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A God on Display: On the Agency of ‘Living Things’ in the Museum

1 ‘Living Things’ and the Ontological Turn

To talk of ‘living things’ seems paradoxical at first: the word ‘things’ seems to represent the inanimate, and thus exactly the opposite of living beings. Nevertheless, human encounters with ‘living things’ are not entirely unfamiliar. Late medieval miracle books are full of stories of weeping Madonnas, crucifixes that move, or speaking figures of saints. We read in missionary reports from the 17th century onwards, that so-called pagans consider certain dead things to be alive, and consequently worship them. We encounter ‘living things’ in fictional literature too, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* (1816), and popular films, such as John Carpenter’s *Christine* (1983) or John Lasetter’s *Toy Story* (1995, 1999, 2010, 2019). Anyone watching a child interacting with a doll or teddy bear can immediately see that living things are at play here.

Scholars encountering the paradox of living things – whether from film or literary studies, socio-cultural anthropology, history of religion or child psychology – have explained the phenomenon with concepts such as ‘pre-modern magic world-view’, ‘processes of discursive production’, ‘symbolisation’, ‘attribution’, ‘identity formation’, etc. The ontological distinction between dead and living nature, mind and matter, subject and object was thus maintained, at least in the academic world.

In recent years, however, contrary positions have been articulated and are increasingly accepted. Scholars now refer to the autonomy of things, and their influence on the individual, culture, and society. This happens against the background of an ontological turn, which informs a new object theory and thus a new way of looking at both things specifically and the material world in general.

Often cited precursors to this new object theory are the ideas of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff. In the 1980s, Appadurai reconstructed the category of the commodity and reflected on the origin of the attribution of value to things. Here, he focused on things themselves and on the ‘commodity situation’ of a thing, showing that this is only one phase in the longer social life of a thing. It is not

only in pre-modern societies that things possess such a social life; so too do the things of our globalised present.¹ Igor Kopytoff argued that things, like people, have biographies.² His person-thing analogy provided impulses for anthropology, archaeology and history to approach things with a new subject-oriented perspective, and to trace their biographies.³

Twenty years later, in the course of an evolving new object theory, Esther Pasztory calls for “thinking with things”,⁴ and Amiria Henare et al. demand a “thinking through things”.⁵ Consequently, a change of concepts and a fundamental paradigm shift is called for in order to take the ‘thingness of things’ seriously. Daniel Miller takes a similar line in his criticism of structuralism, Marxism, semiotics, and symbolic anthropology, for the fact that the three-dimensionality and palpability of things have not been taken seriously so far.⁶ He elaborates his concept of material culture studies in his book on *Stuff*, which is underpinned by the thesis that things make people as much as people make things.⁷ Methodologically, the authors mentioned still assume an ontological separation between researchers and the world of inanimate things. Researchers talk *about* things, not *with* things.⁸

Other scholars go a step further, with a novel approach to the agency of things. Approaches in *Science and Technology Studies* should be mentioned here, first and foremost Bruno Latour’s *Actor Network Theory*. The separation between humans and (technical) things is dissolved. Things create, and can at the same time restrict, possibilities for action. A glance into a medical intensive care unit, with its measuring devices and monitors, makes it clear what we mean when we speak of

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- 1 Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
 - 2 Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91.
 - 3 Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People’s Lives* (London: Routledge, 1988); Janet Hoskins, “Agency, Biography, and Objects,” in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Chris Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006), 74–84 and Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects,” *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (2010): 169–78.
 - 4 Esther Pasztory, *Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
 - 5 Amiria J. Henare et al., eds., *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London: Routledge, 2007).
 - 6 Daniel Miller, “Material Culture,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis*, ed. Tony Bennet and John Frow (London: Sage, 2008), 271–90.
 - 7 Daniel Miller, *Stuff*, (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2009).
 - 8 Daniel Miller, *Anthropology Is the Discipline but the Goal Is Ethnography* (London: University College London, 2017).

a dependence on things and their agency.⁹ Things can be given subject status, or better, they interact with people, according to the actor network theory of Bruno Latour.¹⁰ 'Subject' here is not to be equated with being human, but with the pragmatic competence of "originating courses of action, defining contexts as contexts of some kind, creating meanings and delineating available ways of life. Inasmuch as objects have this competence, they may be considered as intentional subjects."¹¹ The age-old subject-object dichotomy is abolished here. That things have agency is now a widespread idea in the social sciences and humanities.¹²

