

Object Research Lab – Relational Thingness

A dialogue from the lab

Three researchers sit in the Object Research Lab canteen on their tea break. They sit with three-dimensional questions and elusive solutions that always seem to surround their investigations as they attempt to make sense of their world of work – their Object Research.

Researcher 1; the provocateur: So once again, what is a thing? What is the essence of things?

Or perhaps I should ask: what does it take to be a thing?

Researcher 2; the sleuth: We can probably agree that a search for the essence of *things*, such as the teaspoon in front of us, is in fact a search for its relationships.

Researcher 3; the nuancer: I certainly agree with that as I have serious doubts about any kind of essence or essential ‘substance’ of things other than relationality.

The sleuth: So for example... the characteristics of this spoon arise out of its relations of resemblance and difference with other phenomena. The spoon resembles a knife in the sense that we can both hold them in our hands -unlike a car or a house- and are meant to deal with food - instead of clothes or dirt-, yet they also differ as the spoon is used for scooping and a knife for cutting food. We only know what the properties of a spoon are because of the way it relates to other things and practices.

The provocateur: So that means that a thing differs from another thing, as soon as it is related to different phenomena. For example, the role, properties and function of a knife used in the dining room, are very different from those of a knife that is used in a bank robbery. The range of relationships change and therefore the object itself. But how far should we take this line of thinking? Anyway, it is clear that the essence of things is not fixed, but determined by relationships.

The nuancer: That’s a tricky question though as the existence of the essence of a thing is still a contentious issue. But I tend to think that “there is no there there” of the ‘the thing in itself’, but rather shifting, situated event qualities that manifest in thingyness, But it’s a complex discussion ...

The sleuth: This, however, is not to say that things, in turn, do not exert any influence on their relational environment.

Things invite affordances and sometimes compel.

The nuancer: Sure, they provoke and ‘prehend’. Even this spoon prehends its relations as it provokes relational activities. So the tea prehends the shape of the cup and the cup prehends the tabletop through its relation to gravity, and the table prehends the weight of the cup and so on....

The sleuth: and some things are by nature compelling.

The provocateur: Perhaps all things are compelling or provocative in small ways, at atomic levels as well as behavioral levels.

The nuancer: Moreover, things generate bonds between phenomena. A revolving door unites the desire of receptionists and cashiers not to be disturbed by drafts and cold with an opposite desire of large groups of people to enter the public building without continually having to close the door behind them. The revolving door thus consistently avoids a conflict situation and ensures stability.

It is, however, often difficult to properly see what an object is, or indeed, with which phenomena it has relationships and how it exerts influence on its environment. For us, a revolving door is taken for granted, and as long as it functions properly, we are only barely aware that it ensures a convergence of conflicting desires.

The provocateur: ... or feelings and prehensions

The sleuth: You know, when something breaks down, the revolving door for example, many of its entanglements become visible. Suddenly, it appears that the functioning of the door not only results from the interests of receptionists and customers, binding them, but also depends on the expertise of the technical services, the availability of the materials from which the door was made, the costs of the repair and, for example the financial reserves of the door-owning-company.

The nuancer: ... the hands that picked the tea leaves and the airplane that shipped it ... the designer of the cup ... that tree that provided the wood of the table, the rain that grew the tree....

The provocateur: This also relates to the idea of *contingency*, right? How things and events can always be otherwise ...

The sleuth: Sure, there is a kind of contingent impress of what might have been but is not that nonetheless effects the perceived relational activity. We can imagine being compelled or provoked by one of Yvonne's blob/things to pick it up. Our immediate experience is haptic and visual, we feel the texture of the fabric, see the stitching on the blue green form, feel its weight. We may not have heard the traffic outside or smelled the coffee brewing at that moment but they are part of the affective tonality of the experienced event.

The nuancer: So, on the one hand, a thing is influential to the degree to which it is embedded in our lives and in our relations with other things and people. The introduction of a new product, such as the mobile phone, is considered successful when people feel they need the product to function properly. The object is entwined with peoples' daily practices and routines. Also, we notice that the more something is interwoven with the world, the more taken for granted and natural it becomes to us, and the more difficult it becomes to perceive its impact ... I'm thinking of the revolving door. On the other hand, the more an object can escape our expectations, the more it can offer resistance to our interpretations, the more autonomous it becomes. In short, when an object generates disorder, when it frustrates, brings about the unexpected, it becomes stronger, more essential and more independent.

The researchers sigh, finish their tea from porcelain cups. They sit staring at each other and then get up and go through a door marked, 'Object Research Lab'.

Text by Maartje Hoogsteyns and Sher Doruff, partly extrapolated from lab conversations and partly inspired by Actor-Network Theory and Speculative Philosophy.