging – risky even – yet they still comprise intensive learning.

This book invites the reader to substitute the 'as if' mechanism of play and disguise with the 'why not' of trial and error, exploring what such experiments could achieve – if anything – and how they might appear. It seeks to alter the limits of what is possible in anthropological research while emphasising the gesture of researching with, and not just of and for. The pages that follow reflect on how experimental anthropology can create new forms of collaborative research with artists and designers, and therefore expand our notions of knowledge. Along the way, the book examines an untapped potential for exhibitions to act as ethnographic devices, thus enabling analytical experimentation and multilinear forms of relating in the field, instead of merely being used as representation techniques. The research described in this chapter reveals the preparations for and reactions from the exhibition *Objects of Attention*, which set out to explore varied ways of experimenting with objects and with professionals not trained in anthropology. For this show, held from January to May 2019, two designers and 10 artists active in the field of contemporary art were invited to revise ordinary things into epistemic objects. They made the materiality of objects visible in new ways while encouraging visitors to think about migration, gender relations, environmental sustainability, robotics, labour conditions and obsolescence (Figs 1.1 and 1.2).

This ethnography thus presents the ways in which an anthropologist can make use of objects and exhibitions as instruments of social research,

Fig. 1.1 Entrance to the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

Fig. 1.2 Interior gallery space of the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

turning these methods into an object of study. It shows how both objects and exhibitions can be used not only for communicating research results to audiences outside of academia, but also for practising experimental forms of ethnography. By expanding the role of the anthropologist and

our relationships in the field, this research examines the methodological potential of a more experimental form of ethnography. The research opens up innovative relationships between people and things and shows how innovation can be generated through epistemic generosity, preserving the plurality of knowledges in the field, even if divergent, and despite complicating our ethnographies.

Ethnographic Experiments explores both the practices and concepts of contemporary art and design, and considers how these two fields of expertise can be reflected upon anthropologically. However, this book is not intended to be a distant anthropological discussion of or about art, nor an example of design as anthropology. Here ethnography works rather by curating and design, drawing on techniques from different fields to enhance the contemporary ambitions of anthropology and develop new forms of field research. In doing so it complicates traditional boundaries and notions of relevance in the discipline (such as where and what the field of our practice is, as well as the interaction between different fields).

While exploring what it means to be an expert designer and artist, I also embarked on an anthropological study of knowledge production through exhibitions. In the art projects described in this book I acted as a curator, mobilising material, financial and human resources for creating exhibitions of contemporary art while simultaneously studying the very processes and relations generated before, during and after the different projects. In some cases this involved juggling multiple roles and statuses in the field which in turn influenced my fieldwork, through the aesthetic pruning and difficult negotiations that curatorship entails.

There are elements of this book that some anthropologists will find unorthodox, some artists will find too tied up with words and some designers will find amateurish and too contemplative. All of them may be right in their own way. While some academics may find the narrative too soft and irreverent, a curator who read an early draft of this text found it to be too hard and serious, thus showing the limits of this boundary-testing project.[1] In any case, *Ethnographic Experiments* is not a book immediately to concur with but one to reflect on. It is an intriguing quest across different epistemic boundaries, an oblique account of the makings of different modes of inquiry, working in the interstices and peripheries of different professions. As such, this book may raise more questions for its readers (including anthropologists, artists, curators and designers) than it answers, encouraging them to make up their own points of guidance.

Should a reader wish to complicate things even further, this book can also be read from the middle, beginning with any of the master insights written by different participants in the project and then moving

backwards and forwards. Because *Ethnographic Experiments* is not structured as an evolutionary progression, it rather celebrates patchwork passages and cut-up techniques. The choreographic form of writing is part of the methodology; it resembles the experience of visiting a contemporary art gallery, with dozens of people and artefacts strategically positioned around the space. The organisation of the chapters also intends to be attuned with the complex yet fascinating process of exploration, collaboration and boundary tests. So let the game begin!

Beyond the borders

What happens when an anthropologist invites 10 artists and two designers to engage with an ordinary object and redesign it to serve as a political question or as an epistemic device? What kind of reactions and dynamics does this curating gesture provoke and expose? And how does anthropology relate to its own epistemic limits and changing notions of fieldwork?

In his review of *Objects of Attention*,[2] cultural critic Hanno Soans noted that the curator was 'playing away' from his home discipline, conquering new territories yet not behaving as a coloniser. He presented myself, the curator, as being more interested in the 'objecting' artefacts of Aztecs and Incas than in possessing the new-found land. As Soans put it, this was an 'epistemic ziggurat' about the kinds of things that cannot be easily translated into words and lie beneath the threshold of verbal knowledge, thus forming a pyramid-level complexity.[3]

The feedback was often unexpected, multiplying itself and arriving through different channels and from both known and unknown sources. In some cases comments were made in the middle of crowded events at the museum, my fieldsite; others derived from people writing me a message on Facebook or via email. Besides media reviews there were guided tours, public lectures and workshops, as well as comments made outside the traditional place and duration of fieldwork. As an example, the day before the exhibition ended I met with Martin at a party. A professional designer who also teaches at the university, Martin had seen the exhibition three times. As we sipped our gin and tonics he told me he was 'intrigued by the strange feeling of someone stepping into my terrain, entering into my kingdom, but with different rules'.

Martin made me feel as if I were a kind of Trojan horse, arranging a treacherous cooperation between enemies – or perhaps a smuggler who crossed over borders, negotiating barbed wire, methodological landmarks and disciplinary stone markers. I have to admit that I did sneak into

Martin's epistemic territory, albeit only to see what it was like. I entered his discipline and left soon after in order to keep my disciplinary identity more or less intact.

Indeed, this book serves to challenge the very idea of disciplines as bounded contiguous territories to be defended. We all are constantly trespassing into someone else's epistemic land, not always requesting permission to absorb extraneous knowledge or make use of someone else's tools and ideas. Likewise, inter- and transdisciplinary gestures can feed back into the cores, contributing to renewing or reconfiguring existing disciplines.

But would Martin consider this a design exhibition? I pondered on this as I took my smartphone from my pocket to start writing down his comments. There I found an answer to this question, which I quickly transcribed:

> This is not a design exhibition because there is no possible application or functionality in these objects. Some of the objects might even work as anti-design, not following the tasks of design, which is to make the lives of people easier, and to form the future in the present.

This insight kept me thinking about what a problematic object of study design is for anthropology. Design is most often enrolled in the production of future, victorious scenarios and the construction of the contemporary. Anthropology has a different point of contact with life – paying attention to vanishing things and concrete relations and people as they are in the present. We could even say that anthropology has defeat and loss as the main object of study, whereas designers rather choose to focus on victorious interventions.

As a parallel, contemporary art appears as a playground where those futures are dreamed (and in some cases tested). In any case, both design and exhibitions could be approached as more than simply 'outputs' in ethnographic practice; rather they could be considered as a type of knowledge in-the-making and a form of anthropological research in their own right. Passionate in his insights, Martin went on to make a very strange comment. He observed that the objects of the show are 'like watermelons. You have no idea how it looks from the inside out; it is a puzzle without a correct answer'. Martin also explained that the products he designs only become objects when they are possessed by someone; they might subsequently become artworks by being displayed in a museum. 'Once displayed, they stop being functional and become carriers

of stories,' he concluded, leaving me with more questions than answers. Carriers of stories…

The designers I met during the show seemed to be hungry for the future; they spoke as if design was the arena in which our tomorrow is created. Following a strong desire to anticipate the future, designers tend to see what ought to be there and to ignore what actually is. They mobilise all their efforts to materialise future realities, actively changing what exists for something they consider much better. Designers are inter-ventionist; they work 'simultaneously with the conceptual and the material' (Berglund 2016, 31), as if contradicting the aesthetic state of things would be their main mission.[4] Instead of focusing on how things are, designers prefer to discuss things as they might be. They are thus not interested in the process of gaining reality (Yaneva 2009; Gaspar 2013), but rather of transforming it – through the elaboration of alternative scenarios, creating and testing futures.

Design scholar Mat Malpass seems to agree with this critique, arguing that design is a practice that seeks to 'speculate about new ideas through prototypes and storytelling' (2017, 54). The importance of imagination and speculation in design practice has also been noted by Guy Julier, who proposes approaching design as an intrinsic part of the collective imagination.[5] Julier was also among the visitors to *Objects of Attention* and attended our symposium. In his book *The Culture of Design* (2000), he foregrounds how design methods have become more scientific and reflexive, generating their own concepts, interrogating the unstable boundaries between design and use, and establishing design as a distinct form of knowledge production.[6] Some other design theorists, such as Nigel Cross (2004), also foreground that expertise in design has some aspects that are significantly different from expertise in other fields, for instance attention to 'problem scoping'.[7]

For Ott Kagovere, the exhibition's graphic designer, design is an intrinsic part of human cognition and the ability to design is indeed widespread; some people appear to be more skilled than others, however, while they also conform better to normative notions of good and bad design. In critical design thinking, therefore, a key question to ask is who defines what good and bad design might be. In his talk at the exhibition symposium, the day after the opening, Ott provided an interesting insight into the paradoxical approach of professional designers towards vernacular visual communication, distinguishing between those who have to do design and those who choose to do it. As he put it, amateurish works expand the practitioners' view and the boundaries of what is possible to think or do in his field. A member of the audience then asked Ott about the

reason why contemporary designers are fascinated with design that is commonly viewed as 'ugly'. To this Ott replied that it is not a fashion trend but rather part of the history of design, as the edgy, marginal and repulsive could all be at the centre of future-making.

For Wendy Gunn and Jared Donovan (2012), the main resemblance between anthropologists and designers is the ability to interpret daily activities and imagine oneself into another person's world. Anthropologist Adam Drazin has added some nuances to the discussion by noting that design concepts are always produced (and made meaningful) in relation to their context, hence they manifest existing social relationships while trying to actualise the future in the present.[8] Following that purpose, designers make use of anthropological concepts and ethnography to identify cultural patterns, gain a rich understanding of users and link people's actions and thoughts together (van Veggel 2005). For anthropologists, by contrast, the fascination with design mostly stems from how ideas and symbolic thoughts are materialised and the speculative capacity this offers to think about the future in relation to the present (see Gatt and Ingold 2013; Garvey and Drazin 2016; Murphy 2016).[9]

Over the last decade, design has become associated with an anthropology of the contemporary, developing new epistemic tools to study timely phenomena and intervene in the field (Rabinow et al. 2008). In my project, the exhibition became a site of design and artistic engagement, a joint space from where I could reconfigure the boundaries of ethnographic methods. A key challenge was thus being aware of the different standards, interests and research techniques that existed between the diverse practitioners involved. In devising *Objects of Attention* we tried to interweave our parallel epistemologies and create a common ground that would enable the participants to set aside their differences and work with and through them. We were not always successful, since doing this meant working at the borders of what is possible in our respective fields and with what is considered valuable knowledge, simultaneously producing and accounting for the process.

Another key challenge was for the project to create its own audience across disciplinary boundaries and at the intersection (and threshold) of different fields of study and expertise. Indeed, one of the key things I learned was that the ability to speak several disciplinary languages would allow me to move on to a different level of collaboration, becoming more receptive of other idiosyncratic logics and idioms even if I failed to master them. Such a cross-disciplinary exercise not only required entering unfamiliar territories and borrowing positions, but also, in a more complex process, unlearning some of my own disciplinary grammar.

Meanwhile I, as an anthropologist, should continue to be reflexive about my own ethnographic engagements, personal impact in the field and research equipment.

As a result I often found myself asking the question: Francisco, how much disciplinary freedom can you afford?

And
why
are
you
doing
this?

Methodological crossovers

Ethnographic Experiments sets out to expand anthropology's repertoire of tools by attending to different cultures of practice and the way in which artists and designers can be methodologically implicated in anthropological research. By doing so, this book engages with the procedures that define social scientific work, presenting research design as an open-ended and performative process. The ethnographic data thus emerges as the result of the joint efforts of the different actors involved in the field, co-constructed through their interactions and decisions. Here experimental collaborations take place during fieldwork, while one is there, instead of after or before entering the field. An intrinsic difficulty of this project, however, is that it involves a simultaneous exercise of doing and undoing, turning the ethnography into a gesture of epistemic generosity.

This is consequently both a methodological and personal project, requiring a disposition to tinker and to explore by trial and error different forms of knowledge-making. It intersects with different fields and skills, expanding the ways in which ethnographic research is undertaken and brought into public discussions. By arranging experimental relationships with and through objects, the research explores possible modes of combining anthropological fieldwork and the curatorial practice.

These objects were assembled as devices for laying out knowledge in-the-making, contributing to materialise the field while testing the contours of new ethnographic practices. Besides working with five experts from the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design for the exhibition *Objects of Attention* (11 January–17 March 2019), I also collaborated with 10 artists,[10] two designers, an illustrator, three scholars,[11] three performance artists, three photographers, three students of interior architecture

Fig. 1.3 Visitors to the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Jarmo Nagel, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

and a choir. The mixed composition of *Objects of Attention* was commented on by the audience, noting the risk of failure. For instance, during the opening a man close to my own age jokingly explained to me that *Objects of Attention* should not be considered an exhibition, 'but a conversation' (Fig. 1.3).[12]

Engaging with such a range of feedback was, of course, a challenge. Marika Agu, curator of the Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art, described the project as 'too eclectic; it looks like a tapas exhibition, in which one gets to taste a bit of different topics'. Her colleague Sten Ojavee added:

> It is too conceptual; I wish you had been around when I visited the exhibition so you could explain it. It was hard to follow without knowing its context.[13]

Too conceptual for curators and too experimental for scholars, this might be the story of a failure. It could be that anthropologists are not just failed novelists, but also bad curators.[14] But what, after all, is the aesthetic responsibility of an anthropologist? During my own guided tours I used Marika's feedback to provoke reactions from the audience. Within one of the groups, Maria reacted by noting that the exhibition looked more like a *tutti-frutti* ice-cream or smoothie than a tapas display. Maria's comment

and the *tutti-frutti* and tapas feedback made me wonder whether what I was doing is some form of disciplinary pecking (*picoteando*).[15] I identify with such a description and the idea of generating one flavour through the mixing of multiple fruits – in the case of a research project, combining ingredients from different contexts and participants, thus producing a mixed methodology.

Both metaphors, tapas and *tutti-frutti*, also raise concerns about our disciplinary identities and how our work could be measured differently. For an exhibition, the measure of success could be the number of participants per square metre, instead of the names of the artists, the number of visitors or the price of the artworks. My score would be quite high if that were the criteria of assessment, as I achieved 47 participants per 36.6 square metres. And yet the whole was even greater than the sum of its parts, given the intensity of relations, the number of people and the variety of objects, ideas and ways of reasoning.[16]

The selection of artists expanded upon a previously existing relationship of collaboration and, in some cases, of friendship. Thus a certain level of trust and confidence had already been established before the project. The list was limited to 10 artists because of financial and spatial constraints, as well as the belief that 10 political concerns would have a sufficiently representative power. Everyone actively involved in the project was paid for their work except me. Before the opening, and while discussing details of the exhibition with a local curator (such as the budget of nearly €10,000 that came from five different institutions),[17] he told me, visibly upset, that people like me were spoiling the local art scene because of our decision to curate exhibitions for free. I replied that the exhibition itself was not the final goal of my project, in the sense of creating a product to be consumed aesthetically or to fill a room institutionally. Rather the exhibition was designed as an ethnographic device, making use of objects to create collaborative and experimental knowledge. Nor was this curator convinced by my story of making creative use of art exhibitions to study the reactions that they provoke. 'You are now a professional curator!' he replied, explaining that this time the setting was a state museum, the budget was generous and I was working with professionals who earned their living from staging such exhibitions.

While some people thought of me as an experienced risk-taker, others saw me as an amateur without a clear plan. I assumed then that, if amateur, I would be but a professional one – not a jack of all trades but an experienced master of none. Crucially, however, my priorities were different to those of a professional curator with a traditional training in the field and working for an art institution. The reasons for this were as follows:

1) The museum for me was not a normative apparatus, but an operating space from where to test different boundaries and experiment with knowledge-making
2) I wanted to understand the different resources and standards that need to be mobilised to make the exhibition possible, and the best way was to make one myself
3) I was curating everything (not only the exhibition), including my research questions, tools, audience and notions of relevance and evidence
4) In my practice, it was crucial to make time for some kind of ethnographic excess to grow, as well as to design devices and formats that would allow for discussions with both the multiple actors involved and with the visitors

Besides aesthetic skills, what distinguished me from an experienced curator was not just the fieldwork practice and the anthropological toolkit, but also the long hours spent at the desk transcribing my reflexive notes, engaging with them in a written, analytical form, producing many drafts and moving between different levels of abstraction. My interlocutor was unconvinced.

Another curator who read an early draft of this book commented that I was not being entirely honest. Why did she think this? 'Because you are presenting as important details that are not worth considering as knowledge. Indeed, one of the main tasks of a curator is to choose what to ignore,' she replied. I responded that one of the key points of the typescript, which she was holding in her hands, was precisely to show how each of us come to understand different things as 'knowable', precisely because of our diverse disciplinary backgrounds. 'Then you have to define clearly what knowledge is,' she insisted. To this I replied that in order to trace how relevance is decided, I had to work with several different definitions of knowledge, not just one. Not giving up, the curator concluded, 'That is to say that in order to understand how knowledge works, you don't have to define it'. Exactly so. 'But it makes no sense to me!' she complained.

Undoing expertise

> Only cut corners you can tape back later.
> Simone Giertz (2019)[18]

In the opening quote of this section, Simone Giertz tells us about how complicated our relationship to boundaries, corners and walls can become,

thus raising existential concerns. Should we avoid epistemic boundaries on any account?

In anthropology, engagement with not-knowing is as old as the discipline itself, assuming that any social group has their own complex epistemology, not an inferior one, and has limited knowledge as a working principle. In plain words, everyone is a native or an expert in something. Multiple ways of doing things appear as core to the emergence of anthropology as a discipline, driven by an awareness that other forms of knowledge, and of investigating it, are possible. The anthropologist does not have to be a natural or an expert in something to do fieldwork. Indeed, what works is the opposite: a reflexive (de)familiarisation process or estrangement. It is intrinsic to anthropology to discover as strangers what others know as natives. In the study of how humans arrange themselves materially and relationally, anthropologists learn by borrowing epistemic positions, acting as professional strangers and then producing analytical writing about the knowledge gathered in the field. Our construction of the field is based on the observation of particular attitudes to knowledge, as well as our promiscuous capacity to engage with other forms of expertise (a form of letting go that involves both risks and responsibility). As a consequence, fieldwork makes it possible to find what you did not know you were looking for – and that (half-discovery, half-construction) can be achieved in many ways.

Not-knowing can be thus both an object of study and a gesture to be cultivated, presenting our capacity of gathering ethnographic data as our main expertise. In developing methodological and conceptual tools to understand what it takes to become highly competent in a given culture, anthropologists are masters at comprehending someone else's expertise. Our toolbox includes unlearning and the capacity to divest ourselves of our disciplinary expectations and practices, seeking to preserve the unknown as a necessary condition for knowing anew. In some instances (when our existing knowledge prevents us from knowing), we have to distance ourselves from the known in order to be able to come closer to other knowledge and make way for new things to unfold. In practical terms this means learning how to unlearn, referring to the ability of keeping what we consider to be knowledge and matters of relevance open to question (Arantes 2021; Di Puppo et al. 2021; Waltorp 2021).

Such an approach to expertise positions the ethnographer as a continuing learner and field-maker in a Sisyphean quest for knowledge. Nevertheless, all this does not happen automatically, as if there were an 'unlearn' button to press, but by a process of exploring what kinds of knowledge our disciplinary methods tend to ignore. Moreover, we are

well aware that unlearning is not always pleasant and may produce uncertainty over knowledge. What kind of apprenticeship is thus required to ensure disciplinary unlearning? Fixed, clear-cut disciplinary boundaries facilitate comprehension of what makes sense and allow disciplines to generate a supportive feeling of being 'at home'. However, unlearning may open up new possibilities for intervention and investigation, establishing a zone of creativity and experimentation in which the dialogue between one's own way of seeing things and someone else's is possible. My position of undoing my own expertise led me to think about what anthropology is good for and what kinds of devices can help to transgress its own boundaries and limitations. So I ended up asking a rather annoying question: what is professional vis-à-vis anthropology?

Nevertheless, this ethnography is not interested in demarcating epistemic jurisdictions,[19] but rather in probing the spaces between professional worlds. It is therefore not meant to conquer and colonialise someone else's territory of expertise; rather, it aims to surpass disciplinary limits (starting with my own), without breaking too many regulations, standards and glasses. The research proposes learning to think with others by trial and error, based on a method of generating, implementing and assessing field devices through many iterations. The processes of unlearning emphasise the importance of knowing our epistemic limits over performing expertise. In *Objects of Attention* I faced not only the limits of my own ability to participate, but also, in some cases, being placed by other participants at the periphery of what was going on as if I were their assistant – a situation that made it impossible to project any sense of authority or control over the field. Indeed, my role in the research oscillated between playing the lead to being a minor character in the same day, causing me to face diverse and competing relational obligations. I had therefore to learn how to navigate these complex oscillations to avoid working collisions, and to enable participants to play their parts in their own way.

As noted by anthropologist Summerson Carr (2010), expertise has to be understood in relation to communities of practice since it is a form of enacting knowledge. She adds that such enactment is both inherently interactional (involving different actors and objects) and inescapably ideological (based on the hierarchies of value and legitimacy). Both the field and expertise are things that people enact, and they are consequently subject to change.

Indeed, the conditions under which ethnographies are produced and theorised are changing. We note, for instance, the multiplication of information available, shifts in the politics of research funding, new forms

of collaboration in the research process and the increasing experimental combination of dissimilar knowledges in academia (Holmes and Marcus 2005). Such a multiplication is important because it points out that the sources of disciplinary changes no longer stem from within anthropology – at least, not only from there (Martínez 2020). Considering how anthropology relates horizontally to other cultures of expertise, and the way in which we are collaborative, leads in turn to a recalibration within anthropology, precisely because of the potential of experimental collaborations to transcend disciplinary boundaries and its resourcefulness as a practice (Estalella and Criado 2019).

Traditionally anthropological training provides competencies that embrace transgressive sensitivity, as well as the acceptance of self-limitations and the incompleteness of knowledge. Yet in exploring the limits of how to practise unlearning, an important question arose: how best to integrate not-knowing into my exchanges with others taking part in the project. Also engaging with this question, STS scholar Matthias Gross suggests acknowledging unknown factors as an intrinsic part of knowledge-making, which thus allows 'researchers to surprise themselves' (Gross 2010, 1). As he points out, such 'unknowns' denote an awareness of the limits of knowledge, of incompleteness rather than ignorance, and an acceptance of things that we know that we do not know.[20]

Collaboration across disciplinary boundaries entails the recognition of epistemological pluralism as a resource rather than a problem. It means to labour together despite not being the same, despite the uneasiness of working across difference, despite complicating our professional identification and creating new risks (Fortun and Cherkasky, 1998). In other words, collaboration entails opening new doors, talking to outsiders and welcoming them in. However, changing the outsider–insider roles in the field is only possible through unlearning and epistemic generosity. At some point the matter of establishing a common ground will arise as a problem – one that has to be negotiated in order to make the experimental collaboration sustainable over time. But everything starts at the front door: here you encounter people who are on their way somewhere else, invite them over, accept their knowledge as valid as your own and support their analytical capacities.

We might believe that, as ethnographers, we are the masters of ceremony, observing and participating in someone else's world and knowledge but somehow central to the people and things we observe; and yet most of what we do is on the side of something or someone else (Jackson 2017), engaged in 'not-knowing with others' (Pink and Salazar 2017, 16). The paradox, however, is that such borrowing of positions is

acceptable in our discipline as long as one does not lose one's own professional identity as an anthropologist (Eriksen 2018).

During *Objects of Attention* there was a sense of being in a state equal to incompetency – placed in the middle of something that not even the natives could understand to the end. That feeling of not-knowing did not put the existence or availability of knowledge in question, but rather raised awareness of the multitude of knowledge repertoires with which we were working – in a sort of dialogical field, expanded along with further experimental materialisations. The exhibition set out to create a collaborative platform on which methodological tools from different disciplines and expertise cultures were allowed to meet or even merge, regardless of how *tutti-frutti* and promiscuous they might seem. As a result, the normative idea of the anthropologist as heroic epistemic individual was challenged, foregrounding in turn how ethnographic research is part of a wider ecology of knowledge.[21]

In the museum I was often compelled to enter fields in which I felt unqualified, aware of my non-knowledge, facing the limits of my skills and, in some cases, having to go through a process of unlearning my own disciplinary boundaries, tools, concepts, gestures, manners and even skin. The experience of letting my expertise go allowed openness to other notions of relevance, leaving room for surprising connections and the unknown to unfold. It was an open work that involved loosening my methodologies and generating 'non', 'un' and 'not yet' forms of knowledge in order to access new knowledge and what is supposed not to be known.[22]

The field on display

This is an anthropology that does not simply observe, but also makes the object of investigation. In this project, the field is constructed in the same fashion as exhibitions: here the framework, the space, the objects, the public, the relations and the rituals are made with the research, not simply discovered or given. The research describes how ordinary objects, here redesigned through experimental interventions, acquire a capacity to generate new questions and make possible disparate kinds of relations in the field. Nevertheless, exhibitions have traditionally been used in order to re-present knowledge previously garnered in the field. The novelty brought here, therefore, is the fact that what we present is the field itself, changeable and contestable, showing knowledge in-the-making. The display of the field is thus part of the ethnography carried in

this project – a gesture that is itself a stand on knowledge and innovation, as well as a form of participation in the research.

All ethnographies might be somewhat experimental, yet the degree of experimentation varies depending on the existing entanglements, open-endedness and testing ambition of the research: in other words, how we design our work and with whom. This ethnography approaches experimentation as a method in the field, as a form of representation and as a manner of doing analysis. One of the key referential works in my research has been the anthology *Experimental Collaborations: Ethnography through fieldwork devices* (2018). This presents the field as an exploratory fabrication, characterised by sketching learning processes with the capacity to reconfigure traditional genres, formats and ways of making and documenting. In the introduction to the volume, Tomás S. Criado and Adolfo Estalella note that tinkering and testing joint efforts have generative methodological potentials in the social sciences, in turn affecting our research outcomes. This project is also inspired by previous attempts at re-functioning anthropological methodologies through (collaborative, experimental) devices, such as, for instance, Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Adolfo Estalella's (2016) work with free culture collectives in Madrid. Here ethnographic prototypes functioned as boundary objects, enabling new opportunities for social research and for infrastructural relations.[23]

This project follows the path taken by a variety of colleagues, contributing to ongoing discussions about new ways of creating research questions with regard to changing infrastructures of collaboration (Collier 2013; Ferguson 2012; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Rabinow et al. 2008). *Ethnographic Experiments* also follows on the heels of contemporary epistemic debates that describe the changing conditions under which ethnographies are produced, designed and theorised, presenting research methods as being performative. They are said to be 'alive' (Back and Purwar 2012), inventive (Lury and Wakeford 2012), a journey (Laine 2018) and laboratory-like (Macdonald and Basu 2007), producing knowledge through gathering or making ethnographic devices in an experimental, collaborative way. A series of field arrangements were constructed, materially heterogeneous and with a variety of forms. From a methodo-logical point of view, the research demonstrates that the gathering and communication of ethnographic data can go beyond the traditional delimitation of a single method and of a single approach, articulating ethnography with other genres in a constant process of expansion and hybridisation. In this way the research contributes to ongoing discussions about how the contemporary brings about new forms of research, with

novel techniques of gathering material and with continuous dialogue between theory and practice (Faubion and Marcus 2009).

Indeed, there seems to be increasing momentum for these issues. While writing this text, I discovered different initiatives that approach art as both a process and a product of ethnographic research. Parallel to this project, several books were published on the topic. The first publication, *Across Anthropology*, edited by Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius (2020), reflects on ways to diversify how anthropology is undertaken in relation to the curatorial practice and museum infrastructures. For that, the authors propose a mode of operating that is defined as a transanthropological method, working from within. The second edited volume, *Exhibitions as Research*, argues that exhibitions have the potential to create research surplus and involve different ways of knowing. From the perspective of museum studies, editor Peter Bjerregaard tries to answer the question of how to exhibit something that is still in the making, the end result of which we do not know. This is a very important issue, considering that experiments challenge the usual division of expertise in the museum. These kinds of art institutions have the authority to provide 'final truths for its objects' instead of exploring the world (Bjerregaard 2020, 4).

Additionally, anthropologist Inge Daniels curated an exhibition based on her research on domestic spaces in Japan. The project also explored the potential of the exhibition as an immersive device that allows visitors to conceive other forms of living. In the monograph *What Are Exhibitions For?* (2019), Daniels reflects on her experience, focusing on how visitors interacted with objects during the exhibition and what happened to the exhibits afterwards.[24] Denielle Elliott and Dara Culhane have also experimented with multimodal genres as a form of research; they propose an ethnography characterised as unruly, disruptive and disorderly. Their edited volume, *A Different Kind of Ethnography* (2017), describes some of the experiences of the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography – a collective that tries to move beyond the observational paradigm in anthropology by combining ethnographic and creative practices.

A decade ago, in three pioneering volumes (2006, 2010, 2013), Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright explored the 'border zones' and 'divisions' between contemporary art and anthropology. They placed an emphasis on discursive affinities and the common ways of working (which might appear as either overlapping or joined separateness), proposing that the existing difference between these two fields can be used as a productive resource to deepen our ethnographies. Schneider and Wright thus invite both anthropologists and contemporary artists to work together and learn directly from each other's practices in the field, rather

than simply making use of the counterpart's methods and concepts. In this vein, and after noting that they both approach socio-material encounters and relationships as 'the work', Schneider and Wright refer to ethnography as a kind of art and contemporary art as a kind of anthropology. The three edited volumes have provided inspiration and certainly advanced discussions on the topic, even if there is still a sense of having to justify collaborations created not just with words but also hands-on, with works.[25]

In a study of participatory art projects in Barcelona (2015), Roger Sansi suggests thinking beyond the methodological affinities. Instead he seeks to emphasise the different kinds of interrelations and ways of taking part in the field generated by these practices of collaboration. He found that the affinities between contemporary art and anthropology are theoretically and politically complex, both in their processual aspects and their collective thinking/making. Sansi presents contemporary art as a way of sharing and making public (facilitating situations of encounter and also fabricating relations). For that purpose anthropologists can indeed be as idiotic and obsessive as artists. In contrast to them, however, anthropologists cannot act as stalkers, thieves or dealers because 'we are the police … representatives of a corporation, academia, that is defined by a set of rules' (Sansi 2018, 37).

Also engaging with these debates, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov proposes conducting fieldwork as conceptual art, constructing the object of study while depicting it and extracting reactions from visitors. He defines this methodological mode of intertwining theory and practice as 'ethnographic conceptualism' (2013a). Using this method, the space of an exhibition is turned into an open site for constructing anthropological inquiries by generating an audience's response to a curatorial project.[26] The anthropologist Felix Ringel has also practised conceptual fieldwork in order to study ongoing epistemic changes in Hoyeswerda. The failure of the postsocialist transformation in this German town has created an acute downward spiral of decline and a crisis of meaning. Through columns in the local newspaper, a youth camp and a communal art project, Ringel intervened in the field by facilitating and expanding epistemic collaborations during his research.

In our case, the exhibiting of the field became a key part of the processes studied. Making use of an exhibition as an ethnographic artefact in its own right has indeed several precedents; there is nothing intrinsically new in the collaboration of anthropologists with those who have no academic background, working across the boundaries of our discipline and even suspending our disciplinary habitus (Bendix et al. 2017). An example

of this is Michael O'Hanlon's project *Paradise: Change and Continuity in the New Guinea Highlands*, which opened in the Museum of Mankind in London in 1993. O'Hanlon also provided one of the first ethnographic accounts of the nature of curating, reflecting while preparing the exhibition on the very process by which an anthropologist was collecting objects, including engaging with local protocols, negotiations, interests and practical concerns. The exhibition itself was an anthropological artefact, in which objects, texts and atmospheres worked in conjunction to produce meaning.[27]

More contemporary examples of exhibiting innovative forms of anthropology engaged in – or in conversation with – contemporary art practice include the 'Ethnographic Terminalia' collective, which has curated group exhibitions and projects in major North American cities since 2009 (see Brodine et al. 2011). The collective playfully explores issues of reflexivity, reconfiguring forms of collaboration and representation in the field by bringing scholars and artists together in the gallery space. As they conclude, forms of curation in anthropology are yet to be imagined, creating new relationships between different practitioners, researchers and stakeholders.

All these initiatives contribute to the understanding of how artists, designers and anthropologists decide to work the same terrain. In this project, however, we tried to forge a common epistemic perspective in which the heterogeneity of experimental collaborations can coexist and materialise. One of the novelties of this research is that it takes the transdisciplinary relation as the object of study while exploring experimental and collaborative forms of ethnography. This ethnography equally engages with the debate on what we can express with, through and within an object, how particular things do other things and the way in which objects might resist our analytical efforts, establishing their own situated learning while calling themselves to the attention of the visitor.

Overall, there cannot be exhibitions without collaboration and experimentation. For me, doing exhibitions has been like playing with other children, because anthropologists are too often mired in office work, spending too much time in front of the computer. Such an explorative gesture allowed me to observe how the field is emerging from our theory and through our methodology.

Notes

1   Anthropologist Thomas Yarrow had a similar experience with his ethnography in an architectural studio. When he shared the manuscript with the architects, they commented that it was 'a bit dense', noting that 'It's as though you've constructed a building and left the

scaffolding on' (2019, 5). Yarrow also noted that the non-academic readers were more interested in the descriptive passages than in the conceptual reflections and theorised arguments. He thus attempted to rewrite the manuscript in a less argumentative manner, giving more imaginative space to readers and turning the anthropological scaffolding into an invisible presence.

2 Soans also noticed that the show develops 'a subconscious archaeology on the relationship between the world of technology and the world of art', which in his view could be traced from the cave of Altamira to Donald Trump. See Hanno Soans, 'Alateadvuse arheoloogia tehnoloogilises kunstis', *Postimees*, https://kultuur.postimees.ee/6532578/alateadvuse-arheoloogia-tehnoloogilises-kunstis?fbclid=IwAR3sdorWVFLRPfJwWNnI_6OPXsOA-x_RFIH8hP-7hov04QozziT3SVK5cWY. Accessed 24 June 2021.

3 Relying on Georges Bataille's (2004) book *Literature and Evil*, he emphasised the negative work of the objects and proposed taking them as 'evil flowers', fertile and inevitable.

4 For designers, their field is a battleground where desirable futures are at odds. Designer Judy Attfield described design as 'things with attitude' (2020). In her view, design plays a political and aesthetic role in our lives, materialising the possibility of social change and as way of capturing the everyday.

5 Design is mobilised to develop a vocabulary of understanding and fashion new dispositions (Julier 2000), transforming the messiness of matter into material culture through techno-aesthetic interventions (Boscagli 2014). Nonetheless, designs embody existing orders of worth too and are part of the construction of a normative landscape.

6 Julier holds that the visual appearance of objects is still a key part of design work, yet one of the principal differences between design and visual culture is that the former always includes reflections on what constitutes design and often assimilates ethnography during the design process.

7 Not in the sense of extensive problem analysis, but on how given tasks are defined as problematic and in need of solutions.

8 In design practice 'contexts are deployed to explain concepts rather than the other way around' (Drazin 2013, 42).

9 Anthropologist Keith Murphy (2016) outlines three possible configurations of anthropology and design, depending on how relations between participants and objects are framed: anthropology of design, anthropology for design and design for anthropology. As he explains, practicing design for anthropology starts by acknowledging that traditional ethnographic forms are limited to understand the contemporary world and that ethnographic work is inherently interventionist.

10 In this case we are talking about 12 people, as Varvara & Mar are an artist duo and they also involved their assistant, Jesús Rodríguez, as well as Kert Lokotar and Vox Clamantis (12 members) and Jaan-Eik Tulve. At present the members of Vox Clamantis consist of Anna Mazurtšak, Jaanika Kuusik, Jaanika Sink, Kadri Hunt, Miina Pärn, Mari Kalling, Mikk Dede, Sander Pehk, Kuldar Schüts, Anto Õnnis, Taniel Kirikal, Tõnis Kaumann, Ott Kask and Aare Külamaa, all of whom took part in Eléonore's work.

11 Two anthropologists and a media theorist.

12 In some cases the identity of the informant is anonymised. In such instances I did not secure permission to disclose the name or failed to write it down in the middle of the events.

13 Art critic Beti Žerovc (2015) argues that among curators it is common to believe that art events have to be guided and that they should be in charge of describing 'the way things are'. Also Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (2010) have noted a multiplication of educational formats, methods, programmes, models, terms, processes and procedures in art galleries and museums which serve to present the curator's work as in need of commentary and explanation.

14 'Social anthropologists are bad novelists rather than bad scientists' (Leach 1982, 53).

15 For a few seconds I had to reconsider whether the exhibition was about food and wonder if Estonia's climate had unexpectedly gone tropical.

16 *Objects of Attention* was a 'yellow submarine' exhibition: it simultaneously appealed to children, parents and grandparents and oscillated between the surface of the senses and the deeper waters of the subconscious. *The Yellow Submarine* is a music album and an animated film by The Beatles (1969).

17 Funding was not strongly tied to specific expectations by the supporting institutions; it rather required proofs that an exhibition about x topic in y place during z period was organised.

18 Simone Giertz, 2019. 'I turned my Tesla into a pickup truck'. Accessed 24 June 2021. *YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKv_N0IDS2A&feature=youtu.be&t=1399&fbclid=Iw AR2nuMlmmMEemJSfbB9WU7YObuP7WSXnMTxAc4fS1-LMCV-lUTCTHNkrvSU.

19 Dominic Boyer (2008) has also engaged with this in his study of intellectual culture in Germany. He notes that different cultures of expertise entail their own epistemic jurisdictions, which thus places us, as ethnographers, in complex power relations and demanding a reflexive effort to consider how we document and analytically re-frame other expert knowledge into our own. Boyer distinguishes between 'skilled knowing' (possessed, socially and institutionally sanctioned expertise) and 'skilled doing' (experiential and performative knowledge). Both types of expertise are processual, accountable to a community of competent practitioners and dependent on specific learning practices.

20 For his study of how the production of non-knowledge is part of the process of revealing unknown phenomena, Gross (2010) relies on Georg Simmel's work (1906) on secrecy and *Nichtwissen* (non-knowledge). Simmel argued that we are rarely in a position of absolute knowing, but rather stand on the boundary between knowledge and non-knowledge, foregrounding the importance of trust in such intermediate condition. As Simmel concluded (1906), not-knowing is a specific kind of knowledge (not its absence), productive of meanings and entailing awareness of what is not known. Georges Bataille has also discussed the fertile threshold positioning of non-knowledge (*non-savoir*) in relation to knowledge. Nonetheless, he claimed that 'knowledge demands a certain stability of things known' (2004, 133).

21 Such experience made me think of the distinction between knowledge (an abstract construct that reflects social realities and consequently can be 'local', 'scientific', 'practical') and knowers (those involved in a process of understanding, temporal yet more or less accumulative). It also made me reconsider my sense of epistemic authority and the need, in some instances, to retune our own epistemic tools.

22 As in the photographic process, Karin Knorr-Cetina defined this as 'negative knowledge', referring to 'knowledge of the limits of knowing, of the mistakes we make in trying to know … of what we are not interested in and do not really want to know' (1999, 64).

23 Prototyping is seen as a provisional and inclusive practice, which operates in a test mode and allows collaboration and bricolage. Corsín Jiménez and Estalella (2016) used inventive devices for ethnographic elicitation. They introduce a distinction between prototypes for problematisation and for apprenticeship: as an infrastructure that reformats the empirical as a problem (provoking the social into happening) and as a self-eliciting pedagogical form, a sort of 'open source anthropology'.

24 In Daniels' words, 'This exhibition merged the shopping and the museum experience, by allowing visitors to handle mass-produced mundane objects (with the manufacturer name and the price tags attached) that were displayed in interiors which simulated both the home and the store … stressing the importance of consumption practices in the creation of value in people's everyday lives' (2019, 156–7).

25 Still justify to whom? I guess the answer would be to the community of practitioners, to our disciplinary peers, our fellow anthropologists, artists and designers.

26 In the exhibition *Gifts to Soviet Leaders*, co-curated with Olga Sosnina in 2006 at the Kremlin Museum, Ssorin-Chaikov presented a series of objects offered to the Soviet leaders between 1920 and 1990. The project combined anthropological insights on gift-giving with descriptions about the Soviet material culture and power relations (2013b). During the exhibition, the intensive public engagement transformed the museum into a research field, generating unexpected ethnographic data about postsocialist politics, for instance, through the entries written in the exhibition's guest book, which turned into an open-ended ethnographic artefact.

27 This exhibition was fashioned by the interplay between the curator, artists, designers and the museum institution (Lidchi 1997). It reproduced a trade store and a cult house in New Guinea, displaying the characteristic items idiosyncratically made for these kinds of social structures. O'Hanlon's conclusion, however, was that 'the complexities of Wahgi culture could not, pragmatically, be fully explicated in this restricted exhibition space' (O'Hanlon 1993, 136).

2
Putting objects to work

In *Objects of Attention*, the redesigned objects were confined to specific areas and positioned following a trajectory pre-determined by the curator and the space. And yet, depending on the route taken, objects looked and even talked different. The same applies to the sections comprising this book: the author-curator proposes an order following his intuition and in a site-specific manner with the ambition of telling a story.[1] The different sections are loosely connected. They explore the relationship between anthropology and curation, as well as how theory and making are too often divided. The structure of the book seeks to mimic or mirror the structure of an exhibition; it features different pieces that say something in and of themselves, yet beyond this generate something new as a whole. Some readers will approach it like a tapas set that provides different tastes and compositions, or a smoothie that generates one flavour through the combination of the different ingredients. Others will find that the structure's significance lies not in how the sections carry their own distinctive point, but rather in how the puzzle is generated from the combination of these parts. The pieces themselves emerge as distinct tools of a methodological box or steps and examples of a recipe compendium (even though they are merely insights, not prescriptions). All these takes are correct as *Ethnographic Experiments* is open for diverse points of departure, uses and disagreements.

While designing the exhibition, an interesting landmark was the discussion with the museum staff about possible translations of the title into Estonian. The three possible alternatives were *Laetud objektid* (*Loaded Objects*), *Tähelepanu objektid* (*Cautioning Objects*) and *Laetud esemed* (*Loaded Things*). We opted for the first one because it was both less potentially intimidating to a wider audience and more precise than the ambiguous concept of a 'thing', a term that carries less theoretical baggage than objects or artefacts (Henare et al. 2007). Later on, while preparing a

guided tour for a Spanish-speaking audience, I had to translate the title again and realised that none of the previous titles worked well in Spanish. As a result I came up with a third option, with the specific nuances of *Objetos pregunta* (*Questioning Objects*). This version places the emphasis on how these objects raise specific questions (*interpelan*).

Objects can be considered as devices for trial and experimental departures, allowing researchers to cross boundaries in the field and take part in other forms of research and knowledge production. Conceptual experiments thus become richer if those involved can work with things in an open-ended way. Objects might also serve as script devices, modifying the presentation of the social (Harvey et al. 2013; Latour 2000). They have the capacity to index new politics, gestures, plots, stories, concerns and reactions, positioning us in the world and participating in the construction of individual and collective identities. In this sense *Objects of Attention* drew on the assumption that, through objects, we can disseminate critical thought, turning things into devices with which to think (Hertz 2015). The project explored whether a political redesign of objects would contribute to re-scripting relations and produce other kinds of knowledge, thus shaping what we do, what we think and how we organise our lives.

