1 Altered values: searching for a new collecting

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The collecting problem facing museums has many facets. Many believe it is simply a matter of locating an answer to the questions 'What and how should a museum collect?' But the problem is also one of aspirations and implications: unsatisfied desires mingle with full stores and over-committed budgets. And while it is possible to locate many aspects of museum context and provision that explain why museums are never entirely successful collectors, and about which museums have much to complain, those of us who undertake the collecting also cherish beliefs, philosophies and practices which contribute to our undoing. We also undertake our collecting in a changing world and it this changing world which both provides the motivation to collect and yet, as I shall explain, also questions its validity.

Were our ancestors here now, they would have no difficulty recognising this modern collecting problem, for they too had faced it, often within a few years of the establishment of their institutions. But when they began the modern phase of institutional collecting, almost two centuries ago, they felt they were, in many ways, dealing with a finite world. They were primarily collecting objects from nature, in a world designed by a God, where the meaning of the object was set almost unquestioningly in the context of scientific realism. Indeed, within 50 years, some felt they had achieved their primary collecting goal.[1] What they did not foresee, initially, was that collecting would continue as knowledge, education, entertainment, social politics, fashion and so on demanded, and as the museums' disciplinary interests diversified. Cultural change thus added to the diversity of collectables while the emergence of a pervasive museum culture instilled in society a new need for public giving. Any finitude in the collecting project was surely an illusion.

Theirs was a world of discovery. Modern disciplines were formed and ways of knowing took on an empirical rigour which was made concrete in the new museum. However, by the late twentieth century this disciplinary framework had matured to a point of postmodernist deconstruction, and was now set in a world of digitisation and information networking. The

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1 S.J. Knell, *The Culture of English Geology 1815–1851: A Science Revealed Through Its Collecting* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 294.

'hard fact' concept of knowledge gathering, which had underpinned earlier collecting, now became situated in a complex interconnected and overlapping jumble of media, methods and philosophies, which contributed to individual ways of knowing. Here, belief, personal meaning making and politics conflicted with, if not superseded, an earlier philosophy (however realistic in actuality) of disinterested and rational objectivity. In this new world, legitimacy and authority were manoeuvred into the arguments of one group to question the collecting and interpretive rights of another.[2] Having sensed the power relations inherent in cultural representation, museums sought preferred viewpoints determined by morality and ethics. Institutional collecting, which could now be seen as a power-ridden act of authoring social memory, called for fundamental review.

This increased disciplinary reflection has reconfigured the object in knowledge creation and representation. Even in rational science, which has for the most part been unaltered by postmodernism, the collectable object is no longer at the heart of most of its ambitions. The nineteenth-century preoccupation with order disappeared long ago. Thus, however we might wish to view it, the collected object seems no longer to be as central to knowledge creation as it was. This is not to suggest that all intellectual pursuits are now devoid of the need for objects. Some, like art history, palaeontology and archaeology rely upon them, and many other disciplines still retain a taxonomic corner where the object remains key. But whereas once the object was accepted as a source of 'evidence' leading to absolute truth, now its claims are not beyond doubt.

This, however, is just one side of the interpretive equation: the readings that are possible from the object. The other side of this equation concerns the use of the object in the interpretation of knowledge to an audience; the role of the object in communication. Even here the 'real thing' may seem less essential. Many activities, which once relied upon its presence, are now achieved using other media: media in which the dynamism of the living event gives an even greater sense of witnessing a 'truth' or in which levels of interactivity and interrogation permit doubts to be removed. One wonders what would have happened if the early Victorians had had access to the movie camera or Internet. Would we have had a museum culture? But then the early twentieth-first-century Web, with its free access, encyclopaedic qualities, and failing curation, is perhaps more like the museum than we realise.

If, then, museums – defined as they are by the possession of these, now often altered, objects – are to exist into the future, how should they confront collecting? How do the efforts of the collecting institution fit into the

2 See, for example, the essays in I. Karp, and S.D. Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1991).

modern way of knowing? Are museums moving beyond the object and beyond disciplinary knowledge? Are they destined to become centres solely for personal meaning making, the solution of contemporary social issues, and for educational experiences? Certainly many recent changes have suggested this kind of a future, but there are others which seem to suggest a return to the core values of curatorship.

One possible future, being much discussed at this time, lies in the world of digitisation. Across Europe, for example, there are grand plans for a pervasive 'Ambient Intelligence Landscape' (AmIL) which is to be built around networked 'digital libraries' (repositories of digital material), which grow from, and echo, our physical museums and libraries. Information will come to us through our environment and via wearable technologies which are intimately linked to personal context and need.[3] With AmIL comes a plan for digital collecting which makes the encyclopaedic desires of our museum founders appear insignificant. However, the architects of this AmIL world are developing a knowledge infrastructure *exactly* like that created by museum builders in countries like Britain in the early nineteenth century. They too were constructing a pervasively networked new technology offering previously unknown access to knowledge. And just as in modern Europe, they too hoped to satisfy 'inclusionist' social agendas.[4] To this emerging world, then, the lessons of 200 years of museum collecting provide both a model and a warning.

A full review of digital 'collecting' is beyond the scope of this book, but I am mindful that much contemporary collecting will be replaced by activity focused on digital capture, which will be undertaken without the survival of a physical counterpart. With this will come changes in fundamental beliefs about the required physicality of evidence and the associated characteristics of authenticity, but I have already suggested that we have the capacity to accept more dynamic forms of evidence. Clearly the authority and credibility of the digitising institution will play a critical role in validating digital data just as it does in preserving and relaying data associated with material objects. In this new world, the relationship between public and expert remains the same: the expert distils a 'truth' and the public decides whether to trust in it.

What is interesting about these developments is that the fundamental drive to collect and engage with 'real things' (even if digitised) remains. The computer scientists who now lead the 'digital heritage' revolution, like

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3 Information Society Technologies Advisory Group (ISTAG), *Scenarios for Ambient Intelligence in 2010* (Luxembourg: European Commission, 2001). S.J. Knell, 'The shape of things to come: Museums in the technological landscape', *Museum and Society*, 1(3) (in press) discusses this development in more detail.

4 Knell, *Culture of English Geology*, 52.

many museum practitioners and the early founders of our museums, retain a firm belief in both the inherent factuality of the object and the ease with which it can be gathered up. It is social change of the kind suggested by this AmIL world which raises doubts and questions about the future of collecting but yet also suggests that in one form or another its future is assured.

Context and change

Change of the kind being predicted by the new technological visionary has been a constant companion to museum development. It was only in the last four decades of the twentieth century, for example, that a new professionalism transformed the museum's relationship with its collections. One key moment of realisation in this transformation came just a quarter century ago with the publication of Philip Doughty's report on the state and status of geology collections in UK museums. His rhetoric against a failing profession, then personified in the membership of the UK's ninety-year-old Museums Association, proved sensational and stimulated others to stand up and say 'We too have been abused!'[5] Professional standards of care and a workable system of museum accreditation were an almost immediate response.[6] But what had caused this moment of realisation? The implication was that the profession had been living a lie. Professions are, amongst other things, identified by standards, but there seemed to be none. This was, however, not the modern manifestation it appeared to be. Subsequent research revealed that collection abuse had been the norm for 160 years.[7] While academics had revelled in glorious histories, they had skirted around the realities and consequences of past amateurism, monument building and an irrationality of provision, preferring instead to document the nobler

5 P.S. Doughty, *The State and Status of Geology in United Kingdom Museums* (London: Geological Society, Miscellaneous Paper 13, 1981). See P.S. Doughty, 'On the rocks', *Museums Association Conference Report* (London; Museum Association,1980), 12–4. G. Kavanagh, 'Collecting from the era of memory, myth and delusion' (Chapter 9) mentions some of these reports but there were many others, for example: B. Williams, *Biological Collections UK* (London: Museums Association, 1987); J.D. Storer, *The Conservation of Industrial Collections: A Survey* (London: Science Museum and MGC, 1989).

6 Museums and Galleries Commission, *Introduction to Registration* (London: MGC, 1995). Museums and Galleries Commission, *Standards in the Museum Care of Geological Collections* (London: MGC, 1993). These documents were also produced for biology, archaeology, large object, musical instrument, costume and photographic collections.

7 S.J. Knell, 'The roller-coaster of museum geology', in S.M. Pearce (ed), *Exploring Science in Museums*, (London: Athlone, 1996), 29–56. Knell, *Culture of English Geology*. S.J. Knell, 'Collection loss, cultural change and the second law of thermodynamics', paper delivered at the Society for the History of Natural History, 'Lost, Stolen or Strayed' conference, Leiden, 2000.

qualities of unfunded dedication, the pursuit of natural knowledge and so forth. Rather than revealing a modern failure, Doughty and his contemporaries were, instead, seeing the mirror-like reflection of their own professional expectations. As part of a large influx of fresh and idealistic graduates into museums in the 1960s and early 1970s, they, like everyone who joins long-established institutions, discovered a past disguised by myth and rumour. What they saw was real enough and did indeed speak of failure and neglect. A glorious past *had*, it seemed, been betrayed: Britain has a substantial claim to founding modern geology, a founding which also stimulated the emergence of a pervasive provincial museum culture in England. It was rather unexpectedly, then, that later research revealed that the betrayal had been initiated by the very actors who had contributed to the founding of the science and museums in the first place.

'Betrayal', however, is the wrong word. Throughout their existence museums have suffered from gross underfunding. Perhaps they had had golden moments of prosperity, but for most these really were momentary. In Britain, we like to blame the government for such things as underfunding, but the fact is that most of our museums were invented by private individuals who then sought public support; most public museums began with private ideas, private collections or private societies. One cannot escape the fact that these museums were founded on the borderline between Victorian patronage and charity. 'Here are my children, please look after them!', the founders said to those public bodies which took them on, and at once the museum became an orphan under the care of step-parents. That local and national governments supported these orphans was a reflection of other evolving Victorian values: national and civic rivalry, charity, the democratisation of education, the reform of taxation and the adoption of a political philosophy in favour of public funding. At the time it was felt that these unwanted offspring could be patronised for public (and therefore political) benefit. Museums continue to be invented by the same means: a personal vision followed by the public purse. But there is a fine line here between this kind of public patronage and simple charity, and the cyclical fortunes of museums suggest that this line is often crossed. Thus the annual budget round frequently appears like a scene from *Oliver Twist*.[8]

Like most countries, Britain has lacked a strategic rationale for museums, and consequently there has always been a disparity between actual and required levels of funding. Every old plough poking its rusty metal above the roadside stinging nettles seems to be asking to become the founding

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8 '"Please, sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more." The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.' Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1838).

piece for yet another museum. But while the desire to found museums is undiminished, the available funding for the traditional type will inevitably grow smaller as all funding bodies have available to them an increasing diversity of potential recipients for support under those worthy banners of 'science and education', 'social and community services' or 'identity and citizenship' or 'the Arts'. External competition of this kind is just one factor which suggests that museums need to confront the resource implications of collections. There has also been much internal turmoil resulting from professionalisation of practices, and economic and political change. These, too, suggest a need for review.

