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Fourfolded objects, or toward a philosophy of object-oriented curation

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Abstract

This paper attempts to contextualize a philosophy of curation that is object-oriented or toward a “return to the object.” In the museum, three interrelated philosophical problems pervade curation practices that prevent access to the object as it is. Here, the subject-object relations or idealism-realism issues are reconsidered as a specific niche of the philosophy of curation. To address these issues, this paper claims that Jean-Paul Martinon and Graham Harman’s philosophical return to the Heideggerian fourfold (*das Geviert*) can introduce creative pathways for the curated object that is riddled with excess and tensions. Later, with some caveats, the paper addresses the issues and suggests a possible avenue for further research.

KEYWORDS

curation, fourfold, Harman, Heidegger, Martinon, philosophy

INTRODUCTION

In her recent talk, Chiara Zuanni (2022), professor of museology in digital humanities, presents curation as one of the crucial coupled functions in the context of museums. Coupled as “curation and interpretation,” it is supposed to be performed at the end of two equally important processes of “collection and acquisition” and then “management and preservation.” While modern museums or large art institutions have demarcated these processes to different museum positions, for example, the collector, museum director, conservationist, archivist, and so on, some have generally assigned these to the function of the “curator,” that is, the collections curator, management curator, conservation curator, and—as what the term usually denotes—exhibitions curator. In this sense, Zuanni mentions that even from the stage of collection, increased awareness of curatorial agency is needed. This is not surprising since the term curation comes from the Latin *curatus* or *cura*, which means to “oversee” or “take care,” thus covering a comprehensive role in museums. The perceived historical case of what can be approximately called a museum then can be associated in around 530 BCE to a Babylonian princess “taking care” of her *private collection*, which in 16th–17th century ca. Europe was branded as “cabinets

of curiosities” or “wonder rooms” (Wilkins, 2011). Here, the emphasis was not on the cabinets, rooms, or privacy, but on the collection. The remarkable ancient artifacts represent a vast past. As such, the modifiers tend to evoke something toward the contents: We are curious and we wonder not about the cabinets or rooms—analygized, respectively, as the curation platform or the museum space—but the objects themselves.

The objects however were not entirely isolated. Some come with labels. As a coupled function, it appears that curation touches on fundamental issues of interpretation and perception, so that some curators engage in, for example, treating curating as a discourse (Hickey, 2008, 206), curation in a hermeneutical approach (Kröber, 2022), and more recently, curation associated with the interpretation of conflicting ideologies (Lahav, 2023). An underlying question seems to form a knot to the object: what does this object *mean* to be part of the curated collection? But such coupling does not seem to give the object its due. In thinking about the philosophy of curation more broadly within the interdisciplinary field of the philosophy of museums, the “more fundamental” question on ontology in the collection *Philosophy and Museums: Essays on the Philosophy of Museums* is as follows: “what counts as an object?” (Harrison et al., 2016, 2). In this schema, the familiar problem between idealism and realism or of the subject-object relations comes to the fore and we again face the problem posed by the philosophy of access.

While not entirely about hermeneutics or the philosophy of museums in general, the philosophy of curation is a nascent field of its own, citing Sue Spaid's pronouncement (2020, xvi) that only in 2014 when the philosopher Rossen Ventzislavov's published about the curator that “the gloves were off! The curator's role had seeped into the philosophy sphere.” This was also incidentally a year after the publication of *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, edited by Jean-Paul Martinon (2013), which can be considered one of the key works in mapping the philosophical field of curation. Spaid's work *The Philosophy of Curatorial Practice* contributes significantly to the literature as well, along the route of analytic philosophy, alluding to Wittgenstein and Frege among others, while claiming that both analytic and continental philosophy have not “sufficiently articulated the roles played by exhibitions” (2020, 7). Graham Harman (2013), known for object-oriented ontology (OOO, “triple-O”), comments that the realist or object problem has always been explicit in the analytic tradition—its origins in Russell and Moore posed to advance “a strong form of realism” (Hylton, 2017, 20)—but not so much in the continental one. While it can be noted that, following the continental route, Heidegger (1962, 138) already pushed this problem to its fundamental ontological core in his account of objects that “withdraw” from our view unless they are broken or reified (we notice the proverbial hammer once it is broken or not part of the system of functions), the curation-interpretation couple from most traditional to recent curatorial practice does not seem to be fully broken up yet that it loses sight of the object. To reify is to objectify from the standpoint of subjectivity so that here a split happens where Heidegger distinguishes an object (*Gegenstand*—“standing opposite” to a knowing epistemic subject) from an artwork, which captures at best the experience of tension between the subjective viewing and the objective world concealed behind the work of art (Thomson, 2019). Heidegger at this point already differentiated the *thing* over the object as mirroring the interactions of the fourfold (*das Geviert*) of earth, earth, sky, gods, and mortals. Wang (2016, 163) clarifies, however, that when the thing things (*das Ding dings*) in the play of the fourfold, it is no longer the same as the epistemic object (*gegenstand*): its ontological thingness points to “the appropriate place or role of human beings.” As such, in matters of curating, Spaid acknowledges that still, “artworks ... reflect some curator's interpretation” (xii). Seen in this light, access to curator's exhibits opens up ontological issues that point to objects as contents reflecting “myriad influences” (Spaid, 2020, 4).

Philosophy is an attempt to recast what is assumed and thereby contest the prevailing notions surrounding an issue (Martinon, 2020, xiii). In a philosophy of curation, what normally is seen as commonplace practices or thoughts about curating actually are avenues for contestation. It is assumed that most philosophical positions adhere toward a moderate or partial

form of understanding art, that is, when I see van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, it is not entirely about the same night I had with a friend under a night sky full of stars no matter how I associate the painting with my experience, nor is it entirely about van Gogh's arguably dyslexic disposition or intentions while painting the night sky. Rather it is what happens *in-between* that engagement, the manner in which the curator's framework becomes an agency that mediates it or the realisms that supplant it.¹ While this moderate position is safe, in the context of this philosophy of curation, three interrelated problematizations still emerge: (1) the object becomes a mirror of the curator's subjective interpretation, (2) the system of curation and museum management provides the value of the object, (3) and the exhibit curation assumes access to the object as an event of knowledge. As can be deduced from here, these issues only allow, in short, for the existence of the "curated" (object) and so prompt philosophical avenues that shift the movement of return to the object itself.