Theorists who see themselves as New Materialists are even more radical here. They recognize objects in the material world as possessing a true life of their own, beyond human sociality and language. Karen Barad states: "Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers",¹³ and in her work *Vibrant Matter* Jane Bennett insists that things are not passive, they wield a generative power "as quasi agents of forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."¹⁴ From such a perspective, things are alive, not merely metaphorically or symbolically, but factually. This new vitalism or neo-animism can be considered a general feature of the New Materialists' ontology.¹⁵

The positions outlined so far do not represent a consistent theory of things, but they do provide the building blocks for creating one. This is helpful for us when we are dealing with (living) things in museum spaces, which transform things, give individual things an aura, and socialise them anew. Conversely, things influence the atmosphere of their environment. In his aesthetic theory, Gernot Böhme calls this the *ecstasy* of a thing. Ecstasy is spatially understood as a stepping out of itself into the surrounding space, and thereby actively generating the atmosphere.¹⁶

Museum things, however, have yet further potential for agency in their own right. Mobility and historical memory are particularly characteristic of museumised

9 Letizia Caronia and Luigina Mortari, "The Agency of Things: How Spaces and Artefacts Organize the Moral Order of an Intensive Care Unit," *Social Semiotics* 25, no. 4 (2015): 401–22.

10 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

11 Caronia and Mortari, "The Agency of Things," 403.

12 Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) plays a key role here.

13 Barad quoted in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 48.

14 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2010), viii.

15 Peter J. Bräunlein, "Studying Material Religion from a Non-Anthropocentric Perspective? Some Considerations on New Materialisms," *Material Religion* 15, no. 5 (2019): 622–23.

16 Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt/M.: suhrkamp, 2019), 225–46.



Figure 1: Feather image, Kuka'ilimoku, Hawaii, dating to before 1779. Photo: Harry Haase, © Ethnologische Sammlung der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (Oz 254).

items. This also means that a thing, like a person, changes over the course of its history. The objectivity of a thing is by no means its basic characteristic. This depends on its respective contextual embedding, as Nicholas Thomas asserts: "Hence, although certain influential theorists of material culture have stressed the objectivity of the artifact, I can only recognize the reverse: the mutability of things in recontextualization."¹⁷ The existential state of a thing is paradoxical. Through its materiality, it on the one hand possesses an idiosyncratic thingness, and on the other hand displays mutability and individual history. This makes it more difficult to communicate with things.

The hitherto theoretical discussions about agency, ecstasy, and vibrancy of things will now be illustrated through the example of an artifact from the ethnographic collection of the University of Göttingen: Ku, a Polynesian god.

2 A Hawaiian God in a German Museum

I first encountered this god during a visit to the ethnographic collection of the University of Göttingen. At that point I had no knowledge of this object. In front of the display I had to bend down to look into one of his eyes. A strange and ambiguous feeling befell me. His hairstyle somehow resembled that of a punk. His huge mouth, with almost hundreds of teeth, signalled fierce intimidation, but in an exaggerated form, which to me seemed a grotesque caricature. For a short moment, I was caught between two sensations. Was I facing a punk jester from the South Seas? In this case, one might naturally be inclined to laugh. Otherwise, however, one ought to show respect, and such laughter would definitely be improper. Intuitively I opted for the latter, bowed even more deeply, and read the lettering on the display case: "Image from feathers, Kuka'ilimoku, Hawaii, before 1779."

2.1 Ku and the Death of James Cook

Ku's journey to Europe began with a very famous traveller's visit to Ku's homeland. The renowned James Cook (1728–1779) reached Hawaii in January 1778, during his third trip to the South Seas (1776–1780). From there, the expedition explored the northwest coast of North America, and, after a year, returned to Hawaii again. On 26 January 1779, the chief Kalani'opu'u delivered four feathered gods, through his priest Kao, to Cook's crew. In total, eight feathered gods from Hawaii were acquired during Cook's third voyage. All of them were deliv-

¹⁷ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 28.

ered in a highly ceremonial way. Four of the images have a crest, two of them have hair and one has neither. The feather image in Göttingen's collection "has a crest which makes it a likely receptacle for a war god from Hawai'i island, Kuka'ilimoku", as Adrienne Kaepler notes.¹⁸

