

**Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics:
An Examination of the Primal Dialogue Between People and Objects
in Therapeutic and Clinical Sociological Practices, and Implications
for the Enhancement of Museum Exhibitions.**

“The self ‘loses’ and ‘finds’ itself with objects.”

John Dewey

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	p 4
Foundational Research and Body of Literature.....	p 5
Introduction and Overview.....	p 9
Primary Research Activities:.....	p 13
Trails Carolina	
Ross Laird	
Project Synthesis.....	p 25
Phase II Research: An Object Dynamics Case Study.....	p 27
Selected Bibliography.....	p 31
Appendix:	p 33
Description of Primary Research Subjects	
Interview Questionnaires	

Things shape us, save us, and show us who we are.

Executive Summary

Based within the framework of the body of literature in museum and object studies, this research project examined potential areas of confluence between object interpretation and meaning-making in museum practice, with objects as used in therapeutic practice. The purpose was to explore opportunities where object-based therapeutic applications and outcomes could suggest design approaches towards enhanced and healthful visitor engagement in museum environments. The study followed the premise that people have an innate and necessary psychological relationship with objects that I refer to as primal dialogue, and that it serves as a means for understanding why it is that objects are essential in meaning-making and to psychological health. To explore this premise, object-based therapy was determined to be an appropriate and unique arena for study, leading to primary research in the use of objects at an adolescent therapeutic wilderness program (Trails Carolina), and with an educational and mental health consultant expert in the making of objects as a means of self-discovery and actualization (Professor Ross Laird). The therapeutic work with objects at each venue correlates with research in the roles and interpretation of objects in museum exhibitions, including objects in relation to sociocultural identification, self identification, power, and humanity. The study's focus was placed on self-made objects and those found in nature, as opposed to branded and commercially mass produced objects. The primary research findings have resulted in a new theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics that illustrates how objects are inherent to an individual's well-being and psychological health. The five primary dynamics include *Making*, *Associating*, *Releasing/Unburdening*, *Composing*, and *Giving/Receiving*. These initial findings suggest methods in which exhibitions can be designed to influence healing experiences for visitors, and a second phase of research, to be conducted with the September 11th Memorial and Museum, is scheduled for June, 2016.

Foundational Research and Body of Literature

Many scholarly precedents inspired, influenced and provided necessary context for this study. Of myriad works, I have looked closely at those of John Dewey, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, George Hein and Lois Silverman. Each has been instrumental in shaping our contemporary knowledge of objects and their role in meaning-making in museums. In concert with scholarship in the fields of material culture, psychology anthropology and sociology, their work has made the study of objects and human experience an essential part of the museum profession, and an intrinsic part of its vernacular. Dewey, one of the greatest thinkers in education, objects and aesthetic experience, provided the bedrock for contemporary studies in object-based learning and museum experience beginning a century ago, and today his work continues to be vital and relevant.¹ The object studies of Csikszentmihalyi are likewise of great importance, in particular his definition of overarching object characteristics, including power (vitality and energy), self (personal identity and continuum), and society (relationship and hierarchy).² His broad yet descriptive organization of object meanings has encouraged professionals to look at the science of objects and material culture in an interdisciplinary fashion, and consider approaches to object interpretation in museum settings. Hein³ and Silverman⁴ are on the forefront of understanding meaning making in exhibitions and learning in museums, and have made great strides over the past several decades towards restructuring outmoded, traditional approaches to curation, visitor experience, and exhibition design, towards enhanced visitor engagement. Silverman's introduction to the profession of the paradigm of meaning making, influenced studies and applications in the disciplines of exhibition design, development and evaluation, visitor studies, museum programming and most relevant to this study, object interpretation.

¹ Dewey, John, (1934), *Art As Experience*, Harvard University.

² Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly , (1981), *Why We Need Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge University Press.

³ Hein, George, (2000), *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective*, Smithsonian Institution Press.

⁴ Silverman, Lois H., (1999), *Meaning-Making Matters: Communication, Consequences, and Exhibit Design*, The Exhibitionist. The National Association of Museum Exhibitions.

Additional influential scholarship was found in the recent publications of Pierre Lemmonier, Kirsten Latham and Elizabeth Wood. Lemmonier, a cultural anthropologist, has delved into the meanings of mundane objects and their roles within sociological and psychological contexts. Of particular interest is his definition of objects as “perissological resonators;” objects that instantaneously coalesce feelings, activity, contexts and content in the user to form complex meanings.⁵ Additionally, his insights into the nonverbal communicative power of objects has been essential to my explorations in object-based therapies, and understanding how it is that on a primal level, objects enable us to think, relate and act. In their recent publication, Latham and Wood present the Object Knowledge Framework; a new way of considering and defining multidimensional people-object relationships in museum environments.⁶ Their study includes looking at interrelationships between work in phenomenology: the study of individualistic sensorial human experience, with the ways in which humans on an instinctual level seek to make meaning out of objects, as explored in museum-based research. Latham puts forth four key characteristics of object experiences, including Unity of the Moment (an holistic experience not unlike Lemmonier’s theory of perissological resonators); Object Link (objects as repositories); Being Transported (the transpersonal) and Connections Bigger than Self (numinous qualities including reverence, spirituality and connections with higher things, not unlike Ross Laird’s descriptions of spirit within objects). Wood and Latham suggest the Object Knowledge Framework as an interpretive basis for generating meaningful visitor experiences in museum exhibitions, and propose myriad applications of their research for the development and design of exhibitions.

Two exciting researchers have explored the relationship between therapy and museums, each suggesting that exhibition visitation has a direct healing impact on audiences. The insightful work of Andree Salom at the Center for Transpersonal Studies in Colombia,

⁵ Lemmonier, Pierre, (2012), *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-Verbal Communication*, Left Coast Press.

