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Chapter 4

“STOREHOUSES OF UNIMAGINED TREASURES”: DELIGHTFUL RUMMAGING AND ARTISTS’ RESPONSES TO “UNLOVED” COLLECTIONS

ALEXANDRA WOODALL*

Introduction

If you are squeamish
do not poke among the beach rubble.¹

This fragment of poetry by Sappho begins DeSilvey’s paper, “Observed Decay: Telling Stories with Mutable Things,” in which the author talks about decay as “a process that can be *generative of a different kind of knowledge*.”² Here, using the same poem to frame the chapter, I explore another “different kind of knowledge,” generated not through the literal decay of objects but through what happens when artists and others are invited in to “poke among the beach rubble.” This may include actually accessing the hidden depths of museum storage and their often-forgotten collections, getting up close and personal with the stuff of the storerooms through touch, or imagining and making new things in response. All of this, I argue, is about an encounter with objects that is primarily an emotional or affective one,³ one without “prerequisite of information”⁴ yet where sensory

1 See additional translation in Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (London: Virago, 2002), 293, and her note, 379.

2 Caitlin DeSilvey, “Observed Decay: Telling Stories with Mutable Things,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 3 (2006): 318–38 (323) (author’s original italics).

3 Margaret Wetherell, Laurajane Smith, and Gary Campbell discuss interpretations of emotion and affect in the Introduction to their edited book: Laurajane Smith, Margaret Wetherell, and Gary Campbell, ed., *Emotion, Affective Practices and the Past in the Present* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), in particular noting that they are “flowing, dynamic, recursive and profoundly contextual, challenging static and neat formulations.” See page 1 of this reference.

4 Sandra Dudley, “Museum Materialities: Objects, Sense and Feeling,” in *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*, ed. Sandra Dudley (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), 8.

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encounter, particularly touch, can elicit an immediate and visceral response. Touch directly links audiences and/or artists with the objects' histories and contexts, their original makers or owners, and their material embodiment, not least through a connection of hands revealed by fingerprints, patina, or marks of wear and tear.⁵ In addition, building on work exploring artists' interventions in museums⁶ and on activist projects such as that of artist Fred Wilson in his *Mining the Museum* exhibition,⁷ this chapter examines such artistic interventions and engagements particularly in relation to stored or hidden collections rather than displayed ones. These interventions provide important sources of interpreting collections, and thus they generate "a different kind of knowledge" that prioritizes an initial emotional "gut response." This, I argue, has the potential to shape museum methods and practices both behind the scenes and within exhibitions.⁸

A small but growing body of work is focused on museum storage areas as sites for museological research. Geoghegan and Hess note that "despite their invisibility to the public, stored objects and their stubborn physicality are at the heart of what defines a museum."⁹ Brusius and Singh ask in their edited volume: "why is it that, when most museum objects lie in storage, it is the gallery and the exhibition that have come to take such an important place in both the self-representation of museums and the public's perception of these institutions?"¹⁰ In this chapter, I explore museum storage areas through three artistic projects and ask what happens when hidden objects in storage are actually made accessible for these creative imaginings to take place. Rather than just enabling intangible access, here the projects all involve hands-on touch and the physical need to rummage through and work with stored collections as a form of knowledge that is primarily an emotional material engagement rather than being based purely on empirical data, scientific experiment, or historical contextual information, for example.¹¹

5 Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42–56 at 45; Constance Classen and David Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts," in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 199–222 (202).

6 See, for example, Danny Birchall, *Institution and Intervention: Artists' Projects in Object-Based Museums*, unpublished MA dissertation, University of London, 2012; Chris Dorsett, "Making Meaning beyond Display," in *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*, ed. Sandra Dudley (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), 241–59.

7 Fred Wilson and Howard Halle, "Mining the Museum," *Grand Street* 44 (1993): 151–72.

8 For a discussion on the politics of stored collections, see the Introduction in Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh, ed., *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018).

9 Hilary Geoghegan and Alison Hess, "Object-Love at the Science Museum: Cultural Geographies of Museum Storerooms," *Cultural Geographies* 22, no. 3 (2015): 445–46 (461).

10 Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh, "Introduction," in Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh, ed. *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 3.

11 See Alexandra Woodall, "Rummaging as a Strategy for Creative Thinking and Imaginative Engagement in Higher Education," in *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education*, ed. Helen Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 133–55; Dydia DeLyser, "Collecting, Kitsch and the Intimate Geographies of Social Memory: A Story of Archival Autoethnography," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40 (2014): 209–22.

We know that visitors like to explore places that are not usually open to the public. Yet what is it about the voyage behind the scenes that so resonates with visitors and, in this case, with artists, and how might this impact upon museum practices? The title of this chapter is a quotation taken from a short story by Saki (the pen-name of Hector Hugh Munro, 1870–1916), *The Lumber Room* (meaning an attic-like space). Artist Mark Hearld also used it to name his exhibition held at York Art Gallery on its reopening following a capital development and transformation project, which was open to the public between August 2015 and May 2017—*The Lumber Room: Unimagined Treasures*.¹² Intrigued by the title and contents of this exhibition, I sought out the original Saki story. The “lumber room” is discovered one day by the protagonist of the tale, a young boy named Nicholas. Somewhat akin to the public perception of a museum storeroom, the room is a place out of bounds in his aunt’s large house. Yet bold Nicholas ventures in. Artist Mark Hearld used Saki’s narrative as a basis for his curation of objects from across the diverse collections in York, which were displayed alongside works on paper, ceramics, and paintings that he had created in response.¹³

Following a brief summary of Saki’s tale drawing out its relevant themes, this chapter focuses on what might happen when visitors or, in this case, particularly when artists are encouraged to venture into those hidden spaces and explore the “unloved” collections of museums.¹⁴ Focusing in particular on artists’ interventions with neglected collections, this chapter argues that rather than museum storage areas being places of unimagined treasures, they might instead become places for imagining (and reimagining) treasures through a sensory, unmediated, and emotional encounter. There are (usually) no labels or interpretation, and the drawers and boxes lend themselves to being explored in a way that perhaps contrasts with the formality of the museum gallery setting. Indeed, they might be places for questioning the notion of what is “treasure” or is of value within a museum, and they might be spaces through which museum processes (for example, curating, documenting, conserving, and interpreting) can be laid bare. Looking at ways in which artists have brought forlorn collections to life, not least through the act of touching, this chapter focuses on three examples.

The case study methodology includes a bricolage approach of (participant) observation, analysis of exhibition interpretation and artists’ writings, and individual interviews with artists and museum staff to explore how creative experiences in stored collections challenge the very notion of the “unloved” collection. After outlining each case study, the chapter makes comparisons and draws contrasts between them, developing the idea of “material interpretation” and rummaging as methodology. This chapter concludes by suggesting that through these sorts of hands-on encounters and artistic interventions, notions of the values of things, of institutional attitudes towards collections care, and of the processes carried out in museum storage areas are at once both developed and

¹² “The Lumber Room: Unimagined Treasures” was curated by Mark Hearld: www.yorkartgallery.org.uk/exhibition/the-lumber-room-unimagined-treasures/ [accessed July 2, 2019].

