Introduction

> Lorsque l'on cherche à rendre compte de sa complexité spécifique, l'objet animé est en réalité beaucoup plus proche d'un cristal que d'un miroir. C'est une image multiple, plurielle, composée de traits partiels et inachevés, provenant d'identités différentes et parfois antagonistes.
>
> —Carlo Severi, *L'objet-personne*[1]

Materiality, or the Problem

I was observing the *pats* belonging to a member of a cultural organization in the UK which promotes Indian folk art in the art market, at the home of the owner. *Pats* are scrolls depicting religious scenes, mostly Hindu deities, as well as social themes, and are used by painter-storytellers in West Bengal. The *pats* were rolled up and placed on the floor. Suddenly, their owner's little child appeared and looked at the scrolls with interest. His face depicted a clear desire to touch them, and he put his little toe on the frame of a *pat* with the intention of jumping on it. His mother shouted at him, saying that deities cannot be trampled on; they must be respected. The *pats* influenced the child's behaviour and intervened in the relationship between mother and son: on the one hand, they invite the child's propensity to play, and on the other, they reproduce the religious conduct of respect and reverence that regulates the everyday activity of the child's family. Non-living things, human and nonhuman are therefore interwoven, interdependent. Ingold (2000, 103) suggests abandoning categories such as human and nonhuman and viewing them as organisms developing according to a self-transformation triggered by being immersed in the environment (ibid., 345–82). Rather than a willing mind opposed to a non-willing matter, in what Ingold (ibid., 103) calls the relational model, mind coincides with the world itself. Thoughts, emotions, memories are directly given via the

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embodied engagement with the world, a world that it is itself animated (Ingold 2006).

Ingold derives his relational model from Heidegger's (1971) essay *The Thing*. The latter is structured around Heidegger's investigation of a blue jug. If we interrogate ourselves about the 'what' of the pitcher, we could say that a jug is made for containing liquids. We arrive at this conclusion because we have talked with its maker or because we refer to a standardized way of using jugs that we have observed during daily life or has been implanted in us at school. It is by thinking of the jug as something made, as a crafted thing that we can also assume the 'how' of it. There must be a conch, a vessel that technically allows the deposit of liquid(s). However, the conch is not enough; it is necessary to build around it a protective surface that impedes any liquid from spilling over, and which is anatomically sufficiently fitted to reinforce the base of the conch and give sufficient structure to the whole to prevent its collapse. Our reasoning so far does not define the jug as such, though: we only refer to the different constituents of it that can efficaciously contain liquids (ibid., 165).

Even when we apply the scientific method to our analysis of the jug – that should be detached for its actual making – we are using criteria abstractedly and universally defined, as is proper of scientific investigations. For instance, we can observe that pottery does not absorb water, or we can determine the physical laws to which water and pottery are subjected, or their chemical compositions. However, what we can single out are dynamics that can be described and observed in other materials as *aggregates of matter* (Heidegger 1971, 168–69). We are still not able to say what makes a jug a thing and which thingness coincides with the pitcher. We can also think that we cannot clearly understand the jug as a thing if we do not compare it with other things and describe its independence from liquids. Indeed, a jug can have different functions according to the user: it can contain flowers or become a nest for insects.

It is undeniable, therefore, that things usually constitute a cognitive problem for humans: they seem inert, as they cannot be animated if they are not moved by humans or animals. Likewise, they cannot be easily described by linguistic means, as their bond with humans pre-exists the birth of language. The material thing condenses social relations, laws and principles, as well as the imagined – for instance, the ancestors' word – with the real; thus, it is a socially total entity in its expression of all the phenomena and dynamics of a society (Augé 1988, 143–44). The condensing enacted by materiality is possible in virtue of the 'humility of things' (Miller 2005, 5), that is to say, the tendency of things' social properties to resist conscious definitions and understandings and, therefore, to be strictly connected to the human unconscious (Miller 1987, 100). In other words, the more things are not perceived as actors in social relations, the more materiality affects human actions and, conversely, the more humans recognize the impact of the material on their lives, the more they can intervene.

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We can consider the relationships nurtured by material things as 'intensive relations', continually shifting and made up through space and time. They are therefore based upon a substantial 'ontological instability' rather than on ontological differences per se (Harvey and Knox 2014, 8).

If we continue with Heidegger's essay, each relationship that the jug has, even in the scientific analysis, can be read as a projection. The perceiver, since she enters into contact with the jug, projects herself onto the jug. At the same time, the jug projects stimuli to the perceiver. Heidegger calls these projections a 'mirroring' of each human and nonhuman actor involved (Heidegger 1971, 177). The jug, the human and the nonhuman perceivers are immersed within a world that pre-exists their existence. They coexist with each other and their subjective meaning cannot be independent of this co-belonging. They express their presence to the world by projecting it onto the others with a mutual appropriation of each other's reflections (ibid.). There is, therefore, an inescapable condition of ambiguity and fuzziness in the definition of any 'entity'.