⁶ Wood, Elizabeth, and Latham, Kirsten F., (2015), *The Objects of Experience: Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums*, Left Coast Press.

infuses his research with many of the themes explored by Csikzentmihalyi, Hein, Silverman, Latham and Wood. Most particularly, he sites the numinous characteristics in certain objects (as first introduced by Harding, 1961) and the emotive quality of exhibition spaces, as kindlers of transpersonal experience in exhibitions, opening up visitors to flow states, spiritual inspiration, self reflection, deepened awareness and mindfulness.⁷ Salom's work will be of essential importance to any further applied research resulting from this study. (see Opportunities for Application) "Muse Therapy" is the term used by Manoru Adachi at the Nagoya University Museum, where he has studied the healing impacts of arts-based museum programming in conjunction with object-based exhibitions, on primary and secondary school-aged students. He focuses on mental stress in students, and how multiple visitations and multi-sensory interaction with museum specimens indicated "recovery from the problems" (of mental stress).⁸

Personally, some of the most inspirational thinking on objects has come from Ross Laird, Sherry Turkle, Steve Brown, Ann Clarke and Ursula Fredrick. Each of their recent publications contributes to the body of knowledge an original perspective and means by which the profession can examine object meanings in various intimate ways. In my opinion, these researchers have taken information which is "known" and made it seemingly unfamiliar again. Their publications are at once emotional and scientific, and provide new viewpoints to readers that illicit a wonder about objects and how they are a part of the DNA of basic human experience. Across their works they look at objects from the perspectives of the wizened craftsman; archaeologists momentarily freed from the realm of statistics and restricted analysis; and a collection of scientists, humanists and artists. Each brings an insight to our understandings of objects that is at once current, while being rooted in times and cultures millennia old. A wisdom pervades each of their works and the narrative form of their publications has uplifted my own endeavor.

⁷ Salom, Andree, (2009), *The Therapeutic Potentials of a Museum Visit*, Sasana Center for Transpersonal Studies,

⁸ Adachi, Mamoru, (2003), *'Muse therapy' as a new concept for museums*, Nagoya University Museum, Chikusa, Nagoya, Japan.

Laird's work with objects includes his own practice as a master craftsman, as well as his professional experience as a therapist and professor of psychology. In his publications he shares his understanding of the interconnectedness of objects, craft, spirituality and therapeutic healing, and the depth of life experience, insight, and mastery of self that comes with (seemingly) simple engagement in the natural world.⁹ (An in-person interview with Professor Laird, and a tour through Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology, supplied one of the two primary research subjects in this study.) In their different publications, Turkle, and Brown, Clarke and Fredrick's invitations to a wide array of archeologists, anthropologists, artists, scientists and humanists, to share their personal object stories, reinforce the existing research in object studies while welcoming in undogmatic contributions to the body of literature. Turkle's work with the evocative nature of objects, including their role as companions within our emotional lives, repositories for memory and history, and as provocateurs of thought and action, interrelates her personal expertise in psychology and technology with each of the aforementioned areas of research in material culture, museum studies, cultural anthropology, object-based therapy and philosophy.¹⁰ Brown, Clarke and Frederick's masterful book welcomes readers into the innermost thoughts and desires of a collection of archeologists and the relationships they've had with objects from their work that have touched them in deeply meaningful ways.¹¹ The various stories include first-person narratives from objects' points of view, several different accounts of tenderness experienced when discovering a rare object for the first time and the fragment of a formerly magnificent sculpture, as well as stories where the authors are willing to admit that they don't even fully understand why it is that their objects moved them so powerfully. The openness and permissive nature of these particular works have provided a springboard for my own examinations into the therapeutic characteristics of objects, and what I believe to be the primal dialogue with them in which we all are engaged.

⁹ Laird, Ross, (2001), *Grain of Truth: The Ancient Lessons of Craft*, Walker & Company.

¹⁰ Turkle, Sherry, (2007), *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, The MIT Press.

¹¹ Brown, Steve, Clarke, Ann, and Frederick, Ursula (2015), *Object Stories: Artifacts and Archaeologists*, Left Coast Press.

Introduction and Overview

Noam Chomsky refers to objects as meaning-bearing elements: the things in our lives intrinsic to our ability to make meaning out of the world (2013). Much has been written on the subject of the meaning of objects in peoples' lives and in the role that museums play, as our world's repositories of objects, in that very meaning-making. The ultimate purpose of a museum exhibition is to foster such meaning-making, and it is objects, as the primary elements of the exhibition experience, that serve to illustrate, explain, captivate and enable the visitor to relate to the content in a manner that is personally significant. (Silverman, 1999, Hein, 2000, Rounds, 2010). In psychoanalytical and sociological theory, objects signify human factors such as self and identity, the individuals' relationship with the family/society (Rochberg-Halton, 1984, Fowler, 2010), and personal power/primal self (Nguyen, 2011). Accordingly, in object-based therapeutic practices, objects, and their inherent capacity for meaning-making play a functional role in supporting health and healing processes, such as the development of self awareness, the ability to self-regulate, the enhancement of mindfulness competencies, feelings of personal power and self control, transition through liminal periods, and effective communication skills.

In this line of thinking, my premise is that people have an innate *primal dialogue* with objects. The inextricable meaning-based relationship that people have with objects functions in the manner of a continuous and often subconscious or unintentional nonverbal dialogue: objects can extrinsically communicate our own concepts and thoughts with intent, conversely they can communicate complex concepts, thoughts and actions to us (Lemmonier, 2012), they can prompt memory, access subconscious experiences and emotions, they can foster transpersonal experiences that include heightened creativity, spirituality, and self-awareness (Laird, 2001, Salom, 2009), and they can prompt action (Laird, 2001, Turkle, 2007).