¹³ This is a familiar but nevertheless dynamic trope in museum practice, often enabling museums to be self-critical about their practices. For a brief and useful historical overview tracing artists’ interventions in museums, see Birchall, *Institution and Intervention*.

¹⁴ But arguably in a series of practices which could be extended to other audiences.

challenged. Further, this chapter argues that the creativity and enthusiasm shown by artists visiting these stored collections might be something that museums can develop for all audiences by way of a new emotionally engaged approach to public programming that explores what constitutes knowledge in the museum.

“The Lumber Room”

Champion of the satirical short story, Saki wittily mocked Edwardian culture, and his stories often recognize the clever cunning of children, played out against the rigid stupidity of the adult authority figures. In Saki’s tale *The Lumber Room* (1914) (“lumber” here meaning “miscellaneous stored objects”), the main character is Nicholas, a young boy who, due to an incident in which he found a frog in his bread and milk earlier in the day, is not allowed to go to the seaside with his cousins. Instead, his aunt keeps him at home, where he is under strict instructions not to go into the gooseberry garden. It soon becomes apparent that Nicholas has no intention whatsoever of visiting the gooseberry garden. Yet he does have another motive:

By standing on a chair in the library one could reach a shelf on which reposed a fat, important-looking key. The key was as important as it looked; it was the instrument which kept the mysteries of the lumber-room secure from unauthorised intrusion, which opened a way only for aunts and such-like privileged persons. Nicholas had not had much experience of the art of fitting keys into keyholes and turning locks, but for some days past he had practised with the key of the schoolroom door; he did not believe in trusting too much to luck and accident. The key turned stiffly in the lock, but it turned. The door opened, and Nicholas was in an unknown land, compared with which the gooseberry garden was a stale delight ...¹⁵

Once in the lumber room, Nicholas peers around. It lives up to his expectations. Large and dimly lit, the “storehouse of unimagined treasures” contains “wonderful things for the eyes to feast on.” In this room, his aunt, as someone who thought that “things spoil by use,” had consigned numerous items “to dust and damp by way of preserving them.” But for Nicholas, “it was a living, breathing story; he sat down on a roll of Indian hangings, glowing in wonderful colours beneath a layer of dust, and took in all the details of the tapestry picture.”¹⁶

The story continues, describing Nicholas’s experience of the other objects of delight in the lumber room—from snake-like candlesticks to a duck-shaped teapot, a sandalwood box filled with brass creatures to a book illustrated with coloured birds—and each time the thing is described more vividly to include his imaginings of the life histories behind the object. Eventually he is rudely interrupted by the shouts of his aunt coming from the garden, where she is engaged in energetic and rather hopeless searching for him among the artichokes and raspberry canes. Saki wryly writes, “It was probably the first time for twenty years that anyone had smiled in that lumber-room.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Saki, *Tobermory and Other Stories*, selected by Martin Stephen (London: Phoenix, 1998), 121–22.

¹⁶ Saki, *Tobermory and Other Stories*, 122.

¹⁷ Saki, *Tobermory and Other Stories*, 123.

There are several features in this tale that can be drawn out as pertinent to museum practices, particularly in relation to "unloved" collections. Firstly, just like the museum storeroom, here, the room under lock and key is only for "privileged persons" to access. It needs to be kept secure from "unauthorised intrusion," which immediately gives the space some sort of sense of mystery for anyone who is not allowed in, and there is something deeply exciting (but also unsettling) about the prospect of going into an "unknown land." By virtue of there being a key, there is a power hierarchy at play. Somebody owns and has access to this key, meaning that somebody else does not. So it is with museums, not least in the language of curators as "keepers."

Secondly, the tale enters into one of the deepest paradoxes of the use of objects in museums: that "catch-22" that museums have to enable access to objects while at the same time needing to preserve those objects.¹⁸ Here, in the lumber room, just as in many museums, the aunt thinks that "things spoil by use" and to lock them away, out of sight, is the best way of preserving them, in this case even where dust and damp may do far more damage. We might even ask whether the non-use of objects is more damaging, since the object torn (sometimes violently) from its original context by being in a museum¹⁹ is no longer the object it once was and can never again be such; some element of its original object-ness is destroyed just as the object is saved.

Finally, the story is explicit in its descriptions of the emotional and visceral responses Nicholas has to this object-filled space. The sheer joy of being in this unloved room full of stuff is revealed not least through his secret smile. Nicholas's emotional response to material things is expressed through sight and touch ("peeping" at and turning the pages of a book) but without language. He simply sits "for many golden minutes revolving the possibilities" and he smiles.²⁰ All these themes, central to debates around museum materialities and emotional encounters, will emerge further through the case studies that follow.

The three case studies include projects at Manchester Art Gallery, York Museums Trust, and Museums Sheffield, all regional organizations in the north of England. Each case study demonstrates the complex and nuanced role that artists might play in bringing forlorn collections to life, through rediscovery, imagination, use, reuse, and to inspire new making and thinking practices. Each case study also explores ways in which rummaging offers alternative ways to conceptualize what constitutes knowledge in a museum. Building on work about museum materialities, particularly that of

¹⁸ See the conference proceedings from UCL's "Catch-22" event on this topic, held in 2009: "What's the Damage?," www.ucl.ac.uk/conservation-c-22/conference [accessed January 4, 2018].

¹⁹ See Susan Vogel, "Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion," in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003), 653–62 (653); Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape," 200; Sven Ouzman, "The Beauty of Letting Go: Fragmentary Museums and Archaeologies of Archive," in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 269–301 (274).

²⁰ Saki, *Tobermory and Other Stories*, 123.

museum anthropologist Sandra Dudley,²¹ the chapter's proposed method of "material interpretation" (discussed below) sees a delight in rummaging and actually being able to use neglected collections. This in turn can transform and make transparent museum practices and even lead to new methodologies for public programming. Perhaps above all, the case studies, like Nicholas's experiences in the lumber room, provoke and generate a different type of knowing about objects and collections in storage—a knowledge that is born out of affective encounter.

Mary Mary Quite Contrary

The first case study in which artists explored "unimagined treasures" in store is a project inspired by the Mary Greg Collection of Handicrafts of Bygone Times at Manchester Art Gallery (MAG), "Mary Mary Quite Contrary."²² This collection consists of hundreds of domestic objects, ranging from old spoons and rusty keys to basketry, miniature children's books, and dolls' houses. Gathered together by Mary Greg (1850–1949), these things were mainly given by her to the gallery in the 1920s. Often handmade, often worn out, these objects had been largely in storage at the gallery since the 1950s. Until the first decade of the 2000s, the objects had not been displayed, had been considered for potential disposal, and had never had a dedicated curator. Yet through a series of hands-on, open-ended, and lovingly entitled "rummages," in which two artist-lecturers (Sharon Blakey and Hazel Jones from Manchester School of Art at Manchester Metropolitan University [MMU]) were invited behind the scenes, all sorts of creative outpourings began to emerge. It became apparent firstly that such engagements were giving rise to a type of sensory knowledge not often prioritized within museums (what is here referred to as a "material interpretation") and secondly that this type of immediate encounter was enabling an interesting collaborative critique of institutional practices.