In the formation of the concept of 'person', we can see an appropriation of humans towards nonhuman things. Marcel Mauss (1985; cf. 1990) identified the differences between *personae* and *res* as a fact of law: *personae* are the representations or 'images' (*simulacra* and *imagines*) of the ancestors of the *patres familiae* gathered in the Roman Senate. Derived from the masks used by actors, through which (*per*) their voices resound (*sonare*), *persona* started to coincide with the essential or true nature of an individual, which in turn coincides with the ownership of a body, ancestors, names and personal belongings. Things, then, are the expressions of ownership, the sole criterion for the identification of an agency. Therefore, they exist only in legal terms. In fact, 'Germanic and Latinate terms for "thing" are etymologically related to the words for cause (*causa, cosa, chose, Ding*)', and as a result, things 'tend to be admitted to reality only by legal tribunals and assemblies' (Cohen 2012, 6). Human projection onto matter seems to be the only way through which humans make sense of the latter. Anthropomorphism is therefore at the core of the very definition of humanity (Miller 2005, 2).

Let us return to the ethnographic example of the Bengali scroll. The collector established some criteria for the scroll, such as its sacredness and how to relate to that sacredness. These criteria can derive from the curator's engagement with the materiality of the scroll, when she assists in a storytelling performance or contemplates it in a museum or in the intimacy of her home. She projects these criteria onto the scroll. As a result, the scroll, it seemed to me, was for her an ambiguous encroachment between a work of 'Indian vernacular art' and a deity's embodiment.

Nevertheless, her consideration of the scroll did not seal it off from different forms of manipulation and control. Her child saw it as a plaything – maybe because it was rolled up on the floor, reminding him of individual toys or cosy

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rugs. Can we infer that different actors project different ideas onto the scroll? Probably, this is the case. However, we cannot think of the scroll as something passive and permeable to human whims. There is undeniably something at play between the human and the nonhuman that determines a vast array of unpredictability and heterogeneity.

Starting from this cognitive and experiential conundrum, our vision of material culture seems to crumble. The common idea, for instance, that museum artefacts are malleable to curators' practices is no longer so obvious. When a religious artefact is displayed, the curator has to deal with behaviours that are in contrast to standard museum etiquette and are out of their control, such as touching despite prohibitions to do so (Elliott 2006), and prayer or meditation (Berns 2015, 2017a, 2017b). Heidegger, therefore, captured something essential in museums: the more one tries to identify the 'what' and 'how' of an artefact, the more this attempt is frustrated and incomplete. Museums, as sites where visitors know by observing things, continually reproduce this paradox.

Experiencing Materiality responds to an inevitable frustration towards studies of material artefacts and museums. It is an account of curatorial practices towards two types of Indian storytelling scrolls, the *pats* (from West Bengal) and the *paṛs* (from Rajasthan), as an example of an interaction between the human and the nonhuman in a setting usually defined as 'non-Western', 'non-scientific' and 'religious'. I combined an on-site analysis of exhibitive spaces with archival research and qualitative interviews with museum curators in eight European and American museums which hold collections of *pats* and *paṛs*. The chapters highlight the contradictions of museum practices and, at the same time, the potentialities that contemporary museums could offer for an engaging relationship between visitors and museum artefacts, and for rethinking, or better, 'softening' specific approaches in material culture studies.

In particular, the book suggests two methodological strategies: on the one hand, to use museum spaces and artefacts as a medium through which to formulate new theoretical stances in material culture studies, thus viewing museums as *producers* of theories, as well as sensuous engagements. On the other hand, the storytelling scrolls and other South Asian or Asian religious artefacts challenged both the curators and me as a researcher, suggesting unexpected turns in our methodological approaches towards materiality. *Experiencing Materiality* is thus testimony to the 'backstage' of museums. Here, bodies and minds struggle with reflecting on, as well as representing the human symbiosis with, materiality. Humans are engaged and contaminated by material fusion and hybridism.

In the end, I suggest that scholars engaged in the debate on materiality reconsider phenomenology, rather than condemning it. My research on religious artefacts showed that materiality behaves in unexpected ways. Each human

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actor, no matter her background, prejudices and goals, can only have a partial vision of it that might be in contrast with other human perspectives on the same portion of materiality. Scrolls, religious statues and paintings have and produce, therefore, a myriad of properties, abilities and sensuous engagements that can be hardly contained by the limited, mortal and subjectively biased human condition.

As opposed to considering the latter as an illusion or an obstacle to accessing the 'real material essence', as a Kantian standpoint would say, our perspective is the only way through which we can come to terms with materiality. The partiality that materiality expresses to us, I argue, is a potential source of creativity that urges us to deconstruct our assumptions, leading to new languages and forms of knowledge. The approaches towards materiality of the last two or three decades – spanning from Appadurai (1986) and Gell (1998) to new materialisms and Object-Oriented Ontology – seem to me inadequate in addressing the perspectival nature of materiality and material engagements. Materiality has been turned into a debate on agency, thereby forcing the fundamental hybridism between it and humans into a causal 'point of origin' that must be necessarily located in the human or in the material pole. The risk of this quest for agency is that it reduces the richness and potentiality of material engagement into rigid and unilateral categories that cannot account for social phenomena. If we take the example of museums, the idea that materiality is a mere reflection of a curatorial agenda hinders the development of terrain of dialogue with local communities and visitors. In particular, curators cannot predict, or are not able to face, the unpredictable material engagements within galleries. They might, consequently, guide visitors too rigidly or design exhibitions that do not include or respond to the sheer variety of the audience's expectations, needs and backgrounds. *Experiencing Materiality* humbly deconstructs these curatorial and scholarly limits, and corroborates the achievements of the so-called 'New Museology' (Vergo 1989; Karp and Lavine 1991; Karp, Kreamer and Lavine 1992; Karp, Kratz, Szwaja and Ybarra-Frausto 2006) with new food for thought.