Recent professionalisation, in the context of social change, provides useful insights into the world in which museums operate and within which we aim to develop collections. The process of professionalising practice can be traced back to the birth of museums when many curatorial benchmarks were established. The latter decades of nineteenth century added further innovative practices in thematic display and education. Although it is easy for museums to believe theirs are inherited problems, we should not fool ourselves into thinking that our predecessors, of even 180 years ago, were any less sophisticated when they came to consider their actions. They too, for example, had to deal with relativist philosophies which suggested that the reality of objects was an illusion. Their museums, like ours, were a key mechanism for accommodating and facilitating social change. They too had to deal, in their museums, with the interaction of secular society and religious belief, as has again become important in the setting of twenty-first-century multiculturalism, immigration and terrorism. They too had the know-how but not the funding. Theirs was, however, still a museum world dominated by the natural sciences, which from the outset gave an underlying intellectual drive and clear parameters for evaluating the worth of objects. What they did not have is modern levels of resource, and when that resource came along these disciplines were no longer at the height of museum fashion. By then archaeology had already risen to prominence, public art galleries were a civic expectation, and collecting activity in folk life (social history) was well advanced. From the 1960s, museums in Britain entered an entirely new world: museum communication became increasingly studied and incorporated into ever more sophisticated exhibition design; informal education programmes expanded; the conservation profession grew from its tiny foothold; collection management was transformed and the contents of registers and index cards were soon flowing into computers, while emerging documentation specialists struggled to keep up with rapid technological change and horrendous backlogs. More widely, specialist groups (a formalisation of 'communities of practice', now a key

management concept)[9] and agencies (like the UK's area museum councils) began to provide support of a kind that overcame local deficiencies. Many of these innovations were homegrown but they were set in a world undergoing what was at first called 'Americanisation', and unsurprisingly many museum practices also came to the UK from across the Atlantic.

These late twentieth-century changes represented a concerted effort to put things right, to make a leap in professionalisation after a 150-year creep. The 1970s and 1980s were important decades in this regard but are light years away from the mobile, networked and information-ridden world of the present: relatively few families had cars in early 1960s Britain, let alone telephones; 1970s documentation efforts centred on filling in cards; and in the 1980s computer interactives in museums were still a rarity. Clearly museums were adapting but the most significant change for museums was, in the mid-1980s, to recognise the place of change itself in their fortunes, and to discover that institutions can actually utilise the opportunities of change to secure their futures. For museums, which had once so valued a monolithic immutability, this conceptual shift was revolutionary, for the museum itself became an increasingly elastic concept. The Natural History Museum (NHM) in London, for example, was by the end of the century offering a wide range of training and consultancy services. With its designed galleries and customer care policies it bore little relationship to the heavily criticised and conservative British Museum of the nineteenth century from which it had arisen. It remained criticised, however, this time for embracing change: but had it not done so its very survival would have been in doubt. It now forms the model of the twenty-first-century museum: focused, businesslike, public friendly and pluralistically funded, yet preserving its collection and research identity. This is not to suggest that its staff don't still complain, that it has not lost rare skills and scarce knowledge, that its public are perfectly happy, or that its managers don't have to paddle hard to keep the ark afloat, but this museum has certainly adapted to the modern context and made itself capable of embracing future change.

Other museums have been less successful at adapting to constant change. Many set themselves on a course, perhaps only five to ten years ago, with a particular staff infrastructure, which enabled them to fulfil the goals then perceived to be central to the modern museum. In the intervening period, society has moved on still further and its needs have changed. The result for some museum services has been repeated restructuring while others

9 These 'communities of practice' include the UK-led Biology Curators Group, Geological Curators Group, Social History Curators Group, Society of Museum Archaeologists, and the US-led Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections, and the more recently formed Natural Science Collections Alliance. These communities are now also represented online by such specialist lists as Natural History Collections listserver (NHCOLL).

find themselves at a point of tension between what they are and what they need to be. Restructuring is only ever a short-term solution; the future for the museum and for collecting lies in the production of flexible systems and flexible workforces.

The NHM's path to a new identity arose in response to a crisis in public funding which came to a head during the Thatcher government of the 1980s. Indeed, the more general revolution in practice had only just begun when the first post-war recession hit in the 1970s. Recessions followed thereafter with predictable and depressing regularity. In many countries, and famously so in Britain, the onset of the 1980s meant a switch to rightwing government and the rise of economic accountability. This also brought a governmental denial of community or social action – surely a central tenet of museum provision. With this removed, all those public bodies unable to justify themselves in financial terms were destined to struggle. There were repeated crises for government-funded and independent museums as the century progressed. Few avoided cuts, many lost staff and some closed.[10] Museums which had survived on hidden costs and professional camaraderie were now faced with a new financial reality; a sense of 'corrosive cynicism' prevailed, and not just in Britain.[11] Museums *had* to change.

But even in more prosperous times, such as when the British government channelled National Lottery money into a major capital programme for museums, outcomes where not always the best for collections. Revenue budgets did not increase and thus museum expansion meant job redesignation as collection-focused staff took on roles centred on the management of personnel and buildings. While the profession began a range of initiatives to keep museums afloat, the government remained blissfully unaware of what drives the swanlike museum forward. Shiny new museums, and the new brand of edutainment centre which sprang up in competition, concealed a crisis in funding which brought many long established museums in Britain to the point of collapse. The response was the return to the idea of a national strategy, but one that recognised existing provision and the need for pragmatic solutions.[12] Strategic approaches had

10 See, for example, D. Butler, 'French museum "in decay" fights for its life', *Nature*, 385 (1997), 378; E. Culotta, 'Mass job extinctions at L.A. museum', *Science*, 260 (1993), 1584; J. Seymour, 'No way to treat a natural treasure', *New Scientist*, 12 March 1994. For the impact of recession and cultural change on museums and collecting see S.J. Knell, 'Collecting, conservation and conservatism: developments in the culture of British geology in the late twentieth century', in D.R. Oldroyd, *The Earth Inside and Out: Some Major Contributions to Geology in the Twentieth Century* (London: Geological Society, 2002), 329–351.

11 S. Weil, *A Cabinet of Curiosities* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1995).

12 Re:source (The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries), *Renaissance in the Regions: A New Vision for England's Museums* (London: Re:source, 2001).

been proposed by governmental agencies throughout the twentieth century, but only this time did it seem likely that the government would respond.

One side effect of the new financial emphasis, which arrived in the 1980s, was that the cost of maintaining collections could no longer be quietly concealed. This caused anxiety and frustration among professionals who knew that collections had never been properly funded and therefore had never had the opportunity to prove their worth. Spreadsheet accountability entered the world of museums, as it had done in other sectors, and museums adopted management techniques from industry to monitor their performance and plan for change. Such performance measurement appeared, to some, to make perfect sense for collections, and for the work done on them. This use of numerate analysis in museums appears, by its very nature, to bring scientific objectivity to processes and events which are otherwise difficult to define, summarise or evaluate. But figures do not make facts. They can be ill-conceived, wrongly used or misunderstood. They also take on a life of their own, quoted by those who do not (and perhaps do not wish to) understand them or how they came about. They hold no notion of quality (service, patrimony, community, expertise) or of the long term.[13] Those who quote them do so for political ends and thus numbers are reaped and weighed with the annual corn crop, or at best the political cycle, when much of the work of museums takes decades to bear fruit – on the timescale of forestry and landscape management. Figures are, indeed, politically powerful because they can be held up as sound-bite-sized proofs in a way that qualitative data cannot. The problem is not so much a weakness in the concepts of accountability, or even of number summaries, as in the frailty of interpretation and the manipulations of political practice. In this world it is not actual outcomes that come to matter but those that can be quantified.

In other ways, too, the approach can take on irrational qualities by trying to quantify meanings and values, an irrationality which echoes the 1970s' obsession with cost-benefit analysis where human and environmental costs were unrealistically quantified in monetary terms. Barbro Bursell, in this volume, complains that simple numerical definitions can have serious implications for what museums are permitted to collect, and that when number summaries are available more complex arguments remain unheard.[14] But there is undeniably a relationship between the numbers that define the things we collect and the number that appears in black – or red – at the bottom of the museum balance sheet.

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13 Museums Association, 'Performance management', *Museums Briefing*, 5 (1994). Audit Commission, *The Road to Wigan Pier?: Managing Local Authority Museums and Art Galleries*, (London: HMSO, 1991).

14 B. Bursell, 'Professionalising collecting' (Chapter 18).

In the early 1980s, environmental agencies replaced the bald economics of cost-benefit analysis with more qualitative environmental impact analysis. Similarly, in the late 1990s, a new wave of increasingly qualitative evaluation gained a foothold in the museum sector – particularly in the area of learning in museums. These more reasoned methods are what we might expect in a mature 'knowledge-based society'. Accountability is fundamental to all institutional practices, and no less so to the act of collecting, but it needs to be understood, measured and analysed using appropriate tools which bring improvement to practices rather than merely stir up a desire for political change.

Museums were invented to capture and keep against a background of change, not *to* change. Yet, inevitably the collected thing is called upon to perform in ways that were never intended by the museum at its point of collection, simply because of the impact of change. An example of this can be found at the Imperial War Museum at Duxford, England. One of the largest aviation museums in the world it once collected good examples of different types of combat aircraft; its collecting mission was technically focused. Today, the abstract histories one might construct from these objects can be perceived as projecting a clean and dehumanised interpretation of conflict. Future collecting will need to address this problem and the objects collected are more likely to carry human stories and link directly to the historical events of a conflict. It is not that the power or relevance of real objects is questioned here but rather the public, and indeed the staff, require something else of them. The audience for these objects is also changing and its 'ways of knowing' have been altered. Virtual squadrons of F-16 pilots did battle in the late 1990s using the networked game *Falcon 4*. Audiences watching the *Band of Brothers* television series also understood the heat of battle perhaps better than any non-combatants before them purely as a result of new cinematic techniques. For these audiences, the objects in the museum of war perform rather differently. Our parents almost certainly saw something different in them.

The future contexts of collecting will almost certainly change as much as they have in the last twenty-five years. Some changes, such as in available technologies, are more predictable, but where political and social forces operate change is always an unknown. However, we can expect the era of accountability to continue, so change will continue to present risks to long-term institutions. The recent past tells us that museums can expect no assurances of having a future unless they too change in order to demonstrate their relevance. Change here is not simply a matter of educational or exhibition programming, it refers to shifts in the museum's underpinning philosophy. The past is gone, and while we can attempt to hold onto its remnants in our collections and interpretations, we cannot run museums in ways that were conceived on past models. It is here, in

this rather challenging world, that the future of collecting exists. And as one of our most heavily-guarded, fundamental and conservative activities, collecting will be one of the hardest to re-orientate. The fact is that the collecting policy of today will not fit with tomorrow; but perhaps the collecting policy itself has had its day anyway.