The "rummages" started, in a manner similar to that of Nicholas's forays into the lumber room, in adventurous, possibly clandestine, and at the very least ad hoc ways.²³ Between 2007 and 2010, the remit of the Interpretation Development team at Manchester Art Gallery, of which I was part, was to devise creative projects to engage audiences with collections interpretation.²⁴ Contrasting with other interpretive posts in different organizations, whose remits were often to create and write interpretive text,

²¹ Sandra Dudley, ed., *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010).

²² "Mary Mary Quite Contrary: Investigating the Mary Greg Collection," www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk [accessed January 4, 2018].

²³ See Woodall, "Rummaging as a Strategy for Creative Thinking and Imaginative Engagement in Higher Education."

²⁴ Now defunct due to cuts following the demise of Renaissance in the Regions funding, members of the Interpretation Development team involved in this project were the author and Liz Mitchell, who has since written her PhD on Mary Greg as a maker of collections, at Manchester Metropolitan University, and whose research blog can be found at: <https://untidycollector.wordpress.com/> [accessed January 4, 2018].



Figure 4.1. A rummage. Photograph by Alexandra Woodall.

our role was to encourage others (for example, young people, children, and artists) to interpret, often in a-textual ways. Because of the experimental nature of this role, we were fortunate to be able to develop new ideas that were often slightly “under the radar” and with few visitor targets or external “key performance indicators” to report, unlike our colleagues, for example, in the learning team. In short, we could take risks and play both with ideas and things, and we were able to experiment with working with different audiences. Exploring the Mary Greg Collection was one such project. Based on a previous collaboration in which the artists had explored the values of forgotten things in an exhibition entitled *Out of the Ordinary* (MMU Special Collections, 2006), Sharon Blakey and Hazel Jones were invited to come and “rummage” through the stored Mary Greg Collection (see figure 4.1) to see what would happen. Artist Hazel Jones describes her experiences thus:

It was basically: “Here are all the cupboards open. I’m here watching you but *go forth* and have a look and see what you can find!” It was brilliant—it was just—because you could *open* a drawer. You could look for a couple of seconds and then—you know, think “this is amazing but it’s not the sort of thing I’m excited by” and you could be quite quick, whereas if the curator was sort of fetching stuff out for you, it’s a very slow process, isn’t it? And we had a very quick editing process going on. You know, like you’re scanning cupboards at one point, the first time we went. I think not even fetching much out, just scanning what was in the cupboards to start to get to feel for what sort of things [...] and

then we could pick and choose and explore more, and the fact that we could go back more than once, and we did, was even better because each time you went back, even drawers you'd looked in quite well before, you found *even more* in that drawer.²⁵

There is, of course, a long-established practice of inviting artists into museums to intervene, and through the practice of institutional critique,²⁶ but inviting artists to explore the stored collections in this way had not been undertaken previously at Manchester Art Gallery. In his significant contribution to the field, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, curator James Putnam states: "The activities taking place behind the scenes in museums have been *as important* as the modes of display in public areas. There is the interesting contrast between revealing and concealing, as illustrated in the common process of choosing to exhibit one object while keeping others in reserve storage."²⁷

The Mary Greg project aimed to develop reflection on some of these important activities behind the scenes, both to reveal what was already there but also to develop new ways to reimagine the collection and the institution itself. And, above all, the process was a joyous and individual one.

The rummages allow you to make your own pathway through things, to have the agency of a degree of discovery. And that might be discovery of just something at the back of the cupboard, or it might be the discovery that actually this thing that you've picked up has the most fantastic tiny grain of pins in it, or something like that—it could be discovery at a whole level, series of levels of intimacy—but it is *your* discovery, it's not something that an anonymous curator has discovered and then written up on a label and said "Oi, look at this!" It is absolutely yours, and nobody else's. And in that moment, it's a purely personal private thing. You might choose to share it and then it becomes a different kind of discovery, but in that moment, it belongs to you.²⁸

In advocating the rummage as an "intrinsically creative and serious act, comparable to the maker's playful experimentation in the studio," Blakey and Mitchell have nevertheless described rummaging as "neither a word nor activity that museums and galleries generally encourage; it conjures up loss of control and wayward behaviour, undermining the museum's authoritative role as guardian of material culture."²⁹ Indeed, rummaging

25 Interview recorded on June 15, 2013 in Alexandra Woodall, *Sensory Engagements with Objects in Art Galleries: Material Interpretation and Theological Metaphor*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2016, 133.

26 See James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001, reprint 2009); Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999); Claire Robins, *Curious Lessons in the Museum: The Pedagogic Potential of Artists' Interventions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

27 Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 16 (author's italics).

28 Interview recorded on June 9, 2013 in Woodall, *Sensory Engagements with Objects in Art Galleries*, 134.

29 Sharon Blakey and Liz Mitchell, "A Question of Value: Rethinking the Mary Greg Collection," in *Collaboration through Craft*, ed. Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle, and Helen Felcey (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 170–85 (176).

may feel somewhat renegade.³⁰ It allows an equality of access and interpretation not often paralleled in usual curator-visitor relationships. Yet perhaps it is because of this, and its tactile nature, that it is such a valuable museum experiment. I now wish to illustrate the value (and challenges) of rummages as material interpretation by turning to an unlikely object: a headless zebra.

At some point during an early rummage in 2008, the project team came across a cupboard in which there were several cardboard solander-type boxes. On opening the first box, a menagerie began to appear. It seemed apparent that these boxes contained animals from at least one Noah's Ark (see figure 4.2). Bearing traces of lives lived—having been played with—many of the animals were in a state of disrepair, missing tails, hooves, and ears. In one of these, a box that became a subject for the photography of Ben Blackall, lay a pair of zebras. Two by two. Except one of them was headless. Blakey comments in a blog entry focusing on brokenness and use that she loves the headless zebra and, on finding this and accompanying letters from the archive that discussed the missing animals, she began working on a series to restore and remember these animals.³¹

The Noah's Ark animals were clearly fragile, and to position them upright "two by two" or "notate" them (to use de Waal's phrase), to make them present, as in the example image below, was not viable (they simply would have collapsed). Yet they could still be held, felt, smelt, and observed, in and out of their storage boxes.

Sometime later, during another playful rummage with the artists, a small white packet was found, upon which was written the mysterious "LOOSE PARTS." Opening this little parcel up revealed a wonderful horde: tails, hooves, legs, ears, and the missing zebra's head (see figure 4.3).