Some Annotations on Language, Part I: Why Materiality?

My adoption of the term 'materiality' throughout this book consciously emphasizes two aspects of the scholarly coming to terms with material culture. I want to deconstruct some common-sense assumptions on museums and material things by taking inspiration from a reflection of Tim Ingold (2013). Ingold establishes a sharp differentiation between material artefacts, or more broadly, materiality and materials. 'Materiality' is connected with hylomorphism, namely the idea that mind shapes inert matter. In contrast, 'materials' is linked

to morphism. With this term, Ingold means a morphogenetic process, proper to organisms within a relational anthropology (ibid., 20–22).

Not only would the term 'artefact' emphasize the idea of hylomorphism, it is also synonymous with that of 'object', namely 'completed forms that stand over and against the perceived and block further movement' (Ingold 2013, 439). In other words, artefacts would have nothing to say about life, in contrast with mutable gatherings of materials, which Ingold terms 'things' (ibid.). Artefacts could only serve as testimonies of past material engagement, without, consequently, a creative contribution to anthropology as the science of relations. It is not surprising, then, that Ingold considers museums as places where things cease to grow and are condemned to death (Ingold and Hallam 2014). We can assume from his approach that curatorial practices would be restricted to the *care* of material traces rather than to their usage for critical, active intervention in contemporary society. We can consult cabinets as informative books, but the world, with its transformative potential, is outside of museum walls.

Given these premises, I use the term materiality in a way that is devoid of its hylomorphic contents. Nevertheless, my terminology consciously goes against Ingold's subdivision between materials and material artefacts. Although not intuitively identifiable with an organismal process of morphing, material artefacts can significantly impact and challenge human society. The very engagement with materiality allows us to formulate theories and ways of action, regardless of our conscious awareness of this material intake in our lives. Museums, as collections of and dispositions to the public encounter with materiality, represent the headquarters of this material reconsideration of our thinking.

The Museum as Fieldsite: A Methodological Journey

As MacDonald (1996, 1–18) has argued, the discipline of museology started to flourish from the 1980s onwards, with the 'New Museology' (cf. Vergo 1989; Karp and Lavine 1991, Karp, Kreamer and Lavine 1992 and Karp, Kratz, Szwaja and Ybarra-Frausto 2006). Museums, in this museum turn, started to be seen as having a role in society as cultural products of identities; as articulators of concepts and values embedded in society, or conversely, of new thinking and perspectives to address social and cultural conundrums and issues; as instruments of cultural advocacy by some groups; and as hybrid cultural products of colonialism first and localism subsequently. An analysis of museums, therefore, would capture the production of meanings and policies. At the same time, it would provide the means through which to translate cultural concepts and social issues proper to the disciplines of anthropology and cultural studies into performative, political works that can be appropriated by visitors in their social-political engagement with the world.

This potential can nonetheless be manipulated by authoritative powers to inculcate values and precepts as 'natural' and 'taken for granted'. Let us think, for instance, about the positivist collections of museums in the twentieth century, where different imprints of crania were used as proofs of racial theories. In this sense, Bennett (1995), Findlen (1989, 1994) and Hooper-Greenhill (1991, 1992) have shown how museums act as political assemblages and validations of specific knowledge systems, thus following Foucault's (1969) archaeology of power. However, Macdonald (1996, 1–18) warns researchers that restricting the analysis to the archaeology of power impoverishes the complexity and unpredictability of museums. In particular, the communicative triad between curators, exhibitions and visitors is not a mechanical delivery of curators' messages to a passive audience that 'absorbs' it as a 'rule'. Otherwise, the audience would be deprived of its imaginative and decisional power. It is, therefore, necessary to adopt new theoretical and methodological lenses through which to address museums. In Macdonald's case, she conducted ethnographic fieldwork (Macdonald 2002) on the museum community of the Science Museum in London, in which museum staff are viewed as a 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998), or a social group finalized for the fulfilment of the creation of collective and cultural debate.

Museums are therefore seen by museologists as material translations of theories, or as a social phenomenon that must be addressed in theoretical terms. In a well-known article from 2010, Nicholas Thomas proposes that researchers transgress the conceptual boundaries of museums as institutions or collections in favour of grasping them as materially driven activities which produce in themselves new insights and forms of knowledge. As activities, museums are epistemological 'methods' where discovery and unpredictability are central pivotal forces:

> 'Discovery' is more ambiguous; it often involves finding things that were not lost, identifying things that were not known to others, or disclosing what was hidden or repressed. What needs to be considered is not the 'selection' of artifacts and art works, but their discovery, the encounter with arrays of objects, and the destabilization that encounter may give rise to. (Thomas 2010, 7)

In line with these approaches, Grewcock (2014) proposes that research about museums be carried out *relationally*. Relational research on museums implies that museums are performative places, in which the nonhuman intervenes and which are intimately intertwined with the world outside (ibid., 6). It is no longer sufficient to consider the curators' perspectives as the only ones that are imparted to visitors and modelled on material artefacts. What researchers must consider in dealing with museums are 'partial perspectives', where museum artefacts and buildings adapt themselves to different users and interpreters. This aspect of museums does not mean that they do not possess an internal structure and consequently are amorphic. It means that their specific structure

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is open to translation from an experiential world to the other, that of visitors, curators, researchers, designers, communities and so on. Grewcock names this museum structure as a 'boundary object', a concept directly taken from Donna Haraway (ibid., 7–9).