The collecting policy: saviour or deceiver?

Since Susan Pearce first suggested that the processes of collecting were not that well studied, a considerable body of research has been published. However, practice has yet to make sense of this resource. Much of this research is in the area of private or popular collecting, frequently asking why people collect, which does not necessarily resolve our institutional needs though it can explain some of our actions. Pearce and Patricia Kell, in this volume, give collector and donor profiles from both ends of a period spanning some three hundred years.[15] These collectors and donors are united by a common understanding of the collecting process: one determined by their own personal needs and ambitions. Collector profiles of professional staff would certainly illuminate internal museum practices and point to inconsistencies. This is what María García and her colleagues did in Tenerife when trying to establish a collecting consensus. They found that there were as many collecting criteria as there were staff![16]

What their museums lacked were collecting policies. The introduction of these policies into museums marked a shift towards rationalising, and supposedly intellectualising, practices. Collecting policies have laid down the local law in terms of legal issues, international conventions, national and international codes of ethics, pyramids of responsibility, and geographical, temporal, taxonomic, and financial constraints. They have thereby taken us part way along the path to professionalising collecting practice. While they do say what can be collected and how, their greatest value has been in providing a rationale for rejecting gifts and resolving internal and external arguments concerning the funding of purchases and fieldwork. Collecting policies are *the* gatekeeper documents of the collection, though there may be acquisitions committees which interpret these documents and thereby hold the keys to that gate. This type of committee interpretation becomes necessary, though it remains uncommon and imperfect, because most policies contain sufficiently vague statements to enable their strictures to be circumvented, if a really desirable, but nominally excluded, object does become available. Most policies lack a deeper intellectual rationale for collecting and, by definition and rather illogically, collecting policies isolate the object from other

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15 S.M. Pearce, 'Collections and collecting' (Chapter 2); P. Kell, 'The Ashmolean Museum: a case study of eighteenth-century collecting' (Chapter 5).

16 M. García, C. Chinea and J. Fariña, 'Developing a collecting strategy for smaller museums' (Chapter 19).

practices – perhaps in other institutions – which might achieve that same intellectual end.

Collecting policies continue to conceive of objects as facts which can simply be gathered up. This belief rather overestimates the inherent qualities of the object and underestimates the interpretive processes which make sense of the material world. It is a nineteenth-century principle that we have failed to question.

Collecting policies do not totally release the profession from collecting anarchy. Individual museums may have 'found themselves' through the development of a policy but they will not have done so entirely,[17] for museums do not operate in isolation. In their detail, few collecting policies provide sufficient framework for defining a collecting philosophy. They focus instead on simple object acquisition and are thus engaged in a kind of object fetishism – that is a human–object relationship where the object has magical powers over us.[18] Despite statements to the opposite, and with some notable exceptions, collecting policies tend to encourage myopic parochialism, and thousands of museums pursuing their own isolated policies suggests unaffordable inefficiency. Yet collecting policies give a deceptive sense of rationalism, another illusion which separates safe practice from efficient, sustainable and meaningful activity.

So, from a holistic perspective, existing collecting policies tend to have considerable limitations as strategic documents. Moreover, at the highest resolution – that of the individual institution – we see other irrationalities. Most obvious is the direct geographical match between funding body and the area from which the museum collects. All activity is constrained by the geopolitical definition of the museum's 'community'. But is this appropriate for all disciplines and types of material: Bronze Age settlements, industrial development, bird populations, stratigraphy, or mass-produced consumables?[19] If human experience now extends globally (as it long has in many countries and will increasingly do), and the best intellectual practices (such as found in universities) engage with that international context, what is the collecting role of a community-based museum? If it is simply about local identity then this needs to be realised and collecting practices may need to be altered. If it is about excellence in

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17 Indeed, as we know, policies such as these are often created by 'adapting' those of our neighbours. So, perhaps the museums have not 'found themselves' at all.

18 The term 'fetishism' in collecting and material culture studies is well established and does not imply a sexual or obsessive relationship. Susan Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*, (London: Sage, 1998), 128, traces it to the Portuguese *feiticos*, meaning 'a charm', which anthropologists appropriated to refer to objects with inherent magical powers.

19 M.A. Taylor, 'What is in a "national" museum? The challenges of collecting policies at the National Museums of Scotland' (Chapter 14) gives some examples.

disciplinary areas then this is something rather different. Whereas once the local object was evaluated as being a distinctive or regional nuance in the national knowledge-base held in provincial museums, today that object might be viewed as a site of local identity making. The Victorian vision of civic pride – an earlier equivalent of identity making – was not simply built upon collecting the local but on the quality of the materials the museum held wherever they came from. The local perspective can be overplayed.

This emphasis on the local perspective creates policies which endorse a 'free market' collecting economy and the gathering of isolated tokens. In these circumstances there is no integrated understanding of the collecting mission of the museum infrastructure as a whole. This does not mean we should all sign up to a 'grand plan', adopt a single perspective or eradicate the local. But, all the same, it does not mean that there is any justification for collecting policies which merely reflect the source funding. Collecting policies need to be replaced by strategies which adopt a more long-term, holistic, inclusive, integrated, cooperative, sustainable, rational and thoughtful view of the purpose of institutional collecting. These are pervasive themes in most areas where the modern world is being restructured. They need to work their way more extensively into museum collecting and to do so museums will require a deeper understanding of how material culture works in society and how it can be made to work in the museum.

Ending perpetuity and redefining collecting

Given the history of museums – the one with the warts rather than simply the heroics – it is no wonder that the profession is deeply protective of collections. Indeed, the profession swears to a creed which makes the collection a god over it. As disciples of this god, museum professionals are indoctrinated with arguments which support growth and retention, and, using well-chosen examples, justification is simple and the collection remains largely unchallenged, if not entirely understood. These professional beliefs have led to the creation of an entity which possesses even greater immutability than the museum itself. For it is not the museum building which is protected with perpetuity clauses, but the collection at its heart.[20] What is erected is a blanket defence of collections, protecting the concept rather than examining the true nature of the collections or the processes by which they were created.[21] The result is entrenchment: religion as opposed to good questioning theology.

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20 International Council of Museums, *Statutes, Code of Professional Ethics* (Paris: ICOM, 1987), 4.1; M. Briat and J.A. Freedberg (eds), *International Art Trade and Law*, Volume 3 (Paris: ICC Publishing SA/Deventer: Kluwer, 1991); Museums Association, 'Disposal', *Ethical Guidelines*, 2 (1996), 2a.

21 J.R. Nudds and C.W. Pettitt (eds), *The Value and Valuation of Natural Science Collections* (London: Geological Society, 1997) arose through a concern that

Perhaps the most powerful argument (politically if not philosophically or economically) for the retention of material in museums, is that it exists in the museum in the first place. The argument is obviously circular and self-justifying, and comes about for those reasons alluded to in the discussion above. If no process of selective evaluation has taken place in advance of acquisition – as has often been the case, except at a superficial level – then the implied attribution of importance is simply an illusion. These issues are important because collecting cannot move forward without examining the whole cycle of acquisition, retention and disposal, and understanding why collections are perceived as they are.

The collecting problem that needs to be resolved is insoluble not simply because of the problems of deciding what to collect, but by the unrealistic belief that when something is collected it will be kept in perpetuity. If this belief can be eradicated, as it must be, then a strategy can be achieved that is sustainable. Increasingly professionals grow less opposed to the idea that pruning will be needed, and that 'distillation' will become a key curatorial skill. While many museum professionals have been brought up to believe they are contributing to the future, and that their efforts are cumulative and enduring, this will not always be the case. The founders of the museum movement also thought this but their poets, most notably Tennyson, told them how unrealistic this was.[22]

The way to begin, perhaps, is by reconceptualising what is meant by 'collecting' and in doing so take a cue from the founding fathers of museums. They sought to improve upon the kind of 'childish' collecting seen in private cabinets but they did not mean to replace all the private collector's tricks. For them it was the museum as organised knowledge and cultural exemplar which was to be preserved for all time, but not necessarily every item within it. They copied private collectors by mining and refining their collections through sales, destruction and exchange. 'Collecting', as it was conceived at the outset, was to practise connoisseurship, to distinguish between what should be acquired and kept and what should be disposed of. The term 'collecting', rather than referring to an act of accumulation, had a more holistic meaning which encompassed every moment in the life of an object in the collection. Disposal, like the decision to repair, or to show, was an act of the collector as expert. It was an aspect of being a collector, and thus an aspect of the act of collecting. Collecting redefined in this way becomes a practice capable of rational action: material can flow in, but it can also flow out. It is not two

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collections might be valued as financial assets. See also, for example, Society of Museum Archaeologists, *Selection, Retention and Disposal of Archaeological Collections: Guidelines for Use in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (London: Society of Museum Archaeologists, 1993).

22 For the hopes for immortality embedded in the founding of museums and collections, see Knell , *The Culture of Geology*, 313–20.

processes, but a single dynamic act of balance. Collecting is the interaction of expert with manager, and the object is engaged in the processes of collecting from the moment it is considered for the museum to the moment when it leaves the collection. The collection then becomes rather less immutable and considerably more manageable.

Clearly this more liberal (in one sense), though actually more restrictive, definition will ring alarm bells in many quarters. Museums aren't supposed to be like private collectors, critics will say, they have a unique custodial duty – surely this is the very point of the museum. This rethinking of collecting does not oppose this view but suggests pragmatism; to set collections in concrete is indefensible and has been a root cause of museums' failure to achieve successful custodianship. Existing professional ethics have never really prevented disposals by unscrupulous authorities and, if anything, have encouraged loss by neglect as museums have been obliged to hold onto collections even when they had no prospect of resources to care for them. It is time to recognize that museum communities in many countries have reached a state of maturity with regard to professional ethics and government regulation so as to ensure that the floodgates of disposal – always the fear amongst those who have stuck to the perpetuity clause – will not open. Further safeguards can be put in place. In the US and UK there are accreditation schemes which set basic standards. In other non-museum areas of activity, such as in UK universities, all manner of activities are quality assessed. This kind of independent review can be a viable means to ensure those floodgates remained closed and that rational in-out management is maintained. The great professional concern is that collections will be sold for profit, to bail out an institution stripped of revenue funding, and that the material sold will as a result be lost from public view. There are a number of issues here that need pragmatic response rather than blind ideology. Museum professions have to, and can, deal with them. They cannot afford to hide from them.

A majority of objects held in museums will remain there in the long term, but common sense suggests that if two centuries of collecting have provided nearly all that is to be found in museums, and a single century has supplied vast collections of motorcars and aeroplanes, it is time for a serious rethink. This rethinking requires the museum community to consider what it has (and might pass on to someone else or might be lost) and what it might want (our future collecting). The next century will provide just as many opportunities to collect things that fly and things that can be driven but will there really be a doubling of the number of vehicle museums? The thought that museums will have to lose some of these things is a painful one and although to a large degree it is inevitable there is much museums can do to mitigate the worst effects of this loss. In many

cases objects will simply move from one institution to another and duplication will be eradicated.