Objects are our silent partners, our life companions (Turkle, 2007). They are witnesses to the present and in their wordlessness, at times can be the only means by which we can discover or express otherwise inaccessible concepts and emotional states. In his work with mundane objects and material culture, Lemmonier describes objects as being multidimensional devices of non-verbal communication that perform social intercourse: communication that is a part of everyday life yet not always consciously recognized. It is from here that I look at psychological relationships with objects as being a primal dialogue: the object converges, or instantaneously activates a coalescence of feelings, circumstances, and domains of experience in the context of its making or use. Lemmonier refers to objects in that respect as “perissological resonators,” whose material use triggers an emergent nonverbal statement. In that way, objects speak what words cannot and can communicate “unspeakable truths.”

Understanding these psychological definitions and object attributes, as contributed by the museum, scientific and therapeutic communities, could be most pertinent to museums where an awareness of meaning-making is of critical importance due to their evocative and at times provocative interpretive capacities, including ethnic/cultural institutions, historic sites and institutions, monuments, and memorials; places where objects can be particularly emotionally and intellectually potent. The capacity for significant visitor impact in institutions such as these, provides them with opportunities for enhanced interpretive and designed experiences that could enable visitors to engage with content in ways that foster healthful psychological benefits. Similarly, opportunities exist to develop and design independent or unconventional forms of exhibitions with therapeutic benefits as their primary intent. It was the intention of this study to look more deeply at these meanings and potentials, and identify what correlatives exist across these disciplines towards defining what some of those opportunities might actually be.

The framework for my primary research activities centered around the question why. Why do people by nature find so much meaning in objects and in such specific ways?

Why do we foster these intrinsic and inextricable relationships as part of our daily functioning? Why are relationships between people and objects essential to human development and mental health? Why is it important that objects bear communicative, transpersonal and numinous characteristics? In therapeutic contexts we are afforded the opportunity to see heightened or magnified examples of psychological and sociological perspectives and behaviors. Where objects are utilized as tools within the therapeutic process, we can take a deeper look at why and how those object characteristics are essential to healing, and how they are supportive of normative psychological health. Therefore, the venues chosen for this study were selected due to the essential roles that objects play within their therapeutic exercises. The research activities included interviews, observations, and open-ended first-hand experiences. The following overarching questions and considerations provided direction in the shaping of the research activities: *

- How are objects interpreted and incorporated within the environment/the practice?
- How do objects trigger conversation and interpersonal sharing?
- What are the observable reactions to and experiences with objects within the environment or practice?
- What is significant about found, made, and collected objects to individuals?
- Are objects essential elements of how people form and tell the stories of themselves?
- What are the measurable outcomes of object-based therapies?
- What are some of the key words and uses of language used within object-based therapy?
- People find respite in museums (Falk).
- Objects trigger wonder (Bedford).
- Objects converge time, memory and space (Pamuk).
- Objects trigger conversation and sharing (Bedford, Falk).
- Objects foster meaning-making in museum exhibitions (Dewey, Silverman).

* The interview questionnaires used for Trails Carolina and Professor Laird are in the appendix.

The primary research was conducted with an adolescent therapeutic wilderness program (Trails Carolina), and with an educational and mental health consultant expert in the making of objects as a means of self-discovery and actualization (Professor Ross Laird).^{*} These particular venues were chosen as their therapeutic approaches and integrated use of objects are unique, and not prevalent in hospital environments or other clinical practices. The on-site research with Trails Carolina (Lake Toxaway, North Carolina) was conducted from June 31st, 2015 - July 5th, 2015, and included interviews with three specialists, observation of a parent/adolescent graduation session, observation of a group therapy session, and an extended immersion with an adolescent group in the field. The on-site research conducted with Professor Ross Laird (Vancouver, British Columbia) was conducted on July 24th, 2015, and included an in-depth interview, and walk through the exhibitions of First Nation totem poles and cultural objects in the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, British Colombia. (This museum and its cultural objects are a feature in Professor Laird's work and publications.) Additionally, as a related yet ancillary personal experience, a day was spent learning how to hand carve stone and create a First Nations culturally-influenced sculpture with an artist in Whistler, British Columbia.

The following research activity descriptions are highlights, organized according to the primary themes and key content that emerged across the various interviews, observations and hands-on experiences.

^{*} Descriptions of the primary research venues are in the appendix.

Primary Research Activities

Trails Carolina

June 31st - July 5th, 2015

Interviews:

Shane Maxon, Field Director

Jason McKeown, Clinical Director

Brian Hannon, Director of Student Life

Observations:

Tandem bow drilling: Michael Williams, Graduation Instructor, with graduating student (adolescent girl)

Therapy session with Tai Kulenic, Primary Therapist, with Alpha Group (nine adolescent girls ages 15-17)

Field Experience:

Alpha Group (nine adolescent girls ages 15-17)

The therapeutic program at Trails Carolina is based upon a six-phase curriculum where students advance through milestone steps at an individual pace. Its therapeutic approach is holistic, addressing the individual's emotional, mental, physical, and educational growth concurrently. Testing and evaluation are incorporated within the practice with a focus on getting to the root causes of students' crises/areas of destabilization. A particular quality of a wilderness facility is that literally and metaphorically, students can't obfuscate or hide from their strengths and areas of challenge, enabling a therapeutic situation that is highly individualized and organic. The Trails pedagogic emulates the theory of The Hero's Journey, where the individual engages in the program focused on goals, faces internal and external physical and emotional challenges, and learns to awaken, build, and utilize existing and newly developed life skills towards recovery and psychological stability. (See venue description.) Various therapeutic exercises incorporate objects serving as recognitions of achievement, objects as manifestations of personal/primal power, objects as self identifiers, objects as expressions of personal concepts, objects as metaphors for

emotional states and experiences, objects as representatives of potential, objects as transitions, and objects as representations of safety and self-care. Throughout the various phases students are encouraged to focus on the use and meaning of the objects, their role and purpose, and the ability of the objects to communicate with and for them. The students at Trails are using objects at the very core of their meanings within the constructs of power, self and society, and their experiences are basic and unembellished demonstrations of the phenomenological, numinous and transpersonal object characteristics, and as perissological resonators. Of particular interest is the importance of contextualization: divorced from their applied physical, emotional, and practical affiliations, the objects would lack their potency. The following are the predominant themes that emerged from the research; underscoring many of the object-meaning relationships cited within this study and providing insights into possible exhibition applications:

Unburdening/Release

Object Examples: Burden Rocks, Found Objects in Graduation Ceremonies

Burden rocks are one of the most interesting examples of the power of objects I encountered. In cases when students are challenged with overcoming a trauma or experience that is blocking their ability to progress, they will be given a rock by their therapist as a metaphor for that burden. They are instructed to carry the rock along with their gear in their (already heavy) backpack. They are told that when they are ready to release themselves from the burden that the rock symbolizes, they can unburden themselves of the rock. Jason described how students will carry the rock for days or even weeks despite the extra weight, until a moment arises when the student determines it's time to let it go. The release of the object can be ceremonial if the student chooses; tossed into a fire or thrown off of a cliff, or it can be simply dropped. However the rock is disposed of, the act of once having it and then letting it go is therapeutically powerful. Jason stated that "The memory of the object and the act of letting it go is essential to

clinical growth...the student is granting themselves permission to let go (of their psychological burden).” “A lot of people have memories or experiences that inhibit them, their lives from moving forward. When they are here they can impart that belief upon an object and either bury it or destroy that object...something really powerful happens that we don’t have in our culture...People hold onto things out of fear or hate and it limits their ability to start living their lives differently. The act of using an object to destroy or release those feelings and experiences then becomes a reminder that they are now different, that the memory or experience no longer dictates power over them.” Shane likewise brought up burden rocks and described the essence of the therapeutic quality of unburdening: “It is in the letting go that the power comes.” Another example of releasing/unburdening came when Jason spoke about the part of the graduation ceremony when a family is asked to find a few objects that represent different things in their lives, “both what they want to leave here and what they want to take away from the woods with them...there is the act of releasing or parting that is very powerful. These are the things about myself or my life or my story that I want to leave behind, and these are the parts that I want to take with me.”

Non-Verbal Expression and Communication

Object Examples: labyrinths, Shane’s backpack



One of the clearest examples of objects as non-verbal communicators was in Alpha group’s therapy session with Tai. Students were creating labyrinths as metaphors for their lives out of found objects from the woods. The labyrinths were highly differentiated and presented by students using very few words.

There was an inherent “honesty” to the objects used which enabled students’ meanings and interpretations to be the predominant focus. The simple displays of the stones, leaves and twigs were highly representative of students’ feelings of, for example, personal restriction, single pathways lacking alternative options,

impediments and blockages, or lack of clear definition and direction. In this exercise the objects provided freedom from preconceptions and judgement, an intrinsic challenge in our culture with spoken or written words. In our interview, Shane spoke about the power of how an object in and of itself in a nonverbal manner communicates to students the meaning of hope. He gave an example of a well-crafted backpack that he had made in a wilderness situation where students were required to likewise make their own. Shane spoke of how the pack, via its high level of craftsmanship, was in itself a motivator, embodying and demonstrating potential and the possibility of achievement. Students wanted to be able to create a backpack of that level of quality. “(Through the pack) I was nonverbally communicating that I care about craftsmanship, I care about quality and taking my time, and I can teach you how to do this too.”

Hope/Potential

Object Example: Hand-Crafted Objects

In our interview Jason spoke about the essential need for students to experience feelings of hope and of their own potential to heal throughout their therapeutic process. “The biggest part of change and transformation clinically, in the research, is that somewhere along the way the client develops the sense of hope again... there is a hope beyond self-harm or divorce or hurt.” “Possibility and potential are what drive therapy and moments of connection.” When speaking about the act of making an object, Shane described how when working with natural materials that are difficult to manipulate, often you can end up with an object with imperfections, a challenge for most people that seek the idea of perfection. “I don’t want to make mistakes and I want things to be predictable...I learned that materials can push your buttons. If you want things to be perfect you have to learn the beauty in imperfection. Once you get into the art of making things, people soften... their shell or armor falls away.” “We don’t know how to be vulnerable anymore and there is so much shame heaped upon us. The hidden wound.” Additionally, in our interview, Jason brought up the necessity of the experience of imperfection in a therapeutic setting, and how objects, particularly those in nature, lend themselves to the meaning of

imperfection. “Objects can communicate imperfection, which is innate with the nature of things and what we need to learn about ourselves.”

Primal Power

Object Example: Bow drilling kit



Access to power was seen in the bow drilling kit and process of achieving fire. Creating the fire-making tools and then going through the very long and complicated process of using them to make fire enacts all of the processes of life in terms of going through a process to achieve a desired outcome. Using objects to make fire is stimulating a primal power. The bow drilling tools are truly evocative objects on a deep and resonant level. “Busting a coal” is one of the most common expressions you will hear, and it refers to the moment when a wooden spindle entwined within a bow, is drilled into a thin block of wood creating

bow drilling kit
Trails student, age 15

a smoldering coal. It’s this coal that ignites dry tinder to then start fire. It is very challenging and takes well-made tools, physical skill and a tremendous amount of patience. When talking about the bow drilling kits, Brian describes how they are simply inanimate objects, and the difference when used together in the context of creating fire: “when intention is put into it, the objects become animate, they become life...it’s primal and all-encompassing.” The objects that comprise the bow drilling kit are excellent examples of perissological resonators.

Decontextualized they are meaningless, and when in action they converge various thoughts and domains of experience that render tangible ideas and concepts that otherwise cannot be put into words. The power in the bow drilling kit is in the process and experience that it embodies. Brian described times when he would be working with students and it would take hours and hours for

them to achieve a coal. Measuring intention is an important part of the clinical process, and nightly records of which students busted a coal and what was involved in that achievement, enable therapists to help determine psychological progress. Jason said that discomfort in the therapeutic process is essential, where people can be vulnerable and see that part of themselves and then come out on the other side of it. “The bow drilling set wouldn’t be important if it didn’t have with it all of the struggle and the tears and not getting the coal and then going back to it...a



Bow drilling
graduating student

big transforming part (towards healing) comes through knowing that there is going to be some discomfort, just enough to allow us to learn something new.” Shane describes listening to students describing their bow drilling experiences, and even when acting in a nonchalant manner about it, “they can’t not start showing the emotion and the story that went along with that.”