In this paper, I will attempt to answer the main question: what does it mean to "return to the object" in the context of the philosophy of curation? It thus vouches toward a philosophy of object-oriented curation, in a four-folded sense of the word, while repurposing "object-oriented" in Harman's specific sense *and* with Martinon's thoughts on curated objects. The paper does not argue, however, on *the* philosophy of object-oriented curation but it only shows a case that forwards the object more in some possible philosophical implications of curating rather than the subjective or even the moderate engagements in art. For purposes of untying the knot of curation and interpretation, I will not enter the whole debate of interpretation in art that discusses absolute intentionalism, anti-realist absolute intentionalism, and partial intentionalism (Livingston, 2009, 135). As far as the debate goes, we will be needlessly going into other debates such as free will and mind that do not take up the strand of philosophical problems dealing with Heidegger's ontological concern of the object. Recent debates on metaphysical realism and anti-realism also exclude him (Miller, 2022) but there are relevant reasons for salvaging his works, especially the fourfold (*Das Geviert*) for two current philosophers.

To approach the question then, I will limit the paper by exploring the works of Jean-Paul Martinon and Graham Harman. Martinon is a former curator of independent arts trust Rear Window (1992–2000) and co-founder of the Curatorial Ph.D. program at Goldsmiths College, and Harman is Distinguished Professor at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) and one of the central figures of the speculative realist movement that was convened in 2007 at Goldsmiths together with Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, and Ian Hamilton Grant. As it will be explored, these two living continental philosophers are relevant to the three philosophical issues of curation just laid out. With both working radically on Heidegger and his notion of the fourfold, the "return to the object" becomes a complex problem riddled with excess and tensions. Although Martinon is not associated with the object-oriented philosophical movement, I will argue that putting Martinon and Harman in conversation, particularly the common denominator of the fourfold, within the question at hand will comparatively generate seminal pathways that can open crucial implications for the object in the field of museum management and curatorship. In what follows, I will situate the philosophical issues of curation, rehearse Heidegger's ontology and the fourfold, and expose Martinon and Harman's takes on the fourfold. In conclusion, I will address the issues and take, though with certain caveats, the metaverse as an avenue for further research.

THE "GEM" MUSEUM AND ACCESS: CURATION, META-CURATION, AND THE CURATORIAL

If, in normal circumstances within the museum, curators never pretend to know the entirety of the object they label or exhibit (some curators in some museums do not even have the proper background to do it), then what seems to be the problem? Or in thinking about this common

curatorial practice, what is the philosophical problem here? In 2002, James Franklin, literary executor of David Stove, wrote about Stove's "Gem," or the Worst Argument in the World, and how it was a prize Stove awarded to himself after personally running a competition for it. The "Gem," named just for brevity's sake (Stove, 1991, 140), is as follows: We can know things only (1) "as they are related to us," (2) "under our forms of perception and understanding," and (3) "insofar as they fall under our conceptual schemes, etc. So, we cannot know things as they are in themselves" (Franklin, 2002, 615–624).

While curators can normally be unaware of this, Franklin notes that it is because this is "extraordinarily common," underpinning "many irrationalist programs in the history of thought," from classical (dogmatic) idealism—where Stove found its "first gem" (Musgrave, 1999, 25–35) on Berkeley ("to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all while only contemplating our own ideas")—to recent relativisms (Franklin, 2002, 615; 618; 621; 622) in

- the philosophy of language: "we cannot speak about things except through the forms of language, therefore we cannot speak about things as they are in themselves."
- the philosophy of science: "We can know things only via causal (social) processes acting on the brains of real scientists, therefore, the content of our theories is explained without remainder by the social factors causing them; that is, we cannot know things as they are in themselves."
- ethics: "We cannot know ethical truths (if there are any) except through the urgings of our back-of-brain plumbing, therefore, we cannot know ethical truths at all."
- and elsewhere.

We can look nowhere else than in the contextualization of the philosophy of curation. While Stove already lists some 40 "Gem" propositions enough not to induce "too much depression" and ironically housed them in what he calls the "museum of the pathology of thought" (Stove, 1991, 190–192), we can spot more propositions in our own "Gem" museum. Franklin (2002, 616) says that "Gem" is just a euphemism for dogma, and it seems that contemporary philosophy, according to Quentin Meillassoux (2010, 17) has not broken up with the "simple return to dogma" that is correlation. Correlationism is "any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined" and "consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another" (Meillassoux, 2010, 13). For Musgrave, the general gem form is "We cannot X things unless C, a necessary condition for X-ing things, is met. Therefore, we cannot X things-as-they-are-in-themselves" (Musgrave, 1999, 27), which as correlationism takes the form of "We cannot know things unless they are things-as-correlated-by-us. Therefore, we cannot think of the things-as-they-are-in-themselves."

The question of getting out is posed easily as we *can* know *but* only through a "hyphenated entity": the red flag signaling a gem that in our case is "things-as-correlated-by-us" (or only the primary correlation between humans and worlds but not independently of themselves). Says Franklin (2002, 622): "What made the 'Worst argument' worst was not that it raised a question about how to get out, but that it claimed immediately that there was no way to get out." This is the problem called the philosophy of access according to which (1) humans alone are privileged to access objects and that (2) access or correlation is all there is to think about the subject and the object. There is no way out as the gem gives us the inescapable dogmatic conditional: "If we try to think a world outside human thought, then we are thinking it, and hence it is no longer outside thought. Any attempt to escape this circle is doomed to contradiction" (Harman, 2011, 78).

What does this mean in contextualizing a philosophy of curation? We can initially consider the case of The British Museum, the oldest independent museum founded in 1759, whose initial access was restricted only to the "domain of learned gentlemen" and then in the 19th century,

“access was governed by the rules of court protocol and aristocratic etiquette” until finally, visitors can access but with “reluctant staff” guiding them throughout (Schubert, 2009, 17). Most modern and contemporary museums today, despite generally freeing the visitor of the now optional routings of tour guides, are structured either according to the narrativity of the exhibition designating a path or the categories and labels preset in the collection. In this setup, the narratives and categories are mediated by the access provided by the curator's framework. We can associate this issue with the philosophy of curation qua curation, where the object is retained as a reflection of the curator.