Let me demonstrate this problem with the example of the milk bottle, both to indicate how collecting has often been undertaken and raise some questions we fail to ask at the point of collection or subsequently. Some twenty years ago, I was undertaking some work for a small museum when I noticed a crate of milk bottles in the collections.[23] The response to my obvious question was, 'I doubt that anyone is collecting them, so I am.' It was a reasonable and fairly typical response. In 1982, these objects were still in widespread circulation and they are useful, perhaps, for saying all kinds of things about design, convenience foods, and the legacy of pre-motorcar shopping, though the curator gave me no such explanation. I did wonder how these bottles were to perform in the museum setting – what was their function? There are amateur bottle collectors who have their own examples, perhaps, and museums do have some obligation to those in society who share their interests in material objects and their typification. On the other hand it is unlikely that such a collection would contribute much to mainstream history making. Academic historians, if current practices in the subject area are any indication, prefer other sources. To the historian, the 'Drink a pint of milk a day' slogans of the 1970s and the Norman Wisdom film *The Early Bird* (a comedy about the rise of a large (milk) corporation and its impact on the small local trader) say much more about the socially valued aspects of any history in which milk bottles might play a part. Indeed, I doubt that milk bottle history is ever going to be that big and where it does fit into other histories other sources are perhaps more useful. Yet that crate of milk bottles is consuming resources all the time it sits in the museum store. The bottles may have nostalgic value but this, in time, will evaporate, so for how long should the museum keep them? Present rules suggest that they should be kept forever but this question should have been asked at the outset. What curators often forget is that museums preserve an infinitesimally small proportion of things made, used or known; the reverse side of this is that nearly everything is lost, and most of it without a tear. It is hard to accept that not a single milk bottle will survive, but museums have to make a choice: milk bottle, chopper bike or space hopper? In the much longer term, and measured against the limitations of national resource, the choice might be milk bottle, Spitfire or Matisse? Unlike the seemingly ordered and limited natural world (which is still far too big to fully collect), the world of production is limitless and objects from it are variably attached to activities associated with history-making or interpretation for the public. Objects certainly do have a role and do have particular powers which museums can exploit,

23 In Britain, milk was (and still is) delivered to the doorstep in recyclable bottles. It is a practice that has massively declined with the rise of the car, improved milk processing, and the arrival of the disposable carton.

but museums need to understand the things they do well and those they do not.

Museums, then, need to ask: for how long will this object be kept? Does it really matter if it doesn't survive? Are there things that are valued more than this object and which should be collected in preference? Do the contents of other media (books, film, and so on) negate the need to collect? Would a digital image sufficiently capture the key points of this object? How is the object likely to be used in the next 50 years? And so on. We live in a world driven by notions of progress, improvement and change, which deliver inevitable redundancy in things both big and small (from canals to snuff boxes), but museums have to be more than places for redundant things – there must be a bigger historical purpose and ideally this purpose should not, in the first instance, be set out simply in terms of collecting.

The interweaving of values

Other problems of trying to rationalise collecting result from the dynamics of human relationships with objects. Museums traditionally try to create some sense here by pursuing clearly identified aims. These might, for example, revolve around identity making, themes or disciplinary knowledge. However, objects in no sense respect even these rather abstract low-resolution boundaries. Many history museums are engaged in collecting identity. Their purpose is to construct a set of materials which resonate with a group of people who have a shared experience. These might simply be people who share a geographical and/or historical 'location', or interest. Their museums are about remembering, celebrating, and belonging, and so need certain kinds of material culture for these purposes and certain approaches to collecting it. Objects here give a sense of authenticity and concreteness to a shared identity. Collecting for this kind of museum must grow out of the community, it cannot be imposed. The subject of the museum is the people and the objects themselves are always secondary. To those outside this community, the collections and the museum are thematic, even if that theme is the identity of an 'Other'.

Whether or not museums do collect with identity in mind, a visitor can still construct identity from the experiences the museum offers but this is rather different. Indeed, in recent years much has been made of museums as sites of personal meaning and identity making. However, Bourdieu and others have written a great deal about how various contexts (perhaps all contexts) contribute to our making, so museums need to ask deeper questions about their role.[24] The fact that people can make personal meanings or construct their identities in museums does not confer on museums a special social role. Curators may imagine that the closely

24 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste,* (London: Routledge, 1984); D. Miller, P. Jackson, N. Thrift, B. Holbrook and M. Rowlands, *Shopping, Place and Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

argued historical narrative on the gallery walls gives this sense of place and contributes to building identity but most visitors will not read it. Perhaps the museum works as a place of identity only on a romantic level (a 'dream space'): an old building, or where visitors nostalgically remember a childhood visit, or tie some half-remembered history into the objects on display, or ponder an inconsequential local icon which is generated and retained by public demand.[25] Indeed, Bourdieu suggests that the art museum, for example, has a fundamental role in maintaining class distinctions and the distribution of power.

It is certainly possible to locate, particularly within those communities which have been conquered, colonised or vanquished, a strong association between objects, past events and present identity.[26] For several writers the notion of the community is central to effective collecting, from Tomislav Sola's vision of the 'demuseumisation' of culture to Kell's belief in the collection's uniting influence.[27] Many contributors to this book propose a sharing of the resource and an end to cultural imperialism. Such beliefs seem simultaneously to endorse and contradict the community view.

However, the term 'community' is loaded, representing a collective and an exclusive entity. As Rebecca Duclos suggests, and Graham Dominy amply demonstrates, the museum collection can sit on the boundary between communities, being for one a remembrance of home and for the other symbolic of colonisation.[28] What is representational is also confrontational.[29] Much of what is interesting in society is found at this interface between communities. Žarka Vujic's museums were keen to gather representative collections from all factions involved in the conflict in Croatia.[30] Dominy describes the remodelling of South African museums to perform a unifying role. In the past they had been symbolic of a clash of communities. This outward-looking, boundary-crossing approach is important, as internalised histories of communities can create romanticised abstractions, promotional guides or histories erring on the side of propaganda. The sameness of their chosen representative material

25 For many years the public's favourite exhibit at Scunthorpe Museum in Lincolnshire, UK, was Joey, a red deer from a local park that was fed by the public. On its death the museum bowed to suggestions that the half-eaten carcass be 'stuffed' and an icon was created. With some local resistance it was removed from display in 1992 and the space freed up for more didactic interpretation. There are many 'Joeys' in museums around the world.

26 D.J. Parkin, 'Mementos as transitional objects in human displacement', *Journal of Material Culture*, 4(3) (1999), 303-20.

27 T. Sola, 'Redefining collecting' (Chapter 24) and P. Kell (Chapter 5).

28 R. Duclos, 'The cartographies of collecting' and Dominy (both this volume).

29 See also P.M. Messenger, *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property*?, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico,1989).

30 Ž. Vujic (Chapter 10).

culture, when compared to adjacent communities, can also suggest other weaknesses in the community/identity-centred model.

In a completely different arena, Jim Fowler shows how a museum's discovery of its community can transform that museum's very nature and the media by which it records and represents that community.[31] In Malcolm MacLeod's West Africa, the community is alive and the 'collection' remains in use, preserved in its 'context' and its 'community'. This notion of context is key to the identity making museum. The 'collection' examined by Pearce belonging to the Straws in Worksop, and MacLeod's Manhyia Palace Museum at Kumasi,[32] are extreme examples of collecting or preserving context, of making immortal what one can of a life, a time or a place. While the Straws' collection is much like the buried past which communities around the world are fighting to preserve from looters, Kumasi has resonances with nature conservation and the ecomuseum, a preserved living entity.[33] In contrast, Bursell describes the collecting of a complete kitchen – removal of a big chunk of material context (so it would seem) and placing it in a museum. This type of preservation is rarely possible, and raises all kinds of questions about the things which museum professionals value and why, and how the scope of any object collecting never results in preserving much in the way of context at all.

Of course, the boundaries surrounding what museums should care about have moved considerably since the days when they were a representation of a handful of core, material culture- and order-focused disciplines. The civil rights movements of the 1960s transformed that world and thus we should not be surprised to see Nicola Clayton arguing that material culture can be used to break down stereotypes and social segregation, realise disability awareness, introduce informed discussion of sexuality, and involve minority and youth cultures.[34] These are surely subjects at the heart of the early twenty-first century museum, but how should they affect collecting? Currently, equality legislation can actually prevent the recording of race or sexual orientation. One also needs to ask if museums are the right medium with which to record cultures that are intentionally alternative. Though not to collect such material is conceivably an act of censorship, inevitably the actions of museums will result in omission of this kind. The risk then is that only the more vociferous groups will find themselves recorded. But social practices are also manufactured in a bewildering array, and again choices need to be made about what and who

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31 J. Fowler, 'Collecting live performance' (Chapter 23).

32 M. McLeod, 'Museums without collections: museum philosophy in West Africa' (Chapter 3).

33 Knell, 'Collecting, conservation and conservatism'. N. Brodie, J. Doole and P. Watson, *Stealing History: The Illicit Trade in Cultural Property* (London: ICOM UK and Museums Association, 2000).

34 N. Clayton, 'Folk devils in our midst? Collecting from "deviant" groups' (Chapter 12).

should be collected and recorded. Again evidence most practices will disappear without leaving a material trace.

Disciplinary practices and beliefs

In contrast to the identity making museum, the disciplinary museum focuses very much on an intellectual rationale, with implicit values of authorship, research rigour, connoisseurship, tradition and a range of knowledge structures. To this world, a museum built purely on personal meaning making would be entirely worthless unless it conformed to disciplinary requirements for selection and data capture. The act of collecting can then become a point of tension between the self-creation of meaning by the group which is its subject and that academic 'other' which hopes to understand that group on its own terms. Thus in museums identity can become entwined in more abstract disciplinary readings, while thematic perspectives act like scissors cutting out and removing certain readings from a tangled context.

In the disciplinary framework, the object is called upon to function in a variety of ways, and this implies that objects tend to have attributed to them sets of associated values which specify why they are worth the expense of keeping them. A more specific discussion will explain what I mean, and lest anyone should think that I fail to understand their particular discipline, I shall focus this example on that museum area on which I have expended most time: the fossil collection. I could easily have chosen coins, flints, bird skins, domestic life objects, aeroplanes, working costume and so on. Arranged in taxonomic and stratigraphic order, fossils can be perceived as series composed of filled and unfilled spaces. In a provincial English museum, unlike rocks and minerals, fossil collections are largely derived from local rocks. Gap filling certainly takes place but is justified as a process of establishing new local records. Collections also arise from unique collecting opportunities, and many museums have fossil collections which have arisen from the building of motorways, railway lines, gas pipelines and so on. These temporary cuts give rare insights into the landscape's inner anatomy and archaeologists and geologists are invariably soon on the scene. Still other fossils were amassed, in Lincolnshire, for example, as a result of major iron workings and less important brick and limestone workings. Like the temporary exposures mentioned above, most of these sites too have now gone. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the local museum worked with fossil dealers to enrich the collections. So, many of these objects arose out of opportunism and were acquired not as research of a kind that necessarily produced a published account but which, using the geologist's connoisseurship skills, generated materials that were deemed to hold significant potential for particular reasons.