Yet, as already noted, one of the recognized values of this collection lay in its brokenness and in the narrative of things missing, the spaces and traces of former lives lived prior to the gallery. This narrative could only be told through the materiality of the collection. Imagine the surprise of the artists, then, some weeks later when revisiting the boxes, to discover that the headless zebra was no longer headless! The project team struggled to contain their disappointment on seeing a pair of gleaming, pristine zebras, reunited by meticulous (and anonymous) conservators, complete with heads. Had something been lost in the very process of bringing these two parts together to make a present "whole?"³² Arguably, the emotional significance and value of this zebra actually lay in its prior incompleteness, in its traces of life and use, the patina and sense of connection with the children who had once played with it, the story of its brokenness. Yet all too often museums shy away from these powerful stories of the broken, preferring

30 Alexandra Woodall, Liz Mitchell, and Sharon Blakey, "Mary Mary Quite Contrary: The Mary Greg Collection at Manchester Art Gallery," *The Ruskin Review and Bulletin* 7, no. 1. (Spring 2011): 36–46 (43).

31 "Missing Objects," www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk/archives/1546 [accessed September 9, 2015].

32 This question has also been posed in an earlier paper by Alexandra Woodall, "Mary Greg's Bygones: A Misplaced Collection?," *Social History Curators' Group News* 66 (2010): 7–9, and in Blakey and Mitchell, "A Question of Value."



Figure 4.2. Tray of Noah's Ark animals, including a headless zebra, in the Mary Greg Collection.
© Ben Blackall for Manchester City Galleries, licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0.



Figure 4.3. Loose parts including the zebra's head. Photograph by Alexandra Woodall.

the neat, the conserved, and the complete. These stored "unloved" objects can reveal far more and have far more potential for emotional engagement than things on display. I now turn to another project whose aims were to ask exactly this sort of question about the values of things yet which perhaps in reality asked another sort of question, beyond the object itself.

Finding the Value

Finding the Value was an exhibition held in 2014 that took place at York St. Mary's, a deconsecrated church and site for contemporary art that forms part of York Museums Trust (YMT).³³ Five artists (Andrew Bracey, Alison Erika Forde, Yvette Hawkins, Susie MacMurray, and Simon Venus)³⁴ were invited to create new work responding to and actually using a collection of objects (including books, paintings, and ethnographic

³³ "Finding the Value: Contemporary Artists Explore Aspects of the Madsen Collection," www.yorkstmarys.org.uk/exhibition/finding-the-value/ [accessed July 2, 2019].

³⁴ Andrew Bracey (www.andrewbracey.co.uk); Alison Erika Forde (www.alisonerikaforde.com); Yvette Hawkins (<http://yvettehawkins.co.uk>); Susie MacMurray (www.susie-macmurray.co.uk); and Simon Venus (www.facebook.com/simonvenusautomata) [all accessed February 29, 2016].

and decorative art) that had been bequeathed to YMT by a pair of siblings who, ironically, were entirely unknown to the Trust during their lifetimes, Peter Emil Madsen and his sister Karen Madsen. The bequest also consisted of Peter Madsen's wide-ranging collections of objects. Where these items resonated with YMT's acquisition policies, some were immediately accessioned into the main collection. Some were sold at auction, but the remaining objects were given to the commissioned artists to use in whatever ways they saw fit, including through reconfiguring, reimagining, wrapping, and even by allowing silkworms to build cocoons over them. This encounter by artists, another form of "material interpretation," allowed for discussions about the values of objects to take place in a public forum, as well as discussions about what it means to use, or even to use up, an object.

In her Introduction to the Madsen Commissions, then Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of York Museums Trust and curator of the exhibition, Janet Barnes, speaks about the origins of the project. She talks about the market value of aspects of the collection that were accessioned and sold, but she also notes that the remaining items of lesser value "may well have been objects of high value in terms of personal meaning or affection."³⁵ But this will never be known. She asks, "How can the curator respond to these human values as opposed to straightforward calculations of financial worth?"³⁶ The project, also described as "a cultural entrepreneurial risk," arose as an attempt to answer this question.

We decided to take these works, both images and objects, as the raw material for new works. It is intended that the new works should respond to, investigate and develop the values and cultural meaning of the original works. It may even be the case that the financial value of the new works will greatly exceed the present value of the original material. It is hoped to be a creative questioning of, and experiment in, the inheritance and development of cultural values.³⁷

Although there are similarities between this project and "Mary Mary Quite Contrary," there are significant differences. Firstly, unlike the Mary Greg project, the Madsen project always had an outcome in mind: an exhibition of new work by artists who specifically applied for an official commission. Although still a risk, the York project was arguably less open-ended than the serendipitous one at Manchester Art Gallery. There would be a display at the end of the process. The second significant distinction is that at York St. Mary's, the project was initiated by the CEO. There was never anything "under the radar" about it; the project and its challenging of institutional hierarchies, notions of value, and attitudes towards access and emotional response were being promulgated deliberately from the top.

So, what emerged from this shift in hierarchy? How did these artists with distinct practices respond? What aspects of the collection and ideas of its use and ownership

³⁵ Janet Barnes, *Finding the Value: Contemporary Artists Explore Aspects of the Madsen Collection* (York: York Museums Trust, 2014), 8.

³⁶ Barnes, *Finding the Value*, 9.

³⁷ Barnes, *Finding the Value*, 9.

were brought to the fore in the ensuing exhibition? Here, I will outline a few key aspects that highlight some of the similarities and differences in approach between the artists, a diverse group working in different media, at different stages in their careers and practices, and all responding in individual ways to the Madsen Collection. Perhaps one significant question is the extent to which any of the artists actually used the works themselves as raw materials for material interpretations, as Barnes set out in her aims for the project. Were some of the artists more concerned with the stories surrounding the objects or with their "museumification" than with the things in themselves?³⁸ Does this matter? In order to answer this, I focus on just three of the artists' responses.

Susie MacMurray is a British artist whose work includes drawing, sculpture, and architectural installations. A former classical musician, she retrained as an artist, graduating with an MA in Fine Art in 2001. She lives in Manchester, UK, and has an international exhibition profile, showing regularly in the USA and Europe as well as in the UK. In a catalogue essay for an earlier exhibition at Agnew's Gallery, *The Eyes of the Skin*, Kathleen Soriano states, "Whilst the sense of loss has nearly always been present in her [MacMurray's] work, it is also as much about the nature of memories and remnants of our existence."³⁹

MacMurray's work for *Finding the Value* was entitled *Legacy* and was "centred on the idea of the gift and how that context transforms the perception of the object that has been given."⁴⁰ Through carefully wrapping objects in golden wire, they are transformed mysteriously and somehow elevated to a, perhaps, more precious status than the original object. Yet viewers will never know what the original item was. Rather than dwell on the materiality of the chosen objects, MacMurray uses the sensory act of wrapping as her form of material interpretation. But ultimately, the wrapped items go beyond this materiality. They extend into the realm of ideas and indeed of human relationships, where object is understood as gift.⁴¹ The important thing here is not necessarily the object itself, but that it has been given. MacMurray's response is, above all, an emotional one. "My immediate response to the collection had been an intense sense of poignancy: these things, amassed through a lifetime, must have had personal significance and had many stories and private memories attached to them, none of which are now available to us. I was struck by what a loaded gesture the act of giving such a collection is. It touches all sorts of areas, from trust and responsibility to subjective perceptions of value and worth."⁴²

³⁸ Dudley speaks of the need to return to the object rather than use it to punctuate another narrative or where the object might just be part of the "object-information package," overridden by a label. Dudley, *Museum Materialities*, 3.