Researchers' engagement with museums must, therefore, be taken into account in the analysis of museums. Museum ethnography cannot merely interpret curators' intellectual endeavours. On the contrary, it must evoke, in literary ways, non-representational understandings of exhibitions. For instance, Grewcock takes readers into the journey that he has undertaken since he saw an exhibition focused on the anthropology of collage techniques. What does it mean to juxtapose sensations, images, forms and sounds, what message can we single out from the hybrid connections between phenomenological fragments? Grewcock's body suggests to him to go outside the museum, to walk into the woods and the hustle and bustle of the city of London, collecting sensuous fragments on his own. The researcher's existential journey runs parallel to what he understood and took from his visit to the exhibition.

When I read Grewcock's work, my memory immediately established a connection with Austerlitz's peripatetic journeys in Sebald's eponymous novel (2001). Austerlitz came to London as a child of one of the Kindertransports, that is, the rescue scheme of the British government that rescued ten thousand children from Nazi-occupied countries before the outbreak of the Second World War. Austerlitz's past progressively emerges through a series of conversations between the narrator and Austerlitz himself. Austerlitz's long walks, in particular to Euston station, are multi-media, sensorial anecdotes in which his past comes to the fore as attached to phenomenological sensations: 'Fragmented and fleeting sensations become the materials for a sensory ethnography of Austerlitz' past' (Mair 2007, 245). As Arnold-de Simine (2012, 26) emphasizes, Sebald narratively demonstrates how the past can be differently accessed through a 'complex interplay' of embodied experience, memory, oral witnesses and mediating reflections of things, either non-experienced or non-remembered. It is this complicated matrix of media and sensorial fragments that leads Arnold-de Simine to compare Austerlitz's discovery of his past to what museums, in particular the cabinets of curiosities, do.

In accounts such as those by Grewcock, museums can be read as a swift back and forth between composite voices and prismatic overviews of the world that would be materially rooted at the level of imagination and feelings, and where a distinction between curators and visitors/researchers is blurred. In the words of Andrea Witcomb, museums must stimulate this immersion and hybridism of the Self with the 'Other' – other ideas, other bodies, other spectacles:

> Museums are . . . places of the imagination in which one can perform a multitude of identities, largely because one can lose a sense of self in them. Travel, imagi-

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> nation and immersion are, in this image of museums, a productive constellation of ideas that capture some of the experiential aspect of visits to museums and heritage sites. (Witcomb 2013, 152)

Therefore, in the 'museum-as-method' paradigm, museums are experiential tricksters. Different interpretations of, engagements with and reactions to material displays are contingently conjured up together, in oxymoronic compositions, within galleries. They thus articulate a 'dissonance' (Turnbridge and Ashworth 1996; Message and Witcomb 2015, xxxvi) that challenges our epistemological equilibrium about 'what things are and what they represent' (Thomas 2010, 8). According to Witcomb and Message (2015, xl), museum researchers, given these dissonant contingencies, must start from what they observe in museums, rather than applying theoretical frameworks and adapting them to museum material. The museum is itself a theoretical producer, as 'theory is generated *within* the museum' (ibid., xxxvi).

Experiencing Materiality follows the relational understanding of museums. Initially, my research was shaped by the collections and temporary exhibitions of storytelling scrolls I was able to trace, contacting the museums involved and further proceeding with research once they gave their informed consent. I visited, in total, ten museums: the Kulttuurien museo in Helsinki, the Penn Museum at the Penn University in Philadelphia, the World Museum in Liverpool, the Oriental Museum at the University of Durham, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Musée du Quai Branly, the Museum der Kulturen, the Volkerkundenmuseum at the University of Zurich and the Museum Rietberg, also in Zurich. I decided to employ a comparative analysis to obtain a broader view of how curators deal with storytelling scrolls. The second reason for the comparative approach is that I came to these museums with the idea of verifying specific theories, of finding their 'empirical expressions' in the sheer variety of cases.

What I discovered, however, was that museums themselves 'have' their theories, and that I should listen to them in order to communicate that fact to readers. This discovery was a progressive process of awareness that extended itself even after the discussion of my doctoral thesis. My ethnographic records and archival material have spoken back to me and made me decide to 'invert' my methodology. This inverted methodology entails a writing style that combines ethnographic descriptions, interviews and analysis of displays with archival material. Not only do I account for my standpoint and those of the interviewed curators, but I am also searching for perspectives coming from different times and spaces. By consulting past curators' diaries or publications and reflecting upon current curators' words, *Experiencing Materiality* attempts to depict the backstage of an exhibition or a display. The diaries and publications both ex-

press curators' struggles in dealing with religious materiality. They substantiate the phenomenological processes curators have experienced. At the same time, each chapter leads to a theoretical reflection that partially criticizes certain scholarly assumptions that, I argue, have produced my general disappointment towards the field of material culture studies. In other words, the empirical analysis contains a debate on the definition of materiality. In particular, one or more aspects of the latter have been singled out.