Co-Creation

Object Example: Tandem Bow Drilling



Michael Williams with graduating student

The following example of co-creation highlights the experiences of reciprocity. There were a number of moments during the research when the subject of co-creation emerged, whether talking about how in traditional cultures, object-making happens in a group, or is a mentored experience where the meaning of the object is inherent to the communal act of its creation.

Shane discussed this: “If we go back to ancestral cultures and transitions into adulthood...the act of creation laid the framework for social relationships and building trust, and the joint creation illustrated that you are not alone, teaching interrelatedness and interdependence in life.” Jason likened this concept to the primal need people have to co-create many aspects of their lives. Humans comparably craft their own lives and can lose the understanding that the shaping of who we are is an act of family/society co-creation. “Kids will hang out in groups because they are co-creating as a group an experience - good or bad...it allows them to create an unique experience on a very different level...in our society there aren’t often opportunities to create an experience instead of falling into a mold or pattern that is pre-established.” I observed this experience in a tandem bow-drilling moment between Michael Williams and a graduating student. It took many many attempts before the two of them could coordinate their movements together and establish a rhythm. What was interesting to observe was that the student, who had just completed the entirety of the program, was completely at ease with this physical and social awkwardness (she had just met Michael for the first time) and the challenge of coordination. She didn’t get upset or frustrated, she didn’t give up and she didn’t blame Michael, but instead just simply kept working. Her anticipation or expectation that they would generate the coal was seemingly clear and her willingness to go through a process that would most probably drive most people to get emotional or give up was remarkable to see. She was drawing upon the already ingrained understanding of potential, hope, process, and her faith in the objects that she had created, and she allowed another person to join her in this powerful and primal act of creation. It was second nature - or more likely a primary nature that she had been brought back to. All of the elements were brought together with immediacy and were centered around these simple objects.

Giving/Receiving

Object example: Top Rock

A specific element of connection and giving/receiving was introduced when Shane told the story of when his wife hand-crafted a beautiful stone top rock for him (one of the elements of a bow drilling kit). They were working separated from each other and she sent this beautiful and functional object to him as a gift. She had first been gifted the stone (Arizona Marble) and then transformed it into a new form, to then be gifted to Shane as part of a continuum of the story of the stone, and the several people to whom it was special. When Shane received it he said that it was like “she was there to steady my hand.” The object reached across time and space and made a connection via its giving and its receiving, and the fact that the object was a tool enabling another to enact a primal object experience was particularly meaningful. Shane also mentioned that many students will give their bow drill kits to their parents, which he finds incredibly meaningful. It is an act of sharing the student’s story, their primal power, and defining a continuance with the family. In her work Leslie Bedford (2015) talks about transitory objects and objects that can be most meaningful when given away. In this respect, objects are in a way ensuring survival. Sharing and passing along are a part of personal growth and the need for continuance.

Bearing Witness/Life Companions

Object Examples: Achievement Beads, Students’ Clothing

Objects are a repository of a person’s own story.

Each time a student achieves a phase of the program a small ritualistic bead is given to them representing their achievement and transition into the next phase. In our interview Jason told the story of a student who was graduating out of the program and therefore had a small collection of beads. As with many of the students she kept them strung on her boot lace. When receiving the bead representing her final stage and achievement, she didn’t lace it with the others on her boot worn throughout the program, and instead separated it out by lacing it on the shoes that she would be wearing home. When asked why, she said “this bead is the most powerful one to me

and the one that I want to remind myself of every day when I look down.” The new bead was who she was now and would be a new life companion within her life continuum; connected with the old beads yet distinct from the past and a reminder of her present and future. Another interesting example of objects as bearing witness and serving as life companions emerged during my interview with Brian. Students are outfitted with the same clothing and staples for the duration of the program, eliminating the distractions of commercial brands or outside iconographic influences. Brian spoke of the meaningfulness of the students’ clothes both during and following the program. Students spend the predominance of their program time out of doors, and their clothing provides literal protection from the sometimes extreme weather. Some students will take their (well-used) Trails clothes with them when they leave as representations/ manifestations of those feelings of protection. “The clothes were a part of a deep protection... (the objects students take home) are less about the exciting things and more about the things that protected them and went through the experience with them...(reminders of) oh, this is how I take care of myself.” Jason likewise mentioned how they will sometimes receive photos of students’ shirts “with their holes and stains, in shadow boxes displayed on their walls.” Brian also pointed out that it’s disconcerting when a student leaves all of their things behind, suggesting a desire to reject or avoid their own experience. In keeping with this theme, Jason spoke about times when a student wants to take with them objects from their experience and the parent/caregiver disallows them. “When a parent rejects the kid’s object it’s like rejecting the kid...(their object) represents the kid’s story.”

Professor Ross Laird

July 24th, 2015

Interview and walk through the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, British Columbia

*“Making an object is like making our lives.
Making and living are the exact same process.”*

Professor Laird teaches counseling, psychology, interdisciplinary expressive arts, new media, and creative writing, and works in educational innovation, mental health, addictions, trauma, childhood development, conflict resolution, creativity, leadership, and technology. He works with social service agencies, counselors, and educators on themes of professional and clinical development. Professor Laird publishes works on many different subjects and themes including, world history and cultures, heritage, religion and human nature. (See venue description in appendix). Of particular significance to this study is Professor Laird’s personal work as a master craftsman; he works with various materials but most predominately wood. It is through this work that all of his professional work and experiences coalesce, and where he has developed an unique and meaningful approach to healing and therapy with objects. Our interview focused on the same overarching points of inquiry as those used at Trails Carolina (See questionnaire in appendix), and our discussions were complimented by a lengthy walk through the collection of First Nation totem poles in the Great Hall of the Museum of Anthropology, as well as related cultural objects in the museum’s adjacent galleries.