³⁹ Kathleen Soriano, "Catalogue Essay for 'The Eyes of the Skin,'" Agnew's Gallery, November 9–December 2, 2011, www.susie-macmurray.co.uk/published-materials/eyes-of-the-skin [accessed July 2, 2019].

⁴⁰ Barnes, *Finding the Value*, 16.

⁴¹ See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge Classics, 1954, reprint 2002).

⁴² Barnes, *Finding the Value*, 16.

Likewise, artist Simon Venus was also drawn to the notion and story of the bequest itself rather than the individual items forming the gift. He states of his work *Passed On*: “I became fascinated by how such a generous gift was made by just two letters, without the parties ever meeting, and that there is almost no information about or image of either Karen or Peter.”⁴³ His resulting work is site specific: The church location led him to the idea of triptych “as homage to absent donors, with figurative imagery acting as stand-ins for them.”⁴⁴ His emergent cabinet of curiosity display is part mechanical surreal automaton, part memento mori, and part eulogy to the Madsens themselves. He states: “Intrigued by how little is known about the Madsens, I felt their collection took on a greater significance in bearing testimony to their existence, outliving them, given new life and meaning, they march on in time transformed from personal to public ownership and from private collection to contemporary art.”⁴⁵ But his work also questions museum processes: what makes the Madsens’ objects cross into the domain of contemporary art? In Venus’s work, labels were included both to lead and to mislead the visitor and were “chosen to subvert traditional museum labelling whilst the artificial ageing gave them a level of authority and authenticity.”⁴⁶

The third artist discussed here, Yvette Hawkins, is a visual artist of British–South Korean origin working across installation and sculpture. Like Simon Venus, Hawkins’s work also challenges institutional practices. In her words, her work “explores themes which encompass hybridity, tradition, migration and preservation which relate to ‘the cultural other’ and specifically about her mixed-race heritage and nomadic upbringing occupying forty-five homes across two nations. Craft also plays an important role in the making of work, often involving traditional skill centred techniques such as book-binding, embroidery and printmaking.”⁴⁷

Hawkins’s response to the Madsen Collection was entitled *Casing In* and focused on the relationship between decay and preservation (see figure 4.4).⁴⁸ The artist states:

I was particularly excited to find a small collection of Japanese hand-bound books in the Madsen Collection, and a collection of prints and paintings on Japanese rice paper. I was intrigued by markings and perforations through some of the book covers and pages that, on first inspection, were assumed to be intentionally made. These delicate marks are actually the trails left by insects—a beautiful tracery which coincidentally mirrors the landscape drawings found within the books. I worked with silkworms and their fascinating spinning techniques to mend and preserve books from the collection, which had been subject to both these insects and the decay of time.⁴⁹

43 Simon Venus, “Finding the Value,” unpublished essay, 2014.

44 Barnes, *Finding the Value*, 18.

45 Barnes, *Finding the Value*, 18.

46 Venus, “Finding the Value.”

47 Yvette Hawkins, “Yvette Hawkins: About,” <https://yvettehawkins.co.uk/about/> [accessed July 2, 2019].

48 See DeSilvey, “Observed Decay.”

49 Barnes, *Finding the Value*, 14.

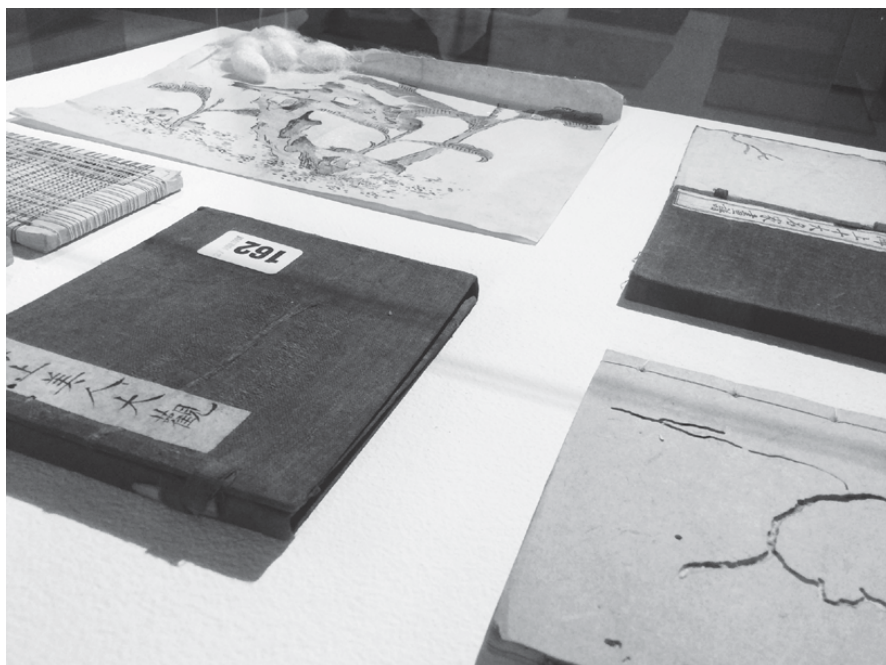


Figure 4.4. Detail from *Casing In*, York St. Mary's, 2014. Photograph by Alexandra Woodall.

Of all the artists involved in *Finding the Value*, arguably Hawkins's response to the brief was the one that found the value. It focused not on the gift or on the stories behind the gift's objects but on the objects themselves. Her process has resonance with Ingold's statement that making "is a process of correspondence: not the imposition of pre-conceived form on raw material substance, but the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming."⁵⁰ Her collaboration with and care for silkworms was a direct consequence of the insect trails found within the Madsens' Japanese books. Echoing the conservation of objects undertaken in museums, Hawkins's silkworms conserve, make, and remake the books. They transform them, laying bare institutional practices of conservation, restoration, and access; they destroy pages and rebuild them and reveal the objects in a new light for the viewer. Here, the artistic intervention is possible through a hands-on encounter with these otherwise forgotten, worn, and bookworm-eaten books.⁵¹ The books are changed forever, used, and used up in this process of being shown.

⁵⁰ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 31.

⁵¹ These new works inspired by the Madsen Bequest developed an already strong tradition in York of dynamic, risk-taking, and imaginative working, both with artists and with objects. Under the visionary leadership of Janet Barnes CBE (Chief Executive from 2002 to 2015), York Museums

In her volume on the pedagogic role of artists' interventions in museums, Claire Robins suggests that "When artists have been commissioned to intervene in collections in order to disrupt visitors' expectations ... the host museum often intends to signal a shift in the way its collection and itself, as an institution, are understood."⁵² This is certainly the case at York Museums Trust, which has successfully worked with contemporary artists in the way Robins suggests to reinterpret its collections for visitors. Indeed, the way in which this has been achieved as a form of material interpretation, especially by Hawkins, is, perhaps, the most successful answer to the initial project where Barnes sought to use the objects as raw material. Following Sandra Dudley's call for museums to refocus on the encounter with the very objects at their heart rather than to exist simply as places to find out factual information about things, elements of this project at York St. Mary's have actively explored "the magic of things themselves."⁵³ *Finding the Value* has managed to enable at least one of its artists to "return to the material reality of the material, to shift attention back to objects as objects, focusing again on aspects of those things' apparently trivial and obvious material qualities and the possibilities of directly, physically, emotionally engaging with them."⁵⁴ In this way, unvalued objects are given new lives. I now turn to the third case study, which also focuses on exposing museum processes.

