

***Still Warm*: Ontological Discomfort, Curatorial Affect, and the Limits of Flat Ontology in Contemporary Artistic Practice**

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Abstract

This paper examines *Still Warm*, a practice-based artistic research project that stages a cabinet of curiosities composed of found animal remains and their digitally preserved traces. Emerging from a long-term conceptual practice known as *The 8 Museum*, the project marks a decisive shift from pattern recognition toward mortality, from semiotic play toward ethical and affective gravity. Through this shift, *Still Warm* becomes a site for interrogating Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), the influential philosophical framework that proposes a radically flattened ontology in which all objects exist equally. The paper introduces two concepts — ontological discomfort and affective gravity — to describe what happens when flat ontology encounters the experiential realities of death, care, and ethical attention. Drawing on feminist care ethics, situated knowledges, and new materialist theory, the analysis demonstrates that hierarchy re-enters flat ontological systems not through metaphysics but through affect, curation, and responsibility. The paper argues that artistic practice functions as a site of theory production rather than illustration, and proposes a post-OOO orientation grounded in the recognition that while beings may exist equally, they are never encountered equally.

Keywords

Object-Oriented Ontology, artistic research, curatorial ethics, cabinet of curiosities, affect theory, digital preservation, posthumanism

1. Introduction

Still Warm is a practice-based artistic research project that stages a cabinet of curiosities composed of found animal remains and digitally preserved traces of once-living bodies. Emerging from a long-term conceptual practice known as *The 8 Museum* — an encounter-driven collection of the number eight in everyday environments — the work marks a decisive shift from pattern recognition toward mortality, from semiotic play toward ethical and affective gravity. Through this shift, *Still Warm* becomes a site for interrogating one of the most influential philosophical frameworks in contemporary art theory: Object Oriented Ontology (OOO).

OOO proposes a radically flattened ontology in which all objects — animate and inanimate, organic and artificial — exist equally, without intrinsic hierarchy (Harman, 2018). This position has proven productive for posthumanist and new materialist discourses, challenging anthropocentrism and expanding the field of artistic attention beyond the human subject. Yet while flat ontology offers metaphysical elegance, it encounters resistance when confronted with the experiential realities of death, care, and ethical attention. A dead bird does not feel equivalent to a plastic number tag. A turtle shell carries a different weight than a cracked tile holding a painted number eight, even if philosophy insists they share ontological parity.

This paper argues that this gap between theory and feeling is not a minor discomfort but a foundational problem for contemporary curatorial practice. Through *Still Warm*, this tension is staged

rather than resolved, producing what is here termed ontological discomfort: the sensation that arises when flat ontology encounters uneven affect, when metaphysical equality collapses under the gravity of ethical and emotional response. Rather than refuting Object Oriented Ontology through abstract critique, *Still Warm* pressure-tests its viability as a lived framework, demonstrating that hierarchy re-enters flat ontological systems not through metaphysics but through care, selection, and responsibility — dynamics that Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) identifies as constitutive of knowledge itself rather than incidental to it.

By framing curation as an ethical act and the cabinet of curiosities as an "ontology machine," this paper positions artistic practice as a site of theory production rather than illustration (Borgdorff, 2012). It argues that once death enters the room, flat ontology becomes curatorially unstable. While OOO may remain philosophically coherent, it proves existentially and ethically incomplete when confronted with the realities of witnessing, preservation, and the moral weight of remains. In this sense, *Still Warm* does not dismantle flat ontology; it wounds it through experience, offering a post-OOO framework grounded in what may be called affective gravity — the recognition that hierarchies persist not because they are ontologically true, but because they are emotionally and ethically unavoidable.

2. Object Oriented Ontology and Contemporary Art

Object Oriented Ontology emerged in the early twenty-first century as a response to what its proponents saw as the over-privileging of human access, interpretation, and correlation in philosophy. Associated most prominently with Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Timothy Morton, OOO argues for a radically decentered metaphysics in which all entities — humans, animals, tools, images, numbers, institutions — exist equally as objects, withdrawn from one another and irreducible to their relations or uses (Harman, 2011; Bryant, 2011; Morton, 2013). For Harman, objects possess a fourfold structure: a real object and its real qualities, both of which withdraw from access, and a sensual object and its sensual qualities, which are available to perception but never exhaust the real (Harman, 2011, pp. 114-115). In this framework, no being occupies a privileged ontological position; hierarchy is not a feature of existence itself but a projection imposed by human-centered systems of value.