The following are the predominant themes that emerged from the research with Professor Laird that underscore creative therapeutic practice, human psychology, object-meaning relationships and that provide insights into exhibition applications.

Hands, Tactility

Ross talked about the power of the hand, and the need for young people especially, to integrate their modes of development through working with objects and by exploring the world with their hands. He quoted Frank Wilson where he describes how “human evolution has evolved in such a way, that changes in the hand come before changes in the brain. The hand is really primary.” The prevalence of screen-based surfaces has greatly reduced the tactile, sensory-based way in which people explore and learn about the world, and the homogeneousness of flat surfaces (keyboards, screens) limits the information that can come to the brain via touch. He describes this as a worrisome development.

Therapeutic Process, Creative Process, Life Process

Ross spoke throughout our interview of the role of the creative process and how it is intrinsic to the life, and to the healing processes. “The world of mental health, the world of personal development, the world of creativity, they’re all the same.” In therapy the creative process is essential; it is the deepest and most authentic means by which we encounter ourselves. “People have to meet blockages and work through them - to have confrontations and go through steps in a creative process in order to make progress. If therapy follows the creative process, and working in making of objects, we will encounter all of the steps and emotional challenges we face in life - they are the same.” Ross described that there is an in-born process towards healing and growth if we just allow it to happen through creative engagement. In our interview, when speaking about a person going through a therapeutic process, I asked him about how he knows when a person is making a breakthrough, or is experiencing growth and healing, and he spoke about “readiness”: how it is unpredictable and you can’t make it happen. A predominant amount of his work is with addiction, and that “the important parts are about immersion and readiness. With addiction you can give people all the resources and help and counseling you want, but the only thing that will get people all the way there is readiness

which is such a mystery...and it can't be rushed." Just like in life and just like in the creative process of making.

Tools

"The tool is 'like a god. It is a creator.'"



In his book "Grain of Truth, The Ancient Lessons of Craft," Professor Laird describes: "Things made from caring hands are alive, and creative work calls out to whomever will listen...the whisper spiraling out from the primordial source of things." "Tools hold tremendous potential and potency...they will take you places if you let them, if you can learn how to be with them."

Hand-made wood plane

"Tools are the carriers of power: the extension of the hand and the mind. There is an extra special resonance that tools hold and I like the tradition of passing down tools." Ross described how tools in these respects are a reminder to remember and to act; that they are a call to action.

Making Objects

Ross discussed the experience of watching people when they are making objects, and the sense of joy and discovery that can be seen. "The thing is to get out of the way once the person starts that connection. (Making objects) is a very personal and intimate encounter for people." When working on a stone sculpture he described: "I spent hours and hours and hours in the shop just trying to be present, just waiting for something to happen, and eventually something did. I wasn't just working on the object, it was working on me."

"The process of making and re-making and re-doing objects leads into inquiries, areas and disciplines that you wouldn't enter into otherwise...and can lead to an intellectual freedom."

Resiliency

Ross spoke about the meaning of the totem poles in the museum and how they are about how a culture thrives, sustains and connects itself to the spiritual and the ancestral worlds,



Totem Poles with Ross Laird
Museum of Anthropology

and that they are in themselves a “call to action.” “If there’s no action then there’s no point, there is only rumination.” Every time a totem pole is created there is an element of the present day in it: they are crafted to tell the stories of self, society, culture, and their past and present. They are telling and continuing the story, and in some ways ensuring the survival of their people. The totem poles are a part of the life continuum, they are a part of the endurance of a culture; they are about resiliency.

Ross spoke about a sculpture he created in response to the tragedy of 9/11, and how it was an act of personal healing and an act of resiliency. In this moment he spoke about how objects can have an “indomitable spirit.” “(Psychologically) Resiliency derives from the need for stability and endurance, our need for belonging.”

Numinous Objects

Ross spoke about the power of the numinous particularly found in wood: “There is an aliveness in wood and it is more personal, there is a resonance that connects with people.” “Wood is like us. It is alive, it grows, it has a smell.” He works with wood because he feels a deep reverence for it and its potential, of what it can be. He is driven to make objects because of a love: “of the materials and the resonance within the emerging object, of the people he wants to share the object with, of his connection with a culture that is born out of the process of making.” The numinous is inherent in the material, in its potential for becoming, and in the process of making.

Project Synthesis

Core to the meaning of objects in the therapeutic work of Trails and Professor Laird, is an element of inherent dynamic action. Resonant with Turkle's identification of objects as provocations (2007), the research illustrates that objects in therapy are instrumental as catalysts to think, relate and act in a literal or representational sense, and in so being serve to trigger and/or enable psychological healing. The active element inherent to the therapeutic qualities of objects as researched, can best be defined in the form of five specific Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics, including:

Making, Associating, Releasing/Unburdening, Composing, and Giving/Receiving.

Examining the Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics through the lens of the related bodies of knowledge in material culture, museum studies, psychology and psychotherapy, they can be seen to embody points of convergence, or a coalescence, among the disciplines. Each of the Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics exhibits the fundamental psychological and sociological concepts of power, self and society; each illustrates evocative object characteristics; each has one or more attributes of the phenomenological object characteristics inherent to meaning-making, and each dynamic characterizes positive therapeutic impact. It is in the Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics that we can define the concept of the primal dialogue between people and objects, and explore the ways in which they, in application, can influence healing within museum exhibitions.