However, to see all these specimens as local records is rather to simplify their complex significances. A few specimens in the collections of this museum had appeared in scientific publications and thus the museum had a duty to protect them. Other specimens were unique (the only known occurrences of taxonomically and stratigraphically interesting material), and because of the uniqueness of the local geological succession, were also therefore unlikely to be represented even in the collections of the national museum. They weren't published but the curator knew which ones they were. A visit by a French specialist at one point confirmed the importance of some of these specimens in another way, in the context of European taxonomy. Yet there were other specimens which had no data (though they could be identified and the rock could be fairly securely inferred) but were huge. The largest came from the local Cretaceous Chalk and was a reasonably common English fossil. It was kept by the museum because of its considerable communicative powers. The objects here then were taxonomic records, stratigraphic records, local records, objects good for explaining things, objects that were impressive or iconic or aesthetic. They included objects that were an opportunity realised and kept for those who could not be there when collecting was possible. There were also objects here associated with human history, whether in the folklore of 'Devil's Toenails' (*Gryphaea*, fossil oysters which proudly sat on the town's coat of arms), or because they came from the efforts of the hundreds of labourers who dug the ironstone, or through association with important local collectors, such as Canon Cross, or folk-hero curator's like Harold Dudley, or important scientists, like the Geological Survey's Vernon Wilson, who came to survey the ironstone during the Second World War for strategic purposes. Other specimens worked simply as reference materials – purely for communication in identification or as set dressing in display. If examined individually each fossil would have different sets of attributes which would describe its place in the collection.

All disciplinary curators should have at least this level of connoisseurship of their collections and the values I have mentioned here can be found in collections of many types. However, we should not overstate the similarities. Minerals, for example, arise from entirely different natural processes and are gathered into collections on the basis of entirely different principles. Certainly we could find the record, the icon, the historical object and so on but care is needed in extending the parallels too far. Although both fossils and minerals frequently come under the care of geological curators, relatively few specialist curators feel fully conversant with both.

Another factor in these assigned value judgements is that they are relative to other collections. Thus if every fossil collection in the country became lost, even the most common fossils in the museum collection, I have described, would be elevated. While this is, I hope, unlikely to occur, in

more subtle ways, which remain unnoticed, the values are being constantly altered by new finds (locally and elsewhere), changes in knowledge, losses due to neglect or decay, the introduction of fakes and forgeries into the market place, the loss of sites, conservation restrictions on collecting, new academic research and disciplinary beliefs, and so on.

This adds to the complexity of evaluation and exposes the curator – unless deeply involved in research on a particular group of objects – to the risk of erroneous conclusions. However, the reality is somewhat more controllable. The curator can admit to working on a limited canvas which values objects against local or regional criteria. This provides a baseline for judgements because essentially this internalises evaluation – it is unnecessary to know if the museum up the road has the same specimen or a dozen of them. One classic defence here, which curators much like, is to say that the specimen is unique. But uniqueness is a quality held by all things and in itself is absolutely useless for decisions to collect or keep. One needs to ask 'How is this object unique?' Aside from its individual existence, the usual justification is that it was found, used or made at a particular time or place. This *may* be important, but perhaps it tells us nothing surprising, nothing we don't know from other evidence. So the contributory nature of that discovery is minor – it is a voucher of a discovery, but the discovery is not very important because we essentially know what it is telling us or it is simply attached to a very insignificant piece of information. So do we need the object (coin, fossil, slug, sewing machine) as a voucher to prove the point? What level of resource input can it justify? An ecological survey, for example, might lead to the collection of thousands of beetles but only some of these will become permanent vouchers. And in the case of these ecological vouchers – and excepting really rare, unexpected or cryptic species – there is a time limit on their usefulness as a record of an occurrence. A common beetle telling us that this is a particular kind of wetland habitat may not survive in the collections once the site has been drained – its usefulness may be over. While such specimens in collections do provide a history of biological and ecological diversity, we cannot value all specimens in collections in this way.

So, if a hoard of 100 coins dates a stratum in an archaeological section, how many of these coins are needed to act as a proof, and how many for the purposes of public communication, or to realise other potential uses? To many museum professionals, simply to ask this question is an act of heresy, but surely this is just the sort of question we must ask and in less obvious circumstances than this.

These questions usually prompt a response which suggests these things are not simply 'examples kept' but opportunities for verification. Perhaps someone discovers that there is a different, but very similar coin, sewing machine, beetle or fossil which is difficult to distinguish from the look-

alike original. This opens up the possibility that we may have made a mistake in our earlier conclusions. Our collections will now need to be re-examined and will contribute to new knowledge or verify the previous discovery. These things happen reasonably often but only a portion of collections have this potential. An additional complication comes from the impossibility of accurately identifying some things because of the inadequacy of taxonomies (fossils being a good example of this). But the sum of this argument is that rational decisions need to be taken of the actual or potential worth of the thing. We do not value all things in the same way, and each object has a particular role and value, but if the sole justification for keeping something is that it is unique, without any further qualification, then it really is a candidate for disposal.

Of course, curators are creative people, and any curator worth his or her salt should be able to come up with something to defend their loved ones. One possible argument against this rationalism, which I have used myself, is that the object holds 'potential'. A good example of the potential of the collected thing concerns the discovery of the conodont animal. Conodonts, microscopic tooth-like structures, had been making important contributions to geology for nearly 130 years but the animal from which they came remained entirely unknown. They were one of the great mysteries of modern palaeontology. Then, in 1983, a streaky smudge of a fossil was discovered in a Scottish collection where it had lain unnoticed for more than fifty years. This was the long sought after conodont animal. This, with the other discoveries it stimulated, turned conodonts into evidence for some of the first and most successful vertebrates, of key importance to debates concerning vertebrate evolution. The discovery stimulated an explosion in evolutionary research,[35] but it is interesting to ponder how important that smudge was the moment *before* its significance was recognised. In these situations connoisseurship skills are critical.[36] The conodont (rather than conodont animal)-containing rock had some meaning before the moment of transformation: it was a stratigraphic marker, a specimen showing conodont relationships (i.e. an assemblage of conodonts), its geographical data marked its presence in a faunal realm, and it was gathered when site, time and equipment made collecting

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35 R.J. Aldridge and M.A. Purnell, 'The conodont controversies', *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, 11 (1996), 463–8. S.J. Knell, 'The most important fossil in the world', *Geology Today*, 7 (1991), 221–4; S.J. Knell, 'What's important?', in Nudds and Pettitt, *Value and Valuation*, 11–16; P.S. Doughty, 'Through a glass darkly: value concepts and ultimate objectives', ibid., 35. Thanks to Mark Parnell. Note that fossil structures receive names even when, as sometimes happens, we don't know the animal or plant from which they come. Thus to talk of conodonts is to talk of certain anatomical parts of a particular group of animals.

36 L. Young, 'Collecting: reclaiming the art, systematising the technique' (Chapter 16).

possible (often a very strong case for retaining material). It was fortuitous that the specimen survived in the collection, but it was also probably the product of considerable distillation at the point of collecting. So the specimen fitted into an established framework of knowledge and all that was required, and was lacking in the 1930s, was someone to study it. The specimen survived not because of its potential but because it already had value. However, there are limits to the numbers of conodonts we might want to keep – they are no different from coins or beetles.

The problem is recognising what is important: an object contains a multidimensional assemblage of possible values, but only some of these can be perceived by the viewer. To select one value over another can be a manifestation of blindness of perception or just of fashion (fashion here being a prevalent set of values in a 'community of practice' – such as a disciplinary group). It is almost certainly time limited, as we shall explore in the next section. A classic example is the political correctness of 'stuffed' – more correctly, 'mounted' – animals and whether such specimens should be retained in museums.[37] If these specimens are to be burned or consigned to the dustbin then we would need to be able to demonstrate that other methods are available to facilitate the kind of 'knowing' that is possible from viewing mounts and indeed to ask if this 'kind of knowing' is important in the first place.

Singular views of collections are dangerous, and really demonstrate how the museum practitioner is different from other experts in his or her discipline. The cutting-edge expert in ornithology may be ill-equipped to judge the value of a museum specimen. Yet a bland claim of hidden possibilities has to be tested to be credible. Evaluations of objects are complex and require the kinds of consultation already laid out in disposal guidelines. Many objects in natural science collections may have little use to modern science but are rather objects of history and culture, so even in the disciplinary collection, objects may have meanings as complex and interwoven as those associated with the more subjective realms of identity, nationhood, citizenship, ethnicity, and so on. Take the fossil collection of the Victorian 'literary geologist' Hugh Miller at the National Museums of Scotland, for example. It includes the actual specimens he illustrated in his very widely read attacks on pre-Darwinian evolution in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The collection remains of real scientific value, but it also embodies that Victorian *Zeitgeist* which agonised over time, life, death and the universe, also encapsulated in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, and it therefore facilitates more complex historical readings.[38]

37 A good example of this is J. Harlow, 'Stuffed animals die death in PC purge of museums', *The Sunday Times*, 11 May 1997, 3.

38 S.J. Knell and M.A. Taylor, 'Hugh Miller, the fossil discoverer and collector', in L. Borley (ed), *Celebrating the Life and Times of Hugh Miller* (Cromarty: Cromarty Arts Trust and University of Aberdeen, 2003), 156–167.

But these cases need to be made, they cannot be assumed. All museum objects acquire histories which might suggest significance but there is a danger in valuing the object just because it has been a long-term resident in the collections.

Martin Wickham seeks a numerate solution to assessing the relative merits of objects and takes the need for consensus into account and handles all this subjectivity, relativity and multidimensionality with iterative pragmatism. Here number summaries seem to work, though Wickham is keen to point out the limitations of the method, and suggests where a more qualitative approach may be required.[39] What is important here is that curators are actually having a go at evaluating individual objects and weighing one against the other. However hard it is, museums need to evaluate the functions of the object in order to determine why and how it is collected (the expended effort) and how long it will endure in the collections (its disposability). Maybe the curator who acquired it cannot answer that question now but he or she can recommend a time when a review might prove beneficial, and certainly views might change. Maybe the answer is 'until something better comes along', maybe it is 'indefinitely'.