Next, consider the case of a black pedestal with no object exhibited in the University of San Carlos Museum, Cebu City, Philippines² during the fire incident at the National Museum of Brazil. The pedestal is curated in solidarity with the loss of Brazil's important objects. The crucial thing about this concerning curation qua curation is that the value of the object is taught by the medium of curation but differs only in that the viewer becomes part of the system of curation too. Recall Marshall McLuhan's “the medium is the message,” anti-content rather than contentless, in which “the message of any medium or technology is the change or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan, 1994, 7–8). This can be associated with what can be called meta-curation, which gives the object value through the system of exhibition and management that changes human sensory perception. Meta-curation as a philosophical issue in curation has broad implications in neuroplasticity, posthuman biotechnics, and epigenetics, but here along the lines of James Putnam's insight (2001), not just the curator but the “museum itself historically evolved as a medium in its own right” (Søndergaard, 2021).

Then, consider the case of the French poet and fashion critic Stéphane Mallarmé's failed attempt—despite 30 years in the making—at curating the “Total Work of Art,” “the ultimate curatorial event” that settled with the title *This Is [C'est]*, trying to define it in many descriptions. This can be associated with the philosophical issue of the curatorial (Martinon, 2013a, 1–3; 2013b). That there is no one medium means there is no one way to convey knowledge: whatever medium the curators choose, it is always an expanding field of knowledge, a “more” that can never be “totalized,” “constricted,” or “properly defined”: “working simultaneously in several modalities, kidnapping knowledges and sensibilities” (Rogoff, 2013, 41–48). Though undefinable, the curatorial, as an epistemic expression, is “an event of knowledge incurred by an exhibition” in contrast to curation qua curation “as the activity of putting on an exhibition” (Martinon, 2020, 256).

The context of the philosophy of curation qua curation, meta-curation, and the curatorial have broad philosophical issues. But in narrowing on their relations to objects, we cannot help but craft some gems in

- the philosophy of curation qua curation: “we cannot speak of the objects except through the curator's framework, therefore we cannot speak about the objects as they are in themselves.”
- the philosophy of meta-curation: “we cannot know the object (if there is any) except through the museum's system of exhibition and technological management, therefore, we cannot know the objects at all.”
- the philosophy of the curatorial: “we can know objects only via (curatorial) modalities bordering on an expanding field of knowledge, therefore the contents of our exhibits are explained without remainder by the event of multiplicities making them possible; that is, we cannot know objects as they are in themselves.”

What emerges instead in these gems is the inextricably linked object that can be reduced as the “curated.” The “curated” can only be accessed (X) through the correlation (C) of the object and among curation, meta-curation, and the curatorial. This further means that there is a general correlation, explicated in the formula, and specific correlations within

the philosophical issues of curation, meta-curation, and the curatorial. If “any attempt to escape this circle is doomed to contradiction,” then perhaps it is necessary to attempt to trudge that path.

HEIDEGGER'S FOURFOLD: THE CIRCLE, CONTRADICTION, AND CORNERING

The impetus “back to the things themselves!” is a challenge taken up by Heidegger from Husserl. For Husserl, there are concrete intuitions that anticipate the insight of being's phenomenal appearance (Carman, 2016, 235): from Brentano, the object is—through the epistemic move of intentionality—separated from (mental) content, which has its own *eidós* or real qualities. Heidegger never meant to escape the hermeneutical circle, which has a subjective epistemological tone, but only wanted to get rid of fancies (*einfall*) and popular conceptions (*volksbegriffe*) in thinking of ontological anticipation as “understanding” (Ricoeur, 1978, 160). Heidegger pushed Husserl's impetus to its fundamental ontological core by placing the object we see in the totality of functions. When the object is involved, it “withdraws” from our view unless they are broken or reified. Heidegger's legacy is that the object is not reduced to just its *presence* (Harman, 2007, 1) or *only* through the correlation its actual presence has with thinking. For Heidegger, things conceal with they are part of the system of functions and things reveal when they are outside it, and he calls these ready-to-hand and present-at-hand (*zuhandenheit und vorhandenheit*), respectively. He does so by averting the “ontotheological” assumptions of metaphysics that there is only one objectual Essence (in the Western tradition, God as the ground) from which all beings or entities are derived: entities such as hammers, trees, and curated objects. We can note that trees are ready-to-hand in the background unless we take notice of its oxygen-exuding presence, or the curated objects in the museum unless a detail, frame, or label catches our attention. At the same time, this aversion led to the accusation of him merely replacing such Essence with *Dasein* (“being-in-the-world”), again a red flag hyphenated entity, as the reason for entities, thereby introducing a ground or an abyss (Heidegger, 1962, 193)³ that forms a rift between *Dasein* and other beings. This abyss is the ontological difference that centers on the contradiction of *Dasein*: it is a being but also not a being (unlike all other beings) (Heidegger, 1962, 32). This “being” talk is what makes analytic philosophers dismiss him as nonsense, a “dismal windbag” that even if “being” is salvaged in analytic discussions of properties, kinds, or nominalism, it is not clear how this changes the general suspicion to all his works (Robson, 2014, 482–487). If the contradiction is not dismissive enough, Heidegger himself seems to be dissatisfied with such metaphysics too that in his late period, he focused on poetry, language, the work of art, and notably his laconic fourfold (*das Geviert*) of earth, sky, gods, and mortals. But while recently, the path to solving the contradiction of ontological difference is taken on accounts of dialetheism—that Being is an entity and, at the same time, Being is not an entity “is propositionally true” or as “truly inconsistent” (Casati, 2022, 181–183)—the discussion on the fourfold is not explicitly part of the argument. Thus, the fourfold (Heidegger, 2001, 147–148):

Earth is the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal.

The Sky is the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year's seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency of the weather, the drifting clouds and blue depth of the ether.

The Divinities are the beckoning messengers of the godhead. Out of the holy sway of the godhead, the god appears in his presence or withdraws into his concealment.

The Mortals are the human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means: to be capable of death as death.