All 2000 objects collected during Cook's expeditions were either kept in royal possession, privately acquired by scholars, or disposed of on the art market. The scholar Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), who (among others) initiated the first university museum in Göttingen (1773), petitioned for objects from the Cook collection. Due to his excellent relationship with King George III (1738–1840), grandson of Göttingen University's founder George II, his petition was granted. The feathered god, with many other objects, arrived in Göttingen as a royal donation in 1782. These items later became known as the Cook-Forster collection.¹⁹ Ku's voyage from the island of Hawaii to the island of Great Britain, and from there to Göttingen, was facilitated by royal ambitions and scientific objectives. Since the first encounter between the emissaries of the British King and the Hawaiian nobility, Ku has moved in the fields of politics and science. Needless to say, political power and representation are correlated in both fields. Cook's expeditions are the epitome of the exploration of the world in the spirit of enlightenment. This specific Western mission of acquiring knowledge on a global scale as a laudable virtue has nonetheless taken its toll and produced its own martyrs. On the 14 February 1779, James Cook died a violent death in the service of such an endeavour in Hawaii.

Today the causes of this homicide are still not entirely resolved. On the contrary, the reconstruction of the death of Captain James Cook led to a controversy around "how natives think". This debate matched two famous opponents, Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere.²⁰

18 Adrienne L. Kaepler, "Hawai'i – Ritual Encounters," in *James Cook: Gifts and Treasures from the South Seas*, ed. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (München: Prestel, 1998), 243.

19 During his second voyage to the South Seas (1772–1775) Cook was accompanied by the German naturalist Johann Reinhold Forster (1729–1798) and his son Georg (1754–1794). For the history of the collection see Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin and Gundolf Krüger, eds., *James Cook: Gifts and Treasures from the South Seas*; esp. Manfred Urban, "Die Erwerbungsgeschichte der Göttinger Sammlung," in *James Cook: Gifts and Treasures from the South Seas*, ed. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (München: Prestel, 1998), 56–85 and Gundolf Krüger, "Rarities from the New Discovered Islands of the South Seas' and the Way to Göttingen," in *Life in the Pacific of the 1700s: The Cook/Forster Collection of the Georg August University of Göttingen*, vol. 2, ed. Stephen Little and Peter Ruthenberg (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2006), 36–48.

20 Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1981) and Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

According to the local myths, Sahlins argues, it is gods who always occupy land and then appoint chiefs as their deputies. The interplay of usurpation and divine-human conquest is cyclical and forms the basis of the legitimacy of power. The cyclical change, as depicted in myth, finds its ritual equivalent in an annual Makahiki festival. The change is visualised in a mock battle, symbolising the transition between the rules of Lono (peace, prosperity, fertility) and Ku (war, destruction, conquest). Hawaiian history is therefore the repetition of this myth. According to Sahlins, when Cook appeared, he was immediately assigned a place in the mythical order of the Hawaiians and was identified with Lono. His arrival coincided exactly with the ritual calendar of the Makahiki festival and his behaviour fitted seamlessly into the logic of the Hawaiians: contact mainly with priests and chiefs, the effort to obtain food, the distribution of iron objects, and kneeling at Ku's shrine. Additionally, the burial of a deceased sailor in Ku's temple, interpreted as a human sacrifice, was seen to initiate the reign of Ku. Having previously left the island on request, Cook's forced return, due to a broken mast, was seen as an attempt at usurpation. This idea was reinforced by Cook's brutal reaction to a theft: to recover a stolen dinghy, Cook kidnapped a chief, whilst another was shot by one of his officers. Hawaiian warriors attacked in retaliation, and Cook was stabbed in the back. Sahlins interprets the event as ritual murder: Cook was killed as god and conqueror Lono, during a Makahiki celebration. Mythical logic prevails and culture gives structure to history. Sahlins' work was initially praised as groundbreaking, since it demonstrated that the Polynesians had their own history. But soon critical voices emerged. Upon re-evaluation of the sources, Gananath Obeyesekere claimed that it was not the Hawaiians who deified Cook, but rather Sahlins who invented a myth. He reduces the Hawaiians to puppets, caught on the strings of their culture. Cook would, Obeyesekere argues, have at best been thought of as Lono's messenger, not his embodiment. Sahlins' reading of a 'different history' could not be proven by the sources. Just as is the case for the British, it is not mythical thinking but 'practical reason' that distinguishes the Polynesians. Cook ultimately failed due to inner-Hawaiian power struggles, claims Obeyesekere. The chief Kalani'opu'u had asked Cook for help against an enemy. Obeyesekere suspects that Cook refused to help. Cook's involuntary return confronted the Hawaiians not with a power-hungry god, but with food shortages caused by the ever-changing demands of foreign seafarers. In addition, Obeyesekere sees Cook as a quick-tempered, even brutal person, who had himself contributed to the escalation of violence.