Within contemporary art and curatorial discourse, this flattening of ontology has been influential. OOO and adjacent currents in new materialism and posthumanism have encouraged artists to move beyond anthropocentric narratives, to attend to the agency of materials, infrastructures, and nonhuman actors, and to reconceive the artwork not as a vehicle for expression but as one object among many in a distributed field of relations. Jane Bennett's (2010) account of "vibrant matter" has been particularly productive in this regard, foregrounding the agency of non-human entities and the capacity of materials to exert what she calls "thing-power" — a force that exceeds human intention and challenges the notion that matter is inert stuff awaiting human manipulation (Bennett, 2010, p. 6). Levi Bryant's (2011) formulation of flat ontology as a democratic principle — the claim that all objects exist on the same ontological plane — has supported practices that foreground process over product, system over subject, and ecology over authorship. Museums and exhibitions, too, have increasingly adopted languages of assemblage, network, and entanglement, positioning artworks, viewers, and environments as co-equal participants in meaning-making.

Yet the very success of flat ontology in expanding artistic attention also reveals its limitations. While OOO offers a powerful corrective to human exceptionalism, it tends to under-theorise the role of affect, ethics, and mortality in shaping how objects are encountered and valued. In insisting that a dead bird and a plastic tag are ontologically equivalent, OOO performs an important philosophical gesture — but one that remains difficult to inhabit in lived experience. The challenge is not intellectual assent but existential credibility. Flat ontology may persuade the mind, yet it often fails to convince the body.

This tension becomes particularly acute in contexts of curation and display. Museums are not neutral spaces of ontological equality; they are, as Fiona Cameron (2015) has argued, technologies for producing hierarchy through selection, framing, and preservation. To place an object in a vitrine is already to elevate it, to inscribe it within regimes of attention, care, and historical significance. Even in exhibitions informed by posthumanist or new materialist thought, curatorial practice inevitably reinstates gradients of value: what is protected, what is labelled, what is contextualised, what is allowed to decay. OOO's claim that all objects exist equally sits uneasily with these institutional realities.

Moreover, the question of death exposes a critical blind spot in flat ontology. While OOO is well equipped to theorise the withdrawn being of rocks, tools, and technological artifacts, it offers far less guidance when objects are not merely inert but once-living. Remains carry with them what might be called ethical residue — an afterlife of responsibility, care, and discomfort that cannot be reduced to metaphysical parity. A deceased animal is never encountered solely as an object; it is also encountered as a former subject, a trace of vulnerability, a reminder of finitude. In such encounters, hierarchy reasserts itself not as a metaphysical claim but as an affective reality.

Recent critiques of OOO have begun to address these gaps, particularly from feminist, phenomenological, and care-ethics perspectives. Donna Haraway's (2016) call to "stay with the trouble" implicitly challenges the withdrawn, non-relational character of Harman's objects by insisting on the inescapability of entanglement and response. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) argues that any ontology that sidelines care and responsibility risks becoming ethically thin — that knowing about something and caring for something are inseparable in any practice that takes its objects seriously. Karen Barad's (2007) account of intra-action proposes that entities do not pre-exist their relations but come into being through them, challenging OOO's foundational commitment to the autonomy and withdrawal of objects. Yet much of this critique remains at the level of theory. What is less explored is how these tensions manifest in artistic practice — how curators, artists, and audiences negotiate the contradictions of flat ontology not in argument but in experience.

It is precisely here that *Still Warm* intervenes. Rather than positioning itself as a philosophical rebuttal to OOO, the project stages a lived encounter with its limits. By bringing found animal remains into a cabinet of curiosities alongside the conceptual legacy of *The 8 Museum*, the work exposes the friction between ontological equality and affective gravity.

