Blobgects: an Experiment in the Discursive Museum.

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The Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology at the University of Cambridge has a [new weblog](). I grant you that this is not particularly earthshaking, but this Blog is a little different. It is only a little different, and that is the point. Though it is a weblog, the entries are not curatorial statements, nor academic discourses, nor even the contributions from the public -- they are objects. Or, rather, they are the catalogue entries and, eventually, the images of objects.

The goal of Blobgects is simple, What might happen if rather than just being able to search a museum's on-line catalogue, and being forced into the idiom of the catalogue, users could engage with the catalogue as they would a Blog? Engagement that would include all the features of a Blog: commenting, tagging, RSS feeds of individual records or searches, etc. In other words, what might happen if we extended the principles of Social Computing, in one small way, into the privileged world of the museum catalogue? Hence, Blobgects.

I imagine that I do not have to state on this forum that knowledge is embodied, it is situated and requires sets of social relations between people. However, I feel that I do have to state, or restate, that knowledge also requires things. Just like people, things are not outside of knowledge but are part of its embodiment. It is true that you cannot have knowledge with just things, things are not knowledge, but knowledge is not simply conceptual -- I would argue that it is not conceptual at all, but that is another matter. Objects, even digital objects, embody surrogate practices, surrogate social practices. They do this so they can be knowledge objects, or, more accurately, can participate in situated knowledge production and reproduction.

So why Blobgects? We could say that there is little point to Blobgects. It is, after all, just a catalogue as a Blog. But this would miss the point, I would argue. The point is that Blobgects, at

least at this stage, is a manifesto. Perhaps a very weak and obscure manifesto, but a manifesto none the less. The point of Blobgects is not to resolve any historical or philosophical, one could even say sociological, problem of the desire of most on-line resource providers to make us all think in the same categories, but to make the point that solutions lie in the understanding that knowledge, and hence access to knowledge, is diverse, discursive and necessarily about social relations. This is, of course, in complete distinction to certain major trends, as well as much of the history of, cataloguing as well as the dominant programmes for managing web content.

By situating a catalogue, the definitive universal description, into a discursive idiom, the Weblog, we are drawing attention to the fact that this is but one way of narrating these objects. Through the ability of users to tag, comment, and order these accounts in their way, we hope that the provisional and local nature of the catalogue itself will become clear. However, we also recognise that Blobgects is, in and of itself, insufficient. Through an international research group, centred in the Museum, we are exploring ways of travelling our digital objects to other knowledge communities, other knowledge settings, to other social settings. Through this work, we hope to vastly extend the knowledges in which these objects participate.

Further reading:

- David Bloor (1983) Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge. London: Macmillan.

- Robin Boast, Michael Bravo and Ramesh Srinivasan (in press) Return to Babel: Emergent diversity, digital resources, and local knowledge. The Information Society.
- James Clifford (1997) Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harry Collins (1990) Artificial Experts: Social Knowledge and Intelligent Machines. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- K.D. Knorr-Cetina (1981) The Manufacture of Knowledge. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Bruno Latour (1991) Technology is Society Made Durable. In John Law (Ed.) A Sociology of Monsters? Essays on Power, Technology and Domination - Sociological Review Monograph. London: Routledge, pp. 103-131.
- Michael Polanyi (1958) Personal Knowledge. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- David Turnbull (2003) Assemblage and Diversity: Working with Incommensurability: Emergent Knowledge, Narrativity, Performativity, Mobility and Synergy. AAHPSSS, Melbourne.
- Susan Leigh Star and James Griesmer (1989) Institutional Ecology, "Translations" and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39. Social Studies of Science 19: 387-420.