I was guided by material artefacts and the challenges that they posed to curators, instead of aprioristically applying a phenomenological method. My initial plans to re-evaluate phenomenology, then, changed in perspective. This idea *emerged* from research rather than *being confirmed* by it. Artefacts suggested that phenomenology is an apt, although limited, methodology for approaching materiality. I let curators speak and retrieved my past interpretations and reactions. By immersing my thoughts in my empirical experience, I have answered the dilemma around materiality. Curators' engagements question whether we can have total access to materiality and how we can describe it. In these terms, museums are the principal *loci* of theories on materiality. They are *field sites* of their own.

The overview of curators' practices with and experiences of materiality is based on conversations, rather than direct observations of their manipulating of material artefacts. I spoke with curators and subsequently observed whether they had revealed traces of their sensuous relationship with material artefacts, and what the latter had evoked in them in terms of theories and abstractions. I therefore engaged in something similar to what the narrator of *Austerlitz* does. I also asked curators to search for archival material and storage specimens related to the cultural context of Indian storytelling, which meant allowing curators to face more directly and explicitly the contradictions implied by exhibiting religious material culture.

Unravelling storytelling collections implied an understanding of the broader logic of collecting, its phylogenetic evolution and its employment in curatorial and exhibitive strategies. The collections examined usually have their origins in the colonial past, during which they were collected in response to specific conceptualizations of the Other; conceptualizations which currently condition curatorial practices. The scant information about the items' usages by local communities, as well as the lack of knowledge on the circumstances of collecting, restrict curators' perspectival understanding of them. The result is that many of these items are not displayed in the galleries, or conversely cannot be highlighted according to their value because they are outside the curators' field of expertise. Many collections of South Asian storytelling scrolls have 'succumbed' to this limit, thereby restricting my research on their archival and photographic documentation.

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On the one hand, my initial focus on the scrolls' treatment in storage rooms and galleries turned into a broader investigation of Asian religious materiality in museum settings. One of the main consequences of this investigation was considering the museum as a whole organism; in this way, ethnography must not be restricted to the field of research, in this case, Indian storytelling scrolls, but must convey the entirety of curatorial strategies and narratives. Interviews with curators were important moments in which the researcher, as in a Socratic maieutic, stimulated them to reflect upon their curatorial assumptions, and to reconstruct their strategies in addressing the collections and in using them in exhibitions, thereby illuminating the contradictions that they have to face in their work.[2]

Differently put, our interviews were similar to what Bateson (1987) had called *metalogue*: a fluid and ongoing discussion between the researcher and the curators about specific dilemmas faced by the latter. Having a metalogue with curators was, in particular, crucial in reconstructing their previous phenomenological experience with religious artefacts, as already mentioned here. Although not explicitly stated during the interviews nor consciously researched by me in that period, curators' words reflect their research on materiality, in a similar way to what Heidegger attempted with his essay. In this book, therefore, I emphasize words, questions and pauses that indirectly and imaginatively conduct the reader towards what curators might have felt the first time they encountered the material artefact, the object of the conversation.

My circumstances also determined my primary focus on curators. Since funding was not sufficient for staying in museums over long periods, I would not have had enough time to investigate visitors' responses. If it was true that visitors could only be addressed with difficulty in the exhibitive spaces, given the contingencies of their usually rather rapid museum visits, it was also undeniable that my short research period restricted the occasions for extensively observing their interactions with artefacts. Furthermore, the flux of visitors at the time of fieldwork was significantly low.

These limits in reaching the public are also due to the difficulties encountered by museum curators themselves. For instance, since 2014, the Kulttuurien museo in Helsinki, which is the result of different collections of the University of Helsinki from the nineteenth century, has been incorporated into the National Museum of Finland. The condensation of museum space has resulted in huge problems of authority, because the National Museum has given just two rooms to the Kulttuurien museo to be used as permanent exhibitive spaces. Furthermore, the Kulttuurien museo, at the time of my fieldwork, had two showcases inside the National Museum to 'advertise' its change of location. The curator told me that the design and the lights must not be changed, and this limited the choice of the artefacts to exhibit. For these reasons, the Kult-

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tuurien museo had to negotiate and collaborate with other museums in the city, such as that of the University.

Some Annotations on Language, Part II: On the Predicament of 'Western'

A significant change from my doctoral thesis is my current hesitance in using the terms 'West' and 'Western'. My adoption of the terms in the doctoral thesis was mainly geographic – to locate European and American museums – and polemic, as I consciously wanted to attack anthropocentric approaches to materiality as elaborated since the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, I progressively decided to abandon this term or to bracket it as 'West/Western'.