This ethnographic study is therefore an invitation to take ordinary objects as devices to think with and through. It studies already-made objects and the process of redesigning them, as well as what these objects do and what happens to them in different contexts. Indeed, they were participating in my research through action rather than just concept-ualisation (Miller 1987). Each object was growing in significance as it took its inexplicable but apparently necessary place in the exhibition, displaying a particular gravitational power. Altogether, these objects generated a cloud of meanings that produced further links in a relational way – potentially transforming other entities and resisting our efforts to keep well-bounded narratives around them.

Objects of Attention was thus not just a semantic monster or 'another fucking exhibition of ready-mades' (to quote artist Maurizio Cattelan).[2] In the exhibition, refigured objects were displayed as political concerns, making visitors think about migration, gender relations, environmental sustainability, growing automation and new forms of labour exploitation. Seven of the 10 works in the exhibition were commissioned, prepared especially for the project. These objects were not exactly encountered as 'ready-mades', neither were they made (*stricto sensu*); rather, they were 'in the process of becoming art' (Yaneva 2003b, 122), exploratively re-arranged and appropriated, becoming material expressions of the

skilled and conceptual activities of the artists (in some cases conforming and disciplining things, in others making them stand out).

Overall, the objects of the exhibition suffered from the de-contextualising and re-contextualising interventions and appropriations of the artists. They were thus crossing epistemic borders and generating different kinds of knowledge along the way. Themselves subject to entropy and varied cultural and personal perceptions, the selected objects were considered as artworks during the show and subject to maintenance and conservation work. As noted by sociologist Fernando Domínguez Rubio (2020), an artwork is a living organism that must continue to be cared for, otherwise it would be doomed to its disappearance as art and as object. Artworks demand attention, dedication and commitment; they are not just objects of meaning, but also physical ties.

This ethnographic study of the making of an exhibition also aims at understanding the material engagements through which contemporary art is accomplished – in some cases as an ever-evolving material process balancing precarious material equilibriums (Domínguez Rubio 2014). Objects can be considered in themselves as compressed performances, emergent, in a continuous process of formation, never complete, never free from the materials (Ingold 2012), growing 'from the mutual involvement of people and materials in an environment' (Ingold 2000, 347). Likewise, they serve as condensers of multiple makings and material achievements, establishing an affective relationship with other objects and the context in which the things were originally extracted. In this sense, exhibitions can be understood as an assemblage of different processes, not simply of artworks (Domínguez Rubio 2016). This perception similarly shows that knowledge itself might also be considered as stable as an art object and its materials.

Many objects last longer than people, political regimes and the original designs with which they were created. Indeed, approaching things as evidence for cultural, political and behavioural study is not new; objects were a key element in the founding of anthropological museums 150 years ago (Stocking 1985). In recent years, however, there has been a shift from the traditional view of 'objects as repositories' to an understanding of objects as participating in social dynamics, possessing their own kind of material agency that is irreducible to human actions (Gell 1998; Latour 1999). In this light Domínguez Rubio (2016) proposes changing the question 'what do objects represent or symbolise?' to 'what do objects do?' Another sociologist, Mike Michael (2012), introduces the gesture of redesigning objects into idiotic devices to serve as a mechanism of inventive problem-making, enabling speculative practices and an eventful sensibility.

There is much to be gained from paying closer attention to what things do and say. Sometimes, objects may tell us more about people than people can tell about themselves. Think about rubbish, cooking tools, dirty linen or underwear. Artefacts also have a significance beyond their tangible quality, and beyond their designer and maker; they often acquire a power of captivation and auratic meaning that relies, paradoxically, on their very materiality. We need only think of Freud's divan, a statue of Lenin, the hammer and sickle, the hand of Fatima, Gutenberg's press, guillotines, uniforms, amulets, guns and Moctezuma's Penacho feathered headdress. Having objects to ground political and methodological discussions contributes to the understanding of how material things can potentially play an important role in social research.

The items displayed in the exhibition can be considered 'boundary objects' in so far as they contribute to bridging intersecting practices, allowing us to work across different kinds of professionals and audiences. These objects might participate in connection processes as objects of practice that facilitate coordination and interdisciplinary communication, accommodating different interpretations by the various professionals involved and in different contexts. As pointed out by Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer (1989), 'boundary objects' give meaning to diverse participants, even though those taking part might have disparate practices, competences, tools and professional languages. The objects at the exhibition were used to inform and to engage a variety of actors, facilitating collaboration among different disciplines. But they were also ethnographic catalysts, provoking insights in the field and holding different meanings in different social worlds.

Nonetheless, disciplinary boundaries establish a sense of difference and often lead to discontinuity in interaction and collaboration, solidifying normative notions of expertise in a particular bounded domain. However, unlike Thomas Gieryn's concept of 'boundary work' (1999), which focused on instances in which demarcations within fields of knowledge are created or reinforced, and emphasised that competition among scholars is driven by the need to establish epistemic authority, Star and Griesemer studied the ways in which cooperation across the existing lines of division between heterogeneous participants can be overcome. For that, Star and Griesemer observed that boundary objects should be 'plastic' enough to adapt to contextual contingencies, but also 'robust' enough to maintain their shape across boundaries.[3]

These objects can thus play an important role in experimental research encounters, facilitating cooperation among heterogeneous participants and contributing to form a shared context. Boundary objects

can act therefore as knowledge integration mechanisms (Trompette and Vinck 2009), negotiating artefacts that help to embrace the intrinsic chaos of collaborative research and to improve the ability to take others' knowledge into account (Lee 2007).[4] Anthropologist of science Joan Fujimura (1992) goes even further by suggesting that boundary objects do not simply allow collaboration across diverse social worlds. In her view, the co-production and mutual enrolment in crafting these connectors serve in turn to influence the methodologies of the participants, destabilise our disciplinary identities and reconstitute the very objects of study.

Eventually, transdisciplinary research shows how boundary objects can take part and resonate in our work; it also contextualises different forms of knowledge to which experimental collaborations give rise. With boundary objects, anthropology grows ever more capacious, allowing for novel epistemic assemblages (that also includes unknowns). Besides learning about objects and their capacity to turn into research devices and design and contemporary art praxis through fieldwork, the research explores the ethnographic rendering of exhibitions – as knowledge in-the-making and as ethnographic devices. And it does so by engaging with people who have different ways of knowing and doing.

The exotic at home

An object is a gaze-narrowing device. It always reminds us of something, pulling us into view, simultaneously pausing and zooming through it (Stewart 2013). Attention and objecthood are intimately related since they imply the concretisation of a thought and enable the allocation of attention.[5] Objects land in space and time, eventually settling on human perception. They are the shadow of living, trespassing the limits of their own materiality once inserted in a specific social or semantic context. In some cases objects acquire unexpected levels of authority and majesty, hard to remove or erase, liberating energy around them and mediating other objects and meanings. They then become wild things that do not fit anywhere, turned into objects of spectacle and celebrity (Attfield 2020), entailing descriptive struggles if not ontological ones (Domínguez Rubio 2020).

An example of this is the embalmed cat that Emeli Theander chose for her contribution to the exhibition – an object surrounded by silence and mystification. She obtained it for free from a second-hand shop in Berlin, and then *artified* the taxidermy process by adding new colours and things to the cat (Fig. 2.1).[6] Emeli feathered it with the elements of witchcraft, turning the object into a melancholic entity beyond death, a

Fig. 2.1 *Phantom Fleisch* (*Phantom Flesh*) by Emeli Theander. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

sort of a Frankenstein or chimera (a hybrid embodiment of two or more creatures). Yet the deformed body of the cat was presented not as an error, misfit or monstrosity, but rather as a poignant allegory – to address the Anthropocene by asking what is natural in nature. It draws attention to human–animal relations in Western societies, thus highlighting our current environmental anxieties, including resource depletion and practices regarding disposal. Likewise it enacts a shared vulnerability – both of the animal and of the artist. A mythical, charismatic creature that produces both wonder and concern, *Phantom Fleisch* also impels visitors to re-think questions about the death of objects: the taxidermy is redeemed through encounters with the audience.

After decades in dusty storerooms, having faced redundancy in museums, taxidermy is gaining renewed interest. This is a result of actual artistic reactions that search for authenticity and works crafted by hand to compensate for overwhelming conceptualisation and mediatisation of art (Marbury 2014). The earliest known taxidermists were the ancient Egyptians, who preserved the skins of animals together with their feathers or fur, although the term itself derives from the Greek words *taxi*, meaning 'movement', and *derma*, meaning 'skin'. The process consists of stretching animal skins over wooden or foam forms to reproduce the animal's appearance, then mimicking their postures and gestures simulacra-like. In Britain, taxidermy was especially popular in the Victorian era. It was

first practised by explorers and scientists to preserve creatures found far afield and later used by aristocrats to impress their guests with startlingly naturalistic specimens. Later it became possible to establish a parallel between the showcase of taxidermy and the original cabinets of curiosities – organised not only to surprise and teach visitors, but also as displays of wealth and as tentative systems of knowledge.

Since the days of cabinets of curiosities, we have learned that anything may be exhibited in a museum and that any place can function as a gallery. Furthermore, cabinets of curiosities were linked to the emergence of anthropology as a discipline and to material culture as a field of studies; they also became, in a certain way, precursors of today's museums.[7] The objects exhibited in cabinets of curiosities arrived from distant colonies, coming from 'Other' faraway cultures and speaking to the history of the empire. Objects displayed in the cabinets were more than things, standing for something more than merely themselves: they were political, enacting a historical and cultural encounter, and they were also aesthetic, part of a complex pedagogy that produced a derogative and appreciative meaning simultaneously (Morphy and Perkins 2006). These objects were therefore part of how anthropology made its object of study by constructing an idea of the 'Other'.

Indeed, while selecting, extracting, collecting and displaying 'ethnic objects', European explorers were not simply documenting the diversity of the human condition; they were also gaining colonial intelligence about the territories and populations of the empire and establishing a hierarchical division between different parts of the world (Fabian 2004).[8] However, the challenge today is that those who were considered indigenous informants have now become anthropologists, curators and designers themselves.

Regarding the exoticism of *Objects of Attention*, professor of aesthetics Max Ryynänen gave me some interesting feedback via Facebook. His first impression was that he had entered into an eighteenth-century cabinet of curiosities, an 'archaic assembly' (Latour 2005a, 22) that provided a moment of pre-discursive or prehistoric wonder. Shortly afterwards Max realised that this cabinet was curated in 2019 and made use of charismatic objects for ethnographic study, reconfiguring the relationship between the scientific and the artistic. Further, Max concluded that, instead of producing a supplementary world – as curators of contemporary art often do – the show rather engaged in reverse engineering and an aesthetic of objection.

As with cabinets of curiosities, a sense of wonder, normative deviation and cultural representation were prioritised over coherence. The

wall installed at the entrance also contributed to generating these reactions, as well as to enhance the potential for objects to have spatialising effects, or even to be places. The wall stood in front of us, demanding to be broken down or jumped over for a forthcoming revolution, and so providing a highly political artefact. Considering the contemporary preoccupation with frontiers and borders, it was indeed surprising that no visitor vandalised it.[9] Walls are the materialisation of a boundary, producing liminal experiences and the suspension of knowledge. They are thus both a geographical and temporal experience and an object of thought and expression.

A wall establishes multiple relationships of differentiation, separation and defence, thus disciplining the space, affirming power and prescribing fixed habits. Walls both reflect and create values and always raise question of responsibility, maintenance and obligation towards the boundary (Oles 2015). Accordingly, philosopher Ernesto Sferrazza Papa observes that a wall is intimately political, reinforcing specific relations of power through the effects generated by its material constitution. However, the political consequences of walls (as political artefacts) 'do not depend entirely on their physical properties, but rather on the material context they inhabit and in turn create' (Sferrazza Papa 2018, 95). Walls thus act on reality, modifying how the space is experienced and producing social effects, such as impeding people to trespass a border and contributing to determine which actions are allowed to take place.

As in the case of walls, objects help us to find ourselves in the world – not in the sense of being affirmative, but rather because of their placing and interrogative quality. They thrust themselves into our senses and consciousness, triggering re-negotiations (Latour 2004a).

Objects are part of a cognitive ordering of the world. They themselves form part of politics and relations, possessing the power to bridge different spaces, times and scales at once. In acknowledging this, we can see how each of the objects displayed in the show entailed a specific way of multiplying relations – socially, semantically and materially – and not just indexing the agency of the artist (Gell 1998). See, for instance, Eléonore de Montesquiou's contribution to the show. She presented a rescue Bible with a leather fetish-like cover, complemented with a sound installation of a choir singing a series of psalms. The artwork was called *Psalms for Jessi*, and Eléonore invited the leather artist Kert Lokotar and the impressive choir Vox Clamantis to take part in the exhibition (Fig. 2.2). They kindly accepted because of their friendship with the artist and sympathy with the project, as the fee that I could pay was very little.

Fig. 2.2 *Psalms for Jessi* by Eléonore de Montesquiou. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

Jessi, a refugee from Cameroon, was jailed at the Harku Detention Centre for six months because she did not have a multi-entry visa. She describes her own relationship with the Bible in this way:

> I have had it since I was a child … I believe it solves all my problems at any time. I read it and it makes me happy. I have read it all. I also have some favourite texts that I go through depending on the situations which I find myself in.

The object proposed by Eléonore triggered questions about the reasons why people are imprisoned these days and the way that faith requires no visa. The Bible appeared as a sort of interstitial agent, unfolding multiple (social, political, material, spatial and semantic) relationships around the object.[10] As Eléonore explains:

> Art is magical, it allows reality to cross times, spaces and borders. Art does not have to be eternal, but rather to release its singularity. In this sense, I'm influenced by philosopher Gilbert Simondon, who argued that art announces, prefigures and introduces, but does not realise things … its main task it is to transport things from one time and space to another.

One of the key assumptions of this project is that objects have the capacity to encourage discussion, enhance political concern and function as ethnographic devices, challenging socio-political arrangements in the present. In contemporary Western societies we rarely transform information into concern – so that resources can be mobilised to answer

what originally was just information. Accordingly, the 'objectual landscape' of our exhibition set out to object to what we think and how we distance ourselves from social concerns, presenting a series of issues that remind us of a contemporary archaeology field.

Objectual landscape

Artworks are, above all, analytical artefacts, condensing, synthesising and multiplying the knowable. This project proposes to refurbish our ethnographic equipment by making use of artworks and objects as crafted matter for social and cultural inquiry. In the exhibition, each object was both an analytical brick and an ethnographic device, used for building a wider methodological and theoretical house and engaging with the material boundaries of the possible in field research. The selected artworks participated in crafting an objectual ecology of knowledge; they also served to materialise my fieldwork in the form of an epistemic landscape and as objects of discussion (Fig. 2.3).[11]

Treating 'rubbish' and working with discarded material can be a way of objecting to current accelerated rhythms of production, consumption and discard. Art critic Lea Vergine argues that artists' engagement with trash is both a form of revolt and a ceremony of exorcism.[12] After all, we too may soon be discarded. For his installation, Kirill Tulin gathered together roughly one hundred sealed-air packaging cushions from the parcels he has received over several years, in order to highlight the size and weight of contemporary logistics and changes in the concept of use-value. *Sealed Breath* was presented through the over-inflation effect of a bubble sphere, pointing out that the importance or value of things might be found precisely in their uselessness.

For some visitors, the installation revealed the effects of the over-accumulation of plastic and excessive generation of waste, which produces an irreversible ecological footprint. The artist was more interested in the labour behind the packaging material, however, and the object's constrained set of functional purposes. As Kirill noted, he was working on already accumulated labour, transporting into the gallery the global neoliberal mode of production. Ironically, the machines that inflate cloud-like cushions on site use the very same air that the workers breathe while assisting the operation of such machines. So, if you open any of the cushions in the museum, you might liberate a breeze from Bangladesh.

The very materiality of things allows us to access and reproduce cultural meanings and vanishing worlds as the remains of previous
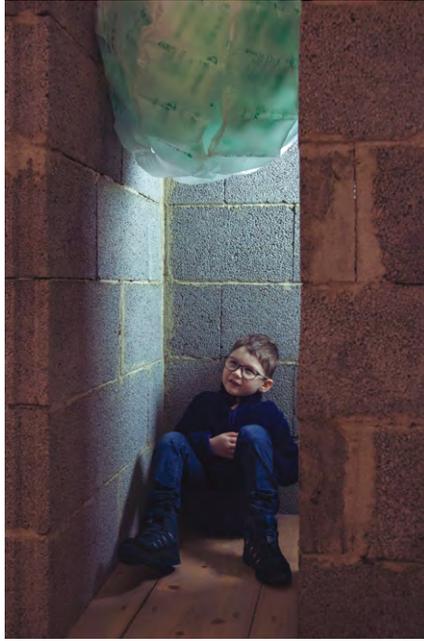
Fig. 2.3   Vincent interacting with Kirill Tulin's installation in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Jarmo Nagel, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

activities. This is also the reason why objects are relevant for anthropological studies, since material culture gives us important clues about the way in which humans live and have lived, learning about their behaviour, beliefs and systems of codification. We can discover many of these things by applying practices of contemporary archaeology. Indeed, archaeologist Colin Renfrew (2003) argues that his experience of excavating and interpreting past remains can be compared with those who visit a gallery of contemporary art for the first time: artists, designers and archaeologists must try to figure out the material world in front of them and make some sense out of an assemblage of artefacts. They have in common an interpretive intervention upon found materials and settings, allowing practitioners to engage directly in relevance-making.[13]

During the exhibition I learned from the Finnish artist Jussi Kivi that, at the centre of the world, there is an object waiting to be found, as if it were a tale by Jules Verne. Jussi contributed to the show with rescued samples (apocalyptic gloves and a poster) from a bunker at Sillamäe's nuclear factory (Eastern Estonia) (Fig. 2.4). The encounter with these

Fig. 2.4 *Nuclear Samples* by Jussi Kivi, displayed in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Francisco Martínez.

items generated a sense of cognitive confusion. On the one hand, they were objects exhibited in a gallery (taken care of, and therefore matter in place); on the other hand, they were originally leftovers found in an old bunker (polluted and dirty, and hence, matter out of place – see Douglas 1966). Also, for some visitors, the work *Nuclear Samples from the former Sillamäe Underground Gallery Collections* highlighted ecological catastrophes and invited the audience to reconsider the use of renewable energy and natural resources. For locals, however, the installation evoked a sense of what everyday life was like under the Soviet regime.

Between 2004 and 2010 Jussi organised different explorative trips into all kinds of manholes in Estonia, together with some friends from the Finnish Romantic Geographic Society. They entered into military bunkers, ruins and underground infrastructures as 'a dark font of possibilities' (Bonnett 2014, 67). In the town of Sillamäe, known for its former nuclear facility, they gathered varied pedagogical and propaganda material. Such objects allowed them to see 'the world of men in awe and the archaeological sensibility of totalitarianism with its own unspeakable romanticism', as Jussi explains, adding that 'I wanted to share the experience before these bunkers were demolished'. As noted by Alastair Bonnett in *Off the Map*, urban explorers show a striking 'affectation for the previously unloved places that they discover' (2014, 56). Jussi rescued a large part of the 'dark, breathtaking' material exhibited in *Objects of Attention*, raising interesting questions about geographical surrealism, the authorship of art and societal risks.

Fig. 2.5 Poster provided by Jussi Kivi and shown in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Francisco Martínez.

Encounters with 'rubbish' are starting points for learning, in the same way as failures and accidents – somehow teaching you against your will that the world is not always stable, knowable and predictable. With the installation *Failure is Practice* (Fig. 2.6) Camille Laurelli addressed the way in which diverse things show different potentials for problems, exemplifying the fragility of the worlds we inhabit and the mistakes of the knowing effort. He gathered a series of damaged tools from mechanical workshops near his studio. These artefacts were certainly unrecoverable and had already crossed the irreversible line of destruction.

Paradoxically, the experience of encountering damaged objects produced a sense of responsibility among visitors. *Garbologist*-like, in the words of William Rathje (1996), these items were gathered together to form an archaeological document of contemporary material culture. The set of broken tools standing on the wall exemplified not only different measures of practice and material aspects of testing, but also the constant struggle between the horizontality and verticality of things. Everything is made to break at some point, yet still we can learn how the distinction between valuable and valueless is site-specific and always part of the production of social order.

All this was my own interpretation, however, because Camille said that he merely wanted to question, ironically, institutional gestures of elevating ordinary objects (even broken ones) to the status of artwork. In this sense, he was rather inspired by the misappropriation of objects

Fig. 2.6 *Failure is Practice* by Camille Laurelli, displayed in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Camille Laurelli.

(*détournement des objets*) described by Michel de Certeau (1980) and by Marcel Duchamp's aesthetics of chance through absurd experiments. Yet, even if we assume that anything can be art, the difference relies on the institutional assessment of deserving care and maintenance or not, making artworks endure as *oeuvres* – not letting them decline into 'things'.[14]

I ask Camille how we can identify what kind of art is relevant. His answer is rather simple:

> Relevance is anything that resists the present, in the sense of not being easily accepted, resisting even the author… No artwork is relevant in the present; I do things for myself, and document it because someone might find it relevant in the future – or not. But there it is, accessible to anyone potentially interested.

Failure can certainly mean a variety of different things. In a process parallel to this exhibition, Camille created his own museum of failure, called 'LVLup'; he collected hundreds of outdated video games and obsolete technological devices to be displayed as valuable cultural waste.[15] Failures leave many *oeuvres* on the side, along the road, on the stairs, abandoned in ditches, gathering dust in the attic. In 1984 sculpture artist Joel Fisher curated the exhibition *The Success of Failure* (Diane

Brown Gallery, New York), which asked whether the art 'system' suppresses the stories of false starts and obstacles encountered in the creative process. Fisher invited other artists to engage with the existing definition of failure and reveal through artwork (judged as a failure by its maker) their own unsuccessful efforts and shortcomings. As Fisher concluded (1984), an artwork is no more and no less than an attempt, and failure is an elaborate fiction loaded with judgement. This idea was recovered in 1997, when Hans Ulrich Obrist curated the exhibition *Unbuilt Roads: 107 Unrealised Projects*. Through this display, based on archival material, he explored the agency of unrealised projects from prominent artists.[16]

Asked to reflect on his involvement in this exhibition, Camille replied:

> I felt that the experimental atmosphere allowed me to fail without bad judgements and to do things that I cannot do in other serious contexts. Also, I enjoyed that Francisco was trying to understand my project before, during and after the show. The polysemy and camouflaged complexity of my artwork was not reduced, as in other previous experiences with curators, but enhanced. The way Francisco did not separate the actual making and the analytical dimensions of the artworks reminded me of Harald Szeemann's project *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form*, organised at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1969. This sort of primitive curating transforms art practices into a prosopopoeia, liberating the process of doing. Paradoxically, it is an anthropologist who makes us, artists, feel in our practice again.

Anthropologists are masterful in describing frames, relations and the materiality of knowledge. As if she were an anthropologist too, photographer Laura Kuusk engaged with current ideologies of domesticity and how objects participate in our patterns of living. For the exhibition, Laura dealt with wallpapers in her work *People Like You*, reflecting upon how dreams and desires are spatialised in haunting kitsch representations (Fig. 2.7). Laura's work unpacked the feelings and aesthetics of dwelling, exploring how consumption takes place ordinarily at home. A functional, prosaic material such as wallpaper makes visible the role of professional home-makers, such as design studios and real estate agencies, which help clients to build up a notion of good taste (Fig. 2.8).

As noted by Laura, wallpapers occupy our space and generate 'joint choreographies' – meaning specific body uses, behaviours and mundane

Fig. 2.7 *People Like You* by Laura Kuusk, displayed in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

gestures, unconsciously adopted. They present biographies, reproduce normativity and create complex relations between different interiors and exteriors. Wallpapers can thus become 'an effective "other" against which one judges oneself' (Miller 2002, 122). Yet what are these things telling us about our lives and the global cultural economy? A wallpaper tells us, for instance, about the ongoing standardisation of our living, yet this is presented as part of a global plurality. They also reveal the way in which objects are integrated into our own body language and eventually participate in the formation and maintenance of knowledge. Indeed, many quotidian things are originally perceived as a disturbance, transgressing our sense of order; only later do they become integrated into our patterns of a living and cognitive system. 'Something similar happens with art-making,' Laura adds. 'There is a lot of repetition, distortion and mimicry in it.'

As Janis Jefferies argues, patterns denote systems of thought. This theorist of visual art reminds us that a pattern can be 'a repeat, a motif, a design, a device, a numerical order or a succession of tones or steps' (Jefferies 2012, 125). Wallpapers also belong to this list, as a patterned textual medium, involving emotional connotations and affective responses. In her public talk at the museum, the day after the opening, Laura explained:

Fig. 2.8   Portfolio of wallpapers by Laura Kuusk, on display in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

> My task was to bring to the fore from the ordinary those things that define or represent us, and then present these objects as an original work, even if it's been done since Antiquity.

Laura is a professional photographer who teaches at the Estonian Academy of Arts. One of her challenges was to contribute to the *Objects of Attention* exhibition by submitting a tangible work that had not been mediated by the camera. The installation of a wooden wall with a portfolio of wallpapers on was thus our 'middle-way' compromise: still using the camera, albeit with a physical outcome.

I subsequently described this negotiation to one of the photographers in charge of documenting the show, Paul Kuimet. He became quite interested in the discussion about the objecthood of images, seeking to argue that every printed photo is an object, in the ontological sense. I replied that every printed photo is a thing, but not necessarily an object – although it might become so if acquiring a performative charge, taking part in surrounding social relations and receiving specific care and maintenance (Martínez 2018b). Things thus acquire significance from social settings, through exchange, maintenance, care or display. In other words, an object is informed material participating in social relations. Our

discussion was so engaging that Paul decided to bring his photography students from the Estonian Academy of Arts to the exhibition and continue it before them.

Zombie devices

Artists, curators and designers are not simply defined by their disciplinary identity, but by the mode in which they work (Farías and Wilkie 2016). They commonly use anthropological concepts and methods in their own practices, translating them through their own epistemologies and ways of seeing.

As part of the show, Timo Toots displayed at the very entrance of the museum a device to reproduce floppy disks, which were meant to substitute for *Spotify* as a source of music. Timo's time and storage capsule challenged newness as the dominant paradigm and questioned simplistic, triumphant separations of old and new media. It further demonstrated that nothing is created from nothing, but rather from tinkering and multiple technological modifications. The music here was Cloud-based instead of being stored, yet the artwork showed that the coexistence of digital and analogue technologies can be rather complex. As Timo pointed out in the workshop that he gave at the museum, people still need physical objects, even if only as a way of linking dissimilar items; this does not occur by clicking, but rather by establishing innovative connections between physical and digital things (Fig. 2.9). He chose the floppy disk because of its familiar, easy-to-handle form. One can put a floppy disk in a pocket and also customise it in a poetic way without much effort. Timo's resurrection of a zombie device such as the floppy disk enacted a form of disnovation, inviting the audience to rethink current notions of obsolescence and creativity (Fig. 2.10).

In his talk at the exhibition's symposium, media theorist Derek Holzer insisted that old technologies do not end: they only experience discontinuation. Through different examples of electronic graphics, and echoing the Benjaminian motto that we dream the future through old technologies, Derek showed that a future anterior is often pursued to find something new in the old. He then concluded that any future-making is but a forward escape into the past.

Derek also pointed out that our broken, obsolete tools keep working on our thoughts, giving form to our cosmologies through processes of adjustment, disobedience and resurrection (see Holzer 2019). He invited

Fig. 2.9 *Floppify* by Timo Toots, displayed in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

Fig. 2.10 Timo Toots arranging his work at the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Jarmo Nagel, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

the audience to think of the development of technology as having agency of its own through exponential accelerations and setbacks. Derek went on to describe how working with discarded artefacts can be a way of testing the past, probing obsolete instrumental possibilities that could have

Fig. 2.11 *Humans Need Not to Count* by Varvara & Mar, an installation at the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Jarmo Nagel, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

influenced how we live in the present. For him, this evokes a dystopian feeling of hardly moving away from our mediating artefacts, even those that had previously been discarded.

Three other artists contributed to the exhibition with artworks made before this project. For instance, in *Humans Need Not to Count* the artists Varvara & Mar presented a robotic clicker counting the number of visitors to the gallery (Fig. 2.11). In doing so it posed questions about our idolatry of quantification and how the chronometers of industrial capitalism replaced earlier collective perceptions of time. The installation offered a performative representation of the ways in which routine jobs are being taken over by robots and the increasing quantification of cultural activities. Many museums have also fallen into this trap of quantification – not surprisingly given the strong financial pressure to count total visitor numbers in order to secure funding, leading to an obsessive need to count and measure everything. The piece also evoked the mythification of artificial intelligence, attributing wisdom and consciousness to what is, in the case of the installation, instrumental intelligence (the robotic hand merely does two moves: radaring and clicking).

The robotic hand with a clicker had a sensor that constantly searched for interaction, counting anyone who passed by (Fig. 2.12). The

Fig. 2.12 *Humans Need Not to Count* by Varvara & Mar. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

paradox was that it did not provide the option of not participating, however. Rather it established a one-channel connection with visitors, making them believe they were part of a dialogue exchange because they were included in the outcome, yet providing a form of interaction without participation. Matters of consent are also relevant when being tracked, traced and monitored, especially when not having given any explicit permission to proceed in that way. Varvara Guljajeva (2018) describes these new practices of interaction as a form of 'post-participation' related to the 'dataveillance' age (van Dijck 2014), in which the audience participates without being aware of doing so or even having control over their participating act. As pointed out by Varvara in her insight, surveillance capitalism has evolved into a model of extractive economy in which the raw material is us: our fears, our beliefs, our hopes, our insecurities, our privacy.

Varvara & Mar also organised the workshop 'Data Shop' within the public programme of the exhibition, inviting participants to reflect on the growing level of monetisation and surveillance in society. During the workshop, participants had to map out their own personal information in social media and store it in a tin, generating a material outcome based on data from Facebook, Twitter, Google or Instagram. To me, this was a novel form of storytelling through mixed media. It made us reflect on the way

in which we all are data producers, as well as on infrastructures of knowledge and information.

As noted by Varvara & Mar, new media art challenges traditional practices and values of conservation in museums because digital technologies rely on hardware that has a short life expectancy; they are a key part of an unsustainable logic of manufactured fragility that creates a large number of disposable technologies (Domínguez Rubio and Wharton 2020). As a consequence, notions of permanence and change are increasingly complex, making the preservationist task of avoiding alterations over time increasingly difficult. New media art also poses challenges to the management systems of collections, with complex structures of files, codes, folders, images, algorithms and programming languages, complicating access, preservation and cataloguing (see Altshuler 2005).

In their public talk at the museum, Varvara & Mar chose to focus on the very process of artistic production, presenting their works as artefacts that are always in the making. They then presented a series of prototypes made in their studio. Yet what kind of object is a prototype? And in which way do prototypes remain present in the final result? For Varvara & Mar, a prototype is a trace of making. They explained that the worst thing that can happen in the production process is not knowing where the failure has occurred. They also argued that artistic research has an unconscious layer that is not present in the academic one, and that both practices have different attachment to artefacts and to testing. They went on to observe:

> The last result, what you can see in the exhibition, does not show all the testing behind, all the failures in the making, the disobedience of our machines, the tools and space used for creating, the chaos of all of it, how the surrounding conditions influence your work, assembling parts from different places and artefacts, and how we still know which wire is for what, and where to find this or that thing.

Materials are important at a heuristic level in terms of how we learn things, influencing the processes of durability, classification and display, as well as the cultural forms and meanings associated with things. It is in this sense that Domínguez Rubio (2014) distinguishes between docile and unruly objects, with the former generating stability and the latter acting as vectors of change. In their public talk, Varvara & Mar did indeed discuss the 'thingness' of artworks and the way in which they retain material potentialities and require specific measures of maintenance. As they pointed out, it is crucial for artists to think about the potential decay of

things, as well as to plan viable maintenance, foregrounding that artworks do not always survive exhibitions. They also described how they prepare several prototypes before actually producing an artwork. Such prototypes are partially usable, provisional, knowledge in-the-making, often rudimentary yet instrumental for thinking, working forms of innovation, speculative and imaginative, yet nonetheless tied to the reality of a product (see also Corsín Jiménez 2014; Marcus 2014).

Material portraits

Can an artwork eventually be male or female?

In *Xena & Samba*, Eva Mustonen combined a sequined bra and a mixer-phallus to spark thoughts about our contemporary aversion to physical proximity and sexual discomfort (Fig. 2.13). In her work, Eva makes use of quotidian techniques of textile design and products of everyday doings to create unexpectedly beautiful mystical objects. For her contribution to the *Objects of Attention* exhibition, she prepared a ritual of

Fig. 2.13 *Xena & Samba* by Eva Mustonen, displayed in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

objection, consisting of a defensive move by the mixer-phallus once closeness to the female bra was sensed. An encounter with an object brings stuff up, interrogates and entails a cut of attention in a way that resembles memory – not being completely sure of the directions and trajectories. What the encounter brings up is not stable and homogeneous, therefore, but changeable and multiple. Likewise, an object does not always speak clearly for itself. The interpretation of an object is an ongoing challenge that becomes, in some cases, an adventure – especially when incorporating perspectives from the margins.

After reading my notes, Eva explained that the installation was more existentialist than sexual in her view; it sought to tell about the absurdity and confusion of life.[17] Also, she added, the gender dimension could be seen from different perspectives. 'Is Xena just a pretty bystander?' asked Eva. The key question in her view was 'Why is Samba expected to ward off potential contenders for Xena's affection?' For Eva the installation, rather than being male or female per se, serves to reflect on the qualities that a man is supposed to display. She asked rhetorically what female qualities could similarly be recognised in the installation? 'The duster is a symbol of cleaning and the mixer of cooking; they are most often used by women, who are presented as having a tendency for hysterics,' she responded, adding that Xena might feel very comfortable and autonomous in her distant skin and prefer to reject the physical proximity of others, be they male or female.

We often talk of the meaning of museum objects for others, but in some cases the key to perceiving and interpreting an object lies in the very intention and emotion of the artist, or in how things come to carry their contexts within themselves. In our exhibition, the social life around the objects was not reduced to their display; their actual making and critical considerations of value (before, during and after the exhibition) were equally significant for this study. For instance, Nino Kvrivishvili contributed to the exhibition with a set of objects preserved during the multiple wars that took place in Georgia in the last decades. Her work *Searching for Traces* tells the stories of weavers and their families, making visible both the strength and perils of identity-making, as well as revealing how networks of memories are formed.

Specifically, the things displayed in the showcase were saved by Nino's grandmother, Raisa Zatyukova. She moved to Georgia in the 1950s to work in the cotton industry in Gori. Many of Raisa's relatives, friends and colleagues chose to leave during the turmoil of the 1990s, so she collected everyday objects from them as a way of keeping their relationship alive. This is a generation whose lives were devastated by war. Their belongings

make evident the effort of building a life in a foreign city, getting married, having children and then having to leave everything behind. These objects become then lifelong companions, experienced as 'memory stabilizers and biographical narrators' (Callén Moreu and López Gómez 2019, 333). As also noted by Lucy Suchman (2005), objects tend to be 'affiliative', adumbrating both alliances and divisions between people (Figs 2.14, 2.15 and 2.16).

In her talk at the museum, Nino explained that Raisa's memorabilia acquired over the years an expansive sense of affinity through the interplay between the interiority and exteriority of the artefact. The objects of this installation are the remnants of a lost process of rooting; they also create a material portrait of Raisa. Her objects resemble maps, complex emotional geographies of broken networks and reversed attachments to a given place. They are the corpse of a past community; but they also offer an invitation to come in, to be part of Raisa's hospitality, to sit and have a tea and a *pryaniki* with her and to learn why and how things are treated with respect. These objects manifest care and concern despite the difficult memories; here the challenges are not put under the carpet, hidden behind the curtains, or left forgotten in a dusty cardboard box. Instead, Raisa chose to legate care, overcoming separations through objects.

We could say that these objects are melancholic, but not nostalgic. There is no romanticisation here, rather an awareness of what has been lost, of defeat, perhaps surrender, certainly estrangement. This installation also invites for a reflection about the discrepant temporalities of objects, bringing to the present different discourses about past and future, as well as diverse forms of material endurance and regimes of maintenance.

The objects of Nino's installation formed a multi-temporal collective, reminding us of others who were here before us and of those who will follow. When things from a different past become relevant again, they often do so with unpredicted associations, meanings or value. Even if they come from the past, objects always speak in the present and to those who are now around them. Yet in which language do things talk? What kind of old messages do they reveal and pass on? Nino's objects gave rise to a great amount of talk from the visitors, animating meaning by their materiality, personal resonance and also the type of assemblage.

Overall, *Objects of Attention* made things matter through a transformational work – in the form of artistry, curatorship and design, which allowed objects to carry an excess of ideas. After this intervention, the things of the show became objects of drama, invested with extra cultural power and social resonance, as well as a capacity to affect, tell stories and

Figs 2.14, 2.15 and 2.16 *Searching for Traces* by Nino Kvrivishvili. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

make things happen. These objects were enacting public knowledge and participating in public discussions, helping the audience to untie political concerns and to object to our actual distance from contemporary problems. Such objects are part of political resistances, mirroring the social, working as both objectors and connectors. As the exhibition showed us, the process of objecting is not invisible; it is rather a sensorial experience.

Notes

1 However, both objects and sections also stand individually; they can therefore be read not only according to their actual order, but also through relatively random registers.
2 *Another Fucking Ready-Made* was the title of Cattelan's contribution to the 1996 group show, *Crap Shoot*, held at De Appel, Amsterdam.
3 'To create common understandings, to ensure reliability across domains and to gather information … developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds' (Star and Griesemer 1989, 387, 393).
4 Engaging with Star and Griesemer's work, information management scholar Paul Carlile (2002) has identified four types of boundary objects: repositories, standardised forms, models and maps of boundaries.
5 Objects enable focalisation, concentration, a train of thought, by combining sensory and cognitive modalities of apprehension and generating reference frames (Scholl 2002; Gomez et al. 2018). Further on, objects can influence cognition and behaviour more than photographs. They are also more memorable, as Jacqueline Snow, Rafal Skiba, Taylor Coleman and Marian Berryhill have demonstrated after a series of experiments in recall and recognition performance (2014).
6 This 'artification' was different from Cecilia Giménez's failed restoration attempt of the Ecce Homo fresco in Borja (Spain), which subsequently went viral, boasting about the number of tourists visiting the town and turning the 'repaired' image of Jesus into a souvenir. Here the artworks are conceived to communicate objection and concern, in a range that goes from the epistemic to the aesthetic or poetic opposition.
7 In the modern European set of ideas, museums were a way of grasping the world and representing and disseminating knowledge, not simply for a means of collecting and displaying (Preziosi and Farago 2004). Likewise, exhibitions were initially the expression of the anthropological practice; only in the beginning of the twentieth century were they replaced by the ethnographic monograph (see Buchli 2002).
8 Such a division has already been challenged and we not only study 'Others' living elsewhere, but also internal ones, approaching our home societies and cultures as simultaneously 'Self' and 'Other' (Laviolette et al. 2019).
9 In his talk at the symposium organised for *Objects of Attention*, anthropologist Patrick Laviolette invited the audience to pay attention to the spatial trajectories that the objects have followed, as well as to the traces or residues left behind. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss, he insisted that these objects are good to think with, not simply about.
10 After her experience of imprisonment, Jessi returned to Nigeria and took the Bible with her, so we could not exhibit the original text. For the exhibition, I had quickly to buy a similar copy on Amazon; once this had arrived, I passed it on to Kert Lokotar's son at the Estonian Academy of Arts so that she (a leather artist) could prepare the cover on time. Likewise, the installation reproduces Jessi's desk at the detention centre: besides a table (which we took from the museum's learning room), we also needed an office chair. We could only find a proper chair at the Estonian Museum of Contemporary Art, in which Kirill Tulin curated *Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler* (see page 127) and I curated the exhibition *System and Error*, involving Kirill in the installation of that show. And so on … objects' relationships can indeed be traced *ad infinitum*. For instance, I discovered Eléonore's work in 2014, while doing research in Narva. I bought her book *Na Grane. Narva/Ivangorod* (2010) at the first opening of the Art Residency at the Kreenholm Textile Factory, by Tõnis Saadoja. To my knowledge, this is the best

book for understanding the way in which this border town and the frontier between the EU and Russia is a centre out there. In her local insights and interviews Eléonore focused primarily on female characters, so she did not include the story of Fjodor Šantsõn, who for more than 25 years has been creating a 1:100 scale model of Narva's old town before the Second World War – a non-existent ideal city – through available photographs, comparing locations in different seasons.

11 Bruno Latour (2004a) has argued that politics are related to the formation of publics and the assemblage of human and non-human elements to generate matters of concern, thus calling for a more troubling materiality.

12 Vergine relies on the work of Guido Viale (*Un mondo usa e getta*, 1994), who reminds us that 'The predilection for used things over factory-new objects is a product of the belief that not everything that is brand new is necessarily to be used and not everything that is old and worn need necessarily be abolished'.

13 This was also shown in the exhibition, *The Way of the Shovel,* curated by Dieter Roelstraete in 2013 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

14 As observed by Domínguez Rubio, 'while it is true that (almost) anything can be art, not everything [*sic*] can be an art object' (2020, 44). The difference, in his view, is in the kind of socio-technical ecologies mobilised to secure the permanence of both categories and objects, once categorised as relevant for the articulation of art history (see also Yaneva 2003a).

15 For more information on Camille's video games museum see LVLup: http://www.kultuurinfo. ee/event/opening-of-video-game-museum-lvlup/.

16 'For every planned project that is carried out, hundreds of other proposals by artists, architects, designers, scientists, and other practitioners around the world stay unrealised and invisible to the public. Unlike unrealised architectural models and projects submitted for competitions, which are frequently published and discussed, public endeavours in the visual arts that are planned but not carried out ordinarily remain unnoticed or little known' (Obrist 2010).

17 Eva is interested in microdramas, in methods of restoring balance and also in forms of social exclusion, and she reflects on them artistically in a bright and funny manner. See the interview (in Estonian): 'Kohtumine Ämbliknaisega', *Sirp*, 25 January 2019. https://www.sirp.ee/ s1-artiklid/c6-kunst/kohtumine-ambliknaisega/. Accessed 26 June 2021.

3
Collaboratology

To place experimentation and collaboration alongside the concept of ethnography is not that new – and yet it still feels uneasy to the ear with its multiple doings and un-doings, as if it were a dodecaphonist composition. One of the purposes of this book is to advance in the study of the way in which collaboration and experimentation may go hand in hand, engaging with different epistemological distances and proximities, hospitalities and hostilities, boundaries and intersections. Attention is thus focused upon reflecting on the risks, potentials, collisions and collusions of collaborations between artists, designers, curators and anthropologists, and on how these ties have evolved in the last few decades.

As a response to epistemic shifts produced by globalisation and information technologies, new forms of knowledge are produced and disseminated through research collaboration. For example, Monica Konrad (2012) and Annalise Riles (2015) praise collaborative relations as an ethically-laden, symmetrical form of social relationship that can eventually be used by anthropologists in the field. For Eric Lassiter (2005), however, collaboration is rather an engaged mode of social research, in which political commitments are reinvigorated and marginalised communities are responsibly represented through dialogic formats of fieldwork.