3. Methodology — Practice as Theory

Still Warm is grounded in a practice-led research methodology that treats artistic production not as illustration of theory but as a site of theory-making in its own right, aligning with what Borgdorff (2012) describes as research through art rather than about it. The project operates in reverse of conventional approaches: concepts emerge from sustained artistic encounter, curatorial decision-making, and ethical negotiation with materials, rather than from a prior philosophical framework applied to practice.

3.1 Research context and duration

The research has been conducted over a two-year period from January 2024 to the present, embedded within the broader practice of *The 8 Museum* — a project that documents encounters with the Hindu-Arabic numeral 8 in everyday environments. As of early 2026, *The 8 Museum* archive comprises more than 6,300 individually documented encounters across 18 countries and four continents, with a projected completion point of 8,888 encounters by early-to-mid 2027. The practice has been walked extensively in Greece (where the author is based), Australia (where the project originated), Japan, Italy, Thailand, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Portugal, Spain, and Singapore, among others — each

geographic and cultural context producing distinct encounter conditions and distinct forms of the numeral 8. The embodied scale of the practice is significant: health data recorded during the project period documents more than 7,200 kilometres walked since January 2024, an average of nearly nine kilometres per day sustained over two years. During regular practice walks across urban, suburban, and semi-rural settings, the artist repeatedly encountered dead animals: birds, insects, small mammals, and fragments left behind by traffic, weather, or predation. These encounters were not sought or staged; they arose within the same attentional mode that governed the parent project but introduced a radically different affective register. *Still Warm* emerged from the recognition that these encounters demanded a distinct framework — one that could account for the ethical weight that flat ontology, the guiding philosophy of *The 8 Museum*, could not adequately address.

3.2 The cabinet as method

The methodological core of the project is the cabinet of curiosities. Historically, cabinets functioned as early technologies of knowledge organisation, assembling disparate objects into microcosms that blurred science, spectacle, and wonder (Cameron, 2015). They were not neutral archives but instruments of power, framing the world through acts of selection and display. *Still Warm* repurposes this form not to revive its taxonomic ambitions but to expose its ontological force. The cabinet becomes a method: a way of testing how objects acquire meaning, how hierarchy is produced through framing, and how ethical weight enters through curatorial attention.

3.3 Non-extractive practice

Central to this method is a commitment to non-extractive practice. All specimens in *Still Warm* are found rather than taken. No animals are killed, collected, or physically altered for the work. The physical body is left entirely in situ — a commitment that applies to all specimens, not only those protected by law. What enters the collection is not the object itself but its digital trace: photographic documentation, sculptural representation, and the narrative fact of encounter. Preservation here is reframed not as possession but as witnessing — an act of care that resists ownership.

This approach situates *Still Warm* within contemporary debates around post-museological ethics and digital preservation. As museums and archives increasingly grapple with the politics of acquisition, repatriation, and extractive histories, non-extractive methodologies offer alternative models of engagement with material culture (Cameron, 2021). By relying on digital representation rather than physical collection, *Still Warm* positions the image not as a surrogate for loss but as an ethical boundary: a way of allowing the dead to be seen without being claimed. In this framework, digital mediation becomes a form of restraint rather than amplification, introducing distance where traditional cabinets sought proximity.

3.4 Curation as ethical action

The project's methodology foregrounds curation as ethical action, following Barad's (2007) argument that observation is never neutral but always constitutive — the apparatus of observation co-produces what is observed. Each curatorial decision — to include or exclude, to isolate or contextualise, to display or withhold — functions not merely as an aesthetic choice but as what Barad terms an "agential cut" that shapes how objects are felt, valued, and remembered. This challenges dominant narratives in which curatorial neutrality is presumed or aestheticised. In *Still Warm*, neutrality is treated as a fiction; every act of framing is acknowledged as an intervention that shapes the conditions of encounter.