There is yet another perspective we can take in viewing collection worth. Palaeontological curators have a particular relationship to their collections, and while taxonomies shape patterns of storage, it is the interpreted meanings of these fossils as living animals and environments, or as aesthetic or historical objects, which given them appeal to audiences. This raises further questions about the inner relationships of objects to disciplines which cannot be fully explored here. Studies of art, archaeology, palaeontology and histories of design and materials require collections of physical objects – they cannot operate without them. In contrast, most other historical research values the library and archive above the museum collection. Relatively few historians look for answers in material culture itself, even if they are writing about material culture. Indeed, in my experience, object collections often fail historians looking for evidence of the history of social practices. Unlike archival materials, objects are not good at retaining information, particularly if collection management has been poor (which has been the case in most collections at some point). In contrast, and rather ironically, the basic documentation associated with collecting activity *is* actually useful in a multitude of ways, even if one can no longer attach it to an actual specimen.

In the latter decades of the twentieth century social history was a particularly strong and well-represented discipline in museums. A burgeoning social awareness, no doubt influenced by E.P Thompson and others, politicised a field which previously used terms like 'folk life' or 'domestic life'. The social awareness, which emerged from this discipline

39 M. Wickham, 'Ranking collections' (Chapter 21).

in the 1980s, has now moved beyond it; now, for many museums, social agenda dominate and do so outside of any disciplinary framework. Gaynor Kavanagh, in this volume, captures the late twentieth-century situation of museum social history well, and raises a raft of questions about its functioning and value. Part of the difficulties for the associated collections arises from this transformation from folk life to social history. The folk life agenda arose from concern for disappearing traditions and took to collecting the settings, costumes and tools of domestic life before they were lost. Social history, by contrast, took a greater interest in historiography and understanding the life lived and the objects that performed within it. Here objects might be described as being social historical but they were only so as a reflection of practices which were known by other means: accounts, witnessing, oral histories and so on. The objects themselves tell us little by comparison. So how does the object contribute to history making? What is its relationship to other media? Does it authenticate or communicate? The answers to these questions should shape collecting. Perhaps the social history curator is simply collecting technologies; certainly this is the case if just amassing objects in isolation from any other recording practices. The stool, the christening gown, the trade union banner and the flat iron are solutions to need, technologies for a social purpose. The social practices which utilise them and invest them with value are intangible and exist outside of these objects as Kavanagh makes clear.

Archaeologists and palaeontologists have little else other than sites and material remnants and frequently turn to modern analogy to interpret their finds. In contrast, historians have access to a wealth of material that is far more useful to history making. Kavanagh is clear that the social historian should be collecting other things and using other means; that simple object collecting for the purposes of making social histories is unsupportable.

Let me give some examples which illustrate the technical/social divide. Take a 'Whites Only' sign which hung above the entrance to a bar in apartheid South Africa. Collected to signify a historical moment, this object is firstly interpreted as a wooden sign, a type of broadcast technology. Any further interpretation of its place in society and its social historical meaning can only come by placing meanings into it – drawn from the external context; it cannot come from the sign itself, even though it has words written upon it. We may now *make* the sign powerful and iconic (just as it was *made* powerful when it was in use), but on its own it is obscure. Nonetheless it appears to work as evidence backing up or authenticating the historical message because it was 'there'. We could use this sign in reminiscence work, and from that draw out rich social histories, but the histories are coming from the person and not the thing. The position of the sign is no different had we undertaken its collecting as part of an ethnological study. To take another example, the bat that Babe

Ruth used to hit a homerun at the inauguration of the new Yankee stadium in 1923 – recently unearthed and dubbed 'the Holy Grail of sports memorabilia' – is first and foremost to be understood as a piece of sports technology. Its significance is that it was used by the player on that occasion but how can it aid history making? Perhaps we could weigh it, feel its grip, study the wood, and so on. More than anything this is an object into which meanings and interpretations are pumped, not the other way around. It is for this reason that it is powerful and desirable.

Historians of the twentieth century and beyond will have an increasing diversity of resources available to document the past without recourse to mass collecting. That is not to suggest that museums will stop collecting real objects but rather than there is an increasing urgency to understand collecting as a technology that has a complementary relationship to other technologies, media and methods. This has always been so – particularly in the field of history. Museums, however, often seem to carve out their own peculiar material culture centred disciplinary niche, often separate from the wider world of disciplinary practice.

Objects, then, exist within a complex web of social and disciplinary practices, both prior to collecting and once in the museum. An awareness of these facets of the object world and the ingrained beliefs of disciplines and museums is necessary to move collecting forward. Richard Dunn's 'self-conscious collecting' steps in this direction by realising and recording an underlying purpose, as do Young's connoisseurship and Samdok's fieldwork methods.[40] But in other areas, only now are disciplines recognising the social practices which underpin their subjects. John Martin argues that the inadequacy of laws controlling the trafficking of fossils feeds corruption and disenfranchises primary producers and end users.[41] The law becomes a disabling smoke screen which affects some but not others and thus disorientates the collecting process. Markets in art, and other areas of culture, do this universally. Janet Owen, in an entirely different way, shows how control of collecting remains in the hands of those who ultimately will neither curate nor interpret the collection.

Time and collecting

Just as the museum makes the past its subject, its collections inevitably become the past's product. Things in the museum grow old, and as they grow old they become rarer because once-contemporary objects have now worked their way out of society and into the town dump. So, over time, the material in the museum grows in 'value'. But is this 'value' relevant to the museum? The fact that something is old is, as argued above, no reason to

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40 R. Dunn, 'The future of collecting: lessons from the past' (Chapter 4), L. Young (Chapter 16), and A. Steen (Chapter 17).

41 J. Martin, 'All legal and ethical? Museums and the international market in fossils' (Chapter 13).

keep it in a museum. Like 'potential', and 'uniqueness', 'age' and 'survival' are false idols. Objects must have other values aside from age which give them worth. There is no denying that old things have a wonderful power over us, and the last thing museums must do is lose that fascination with the past, but we must also ask, 'What else is of value in this object?'

Time is rather too big a topic to be covered fully here but a short examination will illustrate its role in collecting and the limitations it places on what is possible. Nearly twenty years ago ICOFOM[42] held a conference called 'What of Tomorrow's Needs?', which, unsurprisingly, could only conclude that the future is unknown and cannot be planned for. Society has a similar relationship with the past. As many a modern historiographer will tell us, we cannot actually *know* that past but are, instead, limited to making mere constructions of it in ways determined by modern context and medium. Things from the past only ever exist in a present – they are always contemporary with the viewer.[43] They are not pieces of the past as such, but pieces of the present which have a past. The ancient Roman pot may have the markings of the maker, but these are markings to be read now. That is not to deny that the object has some intrinsic physical characteristics and associated contextual data. It is because of these that it is retained, but the relationship between this intrinsic data and what we see is rather more subjective. When I see Nelson's jacket at the National Maritime Museum in London, for example, I sense that I am in touch with the past regardless of the fact that that past is entirely in my head and has come to me from school history teachers and books, romantic films, paintings, television advertisements, and so on. Moreover, while I can claim to have spent a good deal of time researching that period, I still can't claim any purity of view – there are just too many gaps and they have to be filled somehow. It is a problem with which all historians have to contend, and which causes the best of them to go to extraordinary lengths to locate evidence which might limit their interpretations and reduce the size of those gaps.

What this line of thinking initially suggests is a narrow envelope of time in which we understand practices very well, and from which we can collect reasonably well. The ancient Roman knew his present as we know ours; but he could not know ours and we cannot fully know his. We have already decided that we cannot collect for the future, other than by

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42 International Committee for Museology, part of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)

43 As A. Gell, *The Anthropology of Time*, (Oxford: Berg, 1992), 162, puts it: '…the fact that a thing can signify the events associated with its own creation does not mean that the thing itself has temporal attributes: only the events in which it participated can be said to have these.' For wider reflection, D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 55ff.

collecting the present. And if we look to the past we have similar problems. As the moment of origin or original use recedes into the past, the objects from that time which remain with us become increasingly less well known to us, and we increasingly fill gaps in the data using our knowledge of modern and of other periods (by analogy, for example). As time passes we are moving from a position when contemporary collecting could take place to that where we are collecting 'history'. But we should not be fooled into thinking that these objects are separated by time – all those available to us, including old ones, are, as I have said, in our modern context and nowhere else. So while some museum workers have been at pains to distinguish contemporary collecting from history collecting, the fact is that all collecting is inevitably contemporary collecting, even if we are collecting things which are valued because of their association with the past. Contemporary collecting is one of the most difficult of practices because of its overwhelming and multifaceted nature, and because we are collecting things that reflect our own society, which we know to be complex. Collecting historical material only seems easier because there is less of it, we know it less well, and because historians have constructed narratives which value one thing above another.

From a collecting point of view, our material culture, new and old, sits on a kind of sieve of the present. Its durability (worth, quality, and so on) is a measure of how long it will sit there before it falls through to be lost. It is from the surface of the sieve that we can collect, and clearly there is more contemporary material here than there is old, because the latter has had greater opportunity to be lost. So all this material culture exists in the same time dimension regardless of the disciplinary frameworks which utilise it. And we have better opportunities to make a good job of collecting 'the now' than we do of collecting the past. So we are better able to collect and record the digitally produced plastic pop music of Britney Spears, because she exists in the context-rich present, than from the context-stripped worlds of Beatles innovation or Frank Zappa pop-cynicism. Now just as we should not be fooled into collecting something just because it is old, we should also resist the temptation to collect something very modern just because we can make a good job of it! This returns us to connoisseurship – with all its disciplinary abstractions and biases. Connoisseurship is about establishing values: not market values but those that reflect our goal of understanding. What we are asking of the object is 'What and how will this thing contribute to our ability "to know"?'

Another shaping factor here is the resolution of the understanding we seek to achieve. What the passing of time does to our view of the past, and consequently to our collecting, is to concertina the decades into each other, encouraging us to take an increasingly macroscopic view, and thus make the heterogeneous century become a homogenous entity. So while those of us who experienced the popular music of the last five decades of the

twentieth century can detect every variance, swing, imitation and value, and are able to rank one artist above another, it is also possible to generalise and select things that represent a genre – even if we know this pigeonholing is very abstract and personal (since innovation in the genre is marked by individualism and thus is not really amenable to such pigeonholing). So Spears might well epitomise the commodification of music, which is something also to be found with The Beatles and Zappa, and at which Zappa poked fun. This tendency to select the one to represent the all is itself something historians outside museums would resist. And as we move to these lower levels of resolution, the more this kind of representation begins to take on unsupportable generalisations. Yet object collecting has traditionally taken this approach: representing diversity using the singular. Zappa, The Beatles and Britney Spears exist or existed in quite different contexts, worked in different ways, constructed music using different technologies. We could easily choose a framework for studying them which would demonstrate that they are more different than they are similar. In other words, this very notion of historical representation is ahistorical when dealing with social phenomena. Yet in the world of museum collections it is a fundamental curatorial skill. Academic historians prefer to deal with particular cases and might permit themselves to use them in a limited way as examples of wider practice. Samdok achieves this level of history making by engaging in a multimedia capturing of a particular context.[44] Clearly, there are two radically different approaches to history here: which one is the correct one and for which occasion? Does the decontextualised typological history collecting to be found in past practice have any role in the modern history museum?