In recent years Holmes and Marcus (2012) and Estalella and Criado (2018) developed a very reflexive way of practising and studying collaborations. In so doing they established a form of collaboratology that critically accounts for the types of relationships with our counterparts in the field. As they observe, collaborations are not always symmetric nor done for political purposes; they also note that collaborative relations tend to involve experimentation and are part of a wider work of re-tooling or re-functioning ethnographic research.[1] As they conclude, collaborative research does not imply the erasure of disciplinary differences; it is rather

brought into existence across boundaries and is not exempt of mismatched expectations.

Konrad (2012), however, chose to define what characterises collaborative anthropology as distinct from other forms of collaboration. She proposed the following as key features: presumption of benefit, as an expectation of mutual advantages; interactional expertise, as an increased awareness of the other parties' work; and democratisation of research, as knowledge comes to be socially distributed in less hierarchical forms. As a result, in her view, actors with diverse backgrounds and from multiple disciplines are working together more than ever before. Provocatively, Riles (2015) argues that the enthusiasm for collaboration is correlated with the loss of interest in anthropological comparisons and also corresponds to a crisis in expertise. She then rhetorically questions whether a collaborative agenda could be considered as important as the original comparative trust of this discipline.

On this matter Emma Heffernan, Fiona Murphy and Jonathan Skinner (2020) have noted that collaboration has become a key to survival in our precarious age of corporative-like audits of everything, and that it might take place in multiple ways: within fieldwork, between anthropologist and research participants, in writing and communicating findings and in applied, non-academic contexts. In this vein, and after studying the *Who are we?* platform of the Tate Modern, Alena Pfoser and Sara de Jong (2020) claim that too little attention has been paid to institutional agendas and the 'structural' conditions under which collaborations take place, such as asymmetric funding, pressures and a unidirectional conception of impact. All of these, Pfoser and de Jong believe, eventually endanger the principles of dialogue and affect the possibilities for exchange between artists and scholars.

Contemporary art and anthropology are clearly different disciplines. Each has their own rules, standards and methods, their own practices and histories, institutions and habitus,[2] yet we also find family resemblances, intersections and collaborative potentials, turning artists and anthropologists into frequent 'bedfellows' (Hjorth and Sharp 2014, 129). Traditionally, practitioners in these two fields have been more interested in looking at one another's practices simply as sources of inspiration, or rather in doing something that 'looks like art' or 'like anthropology' (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015). Most often anthropologists address the work of particular artists (analysing the conditions in which practitioners work) or look at the anthropological themes in contemporary art (placing artworks in their ethnographic context). Meanwhile artists make use of research strategies reminiscent of fieldwork and participant

observation, or try to describe their own work in anthropological terms (Morphy and Perkins 2006; Sansi 2015; Schneider and Wright 2010). However, the fusion of both practices has not been common.

Even so, anthropologists do not cross any sacred line when practising contemporary art, but simply emphasise artistic possibilities already present in the discipline (Grossman 2018). Indeed, the synergies between art and anthropology are increasingly being discussed and practised, exploring the possibilities of 'cross-fertilisation' (Schneider and Wright 2013) and 'adjacent engagement' (Grossman 2018), trying to do more than just borrow techniques (Clarke 2018) and establishing 'a bridge that can be crossed in both directions' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013b, 168).

Contributing to this discussion, Jennifer Clarke (2014) uses the metaphor 'ecology of practices' to describe how artists and anthropologists might inform one another. In her view, when fieldwork is turned into contemporary art, social ambiguities are made visible in a more direct way, expanding the possibilities of presenting our findings.

In recent years, diverse scholars have tried to list the positive outcomes of combining contemporary art and anthropology, placing the emphasis upon what we can learn from each other. Anthropologist Chiara Pussetti (2018), for instance, argues that incorporating artistic practice within the discipline injects an experimental sensibility into fieldwork, helping anthropologists to capture the non-verbal dimensions of being and also to communicate in a more effective and multisensorial way.

In turn Clarke (2014) observes that contemporary art might help anthropologists to incorporate disruptions into the field, to engage with the public differently and to enact knowledge rather than simply to explain it. However, she also foregrounds the fact that the most common result has been naive misappropriations and instrumentalised, artless shortcuts. The inclusion of disruptions during fieldwork might be a source of tension, however, due to the cumulative character of fieldwork. In contemporary art, on the other hand, practitioners are less afraid of being imaginative, performative or even unsettling (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015).[3] Anthropologist Anna Laine (2018) adds that the finished product in the respective fields is another point of separation. She notes that anthropology requires conclusive texts, but artists may – and do –present tentative objects and performances as an outcome.

During my fieldwork, indeed, it felt paradoxical to keep transforming into text the embodied knowledge of participants for whom texts were not important. In the same vein, ethnologist Billy Ehn notes how artists are not satisfied simply to describe and participate: 'instead they want to produce actual experiences. They want to amuse, to worry or to provoke'

(2012, 16). In his view, collaborations thus far can be summarised in four ways:

1) anthropologists referring to artworks as a source of inspiration: willing to make their argument more powerful, showing the nuances with respect to their object of study or communicating the findings in a more creative and accessible way
2) anthropologists studying artworks in different contexts: putting the focus on the set of relations surrounding the artwork and its making
3) artists making use of anthropological concepts and methods for works reflecting on social settings and experimenting with participative methods
4) artists and art historians doing ethnographic fieldwork in order to develop a cognitive map of the setting and to prepare visual works[4]

In a similar manner, Henk Borgdorff has distinguished between three basic forms of research in the art field: 'a) research on the arts; b) research for the arts; and c) research in the arts' (2012, 37). More critically, Hal Foster (1996) foregrounded that when artists make use of anthropological methods and concepts in their practice, they often lack the ethical reflexivity that characterises the discipline, ending up doing 'pseudo-ethnographic' work and rather mimicking anthropology. As Foster adds, artists often ignore the negative impacts of their interventions outside of the studio, the sustainability of different modalities of collaboration and participation, what constitutes valid ethnographic evidence and the contextualisation of concepts. Finally, Foster objects that exhibitions tend to be organised as a spectacle and that art practice is increasingly conditioned by the market, impelling artists and curators to claim constantly for attention and to personalise all the ecology of knowledge involved in the production, as if they were brands.

   Likewise, Tim Ingold (2013) remarks that art practice is not committed to the descriptive accuracy of ethnography. However, he differentiates between ethnography and anthropology, arguing that the latter shares with the arts a speculative, experimental and open-ended endeavour.[5] Ssorin-Chaikov (2013a) also notes that the combination of ethnography and contemporary art could provoke meaningful situations rather than simply describing them. Drawing on the work of artist Joseph Kosuth, Ssorin-Chaikov observes that exhibiting research might turn into a way of doing the fieldwork (2013a), becoming 'an ethnography that does things as well as saying them' through active audience participation (2013b, 171).[6]

Discussions about participation have also been intense in contemporary art. Curator Nicolas Bourriaud even coined the term 'relational art' (2002), referring to projects in which the audience is a community to be collaborated with. He even argues that the key task of artists is to produce intersubjective encounters and modes of sociability. Bourriaud does not identify the variety of degrees of participation that occur in art projects, however, nor does he establish a clear differentiation between interaction and participation (see Finkelpearl 2013; Kester 2011). Art historian Claire Bishop (2012) has also criticised Bourriaud's ideas for the absence of (self and social) criticism, ignoring uneven forms of participation and limiting the sense of political agency. As she claims, both collaborations among artists and relations with the audience can contribute simply to reproducing the existing social order, or rather to questioning it.

Collaboration is a fragile but powerful possibility, bringing together different degrees of involvement in one matter of concern. It establishes complex accommodations of diverse capacities and notions of relevance, which end up questioning existing boundaries of expertise and the feeling of safety generated by walls, boundaries and squares. Later, collaborative practices equally work the contours of what can be known and unknown, done and undone, thus extending the boundary of intelligibility (and of engaging with the outer limits).[7] Collaboration values plurality over hierarchy, working with those who are on the other side of the line and bringing scientific and non-academic knowledge together (Santos 2007). It is thus an ecology because it sustains a series of heterogeneous, co-dependent knowledges, combined without compromising the respective autonomy, which implies, indeed, a 'mutual recognition of difference' (Schneider 2015, 27).

Approaching collaboration as an experimental practice makes the forging of new anthropological problematisations possible (Estalella and Criado 2019). Nonetheless, collaborations can lead to tensions and disagreements with participants; likewise, these acts are perceived differently not just by the parties involved, but also by those who study them. In *Objects of Attention*, artists and designers became ethnographic objects themselves through being anthropologically studied. Yet, by engaging actively and collaboratively in the exhibition, they participated in the research also as subjects, making knowledge along with the ethnographer. We were all caught in collaboration through the exhibition-making endeavour, turning the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design into a field whereby the negotiations of expertise came intensively into play. While collaborating, it is thus pertinent to ask, what are we

sharing? What does it mean for a research project to be collaborative? And what are the infrastructural effects of collaborative projects?

Ethnographic frontiers

Ethnography is both a process and an end in itself. As a methodology, it consists of different methods, including participant observation, interviews, surveys, diaries, filming, drawing, exhibitions, sound-mapping and so forth. These methods are techniques and devices for eliciting information; they are instruments of knowing, traditionally used to produce or distil empirical material in the field, partly by crossing different kinds of boundaries. The key practice of knowledge in anthropology is fieldwork. This serves to gather data to be processed into an ethnography, and in some cases to throw up unexpected questions and to challenge the pre-established significance and meanings of things. This is because research does not always start with a question, but rather with a place or an object or a memory – consequently with curiosity.

Moreover, the issue of what fieldwork is for raises further fundamental questions such as: Where is the field? For and with whom is the knowledge produced? Some anthropologists, such as Stephen Collier (2013), claim that fieldwork no longer functions as a self-contained method, but rather as a technique for provoking collaborative experiments – problematising, as a side effect, traditional notions of academic validity. Ethnography still is often presented as an experiential knowledge practice (with a special relationship to frontiers and peripheries) which requires 'being there', yet the how, where and when are no longer fixed. The formats of description and being in the field can vary because of the kind of problematisation and public with which we engage, how we are inscribed within a set of relations and the way in which broader socio-political changes have methodological consequences. There are thus different forms of immersion and alternative ways of forging relations, of coming together and accounting for encounters.

As a socio-material practice, part of the art of fieldwork is to adapt to changing social locations, attuning ourselves to a given site and context. Yet nowadays not only is the field being multiplied, but our way of being in it also is increasingly interconnected and occurring more quickly. As a consequence, forms of ethnographic research are mutating along, inventing new juxtapositions of analytical and empirical notions and curating our understanding of difference. Likewise, anthropological knowledge increasingly depends on building alliances and being practised

in a relational manner – through different registers, actors and places. This means forging different techniques of fieldwork and alternative notions of epistemic validity, at the same time transforming delineations of where the field is, who takes part and how.

This is thus a volume about 'doing' anthropology, whereby the poetic, artistic and scientific dimensions of this discipline meet to generate new epistemological encounters and modes of relating in the field. The exhibition *Objects of Attention* was simultaneously a curatorial output and a device of fieldwork engagement; it offered to the audience boundary objects and knowledge in-the-making, but also set up ambiences of care and epistemic generosity through which we could take part in the field differently. The display was not only the material form and transdisciplinary gesture through which I was making my fieldwork, but also a device eliciting new types of relationships (Brichet 2018; Garnett 2018; Marrero-Guillamón 2018). In this sense, the project itself was not so much concerned with the question of 'What should an exhibition look like?', but rather with such questions as 'What does an exhibition do?', 'With whom?' and 'How can fieldwork be expanded into other forms of material intervention and social engagement?' *Objects of Attention* proposed a more experimental and political attitude towards objects, here presented as artefacts of knowing, available for being materially and epistemologically redefined (Knorr-Cetina 1997).

Ethnographic Experiments describes how anthropological research can flourish through exhibitions, allowing readers to comprehend the kinds of knowledge that are embodied in design and art practice. The Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design became the venue where I could rethink the norms and forms of anthropology – for instance, the need to construct pieces of evidence rather than simply discover them. In our case we accomplished the ethnographic task by assembling things and practitioners that do not necessarily fit together and were not originally meant to relate to one another, allowing us to understand the complex relation between existing knowledges.

Exhibitions can thus be taken as a form of research in their own right. They enable participants to construct particular notions of epistemic validity and objecthood, to turn ordinary artefacts into a form of concern and to generate moments of material intensity through aesthetic tinkering. Accordingly, a key aim of my research was not just to learn about artists, curators and objects, but also to explore what I could learn from, with and through them.

The redesigning of curatorial processes as anthropological fields allows us to transform an exhibition into a device for collaborative

experimental research, with the potential to become a device and a methodology in itself, rather than just a site (Candea 2013). From contemporary art and design, as distinct modes of engagement with the problems and materiality that characterise our time, we can learn to give a new concreteness to objects and politics, and develop new forms of being in the field and constructing knowledge. Nonetheless, a key challenge of this project was to be aware of the different standards and protocols between the diverse disciplines and practices involved. In addition, the way in which the different values and temporal regimes are cemented into methodological traditions and into ways of assessing needed always to be considered. A further challenge was to create an audience transversally, across disciplinary boundaries and at the intersection of different interests. In short, a lot of infrastructural work had to be undertaken in order to make this project possible.

Modes of intradisciplinary interventions occur in complicity with our epistemic partners by bringing our counterparts into the interior of our institutional venues and vice versa. Thus it makes room for more speculative collaborations, raising new kinds of questions and crafting research in a dialogical way. This gesture is itself generative of interstitial practices of knowledge, 'fully academic but hospitable to non-academic practices too' (Estalella and Criado 2019, 160). Experiments in anthropology are thus not a deviation from the canon, but rather a way of updating disciplinary practices. Indeed, one of the contributions of this research is the way in which it engages with novel forms of relations in the field, expanding methodological horizons. During the *Objects of Attention* exhibition, different participants were impelled to find ways to share their expertise and connect their capacities together, thus re-purposing gallery space into a point of encounter and exchange. Such a design facilitated the ability to apprehend things differently, and allowed us to reconfigure the boundaries of different specialisations.

Committing anthropology among designers

During the preparation phase for the *Objects of Attention* exhibition, communication with the designers was rather fluid, so I could try to understand their way of making. I met regularly with Ott Kagovere, the graphic designer, in order to outline, discuss and eventually question the key ideas of the project. I have had the pleasure of working with Ott several times, so we have seen each other grow professionally over the years. This was fortunate as it takes time and ongoing interaction to gain

trust, to build relationships and to create a favourable atmosphere for collaboration.

In our initial discussions for the visuals, Ott showed interest in what kind of public I expected for this show. I explained that I was willing to reach out not only to the local artistic and academic community, but also to a wider public, such as families who might come at the weekend. Based on this objective, Ott proposed an aesthetic identity that plays with the idea of a beauty parlour, including an object–mirror in the centre of the poster (Fig. 3.1). He also suggested that a catalogue in the form of a newspaper booklet would be accessible to a wider public and create a sense of everydayness (Fig. 3.2). Later on, during the symposium, Ott acknowledged that among the visual prototypes that he initially prepared I had chosen the one he liked least. This saddened him, so he decided to do some more work on the visuals to make them closer to his taste.

Both designs, the graphic and the spatial, combine a sense of the everyday with an existential and monumental ambition. Hannes Praks, who is both a practitioner and a professor in the field, was in charge of the spatial design. His approach was different from Ott's. Being aware of the
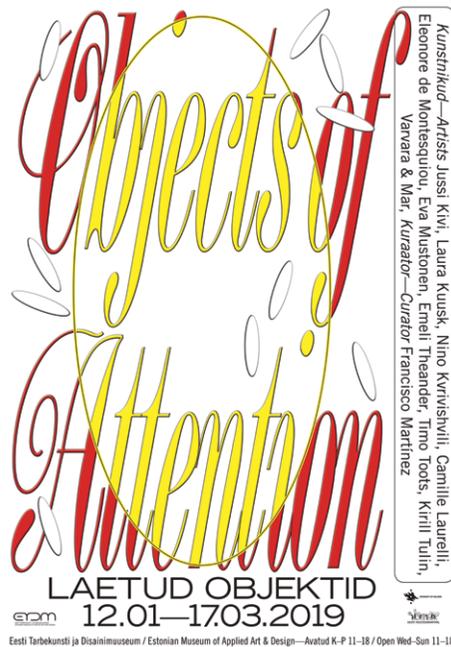
Fig. 3.1 Poster designed by Ott Kagovere for the *Objects of Attention* exhibition.

Fig. 3.2 Artist Jussi Kivi reads the brochure of the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Jarmo Nagel, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

experimental and pedagogical nature of my project, Hannes decided to involve three of his students in the design process (Merly Mändla, Elis Rumma and Henri Papson). They took part in our discussions, negotiations and the installation, playing an important role in making the design possible and often mediating between Hannes and myself.

When I started to explain the key ideas of the project to Hannes, he insisted on the need to use specific keywords, conceptual terms that he would try to 'translate' later into space. We then started to form random sentences together, such as slow time room, awakening room, landing room, changing mood room, equalitarian room and so forth, as if we were prototyping concepts. Hannes then asked me about the effects I wanted to generate for the visitors, to which I replied 'unlearning, suspension of knowledge … to reduce certain gaps between us and politics, between people and objects'. Finally, Hannes asked me to suggest a film he should watch to understand the interior design of the exhibition better. To this I replied, unexpectedly, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920, dir. Robert Wiene).

Finally, the spatial design was constructed as a representation of my research questions and method. However, communication with Hannes

was not always easy. For him, words work against design solutions; knowledge sits rather in a piece of wood, in a wall, in a way of walking up the stairs or attuning ourselves to the space, sensing as a way of getting ready.[8] Hannes invited his students and me to reconsider materials as 'happening', referring to design as a sensory experience. In his view, the body, material relations and the tools used are central to the making of knowledge; in other words, knowledge is channelled through bodies and materials, rather than through verbs and cultural representations. He insisted on a sort of sensual theorisation, believing that matter has ideas of its own. Accordingly, Hannes sought to approach materials as problems of thought, as belonging to the method: in so doing he explored the recursive quality of materials, their temporal qualities, their symbolic weight and so on. In the grammar of a designer, Hannes often spoke of creating environments and atmospheres through material mediums. He urged Merly, Elis and Henri, for example, 'to find the intrigue of each material'.

That day, we all walked together to the museum in order to feel the gallery space through a whole-body experience. On the way upstairs, Hannes started to touch the walls. He then walked around the floor, sat on the windowsill, checked the lighting and finally leaned against the wall for a while. His way of attuning himself to the room – establishing a sort of organic dialogue with matter and space, sensing different forms of staying there, as well as ways in and out – made me realise my own bodily ignorance (Dilley 2010). Hannes explained that learning through affect is an important part of the design process, which made me think about whether a fieldnote could also be embodied and not just written. He was sensitive to what materials come to resonate, something I will never perceive as well as he does. Hannes was clearly more aware of the role of materials in making, and also how material practices are part of any learning – in line with Jane Bennett's observation (2010) that the craftsperson explores what a given material can do while the scientist focuses on discerning what a material is.

Unexpectedly, Hannes insisted on bringing cheap materials such as cement and blocks to Tallinn's old town – where the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design museum is located. That was his design provocation, or his poetic objection, arguing that materials always challenge the projection of pre-established forms onto matter. Nevertheless, his fixations on using cheap materials and on building a wall also show that designers tend to work with different variations of a single idea or versions of a solution, instead of imagining new concepts.[9] From my original proposal to build up a labyrinth, we moved on to a more pragmatic design of a political corridor; a labyrinth would have been too costly and we did not have a large

enough budget (nor the space) for it. Finally, after heated negotiations with the museum staff, we constructed a brick wall in the middle of the gallery space. The wall stood as a weak monument and as a social sculpture, inspiring thoughts about political divisions and the current ethos of building more borders.[10]

My requirement for Hannes was that visitors had to be compelled to face the objects and to spend time with them – in a way shaping the audience's bodily gestures. I also encouraged him to look at the objects of the exhibition as political questions, rather than simply as things. An important point of the discussion about the design was how to create a border-like sense of an entrance into the gallery, a way of landing in it, that gave the impression of being public in a cave. The solution to this challenge was provided by the gallery space itself, which was 40 cm higher than the rest of the floor and requires a step up to enter.

We also considered encouraging careful contemplation and even slow thinking among visitors, to the point of forcing people to watch their steps in the gallery, crafting the space so they could only walk slowly there. Two possible options for achieving this were to put down a carpet or throw some sorts of material disturbances onto the floor. In the end we did not put anything on the beautiful wooden floor since, in the opinion of the museum staff, it was more than enough to damage it with the brick wall (Fig. 3.3).
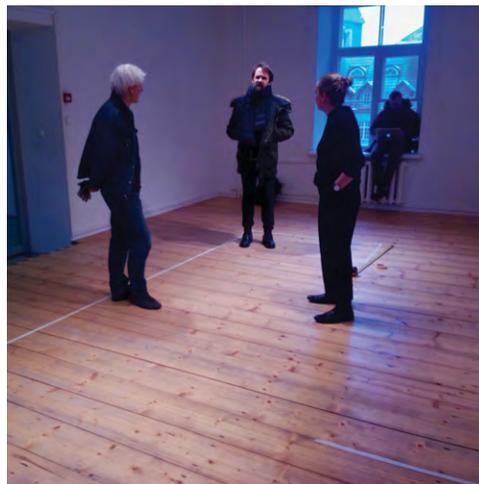
Fig. 3.3 Negotiating the question of the exhibition wall in a tense meeting between the designer Hannes and the museum staff, Kai and Toomas. Francisco Martínez.

Fig. 3.4 Searching for materials in the storage room of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design. Francisco Martínez.

The process of creating the gallery space was not entirely straightforward or easy, however. Let us describe how events unfolded in chronological order. Once all of those involved had reached an agreement about the kind of wall to be built, I went to the museum's storage room with Ketli (project manager) and Merly, Elis and Henri (Hannes's students) to check out the available materials and tools (Fig. 3.4). In the basement we could find boxes, shelves, construction materials and assorted leftovers from different exhibitions.[11] We made a list of the things to buy and the materials were ordered from the nearby Bauhaus shop. It was now 8 January in Estonia, so it was snowing and already dark. Despite this, Ketli arranged for a truck to bring the heavy materials to the museum that same evening. Toomas Übner (the museum technician) and I went to the Bauhaus shop (in Tallinn's suburbs) to buy the rest of the tools and materials. It was already after 6 p.m. when we arrived at Bauhaus (with the exhibition opening planned for just three days later). We shook hands with a member of staff in the storage area of the shop. He told us to wait for a colleague, with whom we also shook hands. I felt a bit out of place and mimicked Toomas's moves, posture and expressions. The second man cleaned away the snow so that the fork-lift could bring the blocks to the truck. I looked at them and said to Toomas, 'They look a bit too thick'. 'It is hard to see anything at the moment,' he replied. The pallets were covered in plastic. The night was poetically dark and shining snow fell through the open ceiling of the Bauhaus storage area (Fig. 3.5).

Fig. 3.5 Buying materials at the Bauhaus shop with Toomas. Francisco Martínez.

Fig. 3.6 Bringing the blocks into the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design. Francisco Martínez.

We arrived back at the museum at around 7 p.m. The working day for museum staff is from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., but Ketli and Toomas were still there, as were Merly, Elis and Henri. We started to bring the blocks one by one into the museum, swiftly to realise that this particular type of block was not only too heavy but also too thick for the small room. A crisis ensued. Henri called Hannes, who came to check the blocks. 'Certainly,

they are too big,' he said. 'We have to take them back and get some new ones.' And then he left. No one bothered to ask who had placed the order or made the list: there was no time for arguments. Nor was there any money left over to place a new order. So Ketli called the store and convinced Bauhaus to take back the old order and give us a refund, persuading them to make quite a rare exception in our case. The next morning, at 8:45, I was at the store, ready to buy the correct bricks and return the old ones. The truck arrived 45 minutes late. I rushed back to the museum, and we carried the blocks into the gallery one by one (Fig. 3.6), before rushing yet again to the store to buy a missing appliance for cutting this type of block.

Professional amateurism

In *Ethnographic Experiments*, I intend to consider not only my own ideas and practices, but also those I do not fully understand. In doing so I can reflect on the fragile network of collaboration that occurred during the *Objects of Attention* exhibition, in which different notions of knowledge, value and ways of using the body eventually collided.

For instance, seeing Hannes's ways of feeling the space and engaging with the atmospheres of individual materials made me wonder about what is lost when translating tangible things into language – 'What is there that he perceives and I do not?' – and the way in which we embody our professions in order to do things well. I was not capable of comprehending the space as a designer would, or able to take notice of certain things; in recognising this I felt the need to liberate my professional self, un-discipline my sense-scape and engage in a work of phenomenological re-training. I could not enter *within* Hannes's skills, his energy, experience, obsessions, expectations and insights, nor copy the know-how of his hand, his scrutinising eye, the things archived in his backbone, the walking distances of his feet or the neurons of his skin. Nor could I use my body as he did his, as an extended gaze.

In short, I could not reproduce his grasp of the world entirely because we are different people (not just from diverse professions). As an ethnographer, however, what I can do is perceive with, through and by means of my informants or collaborators. Anthropological knowledge cannot simply be acquired by mimicry, but rather constructed through description (Geertz 1983). Indeed, in my attempt to conceptualise Hannes's know-how I experienced the utter impossibility of being at the same time an involved actor and a detached observer.

Knowledge is also attitudinal. It is produced through embodied experiences and imagination, through particular ways of standing, remaining and leaving, in our movements and when we stand still. The architect Juhani Pallasmaa (2016) argues that he learned more about architecture from observing the way that his teachers walked and inhabited spaces than from what they said. The body has to be part of the knowledge produced, since wisdom is somehow archived in the body. Yet the body itself can be experienced as an ethnographic frontier – hard to grasp, appearing as both a sensor of knowledge and an object of knowledge, yet providing specific (limited) opportunities for interaction with our surroundings.[12]

As noted by Hannes, body techniques allow us to recognise ourselves as members of a community. But I did not belong to Hannes's community. He insisted that embodied knowledge is more than skills: to know something is to be affected by it. Certainly he used the body in a way that is clearly distinct from the way I do. We can infer from Hannes's practice that there are different types of comprehending; nor does all experience become knowledge or all knowledge language. For Hannes, praxis is first of all attitudinal. It is thus based on processes of bodily inculcation and unspoken assumptions, themselves entailing risk and testing.

During the production of the exhibition it was crucial to accept and manage differences, balance multiple *modus operandi* and respond to problems that emerged from different social worlds, if not cosmologies. A project such as *Objects of Attention*, in which 47 people took part, implies a shared engagement across disparities; it requires the establishment of a common ground, an experience not always regarded as harmonic. Collaboration means depending on the agency of others. In *Objects of Attention* the curator, designers, museum staff and artists were not always pursuing the same goals, requiring multiple negotiations of responsibility in the field. Thus we see the relevance of asking not only how to set up collaborations but also how to identify their limits (not expecting too much from our collaborators and knowing when the experience has to end).

The exhibition was made possible by extremely diverse groups of actors, therefore all participants had to make compromises and maintain epistemic openness. Such compromises were not achieved without tension, however, generating moments of uncertainty that were in some cases productive and in others rather stressful. Nevertheless, irresponsibility in art and anthropology is understood differently.

An example of this is the foolish artistry of Camille, one of the artists whose work was displayed in *Objects of Attention*. He exchanged the label

Camille Laurelli

Läbikukkumine on praktika, 2009–2019
Installatsioon leitud tööriistadest.
Kunstniku loal

Fialure is Practice, 2009–2019
Installation with found tools.
Courtesy of the artist
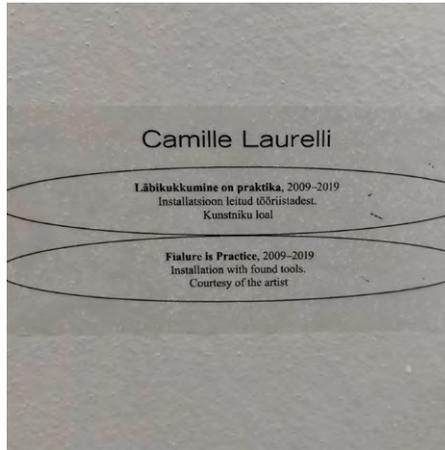
Fig. 3.7 A typo in the caption at the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Camille Laurelli.

for his artwork for a new one containing typos (spelling mistakes), to challenge the actual power of those supposed to set the standard of how to show things (what kind of museum would it be if artists, or even worse visitors, could design their own captions?). It is true that Camille had asked my permission to alter it before the opening. After consulting on the matter with museum staff, however, I told him that to print a caption that was deliberately incorrect was not an option. His response was to come to the museum later on and change it himself (Fig. 3.7). Not only that, after the exhibition he framed the incorrect caption and gave it to me as a present – turning the document into a strategically placed shifter or trap, and an artwork in itself.

If we assume that the main responsibility of an artist is to transgress, Camille's practice was a success. He may best be described as a professional irritator, displaying strategic irresponsibility and misconduct in epistemic and political terms. As we see in his case, collaborators may misbehave, cheat, go missing, fail to keep an engagement or simply be unreasonable and insensitive. But what is my part in such a disorder? Can I still consider Camille and Hannes my collaborators? And what kind of collaborators are they – if not idiotic ones, seeking to transform my field into an aesthetic playground? After all, the exhibition was not arranged as a game, but for fieldwork. Camille's persistent misconduct brings other interesting questions to the fore. How should we respond to misbehaviours, gaps, limited knowledge and amateurism? How do we create research alliances with figures who are continually questioning the common ground of the

project? What are the real benefits of collaborating? And how should surprises be incorporated into our research?

Through experimental collaborations with people who were not always reasonable, I felt disarmed, impelled to un-think my own mastery. In anthropology, however, we pay particular attention to things and people who do not behave as they should and then try to learn from and with them – taking our non-mastery as an adjunct of learning.[13] Complications, accidents and misbehaviours always outrun any planning and design, in the field as much as in life.

In some cases, however, foolish behaviour can be socially and culturally productive.[14] Perhaps Hannes and Camille were not simply my 'native' informants, but rather my 'shamans', 'hackers' and 'tricksters' in the field. They were not outsiders to the project, but rather the anti-structure game-changers, subverting the normal order instead of contributing with affirmative things (Turner 1969). As a curator, I had to execute a work. By contrast Camille wanted to explore the limits of artistry and Hannes to experiment with radical pedagogy; both men revealed a seriously playful expertise and provoked game-like situations.

Like a trickster, Camille aimed at putting everything upside down. He explicitly demonstrated that play can become the centre of someone's life, showing a lusory attitude suited to 'voluntarily overcoming unnecessary obstacles' (Suits 1978, 55). It was not a refusal of mastery, but its unthinking. Both Camille and Hannes were masters of non-mastery, enacting a Hegelian work of negative antithesis. I hated them for a while. What could we do when our collaborators insist, proudly, stubbornly, on their own ignorance, irresponsibility and playfulness? Who do we collaborate for? What could I learn from these kinds of uncooperative 'natives', or from the uncontrollable processes that occurred throughout this research?

Disagreements and misunderstandings in the field might be fruitful methods of understanding the balancing acts and power relationships at play, as well as revealing the entanglements of collaboration and the fact that things are not necessarily experienced and valued in the same way. Indeed, problems can be identified and addressed differently among different professionals.

We can also see this in the talk–performance that Camille gave at the museum, in which he prepared a succession of failures that generated empathy and pity from the audience. First, his son came to dance behind him while he was talking; a glass of water then fell on the computer and a scary blue screen appeared. He got another laptop but then, once connected to the projector, four porn sites appeared on the screen. Finally Camille's

mum called, repeatedly, so he had to answer the phone. Camille managed to forge a space for creative risks and for exploring human attitudes towards failure. However, as we discovered later, photographer Viktor Burkivski (who had been documenting the event) decided to stop recording at the most embarrassing moments of Camille's talk (adding another layer of controversy to the performance) – a fact that demonstrates how in documenting we intervene. Documenting can be thus considered a device in and of itself. It clearly participates in the ethnographic process, transmitting, preserving and producing knowledge simultaneously.

For the publication complementing the exhibition, Camille provided a text (written with a pseudonym) that presented him as the worst artist in the world, the epitome of failure, ranking 29,773 on artfacts.net. Here the interesting move is that, by doing this, Camille was creating his own measures of success and understanding of art. With no shyness, he turns his own failures into a way of promoting himself, like a form of branding. As Camille argues, what makes him an artist is precisely the public depiction of his own failures, deliberately amateurish and risking his own sanity for the sake of art. We can say that his work is always a failure in progress.

> *Bricoleur*-like, he parasites around, with no sense of fault or guilt. Following this vaguely poetic process of tinkering, in which the absurd seems to take over the real, the newly formed objects appear to be in a direct continuation of the artist's body, as if, not really knowing that things had a function, he twists them to his own surreal and naive whim.

This is what Camille says about himself, referring to Camille in the third person. Unlike the rest of the artists taking part in *Objects of Attention*, who approach art making as an extension of their selves into the materials with which they engage, Camille maintains that he does art notwithstanding the materials and objects available. It may thus be said that objects and materials do not inform his art; they even, in some cases, object to his actions.

But is art just what artists decide to be art? Camille's work reminds me of Francis Alÿs's performance *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing* (1997), in which the artist pushed a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City for nine hours until it had completely melted. By taking such an ephemeral object for a walk, Alÿs's intervention explored the possibilities of shifting agency through failure; he engaged in a process of inquiry and experimentation, transforming the block of ice into a theory-making

device. Yet there are not only different ways of embracing failure. The act of failing constitutes artistic pleasure in and of itself, as demonstrated by Bas Jan Ader. This artist enacted the infinitude of failure by letting himself go (gravitationally), falling into canals, leaping from roofs and allowing himself to be swept along by ocean waves. Indeed, in contemporary art failure has been considered an operative method, not only a judgement (Martins 2015).

Regarding Hannes, I did not mention earlier that, while we were gathering materials for the exhibition installation, he was watching YouTube tutorials about how to build a wall. Asked about it, Hannes confessed that he had never built a wall or used cement in his life; he went on to argue that 'this does not mean that I cannot teach others how to do it'. This scene triggered contradictory thoughts about him (was he just a conceptual carpenter?), as well as about the way in which anthropology accepts not-knowing and deals with fieldwork misbehaviour and amateurism. It brought to my mind Jacques Rancière's book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), in which the author recounts the story of Joseph Jacotot, a teacher who undertook to teach French to Flemish-speaking students. As Jacotot knew no Flemish, and noted after a few classes that the students were capable of learning French by themselves, he took it as his role not to transfer knowledge, but rather to allow students to reveal their own intelligence (see also Strohm 2012). Still, there might be an equality of intelligence among teachers and students, but a difference in responsibility. Moreover, they were remunerated for their labour. In addition, we had a commitment and had agreed upon a time schedule with a state museum and other institutions who were supporting the project, all of whom had high professional standards.

I became worried and got into an argument with Hannes. The same night I called Kirill Tulin (who, besides being an artist, also works at installing exhibitions) and asked him to join us the next morning at 10 a.m. to help with the construction. Did I fail as an ethnographer by not trusting Hannes? Instances of tension between us highlighted the fact that collaboration is not harmonic, free of conflicts and disagreements. However, the event did not result in the end of fieldwork and our relationship. In fact Hannes welcomed help in building the wall and worked well with Kirill (Fig. 3.8). He also insisted that even if we had failed to build the wall on time, the project would have been a pedagogic success, as his students would have learned what it meant to work under 'real-world pressure'. Hannes thus purposely placed his students in a tense situation, where they could train their reactions and gain experience by themselves.

Fig. 3.8   Building the wall for the *Objects of Attention* exhibition with Kirill, Hannes and the students. Francisco Martínez.

Discourses of professionalism refer to a sustained involvement and personal commitment; they do not tell, however, about the level of expertise and how well (or ill) behaved the artist or designer may be. Against the actual negative connotations of amateurism (deficiency of knowledge, ineptitude, inability to meet standards or a non-relevant outcome), this term is here taken in its original meaning: doing things for the love of them, testing the limits of our abilities and preserving the capacity of surprise. Amateurism refers to both a phenomenon and a concept; it is both an experience that occurs at the limit of knowledge and also an attitude towards things – a guide to life. Nevertheless, as we mature, personally and professionally, we tend to become less curious about things and to distance ourselves more clearly from the possibility of failing, misunderstanding, misspelling or using idioms.[15]

As ill-behaved problem-makers, the amateurism shown by Camille and Hannes was not exactly an absence of knowledge; it was rather a way of doing things differently and/or a pedagogical commitment. Both men are very experienced in their fields and highly trained, as artist and architectural designer respectively. Yet what made them amateurs was their attitude. They chose to approach their tasks as if they were not experienced at all, neither trained nor professional, jacks of all trades but masters of none. They posed as being not competent in anything, yet undertaking all sorts of tasks.

To sum up, Hannes and Camille ignored pre-given notions of relevance, productivity and measure. They deliberately took risks, chose less obvious materials and directions and were willing to play beyond instrumental logics, causing trouble not only to me, but also making the work of the museum staff harder. They were like religious initiates in a radical rite, showing an overtly active curiosity and appetite for testing and making things happen. By such performances, however, Camille and Hannes provided to this ethnographer the opportunity to discuss the place of surprise and non-knowledge in anthropological studies, as well as dozens of stories to share.[16] Dealing with their actions confirmed for me, once again, that doing fieldwork consists in searching for problems.

Field-making

The field is a social and scientific space, one which is transforming those who take part and that transforms itself over time. It is bounded yet of an unpredictable nature, making possible an excess of ideas, relations and questions. However, anthropological conceptions of the field have also changed.[17] Fieldwork has traditionally been perceived as a question of choosing between going 'there' or staying 'at home' (Clifford 1997). Consequently the field was supposed to be 'somewhere': a place where the ethnographer was present. This idea was challenged by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997), who argued that the field had now become virtually everywhere – meaning that we could no longer escape it and pretend that we were 'out of it'. As they put it, fieldwork is a political location. In a critique of this, however, Matei Candea (2007) defended the epistemological boundedness of the fieldsite. As he argued, spaces have to be delineated for heuristic purposes, even if these boundaries are constructed and rather arbitrary.

Today, instead of thinking of the field as a place from which to move in and out, it would be more precise to speak of turning it on and off; it may also be viewed as a site where relations are curated. Arguably, the field is bounded differently (temporarily and technologically, not just spatially) because of novel forms of relation and of producing knowledge. In other words, new ecologies and scales of research, the intensive circulation of things and ideas (models, standards) and increasingly complex geographical attachments are producing new, knowledge-making processes as well as, in some cases, an imperative to collaborate. Accordingly, contemporary curating-like approaches in anthropology are increasingly focused on involving participants differently, questioning

asymmetric relationships in the field and the taken-for-granted dynamics of epistemic power (Fitzgerald and Callard 2014). Anthropological curating is crafted in a more dialogic way, actively involving artists and designers in the design, implementation and dissemination of research, taking risks together in the production of knowledge.[18] Such a mode of collaboration does, however, re-shape our fieldwork. It also demands from the ethnographer complex modes of involvement, putting us to the test of our own ways of knowing.

In this vein, during *Objects of Attention*, I also had to pay attention to the ways in which forms of difference and knowledge repertoires come together, taking care of others' skills and capacities while decentring my own authority in the field. In transdisciplinary research, a degree of friction has to remain (or even be actively preserved), while carrying on incremental experiments. Moreover, there are knowledges that emerge through collaboration, before and beyond disciplinary identities – knowledges that do not precede the collaborative practice, but rather emerge through it. So we see the relevance of investigating anew the ways in which we are interconnected while producing knowledge (despite having different epistemic goals) and the kind of relations creatively established in the field.

The exhibition was both: an ethnographic device designed in the field and also the empirical outcome of fieldwork. As such it provided knowledge about the whole and about the relationships generated during its production. The field is thus approached not as being given, but rather as something made or constructed against the grain. *Ethnographic Experiments* thus proposes moving through different ways of knowing and of taking part 'from within', in contrast to the more common and established concept of field discovery.[19]

I was actively part of the production of the exhibition and of the different knowledges around, thus making relations possible and provoking reactions while simultaneously studying them. My threefold fieldsite consisted of an artistic exhibition, a state museum and a disciplinary borderland. All three dimensions were differently configured, understood and practised by the participants, yet they were held together through a fragile ecology of knowledge that was not free of tension. A recursive question in the field was 'How is it possible to relate all these different practices in a way that makes sense?' My answer would be that in the production of knowledge, co-dependence is a reality to acknowledge and not a weakness of the ethnographer. However, this is not a conclusive answer, but rather one that brings up additional questions: 'How representative is my experience?' 'What were the implications of approaching a museum as a site of experimental research (instead of a

heterotopic venue)?' 'How can we work around the problems and tensions encountered as the collaborative research unfolds?'

As in the case of exhibitions, ethnography can also be designed to create new formats of constructing fieldwork, generate surprise and challenge the order of things, and not simply to reflect what is already known.[20] Nevertheless, this book does not intend to define ethnography (a way of knowing and as a kind of knowledge), but rather to explore its limits, margins and intersections, working across the boundaries of what we know at the threshold between roles.[21] Furthermore, we can say that exhibitions are just a format, among many others, of being on the way to knowledge and of carrying material interventions, characterised by sharing and by the attempt to establish a common ground. We can thus speak of materialities of collaboration, opening an in between space through which we can undiscipline our methodologies and notions of relevance.

In all the exhibitions I curated, the field was a device full of people and things that were not meant to fit in or engage in the conversation, complicating neat distinctions between native and non-native. This was also the case of *Objects of Attention*, in which objects were tested for their epistemic power and political potentialities. I also had to pay attention to what words can do – listening, thinking, evoking, surprising, producing spatial and temporal effects. My fieldnotes were produced individually and shared with some of the participants, challenging the traditional assumption that ethnographies are written 'for an audience consisting of people other than those who had been studied' (Erickson 2018, 41). However, looking back, I realise that even fieldnotes could have been produced collaboratively with the participants in the exhibition and written by multiple hands (Martínez, Berglund et al. 2021). This would have added another layer of complexity, attraction and also complication to the project, mixing styles and including the voices of those who were not actually expected to read the ethnography. Even without dialogic editing,[22] the multivocality of this ethnography is meant to foreground what collaborations do and the ongoing complicity of the endeavour, as well as the tensions, multiple negotiations and disagreements involved in the process (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz Hernández 2012).

The way we include our collaborators in the ethnography is already a form of doing theory and practice. In an insight included in this book, the anthropologist Eeva Berglund observes that fieldwork is not simply scaffolded by theory; it simultaneously responds to and informs concepts and methodologies. Theories, like things, can also be abandoned or cast

aside to compose something else (Boym 2017). Theory appears then as always unfinished, soft, contingent and not necessarily coming in an orderly manner during its making (see Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018).

On this topic Kathleen Stewart argues that a certain softness and weakness is required for theory work. In her view, theory has to be attuned to the things it follows, rather than to evaluate or represent them. Because things already entail particular modes of knowing, our task is to create the conditions that allow us to be moved by them 'as problems of thought' (Stewart 2008, 73).

Since theories may fall apart when brought into contact with different things (especially if they are too rigid), Latour proposes shifting the emphasis from 'matters of fact' to 'matters of concern' (2004a), from the study of things in themselves (stable, fixed) to the study of things in process (constructed, enacted), thus bringing to the foreground the relationship between scientific and political practices.