As one would have it, these descriptions are “overblown and cryptic” (Edwards, 2005, 457) that the fourfold is “simply dismissed as an example of pious gibberish” so we can see why we have a situation where “the more recent generation tends to avoid this concept altogether” (Harman, 2002, 190). The fourfold, however, offers a particular potential of providing a new approach to curating objects since it introduces various axes, or corners, that interact not necessarily on epistemic subjectivity (or a knowing subject). And from someone with a background in philosophies of Asia, this could be a rich resource. Without moving out of the discussion, it is worth mentioning that Heidegger's ontological *fourfolding* is not wide enough so I could propose an original *cornering* that is wider. For all its axes, the fourfold can indeed work as dimensions or corners, but missing what Graham Priest (2018) emphasizes as “the fifth corner of four”: the Buddhist logic that properly distinguishes semantic and ontological grounds of understanding. While the “fifth of the four” so to speak is too broad yet in suggesting a cornering logic for the contradictions of being to be applied to curation, we don't have enough space to do that here. What we can do for now is preempt the trope of the fourfold in curating objects. The main orthodox trope of the fourfold is not even the four but the “thing”: “this thing it gathers the fourfold” (Heidegger, 2001, 151). Mitchell (2015, 7) then takes “the crux of Heidegger's later thinking to be preeminently a new concern for the thing.” Through this focus on the *thing*, Heidegger's issues of idealism-realism, of dwelling with the fourfold, are given more attention in recent philosophical accounts that relate to curation and objects. To trudge the circle is to encounter contradictions in curation, and the shift to thinking the fourfold to bypass contractions allows different approaches toward the problem of access. Since Heidegger only wishes to “come to it [the circle] in the right way” (1962, 195) and not go beyond it, the shift using the fourfold offers a variety of recent readings that might do it, especially from Martinon and Harman on curation and objects.

MARTINON'S FOURFOLD AND CURATION: STRIFE, POLYLOGICALITY, AND EXCESS

Aside from *The Curatorial*, Martinon also offers a vital reading of the fourfold, as a philosophy of curation in *Curating as Ethics* (2020). The monograph moves in both trajectories of curating as free from the shackles of museological persuasions alone (e.g., online content curation) and, from Jean-Luc Nancy, of recasting moral philosophy toward an ethics guided by finitude and the hope of giving birth to more, to a progeny replete with an excess. Reversing Heidegger's subordination of ethics to ontology, Martinon's novelty lies in an “ethically accentuated polylogical structure, called the fourfold” (xiii) when curating becomes an ethical midwifery of a futurity that defies death. The polylogical structure of the fourfold is opposed to a monological structure determined only by a one-sided economy of thinking (e.g., statistical data, profit, etc.).⁴ What Martinon calls “curating philosophy” is a “double activity” that potentially aims to articulate life generally and current experience particularly, *and* with curating and philosophy, taken separately or together, to expose a life despite excessive disordering.

Martinon's “idiosyncratic,” “more inventive” yet “less violent” and “no other choice” betrayal reading (Martinon, 2020, xii) of the fourfold has at least three main points. First, he is focusing not on “things” that gather but on the “gathering,” the event of strife in the fourfold, which takes the twist of invoking plurality, that is, earths rather than just earth, skies rather than just sky. Second, he points to an ethics “toward a fourfold life,”

which hinges on a polylogical structure. And third, his inspired reading of the fourfold's French commentators allows him to bypass the contradiction that “mortals also happen to be gods,” that is, that mortals' progeny points to an excess. Conveniently, he has set up the scheme in *Curating as Ethics* for his revisiting of Heidegger's fourfold (see Figure 1). In the scheme, we get the nutshell of the three main points above, that the discussion decenters the thing and gives way to the polylogical strife seen in an ethical fourfold life of mortals who happen to be gods as an excess. As Edwards says, “each of the four is what one might call a particular *dimension* of that indispensable conditionality”—“the particular *conditions* that make possible [...] the life that brought to presence the actual thing” (Edwards, 2005, 458). But before we can quickly adjudge that this is a gem, consider that Martinon's reading also betrays this with the points he raised above.

In Figure 1, the polylogical strife “does not immediately invalidate the argument or relegate the issue to a metaphysical realm, and therefore to some nebulous or quaint transcendental philosophy” (Martinon, 2020, xvi) because of his unique reading of mortals who happen to be gods. It is true that Martinon says that “to hear the poly-logic of the fourfold, to hear how we dwell, we really need to start learning to be mortal” (Martinon, 2016, 38). But the fourfold for him “does not privilege the human being as the subjective point [...] This is not a supposedly correlationist perspective” (Martinon, 2017, 16). There is an ironic excess on the part of the mortals where the polylogical strife carries on even when mortals or their thoughts are no longer there. Resting on a contradiction, Dasein becomes both its own limit and excess. This is an “infuriating situation that can only disappoint all those who seek a reassuring certainty” (Martinon, 2017, 23). This will be more expressed in his Nietzschean inspiration of bypassing Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction according

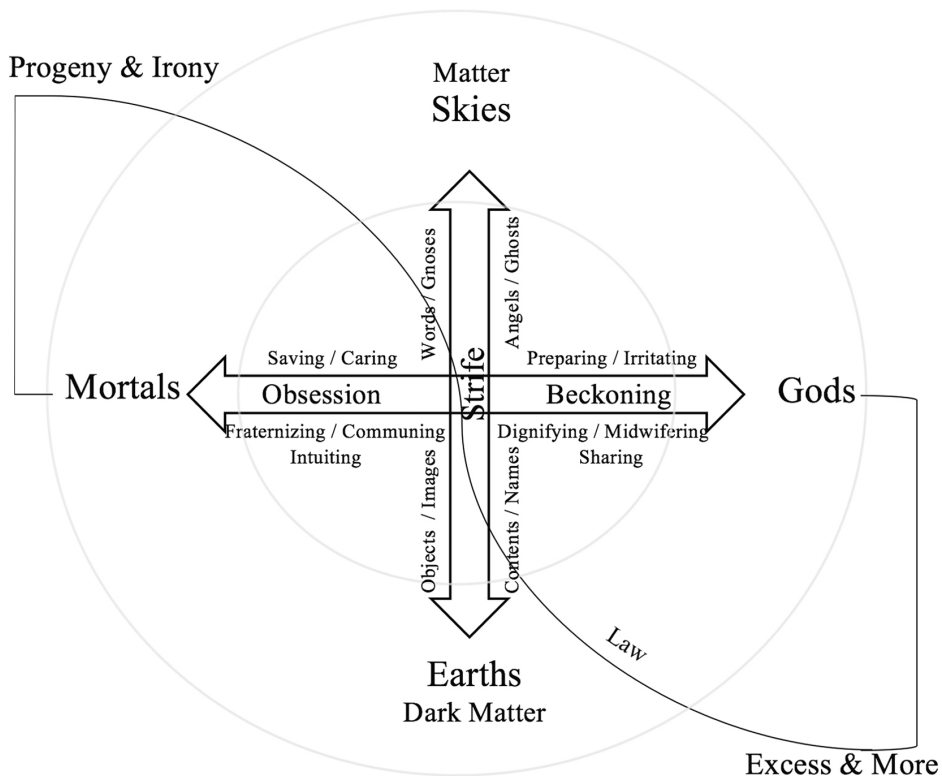


FIGURE 1 Heidegger's Fourfold—Revisited (<https://jeanpaulmartinon.net/philosophy/schemes/>).