Let's now return to the opportunities of the present. We can make choices about what we decide to collect from the sieve: the wealth of contemporary Britney material or the declining number of context-rich Beatle-related items. Our choice should be an application of connoisseurship in the context of institutional mission. If collecting is undertaken as part of a broader programme of research into contemporary society (as seen with Samdok) – as a process of recording of which object collecting is a small part – then a data-rich record will be produced. However, we should be under no illusion that we will achieve a perfect record. Encapsulating a context in any form of record is impossible, and what we create of Britney will be preserved in a very stripped-down, individualised way. We are again confronting the inevitability of loss which is inherent in the selectivity of collecting. And anyway, regardless of our attempts to collect and record, future interpretations of our collected record will arise from the future context of the viewer, who will not be aware of all those things we took for granted, or all the things he or she takes for granted and weaves

44 Discussed by A. Steen, 'Samdok: tools to make the world visible', (Chapter 17).

into his or her interpretation. Indeed, the future viewer may well associate the term 'innovative' with Britney in a way that I intentionally did not. Such distinctions are simply judgements of subjective taste, even if arising from connoisseurship.

From this perspective the tangible and intangible begin to merge but each of us would probably take a different view (often determined by the perspective of our discipline) on the degree to which this is so. This doesn't invalidate the collecting and recording activity, but we have to recognise the activity's inevitable limitations. The lesson that we cannot fully preserve (either by collecting or keeping or by future interpretation) the past or the present, or know the future, actually removes some of the fear we might have about getting it right. If individuals construct their own sets of values, there is no such thing as a correct decision about what should be collected. The solution then lies in sharing responsibility for those decisions, developing an informed knowledge (connoisseurship), involving others (our disciplinary communities) and working within the constraints of the materials available to us. These latter things result in shared values and return the objects to a world of, apparently more 'tangible', disciplinary realities. This sounds like a rather old fashioned kind of curatorship but curatorship doesn't have to be conservative.

There is a moment, then (that is, 'now'), when we might maximise our collecting effectiveness: the moment of reportage contemporary with the event. But this is often very difficult. Vujic's and Dominy's curators faced great difficulties in capturing the moment and representing it fairly.[45] Sometimes change is too quick, sometimes too dangerous, sometimes too harrowing. Vujic argues that in time of war as much as possible has to be collected; the process of evaluation can take place later. Those collecting contemporary art share this view. They argue that retrospective analysis enables the discernment of objects of key art historical value. Of course, such an analysis is equally likely to create omission as it fails to understand how art historical (and other) knowledge is created. Art histories are the result of academic discourse, of which one key aim is to seek out and expose omission, to bring into the spotlight that which has been ignored or left unseen. Dominy shows that having to rely on retrospect is dangerous. The moment apartheid began to crumble a rapid amnesia took hold. If the moment was not seized it was lost.

From 'free' gifts to the 'expense' of collaborative recording

The act of acquisition itself may be inexpensive. Indeed, the rapid growth of museums only came about because of the role played by donation. And the key role of natural science in this development owed much to the

45 Ž. Vujic, 'Collecting in time of war' (Chapter 10) and G. Dominy, 'The politics of museum collecting in the 'old' and the 'new' South Africa' (Chapter 11).

cheapness of the objects. The practice of donation is taken for granted these days, but when modern provincial museums were first established in England in the early nineteenth century it was an extremely novel and uncertain mode of acquisition. The culture of the gift, with all its social overtones (which were a major factor in making donation successful), is another of these aspects of practice which lie at the heart of the irrational and unsustainable nature of museums. It creates the illusion that collecting is free. Clearly, it is not: the long-term costs of storing and maintaining an object have to be paid whether the object was given freely or not. The cost of acquisition is a singular cost; that of keeping is relentlessly cumulative, and with time the overall costs of collecting are the same regardless of whether the object was a purchase, resulted from fieldwork or arrived as a gift. The purpose of this point is simply to reveal the illusion; if museums collect treasure or trash, the cost, in the end, can be much the same. As a collection grows, the amount of resource available for each object – such as staff time – diminishes. Even if staffing levels rise with the growth of the museum, ultimately a financial slump or institutional reorganisation will cause a rationalisation of that staff resource, with consequent implications for the collection. This is sufficiently demonstrated by history to be beyond doubt. Money, then, and the political pressure to spend it in certain ways (such as front-of-house during a recession),[46] determines the size of the cloth and how it is to be cut. Investment in the moment of collecting – to make the best of the task – is actually one of the best uses of museum funding.

A step in this direction can be achieved by replacing the museum conception of collecting with one centred on recording. This frees the museum from the risks of object fetishism (being overpowered by objects). Objects now become part of contexts (as they long have in some disciplines and in some museums), and the media available to record those contexts are opened up. The justification for preferentially collecting objects in the past has been that objects retain a multidimensional aspect in a way that no other recording medium does. Objects, the argument runs, are capable of repeated reinterpretation, which is what gives collections their importance and utility. But Victorian intellectuals had limited media available to record their world and the collecting of objects circumvented all kinds of problems associated with inadequate taxonomies and a poorly educated workforce. The object also has remarkable powers by being real and imperfect – characteristics which disappear in the photography of the art book, for example, where a faithful account is impossible. But the future looks likely to extend the role of these other complementary technologies, and a fuller acknowledgement of recording (of which limited collecting is a part), rather than just simply collecting, looks set to shape future practices.

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46 Knell, 'Collecting, conservation and conservatism'.

Recording also offers new opportunities for collaboration and the eradication of much isolated and localised effort, which can otherwise lead to duplication. National registers of particular object types combined with agreed taxonomies help deal with 'types' and provide a vehicle for collaborative and complementary effort. They permit individual organisations to go in pursuit of excellence and cost-effective focused specialisations to develop. There is no reason why this collaborative framework should not also extend beyond the object-centred collecting, which makes up much contemporary practice, and towards future thematic, fieldwork-based investigations which involve recording using a variety of media, as described by Steen.[47]

This suggestion does not simply apply to thematic museums. Only together can community-centred museums encapsulate regional trends and localised traditions without duplication. This also permits museums to break from geopolitical constraints and pursue the popular ideal of 'centres of excellence' with all that that offers for rationalism and sustainability. Clearly not all partners involved in the collecting and recording of a theme need to come from collecting institutions. Many projects are enhanced – indeed, sometimes only achievable – with volunteer help, or the assistance of university academics, museum societies, amateur groups, oral history groups, students, and so on. Thematic inter-institutional collaboration is already well established in many scientific disciplines in order to make the best use of a rare fieldwork opportunity.[48]

Collaboration, however, appears difficult where there is an active market. Sports paraphernalia, for example, attracts widespread interest amongst private collectors, which drives up prices. The ethics and rationale of the private collector may be entirely different from those of the museum, and private collectors do not necessarily provide things with long-term prospects of survival, protected contexts, or public access. Nevertheless a dialogue can be useful, and remove a little competition from the marketplace. In many disciplines private collectors become excellent volunteers capable of using their collecting expertise for museum ends, and can be trained to achieve museum standards. As collecting becomes more rigorous and intellectually focused, it is important to accommodate, rather than to marginalize, the amateur. There are models we can call upon which turn volunteers into foster parents. In Britain, for example, the National Plant Collections Scheme delegates responsibility for the preservation of historic cultivars to private gardeners.[49] Here each gardener

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47 A. Steen (Chapter 17).

48 For 'centres of excellence', see the 'Wright Report', Department of Education and Science, *Provincial Museums and Galleries* (London: DES, 1973).

49 W.R. Reid et al., *Biodiversity Prospecting: Using Genetic Resources for Sustainable Development* (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 1993).

is, in effect, holding these plants in trust in a very museum-like way, but they also reap very collector-like rewards in terms of kudos of participation and skill in maintaining the collection, and they are also assured that their efforts will be continued. Perhaps, as Paul Martin's bus collector seems to perceive, there is little difference between objects in the museum and those in the private collection, and as a result, new collaborations might be possible.[50]

Commercial collectors and dealers are another group existing on the periphery of the museum world. Again, there is great potential for ethical problems – such as when a museum shows work from an art dealer's stock (which has economic benefits for other items in his stock). But there is also potential for collaboration, such as when Scunthorpe Museum collaborated with commercial fossil collectors, reaping the rewards of previously unseen fossils, while the dealers retained financially valuable, but fairly common, ammonites which they would polish up into décor fossils, incidentally removing all vestige of scientific worth. It was the richest collecting period in the museum's history and cost it nothing other than a little staff time – and, of course, the long-term cost of keeping. Without the time, money and goodwill of the commercial collectors, and the willingness of curatorial staff to give up claims to some magnificent ammonites (of which the museum had a plentiful supply anyway), this would have been impossible, and as the rock was to be lost anyway, the alternative was to lose the fossils too.[51]

Perhaps the most obvious and least contentious link-up is with university academics. Certainly, in archaeology, biology and palaeontology the building of investigative teams is fundamental to high-resolution scientific collecting. These may then collaborate with private individuals to further strengthen collecting. Some have used collecting by the local community to drive official programmes studying biodiversity, such as Costa Rica's INBio (Instituto Nacional de Biodiversidad Heredia) programme; others have utilised local knowledge and possessions to create folk museums. In these latter examples there are issues of local community ownership, which John Martin believes should be taken into account even in scientific collecting.

Whether a participant institution in a project sees itself as a centre of excellence for expertise or material culture, or a centre for identity, or part of a wider community of supporters and collaborators, the overall outcome of

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The National Plant Collections scheme is organised by the UK's National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens. It currently has 600 registered collections covering over 320 genera, 12,000 species and 36,000 cultivars.

50 P. Martin, 'Contemporary popular collecting' (Chapter 8).

51 P. Wyse-Jackson, and S.J. Knell (eds), 'Museums and Fossil Excavation' (thematic issue), *Geological Curator*, 6(2) (1994).

this kind of collaborative exercise is the notion of distributed knowledge and perhaps a distributed collection.[52] The project to found a National Museum of Australia recognised that a distributed national collection already existed and that it needed to take this into account in its collecting. It can be a perspective less based on the possessive drive to acquire objects and more on the broader intellectual rationale of the museum, which encourages sustainability through shared values and shared collections, but which is so easily lost where local or singular perspectives dominate. This is surely another key to the future of museum collecting.

Similarly, John Martin recognises the need to ensure that collecting fossils through trade should benefit the local community, but he also strongly believes in the internationalism of science. Science relies upon this notion of a distributed collection: objects are the property of science, and as such can only be held in trust. It does not matter who holds them provided science has unlimited access. Such views are widely held in the scientific community, but Michael Taylor and Jean-Marc Gagnon and Gerald Fitzgerald take a view which gives greater weight to issues of identity which in turn place greater emphasis on ownership.[53] Such ideas don't undermine the idea of a distributed collection, but rather suggest that it should be distributed in a certain way.