What Can Be Seen

The third case study, *What Can Be Seen*,⁵⁵ is another collaborative project, an exhibition held at Museums Sheffield's Millennium Gallery in 2017. This saw artists Tim Etchells and Vlatka Horvat playfully reimagining the city's historic collections and, importantly, responding to their experiences of museum documentation and packaging in the storerooms. Particularly interested in collections of collections, the artists spent time delving behind the scenes and working with museum curators to create a display that juxtaposed objects in unusual ways, but they also explored their experiences behind the scenes through a series of new photographs. This exploration raised numerous questions for museum staff about what it means to lay bare museum processes to a questioning public. Like the previous projects discussed here, this too rethought the value of objects through what the artists called an "archaeology of the storage space." Tim Etchells is

Trust was arguably at the forefront in the UK of engaging with creative practitioners and developing the use of accessioned objects within artistic interventions. In 2009, for example, *Five Sisters*, a site-specific installation by painter Matthew Collings and mosaicist Emma Biggs, used real items from the accessioned stored archaeological collections to create a huge mosaic of pottery, which spanned the nave of York St. Mary's.

52 Robins, *Curious Lessons in the Museum*, 213. See also Putnam, *Art and Artifact*.

53 Sandra Dudley, ed., *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 12. See also Dudley, *Museum Materialities*.

54 Dudley, *Museum Objects*, 11.

55 "Tim Etchells and Vlatka Horvat: What Can Be Seen," www.museums-sheffield.org.uk/museums/millennium-gallery/exhibitions/past/tim-etchells-and-vlatka-horvat-what-can-be-seen [accessed July 2, 2019].

an artist and a writer based in the UK. He has worked in a wide variety of contexts, notably as leader of the world-renowned performance group Forced Entertainment, and in collaboration with a range of visual artists, choreographers, and photographers. His work spans performance, video, photography, text projects, installation, and fiction. He is currently Professor of Performance and Writing at Lancaster University.⁵⁶ Vlatka Horvat, born in Čakovec, Croatia, also works across a wide range of forms: sculpture, installation, drawing, performance, and photography. Her work has been presented internationally in a variety of contexts—in museums and galleries, theatre and dance festivals, and in public spaces. After twenty years in the USA, she is currently based in London.⁵⁷

Over a period of two years, these artist-partners were invited by the Head of Exhibitions and Display at Museums Sheffield, Kirstie Hamilton, to work collaboratively to engage with the collection in storage, because the institution was "very keen and interested in having a different set of eyes to look at both what they have and what they do."⁵⁸ Rather like the rummages used in the Mary Greg case study, the project started as an "open-ended expedition," with the artists spending a week in the storerooms and with different collections curators, describing it as feeling like "kids in the candy store," and with "a huge amount of openness and trust sort of extended on the part of the museum and the curators."⁵⁹

These rummages slowly began to turn into an exhibition with a three-part structure, reflecting the artists' different experiences and interests in the storerooms. Both immediately fell in love with a particular set of objects: the Sorby Slides (see figure 4.5). This is a collection of scientific slides developed by Sheffield-born Henry Clifton Sorby (1826–1908). By cleaning and staining marine biology specimens and placing them onto glass lantern slides, Sorby developed a new technique for viewing sea creatures. Many of these slides are in Museums Sheffield's collections. Etchells and Horvat partly just wanted an excuse to display these objects, but they also began to develop additional motivations inspired by their time in the storerooms, which they categorized in three distinct ways.

Firstly, they noticed they were drawn to collections of collections: "the museum holds [items] which are somehow many versions of the same thing,"⁶⁰ such as, for example, the Sorby Slides, which are "endless iterations of these sorts of specimens preserved in a particular way," and also numerous drawings by the eminent Derbyshire archaeologist Thomas Bateman (1821–1861)⁶¹ showing positions of bones found through archaeological digs. There is something about the repeat nature of these collections that the artists wanted to represent.

56 "About: Tim Etchells," <http://timetchells.com/about/> [accessed January 4, 2018].

57 "CV: Vlatka Horvat," www.vlatkahorvat.com/cv/ [accessed January 4, 2018].

58 Vlatka Horvat, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

59 Vlatka Horvat, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

60 Tim Etchells, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

61 Interestingly, Thomas Bateman was also Mary Greg's great-grandfather. See "Thomas Bateman," www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk/archives/509 [accessed July 2, 2019].

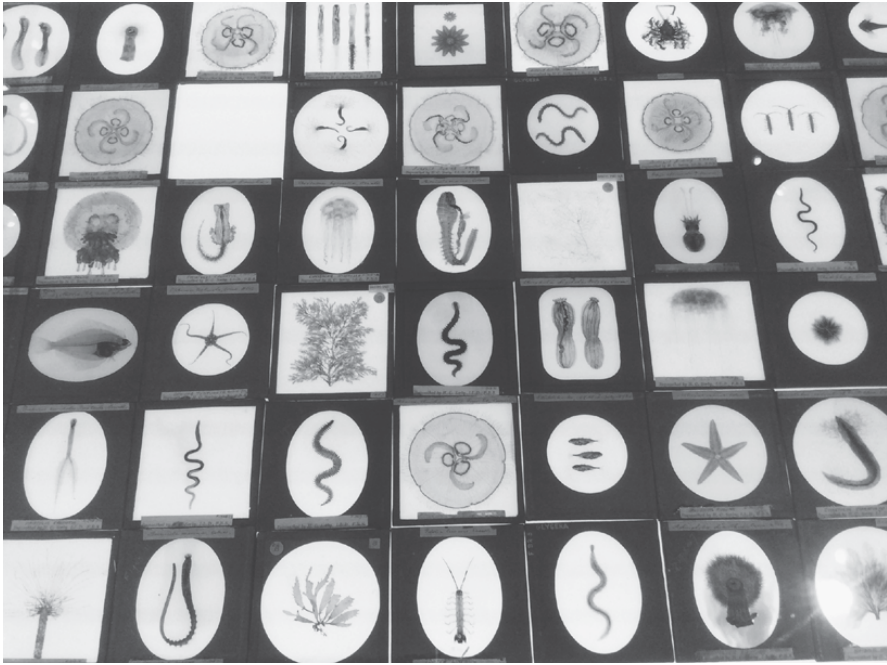


Figure 4.5. Detail from Sorby Slides, Museums Sheffield. Photograph by Alexandra Woodall.