The concept of the West implies a homogeneous 'culture' and philosophical system, whereas what we have are historically relational dynamics between different system of thought. Colonialism, or a colonial mindset, is not a prerogative of Europe, although Europe had a more considerable impact on the world than other colonial regimes, an example of which is the Japanese colonial empire (1895–1945). More importantly, maintaining a concept such as the West implies, even if just nominally, a dualistic opposition with an exotic, irrational world that coincides with Said's (2003) notion of Orientalism. Therefore, I would like to propose a language that can be as situated as possible, thus privileging 'European', 'American' and 'Asian' as ways to differentiate different locations – of material artefacts, thoughts, practices – with an extreme precaution towards possible reifications.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 1, 'What Thing Is This?', embraces the Heideggerian method. It starts from the specificities of Bengali *pats* and Rajasthani *paṛs*. These artefacts have initially been chosen as research subjects, with the aim in particular of investigating how their material characteristics are manipulated within museum spaces. They are storytelling scrolls with religious contents that, at the same time, imbue divine forces. Therefore, they demarcate a ritual performance that coincides with the plot narrated and, at the same time, goes beyond it. The scrolls' affordances derive from how the stories are graphically depicted. The painted surface immerses the audience within a virtual temple that evokes the presence of deities. The audience can thus communicate with deities through *darśan*, an exchange of gazes between the worshipper and the deity's embodiment. Through this reciprocal looking, the worshipper identifies herself with the deity, to the extent that her body hosts the deity's force. In this *darśanic* exchange,

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the scroll itself acts as a repository of sacred power. Consequently, worshippers touch it to receive blessings and empowerment.

According to the biographical approach of Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), as well as the concept of 'communities of response' as formulated by Davis (1997), when the scrolls enter the museum, they are disentangled from religious engagements. Instead, they become metonymies of vernacular Hinduism, of its theology and world view. By looking at them, the visitor can thus retain some crucial information. However, I argue that Appadurai and Kopytoff have not paid enough attention to the peculiar material characteristics of museum artefacts, their affordances. The latter partly escape from human control. On the other hand, human projections and usages shape some of their characteristics.

In the conclusion of this chapter, I urge readers to extend Kopytoff's biographical approach in order to include the fuzziness and ambiguity of the material artefact. In particular, I emphasize how the storytelling scrolls can still stimulate a religious response from visitors and express an attractive sacred force within South Asian museums, regardless of the visitors' religious background.

Chapter 2, 'Curatorial Understanding of the Sacred Within Museum Walls', offers to readers what emerged during metalogues with curators, as well as with other actors who have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the museumification of storytelling scrolls. The principle that guides curators is that visitors are the protagonists of the museum experience: they can or cannot have religious responses in galleries. What curators have to do is create the conditions through which multiple experiences and interpretations are allowed. Given the extreme complexity of the human–nonhuman relationship (which curators experience themselves when they participate in rituals or visit religious sites to then imagine exhibitions related to these phenomena) curators are not able to control and successfully manage museum design. Metalogues, therefore, challenge the literature on the intersection between religious and museum studies: curators are far from being 'soteriological specialists'. I argue that it is necessary for scholarship to turn to the microphysics of material engagement, thus emphasizing its internal contradictions and fuzziness.

Chapter 3, 'Manipulating Sacred Force', further delves into the proposal for a new methodology with a presentation of four displays observed. This portrait articulates the different ways in which curators deal, *from a design point of view*, with religious materiality. The chapter will also present the case of the Rietberg Museum, where South Asian religious materiality drove the first contributors to the museum to initially have a mystical experience and subsequently conceptualize the Rietberg as a museum of 'Asian fine arts'. This dynamic is still present in the museum's contemporary practices, whereby artistic quality is predominant over anthropological information. At the same time, specific

pieces, such as Shiva Nataraja, are accompanied by a mystical allure. I thus anticipate the main argument of the following chapter: that the phenomenological goal in curators has roots in the colonial period.

Two of the exhibitions represent the rare occasions on which I could observe displayed storytelling scrolls. Storytelling scrolls are, in fact, not usually displayed in galleries. Most of the time, they remain in the storage rooms for the experts' examination, in particular that of scholars. Consequently, only a tiny portion of curators in charge of Asian collections have expertise in storytelling scrolls. However, fieldwork can indirectly reveal how storytelling scrolls are employed within the exhibitive spaces. First, there is a concern about displaying religious material without 'offending' practitioners. Disrespect generally coincides with manipulating sacred force without any forms of control by ritual specialists. This lack of ritual control would entail, according to practitioners, a dangerous menace to both the religious community and the curators or visitors themselves. A material effect of this concern is the displaying of copies of religious artefacts or incomplete versions. Second, curators are particularly careful in guiding visitors towards a phenomenological understanding of religion. The latter can facilitate the identification of the audience with the religious experience described, thereby nurturing visitors' reflexive and imaginary skills. In this way, specific elaborated religious philosophy becomes intuitively understandable.

Chapter 4, 'Material Engagements in the Colony', starts from Latour's (2010) reflection on the modern era, which coincides with a progressive 'work of purification' (Latour 1993, 14) from a sensuous engagement with materiality. Sensuous engagement would be the tangible proof of abstract theories – what Latour calls 'factish'. In contrast, 'non-Western' forms of engagement with the nonhuman would be 'fetish', in the pejorative sense of idolatrous. We can infer from Latour, Appadurai and Kopytoff that museums would be centres where material fetishism is suppressed in favour of the factish.