to which “x cannot be and be at the same time” (Martinon, 2023). That “the gods stand for the *manifold* emergence of what is unexpected or unusual in mortals' living present” (Martinon, 2016, 31) means that gods inhabit the time–space suggesting a dwelling within the “demise of all forms of ontologies, including the device known as Dasein” (Martinon, 2016 30). When Mitchell says that as an orthodox reading, “the fourfold names the structure [and] allows things to be opened to relations in the way that they are,” whereby “things cannot be understood apart from the medium in which they are found,” (Mitchell, 2015, 7) Martinon surpasses this seeming gem by invoking the strife of plural earths and skies as the law of heterogeneous self-seclusion and expression. The plurality signifies the heterogeneity of *many* self-seclusions and expressions. Alongside this strife is the beckoning of mortals as gods or gods as mortals, not as separate entities since the excess of immortality lies ironically as mortal progeny. The pluralities of this polylogical strife allow for distinct immortalities and mortalities, self-seclusions, and expressions. Martinon's target is a monological reality where in its “intractable law and implacable logic,” Martinon (2017, 13) opines, “I can only take myself as an object within a great regulative and repetitive process. The ‘I’ becomes an object; i.e. an immeasurable fact reduced to the status of cold data.” And Heidegger (2012, 389) thinks less of objects and more of the thing. To explain how the polylogical structure works, it would be lengthy to explain all the deeds and ends of gods and/or mortals (e.g., fraternizing, preparing, and irritating) or all of the self-seclusions and re-expressions between earths and skies (e.g., names, angels, and gnoses). But since they are interrelated, we can sufficiently take the interactions of “caring” and “midwifing” for the gods/mortals axes and “objects,” “words,” and “ghosts” for the earths/skies axes as close relations to our issues of curation and objects.

Curating is again rooted in caring, and by taking Heidegger's formal structure of care (*sorge*) as “being-ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-involved-in-something” (1985, 295) which, even if we don't use the hyphenated form, bears the meaning of solicitude or *caring for* (*fürsorge*), we are always already caring ahead into possibilities that ultimately looks after “existential facticity” (destined to death). Curating then, as midwifing, becomes woolly, concerned about and relies on many things, which is nursing the dialectics of life and death. Objects herein lack “any transcendental or metaphysical potential, promise, or power” since “objects are just strife” or “simply reexpressions of the mattering event of strife” (Martinon, 2020, 85, 87). In the same vein, the words, labels, or the utterances of the curators must be viewed “notwithstanding their egos” and “not as a ruling, decree, or sentence but as what transits [...] from anonymity to futurity, a transiting or passing that no reductive interpretation of humankind (being, subject, citizen, identity, for example) can truly perceive” (Martinon, 2020 98–103). Such futurity is both excess and progeny from mortals who happen to be gods. The non-reductive element is the “ghost” that allows for withdrawing double binds in curating—both presence and absence—which means that what curators curate is “something unreachable, an extremity that effectively knows no measure” (Martinon, 2020, 108).

In the context of strife, the eventness of the polylogical structure puts the ghostly double binds into work as the double activity of curating. What this means is that a four-folded life becomes indicative through the rifts of strife: “a strife is a friction because it is a double self-assertion” (55). Martinon cites Heidegger in explaining how strife becomes essential in the self-assertion of self-seclusions (earths) and self-expressions (skies): “in essential strife, the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures” (Heidegger, 2001, 47–48). The strife's eventness, as it were, situates friction and rips the contradictions, rendering the problem of access irrelevant when both the subject and object essentially no longer make sense as two distinct poles of different linguistic or logical entities.⁵ When “the work of strife is to simply maintain itself as strife,” the curators and curated objects go beyond mere significations, as it matters not *who* and *what* happens to be in the exhibit in a circularity of cause and teleology,

“without ‘why’ or ‘for whom’ (Martinon, 2020, 56–57). Labels, words, functions, identity, egos – all go on without pause in a struggle of strife, the only matter mattering as event.”

HARMAN'S FOURFOLD AND CURATION: INFRA-REALISM, POLYPSYCHISM, AND TENSIONS

By the time, Martinon wrote in 2017 that what he is doing “should be read in the same vein as Graham Harman's attempt to ‘improve’ Heidegger's fourfold, but without the arrogance of imagining creating a new philosophy,” (Martinon, 2017, 13) he was referencing Harman's *The Quadruple Object* (2011) but not his newest book at the time, *Object-Oriented Ontology* (2017) whose subtitle was *A New Theory of Everything*, which reinvents Brian Greene's description of string theory in physics. If this is not *prima facie* arrogance, a family resemblance view of OOO and its wider movement on speculative realism (against correlationism) can spot self-promoting remarks of its philosophy's “overblown theoretical claims” as “the bliss of new thinking,” “a new era of scholarship,” and “a new breed of thinker” (Lemke, 2017, 146). This arrogance, however, is what OOO tries to circumvent in the name of objects, even claiming that subjects *are also* objects, against a hierarchical subjectivity where humans are superior to things. So, in Harman's view, it is not a bad thing to say that the “I” becomes an object, as Martinon resists, and objects are not inferior to things as Harman sees them, since objects are not reducible to their parts or their effects. For Harman, the reduction of objects to their parts or underlying component is undermining (e.g., Thales' water, Democritus' atoms, Gilbert Simondon's individuation) and the reduction of objects to their relations or effects is overmining (e.g., Berkeley's bundle theory, Whitehead's causal efficacy, Foucault's social formations of power). Clearly, to know objects except through their parts or effects (e.g., objects-as-basically-water or objects-as-mere-products-of-social-formations-of-power) are “gems.” In addition, both extremes taken together create a third “gem,” which Harman calls duominging (e.g., Meillassoux's take that everything can be mathematized while also being inexhaustible by numbers or the materialist position that matter is an unformed stuff relying on form) that reeks of contradiction.