Secondly, the artists showed interest in the particular ways in which objects in museums are categorized. In a large vitrine, they thus displayed objects “selected by and organized according to physical properties and irrespective of their place in the collection or their value”⁶² rather than following any classical museum taxonomy. This playful approach arose as a direct result of the stored objects, which were “in a dormant state” and “waiting out of sight”:⁶³ “We were very fascinated with, I think, the encounter that we had with the objects, the artefacts, the specimens in the storage because there they are somehow off the stage, out of the spotlight, off the podium. They’re sort of returned in a way to a banality.”⁶⁴ So, in the vitrine, a teddy bear lies alongside a puffer fish, bits of glass that had come from the bottom of a hearth in a glass workshop, shells, and Victorian domestic appliances (see figure 4.6).

Etchells and Horvat also began to notice a category of “unworthy” exhibits: things that had not yet been conserved or that needed something to be done to them before they could be displayed. Old oil painting frames, wrapped in polythene, fell into this category as items to which they were drawn aesthetically, and the exhibition title plays on the idea

⁶² Tim Etchells, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

⁶³ Vlatka Horvat, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

⁶⁴ Tim Etchells, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.



Figure 4.6. "What Can Be Seen" detail, Museums Sheffield. Photograph by Alexandra Woodall.

that things are and are not seen, depending on who and where the viewer is situated, not least within the museum's institutional hierarchy. They describe this vitrine element of the exhibition as "demystifying the work that goes on in this invisible life of objects, away from public view and away from display mode."⁶⁵ The artists also expressed a desire to display objects exactly as they had been encountered behind the scenes, to replicate their own emotional encounter. So an entire drawer of Victorian clocks found its way into a case, in different stages of disassembly and still semi-wrapped in tissue. Mirroring the way in which Hazel Jones described the sensation of opening drawers full of Mary Greg's collections, here "We were interested in quite an unruly and cacophonous sort of selection of things that seemingly didn't really go together or have anything to do with each other. I think as that process went on, the curators got more and more drawn into that as well, and quite a few of them said to us, 'Oh, it made me actually look at things that I haven't looked at in a whole or in a different sort of way ...'"⁶⁶

The third aspect that piqued the artists' interest was the notion of traces. In particular, the artists were drawn to textual traces in the storerooms, especially traces of the human hand, perhaps where a curator had labelled a box or had written a little note

⁶⁵ Vlatka Horvat, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

⁶⁶ Vlatka Horvat, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

to him- or herself. They refer to this as “archaeologizing the storage space,” “gathering little narrative clues and hints of people’s work which become these sorts of phrases and fragments of language that sort of activate imagination in different ways, and also speak to the processes of categorization and preserving and so on.”⁶⁷ The artists found themselves drawn to traces in the card index where there were gaps or some sort of institutional failure, for example, where a label had been photographed, bluntly stating, “useless, destroyed.”

We were very drawn to things that were “unidentified object from an unknown country” or “no further context available” or [...] “items about which something is uncertain,” and there was also quite a strand of things in the storage that the museum wasn’t sure if they owned [...] and we learned then through research that all the museums have those kinds of objects. There’s even a sort of classification, letter “x,” which identifies that there’s some sort of dubious status of the item [...] and that can happen when an object gets separated from its record, or the record goes missing and they cannot be matched, or something goes out on loan and comes back and doesn’t get properly logged, so it enters into this kind of limbo state of uncertainty.⁶⁸

Yet the artists were concerned with the ethics of their approach throughout. What would the curators think? They note that they would never have “disrespected the specimens in any way,” and if an object had a problematic status in relation to culture or history in an exhibition that did not contextualize (such as theirs), it would not be right to show it. Likewise, they developed positive relationships with curatorial staff, who they believed may have been “puzzled” about what they were up to but who were “very supportive” and engaged in questions about making sure the work was contextualized (with a supporting film) to ensure that visitors understood the museum’s current policies and procedures with regard to acquisitions and disposals and that visitors were aware that a lack of information about every single object in a museum’s collection was far from unusual.

Perhaps more so than the other two case studies, Museums Sheffield’s project is about laying bare those museum processes and being transparent towards, and thus significantly respecting, its audiences by sharing its (and every museum’s) fallibility. The artists were particularly struck by the amount of trust they were shown by museum staff, and they noted of their experience with the curators that “you come away thinking these are not jobs, these are people’s lives” and that it was “humbling” and “heartening.”⁶⁹ “In a way that’s something that steps the museum down off the sort of machinic, you know, rigorous, you know, entirely infallible system, system, system, and maybe it opens it at a more human level, and I think that’s one of the things that I think works in that show, that people responded to it in that creative sort of way.”⁷⁰ So here, perhaps above all other examples, those museum processes are exposed.

⁶⁷ Tim Etchells, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

⁶⁸ Vlatka Horvat, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

⁶⁹ Vlatka Horvat, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

⁷⁰ Tim Etchells, interview by Alexandra Woodall via Skype, September 15, 2017.

Concluding Remarks

In their paper "Object-Love at the Science Museum: Cultural Geographies of Museum Storerooms," Geoghegan and Hess refer to their work as marking "a departure from the preoccupation with the public spaces of museums to go behind the scenes."⁷¹ They describe three related motivations for this work: to develop the field of museum geography, to link a focus on materiality of objects with the notion of "affect" and object-love, and to develop autoethnography as a method.⁷² They argue that "the storeroom reveals a set of spatial relations involving intimacy and distance, connection and disconnection rarely experienced in the everyday world."⁷³ While their research is about curators and conservators responding to "their" collections, here, the research has opened up those collections to ownership beyond staff—to artists invited into those storerooms or to explore those less-treasured collections. Just as for Geoghegan and Hess's curators and conservators, "object-love, incorporating the personal and national need to care for objects and material heritage, underpins the form and function of the storeroom,"⁷⁴ so too does object-love underpin the response of the artists in this paper.

The important role of emotion in the object encounter as something that goes beyond traditional learning (or knowledge) is noted by Chatterjee: "the experiences elicited by touch ... go beyond, but do not exclude, learning and enjoyment, to include deep emotional responses stimulated by object handling."⁷⁵ Indeed, Pye also states, "objects can touch us as much as we can touch them."⁷⁶ It is these emotional responses that are particularly visceral and "alive" within the storerooms. Ingold speaks of material thus: "Materials are ineffable. They cannot be pinned down in terms of established concepts or categories. To describe any material is to pose a riddle, whose answer can be discovered only through observation and engagement with what is there. The riddle gives the material a voice and allows it to tell its own story: it is up to us, then, to listen, and from the clues it offers, to discover what is speaking."⁷⁷ Yet through opening up storerooms, this riddle is opened to a multiplicity of responses, not least its emotional resonance.

By way of some concluding remarks, I will focus on two benefits of enabling "delightful rummaging" that could go beyond the artist audience to a wider public. Firstly, material interpretation is a valid way of enabling emotional response as a different type of museum knowledge, one that allows for playfully imagining and reimagining collections. Secondly, deliberately opening up areas behind the scenes, making museum processes

⁷¹ Geoghegan and Hess, "Object-Love at the Science Museum," 445.

⁷² Geoghegan and Hess, "Object-Love at the Science Museum," 446.

⁷³ Geoghegan and Hess, "Object-Love at the Science Museum," 451.