However, the collecting practices in Europe from the modern era to the colonial period problematize Latour's theoretical stance. On the one hand, collectors wanted to experiment on their bodies, by touching, smelling, even tasting (Classen 2007) the 'exotic' or 'wondrous' materiality. This process was a form of learning and immersing oneself in an atmosphere of wonder. On the other hand, they catalogued what they had experienced, transforming sensations into aesthetic or scientific theories. This chapter insists on the phenomenological encounter that colonial collectors subjectively experienced. More specifically, readers engage with the diaries of Thomas Hendley (1847–1917) and Fanny Parks (1794–1875) on the one hand, and with the guidebook that Maxwell Sommerville (1829–1904) wrote for his recreation of a 'pan-Buddhist' temple at the Penn Museum on the other. Their knowledge of the 'Other's' material culture partially suspended prejudices towards 'the natives' in favour of a sensu-

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ous training. This 'material knowledge' (Martin 2015, 58) is at the core of the museum enterprise. 'Material knowledge' continues to be present in current curatorial practices and colonial collections. The last two chapters further develop the conflict between 'material knowledge' and Latourian 'purification'.

Chapter 5, 'Reconstructing the Sacred', investigates current reconstructions of religious settings in museums, with the Oriental Museum in Durham and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge as case studies. The reconstructed altars and shrines are intended to act as instructive examples of Indian or Tibetan material culture. In particular, museum curators aim to engage with the Indian and Asian diaspora by empowering their voices and extending their identities beyond their religious affiliation. Curators also use reconstructions to revitalize scanty information related to individual colonial collections. We can say that reconstructing and assembling different pieces from the museum collections and storage rooms is a way for curators to research and understand materiality. Working in museums is thereby an occasion for a phenomenological encounter that articulates the archival information. It is also undeniable that these assemblages continue to have an experimental function for visitors, who can transitorily discover religious interactions and meanings that complete or go beyond the projections and hints left by curators. I consequently argue that the literature on the copies and reconstructions must be 'softened'. In other words, we do not have automatic translations from the ritual to the museum sphere, and nor do we have necessarily a 'wondrous' or 'respectful' atmosphere.

On the contrary, we can say that these displays also reproduce a substantial conflict between the inheritance of colonial 'material knowledge' and curators' desire for decolonization. Chapter 6, 'When Religious Power is Limiting', focuses on the recreation of a Tibetan shrine in the World Museum in Liverpool as an example of these curatorial contradictions. The shrine expresses different curatorial positions towards the extensive Tibetan collection in the museum. Previous curators saw the reconstruction of a ritual setting as a way of respecting Buddhist practitioners. A shrine within a museum would build an inclusive space where believers could meditate and pray, while nonbelievers could have a 'faithful' understanding of Buddhist doctrines. I see in this curatorial strategy a continuity with colonial reconstructions, in particular with Maxwell Sommerville's Buddhist temple.

However, the current head of the ethnological section of the World Museum, Emma Martin, views this curatorial intervention and the response from the British Buddhist community as highly problematic. In her research on Charles Bell's (1870–1945) Tibetan collection, she realizes that a religious and phenomenological interpretation of Tibetan Buddhist artefacts hides the political exchanges between the Dalai Lama and Bell. The emphasis on the historical acquisition of the collection can help visitors in decolonizing the idea

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of Tibet as a 'spiritual' country. Tibetans used religious materiality to resist colonial control and oppression, and reading through the colonial archive can help in understanding their agency. Accordingly, Martin engages in different curatorial projects aimed at enriching and problematizing 'Asian materiality'. In the exhibition Telling Stories, she challenged the idea of 'Indian folk art', in which painter-storytellers, along with other painters, are no longer within a *darśanic* performance but respond to the tourist and art market.

Inspired by the richness of the World Museum, the chapter 'For a Reappraisal of Phenomenology' proposes a restoration of phenomenology. Phenomenology reflects the perspectival views on materiality in museums. I oppose the phenomenological stances belonging to two main approaches to materiality, principally from an anthropological and philosophical background. Certain scholars, in particular Alfred Gell (1998), argue that humans project their will onto materiality, thus experiencing it as imbued with agency. I call this approach anthropomorphic.

In contrast, social scientists and philosophers such as Bruno Latour and Levi Bryant consider materiality as independent from the human. For instance, assemblage thinking and the new materialisms argue that a portion of materiality produces effects by gathering or assembling with other material artefacts. On the other hand, Object-Oriented Ontology views materiality as shaping the world according to its necessity and without being influenced by human projections. Both these two positions are part of the materialist approach.

The anthropomorphic approach minimizes the peculiarities of each material artefact. The latter would be a mere projection of the human mind, and thus totally under the control of the human or the subject. The materialist approach, on the other hand, denies any interrelation between the human and the nonhuman. It has the ambition of scientifically describing materiality and, more broadly, the nonhuman without acknowledging the subjective perspective of researchers.

In 1926, the biologist von Uexküll had already realized that every single organism, human and nonhuman, is immersed in the world. Each can define itself as a specific living being by carving a niche in the world and a particular way of seeing and dealing with the world. Each material thing is, therefore, differently perceived according to the organism that comes into contact with it. In contrast with both the anthropomorphic and the materialist approach, von Uexküll acknowledges that scientists and researchers occupy their own subjective and human perspectives. Consequently, they must deconstruct their perception to reach those of other organisms, of which, however, they can only grasp an approximate idea.