3.5 Sustained discomfort as method

Importantly, *Still Warm* does not seek to resolve the tensions it generates. It adopts what might be described as a method of sustained discomfort — a willingness to remain within unresolved ethical and philosophical contradictions as a condition of research. This aligns with Haraway's (2016) call to "stay with the trouble" — to resist premature resolution and instead inhabit the difficulty of complex ecological and ethical entanglements. Knowledge here is not produced through answers but through the careful staging of questions that resist easy settlement. This refusal of closure aligns with broader currents in experimental artistic inquiry that privilege process over outcome and tension over synthesis.

3.6 Audience response as research material

In addition to curatorial practice, the project incorporates audience responses as part of its research material. Responses gathered through an in-class presentation of the draft cabinet to MAREs cohort peers, and through feedback received since the launch of the digital cabinet at <https://stillwarm.org/>, are treated not as evaluative feedback but as data about how flat ontology operates — and fails to operate — in lived encounter. These responses, though drawn from a small and situated audience rather than a formal exhibition context, consistently reveal patterns that inform the theoretical analysis presented in this paper.

4. Case Study — *Still Warm*

Still Warm emerged as an unplanned but inevitable extension of *The 8 Museum*. To understand why the encounter with animal remains proved so destabilising, it is necessary to understand what *The 8 Museum* was already attempting. The project was not merely concerned with pattern recognition or the semiotics of attention; it was, from its inception, an intentional experiment in inhabiting Object Oriented Ontology. The artist sought to encounter the Hindu-Arabic numeral 8 not as a sign to be decoded but as an object to be met — to treat each found 8 with the attentiveness and respect that photographers have historically reserved for human subjects, elevating it from background noise to the status of a co-participant in the encounter. Each photograph was conceived not as a capture but as a record of a meeting between objects at a specific moment in time: the practitioner, the 8, and the context in which the 8 existed at that exact instant. In this sense, *The 8 Museum* was already an attempt to practice flat ontology — to see whether one could genuinely live within a framework that grants equal ontological standing to all things.

It was precisely the seriousness of this commitment that made *Still Warm* possible and philosophically charged. During the same walks that produced collections of encountered eights, the artist repeatedly encountered dead animals: a turtle on a semi-rural road, birds, insects, small mammals, fragments left behind by traffic, weather, or other animals. These encounters were not sought, staged, or curated in advance. They occurred within the same attentional mode that governed *The 8 Museum*, but they introduced a radically different affective register — one that the project's commitment to flat ontology could not accommodate.

This shift marked a turning point. Where *The 8 Museum* could sustain its OOO-informed equanimity — treating each 8 as an encounter between objects rather than a subject observing an object — the presence of remains broke the frame. Death altered the temperature of the practice. The question was no longer whether the practitioner could meet a found 8 as an equal, but whether that same equanimity could be sustained in the presence of a body that was once alive. The result was *Still Warm*: a cabinet of curiosities organised not around rarity or wonder, but around the moment where flat ontology encountered its own limit.

The cabinet format is central to the work's operation. Each specimen is presented individually, isolated against a neutral background, with minimal contextual information. This restraint is deliberate. Rather than overwhelming the viewer with narrative or scientific explanation, the display foregrounds the act of looking itself. The viewer is placed in a position of witness rather than analyst, invited to sit with the discomfort of encounter without the relief of categorisation. In contrast to traditional natural history displays, *Still Warm* avoids taxonomic hierarchies and avoids transforming the remains into symbols or metaphors. The animals are not representative of species, ecosystems, or moral lessons. They are presented simply as bodies that were once alive.

Crucially, the project refuses physical possession. No specimen is collected, altered, or retained; the physical body is left where it was found. The cabinet contains only digital representations: photographs and sculptural records that document the encounter without removing the body from its environment. This choice positions *Still Warm* in opposition to extractive museum practices while still engaging the visual language of preservation. The work stages a "museum-style afterlife" that is not taxidermy, not salvage, and not ownership, but attention. What enters the collection is not the animal itself, but the trace of its having been here. The digital cabinet of curiosities is publicly accessible at <https://stillwarm.org/>, where the accumulative logic of the project — its growing archive of witnessed encounters — can be experienced directly.