The exhibited objects managed to evoke an experiential response from the audience and to extend the imagination of what we consider politics. *Objects of Attention* thus explored the aesthetic, epistemological and political conditions of objects, reconfiguring them as relational devices. By problematising the relation between empirical fieldwork and knowledge production, I reconsider how we constitute our object of inquiry and the way in which the process of research enacts its own validation of knowledge (Hartblay 2018; Law 2004; Savage 2013). This research also contributes to understanding how things are given form and meaning through experimental and collaborative practices. Knowing differently, however, requires re-tooling and re-training mechanisms, and in some cases unlearning gestures and awareness of the thresholds and limits of experimentation (Law and Ruppert 2013; Stengers 2005; Strohm 2012).

My field-making, based on curating and assembling, was a methodological search that involved working with the ethnographic and the material at once, manipulating things with others, studying our interventions while doing it and accounting for the kind of relations that these processes of transformation generated. In *Objects of Attention*, we were not merely changing the relation between objects and narratives, but also developing new kinds of methods and concepts out of objects, opening up ethnographic conversations, testing different variables during fieldwork and studying the effects and reactions to these interventions during the research process. Here fieldwork was deliberately constructed as an intervention, operating experimentally in the knowledge-making process. In this research I bring to the fore fragile acts of collaboration in the field based on experimental forms of borrowing from other practices while

doing them. It is thus an exercise in producing knowledge with others, who acted as complicit interlocutors rather than merely as informants.

In this project artists, designers, illustrators, photographers and the museum staff were involved not simply as a reality check on my interpretations, but also as my epistemic community from whom to learn, share capacities and produce knowledge. Because they can be analysts in their own right, their varied perspectives on knowledge, and their techniques for making it, should be valued and appreciated.

Notes

1   Such wider work is itself motivated by wider changes in the discipline, such as research increasingly being done in teamwork projects of limited duration and multisited ambition.
2   One of the main messages of Star and Lampland's article 'Reckoning with Standards' (2009) is that standards relate to communities of practice and their maturation – a model, example or measure of things that facilitates a practice while reifying a process and establishing a normative functioning.
3   Two sources of tension and distinction were the ethical standards and the different 'loyalties' we are expected to cultivate in our praxis: one to the university and the other to the art market (Jelinek 2013).
4   Ehn also highlights four transdisciplinary potentialities of art and anthropology:

   1) The experimental character of contemporary art and the way artists use themselves as both actors and as research objects
   2) The embodied engagement of artists with tangible things and their self-reflexions on materiality
   3) The capacity of contemporary art to communicate, engage with and also influence different audiences emotionally
   4) Artists' abilities to find surprising ideas in ordinary life (Ehn 2012, 4).

5   In a round-table discussion on the topic organised in one of my exhibitions (2016), Laviolette argued that: 'the combination of art practices with anthropological methods not only does not reduce the rigor or validity of an ethnography, but also enhances it by allowing us to involve informants in a different level and to enact research in a more kinesthetic or even holistic way. In terms of the difference of an anthropologist becoming an artist, and vice versa, I do not think it is that easy, however, because each of us entails a particular way of seeing. The main similarity might be in collecting material and ideas about a given inquiry or matter, the study of social interactions, but in anthropology there is a theoretical and reflexive aspiration, and art practice might be more focused on mediums and preverbal ways of knowing ... nonetheless, I also consider anthropology a creative practice because our dissemination of knowledge might be playful and engaged too'.
6   Kosuth was a pioneer in this exercise and defined anthropologised art as a 'socially mediating activity', which 'depicts while it alters society' ([1975] 1991, 117–24).
7   As noted by Kant in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), the limit always presupposes a wider space while the boundary rather encloses a given territory and negates the possibility that something else might exist. In other words, the boundary focuses its gaze on its interior: the limit looks outward and beyond (see also Pirni 2016).
8   He seems to agree with designers Maxine Naylor and Ralph Ball, who argue that 'ideas expressed in words are not design ... in the visual world words are best used like poisons in early medicine, sparingly with caution and restraint. They should be employed as links, titles, puns, adjuncts and bridges; aids, not substitutes' (2005, 40).
9   That is due, indeed, to how designers define their problems and traditional notions of expertise (Ball et al. 1994).
10 For example, Donald Trump's policy towards Mexico or the *divide et impera* strategy in Palestine.

11 The museum collection is held elsewhere, preserved through specific climate conditions and conservation standards. It consists of diverse types of artefacts which are representative of different schools, materials and historical periods.

12 In *Les Techniques du Corps* (1934), Marcel Mauss suggested approaching the body as an object of analysis itself, studying how people use their body rather than objects and tools. In his epistemology of the body, Mauss observed that knowing is embedded in practices; one consequently has to be aware of the materiality of gestures and how they recall particular ways of doing and might potentially yield shared knowledge. Michael Taussig (2011) goes further and talks of a 'bodily unconscious', based on non-explicit attuning. Specifically he refers to a cultivated relation to the environment, which expresses itself in the form of an anticipatory awareness, not always intentional, reminiscent of that of hunters, jazz musicians and artisans.

13 Often the inability to know plays an important role in the way we approach the world (Beck and Wehling 2012). Likewise, ignorance and misbehaviour are intrinsic in decision making, governance and politics, instead of temporal or deviant.

14 For instance, it can be used as a way of getting access to knowledge, becoming an element of learning and experimentation (Farías 2017) or, eventually, a liminal new beginning, providing space for self-assessment (Martínez 2019a).

15 Curiosity, in the sense of a desire to know or learn something, has been also considered as an infantile or amateur attitude, pointing at a tension with the logic of scientifically controlled interest.

16 Indeed, in some circumstances, both frictions and idiotic behaviours (as a mode of cultural encounter) might be useful to elicit new insights during a research process (Gaspar 2018b).

17 Methodologically this discipline evolved from a more comparative and historical approach to a synchronic study of bounded habitats and territorially circumscribed small-scale societies. This was called the field, following the terminology of natural history (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

18 I discuss different relationships in the field – of symbiosis, parasitism and predation – in the sense of how bodies of knowledge are designed and transferred. The other ethnographic model would be the extractivist one, based instead on attraction and absorption of data.

19 This is an intensely political and aesthetic gesture, which develops transversal methodologies and transforms our understanding of the field. Yet, as noted by architect Alberto Altés (2016), *intra-vening* other disciplinary territories nonetheless requires an engaged understanding of the relations of things, materials and people, as well as improvisational and speculative skills.

20 This is, for instance, the approach of Kim Fortun (2012), who proposes considering ethnographic designs as epistemic technologies that provoke questions, perspectives and ways of attending reality unforeseen at the start.

21 Here I draw on George Marcus's observation (2008) that ethnographic practices are already taking place in non-traditionally anthropological locales (para-sites), and conducted by non-anticipated actors who show no anthropological background (para-ethnographers).

22 Ethnomusicologist Steven Feld coined the term 'dialogic editing' (1987), in reference to the attempt to incorporate participants' responses to our fieldnotes. In his view, dialogism would facilitate informants' take on our take, not simply re-interpreting our material but also reframing and refocusing our account, lifting the power to control which voices talk, as well as when, how much, in what order, and in which emotional tone or idiom.

4
Master insights

Opening up the museum

Kai Lobjakas (art historian, Director of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design)

Present times require that museums both produce knowledge and connect with different audiences; we are not only about traditional museum items and displays for loyal visitors. Accordingly, the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design does not only work as a gallery space; we also collect, experiment and undertake research. *Objects of Attention* was a provocative way to reflect upon the knowledge we create, looking at our practice through someone else's eyes. The seminar organised by Francisco was also an important medium for connecting our own experience and skills with the ones of our different guests, reconsidering the functions with which the museum is familiar. The durability of a museum is a social and cultural achievement, produced through ordered and sustained patterns. It is not free of complications to institutionalise certain things, ideas and radical practices. For us, the exhibition was an exercise of porosity. It offered a chance to open up the museum and rethink what we are, for whom we work and what we display – as well as how we maintain certain standards and define the borders of our space and institutional practice.

We were curious and intrigued not only before the *Objects of Attention* project started, but also during the exhibition itself and throughout the whole process. The reason for this was the kind of people that Francisco brought together and the unexpected reactions and extremely interesting ideas that surrounded the project. It provided an approach to material culture that significantly widened our scope and ways of seeing and talking about objects, including the multifaceted

nature of design in contemporary times. Understanding design has become harder and means different things for different people: is it a material outcome or a service, visible or invisible, a solution or a problematisation, a finished product or an idea? We often hear different answers to these questions. Then along come projects such as *Objects of Attention* that shift the perspective and raise new questions.

Non-mastery and tolerance for risks in design

Hannes Praks (interior designer)

Design practice and design pedagogy share the need to build at the edge of what we know and what is allowed.

For the spatial design of the exhibition I involved three of my students, giving a pedagogical character to the project (Fig. 4.1). I was a partner of my students and in some cases their assistant, while Francisco, the curator, was my client. The problem was that I never had enough time for the client; I wanted to make time for my students, crafting my freedom from institutional control, instead of having the control myself. The curator, my client, became very nervous as days (and weeks) passed. In the final day of installation I even wanted to have a physical fight with him, but did not because of being in front of my students. Our collaboration

Fig. 4.1 Hannes Praks giving a talk at the museum in the symposium held after the opening. Viktor Burkivski, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

was not smooth but it was real, which provided a valuable lesson to the students. In the exhibitions I have designed there have always been tensions and troubles between curator and designer. On top of that, museums tend to react against creative solutions, citing concerns about risks. If people have low thresholds of tolerance for risks, imagine that of institutions.

As a result I was teaching students to see where the edge of our work lies and what are the consequences of reaching that edge. Pushing students to these limits can be considered a useful teaching method: it makes them concentrated and attentive, and the learning is viscerally felt. When I talk of edges, I also mean risks. We were not sure about the final look of the wall, for instance – whether it would last for the two and a half months of the exhibition, and whether the wooden floor would react badly or suffer damage. In fact we managed to generate a very strong tension between the wall and the wooden floor. There was also a high humidity because of the wet cement, which added a sort of erotic layer. All that affected the atmosphere of the show, of course.

From the beginning, Francisco was not interested in creating a mausoleum of objects; he wanted a labyrinth in which the visitor would experience different contact zones. There was not enough room for this, however, so we opted for the more pragmatic option – that of a wall. It was a good solution, as the wall became another object participating in the exhibition. It would have been considered a failure according to orthodox design standards, as rather than make a perfect background for the artworks, the wall became an artwork in itself; it even dominated the rest of the objects. But in the context of this exhibition it worked very well.

It is true that I had no experience of building a wall and that I started by watching YouTube tutorials, a very millennial thing to do. In any case I was convinced that I could teach students how to do it, or at least to motivate them to make the attempt. Francisco was nervous, but I remained calm. Between us there was a memorable tension, in part because one was familiar and the other foreign to design, but also because of our different ways of defining solutions and problems.

Vernacular design and cultural appropriation

Ott Kagovere (graphic designer)

Every morning as I walk to my place of work, I pass various advertisements and business signs. The advertisements change – each week a poster or a
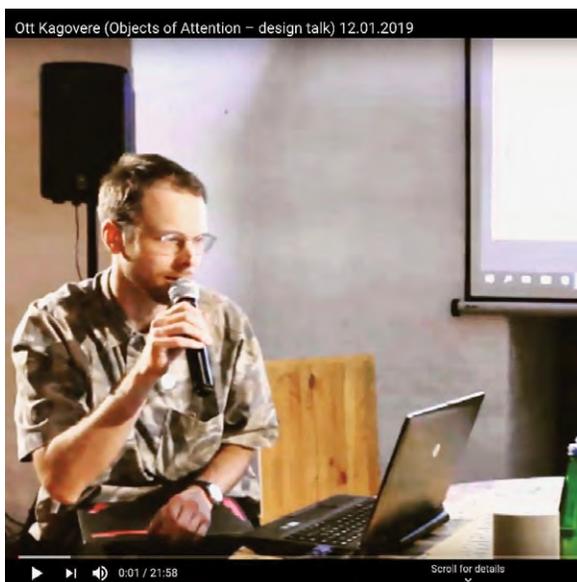
Fig. 4.2 Ott Kagovere giving a talk at the museum in the symposium held after the opening. Viktor Burkivski, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

digital screen notifies me of a new event or a product – while most of the business signs stay the same. The latter consist of hair salons and flower shops, kiosks that provide shoe repairing or key cutting services: small-time businesses that have remained the same for many years. Like old friends, their signs remind me of times past. They look enthusiastic and sometimes incongruous, providing a strange mix of the desperately over-designed or functionally under-designed – an art nouveau flower-esque sign for the cheapest hairdresser, for example, or a sign, simple as a notice board, written with a pen on a paper. Yet in a sense none of this actually matters. These signs have become the ambience of my everyday life. They are my locality, my vernacular (Fig. 4.2).

The vernacular has caught the attention of many designers since *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi et al. 1972), and of graphic designers more specifically since the postmodern movement of the 1990s (Poynor 2003). In many ways this has been a refreshing shift of focus, bringing many topics on the margins for decades back into the forefront of graphic design. Suddenly our eyes were open to amateurish street signs again. It is as if a John Cage quote had started to make sense in the context of design: 'Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore

it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating' (Cage 1961, 3). The graphic noise suddenly became cool.

As refreshing as this development was, making the vernacular aesthetic cool may be only a step away from cultural appropriation. Using, if not abusing, a language of care and empowerment from a certain culture or subculture to make a product 'sexy' can become damaging.

In that sense one should not forget that the vernacular in design is not an infinite source of 'inspiration' of cool and quirky aesthetics, but rather the attention to locality. Specifically, it is to the locality that makes up your world and the small interactions and relationships in it. If these relationships get lost in translation from their original context to a specific design project, one must rethink the appropriation. In the end the aim of good design should not be the production of mere aesthetics, but a communication of subjectivities, of human relations. It should open our eyes and draw attention to the peripheries of our vision. It should make us notice our surroundings rather than overwhelm us with advertisements that hammer new products and their prices relentlessly into our heads.

Words and objects don't come easy

Roomet Jakapi (philosopher and musician)

As an academic philosopher I have been trained to form complex, meaningful sentences expressing rational views and arguments. While writing research papers or teaching students I feel absorbed, but also puzzled by the intellectual beauty of theoretical structures. In some cases I hardly care if anything in the world corresponds to the concepts and structures created by philosophers. What I really care about are the concepts and structures themselves, nice mental constructs, and the ways in which people argue in relation to them.

My puzzlement concerning philosophy has to do with the impression that when rationality is pushed to its extremes, it starts to look suspicious, alien, odd and unreasonable. There are moments when I feel, in the midst of carefully constructed theories and arguments, that the products of philosophising, despite being highly rational, make no sense at all. Surely it is an experience of absurdity, rather tiring.

There are other moments in my academic life when I experience absurdity and even complete meaninglessness – when I hear boring talks at conferences or meetings, for example, and almost fall asleep. There is a point at which the meaningful talk that I hear becomes first partly

meaningless and then turns into an organised sequence of sounds similar to vocal improvisation without semantic content.

I love to hear people talk in languages I do not understand. In fact, I have come to the conclusion that comprehension is a disturbing factor in listening to how people speak. If I do not understand, I can focus on sound and engage in pure listening. At the same time, I realise that the intention and effort to speak properly and meaningfully is a way to organise the sounds in question.

As a musician without classical training, I intuitively form musical structures during live performances, like the one I did at the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Free improvisation is a way of making music where practice, listening, creative thinking and quick decision-making are crucial. Luckily for me, it is a genre where musicians of very different backgrounds can play as equals.

There are quite a few vocalists, including myself, who normally use no words in their musical improvisations. We focus on sound, not language or meaning. We use and treat the human voice as a musical instrument throughout the performance. In my case, this policy of avoiding language in performances may be partly a reaction to the high standards of language use in academic philosophy. In a musical context, a spontaneous talk with a meaning is usually embarrassing and primitive.

At the same time, vocal improvisers often imitate talking or 'speak' in 'unknown languages'. As an improviser I may, of course, use this kind of 'talk' to express the feelings, mental images and thoughts that I have during the performance. Furthermore, my improvised 'talk' may, and often does, evoke feelings, mental images and thoughts in the listeners. However, strictly speaking, such 'talk' is meaningless.

Even free improvisers have habitual ways of producing and connecting their sounds. Through practice the improviser develops a 'musical vocabulary' containing sounds and techniques that he or she frequently uses. Accordingly, free improvisation can be – and has been – analysed in terms of 'musical language' (Parker 2019, 7).

The elements of my 'musical vocabulary' include sounds of different origin. There are pure vocal sounds, some of which resemble linguistic entities while others resemble various non-linguistic sounds in our environment. There are, in addition, many sounds generated by the electronic manipulation of my voice. Finally, there are sounds produced by means of numerous objects that I have bought, found or received as gifts (Fig. 4.3).

The objects I currently use in my performances include a five-eyed toy monster hanging on a chain, some crooked nails, two rubber pigs from

Fig. 4.3 Inventory of sounding objects. Roomet Jakapi.

a pet shop, two tube-shaped boxes, a metal box filled with bolts and other small construction articles, some plastic parts of a rat cage, a small blue elephant piano, a plastic hammer, a plastic sword, a stick for back-scratching, a manual egg whisk in a plastic jug and a latex exercise band.

While I regard these objects primarily as sources of sound, they clearly have other performative qualities and uses as well. Compared to standard musical instruments they look strange, and are shamelessly used in weird ways during my performances. My focus is on the sound that they produce, but I am aware that my objects also tend to generate grotesque images in the minds of viewers and listeners.

The American philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine (1960) famously proposed a thought experiment in which a linguist wonders what a native means by saying 'Gavagai' in certain situations, namely when a rabbit is present. The linguist cannot determine whether 'rabbit' would be a correct translation of 'Gavagai', for the native may mean something else related to rabbits. In any case, it is assumed that 'Gavagai' means something in the language spoken by the native.

In the case of vocal improvisation where no words are used, some sounds may resemble words and sentences, but they are, strictly speaking, without meaning. At the same time vocal sounds and sounds produced by means of various objects may be equally important elements of a 'musical vocabulary' used by an improviser.

By way of conclusion, I want to acknowledge that both academic philosophy and vocal improvisation are greatly enjoyable and ultimately nonsensical activities.

Place a bet on your defeat

Camille Laurelli (artist, PhD in Artistic Research)

Francisco kindly asked me to answer three questions.

What is knowledge?

Before going to bed, my parents used to read me three articles from the encyclopaedia. We had a 40-volume set and we did manage to finish all the volumes by the time I grew up. Now that I am an adult, I can say many things about knowledge. When I wake up, it appears to me as an awareness of one's limits and skills. I always lose when I bet on something, for example, so I prefer not to do this any more. But then, in the afternoon, knowledge appears to me as the capacity to have a choice – to play or not to play, to do or not to do, to put a bullet inside or leave it in the barrel, to work or do nothing, to take the tram or fall asleep.

Finally, in the evening, knowledge is people.

However, I scare many people as a person. I assume it is because of my nervous nonchalance and my inexhaustible flow of words, which put people in absurd and embarrassing situations. Those who know me are aware that I smoke; they also know how much I drink, as well as how much time I spend doing nothing – *il bel far niente*.

The combination of these three kinds of knowledge is condensed in one skill: camouflage.

What is a method?

My method is called 'can't NOT', also known as an 'economy of the few' (scientifically proved). It consists of being precise about nothing, voluntarily choosing to present poor forms. In my artworks, anything that happens could always be better. When I exhibit photographs, I give no dimensions and prefer to show variable sizes. Any titles that would kindly allow the visitor to identify an object as a work do not exist either; although

it is not difficult to add them and to prepare captions, I prefer such details to be deliberately absent. Having thus removed all the necessary dressings that supposedly turn a quotidian object into an artwork, my creation floats ethereally – even if suspended on a strip of sticky tape.

By removing all these elements, or at least by paying no attention to them, I eliminate the hegemonic frames that elevate the object into the field of art. By doing so, I object to art institutions and challenge the established market codes, bringing objects back directly to the 'real' and simultaneously questioning my own position as an artist. This phenomenon is defined by some scientists as 'positive externalities' (Citton 2014).

I believe myself to be something like the last surrealist alive, giving myself over to the raw expression of my thoughts. This could almost make my work engaging, but it also makes me act like a parasite, to the point that I attribute the ideas and thoughts of others to myself without even realising it. My work lacks citations, not even a 'nodding to' or passing reference; instead I openly practise pillaging without restrictions, inferiority complexes or moral hangovers. Rejecting responsibility for any of the consequences of my actions, I prefer the term 'anachronistic plagiarism' – not because I am aware of having recopied from the future (which would make me an artistic prophet), but because I only realise afterwards that I have copied something already in existence.

Actually, it is impossible to separate me from my work. I move around clumsily in a studio littered with disconcerting objects, rather like a mad scientist. Then I pick up whatever is lying around at my place and convert it into something else. Following this vaguely poetic process of tinkering, in which the absurd seems to take over the real, the newly formed objects appear to be in a direct continuation of my (artistic) body. It is as if, not really knowing how to use them before, I twist them to suit my own ends: a wine bottle topped by a showerhead, a round chess board, an office chair hung on the wall … All these assembled things form a kind of map of my life, and follow the vague idea of making the world according to my own image (Fig. 4.4).

Francisco told me, 'Camille, pay attention to how difficult it is to disobey an object'. I also react to objects, but equally to images, signals, anything and everything, and correct whatever does not suit me and my future satisfaction. I always react and never act, as I follow no clear strategy for life or work; I behave like a vacuum cleaner – marked not by inspiration, but inhalation. What I inhale is later transformed into conglomerated, compact dust that is then presented as an 'artwork'. From time to time, of course, I have to empty the bag. Certainly this vacuum

Fig. 4.4 Camille trying out different ways of displaying his broken tools at the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Francisco Martínez.

cleaner method complicates my life, making me live in a constant state of intellectual vigilance – thinking never stops.

What is failure?

Often I find myself in a dilemma: how can I criticise a milieu and also be a part of it, even if just by ranking 29,773 on artfacts.net.? It is a bit like the dilemma of the invisible man: I want you to see that I am invisible. In order to feel like an artist, I have to display my own failure.

Indeed, no one fails as regularly as me, nor more successfully. With some acolytes I created a self-legitimising system taking the form of a network of fake residencies (i.e. 'The Free Zoo') made up mostly of our own apartments; we invite each other round and report on them via a series of blogs and websites, giving the impression that such a network really exists. This system, of course, reaches its limit very quickly. The perfect circle of a mutually approving network of friends does not allow much to happen, except perhaps to be forgotten. We want to prove this network is self-sufficient, but someone has to comment on it. We want to get by without institutions, but that does not generate any systemic conflict because institutions get by fine without us.

Readers may imagine, even if just for a moment, that I am one of those almost invisible artists who act like those tiny grains of dust that make the machine stop working. But this is not exactly a strategy of opposition. It is rather a tactic to displace the imposed order and authority of art institutions, a way of un-saying things, a practice of *détournement*. Michel de Certeau (1980) explained this very well by making use of the French idiom *La Perruque* (literally 'the wig') in reference to the kind of work that one does for oneself under the guise of doing work for one's employer.

I am a specialist in nano-resistances, such as positioning a paper aeroplane between two fans so that it flies, cementing a wall of Lego originally built for my son or folding a piece of paper to make a very complex piece of origami. My artworks are in fact linked to a lazy practice of absorbing the real, digesting it and then rejecting it again. Thanks to a badly-interpreted Paul Lafargue laziness is a right, boredom is also a location for work and idleness preserves us from an alienated existence. Except that this right to laziness was written to combat an economic, political and social system in which the proletarian masses were subservient to the ever-increasing demands of productivity. Artists like me have no respect for work, and the idle time intended to facilitate the liberation of body and mind is stupidly wasted here. After all, it is just a question of making yourself feel good when you waste your time playing video games or watching some television series.

Perfection and error in drawing

Lilli-Krõõt Repnau (graphic artist and illustrator)

In classical printmaking techniques you have to be very careful, concentrated and 'there' to create an image. Otherwise you will cause a mistake which irreversibly affects the final result. Errors in themselves are not necessarily a bad thing. An error forces you to respond to it, leading you to re-adapt your project, but also produces something new and unpredictable. For example, in lithography you have to take so many different factors into consideration that it is easy to make a mistake. Every stone is different to begin with and chemicals behave differently too, depending on the room temperature and the level of humidity. So it is convenient to understand the materials with which you are working.

The possibility of making a mistake is an intrinsic component of any working process. This give-and-take influences how we think and how we

create images. When it comes to digital drawing, however, the situation is different – everything is easily changeable and transformable. You can always take a step backward and modify the image in all directions, non-destructively. Because human beings do make mistakes, traditional animation, made frame by frame, does look a little rough and distorted. Interestingly, computer-generated animation often tries nowadays to mimic such broken aesthetics, artificially creating errors to achieve an analogue visual effect. In my case, it makes me think about the authenticity of films in relation to how they are made.

Nor am I the only one concerned with such doubts and suspicions. For instance, I have noticed how people find it difficult to believe that something has been created using the old printmaking technique, even if I specifically mention the technique immediately under the print. I never thought that someone would suggest my animation work was digitally drawn, but then I started to notice that people were indeed wondering about this. 'Is this digitally drawn?' I heard people ask. For this reason, I decided not to remove my mistakes from the final result (Fig. 4.5). This decision led me to think about how much the digital age has affected our perceptions, so we end up questioning the authenticity of any image.

Nowadays there are so many possibilities of manipulating an image that it is hard to believe in anything we see. I tried for a while to find another artist who has worked with similar techniques. Then I listened to an interview with William Kentridge and realised I had found one. 'That's it!' He has worked with various media and made several films in front of the camera. I really enjoyed the way he approaches animation – as a process of unveiling the act of drawing that can then become part of a
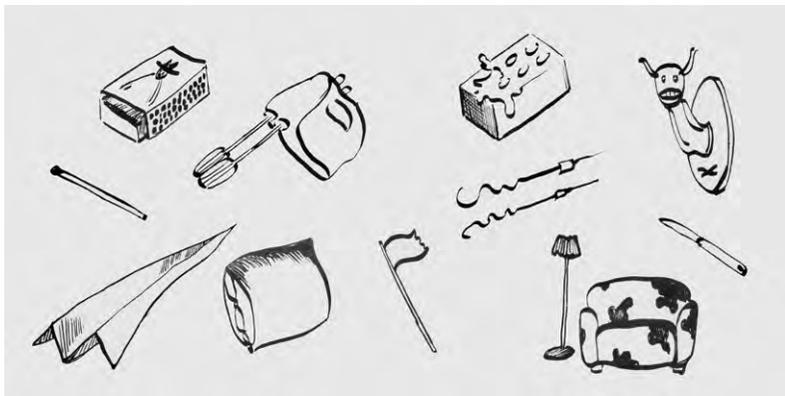
Fig. 4.5   Illustrations by Lilli-Krõõt Repnau prepared for the *Objects of Attention* booklet.

greater whole. Sometimes Kentridge leaves his hand or even his entire body to appear in his films, as if he were performing in a theatre or as if his drawings were a storyboard or just a sketch. By including traces, he attains a new level of expression and a fresh appreciation of animation, experimenting in a skilful yet somehow childish way.

I am not searching for an active participant

Varvara Guljajeva (PhD, new media artist)

Humans Need Not to Count is a custom-made robotic arm that counts gallery visitors and so takes over the job of a gallery assistant. The infrared sensors installed in the gallery entrance register the visitors as they arrive and the robotic arm presses the tally counter accordingly. Since the artwork does not ask for audience interaction but applies the method of scanning an area – everyone who passes by is counted, whether this is a conscious act of participation or not – we can describe this artwork as post-participative. In other words, the aim of *Humans Need Not to Count* is not to establish an active participation with the audience, nor to interact actively with visitors, but rather simply to numerate them – breaking down the individual into numbers.

Contemporary art features an increasing number of artworks that demonstrate no audience involvement, but still incorporate an internal system of interaction with a data source. The introduction of this new approach serves to generate a shift from human–machine to system-to-system interaction (which is real-time data), minimising the audience's role. However, the audience is still involved in a rather involuntary manner, limiting any active participation of users or public and placing the machine–system at the centre (Huhtamo 2007). In our creations, therefore, the position of the audience is different in regard to the work of art. This position is not active or responsive, as would be required by an interactive artwork; rather, it is passive. In other words, a post-participative artwork marginalises the active role of a spectator. Today being passive is actually the norm: audiences participate without having control over, or even being aware of, the participative act. Likewise, systems gather inputs without the consent of an audience, revealing the machine's superiority over its public.

Post-participation is largely connected to the surveillance age. The industry driven datafication is described as 'surveillance capitalism', a term first described by Shoshana Zuboff in 2015 and which underlines the ongoing monetisation of big data as well as earning money by carrying

out surveillance on customers. Being under constant control is a part of the post-digital age. The surveillance has gone further than a mere camera gaze; it is much more complex and diverse. Physical surveillance has been transformed into data tracking (Ozog 2010). Every step and click is traceable, and increasingly used for predicting people's future behaviour (van Dijck 2014).

Early attempts actively to involve the audience originate from the beginning of the twentieth century. The first one may be considered to have been the Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who impelled the audience to be involved in his artistic manifesto of *The Variety Theatre* (1913). In the 1920s Bauhaus artist Max Ernst placed an axe next to his creations, giving members of the audience the freedom to destroy those that they did not like. Similarly, in 1923 Man Ray left instructions adjacent to an artwork saying 'Object to Be Destroyed', a provocative message that urged the audience to destroy the artwork on display. However, it was not until the 1950s that a more dialogic interaction was introduced through the Fluxus happenings (events that sought to deflate art institutions and de-emphasise authorship in a playful way).

Nowadays, artists not only establish new kinds of interaction with their audience, but also work with surveillance technologies (for example, CCTV cameras and tracking and recognition algorithms). Artists also employ strategies for the passive participation of an audience unaware of what is happening; these superimpose the dominant system over a spectator and result in post-participation. In this light James Coupe (2013) has referred to his public as an 'unwilling actor' and Ozog (2010) speaks of a 'helpless audience'. There are, however, different proposals available on how to address this shift. I can also refer to an emerging new culture of makers who rely on open-source media and try to democratise the production and creation of works. Nowadays you can build your own 3D printer, laser cutter or knitting machine; you can make a light dimmer circuit or develop a body tracking system. Copyright is just for losers.

There are complications, of course. In the public talk given at the *Objects of Attention* exhibition, we decided to speak openly, together with Mar Canet, about the many shortcomings and failed productions in our practice, correlating material testing with creativity and art making. While preparing the talk, we realised how much our own work process is influenced by things, technologies and the material environment surrounding us.

In my view, artists are less and less attracted to interactivity than ten years ago, when interactive technology was just emerging. However, artists are increasingly concerned about engaging critically with the

contemporary. This both indicates the growing maturity of the field yet makes artistic practice increasingly hybrid and more difficult to classify.

Crumbs and petals

The Idiots (collective initiated by artist Kirill Tulin)

> I work for cultural production,
> To be serious is compulsory.
> Cultural production is working on me.
> Can I take a day off today?
>
> Worm – self-expression,
> Hook – alienation,
> Worm – self-realisation,
> Fisherman – exploitation.
>
> Roses and bread, roses and bread,
> And there is nothing else.
> In this theatre
> The canteen costs too much.
>
> Fragment from a song, 'Cultural Production', by
> *Your Mother's Maiden Name* (ДФВМ)

We are starving but feel no hunger. We are in the art fields – first slash-and-burned, then heavily fertilised with heated debates on the conditions of the artists' workforce.

Labour rights, this meagre bread and dried-out roses, we have only because those before us demanded and fought for them – this manna did not fall on us as a generous gift from above, nor did it rise up from these fields by itself. Yet just as the hunger artist from Kafka's tale could not find food he enjoyed and so continued to fast, we continue to starve without feeling hunger, because that we already have neither nourishes us nor whets our appetite. Instead, we seize on it as an asset that we need to speculate on. We speculate about the reproduction of human capacity and the social reproduction of an artist's subjectivity, not only that of her or his physical abilities necessary to keep on 'making shows'.

But does the artist's human capacity give us some attitudes that are not (yet) assuming form? Is there some formlessness that makes the

artist's human capacity seep away from becoming a 'good mould' for the reproduction industry to forge, say, adventurous entrepreneurs or crisis managers out of it? Is there such formlessness that would not itself be captured into a 'good artist asset'? Risky assets equal high profits.

With a €500 fee, how good should the artist be?

The cultural industry is particularly apt at satisfying the switch of the demands from 'I want to be paid' into 'Sorry, but I want to see the sense of what I am doing'. 'You are making a good show,' the curator replies – or, if you insist, maybe you get something like: 'you are investing into your future', which is kept squarely in the_present. It is up to you which you prefer – a 'like' on the art platform, floating as if above the dehydrated ocean of criticism, or a welcome ticket into an 'imaginary middle class' awaiting a real inflation. And yet they both leave us starving and nauseated.

The old school parasites in the contemporary art museum may suffer from malnutrition for many reasons – in the sense that the last crumb for them was to be had from 'relational aesthetics', which supplied generous feasts. This is where added value is 'produced' by reproducing the 'good artist asset'; minimal investments (public or not) are needed to keep the good heart beating and the 'social credits' ticking. Dramamine, the grandfather of over-the-counter medicines for motion sickness, would not help form the 'dizziness of freedom' (or the simple and fashionable mode of 'being creative'), so 'Keep Your Chin Up!' and develop a speculative mode of digestion to be on par with a respective mode of production.

What does it actually mean: making art just as good as the conditions of its making and your re-making can produce? Could it spoil the production of good art? Most importantly, could it disrupt the reproduction of 'artists being good' (that is, 'being an asset') chain?

The opening of little potentialities, crumbs and petals, as well as the whole discourse of creative potential that has always accompanied 'human capital', is one of the most efficient methods of separating bread from roses – and then dividing both from the subjectivity reproduced and the commodity produced. One may just as well write an account from prison describing the sea view from the barred ventilation hole. Speculation is sightless, but it is not blind. We know that it is the centre of the eyeball that is blind, not its periphery. Speculation has no sight of the_present: it is its negativity.

These have been The Idiots' fieldnotes, para-anthropological speculations. They are written from the_present; things go as they always did. Social contradictions are masked as problems, artists are asked to be good and solve them, and any hazard of negation is curated away.

Then the art institution comes and says that the world is consigned to destruction. But whose world is ending exactly? The apocalypse is a long-running process, unequally distributed…

Psalms for Jessi

Eléonore de Montesquiou (artist and film-maker)

Jessi is an English-speaking Cameroonian woman. When I offered to bring books to her, she replied that she needed nothing more to read than a Bible. Her Bible and her faith had crossed borders. Jessi became a friend during my visits to the Harku detention centre, not far from Tallinn. She was the only woman there and she was lonely, very lonely (Fig. 4.6). Jessi had arrived in Estonia in March with a student visa. She wanted to visit her sister in Belgium, but she was arrested at the airport and sent to jail. In the autumn Jessi was sent back to Cameroon after months in detention for … what? For not having exactly the right residency permit? Or for fear that she would leave the country?

Eléonore: Good morning, Jessi, how are you today?
Jessi: Good morning, my dear! I am very well. Thank God for his grace. Even as I am talking to you, many people in English-speaking Cameroon are unable to stay in their houses. They are living in the bush. Killing is taking place every day. We are living at the mercy of God. Life is not easy. The doctor here gave me sleeping pills. I told him I don't want them. These

Fig. 4.6 *Drawing of Jessi* by Eléonore de Montesquiou, featured in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition.

days are fine; I do feel depressed, but now I have a bit of relief, since the days are passing. I do feel a bit relieved.

Eléonore: I remember that you told me once about your Bible. If you agree with this idea, I would like to share your story with the public.

Jessi: My Bible is one of the precious things that I hold so dearly. I have had it since I was a child. I take it with me everywhere I go, and have also downloaded it onto my phone. I always have it. I believe it solves all my problems at any time. I read it and it makes me happy. I have read it all. I also have some favourite texts that I go through, depending on the situations in which I find myself. The Psalms are the most helpful texts. Whenever I read them, I feel uplifted and fulfilled in my spirit.

For Bibles, the editions are Good News, King James, New Revised Version. There are others, but these are the ones that are commonly used. As for me, I have Good News and I have downloaded the King James and New Revised Version onto my phone. They are all in English.

Eléonore: Which are the Psalms that help you most?

Jessi: Psalms 3, 4, 23, 51, 77, 91, 121, 142 and 150. My experience in Harku is something I do not like to talk about. But all the same, if you can remember how many months that I was there, six months, I did not sleep for more than three hours a day. Since I had my Bible, which was so precious to me, I spent most of my time reflecting on it. That kept me from having nightmares.

Reality is for those who lack imagination

Jussi Kivi (artist and urban explorer)

My collection consists of Soviet educational poster art, designed to illustrate procedures in the event of an attack with weapons of mass destruction. The material was discovered in an abandoned underground fallout shelter in Sillamäe, Eastern Estonia (Figs 4.7 and 4.8). In Soviet times the bunker had housed a civil defence education exhibition for citizens, firefighters and civil defence teams. The education material dealt with different aspects of civil defence, from first aid and putting out fires to preparing for chemical warfare and nuclear strikes. The main emphasis was on activities prior to and immediately after a nuclear attack.

Figs 4.7 and 4.8   Sillamäe bunker, Estonia 2008. Jussi Kivi.

The town of Sillamäe was part of a Soviet military industrial complex. It was in fact the location of a secret uranium enrichment plant and chemical factories. The workforce was imported from Russia and Sillamäe was closed to outsiders up until the end of the Soviet era. The bunker was abandoned following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although the material was exposed to the forces of nature and vandalism upon discovery, part of it was rescued for future generations in 2008 by the joint expedition of the Romantic Geographic Society and the School of Esoteric Geography. The expedition members were J. Kivi, O. Kochta-Kalleinen and M. Leppänen. A few years later the entire bunker was demolished.

The rescued material is a significant collection of Soviet poster art comprising over 130 works. Thematically the collection remains extremely topical, making preparations for a hypothetical nuclear attack and nuclear fallout, which are practically identical all over our planet.

Experimentation back and forth

Eeva Berglund (anthropologist)[1]

There has been a tendency to assume that the relationship between the practices and practitioners of anthropology, design and contemporary art is merely one of service. In this view, anthropology is used as a proxy for more participatory and collaborative attempts at learning, and art or design are applied by anthropologists to represent their findings. Recently,

however, other approaches have emerged. In line with constructivist, post-colonial and feminist technoscience sensitivities seeking to re-politicise knowledge production, there have been many attempts at drawing other kinds of relations – not only between art and anthropology (Calzadilla and Marcus 2006), but also between design and anthropology, as in the emerging field of 'design anthropology' (Gunn et al. 2013; Murphy 2016). Most of these feature a whole breadth of collaborative cross-pollination exercises and methodological exchanges seeking to re-create newer – should we say 'para-sitical'? (Marcus 2010) – connections between these fields.

Those are disciplinary contacts where not only designers and artists reflect on what it means to import the essential methodological feature of 'old-school' anthropology into their practices – 'ethnography' – but anthropologists are also learning to expand and transform theirs through direct inspiration from art and design methods and materials. In so doing, they re-enliven a certain 'experimental' flair that has been always part of the discipline.

Another mode of encounter between art/design and anthropology is thus also possible. It is one in which ethnography is done 'otherwise', in conjunction with or in juxtaposition to artistic practices, and which generally draws inspiration from them to foster moments and situations that are open-ended and pedagogically valuable, as well as epistemologically fertile. But we also suggest that the collaborations have involved a reciprocal element, making ethnography/anthropology a different art. In those situations, the relationship is one of mutual learning: art and design impact on anthropology and anthropology hopefully gives something back in return. Artistic and design practices are already proving to be catalysts for a shift in anthropology itself. Already new generations of scholars often operate with different criteria of what is interesting, worthwhile and legitimate than those of earlier generations do.

Such shifts, related to the changing roles of experts and activists in society generally, are also about what the object of research practice might be, where it takes place and what is deemed to have happened or been gained through it. Anthropologists working in activist modes, for example, easily offer their intellectual work to be valued and treated as political action (for example, Osterweil 2013) and can take considerable personal risk in doing so. Others employ anthropology as a tool for making sense of prior professional lives, using specialist expertise of their own in conjunction with anthropological modes of problematisation (Smith et al. 2016). Typical reactions to these shifts have highlighted the messiness of ethnographic fieldwork. However, as these experiences

multiply, they not only invite but also generate novel understandings of anthropology and its uses, in some cases in conversation with broader debates on legacies of scientism in social science (Latour 2004c).

Experimentation in its different styles (Klein 2003) has a long pedigree in the natural sciences as a particularly authorised type of research. Experimentation has been in part connected, but also set in opposition to observation. This is despite its own protocols to enhance trustworthiness, which have involved the production of a particular setting, equipment and inscription devices (Rheinberger 1997) designed to articulate particulate knowledge on yet-to-be-known entities, as well as to produce circulating literature that establishes the validity of particular claims (Latour 1987). Latour's thoughts on the imagined ideals of natural science in the social sciences are key in this matter. Whereas natural sciences take the risk of their objects being recalcitrant or 'talking back', social science has mostly preferred to avoid such risk.

The idea of experimenting in the field has a taste of transgression – possibly because of the work initially invested in separating out laboratories or, in the case of art and design, studios and ateliers (Farías and Wilkie 2016). In ethnographic fieldwork, experimentation might indeed be a tale *of* the field and not only *from* it (Estalella and Criado 2018), being more honest about what ethnographers do: namely, improvise and experiment in order to learn. Indeed, all forms of fieldwork have entailed bricolage, imports from the vocabulary of others, practices of arranging relations and interventive gestures.

All forms of experimentation also entail risk, or at least serve to put at risk the solitary and disciplinary modes of research. The ethos of ethnographic experimentation may be that the risks are born across the field as the roles of scholar, activist, local expert or victim or whatever are all put to work in the collaborative production of knowledge. However, one of the most interesting moves may be to consider the traditional 'Others' as 'epistemic partners', rather than objects or subjects of knowledge production, the people with whom we work. For that, it is important to establish a space where practitioners can be confident enough to engage further with these acts – a sort of social laboratory, in which the problem of change and, more specifically, the creation of new artefacts is central.

In short, design interests us because we live in the age of design. But we also live in an age of crisis, in which the futures on offer are scary and many people seek ways to make them slightly less so. Discipline is a mutable and fraught concept these days, so it may be useful to note explicitly that I use the word to refer to a certain competence if not virtuosity, a capacity in a specialist area that comes with application. I also think discipline's

prerequisite is time to learn. In addition, I believe that doing things differently always involves both theory and practice.

It is important to note that the work of thinking has never been confined to academia. However, the fast-disappearing privileges once granted to academics now appear as important but endangered elements of our capacity to engage in the knowledge practices necessary for coping with a changing planet. If design anthropology is to emerge as a discipline understood in this way, it will take time and much effort. Design anthropology would be well equipped to pursue proposals for better, more settled futures, however, as well as a wider understanding of what is human. Design-anthropological collaborations have already developed a lexicon for temporality, as well as a habit of taking it seriously, and for working with partial perspectives and multiple temporalities, ethics and politics.

As practitioners of their disciplines, anthropologists and designers engage with those they study as intellectual partners. They seek answers as well as solace in practical and sociable encounters that are simultaneously learning experiences. Design's conceptual apparatus is a particularly resonant one in these circumstances; it provides a tool for thinking that attends necessarily, and often rather precisely, to acting and thus to shaping futures. Design does not just create future stuff, and certainly whatever it does is achieved not *ex nihilo*, but rather by building on existing infrastructures, problem definitions and techniques. Also, designerly practice develops in relation to one of the key challenges for institutions these days: the overlap between concept and materialisation. In design the relationship between the possible and the actual is not only constantly posed, but also often thoroughly thought-through.