At the heart of this idea of museums acting collaboratively is the emphasis on expertise as a means to make collecting more efficient and collections more rational. More than a century ago, museum guru William Flower warned against the blinkered view of museums as simply being institutionalised collections. For him it was not the collection which formed the central resource, or most distinguishing feature of the museum, but rather its staff.[54] Despite repeated delivery, this message has not been learnt and what we have seen in many museum workforces is an undervaluing of specialist expertise and the erosion of the knowledgebase of museums. Somehow the intellectual resource of the museum must be held together, for as Flower rightly says, it is the staff which define our museums, and without expertise objects are mute.

A strategy for collection development

Discussion thus far has tried to illuminate some irrational practices, dispel a few illusions, and distinguish kinds of collecting and their disciplinary relationships to social, and collecting, desires. I have redefined the act of museum collecting (returning to an earlier conception), thrown out

52 The notion of a distributed collection became apparent not long after early English provincial museums were established in the 1820s, Knell, *Culture of English Geology*, 75 .

53 M. Taylor (Chapter 14) and J.-M.Gagnon and G. Fitzgerald, 'Towards a national collection strategy: reviewing existing holdings' (Chapter 20).

54 W.H. Flower, *Essays on Museums*, (London: Macmillan, 1898), 12.

perpetuity clauses, suggested that we must explore other ways to record, explored a range of conflicting values and even suggested that poststructuralist material culture studies shift objects into the realm of the intangible. A range of arguments and questions have been thrown at professional notions of collecting and the collected object, simply to probe for possibilities and alternatives, and question the traditions of practice which are so easy to follow but so hard to interrogate. Museums should be places of creativity and innovation, and this should be as apparent in collecting practices as it is in exhibition galleries.

Table 1.1 offers a proposed outline for the strategic development of collections. I shall use the term 'collecting' here as I have redefined it (as the intellectual components of an integrated 'acquisition–management–disposal' process, a process defined by a museum-specific type of connoisseurship and focused on mixed media and collaborative recording). The left-hand column gives steps along the way to constructing a strategy and answers the questions on the right. Each step involves a process of review and (re)definition. Where a particular question arises that cannot be resolved at one level, a solution should be sought at another. The process is an iterative one, with the cycle of steps repeated until an acceptable strategy is reached. For example, a museum might believe oral history recording is critical to effective collecting but cannot undertake it due to inadequate resources. It could try to address the resource shortfall (Resource step), or seek a solution in extended participation such as working jointly with another museum in the region or with local college students, or beginning an extramural class which does this work as part of its curriculum (Participants step).

Table 1.1 A framework for the strategic development of collections

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<tr><td>Mission</td><td>What do we want to achieve?</td><td rowspan="5">R
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E</td></tr>
<tr><td>Boundaries</td><td>What does/does not interest us?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Methodology &
Resources</td><td>When and how do we collect?
With what do we collect?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Participants</td><td>With whom?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Targets</td><td>What specifically do we do now?</td></tr>
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A distinction between this form of a strategy making and the imposition of a collecting policy is that the former is a framework for action, for long-term goals and proactive collecting, yet it establishes short-term targets and remains responsive to change and opportunity. In this example, the strategy is reviewed annually to set specific targets, while its more policy-oriented content will change much less frequently.

The collecting taking place must be deeply contextualised, use multiple media and be driven by a mission to understand (rather than to possess). The mission here is for collection development rather than for the museum

overall, though the two will be intimately related. It needs to rationalise the role of the object in what might be termed a project of research (though I use a liberal definition) and to determine what is a reasonable level of effort for the objective in hand. Questions one might ask in formulating the mission include: Who uses the collection currently and how? What are our existing strengths? For what are we known? Are there specific areas we wish to develop as excellences? Who shares our interests? What are the geographical limits on our interests, and why? Is there a case for adjusting them flexibly to suit each individual discipline? With whom can we work collaboratively in order to rationalise what we do? As with the formulation of a collecting policy, the involvement of a wide range of staff is important, but unlike a collecting policy, the strategy is not simply a gatekeeper document but rather a statement of intent directing staff to go out and acquire material in a sustainable, rational and proactive way which sees the three-dimensional archive as only a tiny proportion of the collecting (or recording) activity aimed at this goal. It prevents collecting becoming a passive, opportunistic activity or simply becoming inactive due to limited storage space. It does not mean staff have to spend extended periods of time in the field, though it does permit time to be managed to enable a proper collecting job to be undertaken. It also enables the museum to take rational decisions about what should be collected, when, how and for what purpose. It also ties movements of objects into the collections with movements of objects out. Clearly, it doesn't mean inordinate amounts of material being added to the collection. Clearly, also, activity will depend on discipline and context.

The development of a future strategy can only begin in a co-ordinated survey of existing collections. It would be too easy (were the rules by which we play not perceived as immutable) to establish new rules, to 'shift the goalposts' and dismiss the legacy of the past as embodying an inappropriate philosophy or methodology. Jean-Marc Gagnon and Gerry Fitzgerald show, in a very practical way, how bulk statistical analysis can indicate where existing strengths and omissions lie. The Canadian Museum of Nature has considerable experience of using data in this way.[55] Users must, however, remain constantly aware of how such data have been obtained if those data are to be used effectively. The Canadian data indicates some interesting lines for future collecting, but requires, as the authors would admit, further research to gather other important quality attributes (such as data richness, completeness, state and method of preservation and so on). Curators from other disciplines may feel frustrated at the ease with which the data were gathered and analysed, and

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55 See, for example, G.R. Fitzgerald, P. Whiting and K. Shepherd, 'A comparison of methodologies used for valuation of the fish collection at the Canadian Museum of Nature', in Nudds and Pettitt, *Value and Valuation*, 110–17.

at the strong (and apparently finite) taxonomic framework of biological classification within which such collecting takes place. However, such outsider views of disciplines can be deceptive (particularly if based on number summaries); this discipline is as multifaceted and subjective as any other.

So how would this strategic approach work in practice? Let me give a fictitious example. Under an existing collecting policy the art curator of Bigtown Museum Service aims to amass a collection of art representative of that produced in the region, and to add such pieces as might provide an overview of the major art movements of the twentieth century. Collecting, here, is driven by aesthetics and established art histories. Unfortunately, Bigtown's main industries are in decline and the revenue base for the museum has been decreasing. The art gallery already has a friends' organisation which has in the past been helpful in raising funds. However, a re-evaluation of the service as a whole suggests to the museum's staff that an important aspect of the museum's activities revolves around the town's identity (whether for its inhabitants or for outsiders) (Mission step). Consequently, it was felt that its regional thematic collections were capable of recording distinctive activities that were fundamentally important to this mission, but that its attempt to gain a representation of twentieth-century art was primarily for the purposes of context and education (even if some of those items are prestigious and in themselves contribute to civic pride and identity) (Boundaries step). Fundraising by the friends might be the key means to achieve this latter end (a new educational mission), but it should not be a priority (Methodology & Resources). The art curator who had acquired local works at local artists' exhibitions as well as through gifts decides as a consequence to take a different route. Aware that little was written about the artists she was collecting, and that the museum's awareness of them relied heavily upon personal reminiscence and gossip, she decided to adopt a more ethnographic approach to the regional art scene (Methodology and Boundaries). Collecting was to be an act of recording artistic production and interaction: interviewing artists, gaining oral data, photographs of works, the studio, exhibitions and influences, and other non-three-dimensional information. The keeper of social history had acquired funding to attend training in ethnographic research techniques (Resources) and agreed to assist in getting the project off the ground (Collaboration). The staff expect that the depth of study will encourage donations from the artists themselves, but nevertheless the museum director has pooled all purchase monies with the aim of targeting expenditure at context-rich, proactive collecting (Resources). In the first year the art curator will focus on the craft potters, and as the result of an internal bidding process, the bulk of this year's 'collecting fund' will support this activity (Target). The Director has also convened a collection development board, to review acquisition proposals and objectives. The

board will include representatives from various stakeholding groups (Collaboration, Methodology & Resources) and is managed to enable appropriate input against established policy/strategy without the intervention of local politics (Boundaries). It is a requirement of this board that only curatorial staff contribute recommendations for acquisition and disposal, and that they make their arguments against established criteria (Boundaries, Methodology). It has been agreed that the museum will no longer pursue a policy of keeping objects in perpetuity but that collecting will be used to 'improve' the collection by replacing certain objects with similar ones that are deemed to better fulfil the museum's mission (perhaps through better documentation). All objects in the collection are allocated to one value category:

- A-List – Premier collection. Objects of established artistic merit and rich contextualisation, critical to the museum mission. These objects will, in particular, document artistic production in the region. Objects in this category will generally be kept in the long term as it is doubtful that they can be improved upon. These objects deserve the highest levels of resource input.
- B-List – Objects useful to the wider communicative objectives of the museum. Less critical to the museum's collecting and documentation mission. An asset to be appropriately maintained and kept in the medium to long term. Objects capable of being improved upon or commonplace.
- C-List – Objects which fulfil particular objectives but which, because they don't fully meet with museum policy, or are poorly documented, can be considered ripe for exchange, disposal or replacement. In effect this is the transfer list and it may include items that another institution would consider A-List.
- D-List – Objects which are to be disposed of by prescribed means, preferably in the current year.

A new collecting?

In this chapter I have intentionally been provocative. My aim has not been to offer a complete solution, but rather a series of ideas, point out a few blind spots, and suggest that there is considerably more scope for rational thinking and philosophical probing. Some of what I have discussed appears in the practices of certain museums or in particular disciplines but no museum or discipline is immune from the kind of review. It is a shift in thinking that is required – a reshaping of the rules that govern what we do. Museums do not need the equivalent of the Beeching Report[56] (an axe that

56 The 'Beeching Report', British Railways Board, *The Reshaping of British Railways* (London: HMSO, 1963), led to the destruction of much of the British railway network and has been much criticised as short-sighted.

blindly cuts without considering the social implications of the loss), but an intellectual solution which will derive social and financial benefits.

A rational and sustainable future cannot be built upon such things as mere acceptance of gifts, or policies of non-disposal, or concepts such as uniqueness, age, the local, the redundant, gap-filling, object fetishism, the popular or in isolation from neighbours, complementary institutions or technologies. It can, however, be built upon: increased investment in the act of collecting; realising the opportunities of the moment; demoting the object in the act of collecting and raising associated investigative activity; fundamentally testing the role of objects in our collecting disciplines; on-going collection distillation and 'improvement'; collaboration; objects in the collection having different roles, values and lifetimes; seeing the object as a medium amongst many with its own limitations; by developing adaptive capability; by valuing expertise and by fundamentally rethinking what we mean by 'collecting'.

We need museums to remain those object-centred oases in a world of change, but in order to achieve this they too must change.