Alongside the biological specimens, the cabinet includes a secondary category: obsolete media devices — cameras, lenses, and storage cards positioned in states of recent obsolescence. These objects occupy a deliberate middle ground between the found eights of *The 8 Museum* and the animal remains. They are not alive, nor were they ever alive, yet they share with the remains a quality of latency: they once functioned, once recorded, once participated in circuits of attention and care, and now persist as residues of that participation. Their inclusion tests the specificity of the paper's central claim. If flat ontology is destabilised by any non-functioning object, the argument risks becoming trivially broad. But the cabinet reveals something more precise: obsolete media provokes a different register of affect than animal remains. One might feel nostalgia or mild melancholy toward a dead camera; one feels ethical gravity toward a dead bird. This graduated response — from indifference to nostalgia to moral weight — maps the terrain where flat ontology begins to buckle, and it does so with a specificity that abstract argument cannot replicate.

Within the cabinet, the specimens accumulate. Individually, each encounter carries weight; collectively, they generate a growing sense of affective pressure. As the viewer moves from media artefact to insect to bird to mammal, the distinction between object and subject becomes increasingly unstable. The remains resist being read as neutral objects among others. They insist on being felt differently. This accumulation is critical to the work's effect: it is not one dead animal that destabilises flat ontology, but the repeated insistence of mortality within a system that claims ontological equality.

The relationship between *Still Warm* and *The 8 Museum* remains present, even when the eights are no longer visually foregrounded. Conceptually, the cabinet operates within the same attentional field. The same logic of encounter — objects not authored by the artist, found rather than fabricated — governs both practices. Yet the contrast between the two reveals a crucial asymmetry. Where encountered eights invite interpretation and pattern recognition, encountered remains foreclose play. They produce what might be described as affective gravity: a pull toward seriousness, care, and ethical reflection that cannot be neutralised by theory.

Initial audience responses to *Still Warm* consistently reflect this tension. When the work is presented alongside its OOO framing — as it has been in academic contexts where viewers are already familiar with or introduced to the philosophy beforehand — the theoretical scaffolding quickly buckles under the

weight of experience. The longer one looks, the harder it becomes to sustain the idea that all objects feel equal, even if one accepts that they are ontologically so. The cabinet thus operates as an experiential test: not asking viewers to agree with a philosophical position, but inviting them to notice where their own responses exceed it.

In this way, *Still Warm* functions as what might be called an ontology machine. It does not assert a claim about the nature of being; it constructs a situation in which claims about being are placed under pressure. Through the simple acts of isolation, repetition, and restraint, the cabinet reveals how hierarchy re-enters flat systems through affect and ethics rather than through metaphysical assertion.

5. Analysis — Ontological Discomfort and Affective Gravity

The central theoretical contribution of *Still Warm* emerges in the space between philosophical assertion and lived response. While Object Oriented Ontology insists on the ontological equality of all objects, the encounters staged by the cabinet reveal a persistent experiential resistance to this claim. This resistance is not simply a matter of cultural conditioning or personal sentiment; it operates at a deeper affective and ethical level. The sensation that arises when flat ontology meets uneven feeling is here named ontological discomfort.

5.1 Ontological discomfort

Ontological discomfort is not a cognitive disagreement with flat ontology but a bodily one. It is the moment when philosophical coherence fails to account for the weight of experience — when a viewer may intellectually assent to the idea that a dead bird and a plastic number tag exist equally, yet cannot escape the felt reality that they do not carry equal significance. This sensation persists as a tension between what can be thought and what must be felt — functioning as what Sara Ahmed (2006) describes as a moment of "disorientation," in which the alignment between body, world, and theoretical framework breaks down, revealing the assumptions embedded in our orientations toward objects. Ontological discomfort is not resolved through argument. It signals where theory loses traction and where new modes of inquiry must begin.