Note

1   This essay was originally prepared for the brochure of the *Objects of Attention* exhibition and includes the generous input of Tomás S. Criado.

5
A laboratory of objects

Instead of a well finalised display with fixed meanings, *Objects of Attention* was an experimental assemblage. The project sought to explore whether the field, as a site of knowledge production, could be both exhibited and constructed – through both epistemic generosity and an open-ended combination of conceptual and material work. Yet, as with any other experiment, the exhibition was also exposed to the possibility of failure and also to contagion (to other things). The objects displayed in the exhibition acquired a new relationship with one another and with the public, changing the existing configurations of perception and meaning. Moreover, we can say that the objects themselves, the museum setting and those who actively took part in the preparation of the exhibition were all subject to experimentation.

In mounting the exhibition we were also experimenting with ethnographic forms, processes, conditions for the production of artworks, matters of concern and different audiences. We were dealing with all these at once, as if we were part of an experimental system in which the engagement with epistemic artefacts involved practitioners in wider circuits of knowledge. Through the engagement of contemporary artists and designers with, and through, the expressive (material, design, functional, indexical) potential of ordinary things, the items were transformed into 'vehicles for materializing questions' (Rheinberger 1997). Also they were epistemic objects for thinking about the contemporary – through topics such as migration, gender, environmental sustainability, digital rubbish, obsession with changes and the role of humans in an automated world.

To some extent the exhibition was a system of testing, 'designed to give unknown answers to questions that the experimenters themselves are not yet able clearly to ask' (Marcus 2010, 276). Traditionally testing, as a form of experimental knowledge production, is characterised by

temporal and spatial concentration and also by specific material arrangements, creating a controlled space in which to experiment (Criado 2018; 2021). In our project objects also seemed to be secluded, placed between walls, contesting the outside, not allowed to see the sun but accessible to different audiences in a concentrated and condensed way. As a result the exhibition was not simply a site, but also a collective experiment, in which not only experts were participating (Latour 2011).

Etymologically, experiment derives from the Latin verb *experior*, meaning 'to test', 'to try', 'to find out', generating unexpected knowledge (Gross 2010). Despite their ephemeral character, experimental research designs also break down the boundaries between laboratory and field. In other words, the field can then function as a laboratory and vice versa. This design also makes possible mutually interventionist roles in the field, in which the work of artists and designers becomes an experiment in itself. Likewise, objects may also play an important role in the organisation of experimental collaborations. Indeed, every object at the exhibition was a 'boundary object' meaning that it was a collaborative prototype, supporting complex interactions between participants and creating common understandings. As such, these objects facilitated disciplinary border crossings, as well as working at the boundaries of our professional identities, by bridging intersecting practices, cultures of expertise and heterogeneous socio-technical worlds (Star and Griesemer 1989; Fujimura 1992; Knorr-Cetina 1999).

Based on Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's notion of 'epistemic things',[1] Karin Knorr-Cetina has coined the concept of 'epistemic objects' (2001) as artefacts characterised by an incomplete, undetermined nature that ask for a continual re-definition. Knorr-Cetina proposes then to study how things perform with other things and with people. This concept is also relevant in understanding how disciplines are embedded in specific objectual practices, as well as the way in which knowledge is distributed both within our discipline and between disciplines.

Laboratories, however, combine a controlled experimentation with epistemic authority and the legitimising rituals of academic knowledge. Moreover, they show a particular relation between fixity and contingency – as fields do, but differently, since fields are harder to control and manage than labs are. In the natural sciences the production of venues for experimentation has been acknowledged historically to be an authorised type of research, yet this has been the case far less often in the humanities and social sciences (Rheinberger 1997; Klein 2003). As paradigmatic sites for the spatial organisation of experimentation, both laboratory and studio are characterised as 'a controlled inside from an uncontrolled

outside, thereby producing both a notion of placeless knowledge and the possibility of inconsequential action' (Guggenheim 2012, 102). Nonetheless it is possible to find a few differences. Unlike a studio, for example, a laboratory affords institutional authority for knowledge production (Farías and Wilkie 2016). In addition, a laboratory tends to be more strictly designed than a studio.

But what is the role of experimentation in ethnographic research? Is it possible to transform a state museum into an object-led laboratory, and the ethnographic field into a platform upon which to experiment with epistemic validity and different audiences and professionals? Our intervention had the aim of transforming the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design into a zone of knowledge assembling; here we carried out a socio-material experiment in front of the audience, rather than merely providing a platform to communicate the results of ethnography already performed (Macdonald and Basu 2007). Our laboratory (here, the art gallery of a state museum) was turned into a space of activation of experimental socio-material relations. Such approach reflects actual changes in what we consider knowledge and, accordingly, in how we produce and communicate it. The progressive interweaving of fields of knowledge does not only affect matters of relevance, evidence and disciplinary boundaries. It is also being organised by novel experimental configurations and different modes of data gathering and analysis (Biagioli 2009; Niewöhner 2016).

Objects of Attention transformed the museum into an operating space for different research interactions and tentative situations, and consequently introduced risks, uncertainty and surprise – elements that do not work well with the institutional role of museums. In this project the museum *became* the space of a problem-setting intervention, and therefore of extended possibilities – building experimental research and analytic infrastructures in a way that allows the incorporation of participants as more than informants (Boyer and Marcus 2020). As such we approached it as a production site that more closely resembled a studio – a place in which the makers of the objects do not always know what they are seeking (Farías and Wilkie 2016) – than a state institution intended to establish artistic canons and reinforce standards.

However, in the social sciences the process of discovery and the process of presenting knowledge are most often staged as strictly separated, building a sense of scientific objectivity by distinguishing between the research and analytical work (Burawoy 1991). The *Objects of Attention* exhibition sought to construct another form of knowledge-making – one that also involved questions of academic validity and

material modes of both political and academic engagement. Even if only temporarily, we can transform rigid and highly structured areas (such as museums) into laboratories of objects and fieldwork, where intention and accidents might coincide. Indeed, one of the driving factors of my research is not to pass up opportunities for experimentation. Quite the opposite: the platforms that provide us with opportunities for interacting with society and materials in an open-ended way need to be defended and re-created.[2]

Ethnographic Experiments shows how the collaborative character of the gesture of exhibiting the field facilitates re-scaling and re-functioning research, as well as the production of new modes of ethnographic representation. We are thus talking not simply of anthropology's evolving culture of method, but also of issues of authority in the field. This renewed interest in materiality and exhibition experiments might refer to a crisis of representation. It could also be that the current experimental moment responds to a sense of epistemological crisis.

For instance, we can see an increasing interest in things that are 'in the making'.[3] In this vein, Paul Basu (2017) proposes to engage with the notion of the 'in between' as a way of escaping any methodological essentialism; discussions of entanglements, hybridity and multidirectional trajectories, of separations, thresholds and dislocations, of indeterminacy, disorder and indiscipline, of border zones, side roads and paths 'in the making'. A study of the 'in between' reveals the work of going through, of mutating and becoming – often generating a liminal suspension of knowledge.

Objects of Attention took the format of an exhibition as an epistemological device that leaves open the generation of both questions and answers. The use of exhibitions as ethnographic devices refers thus to a particular format of material-relational production. The assemblage of objects created in the exhibition was a useful ethnographic device for understanding the many facets of interpreting and interacting with other objects, with audiences, with professionals and with political issues. Yet the knowledge derived from such an assemblage of things was hard to predict or to control. Here objects were part of an explorative exercise in making sense and making visible, testing how ideas can be manifested through things and how design forms are materialised. It also reveals new forms of storytelling and new ways of gathering ethnographic material.

In this project, experiments and collaborations break through different forms – sometimes as a methodology and sometimes as an object of study or a research aesthetic. As more and more scholars are willing to explore transdisciplinary methodologies, it is convenient to start discussing the next step, which is to explore cross-boundary ways of gathering

material evidence and communicating findings. The challenge is still how to use the methods of anthropological research, design and contemporary art practice in the service of an overriding question, expanding the notion of the field without sacrificing an ethnographic surplus of ideas.

Ways of objecting

Objecting is a particular way of engaging with the world – challenging and opposing it, making disagreement perceptible and being unwilling to behave as expected. It is a form of intervention in public matters and also a form of methodological problematisation, moving back and forth between the theoretical and the empirical, the tangible and the conceptual, the visible and the hidden. In this vein, adopting an opposing position is also experienced as a critical form of attracting attention, a way of turning the lights on. Objecting can thus also be taken as a method of testing and not just of protesting; it is itself contingent, contestable and experimental.

To present a viable opposing view requires a purpose, a public and an argument, as well as something that lasts in time (most often in the form of a material presence). The term 'objection' comes from fourteenth-century French, meaning to reply or retort. Yet etymologically we can go back to the Latin word '*obiectionem*', which referred to the action of opposing. Moreover, objects stand against and before us, crystallising the gesture of objecting, assembling audiences, sparkling effects and triggering 'new political occasions' (Latour 2005a, 16). In this sense, objecting should not be deemed an anti-social gesture but quite the reverse. It is an integral part of being in a society, of engaging with public concerns and of presenting things to the views of others. It is consequently a well-directed cognitive act.

Objecting acts do not dispute the existence of reality, but its actuality. Indeed, one of the main powers of objects is not their representativity, but rather their capacity for making the imaginary feel as real, as 'sense-fictions' (Pine 2016, 300). Objecting is thus a matter of thinking through objects and exploring the connections between them and different places, people, events and material processes; in so doing we assume that objects release capacities and relations, further affecting other objects in turn.[4]

From a methodological perspective, Liana Chua and Amira Salmond (2012) remind us that ethnography always unfolds within a specific artefactual environment. They propose next to develop more artefact-based methods in which the research focus is upon specific entities as they traverse geographical, historical and socio-political boundaries.

Ethnographic methods could be one of the reasons why museums may benefit from working with anthropologists. The anthropological toolbox helps us to investigate the way in which objects co-produce other things as well as people's subjectivity (Olsen 2010). Indeed, two of the etymological meanings of 'thing' are cause (*cosa, chose*) and assembly (a gathering zone, a meeting space). We can also pay attention to the etymology of the word 'object' (from the Latin word *obiectus*), which denotes an act of placing something along the way and of focusing our attention on something specific. The combining of the prefix *ob–* (cast in the way of) with *jacere* (to throw) refers to something that is presented to the senses and intrudes into our thoughts. Here it calls for a response, opposing or putting against or in front of us, as many translations of the word into European languages show: *Gegenstand, objeto, объект, voorwerp, objekt*.

Objects can do both: reach and cut across cultural divides. They enable various professionals to work out what they may possibly create together, thus providing bridges between realms that otherwise scarcely communicate. Objects can thus act as a link as much as a cut, crack or rift, yet they may also be enigmas, generating tension and evoking surprise, curiosity, even bewilderment. What objects always do, however, is to command ethnographic attention, even if resisting an easy appropriation. They often call our assumptions into question and 'object' to those who encounter them. Objects show an expansive capacity, in some cases producing effects of entrapment, empowerment and contagion – or even an ancestral impulse to step into the gallery, destroy its whiteness, smash the vitrines and free the captured objects exhibited there (Taussig 2004). In this sense, objects can be considered compressed performances in their own right. They serve as condensers of multiple makings, ruptures and oppositions, and establish an affective relation to the context from which they were originally extracted.

Sorry for insisting, but it is important to realise that things make things happen, both socially and materially. This is beautifully shown in the film *The Way Things Go* (1987), created by the Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weis. The film documents an endless chain reaction in which objects interact with one another in a series of impending, apparently casual choreographic collapses. This documentary is itself a shocking artefact; it appears to be rather comic, poised somewhere between a Jacques Tati film and a visual encyclopedia of material failure, turning the ordinary and everyday into something profoundly strange. It expresses beauty in a warehouse, for example, by using tyres, ladders, shoes, oil drums, soap, pyrotechnics, water and petrol. The artists present seemingly familiar situations as if things moved on their own; it is thus

left to the viewer to interpret what is order and chaos, system and error, and where to draw the line between them both.

Another remarkable experiment with objects was *The Comedy of Things*, organised by anthropologists Morten Pedersen and Morten Nielsen in 2014. Twenty fellow professionals were invited to gather in a Copenhagen hotel to explore the connection between the making of anthropological knowledge and the creation of comedies in an open-ended design. The organisers were thus not afraid of engaging with unexpected or awkward issues, nor with different testing typologies. *The Comedy of Things* demonstrated that through a creative and experimental engagement with objects we can generate novel forms of anthropological knowledge.[5]

We can thus talk about objects of and for knowledge. In a similar manner, *Objects of Attention* proposed an emancipatory use of material culture; things were placed in tension and in opposition, exploding and dissembling what we know about objects. The displayed objects stood as an enduring objection to and in opposition to something. They were set against confinement, nuclear energy, the loss of one's home, packaging and consumption excess, intended design and use, sexual proximity and, in some cases, even objecting to life and death. *Objects of Attention* also addressed the problematic aspects of its own production, as well as reflecting on the extent to which exhibitions are influenced by the circumstances under which they are produced.

Artists became the first collaborators after my invitation to join the project. But there were also adjacent participants, such as my three-year-old son. In the museum I had to look after him a couple of times, when he played in the corridors, galleries, offices and storage rooms, objecting to my work. On another occasion a woman posed naked before a photographer in a studio in front of the museum offices. She comically disrupted one of our strategy meetings, without being aware of what was going on in the adjacent museum. Yet were my son and the naked woman in fact objecting to my objections, or perhaps to our seriousness in presenting them?

Materialising power

In 2005 Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel jointly curated the exhibition *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, held at the ZKM/Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. The curators foregrounded the transformative power of things in politics, in contrast to the agency of ideologies and institutionalised forms of representation. They presented

politics as a way of assembling 'matters of concern' and making political settings away from mainstream political arenas.[6]

Nowadays it is increasingly difficult to identify the specific place, time and practice of political matters: they seem to be everywhere and nowhere, played in any moment and yet keeping people distracted from relevant concerns, constantly performed without ever being part of their own making. Drawing on the idea that politics is too important to be left to politicians, Latour and Weibel organised *Making Things Public* to visualise what is political and reflect on what is to be considered a public matter, and who this should concern.

Yet in what way can objects be political? And how do things shape our political lives?

Objects are important to political theory. They serve to produce order, historical narratives and authority, and to materialise imagined communities (Smith 2015). Yet objects have the capacity to sustain order as much as to challenge it and to promulgate political authority as much as to question it. They may participate in operational relations of authority in order to disrupt them, since objecting is part of the social efficacy of objects. Part physical, part social, objects are invested with politics through their capacity to resist and transfer meanings, to modify our perceptions of the material world, redefine contextual relations and forge plural political positionings (Latour 2004b).

A lingering question during the *Objects of Attention* exhibition was whether we can change our understanding of social matters by reconfiguring tangible things and including them in the political sphere. This gesture is not simply about theorising objects into our political lives. Rather it produces further problems of knowledge and responsibility, potentially rupturing everyday habits and changing political responses (Braun and Whatmore 2010; Stengers 2010).

Traditionally objects have been understood as having semiotic, archaeological and political value; they are used to tell a story about the people who *own* them, for communication purposes and the metaphorical creation of meaning. Objects are more than cognitive representations, however; they contribute to re-imagining the boundaries of what constitutes 'the political'. Indeed, tangible things can be considered cultural nodes that mediate social instrumentality and make things happen. For instance, Marx argued for an approach to materiality as a derivative of socio-economic relations. In more recent history objects have been viewed as participating in social actions and making things happen; they are more interesting for what they do than for what they represent (Gell 1998).[7]

Things possess a multifaceted continuity through time – to the point that a given society might radically change but the objects do not. In the exhibition *The Power of Things*, curated by Kerttu Palginõmm at the St Nicholas Museum of Estonia in Tallinn, we could encounter several examples of this in practice. Visitors could pay attention to the token of a poor person, an object with the power to situate an ordinary beggar above the rest of beggars in medieval times, making him eligible for institutional care. We could also see the pilgrim shell of Compostela, providing an individual with the opportunity to redeem sins through pilgrimage; or face the spareness of Dr Johannes Ballivi's simple tombstone, easing his passage into paradise.

The Power of Things was not simply an exhibition of medieval art, relying on the historical narrations evoked by objects. It also had a theoretical ambition, for instance reflecting on the materiality of a given epoch and place, and how power and the immaterial are expressed in tangible ways. This leads us to question how tombs, as crafted material forms, fulfil their task of immaterial representation, and the way in which objects do reveal power. The exhibition also reflected on the role of objects in the transition between life and death, uniting materially the paradise to be earned, the political power not to be forgotten and a biography to be preserved. An example of this unity was the painted epitaph of Pastor Johann Hobing on his deathbed (1558), complete with a blanket from his home region of North Rhine-Westphalia.

In medieval times objects contributed to create a sense of power by demonstrating abundance, connections and control over resources. Yet power might paradoxically be expressed in the desire to transcend materiality.[8]

The curator, Kerttu Palginõmm, invited me to visit the exhibition. She also asked me to give a public talk about how power is also a property of materiality, making politics sensorial and consequently more real and viable (Rancière 2006). In some of the objects in the exhibition we could also recognise geopolitical clues and historical connections, for example the commercial routes of the Hanseatic League, as well as communicative artefacts, such as the signet ring of a nobleman and the historical notion of the 'Other', evidenced via a brooch with the head of a Saracen on it. We could also learn about the materialisation of power in the fifteenth century by paying attention to the objects carried by the cardinal and the pope in Bernt Notke's painting *Danse Macabre* (late fifteenth century)

Paradoxically, these quotidian objects became the heritage of the future, raising a series of important questions such as: What would a contemporary 'Dance of Death' look like? What objects of power would be

depicted today? Which among our objects do we think will become the heritage of the future? Do we look at objects differently than we did 500 years ago? What about the unnoticed changes in the objects? The materiality of things is precisely what makes possible the encounter between those who created and lived with these objects and ourselves, who try to comprehend them centuries later. In *The Power of Things* I also learned that medieval items often resist deterioration better than modern materials, posing paradoxical challenges for the conservation of collections. A museological collection is possible by dismembering things from their context and reassembling them into the institution through specific placing strategies, conditions, explanations and categories.

For anthropologist Susan Pearce (1992), museum collections are made up of items that come from the past and are reassembled with the intention of producing a whole greater than its component parts. The art historian Susan Vogel (1991) reminds us that most of the things displayed in museums were not made to be exhibited there; only contemporary art has been made specifically to be seen in them. Objects are most often displayed through successions that are either chronological (along a temporal axis) or stylistic (representing distinct schools, historical periods or political regimes). Such displays serve to organise the world as history of art through a defined series of continuities (Bann 1984). Accordingly, objects are always presented as either specimens or relics. From another perspective Domínguez Rubio (2016) refers to museums as 'objectification machines', serving to reduce uncertainty, fix forms and stabilise relationships between shapes and materials in order to maintain the intelligibility of artworks qua objects.

In exhibitions, a sense of order is constructed through the distribution and arrangement of a disarray of things, which produces in turn a perceptible aesthetic whole. We therefore experience order not merely in spatial and temporal realms, but also through a sensorial one – meaning that we are 'ordered' by things while perceiving their own encompassing order. Each time we visit a museum we experience a new present, as if it were a river. Through every new exhibition a museum reinvents itself – it is always different and yet always the same, endlessly shifting in a *Gattopardian* fashion.[9] These constantly changing iterations construct a 'fixed ephemerality' (Crane 2002).

Likewise, a museum is always the materialisation of a better-looking life. It is made by dismembering things from their original context and reassembling them into the institution through specific placing strategies, conditions, explanations and categories. The museum world is experienced as a play of mirrors, in which what there is seems to be as important as what

there is not. Visitors enter into a world full of illusions, mythologies and perspectival perceptions. Here they discover ecstasy, puzzlement and darkness, human desires and misrecognition, even as they encounter revolutions and counter-revolutions, iconoclasm, artefactual inventions and tricks, storytelling and the power and affordances of representation. All of these produce a feeling of excess that we cannot easily assimilate.

In my case, all the objects of my curatorial project derived from the present. To produce a coherent whole was not my main priority, but rather to create an experimental assemblage for thinking anthropologically about the contemporary. Walking around the old St Nicholas cathedral, now a museum, I appreciated the difficulty of designing such an exhibition at this venue. Firstly, the setting (a Gothic church dating from the thirteenth century) eclipses any artwork or object displayed there. Secondly, there was the obduracy of the existing collections to consider. This arose not only from the kind of collection and number of items, but also from the very heuristic level, through the indexing power of the elements conforming to the assemblage. To work with a collection means to hold, preserve and access a set of objects and documents, engaging not only with the performative and representational potential of the assemblage, but also with its limitations, inertias and affordances (Martínez 2019b). In this sense a collection can be taken as both a place and a medium, a home for objects and a device for knowledge-making, as well as a space for reconnecting and recollecting.

But would a tombstone in the St Nicholas Museum collection be considered a singular entity or a set of relationships? For archaeologists Chris Fowler and Oliver Harris it would be both – an assemblage always in becoming, and yet also a thing in its own right, involving 'changing relations that transform the monument through time and those that persist allowing it to retain recognizable form' (2015, 144). As these authors conclude, we need more than a single means of engagement and analysis to understand the persistence of things, the ways in which they emerge as bounded entities and come to endure through time. After all, objects are beautiful, among other reasons, because they endure.

Objectography

One has to be careful with the selection of objects. Take only those that will be used and cared about. A substantial connection to objects, or even just their company, might make people anxious. Objects do not easily accept being lost, forgotten or ignored; they wait for their moment to

strike back. You cannot mention 'Rosebud' and then forget about the sled, or pretend that love letters at the bottom of a drawer will always be silent.

Things are not just present; they are made so by diverse human perceptions. Through our embodied engagements with them and through situated notions of value, worth, functionality and validity, we can even identify agency in objects. As a cultural phenomenon, and as with texts and images, things can be taken as evidence, helping us to gain insight into the societies that produce them, as tangible remains that continually convey meanings. In this light we can make the following arguments:

1) Inanimate things give symbolic meaning to human activity, as they have the ability to signify something, mediate human experience and carry out social functions
2) Things mirror and condense social phenomena, as a day-to-day metabolism acted upon by people
3) Since things convey experience and express meaning, they can be taken as evidence that allows us to reconstruct lifeways, imaginaries or particular human (in)activities.

People surround themselves with stuff possessing practical, aesthetic, political or affective value; they collect it, use it and abandon it, imbue it with symbols and imaginings, create comfort with it and entertain with it. It is therefore relevant to investigate how things become loaded with particular significance, and the way they can participate in social settings. Pushing beyond the (vague) concepts of materiality and material agency, Pierre Lemonnier insisted on starting our research by acknowledging the very physicality of objects and the ways in which they are manufactured and used ordinarily. Specifically, he focused on mundane objects in Papua New Guinea (such as eel traps, garden fences and drums). Such artefacts:

> would not find their way into museum cases and … are uninteresting to most anthropologists, sociologists and historians, but nonetheless lie at the heart of the systems of thought and practices of their makers and users (2012, 13).[10]

Objects are cultural artefacts made (and often owned) by people. If we remove the subject, however, we risk depoliticising objects and ignoring power relations and the work of affects. As pointed out by Daniel Miller, objects are able to perform social tasks precisely because we are often unaware of them; they set our scene without consciously being challenged by us. He refers to this phenomenon as 'the humility of things' (1987;

2005), noting that the less aware we are of the company of things, and their participation in our actions, the more powerfully they influence what we do and see. Objects may even have an infrastructuring capacity for bringing together, relating to, coordinating, organising and making public (Niewöhner 2015). They generate particular modes of being, making people's behaviour and objects appear as one.

For instance, Tomás Errázuriz (2019) has studied his grandmother's material culture to discover how a particular socio-material entity, that of house-grandmother, has been created – and how it stabilises kinship networks, bridges different generations and reinforces affective relations materially. His grandmother has lived in the same building for more than 50 years; she carefully curates anything that comes in and out of the house, equating the sacrifice of an object with a failure of relationships. In a self-reflexive form, Tomás juxtaposes his own way of living with that of his grandmother. He acknowledges how he passes through different apartments and multiplies the objects that come into and out of his homes, producing a sort of one-night-stand relationship with things.

One of the aims of this book is to discuss the role of things in ethnographic research, and to explore how objects may function as tin-openers of social relations and as bricks to construct our field. A close look at object perception allows us to learn the epistemic and political capacities of objects, how one becomes attentive to them and the ways in which object perception participates in world making. This practice could be considered a sort of 'objectography', analysing what objects do and provoke, instead of discussing what they are (objectology) or putting their life stages into narrative (objectobiography).

Objects provide points of encounter between the perceptual, the imaginary and the material. Anthropologist Sandra Dudley, for instance, observes that 'it is in the engagement between object and subject, in their very confluence, that sensory responses, emotions and ideas are generated' (Dudley 2012, 8). Objects also influence our bodily acquiescence to them, through a touching vision. An objectography therefore entails wanting to grope for an object, to understand 'how it would feel to stroke it, or how it would sound if I could tap the metal, or how heavy it would be if I could try to pick it up' (Dudley 2012, 1).

It is in this sense that objects carry a more than rational weight, beyond consciousness and language, oscillating between different worlds, perceptions, meanings, vulnerabilities and relations. It is thus necessary to understand the relationships between object, people and their context, as Dudley observes. For every object there are multiple forms of relation, perception, awareness and intentionality. This wide range of potential

associations and the experiential possibilities of objects eventually complicates what objecthood actually means, attributing to objects a strong epistemic value.[11]

In the gallery, one can observe how bodies move closer and then separate again, finding different details and sensations in the objects they encounter. These movements are concrete instances of thought and perception, as well as catalysers of further relations.

As observed by Miller (2005), the mediation by materiality is different from the mediation by signs; he notes that objects cannot be broken up into grammar and are explicitly separate from linguistic logics. Also Tim Dant (2008), in his sociological study of the actions involved in car repairing, observes that perception relates to specific repertoires of gestures. He then describes the mechanics' 'repertoire of gestures' and how their skills are more related to perception than to abstract knowledge. Dant goes on to argue that material interaction involves not only pragmatic reasoning, but also emotions and in some cases complex sensual knowledge (such as how to handle tools and pieces, which one goes where and what actions are important for transforming things to suit our purposes).

The objects included in my exhibition were certainly not subjects in the conventional sense; they did not have citizenship, nor did they vote or pay taxes. Yet, as artworks, they were subjected to preservation rights and contractual obligations. Accordingly, they were placed into our sensorium in specific normative ways, so that some things became 'perceived, experienced and imagined as a particular kind of object' (Domínguez Rubio 2020, 260). By doing so, objects made out of various materials and with different origins were capable of resurfacing memories, provoking multisensory and affective reactions and allowing different kinds of knowledges to come into being.

The production of an exhibition entails consideration of bodily reactions and itineraries. In our case, we chose also to craft the negative space of the museum to define explicitly how to navigate the exhibition and how bodies come to experience the space. As a result, we could observe them participating in social relations in a more horizontal or vertical manner. Three of the artworks of the show – those by Camille, Laura and Timo – were outside the gallery space. My occupation of the entrance and the stairs of the museum was based on the assumption that there is no such thing as a neutral territory in museums, just as there is none in a playground or a battlefield, or on a chessboard.

This exhibition demanded active engagement from its audience (Figs 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3). It surprised visitors right at the entrance, while they were still climbing the stairs, with a taxidermic cat facing them as

Figs 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 Body gestures generated by the artworks in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition. Jarmo Nagel, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

they stepped into the gallery. Here they also encountered a restless mixer that vibrated as it approached a bra, along with Gregorian chants, robotic clicks (Fig. 5.4) and encaged plastic mysteries – quite a change from pleasant eye contacts to figurative paintings or well-polished applied art.
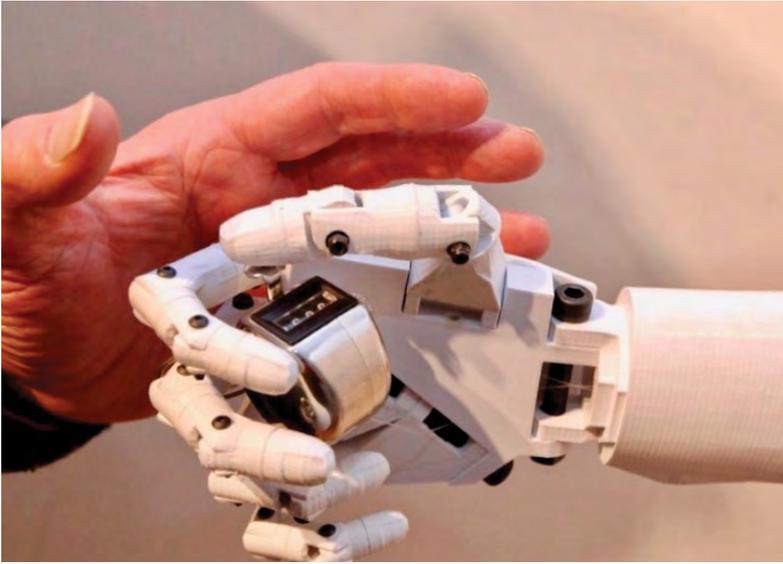
Fig. 5.4 A person interacting with the robotic hand created by Varvara & Mar. Jarmo Nagel, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

In order to illustrate these ideas, I have selected some scenes that illustrate the repertoire of gestures that *Objects of Attention* produced.

Material culture is itself contingent, porous and dynamic. Any methodology studying the meanings of and values associated with materialities, therefore, can be but impure, situational and interdisciplinary in its methods (Miller 1998).[12] Examples of this form of inquiry are the object interviews proposed by sociologist Sophie Woodward (2016), who explores different 'material imaginings' by asking people to speak things. In some cases, however, people might lack the language skills, or simply find that words cannot adequately articulate their relationship to things. The researcher then has to make up alternative forms of inquiry, such as visualising, showing, documenting, installing, and so forth.

This field of studies has expanded the discussions in recent years beyond the opposition of social and material worlds. This dichotomy has been transcended, for instance, by applying a dialectical approach to the study of the subject–object co-production and, eventually, extending the notions of care and curiosity to objects (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). Latour (1992; 1999; 2004a) even argues that objects can be actors in everyday life, noting how seemingly trivial things such as a key or a safety belt may actively intervene in our lives. Subsequently he has tried to exemplify what a material–social setting could be (as an object in action that binds

persons and things) by posing a provocative question: Who is the actor when someone gets killed: the gun or the individual firing it? In this example, the gun is no longer in a drawer, armoury or pocket; it is held in a hand, being pointed at someone and influencing how we behave.[13]

Arjun Appadurai (1986) has also addressed how both an object and its exchange create social relations and the way in which value is not inherent in things: it is rather an assessment made about them by subjects in a given context and circumstance. In his view, it is the social usage of a thing that dictates its meaning, foregrounding how memory and circulation allow objects to have multiple or changing meanings and values (see also Kopytoff 1986). Anthropologist Janet Hoskins (1998) moved the debate about the subject–object node forward by arguing that objects simultaneously have their own biographies (in other words, things might go through different stages or afterlives), even as they mirror, materially, the biographies of others and specific parts of individuals' personalities. In addition, she insists that objects may be assigned a gender, name, cultural biography, history and ritual function.[14]

In *The Object Reader* (2009), Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins argue in favour of simply studying objects and their lessons, instead of trying to delineate a single coherent field of 'object studies' or considering them as constituents of methodologies. In any case, observing interactions in social settings appears as a crucial aspect of any material culture analysis – identifying tacit knowledge, comparing what people say they do versus what they actually do, along with building material and contextual sensitivity. The politics of representation are important too, attempting to be critical and reflexive, not simply descriptive.

But objects do not have to determine social issues to be important; they rather participate in life processes by influencing the ways in which social actions are carried out (Dant 1999). As noted by Miller (2005), people create things; these things then affect people, who in turn create other things. The Latin etymology of artefact also derives from the conjunction of two Latin terms: *artis* (skill in joining) and *factum* (deed, done). An artefact thus refers not only to human workmanship, but also to a product that survives this very action – a 'socially produced durability' (Buchli 2002, 15) which appears to be stable and unstable simultaneously.

The value, interpretation and preservation of objects often depend on the work of other objects. On the one hand, objects demonstrate obduracy and resistance to changes; on the other, they demonstrate a constant need for maintenance (Domínguez Rubio 2016), presenting questions of care and responsibility without concession.

Objects, subjects and vice versa

Material culture studies have expanded these discussions beyond the Cartesian opposition between social and material worlds. This dichotomy has been transcended by, for instance, applying a dialectical approach to the study of the subject–object construction, evoking notions of co-creation and mutual constitution between people and material culture (Miller 2005).[15] Things say something about social relationships and naturalise regimes of value through people's engagement with a multitude of everyday objects and experiences. Objects not only generate specific meanings, but also redefine the realm of possibility and make certain experiences and narratives more viable. As Roland Barthes (1957) explained, our identities and ideologies are constituted, represented and experienced through engagement with everyday materiality and items of popular culture.

Another example of the indexing character of our material engagements is Simmel's socio-aesthetics (1997 [1905]). In his early twentieth-century study on modern urban life and its effects, Simmel observed that material forms impact upon us not only as an external world, but also as part of our mental experience. Siegfried Kracauer (1995 [1927]) picked up on this idea to show how forms of materiality condition our cultural experiences, famously remarking that surfaces and ornaments are not superficial, but an assemblage concentrating the phenomena of everyday life. We can also refer to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1999), which examined the secondary and the excluded. His notion of the *flâneur* is itself methodological in that his protagonist interacts with the traces via allegorical engagement as well as by following a montage principle of juxtaposition.

It has become increasingly difficult to define and delimit material culture after the remarkable development and increasing popularity of this field in the last decades. The research areas of art history, urban ethnography, visual anthropology, memory studies, museology and archaeology also fall under the rubric of material culture studies, expanding the debates on aesthetics, sustainability, identity-making, archives and technological developments. Considering the level of attention and number of publications that now exist on this subject, we could argue that materiality is no longer the sole concern of museum scholars and archaeologists, or of those investigating the active rejection of the material world as well as varied dematerialising phenomena (for example, digital technologies, social networks and the internet). Studying material culture gives us important clues about the way in which humans live and have lived, revealing more about their behaviour, beliefs and systems of codification.

The concept of material culture originally emerged from museological, archaeological and anthropological works in the late nineteenth century, most often in relation to colonial expeditions.[16] More recently, Daniel Miller has criticised those assumptions that relegate material culture to the passive role of supporting social structures, as if objects simply represent people or illustrate cultural life. Things have a particular ability to intrude silently into our lives (Miller 1987; 2005). In some cases they come to be endowed with particular forms of meaning, value and power, playing an active role in the production and sustenance of relations and culture (Domínguez Rubio 2016). Miller puts the focus on their dialectic relations and the way in which things frame our experience, taking materiality as an integral aspect of all relationships (2005).

Then, drawing on the phenomenological tradition, Tim Ingold (2000; 2013) denies the relevance of the object–subject categories entirely, emphasising instead a multi-sensorial engagement with the world in which subjects, their bodies and matter meet in a reciprocal shaping. He further rejects the notion of materiality, insisting rather on the concept of material and arguing that the physical qualities of matter cannot be reduced to the social values involved in its interpretation (Ingold 2007). Furthermore, Ingold (2012) advocates making a clear distinction between objects and things. As he puts it, objects are against us, standing in the way, thrown to us like a problem, whereas things are with us, on our side and available for multiple re-combinations.

Miller and Ingold have engaged in a long-standing debate over several decades about the accuracy of the term 'materiality' for studying the relationship between the social and the object worlds. While Miller (2005, 8) argues that human deeds confront us as a material mirror (that is historically created by those who lived before us and that continues through our use), Ingold holds that the transformation of materials and the skills of the maker are the same thing. In other words, forms are never imposed onto matter as materials have essences; making is just an embodied involvement in things. Ingold thus places the emphasis upon the study of skills and somatic knowledge, seeing the world in terms of material flows and sensory awareness.[17]

Another important approach has been the one adopted by Alfred Gell (1998) and Latour (1992; 1999; 2005b). They also extend the capacity for agency to non-humans, claiming that things actively shape societies and play an important role in any human formation. Unlike Ingold, however, Gell and Latour put the emphasis on the capacity to act, engaging with

questions of power, subjectivity and intentionality. For example, Latour proposes the flattening of different modes of agency, arguing for a symmetrical approach to humans and non-humans and talking of networks of associated actors instead. Gell, however, insisted on specifying the different forms that agency can take.[18] As a combination of cultural and natural attributes, objects' significance can be understood by studying their relationship with other things and with people. Another example is the research done by cultural theorist Bill Brown (2001), who suggests that a thing refers less to an object than to a particular subject–object relation. Additionally, he argues that objects shape our lives because we think through them, and often they provide the terms of their own analysis (see also Henare et al. 2007).

New postulates, however, argue for extending the conception and boundaries of things, assuming that their agency is not ultimately explicable in terms of human perceptions. They thus question the separation of the inorganic and organic, the passive object and active subject, the head and the hand, to the point of arguing that objects have been 'colonised' by subjects and the social (Candlin and Guins 2009, 4). Drawing on Heidegger's work, philosopher Graham Harman proposes, for instance, approaching objects as a totality, as a complex system in itself, instead of taking them as merely physical unities or as culturally constructed entities. Harman employs an 'Object Oriented Ontology' (2016) that focuses on encountering objects as objects and studying them for what they are. New Materialists, on the other hand, argue that things are more interesting for what they do and for their alterity, thus paying attention to their forms of relation in networks and the distributive agencies and affects of (organic and inorganic) hybrids (Bennett 2010). As they claim, matter is intra-acting in assemblages, altering capacities and affecting relations, through the vibrancy of emerging events (hence the importance of sensory connections), rather than based on structures of power.

If opting for the material culture approach, the observations would emphasise dialectical and metaphysical relationships of power, will and meaning, in which subjects and objects interact in a one-way channel, as if playing a game of table tennis, yet retaining the role of humans as initiators of relations. In the new materialist approach, however, hierarchies emerge as being more relaxed and the focus is placed rather on the kind of links that connect the existing parts. Their own representations likewise appear as socially constructed; neither objects nor subjects ever fulfil pre-determined categories and the assemblage generates an ontology of its own.[19]

Notes

1 Here Rheinberger (1997) is referring to the materiality of the experimental process and the role of objects in scientific inquiry.

2 There has recently been a proliferation of experiments around us, on television, in cooking, with respect to sports formats and, in human-computer interactions, for example – and so why not in research too?

3 Likewise the world is becoming more animistic, things are taken as having spirits and nature is not approached as dead anymore (Taussig 2011).

4 For instance, after conducting research into how everyday objects are used on a meth cooking site, Jason Pine (2019) observes that diverse things might join to yield multiple, unstable (and often unforeseen) re-combinations that promiscuously dissolve boundaries – between objects and materials, subjects and substances and even between garage, bathroom and living room.

5 A key question driving the project was 'Could anthropological concept-making be experimentally re-imagined as vernacular, inevitably but perhaps productively amateurish, installation art?' Participants were 'encouraged to document the concrete steps whereby new associations and connections were made' and a series of resources were provided to execute the experiment. See http://comedyofthings.com. Last accessed August 2019.

6 STS scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa then engaged with Latour and Weibel's distinction between the settled 'matters of fact' and the constructed 'matters of concern' by adding the concept of 'matters of care'. In so doing she proposed that care 'contains a notion of "doing" that concern lacks' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 42).

7 For Neil MacGregor, author of the bestselling book *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, a history told through objects speaks 'to whole societies and complex processes rather than individual events' (2010, vi).

8 Often early modern objects do not explicitly connect cultures, but reinforce the particularities of local power, knowledge and faith (Findlen 2013). Yet in the case of *The Power of Things* most of the objects were cross-cultural, intersecting different places and narratives, and even showing global circulations.

9 As described by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in his novel *The Leopard*, published in 1958: 'If we want everything to say the same, everything needs to change' ('*Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com'è bisogna che tutto cambi*').

10 As Lemonnier points out, mundane objects evoke tensions, hopes and unspeakable aspects of cultural relations: 'They are sometimes the *only* means of rendering visible the pillars of social order that are otherwise blurred, if not hidden' (2012, 13).

11 Inspired by Michel Duchamp, anthropologist Alfred Gell (1985) noted that objects can potentially cause stoppages, with meanings as well as desires and fears emerging from body gestures. This is often experienced as a pre-knowledge encounter, evoking rich associations and feelings and triggering unexpected chains of ideas and images (Jordanova 1989).

12 There have been some precedents related to art history, for instance the methods developed by J. D. Prown and E. McClung Fleming in connection with the Winterthur Museum at the University of Delaware. Prown's methodology was outlined in 1982. In his view, things express belief and values metaphorically, so he designed a methodology to uncover these metaphors based on the following: 1) description based on observation: inventory of physical aspects, such as materials, dimensions and iconographic content; 2) deduction based on direct sensory engagement: involving considerations of what an object does and how it does it; 3) speculation, formulating theories and hypothesis; 4) emotional response, linking the object to experiences and feelings; 5) programme for validating the hypothesis using interdisciplinary techniques. McClung Fleming presented his methodology in 1974. He approached artefacts as vehicles of communication that embody information about individuals in a given society. The task of the researcher is therefore to yield information on artefacts, focusing on features such as history, material, techniques, design and function, following a sequence of four operations: identification, evaluation, cultural analysis and interpretation.

13 Latour himself was inspired by philosopher Michel Serres's notion of quasi-object. Serres argued that in a rugby game the central role is actually played by (a third entity such as) the ball. 'The ball isn't there for the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball; the subject moves around this sun' (Serres 2007, 255). 'Being or relating, that is the whole question,' he concludes (2007, 224).

14 In the same vein anthropologist Patricia Spyer (2013) studied the investment of accumulated experience in things, noting the emancipatory power that objects have to bind people, especially through ritual/liminal artefacts.

15 As noted by Victor Buchli (2002), material culture is a young academic subject. It has evolved over the last half-century through such landmark works as Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966), where the author recounts the ways in which social exclusions and cultural delineations are materially based; Lévi-Strauss's (1982) reflections on objects as mythic forms; Bourdieu's remarks on how the abstract also appears in the more tangible, as an underlying order (*habitus*) and taste (1984); and Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things (*1986), which shows how the value of a commodity is created by the networks in which exchange takes place. In this way Appadurai asserts that both the object and the exchange relationship create social relations; value is not inherent to things, but to an assessment made about them by subjects in a given context. Appadurai's anthology also helped to introduce such concepts as 'tournaments of value' and 'the biography of things' into the academic lexicon, as well as a methodological stance based on tracking the trajectory of these concepts in order to illuminate what encodes their social and culture significance.

16 The term was arguably first employed by the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in 1871, referred to as a form of patterned knowledge and behaviour. However, current practitioners often present their work as a corrective to the anthropocentrism implicit in modern knowledge, rejecting also the trait of colonial ethno-history.

17 As he points out, we are all 'immersed in action' (Ingold 2013, 97), denying that there is a single agent behind making and working with materials.

18 In addition Serres (2007) has observed that things might act upon us, making humans turn around. Yael Navaro-Yashin, however, criticises that the Actor–Network Theory lacks ethnographic specification and historicisation (2009, 8).

19 According to this postulate, reality is *in-formed* through a network of interactions and interferences (including further material, historical, social and semiotic relations), yet the assemblage is not reducible to its parts nor fully dissolved into larger organic wholes. Rather, it is perceived as an emergent phenomenon, embedded throughout multiple links, which in turn multiply the modes of conceptualising experience (de-objectivising reality to a great extent).