The following chart defines the Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics and illustrates the convergences across disciplines as described:

Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics
Releasing/Unburdening, Giving/Receiving, Composing, Associating, and Making
Releasing/Unburdening
The action of releasing an object from a state of highly associative ownership into another place or state with the intent of entirely and permanently removing it from its former association (meaning) and state of ownership.
<i>The healthful/healing attributes of Releasing/Unburdening include:</i>
Resilience
Containment
Stabilization
Mindfulness
Self-regulation
Self-efficacy
Empathy
Associating
The action of maintaining and keeping within close physical proximity to an object in an effort to perpetuate the knowledge/memory of the object's attributed associations including experiences, states of being, places and people.
<i>The healthful/healing attributes of Associating include:</i>
Self-identity
Self-regulation
Mindfulness
Mindset
Trauma recovery
Self-efficacy
Giving/Receiving
The action of donating or offering to another person or people an object with the intention of its being accepted, and the resultant act of its being received with its attributed meaning being mutually understood and held intact.
<i>The healthful/healing attributes of Giving/Receiving include:</i>
Resilience
Stabilization
Connection with family/society
Perspective-making
Trauma recovery
Composing
The action of bringing together and juxtaposing objects with the intent of forming and expressing a concept or idea in order to coalesce, examine and convey a meaning that cannot otherwise be fully or entirely explained or expressed to its fullest capacity.
<i>The healthful/healing attributes of Composing include:</i>
Mindfulness
Self expression and communication
connection with society
Self-awareness
Self-identity
Containment

Making
The action of generating an original or newly formed object as a means of experiencing and implementing the fundamental creative process, therein undergoing the progressive stages of therapeutic growth and healing.
<i>The healthful/healing attributes of Making include:</i>
Self awareness
Self-regulation
Stabilization
Mindfulness
Emotional Grit
Resilience
Containment

Phase II Research: A Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics Case Study

The Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics present an interesting opportunity for further applied research in exhibitions. It is possible to develop, design and fabricate an original exhibition based upon one or more of the dynamics as defined with the research, and produce an experience that engages visitors within an object-based therapeutic process. The considerations include the feasibility of executing a physical environmental experience that appropriately applies the dynamics, characteristics and therapeutic approaches as derived from the research study, and whether true therapeutic outcomes are achieved.

Towards further articulating the Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics theory and examining how one or more of them are experienced within an existing museum exhibition, a case study will be conducted with donors to the September 11th Memorial and Museum in New York. This research work will engage a sample of the families of victims whom have donated to the collections towards exploring the intent, outcomes and psychological impact of their donating experience. It is anticipated that the focus group and subsequent interviews that will comprise the study and provide qualitative data, will particularly address the dynamics of Unburdening and Associating. Information gained from the case study will serve to support the pursuit of a comprehensive applied exhibition project engaging multiple dynamics as described above.

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Appendices

Trails Carolina:

Lake Toxaway, North Carolina, US. An adolescent therapeutic wilderness facility.

Trails Carolina offers sophisticated, empirically-supported and evidence-based therapeutic services to its students and their families. Utilizing eclectic treatment modalities in an emotionally safe and supportive milieu, their clinical team works collaboratively with the academic, residential and recreational staff to help participants address their problems; cultivate their strengths, prepare for the challenges ahead and ultimately, realize their potential as students, community and family members and as individuals. Under the auspices of a treatment team approach, students, their parents and Trails staff collaborate with the student's primary therapist to identify treatment goals, develop plans and strategies for intervention-implementation and regularly review progress, successes and areas of growth.

Trails Carolina utilizes a developmentally grounded phase system, individualized to address each student's particular needs, in an effort to structure a path towards increased responsibility and privilege. The phase system aims to reward hard work; make explicit expectations of program engagement; provide a metaphoric foundation for understanding the manner in which upward mobility works in higher education, places of employment and society in general.

Clinical services for each student include weekly individual therapy sessions and tri-weekly group therapy sessions. Individual psychotherapy, conducted by licensed and experienced therapist, is delivered in a manner based on each student's needs and is structured to address treatment goals identified at admission; these goals are often established during a student's wilderness therapy experience and refined throughout the process. Group therapy sessions, conducted three times each week for an hour, include psycho-educational groups (e.g. pharmacology; chemical-dependency; ADHD); goal-oriented (in which all staff and students attend to "get on the same page" around treatment goals, expectations and interventions); process-oriented (typically aimed at addressing group dynamics and community strengths and issues).

Ross Laird, PhD:

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Ross Laird is a professor and instructor in counseling, psychology, interdisciplinary expressive arts, new media, and creative writing, and has taught at educational institutions including Simon Fraser University, Vancouver Community College, The Union Institute and University, Antioch University, and Kwantlen Polytechnic University, where he was a recipient of the Dean of Arts Award for Teaching Excellence. Laird is a frequent speaker at conferences, a member of the BC Association of Clinical Counsellors, and the 2003 recipient of the Association's Communications Award. He provides consulting services to a wide range of organizations on many topics: educational innovation, mental health, addictions, trauma, childhood development, conflict resolution, creativity, leadership, and technology (among other themes). He works with social service agencies, counselors, and educators on themes of professional and clinical development. He has worked with large corporate clients (such as IKEA and Translink), governmental organizations (such as Vancouver Coastal Health and the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development), post-secondary educational institutions (such as UBC and Simon Fraser University), professional organizations (such as the Business Council of BC and the BC Union of Psychiatric Nurses), independent schools (such as St. George's, Southridge, and Crofton House), nonprofit organizations (such as First United and the Canadian Cancer Society) and many other groups.

Ross Laird has appeared on CBC's Tapestry, North by Northwest, The Early Edition, Daybreak North, and on the CBC Evening News, and has also appeared on Bravo's Book Television, CityTV's Breakfast Television, and on CKNW's World Today, Morning News, and Bill Good shows. His first book appeared on Macleans national best-seller list and he is a recipient of the Union Institute's Sussman Award for Academic Excellence for "ultimate academic achievement at the doctoral level." His doctoral dissertation, which subsequently was adapted into book form

as *Grain of Truth: The Ancient Lessons of Craft*, was shortlisted for the 2001 Governor General's Award (the highest literary award in Canada) and the BC Book Prize. *Grain of Truth* was voted one of the 100 most important books of 2001 by the *Globe and Mail* and by *Spirituality and Health* magazine. He is the recipient of the 1997 Cecilia B. Lamont poetry prize.