When we stand in front of Ku's display case, we are in touch with the mythology and cosmology of ancient Hawaii, with its hierarchical aristocratic society, human

sacrifice and war. We are also confronted with a historical narrative revolving around the mystery of why James Cook had to die, and ultimately with a dispute about worldviews, Western and non-Western rationality.

2.2 The Social Life of Ku

Ethnographic perspectives on objects like Ku have two dimensions. The first is the cultural context, the ritual use and the symbolic value of this figure. Ku appears here as a meaningful object that reveals its biography through questioning historical documents and anthropological research. The second dimension consists of linking contemporary empirical research and material culture. Ku will show us that a two-hundred-year-old museum object is not automatically condemned to death in the archive and display case, but, on the contrary, is still able to develop a social life today. In Ku's case, such a social life is particularly evident because of his extensive travelling.

An exhibition in 2006 brought Ku and numerous other objects from Göttingen back to their home in Hawaii. The temporary repatriation and presentation of these objects have a political, and above all identity-creating, significance. For the majority population of countries such as New Zealand or Australia, James Cook is a cultural hero, embodying the connection to the British Empire and Western civilisation. On the other hand, in many Pacific countries, indigenous intellectuals have been speaking out against this interpretation since the 1970s, calling for a "return to roots".²¹ Due to rapid colonisation and missionary work, their own culture and religion are only available in fragments or through external perception by the colonisers. Artists, writers, and local scholars articulate their "own visions of Oceania and earth".²² Movements like *Faasamoa*, *Fakatonga*, *Maoritanga* or *Hawaiian awareness* are not only about the right to protect one's own culture.

21 Jocelyn Linnekin, "The Ideological World Remade," in *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders*, ed. Donald Denoon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 397–438. For Hawaiians' perception of James Cook, see Rocky K. Jensen and Lucia Tarallo Jensen, "Geschichte aus unserer Sicht: Die hawaiianische Perspektive," in *James Cook und die Entdeckung der Südsee*, ed. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2009), 34–36 and Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, "Ku and the Battlefield of Authenticity. A Hawaiian Feather Image and its Contestation between Empathic and Objectified Authenticity," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 137 (2012): 172.

22 Renate von Gizycki 1995. "...Our Own Visions of Oceania and Earth' – Zeitgenössische Schriftsteller im Südpazifik (Polynesien) und Probleme kultureller Identität," in *Ethnologie und Literatur*, ed. Thomas Hauschild (Bremen: kea-edition, 1995), 95–114.

Essentially, they centre on the sovereignty of interpretation in matters of their own culture.²³

Whilst for some, the Cook-Forster collection is a symbol of pride in the European 'civilising' mission, for others it signals cultural loss and destruction, as well as a call to seek identity. Obviously, the perception of Ku within Hawaii varies according to the origin of the viewer, having a different significance for members of Hawaii's indigenous minority,²⁴ and in particular for descendants of Hawaiian clans of rulers and priests, compared to the significance for the Japanese, Filipino, and white American majority.

When, in January 2006, the pieces of the Göttingen collection were made ready for their journey to the South Seas, an unusual farewell ritual took place in the museum. La'akea Sukanuma, president of the Royal Hawaiian Academy of Traditional Arts, and other members of a Hawaiian delegation, performed a highly emotional Hawaiian blessing.²⁵ Afterwards Ku and other pieces of the Cook-Forster collection were displayed in the Honolulu Academy of Arts and the Australian National Museum in Canberra. The director of the Honolulu Academy of Arts, Stephen Little, emphasised that the exhibition was not a tribute to Cook. "We recognize that the legacy of Cook's voyages included disease and death for many cultures throughout the Pacific – a fact that Cook himself recognized. The purpose of this exhibition is not to glorify Cook but, on the contrary, to celebrate the brilliant cultural and spiritual lives of the indigenous people of the Pacific as they existed prior to the first contact with Westerners."²⁶ Ku was not displayed as art, but "became a sacred representation and offerings were laid in front of the

