WHAT IS PART OF THIS OBJECT? WHAT IS THIS OBJECT PART OF?

> "Along with diamonds, rope, and neutrons, objects may include armies, monsters, square circles, and leagues of real and fictitious nations."
> — Graham Harman, "The Quadruple Object"

Each participant gathers a small number of objects from the local environment. Consider organic objects and materials as well as designed artefacts. Back at the studio, arrange the objects on a table. Your exercise is to select an object from the collection and present "countercompositionals" and "counterfactuals" for the object.

Countercompositionals

One way to understand an object is to identify what it is made of. For example, an apple. At an easily comprehensible scale an apple has a core, seeds, flesh, skin, and a stalk. Each component has a function, and the combination of these components gives an apple its specific qualities: colour, hardness, size in your hand. A countercompositional speculatively replaces one or more of an object's components. An apple composed of other materials could be a radically different object.

Counterfactuals

Another way to understand an object is to identify its functions in the systems to which it belongs. For example, an apple functions within the system of commodities; it has a market value as food. It also functions within the digestive system of someone who eats it. A counterfactual speculatively replaces one or more of these functions. An apple that is extremely expensive to buy, or a deadly poisonous apple, could also be a radically different object.

These two concepts suggest defining questions about your object: "What is part of this object?" and "What is this object part of?" Propose countercompositionals and counterfactuals for your object. Explore their implications conceptually and manually, through text, images, unmaking, making, and display. Begin with imaginative and speculative proposals, but arrive at something that you can visualize.

Discuss the work produced as a group. Pay particular attention to identity and language. How slight a change can a countercompositional or counterfactual make before an object is no longer recognizable by its name? Reconsider what defines each object. Is an orange apple still an apple? If not, does it mean that colour is the most important characteristic of an apple?

AN IDEAL OBJECT

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was not universally accepted in the scientific community. Sceptics pointed to a lack of physical evidence proving its speculative hypothesis. Then, in 1912, fragments of a skull were found buried in gravel in the village of Piltdown, England. They represented an unprecedented discovery – the "missing link" between apes and man that archaeologists had been searching for. Critical evidence in support of Darwin's theory.

In the following decades the Piltdown discovery was thoroughly canonized. The skull fragment was displayed in London's Natural History Museum, and included in academic conferences and textbooks around the world. Until, in 1949 – nearly forty years after its discovery – the Piltdown skull was revealed to be a fake. New dating methods showed it to be a combination of parts from an orangutan skull and a modern human skull, deliberately sculpted and coloured to conform to contemporary scientific expectations of the missing link. The author of the hoax was never definitively identified.

This exercise can be approached in one of two roles. You may work in any genre – besides archaeology you might consider literature, art, astronomy, and so on.

Hoaxer

Conceive an object comparable to the Piltdown skull. The Piltdown hoaxer's work required no specialist equipment; the bone fragments were remodelled with a file and stained with iron and chromate. The hoax was successful because the hoaxer understood the context – a community of archaeologists who wanted to believe in the missing link. Explore and document the context for your hoax and show how it informs your decision-making.

Critic

Expose an existing object as a fake. Consider how to undermine a scientific or artistic narrative. Explore the repercussions of your intervention – what other objects could not exist, or would lose their meaning?

Work conceptually and manually, visualize your ideas with text, images, unmaking, making, and display. Discuss the work produced as a group. Emphasize conceptual ingenuity over the quality of making.