5.2 Affective gravity

This discomfort points to a deeper dynamic that can be described as affective gravity. While flat ontology removes metaphysical hierarchy, affect reinstates hierarchy through force rather than claim. Certain objects exert a pull on attention, care, and ethical responsibility that others do not. This pull is not chosen; it is experienced. A dead animal draws the gaze differently from a found number not because of its ontological status, but because of what Bennett (2010, p. 6) calls "thing-power" — the capacity of matter to exceed the frameworks imposed upon it — combined with what Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) identifies as the ethical residue that clings to once-living bodies. Affective gravity thus names the way hierarchy reappears in ostensibly flat systems through emotional and moral weight rather than philosophical decree.

5.3 Addressing the anthropocentrism objection

A critical question arises here, one that demands direct address: if affect is the diagnostic tool by which flat ontology's limits are revealed, why should affect be trusted rather than dismissed as subjective bias — a latent return to the very anthropocentrism that OOO sought to overcome?

The answer requires distinguishing between two forms of anthropocentrism. The first, which OOO rightly contests, places humans at the centre of ontological hierarchy — asserting that human perception

determines what is real. This is ontological anthropocentrism: the claim that being itself is structured around human access. The second, which *Still Warm* invokes, is not ontological but ethical: it acknowledges that human positionality is an irreducible condition of any ethical encounter, without claiming that this positionality determines the structure of reality.

As Haraway (1988) argues in her foundational account of situated knowledges, the demand for a "view from nowhere" — an unpositioned, objective perspective — is itself the most deceptive form of bias. All knowledge is produced from somewhere, by someone, within conditions of embodiment and care. The apparent objectivity of flat ontology, its refusal to privilege any perspective, can itself be understood as a form of what Haraway calls the "god trick" — a claim to see everything from nowhere, which is in fact a specific and interested vantage point masquerading as neutrality.

Affect, in this framework, is not a distortion of ontological inquiry; it is evidence that ontology has entered the domain of ethical life, where abstract equality is tested against the demands of situated responsibility. Barad's (2007) account of intra-action reinforces this point: entities are not pre-given but are co-constituted through their encounters, and the "cuts" that distinguish observer from observed are always already ethical interventions. The felt weight of a dead animal is not mere subjective bias to be bracketed away; it is real information about the kind of relational field that the encounter produces. To dismiss it is to reproduce precisely the disembodied abstraction that feminist and care-ethics critiques have identified as the blind spot of speculative realism (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Still Warm does not, therefore, represent a naive return to anthropocentrism. It proposes instead that any encounter with objects is always already situated, embodied, and ethically charged — and that acknowledging this condition is more rigorous, not less, than pretending to a view from nowhere. The project's positioning is not an abandonment of posthumanist inquiry but an insistence that posthumanism must account for the irreducible fact of the positioned observer. As Ahmed (2006) demonstrates, all orientation toward objects is shaped by the body's history, its vulnerabilities, and its capacity for care. Flatness, in this light, is not a neutral description but an abstraction that suppresses the conditions of its own production.

5.4 The ethical remainder

In *Still Warm*, affective gravity is not manufactured through spectacle. It arises through repetition and proximity. Each additional specimen intensifies the pressure on the viewer's capacity to maintain ontological neutrality. The cumulative effect is not shock but saturation: a growing awareness that death cannot be assimilated into a system of equal objects without remainder.

This remainder is ethical. Ethics enters the cabinet not as a thematic layer but as a structural force. The very questions that viewers ask — Am I allowed to look? Am I complicit in aestheticising death? Is this care or consumption? — signal the collapse of ontological flatness in the presence of responsibility. OOO offers little guidance here, precisely because ethics depends on differentiation. Care is selective. Responsibility is uneven. To care for everything equally is, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) observes, to care for nothing in particular. Flat ontology, when confronted with ethical demand, reveals its own insufficiency.

5.5 Curation as hierarchy

Curation intensifies this contradiction. The cabinet of curiosities is not merely a neutral container but a technology of hierarchy. To place an object in a vitrine is to elevate it, performing what Barad (2007) would recognise as an agential cut — a constitutive intervention that co-produces the conditions under which objects become visible, meaningful, and valuable. Even in *Still Warm*, where the refusal of

physical collection resists traditional museum power, the act of digital preservation still performs a curatorial elevation. The image becomes a site of attention, the encounter becomes a moment of care. Selection, framing, and isolation — however ethically motivated — reintroduce gradients of value. Flat ontology collapses not because it is philosophically flawed, but because curation makes it practically untenable.