23 However, the voices of such revitalisation movements and post-colonial criticism are never uniform and are themselves set within a context of internal power relations. The question of who represents whom, and with what legitimacy, must also be asked here. It is against this background, too, that the controversy over accusations of misrepresentation in the context of the Cook/Forster exhibition in Hawaii must be understood. See Philipp Schorch et al. "Globalizing Maori Museology: Reconceptualizing Engagement, Knowledge, and Virtuality through Mana Taonga," *Museum Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (2016): 48–69, and the reply by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, "Beyond Plagiarism: Where Does Scientific Misconduct Begin? Academic Integrity, Misrepresentations and the Cook/Forster Collection," *GISCA Occasional Paper Series*, no. 28 (2020), DOI:10.3249/2363-894X-gisca-28.

24 According to the census of 2010, this minority makes up over a fifth of the population, see "Native Hawai'ians," Minority Rights Group International, accessed October 24, 2020, <https://minority-rights.org/minorities/native-hawaiians/>.

25 The delegation of Hawaiian representatives escorted Ku back to Hawaii. Hauser-Schäublin, "Ku," 169, describes the ritual in detail.

26 Gordon Y.K. Pang, "Gifts to Cook Come Back to Pacific," *Honolulu Advertiser*, February 4, 2006, <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/Feb/04/In/FP602040330.html>.

feather image [...]”.²⁷ Ku in Honolulu, as then director of Göttingen’s ethnographic collection Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin stresses, “was definitely not simply an ‘object’, but a ‘subject’” and “this feather image also had a divine aura.”²⁸

One month later, another farewell ceremony took place, prior to Ku’s European tour in July 2009.²⁹ Here, members of the *Mana e Hula Dance Show* presented several dances in honour of the god of war, in front of a very prominent audience at the Göttingen Institute for Socio-cultural Anthropology. The university president used this ceremony to solemnly promise that the building would soon be renovated, namely in 2011.³⁰ Heinrich Prince of Hanover spoke about the links between the Göttingen University collection and the British royal family. Lower Saxony’s Minister of Science emphasised that with the collection “the best ambassador for science, for Göttingen and Lower Saxony (...) is going to travel again”.³¹ The relationships described show how Ku’s social life has an impact in public space. As an actor he affects local politics and, in the case of Hawaii, socio-religious revitalisation movements.

2.3 Materiality and Authenticity

In the course of Ku’s world tour in 2006, rumours circulated that the object was a fake. Ku’s authenticity was on trial. Comparative pieces from other museums are significantly less well-preserved than the Göttingen specimen, and the remarkably good conservation status of the feathers over a period of more than 200 years seemed suspicious. Speculation that the god of war might have been forged in the 1920s, using coloured chicken feathers, prompted Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, the director of the ethnographic collection at that time, to go on the offensive. The figure was expertly examined, and the results were presented to the public.³² The strongest arguments here are those based on the materiality of the object. The yellow bird feathers come from the mating plumage of a Hawaiian bird species that has long been extinct. The knotting technique of the feather fastening is extremely complicated and has not yet been understood in detail. Finally, it is well known that, on Cook’s third South Sea voyage, the objects

27 Hauser-Schäublin “Ku,” 168.

28 Hauser-Schäublin, “Ku,” 169, 170.

29 Between 2009 and 2010 the Göttingen Cook-Forster Collection travelled to Bonn and Riehen (Switzerland).

30 Unfortunately, this promise was not kept, with the delayed renovation and reconstruction works currently scheduled for 2021.

31 See the article in the local paper, Göttinger Tageblatt, July 28, 2009.

32 See Hauser-Schäublin, “Ku”.

taken on board were treated with arsenic to prevent insect infestation. Ku owes his fluffy plumage to this circumstance, which without poison would have fallen victim to parasites long ago.

The question of authenticity is extremely important as it determines the value of the object. Ku has a cultural and spiritual value for the Hawaiian community, whilst also having a commodity value as a museum object, which is reflected in the sum for which the figure is insured, or its value on the art market. At the same time, authenticity can only be proven through its thingness. Both aspects, the material and the spiritual/political, promote Ku's biography, agency, sociality: in short, his liveliness.

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