Von Uexküll's intuition paves the way to the *phenomenological approach*. This approach is what William James (1925) would call 'mosaic philosophy' or 'radical empiricism'. It starts from the practical embodied engagement with the

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world, with the purpose of then formulating a more general statement about reality. According to a phenomenological view, the human and the nonhuman coexist. They build ambiguous and hybrid relationships with each other. As such, they cannot be ontologically isolated, as the *materialist approach* would infer. At the same time, there is no projection of the one to the passive other, as the *anthropomorphic approach* would maintain. Any social scientists, curators or philosophers must start from their specific perspective and the ways in which it conditions their knowledge of materiality. Certainly, knowledge of materiality consists of a hybridism between the researcher's projection and materiality's affordances. However, certain material features escape from the sensuous contamination with the human and are totally outside the researcher's control. It is impossible to reach materiality as such, in its totality: we, as humans, can have just a *perspectival knowledge of it*.

The concluding section of this book suggests adopting a phenomenologically perspectival view to address materiality and material artefacts in museums. In the example of the World Museum, the co-presence of diplomatic-historical circumstances with the reconstructed shrine can challenge visitors' prejudices towards Tibetan Buddhism. Temporary exhibitions on current works of Tibetan artists – as planned by Emma Martin (2017) – can further emphasize the creative resources of Tibetans without reducing them to a 'static' and 'eternal', 'ossified' culture.

In the Conclusion, I develop a personal theoretical and methodological framework from the rehabilitation of a phenomenological approach. I account for materiality's specificities and view humans' constructs as materially driven. At the same time, I consider the hybridism and contamination between materiality and the human. Rather than being a bias, human positionality is an openness to an understanding of matter. I propose again – Lucia Zaietta and I already formulated this concept (Gamberi and Zaietta 2018) – a 'weak' anthropomorphism. In scholarly analysis, we cannot escape from researchers' positionalities and their projections on matter. Anthropomorphization, though, cannot exhaust things for what they are. There is always an element of materiality that *is totally other* from us and outside our control.

Our phenomenological engagement with material artefacts enlightens only certain aspects of them: the others impact on us in unexpected ways. However, a 'weak' anthropomorphism does not mean that materiality constitutes *an ontological reality per se*. It is in the interaction with the human that materiality reveals its inexhaustibility and ineffability. What we have is an ambiguous, hybrid and volatile flux between the human and the nonhuman. Ambiguity and hybridity are not just given in the process of making artefacts. Our broader sensual engagement with them stimulates heterogeneous, sometimes contrasting responses, such as memories, free associations, information, bodily sensations and so on. Besides, our reactions vary according to the different perspectives

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occupied by each one of us. Consequently, material artefacts reveal a huge variety of properties and abilities.

Instead of definitive solutions to the dilemma of materiality, Experiencing Materiality stresses the creative potential of the inexhaustible and the perspectival. Instead of categorizing the human and the nonhuman according to their differences or their 'agency', we must focus on their unpredictable relationships, and pay attention to the shifts (Strathern 1991) and reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 2005) of meanings and practices. It is only in this way that we can challenge preconceptions, which seem 'naturally' part of us, about the material world.

Notes

1. I was not able to find an English translation of this passage. However, the concept of crystal recurs multiple times in the last works of Severi. See for instance this quote: 'The artefact appears as the image of a set of relations (rather than of an individual, whether they are mythical author or supernatural ghost) and this depends on the production of a series of partial identifications. A tradition is thus authorized by a *dispositif* of anonymous utterance: though they emerge out of a series of clearly defined interactions, its agentive power and its speech never coincide with an actual intervention from a ritual participant. Behind the supposed presence of an utterer whose identity remains indiscernible, we can glimpse the object's evidential function, which ties harp and fetish to an image of the truth. In other words, the (paradoxical, at least from a Western perspective) space where the artefact is endowed with agency is that of an authorless authority, where the ritual artefact does not work as a mirror reflection of a human agent, but as a crystal capturing several identities in one. The kind of 'distributed I' that the artefact enacts is not formed by a single identity distributed n several material occurrences (as Gell would have had it). It is better described as a set of different identities condensed in a single, but complex one' (Severi 2016, 148; cf. Severi 2020, 183).
2. I decided to offer to participants the possibility of maintaining their anonymity, both because that guaranteed a more spontaneous and relaxed interaction and because I could state from the beginning the transparency of my research purposes. However, I knew that especially in the case of museum curators, the ideal of uncontaminated anonymity could not be completely fulfilled, as a lot of information related to the artefacts, as well as to the stories and characteristics of the collections, might be used as clues for identifying some of the participants. In addition, the choice of anonymity discouraged some of the hypothetical participants, especially scholars, from getting involved in the research project, because of the popularity achieved either by their exhibitions or by their published works, leading to their desire to be named in the research. Even though I clarified with them that the anonymity issue was only an offer to protect their privacy and not a fixed and unconditional code of conduct, they did not usually change their minds. In this current account of my research, I decided to disclose the identity of one curator, Emma Martin of the World Museum in Liverpool. Her name cannot be anonymized since she has written scholarship that I deemed fundamental for the theoretical and reflexive intake of this book.

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