6
Permeable museums

It is important to value museums as a public good, not only as artistic repositories or rigid institutions entangled within financial systems and power games. Like any social construct, museums are debatable, disputable, multivalent, permeable and often populated by a wide variety of audiences. Yet they also are highly vulnerable assemblages requiring constant maintenance, care and support.

We care about museums because they always do something to us; if you do not experience encountering artworks as transformative, at least museums serve to leave you alone with yourself. In some cases they are also experienced as spaces of concurrence, negotiation and communication. For instance, Mary Louise Pratt (1991) and James Clifford (1997) both refer to museums as 'contact zones', emphasising the multiple forms of interactions and exchange that take place there.[1] But the use of boundary objects in an exhibition contributes to transform the site 'from a space of representation to a space of encounter' (Macdonald and Basu 2007), and thus into a field where experimental research can take place.

One of the reasons why I decided to work with the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design was its potential for audience-making, reaching out to people of different ages and from different professions. The museum is housed in a three-storey former granary in Tallinn's old town, dating from the seventeenth century. It has three floors for exhibitions and 15,000 items in its collection, composed of textile art, ceramics, porcelain, leather, glass, jewellery, metalwork, furniture and design prototypes and products. In addition to the potential for attracting a cross-disciplinary audience, other factors such as its being a state museum (investing the project with a stamp that facilitates access to funding) and its focus on displaying design objects played an important role in my decision.

Before the show, I had visited several different exhibitions there and had also met with the director, Kai Lobjakas, a couple of times. So I was

Fig. 6.1 *Tuba* (*Room*), installation by Urmas Lüüs and Hans-Otto Ojaste, 2018. Paul Kuimet, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

familiar with the museum and aware of some basic details – its location and exhibition space, the professionals who work there, its reputation and porosity. Indeed, mine was not the first show in the museum to juxtapose contemporary art with non-art objects, or even archaeology-related practices. In 2018 Urmas Lüüs and Hans-Otto Ojaste prepared an installation reproducing a typical Soviet room based on their childhood memories (Fig. 6.1). The staged environment made use of pieces from the collection and additional materials found by the artists. As the pair explained, by removing things from their natural environment they were liberating 'imprisoned' objects and creating, in turn, a 'phantom room'.

As pointed out by Kai, the director, the objects included in my project and the ethos of the exhibition were meant to attract a new museum audience. The experimental artefacts in my show also established an interesting, open-ended dialogue with the museum's other objects (more classic, representative items). Human artifices of the present then also became a museum's subject, instead of just past designs, enabling a fluid circulation of dissimilar people, objects and ideas.

During the exhibition Kai gave an hour-long interview to art critic Maarin Ektermann for the radio programme *Kunstiministerium*. In this she disclosed details of the process, her expectations for *Objects of Attention* and a discussion of how the museum wanted to be populated by

a variety of audiences.[2] As she noted, the exhibition was helping the museum to attract new visitors who had not been to their shows for some years. Kai also acknowledged that she and the exhibition's producer, Ketli Tiitsar, had not completely understood what the exhibition was to be about from my first dense, academic description of it. Nonetheless, they were brave enough to consider it and to organise a meeting so that I could explain my ideas in more accessible language.

Maarin later invited me to talk about these matters in her course 'Museum Education and Communication' at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Here she also asked specific questions about the agreements made with the artists, and any disagreements that occurred. As a conclusion we contended that the accounts students are often given about curating are in many instances overly idealistic, if not romantic.

According to the museum statistics, 1,340 people visited the exhibition after the opening. Should this be considered a lot or too few?[3] Audiences are not simply sparked into being; they are rather co-produced through an entanglement of issues, events and material elements (Marres 2005). Subsequently they come into being and then vanish again, having had in the meantime very real consequences – despite being no more and no less than ephemeral, imagined entities. The question of audience-making and also concerns about not-understanding were both expressed in my fieldnotes:

> 'In the beginning I did not understand what all these things are doing here. It only makes sense when you explain it,' a woman told me after the guided tour in Spanish. Today 15 people came on the tour, and they all seemed to be following what I was saying. A few weeks ago only four people came, which made me question whether the effort of organising the exhibition was worth it, and also to ask myself for whom did I initiate the project, and why. Varvara told me that the art audience in Tallinn is small, and perhaps the museum channels do not reach other people who could potentially be interested. Also, in her experience, the events that work better are those oriented towards children, as parents need to do activities with them during the weekend. (16 February 2019)

The benefits, limits and usefulness of experimentation in art museums was one of the focuses of our public programme, which included two performances, a symposium with a dozen lectures and talks by artists, two workshops and four guided tours. A key proposition behind the programme was that museums may be thought of as places where

Fig. 6.2 Performance by Roomet Jakapi and Mihkel Kleis during the opening of *Objects of Attention*. Jarmo Nagel, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

different participants can share experimental ways of linking together their various talents. For example, there was a performance at the exhibition's opening by philosopher Roomet Jakapi and musician Mihkel Kleis ('old-school strangers', as described by Hanno Soans in his review of the exhibition) which featured a ritual of unlearning and making music by 'abusing' different objects (Fig. 6.2). Likewise for the local station IDA I made a programme with songs that inspired the exhibition, while our illustrator, Lilli-Krõõt Repnau, prepared for the *finissage* a therapeutic piece of singing to bid the objects farewell.[4]

Art historian Kerttu Palginõmm kindly wrote a review of *Objects of Attention* for the cultural journal *Sirp*. In it she noted how the exhibition invited the audience to reconsider ways of experimenting in museums and to practise a more vernacular understanding of ethnography as a result.[5] She referred to the display as a platform that amplified the performative and political character of objects. Kerttu then concluded that my project was expanding the notion of curating and making it relevant beyond museum and gallery space.

During *Objects of Attention* the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design was invaded by 'strange' things; these in turn affected how people responded to other exhibits in the museum. As an example Kaarel, who works as an IT technician, commented after the last guided tour on how

Objects of Attention had destabilised the rest of the museum. He felt that the objects of this exhibition had served to 'undo' the other ceramics, fabrics and industrial design products through a process of 'contagion'.

I certainly liked the idea of irritating the museistic hierarchy of things. The other items exhibited are usually displayed because of their representative and artistic value or for what they mean (such meaning having already been decided on and established). In the case of *Objects of Attention*, however, meaning, form and the relations surrounding the objects were flexible and open to interpretation.[6] The set of objects–artworks were indeed meant to challenge notions of objecthood and to produce unpredictable effects and surprise among the exhibition's visitors. The way objects were displayed there invited the audience to make up unexpected connections and to reflect upon something wider than a physical object and a gallery.

Nor were these artworks merely presented as objects of display. They were rather used as epistemic devices, also evoking emotional reactions and urging people to take certain political actions and positions (Svašek 2007). To some extent the assemblage of objects was meant to reproduce the curator's actions and intentions; yet the line between the curator's desired results and the effect of the exhibition seems never to be a straight one. In this sense, it could also be called an assemblage of unknowns, surprises and concerns. This was manifested by artist Ly Lestberg, for instance, who commented that while visiting the exhibition she felt something liturgic, similar to a religious experience, and that there was definitely 'something Spanish' in the show. This comment shocked me a bit, as she was referring to the experience of visiting the exhibition through a feeling of ecstasy and national culture rather than of knowledge production. It also made me reconsider whether the exhibition might appear as too moralistic, as well as how seriously one has to take such comments.

Curating is an act of love (and of networking)

Objects of Attention might have finished, but conversations with local curators continued in different settings. Together we discussed our experiences and shared our frustrations. The exhibition allowed me to expand my practical competence in curating, yet I cannot easily identify the moment when curators and artists started to consider me as a peer, someone belonging to their field of practice. First people greet you in openings. At some point they start talking to you. Then they show interest

in your current projects, or even propose collaborations. Finally they share their fears, hopes and insights with you.

For example, A., an Estonian curator, tells me while drinking a coffee that curating is really like gardening: our main activity is pruning, selectively removing elements that do not belong to the plant we want to grow, a process that includes taking care of the water and sunlight. What I understood from this is that curators should, first of all, know how to care, yet her comment was not just metaphorical or poetic. She meant to show oneself as 'delicate' to each of the artists taking part in an exhibition, making them believe that the show could not run without each of their individual contributions. In addition, for A., the second task of a curator is to mobilise people and resources from different institutions, making them believe that the world will end if the exhibition were not organised. 'It sounds as if curating is more of a make-believe activity than a pruning one,' I commented. 'You can put it that way,' she replied laconically.[7]

In the last decades the field of curatorship has been radically expanding. Curator Marika Agu, who kindly read an early draft of this book, even recommended me to remove 'curating' from my title, as nowadays it means 'everything and nothing'.[8] As I learned, a curator's main tasks are to create concepts and atmospheres, to select artists and artworks, to raise funding and produce different sorts of events (not just exhibitions) and to mediate between different agents and institutions.

I also sent a draft to Kirill Tulin. In response he recommended me to read *When Attitudes Become the Norm* by art critic Beti Žerovc, foregrounding two questions from that book:

> Can this be defined as individual authorship or does it make more sense to speak of collective authorship? What is the curator with respect to the exhibition: expert, artist, a mix of the two … or some entirely third thing? (2015, 11)[9]

Another interesting book is *A Brief History of Curating* (2013), in which Hans Ulrich Obrist tries to draw the contours and contents of curating through a series of interviews with key figures of this practice. The curator is there presented as a flexible yet obsessive servant, assistant, inventor, coordinator, lover and enthusiastic supplicant. As described by Suzanne Pagé, in the interview included in Obrist's book:

> The curator should be like a dervish who circles around the artworks. There has to be complete certainty on the part of the dancer for it all to begin, but once the dance has started it has

nothing to do with power or control. To a certain degree it is a question of learning to be vulnerable, of remaining open to the vision of the artist … It's about forgetting everything you think that you know, and even allowing yourself to get lost. (Obrist 2013, 294)

From personal experience, I can say that curating can be a stressful, accelerative, challenging and tiring practice. It takes place in the middle of different tasks, time regimes and notions of value, and requires constant allocation of resources such as materials, funding, space and time. The curator must develop a sort of matchmaking infrastructure with elements of design, conceptualisation, selection, managing, meeting, paying, producing, spatialising, visualising, installing, meeting technical and safety requirements, talking to the media and pleasing all the actors involved simultaneously.

To curate the exhibition *Objects of Attention* was an even more stressful duty than moving into a new home and way more taxing than ordinary fieldwork. When curating exhibitions I sense a contradictory feeling of thickening my skin and unlearning some of my disciplinary tools. Anthropological fieldwork involves entering relationships at different levels, yet the method of participant observation allows the practitioner to oscillate through different degrees of immersion, to establish a sequence of things and also to establish written coherence within the field. However, the curator has no shelter or banister to hang onto. Things have to be done by a particular deadline, everyone demands something from you and your decisions have a direct impact; in some cases they appear irreversible. The curator is also a symbolic firefighter, constantly putting out potential conflagrations with perseverance and imagination. Also, in a similar way to anthropologists, a curator has to work at the intersection of different standards and representations of actions. He or she thus becomes a jack of all trades but arguably a master of none – a person who has a wide range of abilities but excels at none of them.

Still artistic and curatorial practices are characterised by proposing new sensibilities, forms of value and relations of living, which are themselves a form of hosting. From this we see the importance of discussing the role of artists and curators in forging alternative forms of relating – more compassionate, caring and open ones, for instance – by developing platforms for epistemic generosity. This was, indeed, one of the key ideas of Kirill, who himself curated the project *Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler* (November 2017). For Kirill, hospitality is a *sine qua non* condition for transforming things. He consequently refurbished the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia into a *tepidarium* (a warm room in

Fig. 6.3 Kirill's *tepidarium* at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia. Alla Tulina.

an ancient Roman bath) for public encounters and critical discussions (Fig. 6.3). As Kirill explained, the *tepidarium* was also a way of retraining himself with other participants and visitors, and eventually of addressing political issues.

For a period of one month (organised into seven separate shifts, a 24-hour day of work followed by three days of rest), the stoker–artist and his successive helpers heated the building of the museum. They used debris left behind from previous exhibitions, hosting discussions among the nearly 50 people who came to visit the space every shift. Kirill provided a space in which visitors could spend time and exchange thoughts. This rather simple action appears nonetheless critical and subversive due to the fact that physical public spaces are currently shrinking in Tallinn, even as privatised commercial spaces are increasing enormously. I had the pleasure of acting as a helper to Kirill on one of the shifts. During this I was able to learn from the inside how many artists demonstrate an anthropological sensibility to analysing labour, memory and community in a similar way to anthropologists.

We can thus say that curating is a form of hospitality, making people feel at ease on your ground while establishing alliances and engaging in multiple forms of collaboration. Curating is characterised by the capacity to listen and to host, to offer shelter and to be favourable to the stranger.[10] In their book *Hospitality: Hosting relations in exhibitions*, Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer describe curating as an act

of giving and accommodating, showing elements of a gift economy. As they put it:

> A curatorial situation is always one of hospitality. It implies invitations to artists, artworks, curators, audiences and institutions; it receives, welcomes and temporarily brings people and objects together. Some of these have left their habitual surroundings and find themselves in the process of relocation in the sense of being a guest. (Bismarck and Meyer-Krahmer 2016, 8)

The curator has to offer resources for material, emotional and physical support, provide time and space for encounter, pay attention to what others have to say and combine a principle of responsibility with the giving of care.[11]

Curating certainly honours its Latin etymology – *curare*, meaning to take care of, and thus share not only our agency and capacities, but also our vulnerabilities. Yet aspects related not to care, but rather to entertainment, asymmetry of power relations, social media, precarity and persuasion are also related to the practice of curating, turning hospitality and surprise into commodities (Figs 6.4 and 6.5). This is noted by Žerovc

Fig. 6.4 The author in his role as curator giving an interview to Estonian national television, January 2019. Ott Kagovere.

Fig. 6.5 Invoices, invoices, invoices. Scanned copies. Francisco Martínez.

(2016), for instance. She claims that art institutions are using the ideal of hospitality to justify the precarity and exploitation of artists. Even if relations of hospitality are most often understood as unobjectionable, hospitality is itself a rather unstable outcome, sharing the same etymological root as hostility (Fassin 2012; Fraser 2016).

Besides the experience of curating, I have had the chance to attend several biennials and diverse art openings and parties. In both art events and academic conferences, the ritualistic codes of socialising and taking part are learned mimetically. Yet two comparative differences struck me. The first is the importance of name dropping in art events – as if by stating the name of an artist, the person who says it becomes part of the artist's galaxy or shares in the aura of the works. The second is the merciless economy of attention applied by artists, curators and, especially, by those who surround art-making – managers, journalists, collectors and cultural programmers – who effectively reduce art to glorified acts of individual skill or curatorship. As a result, curators are expected to be 'masters of networking' (Buurman 2016, 124).

Forms of estrangement

Theodor Adorno criticised Walter Benjamin for believing that some objects have the capacity of looking back at us in their 'petrified unrest' (Benjamin 1973). Certainly it is hard to prove that objects occupy a place and time inside us, but this does not mean that they do not. Objects have a relational component in their definition, one that is not always easy to see (Brown 2001). They are angled, selective and sometimes authored, entailing a world-making capability and a focus of action, attention and care. Yet objects also enact a cognitive ambivalence or astonishment, initiating access to a beyond, while simultaneously putting you in your place.

As in dreams, we perceive museum objects at once as a barricade, in a confrontational manner, rather than approaching them through the wrapping of words. Relying on Freud's work, sociologist Klaus Theweleit (1995) argues that we choose objects in the same way we fall in love – based on unconscious drives, lacking control, without rational understanding, even blind to our own motives and desires. Both individuals and things are considered 'objects' in the psychoanalytic tradition and, according to that school, it is only by losing them that our subjectivity is formed. Jean Baudrillard even argued that the possession of objects is 'a tempered mode of sexual perversion' (1996, 99), while cultural critic Peter Schwenger noted that the relationship between object and subject often appears to be one of melancholy. In his view one can be possessed by objects too – especially around liminal situations in which things acquire an 'uncanny agency', arising 'from the one beneath which it is currently sensed' (Schwenger 2006, 84, 4).

At times I felt a sense of strangeness in working with objects. They seemed to open up definitional problems that involved academic, ethical and even personal issues, forcing me to re-examine accepted interpretations by situating them in unanticipated contexts. The concept of estrangement refers to a process of mental interruption; it is an activity that cuts across forms of cultural belonging and social hierarchies, working to introduce new subjects through heterogeneous behaviours or objects. Making things strange is a way of returning sensation to life itself and to experience the world anew (Boym 2005).

This cultural praxis was defined in the 1920s by the literary critic Viktor Shklovsky. He coined the neologism 'estrangement' (*ostranenie*, остранение) to encapsulate practices of de-familiarisation, creating distance, profaning existing protocols and making the previously familiar strange (Shklovsky 1983).[12] He argued that when perception becomes

habitual, a process of automatic algebrisation takes place. In this the sensations of performing certain actions and the process of communication become so habitual that words, phrases and sensations are replaced by symbols. We then no longer see objects or feel events in their entirety, but recognise them only by their major characteristics. Estrangement thus is a practice that opens up the political and encapsulates the potential for new possibilities, since it promotes a new relationality.

The notion of estrangement, in which the audience are forced to take notice, was also exemplified in Kaire Rannik and Liina Siib's exhibition *The Chimera* (Draakoni Gallery, 2016). Here the familiar were made strange, with everyday artefacts transformed into something not easily understandable and yet moving. By reworking ordinary things as miniatures, the show contrasted what objects look like in reality with how they appear in our subjective world. The displayed miniatures also challenged any clear-cut distinction between artwork and document, between the interiority of the viewer and that of the object, between what is supposed to be merely seen and something that creates a nostalgia for craft (Stewart 1993). The effect produced by the show was one of rarefied delicacy, oscillating between analogy and allegory, dislocating the visitor and making things look unfamiliar for the sake of re-enacting the world (Boym 2005).

In reflecting upon her working methods, Siib commented:[13]

> First I collect information and use it to re-stage representations. Then I use anthropological methods as a way of contrasting categories and leaving behind stereotypes. I also do fieldwork, but in art practice we are freer in our inquiries; for instance, we do not have to be accountable or politically correct, and we can explore creative storytelling … Nowadays, I am involved in a project researching Estonian women working in Helsinki. When I first met with these women I had to re-evaluate all my initial ideas, as if I were an anthropologist testing different hypotheses.

Nonetheless, Siib concludes that curating an exhibition is not the same as producing an artwork or writing an academic paper; all three processes have a different approach to knowledge representation. Artworks may result from an extensive research, in some cases not that different from writing an academic paper as a process, yet artworks are still radically diverse in aesthetic outcome and subjective experience, and so produce knowledge of another kind. In that sense, knowledge production in exhibitions should not be limited to the curator's work; it should also

involve other actors and be aware of the performative issues concerning knowledge (Treimo 2020).

Certainly one should ration out one's museum visits, as these are experiences to be appreciated with time and attention. But what if you have the museum at home?[14] This is the situation of Flo Kasearu's house museum. She regained ownership of a house in the Pelgulinn area of Tallinn and proceeded to create her own home museum, similar to other intimate museums dedicated to the life of nineteenth-century writers. In this case Flo shows her own life as an artist and turns her biographical incidents into art objects. She invites people to see common things in an unfamiliar way, re-contextualising everyday objects as something extraordinary.

> I make art out of my personal situation and social needs, but the art is not about myself inside. It is biographical … but I objectify my biography. I cannot that easily separate art and life … anthropology appears to me as too serious and realistic. In my works, I try to be more playful and explore different sorts of storytelling.[15]

Another example of the knowledge generated through the combination of art and anthropology is Jaanus Samma's project *Not Suitable for Work. A Chairman's Tale* (Estonian Pavilion at the 56th Biennale di Venezia). Samma used the biography of an ordinary man to make people understand what it meant to be homosexual in Soviet Estonia. Juhan Ojaste was born in 1921 in an Estonian village. He made it through the Second World War, married, worked on a collective farm and eventually became its chairman. Everything was fine until the early 1960s, when he was arrested for same-sex relations. An abrupt social downfall occurred, as Samma explains:

> Then he was sentenced to a year and a half and was released from prison totally broken. He could no longer dream of continuing as the chairman of the farm. His wife abandoned him. His dignity was crushed.

Regardless of the tragic life of the chairman, Samma avoided portraying him simply as a heroic figure, descending into the rhetoric of victimisation or vindication. Rather, the artist opted for deploying a genealogy of male homosexuality in Estonia. As a research method, Samma began to investigate micro-histories in various archives and to conduct interviews with elderly homosexual men about their everyday lives, gathering stories about characters with such nicknames as the Butterfly, the Balloon,

the President or the Seal. Asked via email whether there were any anthropological inspirations or ambitions in his work, Samma explained:

> I do not think about my practice in anthropological terms per se, but I agree that there is definitely a convergence in methodology. I see my practice as research-based art – specifically my projects have dealt with gay history and queer public spaces. And this is the reason why I like doing art – to have the ability to choose my tools from different discourses and disciplines (history, anthropology, conceptual art, etc.) and not limit myself just to one.

In another instance, I conducted an artistic performance myself to reflect on the myriad of roles that ethnography can generate through a *mise-en-scène* of fieldwork. In this case the experimental methodology consisted of installing myself in two different cafés – one in Lisbon and one in Tbilisi, beyond the reach of smartphones and laptops, and then remaining in each café for 35 hours, doing nothing. The significance of doing nothing is ambivalent: it can be understood as a form of inactivity and stillness, but also as a public performance of lack of purpose and reflexivity.

The experiment was inspired by a number of artists and writers. The elements of voyeurism were taken from the French artist Sophie Calle, who plays with the limits of safe distance and personal exposure. For instance, in *Venetian Suite*, Calle shadowed a man she had met briefly at a party in Paris for two weeks, compiling a photographic and written dossier about both his movements and her experiences in tailing him.

Another inspiration in the endeavour of doing nothing derived from the Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh. In his *One Year Performance 1980–1981*, Hsieh made himself punch a clock every hour for a year. In addition he subjected himself to restricted conditions of movement, interaction and sleep to investigate the nature of time and methodologically to observe its passing. Each day he took a photo strip, showing an increasingly dishevelled and bleary-eyed Hsieh. Of the possible 8,760 hours of a year, the artist missed only 133 punches. In his subsequent creation, *One Year Performance 1981–1982*, Hsieh remained outside for 12 months, exposed to the elements with no shelter. He documented his vulnerability, physical degradation and threatening encounters meticulously, transforming the performance into a radical experience of the present.

The final two inspirations for my field installation were George Perec's inquiries into the infra-ordinary and the performance undertaken

by the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas in the festival of contemporary art *Documenta 13*. This last consisted of Matas being seen writing at a Chinese restaurant in the suburbs of Kassel.

During the 'doing nothing' field installation, I sometimes felt that I was in the middle of everything that was going on. At other times I felt unnoticed and redundant or, even worse, a hopeless trickster. The complication was that I had to be seeing and unseeing simultaneously. I felt as though I were *The Invisible Man* of H. G. Wells (1897), testing surfaces and inhabiting the grey zones between light and shadows. In Wells's novel, however, the main character, Ralph Ellison, is capable of sharing and seeing despite his invisibility. His own invisibility thus becomes an ethnographic device, embodying limits at the threshold between different designations. Indeed, undertaking fieldwork as if one was *The Invisible Man* would be an interesting socio-technical device for conducting collective experiments and engaging ethnographically with the contemporary world. It would be a creative way of practising ethnography, therefore making possible different techniques of knowing, intervening and communicating with the field.

Both anthropology and contemporary art intrinsically rely on moments of estrangement and de-familiarisation, learning to detach ourselves from our surroundings. However, this form of excess is practised and measured differently. My attraction to contemporary art is indeed due to the radical, fringy standing of artists in the world, not only in the analytical sense but also in the empirical one (Fisher and Fortnum 2014).[16] Some colleagues in academia openly envy the freedom, visual skills and the ability to work on the edge that artists possess (cf. Koobak 2013); I do not feel this way myself. Rather, I am aware of how difficult it is to be an artist and seek to avoid approaching them as 'noble savages'. We should rather invent new ways of being available with artists, sharing our capacities in more symmetrical relations.

Rescue displays

Anthropology is inherently related to a sense of urgency and of losing something, as well as to a need for transmission, of passing on. We speak of reproduction, inheritance, forgetting, rupture and destruction, albeit not of continuity in simple terms. To practise anthropology is thus to be involved in different exercises of tracing, rescue, redemption and salvaging, some of them not directly translatable to verbal language. This section describes three curating exercises in which I was a sort of forensic

curator, organising exhibitions as rescue acts involving (suffering) things and in the wake of material loss.

In the following examples, the exhibitions were all designed as rescue devices. They engaged with things that had been discarded, forgotten or made invisible yet lingered on, sensitive to political issues and providing evidence of asymmetric power relations, rather like a testimony (Weizman 2014). These exercises approached curating as a recuperating or even salvaging operation, using art institutions for the archaeology of contemporary social relations. The exhibitions thus drew upon both aesthetic work and activism in order to question current political realities and confront hegemonic discourses of relevance and evidence. These projects showed, in turn, that injured objects might operate in a museum setting as both political questions and ethnographic devices, once re-assembled into unconventional forms of art. In doing so they challenged traditional assumptions about how art generates situated knowledge, drawing on the assumption that what we care for as researchers has material consequences (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

Details about these projects are also complemented by insights from the shortcomings and failures of my endeavours.[17] The first case study is the exhibition *The Railway Street Market Goes to a Gallery*, organised in Tallinn (EKA gallery, April 2014). As rumours about the disappearance of this open-air bazaar increased, I invited 22 people to rescue an object that they would miss if the market finally closed down (as it eventually did). I then exhibited the items and the explanations of their significance in a gallery, organising different activities to engage a wider public in the discussion about the street market's importance within the city's everyday life. The practice of art provided me with the chance to release control over the values and meanings attributed to the railway bazaar; it thus transformed the exhibition into a social laboratory characterised by open-ended reactions not easy to interpret. As artists do, I wanted to activate social and cultural connections that were silenced or ignored, and also to excavate into the future of this market. These objects were used as tools and devices of my ongoing ethnographic work, helping me to change the relationship between public and my fieldsite. As a curator, I did not seek only to capture material practices, but also to provoke responses about the relevance and meaning of the site within Estonian society.

The street market promoted inclusiveness and accessibility in a city where nearly half of the population speaks Russian and the other half Estonian. Most importantly, the market was a gateway to the city centre for people living in the suburbs and a space of camaraderie for those of

precarious social position. The range of items sold at the railway bazaar was exceptionally varied, ranging from jewellery to food, art, music, spare technology, expired goods, souvenirs, second-hand clothes, handicrafts, tobacco, lingerie and junk. Conceptions of authenticity, tradition, uniqueness and origin were contested every day at the bazaar. Here past, present and future were played out intensively through objects and interactions. Issues such as globalisation, capitalism and Soviet legacies were also intensively negotiated. We could see this sort of intercourse in the items displayed at the stands, many of which came from Poland, Russia, Turkey, Latvia and China. However, the different routes followed by these objects were not always evident or one-directional.

Ethnographic Experiments draws on the assumption that a visit to an exhibition may influence the way that people make things and organise their work. Exhibitions are assemblages that can potentially affect visitors and alter our understanding of the world, consequently generating some cultural or social change. This is the case of T., who formerly worked as an official in the old prison of Tallinn.

In 2016 I curated the show *Place Oddity* with Lilli-Krõõt Repnau. Our exhibition drew attention to those places that produce a limbo or liminal condition when one is occupying them, like a passage into heightened consciousness. The trigger of the exhibition was an unsought discovery during a party, however, when a friend of a friend told me that, for 19 years, an official in the Tallinn prison had altruistically organised drawing workshops with the inmates. More than that, he had archived all the drawings they produced behind bars.

After confirming the information was correct, I dared to ask from the Ministry of Justice for permission to meet with this official and eventually to see the archived artwork. Permission was unexpectedly granted and in February 2016 I visited the site, crossing intimidating detectors, corridors, fences, courtyards and empty spaces to meet with T., the official. I was impressed that she had not simply stored the paintings, drawings, maps and board games produced by inmates over two decades, but had also retained clear memories of the process and was able to contextualise the conditions under which the artworks had been made.

Confinement is exercised in a diversity of places, including prisons, immigration centres, asylum residencies and psychiatric hospitals. All these institutions are simultaneously in charge of the care and punishment, isolation and reintegration of people who are often presented as socially disposable. What kind of artworks could be produced in such closed environments? Could a prison be a place for creative practices? The stories accompanying the paintings and drawings help us to understand the

emotional engagement of the inmates, the ongoing process of self-reflexivity and the existence of something like a culture of incarceration:

– A prisoner tried to draw this painting for a very long time. In the beginning the background was white and the man in the picture appeared with hazy eyes. Then the prisoner changed the background to black and only dealt with the picture when he was in a bad mood. But one day the prisoner came to the art class, cut paper butterflies, glued them and said that the painting is finally ready …
– This painting shows the emotions of a prisoner the day before he was released. The prisoner attended the art class for the last time and the group's teacher asked him to express his emotions on a canvas, to play with colours. So the result was this …
– The prisoner believed that in every house there must be an elephant, as something that brings good luck. He insisted on putting it on the wall of the classroom so that we all would have good luck too …
– Two prisoners drew this picture together. One of them was daltonic; he could not define green colour, yet was able to explain what he wanted. The colours were mixed for him and then he made the painting.[18]

In the small corner where all the works were piled up, I discussed the possibility of exhibiting some of them with T. As she was enthusiastic about the idea, we made a pre-selection together (Figs 6.6, 6.7 and 6.8). Meanwhile, as we began to obtain the corresponding permissions to exhibit the artworks, I contacted a gallery in Tallinn and spoke to an artist friend of mine (Lilli-Krõõt). We needed to consider how to link the inmates' works conceptually and convince a gallery owner of the relevance of such a display. The possibility of talking to any of the inmates directly was out of question, yet permission to exhibit the works was finally granted via email.

A few days later, however, I had a private conversation by phone with an official of the Ministry of Justice. I was told that such permission was 'fragile' and could be withdrawn if I sought to make 'too much noise' with this project. After receiving such conditional permission from the Ministry of Justice, we decided to organise the show as soon as the gallery had a free spot in its calendar. In doing so we demonstrated a determination to make the project happen despite not being fully aware of its relevance or our own role in it.

Figs 6.6, 6.7 and 6.8   Paintings by the inmates of the old prison in Tallinn. Francisco Martínez.

Place Oddity provided an opportunity not only to make visible the imaginaries and work done by people in prison, but also to generate a debate about the importance of embodied practices of social reintegration that have been institutionally organised. However, the authorities responsible for managing the prison system always remained suspicious

about the impact that this modest project might have. An hour before the opening of the exhibition, and immediately after I had given a short interview about the artworks to Estonian national television, I received a phone call from another official. In this I was asked to avoid making any polemical statements and reminded that we had agreed not to make 'too much noise' with this project. In addition T. did not attend the opening as expected. Two weeks later, once the exhibition ended, I returned to prison to deliver the selected artworks; she then told me that she had been very busy and could not visit the exhibition at all. She was also reluctant to confirm whether the inmates had been informed about the project.

That moment was bitter, and it made me reconsider for whom I had organised the exhibition – was it just for my ego? I also questioned whether I had made the correct decision (ethically, pragmatically, time-wise) to follow an apparently attractive opportunity, since the research failure had created an end point – the end of knowledge. Indeed only now, four years later, have I managed to write this brief reflection on the project's contingencies and its failure in producing any anthropological knowledge. This was a learning exercise for me, testing my own capacity to curate and showing the limitations of my experience. Nonetheless, I did gain some understanding about people in prison and their circumstances, as well as how institutions are reluctant to support open-ended projects that involve them.

Museums do not need objects any more

In my projects, ordinary things became artworks and also objecting items, building knowledge about material culture and social relations through a redeeming gesture. But imagine, for instance, a gallery into which curators and artists bring nothing. We employed such a strategy in the exhibition *I Looked into the Walls and Saw...* (ISFAG, October 2014, curated with Maroš Krivý), a site-specific meta-show in Tallinn's old harbour-front power station. Rather than bringing new pieces of artwork to the gallery, we proposed that the participants reflect on the space as if it were a sculpture, an installation or a painting in its own right, blurring the boundaries between what belongs to culture and to nature. The exhibition explicitly refrained from any physical intervention in the gallery and the space itself was the object of curation, as found. The curatorial act consisted of inviting 20 guests to salvage meaning from leftovers found on the site, without tempering the entropic nature of these discarded things. Such a gesture was based on the assumption that

both leftovers and the physical qualities of the site itself had the potential to reveal other histories in the present, and also to recover something of the former modes of inhabitation at the site (DeSilvey 2007).

The 'artworks' included in the show were the residual elements of a former industrial complex precariously transformed into a gallery. This site functioned for more than half a century as a coal storage facility for the nearby electricity plant. As noted by the designer Ott Kagovere, walking around the gallery generated particular musical evocations.

> ISFAG reminds me of the music of Rashad Becker. At first quiet – a regular industrial space, left empty and alone, but slowly growing into noisy details. You notice the weird composition of the rooms, old, broken walls, covered with dust, fungus and old paint. The more you look, the more you find. But you can relate to it also on a general scale, taking the whole wall as a self-generating abstract painting. A contemporary version of the Rothko Chapel, if you may. Hence, another comparison might be with Morton Feldman's compositions, which have been often described as so spacious that you can almost walk inside the music. If I should imagine myself walking inside a 'Piano and string quartet', ISFAG would be a likely place, with its endlessly dripping water and strings of wind outside.

The exhibition *I Looked into the Walls and Saw...* did not bring any new 'artworks' into the gallery. In contrast to this, most of the artworks exhibited in museums have been previously removed from their original time and space, to be then re-contextualised in order to command attention in themselves.[19] Likewise, in museums, objects are not commonly thrown together; they are rather displayed and organised systematically. In our case, however, the gallery space was conceived simultaneously as a site and a non-site, following Robert Smithson's distinction (1968).[20] Limestone bricks, mushrooms, pipes, insulation foam, holes, water puddles, walled-in windows and changing weather conditions were some of the main exhibits on display. The artworks themselves were subject to disintegration, found as leftovers and interpreted as things 'in between', stuff set in the middle of multiple apparitions and dispositions.

As part of *I Looked into the Walls and Saw...*, an attempt was also made to acknowledge how the experience of art *as* art might be subjected to entropic processes, including oxidation, abrasion, fracture, collapse, weathering, political change and economic disinvestment. These spaces often encapsulate codes and mysterious messages. As shown by street artist Minajalydia in her contribution to the display, material decay can

also be approached as an act of communication similar to graffiti. In addition, we can refer to the choice of anthropologist Franz Krause for the show, who observed:

> These pipes are not supposed to be here. They are just passing through. They are hidden, where possible, behind a makeshift plywood facade. And they are insulated with thick sheets of material, not to reveal any of the riches they carry, on the way from somewhere to elsewhere. Much like this room itself, they are not made for loitering, but as corridors – spaces to hurry through on the road to a proper destination. They connect points, a point of origin and a target point; and this connection has to be as smooth, fast, frictionless as possible, and deliver all the content in its original state, unadulterated by the journey.

For this exhibition, architectural historian Ingrid Ruudi reflected on how the labour of art workers is to sustain zones of unconventional critical thinking. The process also includes Sisyphean, endless tasks such as drying the floor of the gallery or repairing holes in the roof. She wrote:

> A non-profit gallery as a commerce-free zone of exchanging ideas is made possible by someone initiating it, maintaining it, taking care of it. Sweeping up the water from the floor. Doing it voluntarily, out of enthusiasm, largely unpaid.[21]

It has been said that in museums we encounter a collection of 'slowly unfolding disasters' (Domínguez Rubio 2020, 6). Instead of life unfolding, however, visitors see life as stasis. In this sense museums are sites of exception, 'in which we are supposed to suspend our otherwise promiscuous relationship with things' (Domínguez Rubio 2020, 31). Nevertheless, from relying on physical things and from discussions about aesthetics and material agency, contemporary art has been paying more attention to conceptual forms of making things up – as well as to producing multiple interactions, in the form of relational, situated and performative assemblages and installations.[22] Art critic Boris Groys (2009) even argues that, in the contemporary context, the ontological difference between making and displaying art has vanished – in the sense that to make art is to show things as art, and to create an artwork is no more than to exhibit something in an art space.

In *The Return of Curiosity*, anthropologist Nicholas Thomas argues that exhibitions play a key role in fostering empathy and stimulating

curiosity through 'moments of discovery, captioning and juxtaposition' (2016, 101). As he explains, exhibitions are more than amassed things 'susceptible to precise enumeration and definition'; most often they appear 'stranger and more surprising assemblages than we have appreciated', becoming 'an apparatus that helps us "collect our thoughts"' and equips us 'better to acquire an awareness of the societies we all now inhabit' (Thomas 2016, 74, 63, 143).

When re-contextualised in a gallery space, the meaning and emotional agency of things may change. This in turn generates a dialogical process of interaction that connects the sensual, the emotional and the imaginary, in turn producing further sets of relationships or understandings (Svašek 2007; Dudley 2012).

Domínguez Rubio refers to exhibitions as material acts of imagination, making perceptible specific meanings and narratives.[23] Nowadays, multiple materials intersect within contemporary art practices – materials that have until recently been difficult to combine or to see together. The role of objects in museums has likewise changed, their place in galleries shrinking in response to the changing mission of museums and their public visibility. Increasingly, museums have to self-fund their work with shops, cafés and the organisation of events, reducing the space for and number of objects exhibited and therefore requiring more work from each of them. The result is that objects are becoming increasingly peripheral in museums, which became 'objects in and of themselves' (Conn 2010, 56).

Besides a tendency to de-objectify contemporary art, we also see that the traditional relationship between skills, tools, art and manufacturers is changing. Indeed, contemporary artists put more and more emphasis on conceptualisation and study, and less and less on the material production of artworks. This has significant consequences, such as the externalisation of costs and skills, as well as changes in the traditional notion of artistic authorship and tacit knowledge (Sansi 2015).[24] Similarly, the practice of design has evolved from focusing on designed objects and services to emphasising designers' ways of working instead (Clarke 2011). Accordingly, the very definition of what constitutes an object has changed. Nowadays it includes disparate things such as brands, buildings, products, services, performances, animations, video games, etc. (Farías and Wilkie 2016).

If we think of conceptual, relational, installation, visual and performance art, we still find a strong material resonance in these contemporary art practices. Nonetheless, once presented in the museum, objects are materially fixed and re-signified, acquiring different meanings, levels of effectiveness and capacities for relations. By entering into the museum circuit, objects are separated from active circulation and anything that is

in flux, changing out there, becomes standardised. Viewed together in a gallery, they then form a novel assemblage, objecting to people and other objects in not always predictable ways. Freezing their entropic heat does not mean, therefore, that the doings of these objects are exhausted. Quite the opposite is true. Objects still preserve the capacity for commanding attention and a powerful sense of estrangement, which varies depending on the dispositions of the new settings. In some cases, and once displayed in the museum as art pieces, objects then acquire new meanings, triggering relations not always anticipated by their producers.

In his ethnography of the maintenance labour behind some of the key artworks at MoMA, Domínguez Rubio (2020) refers to artworks as temporary realities constructed both materially and discursively. He thus presents contemporary art as a particular stage in Western culture, built on the master narratives and conservation infrastructures of modern institutions. For that, a great part of museums' work still consists in manipulating things, using technical tools, adjusting materials and fixing spatial infrastructures, often based on contested sketches or abstract conceptual goals. Accordingly, Domínguez Rubio proposes to study artworks as material processes that unfold over time; these are 'fragile and tentative realities', since 'objects decay, wear down, break, malfunction and have to be constantly mended and retrofitted to prevent their collapse … continually done and redone, both materially and discursively, to be kept alive' (2020, 2, 4, 5, 39). So it is for as long the objects are cared for; the paradox, he notes, is that our capacity to care is finite, hence the need to select what to neglect.

Even if exhibitions are composed of artworks, the whole experience should not be taken as an artwork in itself, nor as a simple sum of its parts. An exhibition is a device that has to be designed; it answers to specific, situated questions regarding its public, the venue and its contribution to the field and/or to a social community. Regarding *Objects of Attention*, after this exhibition I rejected the invitation to take this assemblage of objection somewhere else, in its entirety, since its purpose was not to pave the way for my career as a curator, but to produce a different kind of fieldwork. Yet I am aware that there are similar projects that have succeed in travelling elsewhere, such as Blanca Callén's *Objeciones* (*Objections*, 2016, at Antoni Tàpies Foundation, Museum voor Schone Kunsten and FRAC Lorraine), and that this was constitutive of various ecologies of knowledge production. Callén and her colleagues asked the audience to donate a soon to-be-discarded object, together with a picture of its original environment. They gathered information from the participants about reasons for the item's disposal and the story that lay behind it.[25]

They also proposed the notion of 'intimate entanglements' to explore how objects come to matter to us and what makes us care for them.[26]

In their critique of our relationship with things, Callén and her collaborators engaged with similar questions as Urmas-Ott when preparing the exhibition *The Room*, held in 2018 at the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design. What do we throw away? What do we keep? What remains? What do we use? What has meaning for us? The exhibition also resonated with the mission of the Museum of Broken Relationships in Croatia, to which people brought their individual stories of romantic break-ups. They donated ordinary objects that had been meaningful to them as couples (a gun, stuffed toys, a purse, an old dress, a hair dryer, a bottle filled with tears, an axe or a prosthetic leg) to the museum. All these objects serve to constitute an experiment with knowledges in the periphery of value, celebrating what some call 'leftovers' or 'junk'.

Objects are cultural nodes mediating social agency and capable of generating complex responses (Gell 1998). They include different historical times, accruing meaning along the way and gaining a capacity of performance in relation to their actual context. In so doing they come to symbolise realities unknown to their own makers and to expose myths and ideologies (Barthes 1957). The process of exposing an object impels the audience to connect the present of the thing to the past of its making, establishing a relationship between them that may lead to new cultural configurations. Objects remain as powerful mediating artefacts of human relationships, hence the relevance of studying how objects are part of the machinery of knowledge construction (Knorr-Cetina 1997).

But to what extent do the artistic and social possibilities of artworks derive from their objective materiality? One of the sources of inspiration for this book is the project *Home-Made: Contemporary Russian Folk Artefacts* by Vladimir Arkhipov (2006). This self-taught artist, trained as both an engineer and a doctor, has acquired hundreds of idiosyncratic objects born out of necessity, at the margins of modernity, yet carefully fashioned in a sort of anti-design to serve a different function than originally intended. Although Arkhipov has exhibited part of his 'post-folk archive' in galleries and museums,[27] the display did not automatically confer the status of artwork on the objects, since the makers had not reassigned them to the category of art in the manner that Duchamp did. Indeed, soon after the exhibition the artefacts were meant to resume an instrumental function (Haywood 2007).

These non-artistic objects demand a re-narration of the arthood and objecthood categories, which better recounts the back and forth mutations of artefacts into artworks. In a self-reflexive manner, Arkhipov

(2011) explains that he does not appropriate the authorship of the items and seeks to display them as organically as possible. He always tries to identify the maker behind the artefact and to tell the year, place and story behind its re-production. As Arkhipov concludes, things are in a constant flow, available in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish between reality and imitation, art and artefact, material and culture.