Ontological discomfort thus emerges as the felt recognition of this collapse. It is the sensation of standing in a space where theory insists on equality while practice produces hierarchy. This sensation is not a failure of the viewer to understand philosophy; it is evidence that philosophy has reached the limits of its applicability.

6. Discussion — What Breaks When Flatness Meets Death

The analysis of *Still Warm* reveals that the tension between flat ontology and affective gravity is not a local problem limited to one artistic project. It exposes a broader structural contradiction at the heart of contemporary curatorial culture: the coexistence of philosophical commitments to ontological equality with institutional practices that inevitably produce hierarchy. This contradiction becomes most visible — most unavoidable — when death enters the frame.

6.1 Museums as machines of value

Museums have long functioned as machines of value. Through preservation, labelling, and display, they transform objects into carriers of meaning, authority, and historical weight (Cameron, 2015). Even in post-museological contexts that seek to decentralise narratives and resist human exceptionalism, the act of curation continues to perform a sorting function. Objects are selected, protected, and elevated, while others remain outside the frame of care. Flat ontology may contest the legitimacy of these hierarchies in theory, but curatorial practice depends on hierarchy to operate at all. Without selection, there is no exhibition; without framing, no meaning emerges.

The 8 Museum was conceived from the outset as a speculative museology enquiry: who gets to decide what is worthy of preservation and display, and what would it look like to foreground an object we normally give almost no attention at all — not once or twice, but repeatedly, obsessively, to the exclusion of all other subjects? By elevating the incidental number eight into a collection of thousands, the project tested whether sustained curatorial attention could generate significance from apparent insignificance. *Still Warm* makes this contradiction visible by introducing remains into a system otherwise sustained by a certain productive absurdity. Where *The 8 Museum* could maintain its lightness — inviting pattern recognition, semiotic drift, and aesthetic pleasure — the presence of death imposes ethical gravity. The cabinet no longer functions merely as a site of wonder; it becomes a site of responsibility. Viewers are compelled to confront not only what they see, but how they are seeing it. In this way, the work exposes the impossibility of neutrality in any encounter with mortality.

6.2 Digital preservation as ethical act

This has implications for how digital preservation and representation are understood within contemporary art. As institutions increasingly turn to digital archives, virtual exhibitions, and photographic documentation as alternatives to physical collection, ethical questions are often framed in terms of access, ownership, and restitution. *Still Warm* reframes this discussion by suggesting that preservation is not merely a technical solution but an affective and moral act. To digitise a dead animal is not to neutralise its ethical weight; it is to relocate that weight into new circuits of attention. The image

becomes a site where care, discomfort, and responsibility continue to operate, even in the absence of the physical body.

In this sense, digital mediation does not flatten ethics — it redistributes it. The work challenges assumptions that non-extractive practices automatically resolve the moral tensions of display. While refusing physical possession is a critical gesture, it does not eliminate hierarchy; it simply shifts the terrain on which hierarchy is enacted. The question becomes not whether hierarchy exists, but how it is acknowledged and staged. *Still Warm* insists that ethical transparency matters more than claims of neutrality — modelling what Haraway (2016) calls a practice of "response-ability," in which the capacity to respond ethically is cultivated rather than assumed.

6.3 Toward a post-OOO curatorial ethics

These dynamics point toward the need for what might be described as a post-OOO curatorial ethics — one that accepts the metaphysical insights of flat ontology while refusing its ethical insufficiency. Such an ethics would recognise that while all objects may exist equally, they do not demand equal care. Care is necessarily selective, situated, and relational (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). It arises not from metaphysical principles but from vulnerability and proximity. Death intensifies this selectivity, making visible the emotional infrastructures that underlie all acts of valuation.