An object in OOO “simply means anything that cannot be reduced either downward or upward, which means anything that has a surplus beyond its constituent pieces and beneath its sum total of effects on the world” (Harman, 2017, 51). Moreover, objects exist and relate with each other even when, *contra* idealism, the human is not there. OOO is a realism not of “an external world apart from the (human) mind” but a “weird realism” (Harman, 2012, 45) or “infra-realism” (Harman, 2015, 140) of *objects* and *relations* where objects are always withheld with their relations and are incommensurable. Yet objects perceive one another in a polypsychic relation. That objects perceive too is not a form of panpsychism where the mind aspect is simply attributable to objects. As Harman (2011, 153) says on polypsychism, “objects do not perceive insofar as they exist, as panpsychism proclaims. Instead, they perceive insofar as they relate.” Harman (2011, 111) thus takes a lesser-known version of the fourfold (see Figure 2) since “the 1919 Heidegger saw a drama underway in the heart of individual entities but the 1949 Heidegger sees it as a drama between being as a whole and specific beings.”

Nonetheless, the individual *some things* do not constitute a taxonomy in the same way that the earth, sky, gods, and mortals are not taxonomies or entities (e.g., dolomite mountain, stratosphere, Shiva and Vishnu, or the Evanescence band). Harman zeroes in on objects, the four *some things* that were not clear yet in 1919, and tries to explain them through their tensions prior to the tensions of earth, sky, gods, and mortals in the 1949 fourfold. He takes the direction of Husserl's sensual or intentional objects with the split in mind of the objects' (*eidetic*) real and sensual qualities. What we only perceive is the sensual object, which implies that we cannot perceive the real object. The real object vindicates

his infra-realism, or “a weirder version of Aristotle's theory of substance” (Harman, 2011, 118). In effect, the drama of the earth, sky, gods, and mortals vanishes from the current issue since the drama is diverted to the weird realism's mantra that somehow represents the unmeasurable strife⁶ cleaned of the gods: “reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it” (Harman, 2012, 45). From the 1919 fourfold, Harman (2010, 142) introduces the new fourfold by rebranding the four *somethings* (see Figure 3): there are real objects (RO), sensual objects (SO), real qualities (RQ), and sensual qualities (SQ) with their corresponding four tensions. He refers “real” to those that cannot be perceived, and “sensual” for those that can be perceived. The tensions happen using indirect causation (Harman, 2009, 292–302) among the loose relations of the objects since there is no direct access to reality and philosophy as firstly aesthetics for OOO is not about knowledge or literalism (Harman, 2020, 31). In which case, the real objects and qualities are caricatured by the sensual objects and qualities.

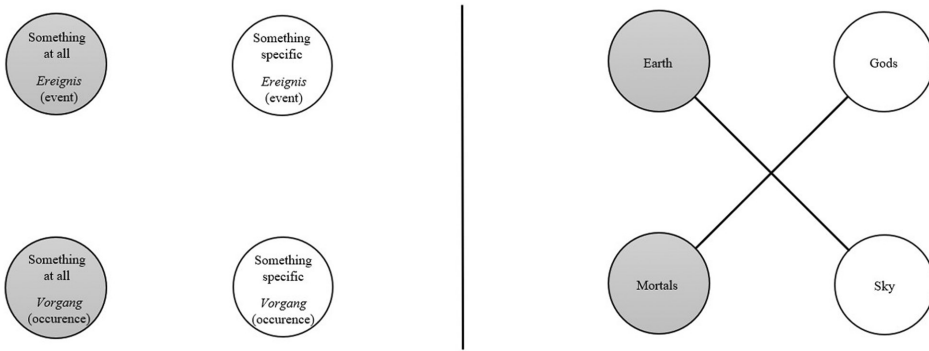


FIGURE 2 Heidegger's Early Fourfold (1919), left, and Late Fourfold (1949), right (Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 113).

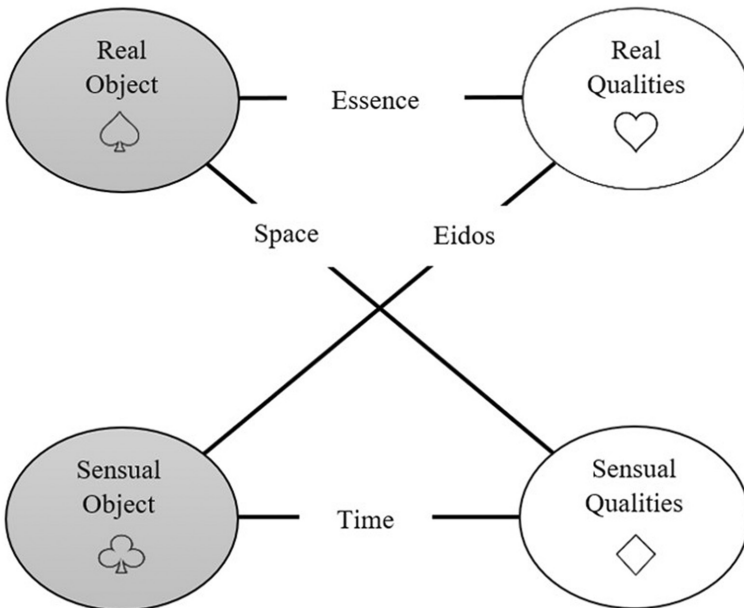


FIGURE 3 The New Fourfold - Four Tensions (Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 142).