In this discussion, it is pertinent to recall Shelly Errington's (1998) anthropological distinction between 'art by intention' and 'art by appropriation' – that is, between artefacts created with the specific purpose of being displayed as contemporary art and items created for a different purpose but given the status of art by collectors, art historians and museum curators (following the modern European canon). As Errington describes, the value of these kinds of artefacts, unfamiliar to Western eyes and extracted from its original context, is risen by translating it into the Western art grammar – being presented as primitive, placed on podiums and spot-lit in galleries, as well as documenting its ritual functions and iconic content. The items included in *Objects of Attention*, however, transgress these two categories. On the one hand they were specifically revised to be displayed as contemporary art, in the sense of showing a clear artistic intervention and intention behind them. These objects show an ordinary pre-existence before acquiring the aura of art, and were also extracted from their original context. Nor did these artworks have any artistic narrative predetermining their meaning, but rather a history of quotidian use and functionality.

Nonetheless, it could also happen the other way around. Art objects may lose their status as art and be reduced to things, unsuitable for being displayed in galleries and museums. This loss of value and subsequent degradation might happen for different reasons, for instance breakages, fading colours, the effects of humidity or pollution, or damage from animals or insects; objects may also suffer through not being properly documented. Collections are exposed to different types of processes that cause damage and loss of value, raising our awareness of the constant need to keep things well preserved and documented.[28] Luckily nothing got broken at the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design; only the wooden floor was slightly damaged, with a grey mark left by the wall of blocks for the exhibition. However, accidents in art museums and galleries are not that rare.[29]

Curatorial hubris

During the preparation of *Objects of Attention*, the objects were managed, monitored and packaged to meet high standards of security – for instance

Fig. 6.9 Ketli packaging up the items of *Objects of Attention* to send them back to the artists. Francisco Martínez.

by measuring the humidity of the gallery and by using adequate gloves, careful packaging, adequate hanging tools and professional transport (Fig. 6.9). During unpacking and installing the idea was, overall, to apply the minimal touch possible and reduce the risks of human failure while handling the objects. In museums artworks are watched and preserved under high standards, but materials are not. Interestingly, these two categories (object–materials) might rapidly switch by a small gesture such as putting a column under or a frame around them.

A museum is also recreated by the installing operations and negotiations, with this kind of institution being remade again and again after each exhibition. The space is thus intrinsically 'in the making', despite its solemn, atemporal projection. In museums the presupposition of rationality and linear history is always haunted by the spectre of entropy and disorder, making it a place in which complex negotiations and adaptations take place.

Indeed, one of the fascinating aspects of curating an exhibition is to learn about the convoluted dynamics and relations that exist between the exterior and interior of a museum, between the gallery space and what lays beneath the stage or behind the scenes (Macdonald 2002). We can find in backstage operations what defines a given museum, the way in which it manufactures certainty and presents itself as a rational and well-structured arbiter of value (Van Saaze 2013). Museums are not always a stable milieu, often appearing 'as a quasi-technical network' (Yaneva

2003b, 117) and 'machines for art' (Domínguez Rubio 2020, 15), equipped with different instruments.

Another fascinating aspect of curating is to see how technicians and museum workers adapt space and materials to the curator's concept. Installing is a process whereby instructions are not always clearly given: here we can also see the director cleaning with a broom, the technician deciding the perspective from which artworks are seen, the communication manager determining the way in which concepts are translated and the producer seeking to overcome or set de facto limits to what it is possible to imagine and do in an exhibition.

When *Objects of Attention* ended, we faced the ambivalent question of what to do with objects that have little market value outside of the museum context, for instance the ball made by Kirill out of plastic packaging. During the de-installing Toomas Übner, the museum technician, thought it had little purpose: 'We have to throw it away, this is rubbish. What else can we do with this?'[30] He even took a photo of me holding the ball in my hands. I subsequently wrote to Kirill for his take on the matter, and his instructions were to store the artwork until he returned to Estonia. Was this gesture of storing one of care or rather one of displacement? And what does Toomas's intention of throwing the ball into the rubbish bin reveal about the qualities of 'design' and 'art' in things? It is not the end of art history, but definitely the end of this object's history as art. Eventually, however, would this be a serious loss? Certainly not – indeed, even the opposite is true: its fate suits the questions posed by the artist well.

The same happened, for instance, with the art installation *Greetings from Another Land and Another Time*, shown in the exhibition *When You Say We Belong to the Light We Belong to the Thunder* (Museum of Contemporary Art of Estonia, 2019).[31] Based on archival research, site explorations and practices of contemporary archaeology, we gathered a series of postcards from twentieth-century Estonia showing recognisable landscapes that no longer exist. The project also reflected on the nature of postcards as image–objects, participating in how people imagine the world by the very act of selecting landscapes and putting them into circulation.[32] In a vitrine (Fig. 6.10) we put a selection of postcards from the Estonian National Library, set in dialogue with actual material remains and documentation from these sites. The display thus combined elements of visual art with material culture and political critique (Martínez and Agu 2021).

Once the exhibition was over, we were abruptly confronted by the question of which elements of our installation to preserve and which to discard. Our loan agreement with the library obliged us to return the
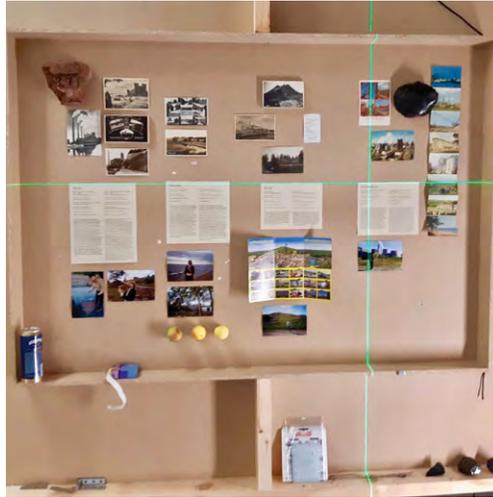
Fig. 6.10 Installing the research vitrine, part of our installation *Greetings from Another Land and Another Time*. It featured in the exhibition *When You Say We Belong to the Light We Belong to the Thunder*, held in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Estonia, 2019. Marika Agu.

postcards safely. Indeed, our intention was to keep the installation in its entirety and to offer it to the library as a present. The day after the exhibition ended, however, Marika discovered that the museum's manager had already thrown out some of the installation's elements, namely the rotten apples, the seashells and the beer can, considering them rubbish (useless, valueless, unusable). It was therefore already too late for the gift idea. The only thing recoverable, besides the postcards, was the wall caption prepared for the installation.[33]

Another example of this happened during the exhibition *Aesthetics of Repair in Contemporary Georgia*, which I co-curated with Marika Agu in 2016. Held in the Tartu Art Museum (Estonia), it was designed to reflect on the art and materiality of everyday survival in Tbilisi. On an everyday level we found paradoxical expressions of material culture, as well as discovering how difficult it is for art projects to endure in Georgia. Our visits also revealed a particular distress arising from the gap between the human desire to improve the actual situation and the suffering caused by being unable to do so. To negotiate this gap, the local people with whom we met had to oscillate between creativity and constraint, anxiety and possibility, repair and breakdown (Figs 6.11 and 6.12).

Our project therefore delved into the significance of material re-combinations in such a societal context, in which traditional skills and

Fig. 6.11   Aesthetics of repair in Tbilisi. Francisco Martínez.

Fig. 6.12   Vernacular architecture of Tbilisi. Francisco Martínez.

actual needs merge to define Tbilisi's aesthetic and semantic density. We decided both to document occurrences of the destruction of works of art and to reflect on affective responses to breakdown (Fig. 6.13). We also gave an account of local ways of solving problems, creatively done by
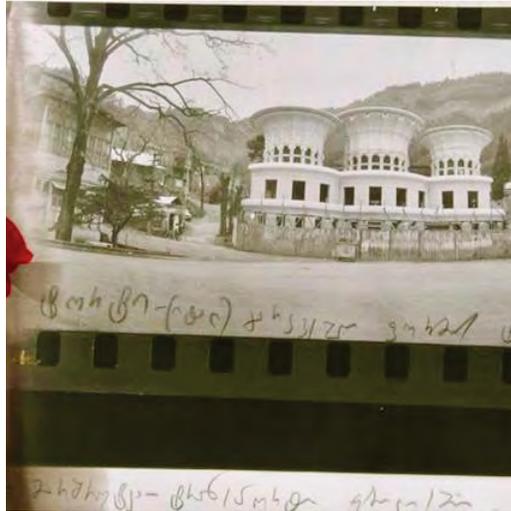
Fig. 6.13 Palace of poetry in Tbilisi. Nino Sekhniashvili.

manipulating existing materials as well as by adding new elements to the existing architectonic assemblage.

Interestingly, some of the elements actually featured in *Aesthetics of Repair in Contemporary Georgia* (Tartu Art Museum, 2016) were thrown away (again) after the exhibition. The documentation of the performance of Bouillon, for example, was first exhibited and then discarded as rubbish (my co-curator Marika had to explain to the museum cleaners not to sweep it away). I refer in particular to the hair shaved from the heads of the six members of this artist–group during the show's opening (Fig. 6.14) – a performance intended as a ritual to release bad energy. Full of tension and visually powerful, their action helped the audience to understand key aspects of the human condition including rituals of sacrifice to cope with dispossession and despair.

The risk of objects being destroyed or simply vanishing has been one of the key factors that has brought them into museums (Boldrick 2020). Yet museums, libraries and archives all throw things away too, employing multiple criteria and regulations for disposal. For instance, we are talking about things that have lost value or have relatively little function in the present, such as VHS cassettes, floppy disks, flyers or CDs, once their contents have been digitalised. Some of these items are still preserved as relics or as samplers of haunting audiovisual formats, combining a sense of obsolescence and authenticity (Martínez 2018b). In my experience the criteria for disposal are a mixture of protocols, subjective views and

Fig. 6.14 Bouillon's performance in *Aesthetics of Repair in Contemporary Georgia,* 2016. Johan Huimerind, Tartu Art Museum.

limited resources (of space, time and funding), making such decisions more contextual than expected.

A century ago Georg Simmel was already alert to the modern increase of material culture. Nowadays, new information technologies and social networks have vastly increased the volume and types of data. The number of things that potentially can be collected has multiplied also in the last decades, in relation to our 'everyday too-much-ness' (Chin 2016). In consequence, it has become increasingly difficult to comprehend objects because of their super-abundance, which produces a 'thingly contamination of the present' (García 2014, 1).[34] Even if materiality itself is engineered to be increasingly ephemeral, things are still made to last and persist, and one can find beauty in how they do so.

Based on these postulates, we could also reconsider the value of the art ephemera, and also the e-ephemera, produced around *Objects of Attention* as a form of documentation in progress. By art ephemera I mean sketches, flyers, leaflets, posters, tickets, packaging, publicity, banners, artist files and hundreds of similar items growing daily. These include both physical and digital material, since we can also consider tweets, emails and posts on Facebook and Instagram. They show a specific temporal quality and format (printed or not), yet also display an artistic ambition beyond the documental purpose. See, for instance, some of the visual ephemera produced for the exhibition which might help us to

Fig. 6.15 Images for the press release of *Objects of Attention* prepared by Ott Kagovere, 2019.

reflect on its aesthetic appeal, documentation value and role in contemporary art (Figs 6.15, 6.16 and 6.17).

Art ephemera refers to all the stuff compiled with an eye toward history; it just happens to be there, stockpiled, unexpectedly preserved, materialising surprises and contradictions, revealing details that were invisible and, in some cases, silenced. Art ephemera shows an anti-historical stance, with one leg in the everyday world and the other in the extraordinary, raising important questions about the limits of archiving.
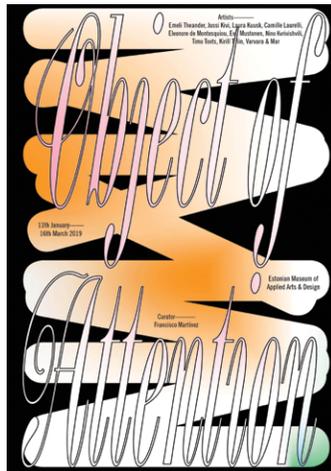
Fig. 6.16 Sketch design for *Objects of Attention*, 2019. This version of the design was not chosen by the designer, Ott Kagovere.

View from above

sphere

local deformation of the labyrinth *

visitor path

* a sheep eye should be able to notice the slight widening deformation of the corridor but it should be anything but obvious.

** visitor should have an impression that the labyrinth continues the way it brought her to the sphere, only that she cannot continue to walk.
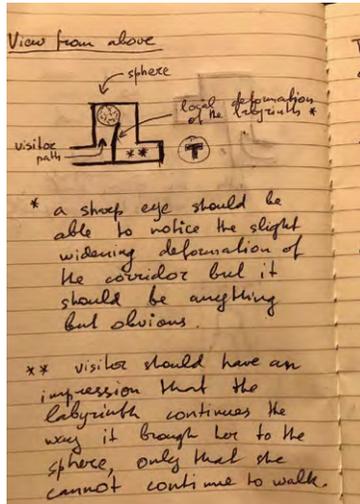
Fig. 6.17 Notes sent by Kirill Tulin explaining how to install his works in the *Objects of Attention* exhibition, 2019. Kirill Tulin.

In addition, art ephemera is a particular point of entry into the making of things – a material through which to explore the aesthetic relationality of objects. Ephemera can be a useful source of information too. They show aspects of the ordinary making of exhibitions that are not very accessible and provide information about the evolution of taste, graphic arts, advertising and society in general (Rickards 2000; Casiot 2006).

Despite its documentary interest, ephemera has traditionally been considered of no value. This is probably in part because of its overly transient nature, often distributed free and frequently discarded after a cursory glance, and also because it is difficult to see, in advance, how ephemera could function in the future as archival data. Yet what might appear to have no value or be mere curiosity in one age could indeed be treasured or useful in the next.[35] In addition, e-ephemera might become a key point of access to exhibitions, with the potential both to make certain things visible and to attract visitors. As an example, a few textual e-ephemera samplers from *Objects of Attention* are included below.

- Instagram of the museum (including two pictures I had not seen before): 'Everybody is listening to the curator. Thank you all for coming over today and during all the months the exhibition was open!'
- Instagram of the museum: 'Full house tonight! Opening of the *Objects of Attention*!'

- Instagram of Nino Kvrivishvili: '*Objects of Attention* at Grandma's' and a picture of the exhibition leaflet posted at the wall of her grandmother's house.
- Facebook post by author: 'An exhibition review can also be inspiring. Big thanks to Hanno Soans for the interesting connections to G. Bataille, Ziggurats, the Altamira cave …', combined with a link to the article.
- Facebook post by Kai Lobjakas: 'Francisco Martínez has curated an intriguing exhibition to our tiny gallery space opening on Friday and invited many interesting guests for a seminar on Saturday to discuss objects, their meanings, explore alternative ways of knowing and experimenting, initiating critical thinking. Join us for *Objects of Attention*!'

As there were several moments in which I had to accept the impossibility of translating everything into words, I decided to put the emphasis on documenting the process – here used not only to freeze moments of the making, but also to elicit more responses in the field. For instance, the documentation of the *Objects of Attention* exhibition played an important role in confronting participants with the space and how their piece is contextualised and seen at different stages of the project. Documentation was also an important tool for creating and attracting audiences; indeed, many of the photos included in this volume were posted on Facebook and on Instagram by me, by the artists, by the museum staff and by visitors. They were thus capable of connecting people and things, and diverse phases of the research (Afonso 2016).

By practising experimental collaborations, we might have to change the way that we document things in the field (Estalella and Criado 2018). In making such collaborations, inventories of the devices used in the field can play a crucial role by exposing the mechanisms that facilitated the ethnographic work.[36] As with fieldwork, curating entails not only reading documents but also producing new ones, generating a chain of documents that are related to other documents and themselves produce further ones. These documents show specific material properties and forms, and are constitutive of relations. They represent knowledge in the making and also in motion, as they are passed on, sent, thrown out, broken, restored, hung, circulated, written over, drawn on, wrapped up and also exchanged, manipulated, lost and even destroyed. In contrast to historians, curators and anthropologists create their own documents. This process crafts back what and where is understood to be the field (Amit 2000), revealing the way in which knowledge is accumulated, stored and eventually recovered

in notes and archives. Traditionally anthropologists' archives have been approached as a continuation or supplement of fieldwork, with a function limited to ordering and systematising. Nevertheless, new answers to this issue propose to consider ethnography itself to be a practice of producing archives (Marcus 1998; Sanjek 1990).

Nonetheless, most of my (recent) observations and notes have been written in Word files and in a phone app. Likewise I have thousands of photos taken in the field, more or less organised in thematic and/or location folders. Besides pictures and field notes, another ethnographic device that became crucial in my research was Dropbox, a Cloud platform for sharing and archiving (although not one recommended by my university IT staff). I stored all the material from the *Objects of Attention* exhibition in Dropbox, as well as using it for sharing pictures and texts (with artists, the media, museum staff, etc.). This platform proved to be a practical method of regaining access to the photos and texts after my laptop collapsed a couple of weeks before the show's opening. New digital technologies are certainly influencing our way of doing research, and indeed our lives overall. For instance, they extend the possibilities for having access to information and archives, as well as increasing the range of formats and tools that we can use in the field.[37] Just think of the internet, email, the smartphone, the IT Cloud and so forth.

Yet archives can also be considered a particular kind of object – sharing many of the object's qualities, transporting the past into the present and eliciting new forms of relationship among strangers (Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2014). Looking back, my exhibition could have been entitled *Archives of Attention* and would still have made sense. Indeed, museums seem to need documents and archives more than objects, as the former are key for creating traditions and art histories, and for effectively materialising the connections between authenticity and authority.

Notes

1 With a background in post-colonial studies, Pratt presents museums as gathering points, foregrounding the co-presence there of things and people that were previously separated. Clifford, in turn, argues that a museum is an ongoing relationship, fragile, asymmetrical, contested but also collaborative, which thus allows the reworking of traditions by the participants. His notion of a 'contact zone' is consequently a translational space in which to articulate cultural differences.

2 See https://klassikaraadio.err.ee/899940/kunstiministeerium. Last accessed 26 February 2019.

3 According to the statistics, the museum had 22,604 visitors in 2018. A total of just under 6 per cent visited the exhibition.

4 Interestingly, Lilli argues that one is a true artist when showing a constant awareness of the details of the making process. This involves acknowledging your own limitations, fears and motivations to draw for hours and hours.

5 Kerttu Palginõmm 2019. '*Laetud objektides teostunud emotsionaalne ja poliitiline potentsiaal*' (*The Emotional and Political Potential of Loaded Objects*). *SIRP* https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c6-kunst/laetud-objektide-emotsionaalne-ja-poliitiline-potentsiaal/.

6 And even to making things up, which reminded me of the surrealist re-enchanting of objects (Gaspar 2018a).

7 Fieldnote, 5 August 2019.

8 Jonas Tinius and Sharon Macdonald (2020) indeed argue that we no longer live in an age of the *bricoleur* or the *flâneur*, but in the age of the curator: everyone wants to be one.

9 She discusses how the figure of the curator has been gaining influence in the field of contemporary art, as someone with a supposedly 'magic touch': 'With the curator, institutional art achieves its fullest expression … art is created not merely with the idea and hope that it might one day end up in an art institution … but it is actually made in close collaboration with the art institution and is designed to fit the institution's space and needs' (Žerovc 2015, 8). She notes how art institutions might homogenise what they produce: 'capable of the most extraordinary harmonisation of multiplicities, the institution is like some truly marvellous milling machine: whatever drops into it, no matter how indigestible it seems, is ground into a pleasing porridge. The flavour differs, of course, depending on the institution's focus, locality, and so on; questions about flavour and the correct way to make the porridge are the subject of constant debate and sometimes even very heated dispute. But this is precisely how the system lubricates itself – how the institutionalised rituals of contemporary art consumption are perpetuated with considerable uniformity all over the world' (Žerovc 2015, 11–12).

10 Linguist Émile Benveniste found the etymology of hospitality in the Latin *hostis* (foreigner, enemy) and *pet* (power); he referred to a welcoming attitude (distinct from hostility) and the conditional and situated power to do so (a form of mastery).

11 In a way curating is an act of love to the world, a form of *amor mundi*.

12 In Shklovsky's works, *ostranenie* appears as a form of world wonder – an acute and heightened perception of the world that impels people to see common things in an unfamiliar way, potentially re-structuring patterns of behaviour (Boym 2005). Other equivalents of estrangement could be found in the works of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin to prevent the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect, unnatural appeal for empathy) or in Theodor Adorno's *Erschütterung* (shudder, shaking, shock). All of them aim to cause discomfort and remind people of the artificiality of the social (whether related to theatrical performances, aesthetics or the processes of government).

13 In a round-table discussion that I organised to discuss current 'flirtations' between contemporary art and anthropology (EKA gallery 2016).

14 As pointed out by Strathern (1987), the analytical glance and the estrangement and problematisation of the social reality can also be done at home.

15 Interview conducted on 7 August 2015.

16 As put by Vergine, artists embody 'social error … tossed into the world, overwhelmed by consumer objects, often dragged along by a senseless fate' (2006, 12, 18).

17 The five projects, *Greetings from Another Land and Another Time* (Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia 2019), *Place Oddity* (EKA gallery, 2016), *Aesthetics of Repair in Contemporary Georgia* (Tartu Art Museum, 2016), *The Railway Street Market Goes to a Gallery* (EKA gallery, 2014) and *I Looked into the Walls and Saw*… (ISFAG, 2014), contribute to an understanding of the praxis of combining contemporary art and anthropology, and how objects are part of larger meaning-making processes.

18 Comments on each selected work were made in situ and later revised via email by T. in February 2016.

19 George Stocking (1985) labels this particular situation of the museum objects as a 'fifth dimension', beyond the three dimensions of materiality and the fourth dimension of time–history; a fifth dimension is implicit in the constitution of a museum and in its relations of power. As he points out, such display and the designed relation between the objects are constitutors of power, representation as well as expropriation. Not surprisingly, Stocking concludes that if it were a sixth dimension, it would be based on 'ownership'.

20 A site is a place that can be visited, involving travel. A non-site contains the information of the site, but has lost its original system. Smithson brought non-sites into galleries by transporting

21 rocks and micro-geological fragments into the white cube as sculptural containers complemented with documents. Maps and documents appear then as a passage between the two locations – the gallery and the site – thus participating in the displacement in situ.

21 Besides foregrounding the original meaning of the term 'curating' – to take care of – Ruudi also brought to the exhibition Mierle Ukeles's claim in 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art' that 'My working will be the work' (1969). Ukeles reflected on the implications of labour in making art by representing everyday activities as contemporary art. In 1976, for instance, she prepared an artwork called '*I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*' for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The work was based on Polaroids of people doing their regular work. In 1977 the New York Sanitation Department invited Ukeles to be their first artist-in-residence. She then began a project called *Touch Sanitation*, for which she shook hands with each of the 8,500 sanitation workers of the city, expressing words of gratitude to them: 'Thank you for keeping New York City alive'.

22 Minimising therefore the physical artwork factor. It has been argued that, in the last decades, we can also observe an increasing de-objectification of artworks, and of studios and of museums too (Lippard and Chandler 1968; Meyer 1972).

23 Further on, he argues that 'exhibitions do not display objects, they generate them… the work of an exhibition entails producing and negotiating forms of legibility through which something is presented in such a way that it becomes imaginable as a particular kind of object' (2020, 259–60).

24 Equally designers have been losing tacit knowledge because of not being the final users of their own designs (Whiteley 1994).

25 Callén with Laurence Rassel, Soledad Gutierrez, Linda Valdés, Jara Rocha, Isa Pacho and Luzie Weigelt. For more information see https://www.fundaciotapies.org/objections/es.

26 As later described, the art-research project became 'a method to create a heightened form of appreciation of such objectual attachments' (Callén Moreu and López Gómez 2019, 321).

27 See Alexander Evangely 2008. *Russian Povera*: http://www.bednoe.ru/eng/eng/arkhipov.html.

28 Preservation and maintenance work are a response to danger and risk – a more or less strategic set of practices that show a strong performative character and preventing goal.

29 For instance, just few months later, at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia, a child broke a piece while playing around in an exhibition. A visitor to the Serralves Museum in Porto had to be hospitalised after falling in an art installation designed by Anish Kapoor. And vandals attacked 70 art pieces and antiquities at the Pergamon Museum of Berlin. Interestingly JR East, a major Japanese railway company, opened an *Exhibition Hall of Historical Accidents* in 2002. This exhibition consists of video footage, documentation and signage from accidents, as well as replicas of trains that had been involved. The show is only accessible by actual employees (rather than for public display), as its key aim is to make them learn from past accidents. This show echoes Paul Virilio's call for a museum of the accident (1986), to reflect on the changing nature of accidents and also to serve as warnings of even greater disasters to come.

30 Field note, 18 March 2019.

31 The exhibition was curated by Heidi Ballet as part of the Tallinn Photomonth 2019.

32 The selected postcards were preserved in the archive of the Estonian National Library, however. Separated from popular use and stopped from circulating, they acquired a documentary aura. Though the display in a museum setting attributed a new, unexpected artistic value to the postcards, this form of illustration has traditionally been seen as a minor photographic genre.

33 Then it is when the 'thinginess' of an object is revealed – after its separation or breakdown, when it stops working as planned and the materiality of the object is tired, or abused, or defeated, as noted by Bill Keaggy. His 'garbology' project *50 Sad Chairs* (2008) featured portraits of chairs discarded from offices or homes in the streets of St. Louis.

34 Events are always influenced by the mobilisation of things, seem to be one of the key points of García's argument. An object is also no more and no less than a thing in another thing, as if it were a sort of Matryoshka doll, concludes this philosopher.

35 Art ephemera might also gain value as a constituency left behind, in the vein of temporary artworks such as performances, hence engendering the presence of something that is long gone (Domínguez Rubio 2020).

36 Estalella and Criado (2018) conceptualise collaboration as an experimental practice that questions the authoritative subject–object distinction upon which anthropology has been founded.

37 In this regard Roger Sanjek and Susan Tratner contend that 'technology has changed not only how anthropologists conduct their fieldwork but also how they record, process, analyse and communicate their findings' (2016, ix).

7
Curating ethnographic research

Ethnographic Experiments combines anthropology, design and contemporary art practice for the cultivation of creative research, exemplifying a beneficial exchange between dissimilar disciplines and domains. It has explored how we can reflect upon the complexities of design, contemporary art and objecthood (from an anthropological standpoint) through field-making and curating. Here, curating ethnographic research is proposed as a critical mode of inquiry in itself, a method to generate analytical knowledge and a way of intervening in social issues. Besides working as a methodology, this speculative form of constructing the field allows the researcher to lose control over meanings while taking part in the production of things. The field then becomes a site of experimentation and co-creation, collaborative and excessive, aware of frictions and different agendas, yet still making room for diverse skills and interests to create analytical artifacts and provocative reactions together.

Another key proposal of this book is that exhibitions can equal ethnographies, both in their methodological and analytical potential. Exhibitions do not only serve to communicate findings, but they can also participate in ongoing research as spaces for knowledge-in-the-making, whereby several analytical artefacts are assembled, discussions are provoked and meaningful relations are intensified. Accordingly, the research has approached exhibitions as both an anthropological field and an ethnographic device to reflect upon the process of knowledge production while simultaneously practising it. In this sense, the monograph argues for a renewed expansion of the notions of field and fieldwork, problematising what counts as valid knowledge and exploring how ethnographies can be conceived as an act of curating.

This take on ethnographic work is interventionist and demands from the anthropologists to be an active participant in the construction of the field and the production of things, not just observant. By doing that, we decentre the role of the ethnographer, redistributing roles, responsibilities

and analytical capacities in our research. This research thus an experimental ethos, actively learning across and between diverse professional worlds and seeking out different forms of knowledge. The text itself encompasses fieldnotes, dialogues, insights, analytical reflections, literature surveys, exhibition reviews and even poetic evocations. It reflects on the various possible ways of being in the field and on the multiple means by which knowledge is produced. In addition, the text offers the reader the possibility of conceiving the kind of relations established during the exhibitions studied here, describing how artists and designers themselves work and how they conceive the world. The redesigning of curatorial processes as anthropological fields allows us to transform an exhibition into a device for collaborative experimental research, reformulating questions with our ethnographic subjects in open-ended ways. As Estalella and Criado note (2018), through such gestures of creative intervention in the field, novel aesthetics of collaboration in the production of knowledge intermingle with traditional ethnographic forms (such as participant observation). Accordingly, the unexpected work that experimental collaborations involve surpasses and expands what was originally constructed as the field.

The show *Objects of Attention*, in which I practised anthropology through contemporary art and design, provided a sustained form of ethnographic experimentation and collaboration. Here knowledge was produced exploratorily, exposed to unintended effects and questions, with no certain idea of what the results may be (Macdonald and Basu 2007; Holmes and Marcus 2012). The exhibition engaged with objects as ethnographic operators and intervention tools, triggering diverse perspectives on knowledge and collaboration. A collection of boundary objects was then assembled to explore different forms of knowing and to articulate a re-presentation of political concerns and aesthetic objections. In such an expanded field, the ethnographic research was not meant to analyse a single culture or a distant community. My main object of study was instead an exhibition – a zone of uncertainty fabricated for encounters and interactions, and a collaborative research method that I was crafting, in the form of a prototype (Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2016).

During the exhibition, the roles of ethnographer and curator were played simultaneously. They brought together empirical material and diverse objects and people, as well as building bridges to span across troublesome pairs – bridges either to be crossed or ignored. The process, meaning the actual construction of the exhibition, also inspired discussions about what counts as anthropological data and how experiences of various kinds come to matter academically (Savransky 2016).

Curating an exhibition is a public-making gesture, a form of outreach while taking a stand towards the world. To assume this role means that you have something to say and to share; it requires the production of new dialogues and ways of seeing. In a similar manner, the field is something that we construct while participating in it. The field is equally a form of public engagement, creating the conditions for studying something and in turn generating encounters, questions and knowledges. In other words fieldwork makes things, and what we do is more than simply describing a process.

Objects of Attention followed up on current explorations to disseminate and produce knowledge in a different way. It was based on participant-making, practising methods of art and design to interrogate the range of experimentation and collaboration possible in anthropology. This research also explored how new ways of comprehending objects might generate innovative ways of being public and political. It thus approached objects as meeting places in which to rework both social relationships and cultural representations. I participated in the production of the very things I was studying in order to learn to see things as my field companions did. Even if I was taking notes my ethnography was not only textual, nor simply based on observation. I was also building walls, installing artworks, arranging lighting in the gallery, preparing press releases and short descriptions in different languages, distributing newspapers and giving television interviews, applying for funding and paying bills, conducting guided tours and managing workshops, buying materials at Bauhaus, ensuring that the wall was completed on schedule, making decisions about the best way to distribute the objects and also organising the documentation of the process.

In the field I acted as a curator, which involved negotiating my passage through different professional landscapes. I was not always being able to make sense of these new-found territories or of these experiences. *Objects of Attention* was designed as a form of fieldwork in which I, the anthropologist, was not in control of what was going on and not fully aware of what was happening. I thus relinquished my authority as the 'expert' of the cultural world I was studying. In this sense, my research was focused not on knowing more about artists and designers, or working 'as them', but aimed at knowing differently 'with them'. In doing so, I had to practise and preserve multiple ways of participating in the field, moving back and forth between the known and unknown, working with and through differences, exploring alternative definitions of knowledge and forms of field research while making them.

Following a sort of mirror-like effect, I started to question my own knowledge practices by engaging with those of others. As I did so I

reconsidered what my task as an anthropologist really was, and how or why I defined myself as such. Likewise, the decision about when I should end fieldwork was not decided by an academic community; it was rather given by the participants in the project. More specifically, this decision co-related to the ending of the exhibition, the requirement of the museum to free up the gallery space and the need to deliver invoices to supporting institutions and return artworks to contributing artists. Several artists asked me then if I would quit academia to pursue a career as a curator instead; some even proposed further collaborations. To these questions, I always gave the same response: the exhibition was to me both a fieldsite and a research device, it was something to be done for a specific period of time; not only that, the whole project was organised to gather material for a book. Looking back, their questions seem to imply that it is not possible to be a professional curator and an academic anthropologist simultaneously.

In more personal terms, during the opening of the exhibition, I replied differently to Ketli, project manager at the museum, and to Sandra, coordinator of its pedagogical programme. To them I answered that this could well be the last show I curate; the whole process is very tiring and the academic outcome of the effort is not always clear. With a smile, Ketli said that she was sure that I would curate more exhibitions; Sandra agreed that it would be a shame to stop because I actually did it well. Somehow I got the impression that the museum staff had already discussed this question, being curious of my future plans in the field.

In anthropology, a great deal of time goes into reconsidering how we come to know what we know and what counts as knowledge – as well as what and where we expect anthropology to be. This discipline has traditionally been a destabilising knowledge for hegemonic canons and discourses, even for its own ones. In explaining faraway cultures and other ways of adapting to the environment, the discipline questions the naive conviction that ours was the best and only culture possible. Anthropologists are consequently interested in unfamiliar things, alternative modes of thought, methods of working through different boundaries, as well as in those insiders who do not fit into the community. It is even more complicated than that, however, since anthropology is largely composed of professional strangers who can hardly feel at home anywhere – not even in their own discipline.

Perennially confronting the dissolution of fields of study, anthro-pologists tend to open up new domains and extend what is possible methodologically, both in terms of field-making and in updating what and where fields are. Anthropology was originally distinguished by its

distance from the (exotic) object of study, a situation that established a clear separation between ethnographer and informants. In recent years, however, such distance has evolved into a complex proximity, indicating variances in the epistemological and ontological notions of otherness (Peirano 1998).

Moreover, the current edges of anthropology are appearing elsewhere. Many interesting discussions in contemporary anthropology have moved out of academia and the conference room, in some cases even beyond the borders of the discipline. This has generated defensive reactions from colleagues who resist the current centrifugal forces (Gullestad 2010), and also given rise to concerns about the object of study and function of contemporary anthropology – and even to its integrity as a discipline (Rabinow et al. 2008).

Still this discipline cultivates its self-identity as a reflexive counter-culture, since it is characterised by self-criticism, introspection and attentive listening – something that allows us to craft potential counternarratives.[1] Moreover, definitions of what anthropology is, who may be considered a practitioner or what counts as knowledge are likewise contingent and performative, embedded in specific contexts and enacting their own notion of significance. As anthropology is made 'in the doing', it is also open to being remade, reconfigured and tinkered with – making use of our freedom as much as we can, shifting both the kinds of topics with which we engage and the ways in which we study them. For that, we may still need to participate in the logic of disciplinary institutionalisation and traditional routines for validating knowledge. Yet in novel ways, by testing limits, building upon elastic intersections and staying there on the boundaries, we can aim to produce research which has an impact beyond academia, and propose alternative measures of success and validity.

Master of none

This research has proposed an experimental method of field-making in which the anthropologist engages in the ethnographic process by actively practising art, curating and design. The anthropologist does not thus begin from a position of expertise, but from one of testing and incomplete knowledge. This, in turn, gives rise to different side effects such as meeting the limits of comprehension, creating tensions between participants, cancelling some analytical forms of knowledge and finding oneself in a state of negative capability and not-knowing. Nevertheless, it allows the ethnographer to reconfigure his/her toolkit within a

dissimilar group of collaborators and through objects. In *Objects of Attention*, artists and designers became my epistemic co-makers, yet ones with whom there was not always consensus or smooth collaboration. From this we see the need to find boundary objects to communicate with each other despite our different backgrounds, standards and notions of audience.

I have to confess that, at the beginning of this project, I doubted whether the artists would be willing to participate and work at the edges of their actual practice. It is true that not all the artists invited to take part in this project accepted the challenge. One of my tasks was thus to respond to emerging conditions in the field, crafting entanglements that facilitate care for one another's capacities. However, as we become more professional and disciplined, we are less open and prone to do so, preferring to focus on fixing things within disciplinary walls and categories of thought (Ingold 2017). Another aspect of our becoming more professional is that we avoid making time for what appears unimportant and non-usable, or for engaging with what has not yet been graded as knowledge or translated into information. This does not mean that one has to embrace ignorance, however. It rather serves to show the importance of being open to epistemological multiplicity and boundary tests.

Anthropologists had often engaged with the discovery and observation of connections. However, a great part of the fieldwork in my case was dedicated to the very making of them, and of devices that could potentially generate them. Further on, in my fieldsite, the question of who is 'indigenous' or 'native' appeared to be rather ambiguous if not confusing. One is 'native', I would say, depending not only on the context and practice, but also upon the question asked and the kind of connection to a given culture of expertise.[2] In addition, expertise is not a divine, securely possessed authority but a relational and contextual enactment of knowledge, circumscribed to particular questions and ways of doing.

Such sideways form of undertaking fieldwork has further side effects. It serves to challenge the hierarchical relation between the empirical data and conceptual work in the field, for instance, and to normalise the engagement in cooperative formats that include the meta-reflexivity of others.[3] The anthropologist as field-maker comes across not as a jack of all trades but rather as a master of none – playing loose with established methodologies, hosting different participants and learning to borrow positions and pay attention to things laterally. Moreover, changes in knowledge production extend beyond classical disciplinary frames and notions of expertise, impelling us to write for audiences not imagined to be much like ourselves. Thus we see the imperative of including actors in

new ways, encouraging reciprocity between academic and non-academic questioning (Berglund and Criado 2018). In addition Holmes and Marcus (2005) have noted the opportunities that para-ethnographic modes of knowledge can bring to anthropological research, despite circulating outside academic and institutional networks.

Self-reflexive critiques about the scope of anthropological expertise, the utility of our claims and our insistence on exceeding what can be done are intrinsic to the very practice of anthropology. For instance, Marcus refers to it as a 'self-consciously marginal discipline … pulled by its curiosities towards its peripheries' (2007, 31). Indeed, many of the most exciting works in contemporary anthropology derive not from any disciplinary core, but from its borders and in the confines of fieldwork itself.[4] In this vein, I suggest decentring ourselves and expanding our methodological toolset with a centrifugal pull towards other fields. But how far can we bend disciplines? And what are the risks of doing so? Anthropology's constitutive looseness and the porosity of its boundaries might generate anxiety among some colleagues (Weiner 1995; Martínez 2020),[5] but in some other cases, such as mine, it facilitates overcoming the feeling of never fully being a native in a given discipline.

During fieldwork, the ethnographer has to deal with being seen as an outsider by the people with whom he/she has to interact, moving through the 'in between' and viewing the worlds through the cracks. Overall, the impostor syndrome makes us feel that we do not belong in a given community, manifesting itself as a constant fear of being discovered: you were never invited into the hallowed halls of the academy, so it is only a matter of time before someone notices you should not be here.

Being an outsider is highly valued among anthropologists, however, as is understanding the limits of our own expertise. We may go to places where we do not belong; here nobody knows who you are, what family you come from or even what are you really doing there. We are specialists in cultural decentring and feel at home in edges, disorder and defeat. Not surprisingly, anthropologists hold the very best CVs of failures among all scholars; they are also those most aware of the scope of their ignorance.

Yet attractive as amateurism and unlearning may be in theory, institutions such as state museums will rarely incentive its application or recommend it as a purposeful resource for all. Not-knowing can nevertheless be cultivated by those who are not afraid of crossing borders as part of being on the way to knowledge, meeting our limits of comprehension by staying in a condition of negative capability. In some cases one has first to not-know in order to access the knowledge that exists on the outskirts of our graspability and skills (Martínez, Di Puppo and Frederiksen 2021).

Practising unlearning is thus to be understood not as the opposite of knowledge, but as a productive gesture that allows us to question the genealogy of things and discover knowledge that we did not know we had. The challenge thus consists of integrating not-knowing into something known – a primary condition for learning, after all. In order to learn from and with others, we have to make room for new concepts and question our very basic assumptions. During the curating process of *Objects of Attention* I had to go through an unlearning exercise in order to meet and comprehend others' skills and wisdom, recognising the limits of my own knowledge and, in some cases, taking off my academic hat and stepping out of the scholar position. Such a gesture of *going through* allowed me to learn how different epistemologies are materialised, so practising design and curatorship as part of a larger form of inquiry – an ethnographic assemblage that supplements observation as an active instance. In this sense, my field-making did not necessarily reject ethnography. It rather tried to reconfigure its boundaries by using artistic and design-oriented means, establishing relations in the field in a rather inventive way (Berglund and Criado 2018).

The entanglements of such knowledge 'in-the-making' can be conceptualised as ethnographic curating – a particular form of participation and a research strategy practised when one cannot be, for different reasons, a mere observer in the field. In ethnographic curating, the long-term immersion of participant observation merged with an investment in animating other ways of creating connections in a sort of experimental system that invents questions previously impossible to formulate (Fortun 2012; Strohm 2019). My field-making gesture thus generated unforeseeable knowledges and problematic situations by connecting the concepts of analysis, creative representations and material engagement.

The materiality of thinking

Objects of Attention reflected on the limits of professional qualifications through explorative material engagements. However, a series of important questions emerged: Who were the natives in this project and where were they encountered? What is the role of the anthropologist in this para-ethnographic space? Consequently the exhibition could not be considered simply an anthropological study in which designers and artists participated. As noted above I, the anthropologist, was also an artist, producer, designer, administrator and builder. Likewise, professionals with no anthropological background were compelled to be self-reflexive and open to ethnographic experimentation, even as they maintained key roles in producing, mediating

and distributing cultural representations (Holmes and Marcus 2005). As a result or side effect, such construction of the field served to multiply the species of knowledge and in some cases to move many interesting discussions in contemporary anthropology out of the academic arena.

In *Sustaining Interdisciplinary Collaboration* (2017), Regina Bendix, Kilian Bizer and Dorothy Noyes describe the implications of various modes of engagement and making knowledge. They also reflect upon the complexities of sustaining collaborative projects over a long period (a precarious undertaking, as interdisciplinary research interests, agendas and trajectories tend to be diverse). The authors develop a striking analogy in which disciplines appear as mountains and interdisciplinary collaborations as rivers, concluding that one cannot swim all the time and that taking time to build a tent, or lodge, for resting is also important.

I am one of those in the epistemic valley, busy taking detours, often enjoying a loose, floating, methodological standing. Yet I do not forget to keep the mountains in sight as a disciplinary home, providing occasional sources of strength, as Bendix recommended me to do after reading this passage. Mountains are complete and unambiguous, but rivers are historically zones of exchange, contact and flow, of porosity and oscillations between thin and thick. Rivers thus equally undermine extremisms and pre-established boundaries.

In the increasingly complex and professionalised worlds in which we live, collaboration can be considered a pragmatic response. However, to be successful it also requires an ethos and 'an increased awareness of the other parties' work' (Konrad 2012, 9). In this vein, design theorist Cameron Tonkinwise (2008) proposes to acknowledge actual practices of co-creativity by asserting that

> No expertise is solo. If acts are not explicitly collaborative, they will nonetheless tend to involve negotiations with suppliers, sub-contractors, sellers. Even if conducted alone, the recipients of what is being expertly done will be in mind.

Design theorist Paul Carter similarly presents collaboration as a prerequisite for material thinking. He argues that to work collaboratively 'is to imagine community in terms of affiliation, rather than filiation. It is a technique for making sense of gaps, interruptions and unpredictable crossovers' (2004, 5). He then adds that some forms of knowledge exist in advance, and others appear in the making, often constructed through collaborations and experimentation.