⁷⁴ Geoghegan and Hess, "Object-Love at the Science Museum," 461.

⁷⁵ Helen Chatterjee, ed., *Touch in Museums: Policy and Practice in Object Handling* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 4.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Pye, "Understanding Objects: The Role of Touch in Conservation," in *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth Pye (Walnut Creek: Left Coast, 2007), 121–38 (134).

⁷⁷ Ingold, *Making*, 31.

more transparent, enables critical rethinking of institutional practice. A willingness to engage in these sorts of practices of “letting go” of ownership and giving over authority on collections to artists is a direct political, democratizing, and arguably more ethical act by the institution.⁷⁸

In her volume *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, Sandra Dudley notes, “it is perhaps especially remarkable that more work has not focused on the physical and sensory attributes of objects and their implications for the uniqueness, actual and potential, of the museum experience.”⁷⁹ The sorts of projects in this chapter are exactly those which aim to explore these materialities of objects, particularly through affective encounters with objects that were, at first, not on display. One strand linking all the case studies is their focus on material interpretation as affective and sensory: artists make new work in response to objects because they have been able to encounter them first-hand and with their hands. In some instances, they even used the objects up in their new creative endeavours in a process invested with emotion.

While rummaging and opening up the storerooms or neglected collections will not be appropriate in all museums and with all collections, there are elements of this approach that could be appropriated into museum strategy, not least in approaches to public programming. A focus on the materiality of objects, on engaging with makers in particular to provide new ways of interpreting objects through their materiality, might go some way towards meeting the recommendation made in the *Collections for People* report⁸⁰ that Collections Access Officers should be employed to engage the public with collections. Perhaps, indeed, it is time for some kind of “rummage facilitator” role across the sector. Responding to material is, after all, what makers do, having a “particular sensitivity to the way material bears traces.”⁸¹ Of course, many museums and galleries already have artists in residence,⁸² but this call has a different emphasis. Artists might play a particular role in actually engaging the various visiting publics (and staff) with “unloved” objects in imaginative, creative, and new ways. Indeed, we might go one step further to reflect on

78 Robins, *Curious Lessons in the Museum*, 213.

79 Dudley, *Museum Objects*, 5.

80 Suzanne Keene with Alice Stevenson, and Francesca Monti, *Collections for the People* (London: UCL Institute for Archaeology, 2008), 71–72. Recent work at Derby Museums’ Silk Mill: Re:Make, as a space for makers, is one such example of this type of approach. See “Re:Make,” <http://remakemuseum.tumblr.com> [accessed September 20, 2015]. The Museums Association’s *Collections 2030*, launched in March 2018 with its focus on the use of collections, will be significant for future developments in this area.

81 On discussing the response of one artist to a wooden spoon: “I had not particularly noticed the wear on that spoon and the fact that the wear on that spoon must have come from somebody doing that [stirring motion], lots and lots and lots and lots of times. And that’s what she saw. She saw that act, that movement, that sort of describing of a movement in the wear and tear on that spoon.” “H,” interview by Alexandra Woodall, June 9, 2013, in *Sensory Engagements with Objects in Art Galleries*.

82 See Kirsten Wehner and Martha Sear, “Engaging the Material World: Object Knowledge and ‘Australian Journeys,’” in *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*, ed. Sandra Dudley (London: Routledge, 2010), 143–61 and especially Robins, *Curious Lessons in the Museum*.

the role of the museum as enabler of access; using objects, even using up objects, might be seen as something positive, even as a restoration of life to things. Interviewees spoke of museum objects as being dead things, using a variety of metaphors to do so. Yet what if, through a process of making things present and accessible, we let them die a more natural death (and therefore truly live)? There are conservators using this line of argument, so the notion of "sacrificing" objects is less controversial than it might at first appear. "If a few objects disappeared, or were damaged, there would still be objects enough left to satisfy everybody in the future."⁸³ And, going even further, this could actually be an ethical imperative, since "using collections, even if we risk losing some items is not irresponsible, but it should be judiciously encouraged as it makes objects accessible."⁸⁴ Objects are not meant to exist forever. One interviewee has even suggested that being "sacrificed" from a collection is actually an act of regaining something of its original life:

It is a difficult one because you don't want the objects to get damaged but [...] if they're just lying in a drawer gathering dust, they're not doing anybody any good. So you obviously need [...] sacrificial objects [...] Things that you've got multiples of, surely you can sacrifice one? [...] I mean, most of the objects are pretty sturdy, aren't they? I mean they've been battered around. They've been lying in the ground. They've been used. Actually, what's a few more scratches? Actually, a few more scratches is probably improving them and [...] it's actually probably going to be improved by being handled. It's going to give it life again, isn't it? See, you're not sacrificing it; you're giving it life. You're sacrificing it from the collection. Am I getting too poetic here? [...] Objects tell stories by the marks on them as well. So handling them is going to leave more stories, isn't it?⁸⁵

Through material engagements and interpretation, activities such as the rummaging and handling described in this chapter will enable those objects to further develop their social and emotional lives, biographies, and agency.⁸⁶ In fact, delightful rummaging is to reunite these objects with their lost materiality, a materiality that is, above all, a materiality in relation to people, and these people are largely lacking when the objects are in storage.⁸⁷ Like Saki's lumber room, behind the scenes of museums there are also "storehouse[s] of unimagined treasures." It is our job to make the storerooms accessible

83 Jan Hjorth, "Travelling Exhibits: The Swedish Experience," in *Towards the Museum of the Future*, ed. Roger Miles and Lauro Zavala (London: Routledge, 1994), 99–115 (106), cited by Elizabeth Pye, "Collections Mobility Perspectives on Conservation: Emphasis on the Original Object," in *Encouraging Collections Mobility: A Way Forward for Museums in Europe*, ed. Susanna Pettersson, Monika Hagedorn-Saupe, Teijamari Jyrkiö, and Astrid Weij (Berlin: Finnish National Gallery, Erfgoed Nederland, and Institut für Museumsforschung, 2010), 136–49 (141).

84 Pye, "Collections Mobility Perspectives on Conservation," 145.

85 "J," interview by Alexandra Woodall, June 15, 2013, in "Sensory Engagements with Objects in Art Galleries."

86 See also arguments made by Cornelius Holtorf, "Averting Loss Aversion in Cultural Heritage," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 4 (2015): 405–21.

87 "The concept of materiality is required because it tries to consider and embrace subject-object relations going beyond the brute materiality of stones and considering why certain kinds of stone and their properties become important to people," Christopher Tilley, "Materiality in Materials," *Archaeological Dialogues* 14, no. 1 (2007): 16–20 (17).

and to unlock their doors, not least to artists, to imagine and reimagine not only their material treasures but also their processes, their people, and their relationships, to keep these objects alive and in use and to enable that emotional response of object-love and joy to emerge. In order to give hidden collections their full affective, emotionally charged potential to be “generative of a different kind of knowledge,” a knowledge that is so often overlooked within traditional museum displays with their object-information packages,⁸⁸ it is imperative that we cast any squeamishness aside, “poke among the beach rubble,” and delight in enabling new ways for people to encounter material objects.

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