Laird's second book, *A Stone's Throw: The Enduring Nature of Myth* explains the origins of the mythologies of Egypt, Israel, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. *A Stone's Throw* continues the themes of creativity and spirituality that were explored in *Grain of Truth: The Ancient Lessons of Craft*. Traversing five thousand years of history, and from his perspective as a craftsman sculpting stone in his shop, *A Stone's Throw* follows the evolution of sacred mythologies from the pharaohs and their pyramids to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the sacred Kaaba stone in Mecca, the Washington Monument, and the World Trade Center. *A Stone's Throw* offers readers a means of understanding the contemporary world with greater depth and clarity. It lays bare the shared heritage of religions, of peoples, of the essential themes of human nature.

Questionnaire

Subject: Trails Carolina

Interviews conducted between July 1st - July 15th, 2015

- How did the Trails pedagogic, including object-based therapies, develop? Where did your approach begin?
- In my research I've been learning about how objects foster transpersonal experience; they can connect us with a deep internal energy source and innermost creative source. This experience can be referred to as a person's "unique aliveness," such as what someone might feel when meditating. Another example is when a person is making something or being creative and loses their sense of time and feels a relief from personal defenses and preconceptions. They relax into a state of mindfulness. In your work have you witnessed someone having this sort of experience when in the act of using, receiving or making objects? What do these moments look like when witnessed?
- I've been exploring the concept that people have a sort of "primal dialogue" with objects: we have a non-verbal exchange or relationship with objects that can illicit emotions, empathy, and enable us to articulate our thoughts and expressions in a way that we might not be able to otherwise. Have you experienced a moment when someone is working with an object and seems to make that connection? Like an "ah-hah" moment when that person seems to grasp an idea or make a connection that they couldn't through verbal means? Or when a person can express themselves in a way that they couldn't verbally?
- Can you describe the relationship between very specific objects (found objects in nature, hand-made tools, milestone beads, etc.) and feelings of empowerment that you have witnessed? Are there common indicators that tell you that someone is feeling empowered?

- What are the differences that you see when someone achieves and receives a milestone bead, and when someone achieves the proper construction of the bow drill tools, or finds an object in nature to use as a communicative device? What other object-based experiences?
- Do the adolescents ever take any of their objects with them after completing the program? (Beads, objects used in fire-making, tools such as the bow drill, etc.) Do you know why?
- How have the uses of objects changed/evolved in your practice over the years?
- What measurable (long term) outcomes have you been able to track resulting from your object-based therapeutic exercises?
- Do you know of other object-based therapies/therapeutic programs that you can recommend?
- Are there other meaningful object-based experiences, observations or therapeutic exercises to share that I haven't asked about?

Questionnaire

Subject: Ross Laird

Interviewed on July 24th, 2015

- In my thoughts on the concept of people's "primal dialogue" with objects, I believe that objects can speak to us, for us, and along with us, and in their silence relieve us of the packaging - burden - of spoken or written language. This nonverbal relationship enables us to connect with the meaning of objects and of ourselves free from preconceptions or judgement. Objects enable us to feel, think and communicate nonverbally with truth and honesty. Have you experienced this in your work as a craftsman or in your therapies?

- In Grain of Truth you describe walking among the totem poles and various collections and "gaze at these ethereal faces staring back from a lost age...hear that whisper spiraling out from the primordial source of things," and the "spirit of creative work calls to whomever will listen." These elegant passages resonate with my thoughts on the primal dialogue that people have with objects, and I wonder about a person's ability to "hear the call" as you say. Are there ways a person can enhance their ability to gain awareness of the meaning of objects in their lives? To increase their openness to an object's call?

- In my research I've been learning about how objects foster transpersonal experience; they connect us with a deep internal energy and innermost creative source. This experience can be referred to as a person's "unique aliveness," such as what someone might feel when meditating. Another example is when a person is making something, experiences flow, and feels a relief from personal defenses. They relax into a state of mindfulness. In your work have you witnessed someone having this sort of experience when in the act of using, receiving or making objects? What do these moments look like?

- I wonder a lot about the potency of tools - tools that we make ourselves and enable us to create something, be it another object or something truly primal such as fire. You describe your tools very powerfully as “reminders to remember, and to act.” Can you talk about the relationship amongst tools, objects, and feelings of empowerment that you have experienced or witnessed?

- In A Stone’s Throw you say “In countless guises, the instinct for beauty prevails” and at the Met in New York you reflect upon fragments of sculpture that have survived - endured - for centuries amidst death and destruction. You draw that moment into your own experience during 9/11, and the healing you found through working on a carving, and the smiling, indomitable spirit of the sculpture you created. Do you think that this indomitable spirit - of the fragments in the museum, and of the sculpture that you brought into the world, speak to people’s need for stability and personal endurance? What do you think is the psychology of our relationship with an object’s ability to endure through time and tragedy.

- Objects can be powerful because they bear witness to life, events, times, and become repositories of those stories. In this light objects can live beyond ordinary perception and become transcendent, evoke empathy and inspire feelings of awe. This is described as numinous experience. Can a numinous experience with an object be part of a therapeutic experience? How can we foster numinous experiences?

- What drives you to make objects?

- Are there other meaningful object-based experiences, observations or relevant therapeutic exercises to share that I haven’t asked about?

Brenda Cowan, Associate Professor of Exhibition Design in the School of Graduate Studies at SUNY/FIT, works in the areas of museum exhibition project management, development, exhibition narrative, object studies, object-based learning, visitor studies and exhibition evaluation.



The author and an Inukshuk carved from soapstone.

(Making)