Carter (2004) has coined the term 'material thinking' to reconsider new ways in which to convey the knowing involved in creating, as well as how people think about making things. This approach has been revisited by Matt Ratto, a philosopher of technology (2011). He formulated a notion of 'critical making', arguing that the act of making itself can reveal insights not captured in the final object. For that, Ratto suggests leaving behind the matter–idea binary and attempting instead to connect two modes of engagement often held separate: theoretical thinking and physical making. As he argues, it is wrong to regard making as the opposite of thinking, as if making were simply a rule-following technical process. Rather, we should incorporate both materials and making into our conceptual work, learning to understand creativity also in material terms. This approach subsequently calls into question the false distinction between creative and non-creative practices and the over-valuation of the new, instead of acknowledging the relevance of tinkering and re-arranging things (Farías and Wilkie 2016).

Following this line of thought, Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (2007) note that creativity should not merely be read in terms of results, innovation and individual talent, but also as a process of tinkering and improvising – intrinsically relational, generative and temporal. Hallam and Ingold thus emphasise the improvised and experimental nature of creativity and skilled practices. They refer to improvisation and experimentation as fluid, forward movements, engendering innovative relationships between people and things. Their conception of knowledge is, therefore, more interactionist, reciprocally constituted with the things around us. Skills are conceived of as a starting point to apprehend the world.

From an anthropological perspective, Trevor Marchand proposes to pay more attention to acts of tinkering and improvisation instead of imagining an unplaced act of thinking. In an ethnography of apprenticeship in carpentry (2010a), Marchand notes that making intrinsically entails the possibility of misinterpreting things; ideas and practices may be carried forward in ways not predicted and not according to plan.[6] In another study of apprenticeship, this time with the coppersmith masters of Michoacán, Mexico, Michele Feder-Nadoff (2019) also foregrounds that skills can be practised but not possessed; they are only emergent 'in relation to', found in the action itself, in a sort of dance of agency. A skill is thus an intangible quality gained, through tangible experiences, gradual accumulation and multifarious interactions. It thus comprises a kind of knowledge not entirely translatable into information.

Tim Ingold (2017) has also engaged with the distinction between wisdom and knowledge. In his view, knowledge is intentional and

explanatory, wisdom attentional and existential. Wisdom thus has to be considered as a process that unfolds, rather than a property to be possessed; it is not a capacity of mind, but a way of attending to things, an inclination, a way of entering into the world.[7] In addition, the possession of practical knowledge conditions one's sensible experience of the world in relation to what can be accomplished through it – farmers look at the seeds and then at the weather, plumbers at the pipes, dentists at teeth, carpenters at furniture, gravediggers at the grounds of churchyards, plasterers at cracks, psychoanalysts at pictures of your parents, cooks at your saucepans, and so on.

Skills derive from practical engagement with and through things that surround us, based on different kinds of embodied competence. Furthermore, we can argue that making activates varied interactions, connections and material dynamics, both with different people and with things. This is probably what Caroline Gatt and Tim Ingold (2013) mean when they encourage ethnographers to proceed alongside the people they study, doing more than simply documenting, interpreting and contextualising the informants' moves. Ethnography appears thus as a form of making, 'a process of active following, of going along … a way of knowing from the inside', so revealing the broader processes through which people acquire knowledge (Ingold 2013, 5, 1).

In addition, during the curatorial processes I realised the impossibility of codifying (translating into information) a great part of the knowledge involved in the project. My descriptions fell onto objects that resisted verbal representations; in some cases they were different from those of the artist. Verbal accounts often appeared to be insufficient in capturing some of the meanings, implications and forms of knowledge around me, so I began to reflect on other means of generating and representing knowledge. I even called the very meaning of knowledge into question. However, this reflection started by accepting the impossibility of knowing and mastering the different grammars and skills employed by all the participants. In other words, during the making of the exhibitions I experienced my epistemological limits, as well as the need to unlearn those anthropological tools that impel me constantly to codify knowledge. In turn I learned how to get along well with not-knowing, with epistemological multiplicity and with tensions between knowledge regimes.

Objects of Attention set out to describe what counts as knowledge from different points of view, exploring how a sense of order and aesthetic accomplishment is developed and transmitted in communities of practice. As observed by Cristina Grasseni in her study of apprenticeship among

cattle breeders in northern Italy, 'different ways of seeing reveal different ways of knowing' (2008, 159). She foregrounds the fact that knowledge is embedded in doings and activities; in other words, that understanding is gained from within the practice. Likewise, fieldwork is shaped by diverse material engagements and multiple collaborations, initially based on not knowing what to see. We learn to look.

What we know, and how we know, may take many different forms. Anthropology is indeed a discipline that makes knowledge 'about the ways other people make knowledge' (Marchand 2010b, iv).[8] Johannes Fabian has also participated in this discussion by arguing that knowing what and how we know affects all phases of our work; it is thus 'a practical, not just a theoretical, problem' (2012, 439). Overall, knowledge appears as an achievement of experience that takes time and (re)work, influencing how we come to know the world and the kind of relationships that we establish. Yet a close look shows that knowledge can be different things: it can be a state (of knowing), a field of practice (skill, capacity to do) and a possession (having, owing).

In discussing how we come to know what we know, philosopher François Jullien shows that the capacity to distinguish things does not necessarily make us able to represent them. In *A Treatise on Efficacy* (2004), Jullien notes that, in Western philosophy, there is an acute ontological gap between thought and action, based on the scientific ability to make predictions, forecasts and models, involving a strong means–end relationship and being goal-oriented. However, the Chinese notion of efficacy (*shi*) foregrounds that outcomes are born as much as of situational dispositions as of purposeful agentic interventions. This in turn means that one cannot fully prepare the control of things but only their accompaniment (Jullien 2015).

Coming from the Mediterranean myself, I have always been fascinated by the Greek concept of *kairos*, the dramatic intervention in the critical moment, and by figures such as tricksters and demi-gods, tackling the world head-on instead of reading with patience about the unfolding of things, situational circumstances and their propensities. Nevertheless, *Objects of Attention* was an adventure without a hero, a labyrinth without a minotaur.

The field was the museum, the site from which to study the relations and common ground established during the design and production of the show. Nonetheless, an ethnographically-gained understanding of design and contemporary art does not make me an artist or designer. Neither do I have the required attitude and skilled vision, nor do I belong to the corresponding community of practitioners.

Boundary tests

This ethnography has an unconventional structure, situated between an exhibition catalogue, a toolbox for artists and designers to make use of anthropological techniques and concepts, a recipe compendium for anthropologists to learn to collaborate with non-anthropologists and an inventory of practice-based insights. Such design is meant to explore new ethnographic possibilities and push further towards the limits of what one dares to do and write in terms of fieldwork. The research also focused on the particularities of working with objects and the kind of relations established around them, shifting the focus from things to socio-material assemblages. It combined an interest in the intrinsic properties of objects and their significance in contemporary social life with an exploration of alternative ways of doing anthropological research by conducting an experimental, hands-on field-making, moving between multiple testing registers and collaborative work.

Ethnographic Experiments contributes to the current experiments going on in anthropological practice, encompassing other means of representation and production of academic knowledge such as exhibitions, drawings, creative writing or performances. In recent years, transdisciplinary collaborations have been increasingly discussed as sources of methodological innovation, as objects of study, as institutional models and also as forms of understanding and intervening in the world. However, such collaborations raise questions about the identities of the participants, as well as who we are addressing with these kinds of projects.[9]

Anthropology, as a discipline, is made of a specific set of knowledge practices, values and boundaries – as well as by practitioners who ultimately define the contours of epistemic validity. As Marilyn Strathern observes (2000; 2007), disciplinary knowledge is something told and made by its practitioners, along with notions of relevance and epistemic validity. She further notes that such a definition defines the discipline in turn. Disciplinary knowledge is therefore not there to be discovered, but is rather a construction through boundary-work – and yet, despite being contingent social constructs, boundaries are real in their consequences.

Boundaries are indeed necessary for the existence of disciplines. They contribute to institutional stability by excluding what is 'pseudo' and 'amateur' from the scientific, separating 'us' from 'them', classifying behaviours as adequate or deviant. Sociologist Thomas Gieryn (1983) coined the term 'boundary-work' to describe the discursive practices and ideological demarcations of disciplines by which sciences establish their authority and autonomy as a powerful social actor.[10] Overall the determination of both who

belongs within the community of practitioners and who lacks authority entails classifying, categorising and creating typification systems of social and material phenomena. Gieryn notes that demarcations are not merely an analytical problem, however; it is, fundamentally, a practical one, since boundaries require continuous work of maintenance, defence and police and involve a variety of actors and institutions.[11]

Boundaries always bring particular relations to the fore, materialising different dimensions of distinction (Martínez 2019c). They are designed to minimise ambiguity and contingency, yet they are often experienced as fields of tension and interaction, zones of contact. A boundary seemingly marks an end, yet it can also be a disguised threshold and a new beginning, leading to discontinuity and inviting for a dialogical relationship. In other words, a boundary is a physical space as much as a mental and social one. Further, boundary crossing enables change because it temporarily suspends the existing cultural repertoire, giving rise to a cathartic improvisation – a state of possibility that disrupts established routines.[12] Boundary crossing thus refers to a shift, destabilising binary assumptions and focusing instead on what things become instead of what they are.

In this research, the field was made through a mixing enactment, one that does not pre-exist ethnography but is constructed through it. The natives were well-known professionals in their field, namely designers, artists and museum workers. In this *tutti-frutti* ethnography they were not expected to become anthropologists and lose their disciplinary identity, but rather the other way around. I was the one who had to re-learn the art of ethnography by working with them, based on their back-and-forth inspiration brought from their practice. Yet pluralising the modes through which anthropological knowledge is made requires us to enter into territories where we are unfamiliar and, to a great extent, unqualified (Suchman 1994). In so doing we travel from new sites into fields previously thought beyond our respective disciplines. In this sense, the boundary tests were related to the process of re-training ourselves and of disciplinary unlearning.

Moreover, the project's ability to integrate practitioners from different backgrounds depended upon participants' own preparedness to learn things they had not done before, as well as their openness to reflect and accept the alterations produced by their interaction with the extraneous (Holmes and Marcus 2005). However, bringing something extraneous into your practice entails both reductions and expansions (Strathern 2005), as well as potential disagreements about the set of problems, objects, practices, theories or methods (Barry et al. 2008). Transdisciplinary research thus implies an effort from participants of different backgrounds to create new conceptual or methodological innovations that move beyond

(transcend) discipline-specific approaches. This in turn involves a removal of points of reference that might generate uncertainty.

However, the actual demarcation of boundaries in our work does not preclude the crossing of them (at least not of all of them). Moreover, the idea of discipline can also have positive outcomes in our practice, for example allowing us to negotiate the value of what we do (Clarke 2014), relying on particular competencies and skills that we have already acquired. In this vein sociologist Thomas Osborne (2013) argues that disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity should not be seen as opposites, but rather as two aspects of the same game; in other words, one needs a disciplinary boundary and protocol in order to transgress it. Likewise, transdisciplinary research does not necessarily involve new knowledge; it does not always open up the space of research possibilities either, nor provide a solution to all contemporary problems (Barry et al. 2008). Rather it is an integrative mode of knowledge production, most often organised by temporal configurations oriented towards specific problems (Biagioli 2009).

The object of study of this ethnography is precisely this subject – the transdisciplinary relations established among anthropologists, designers, artists and museum staff, and the ways in which collaboration requires us to perceive the limits and exclusions of our own knowledge practices as well as a certain degree of unlearning.[13] Collaborations are thus taken as both a means and an end in themselves, allowing us to work outside conventional disciplinary boundaries in an expanded field of emergent interrogations, research techniques and notions of relevance.

The novelty introduced here is that the collaborative research is more dedicated to problem-making than it is engaged in problem-*solving*. Such endeavour is harder to audit, capitalise and translate into numbers, however, eventually producing the required short-term results for the current system of evaluation (Bendix et al. 2017). Furthermore, transdisciplinary collaborations rarely have a lasting institutional life (Biagioli 2009) – not only because disciplines show inertial tendencies (Barry et al. 2008), but also because of the instrumental character of transdisciplinary collaborations (in which investigators from different backgrounds are brought together to deal with a specific problem).

The experience of studying what lies across and beyond disciplines might have the effect, in turn, of blurring traditional genres and disciplinary boundaries and re-shaping professional identities among practitioners in a transgressive way (Nowotny et al. 2001; Chandler 2009). This is the reason for my emphasis on the 'trans' generated, as a liminal condition of mutual learning in which an ephemeral yet intense sense of community might emerge (Turner 1974). Another important

issue here is the extent to which transdisciplinary engagements are nowadays prescribed by funding institutions.[14] This brings to the fore another relevant question. Should transdisciplinary collaborations occupy the position of an end or a mean, of an outcome or a beginning?

Ethnographic Experiments combines different models of knowledge creation and dissemination, answering to the need for collaborative work and exemplifying the progressive interweaving of fields of knowledge (Biagioli 2009; Estalella and Criado 2019). Endeavours to collaborate experimentally with societal actors and to be cross-disciplinary deserve a different form of recognition within academia – one that is not simply written in documents but rather practised despite reactionary institutional resistances (Felt et al. 2016). Disciplines are often bounded by defensive forms of apparatus which require an institutional visa to travel and cross epistemic borders and waters. Trespassing, bridging and borrowing operations to collaborate experimentally with others are increasingly needed, however, in order to engage creatively with contemporary matters of concern and to construct an expanded field of knowledge-making. This field enlargement through the interstices might be squeezed out institutionally, yet it could potentially destabilise the disciplinary core too. In cross-disciplinary collaborations the very ontology of the discipline is at stake, having implications for how we imagine what we do (Barry et al. 2008).

In the case of *Objects of Attention*, transdisciplinary collaborations were arranged to reconfigure the one-way linear formats in which traditional ethnographies are produced, as well as to generate different ways of interrogating problems and forms of objecthood. Through a commitment to field enlargement and disciplinary boundary testing, this book proposes inventive ways for practising anthropology and for studying the intersections between, across and beyond different fields of practice. I believe that part of our job as anthropologists is to create our own definitions of valid knowledge, recalibrating our 'equipment and training' (Latour 2004a, 231). The future of anthropology depends to a great extent on how well we reconfigure the definition of where the field is and what ethnographies and valid knowledge are, bringing closer the production of scholarly knowledge and its dissemination.

Knowing anew

This book explored the material and hands-on consequences of experimental collaborations, through which new ways of designing

and curating ethnography could open up. Here ordinary objects were used as devices of collaboration in the field, expanding that which had been previously assigned to the ethnographic. This book thus reflects on how different research practices meet and establish a common ground; it also discusses the complexities of how to apply experimental collaborations in real-life settings. We are thus referring to epistemic limits, capable of being crossed or connected to, through and between different imaginaries, practices and aesthetics. Or perhaps we should rather talk of anthropological peripheries, notably 'in between' (the known and unknown).

Here I propose to conduct fieldwork until you reach some sense of limit and then see how it feels to be there, where to set the camp and whether it is sensible to go further or better to retreat (taping back the corners previously cut). In my view, the right moment is felt once the problematisation of the boundary starts to trouble you. There are in fact no limits on method, beyond our own understanding of what the knowable may be. In other words, the praxis and what counts as knowledge define what we do and, in turn, the working relations that we establish.

Nevertheless, the first publisher to whom I submitted this book proposal (a university press) replied that this ethnographic was too experimental to be published by an academic publisher. It was improper anthropology, contaminated with someone else's practices and knowledge-making, venturing over the threshold, stepping outside disciplinary ways of doing things and yet not going far enough beyond them.[15] A friendly review later argued:

> At times, a normal reader might not know what artists are talking about – at other times, it also seems that they themselves did not either. Certain artists really do live on different planets! … When the exploration ventures too much into the unknown or the experimentation is too bold, you must expect that not everybody will be on board. Some colleagues might be less open-minded about all this and could consider your book an actual attack on the integrity of the discipline, vanishing the existing boundaries between fieldwork and curatorship, between visiting a museum and participating in research, between art and academe, and between creativity and knowledge production. And eventually between ethnography and anthropology, for that matter.

This research gathered together different borrowed objects, insights, responses and concepts, combining empirical instances with theoretical

compositions. It considers the changing functions and designations of an anthropologist in the field, reflecting on the aesthetic, conceptual and methodological slippages and potentials of a reversal of roles with artists and designers. The book also provides a survey of the field of material culture studies. Its key aim is not only to engage critically in theoretical discussions on materiality and object-oriented ontologies, however. Rather, it undertakes an investigation into how to render possible experiments in the field and learning how to shape a possibility for collaboration in other terms.

Here one cannot find a programmatic explanation of the use of objects and exhibitions for social research. Instead, *Ethnographic Experiments* offers an account of testing epistemologies by making use of ethnographic devices that allow us to maintain a plurality of viewpoints in the field. In some of its passages, this ethnography refuses to transform non-rigid forms of knowledge into rational, disciplined and systematised ones, also arguing for the necessity of knowledge that is experimental and not clearly valuable in itself as data (Estalella and Criado 2019). There is rich potential in using exhibitions to practise different strategies of boundary testing and as a form of field-making, where a collaborative and experimental web of doing is expressed, negotiated and contested.

Exhibitions create the conditions under which we may not simply transgress professional boundaries, but also influence disciplinary practices in return. Such a collaborative engagement produces an experimental materialisation of ethnographic research in its turn, serving to expand our research tools beyond disciplinary boundaries. By redesigning the curatorial process as an anthropological research method, the different art projects described in the book set the stage for reconfiguring the practices used by researchers: they move back and forth between the theoretical and the empirical, the artistic and the academic, the conceptual and the physical.

The gesture of reconfiguring the boundaries of ordinary objects is a way of knowing in itself. This form of materialisation and of knowing enacted different conversations with varied actors and with things. In a way, we can say that disciplinary notions of evidence resemble a museum collection, continually refined and in need of multiple processes of maintenance. Indeed, this kind of experimental anthropology might be compared with a work of contemporary art – relational, unstable and relying on traditional canons and practices, even as it exceeds them all.

None of the ethnographic tasks described in this book are easy ones. It was not a smooth process for either artists or designers to become part of the various contradictory entanglements and commitments forged

during the process, which indeed revealed complex distances and proximities. Yet doing research with boundary objects and professionals not trained in anthropology allows us to expand our notion of the field and to make use of things or venues that were considered as belonging (or relevant) to the discipline.

Anthropology emerges in the process of engaging with the limits of one's own knowledge, unlearning one's assumptions and creating distance in which to reconsider the familiar.[16] As this book has shown, the processes of undoing, unlearning and border crossing are, in some instances, required to design experimental collaborations. The gestures of unlearning and of undoing objects may generate discomfort, however, as they involve questioning professional identities, meeting the limits of comprehension and putting the anthropologist in a condition of negative capacity and not-knowing. But it can also be generative, making things happen and testing new forms of relating, instead of working through a defensive boundary work.

During the symposium organised for *Objects of Attention*, anthropologist Eeva Berglund pointed out that experimentation also intensifies the dynamics of producing risks, for instances of not arriving at a predictable outcome, as well as generating side effects, for which responsibility is not always taken. It is therefore pertinent to reconsider who takes the risks when the experiment is conducted and what happens to those who are not willing to be part of someone else's experimentation process. Berglund also spoke of the productive tensions that this kind of research creates, highlighting the processual nature of fieldwork and the complicity between participants in the research process.

By expanding on a previously existing relationship of collaboration among the participants, and in some cases of friendship, *Objects of Attention* and the diverse events scheduled around it were organised to allow access to alternative forms of knowledge. We managed to mobilise both design and contemporary art as catalysts for research that is at the intersection of diverse disciplinary borders, reconsidering along the relationship between physical making and words, between creation and ethnography. Furthermore, the exhibition did not simply put disciplinary tools and concepts into the service of non-academic purposes (as those involved in applied anthropology might do). Rather, it tried to create epistemic tools and concepts through experimental collaborations, re-functioning our methodologies and its notions of relevance (Estalella and Criado 2018).

Ethnography is thus response and collaboration at once here, theorising upon my curating in an open-ended way. The research has

consequently explored the kinds of knowledge that can be produced in exhibitions, and the way in which these relate to conventional types of anthropological notions of evidence and methodology. By reflecting on the potential and limits of exhibitions as devices for social research, *Ethnographic Experiments* aimed at contributing to ongoing discussions about experimental methodologies in anthropology. It sets out to explore how new combinations in the field may help us to reach new kinds of knowledge, as well as the capacity to relate among disparate objects and professionals.

The result is a rather tentative toolkit for an evolving practice, in the sense of allowing diverse insights to stand during the process and in the final outcome. The ethnography borrows knowledge and methodologies from different participants through a combination of approaches, whereby insights are not merely told in the researcher's analytical voice. Taking the epistemologies of our participants seriously allows us to work through differences and variations that do not claim for uniformisation and also serve to retrain ourselves – conscious that disjunctions are an intrinsic part both of anthropology and of working with people.

So there are all these things in *Ethnographic Experiments*. Certainly, there could have been many ethnographies resulting from this research (as many as there were participants), but only I took the decision to write one up. Nonetheless the book includes a series of insights by some of the participants in which they engage with the research topics from their own perspectives, in relation to their own practices and with their own definitions of valid knowledge. In this project, collaboration between artists, designers and anthropologists was not limited to the level of practice. It also promoted a shared theory-making, studying along the very process of composition of theoretical constructions and illustrating fieldwork as the research process unfolded. This anthropology thus served to combine a research focus on both things and processes. It attended skilfully to different modes of knowing and also engaged with uncontrollable aspects of curating and collaborative research.

We are always accounted for in terms of what we do – not least by our community of practitioners, who establish what is or is not appropriate or relevant to our discipline. Yet our disciplinary horizons ought rather to be configured by our own praxis and ability to define what constitutes a valid or relevant claim. Here we see that anthropology as a practice and as a discipline do not always meet; indeed, they may quite often appear as disconnected, or even challenge one another. As a practice, anthropology can be quite anti-disciplinary, incomplete, conversational, explorative, eclectic, free, loose and destabilising – constantly exceeding

what it is possible to imagine and to do. And this is the radical beauty of it. Anthropologists constantly deploy an amateur attitude, a position of curiosity in gathering data and openness to (un)learning, testing and tinkering. That is our mastery, and we are radicals by doing so.

Notes

1   This is a loosely defined discipline (the study of the human condition). For instance, Thomas Eriksen (2006) insists that anthropology is about humility, about listening and understanding our own epistemic limits in relation to other people. For Ingold, 'anthropology is philosophy with the people in' (1992, 696), studying both conditions of living and what life is for people in specific settings.

2   Reflecting on the distinction between a native and an anthropologist, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2003) explains that 'What makes the native a native is the presupposition, on the part of the anthropologist, that the former's relation to his culture is natural, that is, intrinsic and spontaneous, and, if possible, non-reflexive – or, better still, unconscious. The native expresses his culture in his discourse; likewise the anthropologist. But if she intends to be something other than a native, she must express her culture culturally, that is, reflexively, conditionally and consciously'.

3   As an example, anthropologist Ulf Hannerz has done this in his work with foreign correspondents. He noticed that we both have to reconsider in our respective jobs what new analysis we can add to the one done by natives. Hannerz (1998) then proposes to study more 'sideways', reducing the existing analytical distances with our informants and dismantling any belief of being intellectually or morally superior. Another example is the work of Bill Maurer in his ethnography of Islamic banking in New York (2005). He also calls for more lateral analytical moves in the field, suggesting in turn a dynamic oscillation in the conceptual work of the informants and the anthropologist.

4   As STS, media studies, feminist studies, archaeology and contemporary art are contributing to revitalise our stock of concepts and methodologies, see Marcus 2008. We could even add to this that the most exciting anthropology nowadays is often done by early career scholars, those precariously positioned in academia.

5   Anthropology has been characterised as an 'indisciplined discipline' (Comaroff 2010), constantly redefining its scale and conceptual foundations and re-functioning its techniques of knowledge production.

6   Furthermore, making involves a complex relationship between continuity and change. Likewise, in a study of traditional builders in Yemen, Marchand (2003) remarks that relations of apprenticeship are not easily articulated verbally and show continuities out of the workshop. The transmission of skills seems rather to happen in practice and is contextually supported by the senses (see also Ingold 2000).

7   Another important issue in the task of understanding creativity is how to describe intuitive knowledge, which is something beyond learning and representation (Ingold 2013) and rather apprehended through pragmatic sensuous intentionality (Vannini 2009). In Modern Greek language, for instance, the term *mêtis* refers to the embodied wisdom practised for generations in particular places often entailing a cunning intelligence (Detienne and Vernant 1991; Klekot 2021).

8   In different articles Marchand (2010) and Emma Cohen (2010) claim for a more interdisciplinary approach to knowledge-making, providing more than a single explanatory account of how we come to know what we know. Also musing on these matters, anthropologist Fredrik Barth asks whether knowledge is to be considered a thing or a relationship. Instead of defining knowledge, Barth proposes to work using a definition of knowers as those 'who hold, learn, produce and apply knowledge in their various activities and lives' (Barth 2002, 3). Barth suggests that knowledge has three faces simultaneously applied and with mutual influences – substantive, communicative and organisational. He invites readers to pay attention to the 'salient processes of production, reproduction and use of knowledge that take place and shape

the forms of knowledge' (Barth 2002, 6). In this vein we might even speculate with a distinction between material culture and material knowledge (despite their overlapping areas). Whereas the latter refers to the elements that people have for intuitive action and considerations, based on individual experience, distributed in time and space, spreading from individual to individual, the former foregrounds the structures available for 'after the fact' reflections – pointing at a collective and to be socially shared. In addition, archaeologist John Robb (2010) engages with these ideas. However he foregrounds the fact that bodies of knowledge often pre-exist actors and our actions can fall below the threshold of consciousness.

9 Boundary crossing, however, might generate feelings of being lost, missing points of reference and being unable to work through the inside and outside of the boundary. Likewise, and as noted by psychologist Kathleen Kirby in *Indifferent Boundaries*, boundary crossing holds radical possibilities but also political dangers in that 'it can lead subjects to disrespect the bounds of others' (1996, 117). As she observes, boundaries are 'organized by momentary impositions of difference' (1996, 109), so we cannot afford to naturalise the boundary; instead we must seek to break down its rigidity. To exemplify this argument, Kirby describes the travels and misadventures of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish explorer who lived in the sixteenth century.

10 Boundary work is part of 'credibility contests' and the recognition of being a rightful agent for the purpose of establishing epistemic authority (Gieryn 1999, 23).

11 Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár have also contributed to this debate by finding properties such as permeability or durability in boundaries and by distinguishing between symbolic and social ones. The former are applied through concepts and categories, the latter by objectifying differences and arranging an unequal distribution of resources (2002, 168–9).

12 As an out of the ordinary experience, crossing borders has its own effect on those who choose to immerse themselves in the effort. In order to understand the role of individual agency within periods of social transformation, Arnold van Gennep (1909) proposed a three-fold structure: separation, suspension and re-integration, placing the emphasis on the transformation of the subject during the liminal experience. Liminality referred to the phase of suspension, to 'in between' situations that involved a change of status and, eventually, the resolution of a personal crisis. Victor Turner (1974) recovered this sequential structure of ritual processes for his studies on Ndembu rites of transition. However, Turner split the liminal suspension into two distinct periods: crisis and redress. He also explained that the crisis stage functioned as a threshold – a moment of meaning formation and condensed symbolism – which entailed an intense becoming, marking the 'through' of the process.

13 Here the 'trans–' prefix refers to a heuristic movement across fields and disciplines, constituting a collaboration aimed at transcending the existing academic boundaries (different thus from the 'inter–' prefix, which means a working relation between established fields and disciplines, without stepping out of the pre-established disciplinary line).

14 To understand how contemporary calls for transdisciplinary research are bound up with wider social and economic changes see Noel Dyck (2008).

15 The intersectional, open-ended impulse of anthropology has been noted by key figures such as Lévi-Strauss (1953) and Clifford Geertz (1988); they both described our discipline as a fragmented practice that had grown out of various leftovers of other disciplines and shows an anti-centric character. Indeed, anthropology is characterised by being in a state of crisis, moved forward through experimentation and attempts at boundary crossing (Martínez 2020).

16 This position is not far from Ingold's (2014) insistence on differentiating ethnography (a way of describing and documenting life, rendering an account of the world around us), from anthropology (engaging with bigger, fundamental questions that go beyond exercises of contextualisation and is speculative on the conditions of possibility). Ingold even goes so far as to argue that our disciplinary obsession with ethnographic techniques and our adherence to the protocols of positivist methods serve to prevent us from having a stronger public voice.

Coda: the morning after

I was glad to not see anyone in the kitchen of the hostel. Some of the participants in the exhibition had stayed in Kohtla-Nõmme after the official opening, prolonging the party, dancing *cumbia*, climbing over the hill of mining debris at night. That was indeed a memorable moment. Now I see one of the artists stepping out from the hostel and sitting down on the bench in front of it. She smokes, revealing an existential hangover similar to mine, a strange sense of unreality and emptiness after the opening. Does it make sense, what we do? Is it worth the effort? And for whom?

So I come upon a comrade with whom to share this curious morning after, the calm before another storm. There is a guided tour scheduled in a few hours. Some stuff also needs to be cleaned up, put in order and packed away, and there is plenty of communication to do, emails to answer, invoices to be paid ... the usual tasks that fall to the curator. It has been a long week of installation here. Luckily we got everything done on time, Estonian television came and the vibe with Juku, the technician, was superb. We managed to restore good relations with the museum staff, and everyone was gorgeous and generous at the opening.

Yet now, a week after writing these lines, I am still enveloped by a mourning feeling. How long does it last? Anna Škodenko, one of the artists taking part in the exhibition, tells me that she always suffers from this existential hangover after opening a show. Mar Canet, another of the artists, says that the feeling of 'the day after' is worse for musicians and actors.

In the last days I have received positive feedback throughout several channels. I believe it to be genuine, as the comments are specific and beyond bland polite praise ('what an interesting show…'). Different visitors remarked upon 'the quality of the texts included in the booklet', 'how well the exhibition works as a whole, including the stuff already in the building', 'a nicely curated exhibition. The artworks melt into their surrounding in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish where the

intervention begins and ends'. Some referred to individual artworks: 'I was particular touched by Anna's work'; 'I was surprised to see how Laura managed to wrap up through photos the research we have done in a year'; 'I keep thinking about the total installation done by Darja'; 'I could not stop watching Eléonore's video because it summarised what my childhood was'; 'As an artist, this project really reminded me about what it is that I love doing'. One person noted that 'The exhibition is very adequate … a real precious present that you gave us'. But what does 'adequate' really mean? The dictionary defines it as 'satisfactory or acceptable in quality or quantity'. Or should I focus instead on the second part of the sentence, the most positive part?

I revised the proofs of the book you now hold on your hands while opening another art exhibition: *Life in Decline*, organised at the Estonian Mining Museum (in Kohtla-Nõmme, Estonia) and held between 17 June and 3 October 2021. This new project engages with the fragility of the things we construct; we have tried to open up decline in its multiple facets, paying special attention to the side effects of the modern extractive industries in Eastern Estonia. That is why it made sense to organise such an exhibition at the Mining Museum of a mining town, in a mining region – now in decline.

For the show, the former administrative building of the Kohtla mine has been used to illustrate what goes on in a condition described as 'in decline'. Ten Estonian contemporary artists were invited to act as accidental ethnographers, despite not having anthropological backgrounds. The original assumption is that nowadays, for ethnographic research, we have to explore new forms of collaboration and experimentation in the field.

In the case of this exhibition, artists proved to be knowledge-makers themselves, able to produce highly valuable analytical knowledge through artworks. To prepare their contribution, most of them visited different places in the east of Estonia, spending time there, talking to people, observing things, all the while making connections between personal biographies and collective discourses. As a result, their artworks do not simply function as conceptual or aesthetic objects, but also as analytical artefacts – as they condense, synthesise and multiply the knowable.

An example of this is the work of Anna Škodenko, entitled *Standby Regime*. To produce this work, Anna had accompanied myself and my team on some of our research trips, where we met with some of our informants and stakeholders to learn about ongoing repair interventions in Eastern Estonia. We also visited half a dozen cellars in Kohtla-Järve, where we experienced the particular choreography of moving around these storage rooms. Anna wanted to represent objects that are concealed

from the gaze of strangers, things somehow suspended in the expectation of change or a better future. Through her hand-drawn representation, a site-specific installation in the former bar of the administration building and a nostalgic song sang by her father, Anna managed to make visitors feel the overwhelming condition of standby shared by both cellars and decline. As she noted, 'Only close members of the family can enter this dark entity. Pantries are shelters for accumulation and future appropriation. They provide space for the experience of secrecy and are inhabited by different shadows and biographical trajectories, combining both emptiness and fullness, as well as value and non-value'. Indeed, during our second guided tour, we all experienced a very intimate moment while people started to reveal what they kept in their own cellars and the family songs they sang.

Nonetheless, this exhibition is not just about Eastern Estonia. It also reflects on what it means to be in decline, as a specific human, socio-economic and ecological condition. A condition that can also be ordinary and normal, showing complex continuances while recovery has not been achieved. Likewise, the exhibition itself is not only used to communicate research results, but also to generate discussion and study the reactions that the artworks might provoke. A project such as this, organised in a private provincial museum and based on research collaborations, thus entails more risks than a usual exhibition does, and requires openness and generosity from all the participants.

Here artists and designers have used their creativity to conduct the kind of research and analysis that we usually do as anthropologists. My own fieldwork was indeed practised as a series of collaborative interventions – adjusting, improvising, making new sets of relations and negotiating normative canons in a deviceful way. For example, the exhibition's designer, Viktor Gurov, visited the area with me, undertaking archival research and engaging in unexpected discussions about the kind of values that we wanted to transmit through particular colours. At some point we had to choose between two great sketches of the design. These were based not only on the kind of audience we wanted to reach, but also on the preliminary findings of the ongoing research and the values that we wanted the exhibition to foreground. The first sketch, as we described it, was more 'feminine' and 'organic'; it emphasised the fragility of things with a typeface resembling handwriting and handmade lines, as well as with pink and purple colours. The second sketch, more 'masculine' in tone, referred to modernity, the afterlife of progress and industrial infrastructures, here represented with straight lines going down. In addition it represented toxicity and mining working culture by using specific tones of green and

yellow (as with working vests). In the end we decided to combine them both in a fantastic visual hybrid created by Viktor.

The artists as knowledge producers

Ethnographic Experiments does not hide the productive tensions and problems that emerged during the research and it engages with questions such as: how might experimental forms of anthropology and ethnographic devices be evaluated? And how can this kind of knowledge be used? For instance, I dedicated five hours of work to answer the questions sent via email by a journalist of the main newspaper of Estonia. It was supposed to be an interview about *Life in Decline*, but the journalist's opinions about the topic of the exhibition are as long as my answers. Finally, the interview won't be published because the journalist is not satisfied with my answers – he says that I talked too much about the exhibition instead of engaging with his ideas. I end up asking if he actually visited the exhibition, and he cynically replied that this was the best among my answers.

In another interview arranged by the Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art, I suggested involving some of the artists participating in the exhibition to provide a more dialogical sense of what we are doing. Asked about the process of collaboration, this is what artist Laura Kuusk replied:

> During the last year, I participated in Francisco's research project in Eastern Estonia, mostly documenting the visits and interviews… In this way, I was able to follow the process by which some of the residents in these shrinking towns are invited to relocate into another apartment, so that the state can demolish several half-empty apartment blocks. I am a bystander here… Everything related to oil shale mining is part of Estonia's national identity.

Laura's choice of words is indeed intriguing. The Estonian word *kõrvaltvaataja* can be translated to mean a 'bystander' or 'onlooker', referring to someone who refuses expert knowledge and is separately available. More specifically it is a way of accessing the object of study sideways, cultivating a lateral form of observation. In my view, Laura was presenting her contribution to this project, and to our collaboration overall, in too passive a way. For 10 months, she had been coming with my research team and me to Eastern Estonia to visit empty apartment buildings, meet

municipal officials and attend public meetings arranged by the Estonian Ministry of Finance to inform local neighbours about the demolition of apartment houses and relocation plans. All this knowledge was indeed valuable to figure out and produced one of the strongest works of the exhibition: *Vacant*. In this photo series, old apartments on sale are, however, presented by a choreographic real-estate agent, making the audience visualise Soviet urban planning and market laws (of supply and demand) in relation to the present depopulation problem.

In the event collaborators of various sorts and with different skills met, talked and so created something certainly bigger than its parts. We can refer to the exhibition as a platform for knowledge integration, juxtaposing different research agendas, methods and situated discourses, and not just results. Collaborating in the field reshapes the way in which we are available, becomes a heuristic source of theory-making and alters the epistemic positions of participants (Rakowski and Rossal 2018). Collaborating is also a decentred form of knowing; it enacts willingness to be acted upon by other forms of knowledge and of doing. This mutually transformative condition of immersion yields analysis and turns the artist into a knowledge producer, constructing a different sense of the ethnographic endeavour. As discussed in this book, making use of exhibitions for social research and experimental collaborations in the field bring new possibilities for nonconclusive analytical practices to the fore. In some cases, this gesture might even create a new strand of academic investigation, enacting new possibilities in gallery space and in museums. Hence, we were not just re-functioning fieldwork but also creating new forms of intervention in the field and experimental realities. So, if in *Objects of Attention* I was re-learning the art of ethnography through curation, here, artists were asked to reconsider the analytical potential of their aesthetic work and its contribution to knowledge production. Before, during and after the exhibition, we were actively searching for new languages of collaboration and the co-production of analysis, each of us within our own techniques and partial knowledges.

Rescue Plan, by Varvara & Mar, exemplifies well the potential outcomes of this gesture. This installation reflects on the limits of top-down rescue plans that are sometimes considered by the local population as not just unhelpful but even as a burden. It consists of two elements: a lifebuoy meant to float yet appearing as half-sunk in a pond (created after decades of mining activity) and a red chair similar to those used by lifeguards in their observation (here representing both authority and responsibility). On the chair, and as if it were graffiti, the artists wrote comments about the region found in the media and on social networks,

such as: 'Money to me, waste to you', 'Oil shale fairy tale', 'Kohtla-Järve stinks', 'This is the Estonian Donbas', 'Become an entrepreneur', etc.

The site-specific installation makes visitors visualise the government's failure to deploy working rescue strategies, as well as the negative representations associated with the region. Both aspects can indeed be upsetting to some, to the point that the work was vandalised a few days after the opening – the lifeguard chair was broken and the pieces thrown into the water. For a year, I had been exchanging my fieldnotes and some articles with Varvara & Mar, meeting regularly to discuss the ideas they had for the artwork, which were changing during the process. Finally, we went for the rescue plan installation, yet its production was not free of tension, and a couple of times Varvara told me not to be that *generous* with suggestions and questions about their work; after all, they were the artists and I was *just* the curator.

There is a big step to be crossed, or rather to be understood, between artists' analytical capacities (as our research counterparts) and how our institutions recommend us to collaborate with stakeholders out of academia and to be creative. Namely there is the need to unlearn our calculative disciplinary tools and make room (and time) for our collaborators' capacities to unfold. It sounds easy; it is not, in part because one has to work against the current politics and infrastructures of knowledge production. One of the key concerns of this project was thus to generate interstitial practices that create a common ground for taking care of others' capacities and knowledge.

As explained by Darja Popolitova (another participating artist born in Eastern Estonia):

> I honour the region where I grew up and recognise the transitional situation in which several generations found themselves. My personal trajectory followed a similar winding road: growing up in a Russian-speaking environment and then moving into an Estonian-speaking one; from Eastern Estonia emigrating to Tallinn; from holding a grey, alien passport to gaining an Estonian, EU passport.

Her artwork (an installation composed of a video, an embroidered dress, orchids placed next to stones and obsolete machinery, a jewellery piece and a laser-engraved oil shale next to a local graffiti) is indeed based on auto-ethnographic and archival research. Through her art Darja transforms the experience of language frictions into anthropological knowledge and critical discourse analysis. To do that she turns herself

into a fictional character, the jewellery witch Seraphita, who cures people from cultural hybridity.

Contemporary art works by showing; ethnography by describing, and sometimes explaining too. Accordingly, the relationship between the two is most often one of mutual defiance. For while both may find inspiring elements in the other, the structural limits of each practice tend to prevail while exhibiting the field. As we have seen in this book, there are many forms of approximation to our disciplinary limits, as well as possible articulations between ethnographic knowledge and contemporary art. However, and despite the analytical qualities that can be found in contemporary art, it is advisable not to take artworks as ethnographies in themselves, since their intention is not to relate a collective reality, but rather to make an individual experience perceivable by others. Indeed, it is difficult to determine where what is documented ends and what is invented by the artist begins.

And yet *Ethnographic Experiments* has tried to work precisely through the interstices of both practices, at the threshold between different roles and designations, combining collaborative field-making with analytical experimentation as a methodological gesture. All the exhibitions featured in this book were organised to explore different forms of knowledge production, approaching the field as an expansive space of possibilities. This book has shown that ethnography can also be practised as an experiment of research creation, turning museums and art galleries into a joint space from where I was able to reconfigure the limits of anthropological methods. The different projects described here provided an opportunity to generate unexpected questions in the field, as well as my own epistemic tools, by taking up the idiom of contemporary art and design.

One of the key contributions of *Ethnographic Experiments* is thus to expand the repertoire of practices in anthropology by connecting analysis, design and experimentation in social research. In a nutshell, how can we approach exhibitions as an ethnographic strategy or research device? How can fieldwork be served by curation? How can we intervene in the field during ethnographic work, and not simply observe? What are the implications of this method for anthropology as a discipline? And, eventually, how do experimental collaborations actually unfold, and how far can they extend? Questions such as these have been the main issues discussed in this book, which started in a playful way and ends with a rather sad tone. After all, ethnographic experiments are not that distant from life itself.

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'With great verve, this enjoyable book takes a fresh, insightful look at creative collaborations between anthropologists, artists and designers. It explores how these kinds of partnerships take shape and dynamically generate new knowledge. The book includes an important and fascinating examination of the potential of the exhibition as methodological device. It will be invaluable reading for anyone interested in museums, art, anthropology and their innovative intersections.' Sandra Dudley, University of Leicester

'Martínez has put together no less than a must-read treatise on "collaboratology" where art spaces joyfully turn into a laboratory and epistemic generosity becomes a guiding research principle. This book will surely inspire readers to reconsider fieldwork as a "curated" entity, inviting designers and artists to act as epistemic partners, turning objects into springboards of further relations and enabling anthropologists to relearn their craft from curators.' Tomás S. Criado, Humboldt University of Berlin

'With this book, Martínez has curated scenarios for novel ethnographic relations. His approach to anthropology is capacious and creative, inviting future experiments for doing research differently. His writing easily moves across disciplinary boundaries, generously inviting readers into creative thought and sense processes. More than a meditation on boundary objects, his book is itself one. It transforms academia's analytical intensities into thought-felt matters of concern.' Jason Pine, State University of New York

Ethnographic Experiments with Artists, Designers and Boundary Objects is a lively investigation into anthropological practice. Richly illustrated, it invites the reader to reflect on the skills of collaboration and experimentation in fieldwork and in gallery curation, thereby expanding our modes of knowledge production. At the heart of this study are the possibilities for transdisciplinary collaborations, the opportunity to use exhibitions as research devices, and the role of experimentation in the exhibition process.

Francisco Martínez increases our understanding of the relationship between contemporary art, design and anthropology, imagining creative ways to engage with the contemporary world and developing research infrastructures across disciplines. He opens up a vast field of methodological explorations, providing a language to reconsider ethnography and objecthood while producing knowledge with people of different backgrounds.

Francisco Martínez is Associate Professor at Tallinn University and convenes the Collaboratory for Ethnographic Experimentation (EASA Network).

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