From this perspective, *Still Warm* contributes to a growing body of work that treats discomfort not as a problem to be solved but as a productive condition of contemporary art. Discomfort becomes a diagnostic tool, revealing where inherited theoretical frameworks fail to account for lived complexity. Rather than smoothing over these failures, the project holds them open, allowing tension to remain visible and generative. This approach aligns with broader movements in critical theory and feminist ethics that emphasise care, situated knowledge, and relational responsibility over abstract universality (Haraway, 1988; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Ultimately, what breaks when flatness meets death is not ontology itself, but the fantasy of ethical neutrality. The cabinet of curiosities, once a symbol of encyclopedic ambition and colonial power, is here repurposed as a site of ethical exposure. It shows that even in a world where objects are said to exist equally, some encounters will always matter more — not because philosophy demands it, but because being human does.

7. Conclusion — After Flatness

Still Warm began not as a theoretical intervention but as an artistic encounter: a shift in attention from patterns to remains, from the semiotics of the everyday to the ethics of mortality. Yet through this shift, the project has come to articulate a deeper philosophical challenge. By staging death within a framework shaped by Object Oriented Ontology, *Still Warm* exposes a tension that cannot be resolved by theory alone — the tension between ontological equality and affective gravity, between what philosophy claims and what the body insists upon.

This paper has argued that the significance of *Still Warm* lies not in refuting flat ontology, but in pressure-testing its limits through curatorial practice. Object Oriented Ontology offers a powerful metaphysical account of being, one that has productively reshaped contemporary art discourse by decentering the human and expanding the field of attention (Harman, 2018). Yet when confronted with death, care, and ethical responsibility, flat ontology reveals its insufficiency as a lived framework. Hierarchy re-enters not through metaphysical argument but through affect, selection, and responsibility — through the very conditions that make art and curation possible.

The concept of ontological discomfort names this moment of collapse: the sensation that arises when philosophical coherence fails to accommodate the weight of experience. This discomfort is not an obstacle to understanding; it is a form of knowledge in its own right — what Borgdorff (2012) describes as the epistemic contribution of artistic research, knowledge that can be produced through practice but not fully articulated through propositional language alone. Alongside this, affective gravity describes the force through which certain objects — particularly once-living bodies — command disproportionate ethical and emotional attention, reinstating hierarchy within ostensibly flat systems.

Through the cabinet of curiosities, *Still Warm* transforms these tensions into a methodological stance. The cabinet becomes not a repository of wonders but an ontology machine: a curatorial apparatus that reveals how meaning, value, and responsibility are inevitably produced through acts of framing and care. By refusing physical extraction and relying on digital preservation, the project models an alternative ethics of encounter — one that prioritises witnessing over possession, attention over ownership. Yet even this refusal does not abolish hierarchy; it merely relocates it, demonstrating that ethical weight persists regardless of curatorial strategy.

What emerges, then, is not a rejection of Object Oriented Ontology but a call for its expansion. Flat ontology may remain compelling as a metaphysical description of the world. What it cannot provide is an adequate account of how the world is lived, curated, and felt — especially in the presence of death. *Still Warm* proposes a post-OOO orientation grounded in affective gravity: an acknowledgment that while beings may exist equally, they are never encountered equally, and that this asymmetry is not a theoretical failure but a human condition — one that, following Ahmed (2006), reveals how all orientation toward objects is always already shaped by the body's history, its vulnerabilities, and its capacity for care.

In positioning artistic practice as a site of ontological inquiry, this paper affirms the capacity of art to function not merely as illustration of theory but as theory in action. *Still Warm* demonstrates that philosophical frameworks gain depth when exposed to the conditions of lived experience, and that discomfort can be a generative force rather than a problem to be solved. By holding open the contradictions between flat ontology and ethical feeling, the project invites a rethinking of how contemporary art engages with posthumanist thought — not by seeking coherence at all costs, but by allowing fractures to remain visible.

After flatness, what remains is not hierarchy as doctrine, but hierarchy as experience: uneven, uncomfortable, and unavoidable. *Still Warm* does not attempt to resolve this condition. It stages it. And in doing so, it offers a model for how artistic research can inhabit philosophical tension — not to close it down, but to make it felt, shared, and ethically alive.

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