As an application to curation, we can roughly draft the tensions of the curated object as an example. The curated object does not, however, have to be physical as OOO veers away from the duoming of materialism, and paradoxically positions itself to immaterialism (Harman, 2016, 15–16) and deliteralized form and function (Harman, 2022, 172–173). To initiate a comparison of the old and new fourfold, we can consider the Macao artist Yuen Wai Ip's painting *Birthday Cake* (2003) as a curated object. In the 1949 version of the old fourfold, there could only be a less sophisticated exposition of *Birthday Cake's* meaning or unmeaning in relation to the angst that it gives to Dasein as Harman thinks that however we think it, we cannot find any other entity for Dasein except for the human being. *Birthday Cake* is taken with the reality of the world as a whole, which crisscrosses or “mirror-plays,” to use Heidegger's term, the unveiling and unveiling of existence, even if it shows Yuen Wai-Ip's world. For Harman, “Heidegger is a thinker not only of profundity, but of profound monotony” where different terms throughout only nicknames or aliases for a single obsessive reversal between the poles of “concealed” and “revealed,” “ready-to-hand and present-at-hand”—“a perpetual collapse into a repetitive dualism” (Harman, 2002, 6). As such, the old 1949 *das Geviert* “is nothing more than the dry logical outcome of Heidegger's philosophy of tool and broken tool” (87)—the withdrawing and presencing of objects. In this case, even if there are four dimensions, the old fourfold only reflects a dualism: the earth and gods *conceal* and the mortals and the sky *reveal*. Within this setup, the “1949 fourfold marks a step backward from the 1919 model” (Harman, 2011, 110), so that the 1949 fourfold regresses to Heidegger's *right way* of thinking about access in the ontological circle—but a circle nonetheless—without attempting to break the contradiction. Curating *Birthday Cake* here merely subsists within the mirroring interplay of *zuhandenheit* and *vorhandenheit*, but not the more exciting tensions that could have been intricately developed as individual objects and their qualities.

The *Birthday Cake* is a curious piece and should be more complex than a dualistic viewing. In detail, it is a 114cm × 42.5cm painting finished by Yuen Wai Ip on August 24, 2003, depicting a dark living room barely showing an electric fan on the far right, a sofa, and what seemed like a half-shown door on the far left going to the toilet. The room is lighted only by a triangular illumined shade of a lightbulb in between the sofa and the e-fan, and a birthday cake sits on the floor just next to the sofa, near the edge of the light, positioned at the very center of the painting.

In contrast to the 1949 fourfold, the new fourfold can give more specific details of the painting's tensions. The real *Birthday Cake* painting withdraws with its real withdrawing qualities (RO-RQ) whose tension is called Essence. This essence withdraws even to Yuen Wai Ip himself. That the *Birthday Cake* painting has relations with the sensual profile, for example, color, strokes, the positioning of the cake, or the qualities that we can perceive wherever we are rather than its place in the museum means the tension is Space (RO-SQ). But where sensual means what is perceived, the sensual object in the relation has sensual qualities that change, for example, the perception of the *Birthday Cake* painting in one afternoon, with shifting details, viewed in different angles and lightings, but also the perceived evening in the painting, which points to the tension of Time (SO-SQ). And finally, since there is a split between sensual qualities (the shifting features of what is perceived) and real qualities (the inherent withheld feature of what is perceived), there is also the tension of Eidos, which makes the perceived *Birthday Cake* painting (SO) retain its profile as such, but the profile that withdraws (RQ). Fourfolding the painting in this sense creates a more nuanced understanding of the four *somethings* relating, which involves the subject in the object's relations (our profiling of the painting) while not exhausting all the qualities perceived. This sketch is again rough but it gives the overview of Harman's new fourfold. For Harman, objects and their relations have tensions, so infra-realism happens within polypsychic objects and their qualities.

CONCLUSION: ADDRESSING THE ISSUES AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

How does Martinon's reading of the fourfold and curation address our issues? In the issue of the curation qua curation, the curator as caring can even vanish from the picture, midwifing a labeled yet strifing futurity even without him (cf. Martinon, 2013a, 284). For Martinon (2021), “curators need what defies reason, they need what lures them into measuring it,” which “has to do with living and working with” the “ghostly.” In the issue of meta-curation, the strifing futurity ironically means that museums have no future (Martinon, 2006b, 59) and so the museum as medium is not an end in itself since it “is never in a situation of complete achievement, it is always calling for another achievement. There is no rest” (Martinon 2006a, 165). This also addresses the issue of the curatorial, since the modalities of knowledge in the exhibit are not the relativist gems of “knowing the object except through its relative correlation to *my conception* or *your conception* of it.” As Martinon (2006b, 6) says, “this does not mean that works of art or museums can only exist in the hell of absolute and infinite relativism” since through strife, polylogicality, and excess, the museum “reveals that the abyss they represent, an abyss where interpretation noses dives at every occasion, is a true abyss” whose possibility “suppresses the absence of abyss that prevents it to drift into itself” (165).

How does Harman's reading of the fourfold and curation address our issues? With OOO, the responses to the issue of curation qua curation and meta-curation should be clear: The curator is an object as well no more than what it curates, and both are all part of the museum that is also an object. Each object relates to its tensions with each other, with no primacy to either the curator or the museum. For the curatorial case as an event of knowledge, OOO does not overcome the exhibition as something too deep, known only through multiple modalities. OOO “is not the relativist thesis according to which nothing is real, hidden, or essential but only how it appears to us. Instead, it is a bizarre alternative to relativism in which the real, hidden, and essential do very much exist, but communicate only by way of the unreal, apparent, and inessential” (Harman, 2011, 133).

The caveats, however, are that Martinon seems to be working on an aporia and Harman on a paradox; both arguing for an irreducible fourfold object that is riddled with excess and tensions. Martinon (2013a, 31) asks, “how is one then to distinguish between the curatorial and thought? Would that not simply imply stepping outside of thought (and therefore the curatorial)? Their interdependence is irreducible and this is what creates significant phenomena.” While a rejoinder in recent Heideggerian studies could be that “at the very heart of every entity, there is a contradiction which cannot be avoided [...] whenever we experience entities in relation to their Being, a contradiction shines with such an unusual power that not even the Principle of Non-Contradiction can dim it” (Casati, 2022, 182), the aporia thwarts contradiction when a polylogical structure constantly struggles to veer from a monological ontology that is static. For Heidegger, Martinon (2007, 120) says, an aporia, which is an impossible passage, is “a fundamental situation for Dasein.” The curated object within the strife is caught in an aporia, which is always a *poros* (Martinon, 2020, 92), a difficult path that addresses the difficult issues (aporia) in life (Martinon, 2020, 204–205). This does not challenge Harman's OOO. Harman's objects are not contradictions but “generate a paradoxical sense of the thing as weird yet withdrawn, lonely yet awesome, deserving of love yet emanating a certain danger, enjoying solitude yet possessed of an appetite that constantly propels it outwards in search of something” (Bayly, 2021, 3–19). Both strife and the tensions of the object encounter each other, with the proviso that Martinon's objects still retain the ontological distinction of Heidegger's fourfold with plural earths and skies having “no limits” (Martinon, 2020, 72) while Harman's objects retain limits in understanding the reality of objects (and consequently subjects).

Some further research and application can be made on how they approach the issues of curation. For instance, they can shed light on curating religiosity in museums, which can intersect

objects as icons that point to something beyond in Marion (Kahambing, 2019) to partial considerations of OOO theology with a partial God as an object (Baldwin & Harman, 2020), or under a critique of monotheistic omnipresence (Martinon, 2020, 32). But to return to the issue of curating non-physical objects, there is a sense in which curating online content can be treated as a gem. That is, when the user goes to a social media platform, the algorithms do not show random things with an external capacity but feed what the user wants to see, know, or want to access—allowing a circular structure that reverts the object into the subject's intentional dispositions or as intentional *contents*. When applying curation beyond the institutional confines of the museum, the link between curation and the metaverse is a vital inquiry to be discussed albeit not extensively here. Museum immersion in the metaverse (Kahambing, 2023a) can cover and interrogate real and virtual objects affecting concerns of somatic modifications. The metaverse, set to advance internet-based interactions, immerses the subject—herein the user—into a virtual background or cyberspace with digital objects. The three issues are again extant here: first, with the algorithmic and intentional issue raised above as curation qua curation; second, on meta-curating objects via a network of technological apparatuses; and third, on the curatorial, where the multiple modes of virtual designs, applications, and internet traffic in the metaverse inform varying ways of engaging with digital content. While virtual space immersion already poses some blurring of the subject-object, virtual-real distinctions (Kahambing, 2021) it can be argued whether the realism of digital objects and the immersive subjectivity count as objects as such. Here, we at least can be informed by the foregoing four-fold readings.

Martinon treats digital content in the same way as objects with hyperlinks pointing to a ghostly excess of real and non-real. But Harman might not be ready to accept this and say that “all objects are ‘equally real’.” For it is false that dragons have autonomous reality in the same manner as a telephone pole”; rather he says: “My point is not that all objects are equally real, but that they are equally *objects*” (2011, 10). For instance, Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) exhibited in a physical or virtual gallery can be said to be objects *but* with their own excesses and tensions. These can be comparatively assessed with David Chalmers' claim (Chalmers, 2022, 11) in his new book *Reality +* where “*virtual realities are genuine realities*” and “the objects we interact with in VR are real.”

The significance of the discussion so far is that the philosophy of object-oriented curation can open crucial implications for the object in the field of museum management and curatorship, but also extending outside the museum. Objects have their own excesses and tensions, undetermined by the curatorial agencies that hover over them. Moreover, the philosophical issues of curation with their gems together with the juxtaposition of Martinon and Harman's reading of the fourfold can generate creative pathways not just of thinking about physical but also digital objects. While the juncture that meets both readings can be applied outside the museum, the juxtaposition of their perspectives comes from examining the issues of curation in the museum. Zuanni (2023) mentions that the productive engagement for objects born in the digital sphere—or reborn digital objects—lies in the liminal spaces of the original and representation, replete with new biographies over and beyond curators' narrativizations. And yet the debate is much more complex than it seems. As it happens, Yuk Hui (2016, 18) was also in Goldsmiths in 2007 during the first speculative realism conference, but in speaking of the digital object, he rereads Heidegger rather differently than Harman's object, focusing not on the weird Aristotelian substance informative of the object's realism but on the “realism of relations.” This might sound antithetical to Harman and closer to the polylogical strife of Martinon, but digital objects can engage in polypsychic relations too in tensions with their recursive properties (Kahambing, 2023b) albeit retaining their own withdrawn substance. Without going into detail here, Hui's reading of the fourfold that hinges on *dinc*, “to gather” can only nudge the possibility of “interobjective thinking” in networks and convergences, something that might coincide as digital polylogicality and digital polypsychicality in Martinon and Harman's senses, respectively, for further exploration.

This paper is ultimately an attempt to plot some initial convergences in answering the issues at hand *toward* a philosophy of object-oriented curation. Or to borrow Harman's words (Harman, 2011, 136), "We become philosophers rather than aggressive ideologues by always being *under way towards* discovering what everything is."

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Realisms should be understood not in the sense of the art movement that depicts the plight of ordinary people or the near copy of an object in hyperrealistic formats but realisms that maintain connection between the mind and the external world. For instance, Hilary Putnam's internal realism takes the real world with conceptual schemes in a sense that there could be no "concept-free" access to reality (Niiniluoto, 2002, 221).

² This is a standalone box in 2018, an isolated display along with the usual exhibit of taxonomy in botanical persuasions in the USC Museum. There is no event opening or introducing the box to the public in a ceremonious way but just an odd-one-out case together with the commonplace exhibits. Here, the museum fixes the gaze to its labels, despite the absence of an object, so that it is the platform, mode of technology, or message that gets a focused from a wider or meta perspective. There is a sense in which empty pedestals become valuable objects when curated from a wider perspective, see for example Michael Dickinson and Gregory Smithers' "The Power of Empty Pedestals" (2020). See also Robert Rauschenberg's "White Paintings," John Cage's 4'33, or more strikingly perhaps, Salvatore Garau's invisible sculpture "Buddha in Contemplation" that only works when meta-curated: there is no sculpture of course but the meta-perspective teaches the subject into a particular message rather than the content that is none. Be that as it may, meta-curation is an underexplored topic in the philosophy of curation that needs an expanded attention on its own (cf. Kahambing, 2024).

³ For the "abyss of essence," see Heidegger (1968, 16). For a recent account of the metaphysics of this abyss, see Cykowski (2021). For a de-familiarization of this abyss, see Jan Gresil Kahambing (2022).

⁴ More recently, Martinon (2023) uses a polylogical argument for the museum's fourth future.

⁵ I thank the first referee for raising a point of clarity for this section.

⁶ I'm grateful to the first referee for spotting this vital connection.

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