Impermanence

Exploring continuous change across cultures

edited by

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Caring for the social (in museums)

Haidy Geismar

Despite the commonplace assumption that museums are primarily defined by their collections of objects, it has become overwhelmingly clear that knowledge, stories and values are just as integral to museum collections as material things are. Today, museum practitioners working with collections management are increasingly raising questions about who is to collect, and conserve, the skills and knowledge that underpin the artefacts that museums acquire.[1] In this chapter, I draw on my background in museum anthropology to explore how these questions are emerging within the art museum. In both contemporary art and ethnographic collections (and, of course, in many other institutional contexts), practitioners are exploring the challenge of how to collect, preserve and conserve that which is generally defined as immaterial, contingent and impermanent.

Here, I explore some contemporary conversations about impermanence in reference to two London-based museum projects: 'Finding Photography', a project at Tate Gallery to explore the networks of skill that underpin contemporary art photography, and 'Encounters on the Shop Floor', a project led by the V&A Research Institute (VARI), which explores embodied knowledge through a wide range of skilled practices. As discourses of conservation and collections management shift from the protection and preservation of material forms to the inclusion of more social understandings of care, I ask what it means to care, in the museum, for social networks and relationships as well as objects. The question that underpins this chapter is: when we ask how museums can care for and maintain sociality over the long term, are we thinking about museums as social communities or are we thinking of social relations as objects? Can museums develop new practices and interventions to care for people, or

will doing so inevitably just produce new kinds of objects? I argue that the notion of care, in fact, holds these two questions and concepts together, in a similar fashion to the movement between ideas of permanence and impermanence being explored in other chapters in this volume. Can concepts of care and skill provide blueprints for museums to manage the precarity, obsolescence and impermanence that inflect the techniques and technologies used to make many of their collections, as well as support the discourses of preservation that underpin traditional definitions of heritage and conservation?

Impermanence in museums

Traditional academic narratives have explored how museums create and disseminate knowledge of the world through the collection, storage, preservation, conservation and display of things, forming national identities and educating and disciplining citizens. Museums have also played a vital role in debates about inclusion and exclusion, imperialism and colonialism, history, heritage and culture (for example, Bennett et al. 2016; Karp and Lavine 1991; Karp et al. 1992, 2006). While museums participate in these broader fields of inquiries through so-called 'object lessons', they are, themselves, meta-object lessons – forms of inquiry into the nature of objects (Geismar 2018). Practices of collection, conservation, curation, display and representation do not simply act on objects; they help to construct the categories, such as property, ownership, interpretation, value and meaning, that define things as collections. For instance, Elizabeth Edwards has described how photographs in museums have shifted over time from being 'non-collections' to being recognised as documentation, as supplementary and archival material and, finally, as historical artefacts, ethnographic collections and fine art (Edwards 2019). Each shift resulted in changes not only to how photographs are displayed, cared-for and valued but also to the ontological status and value of photography in the museum (see Edwards and Morton 2015). In this way, museums might be understood as 'objectification machines' (Domínguez Rubio 2014, 620) that work to substantiate, legitimate and preserve things *as* objects. Drawing on fieldwork at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Domínguez Rubio describes the processes of 'containment and maintenance' of environments and materials to preserve what, in the Western art museum, is an 'extremely narrow "regime of objecthood"' (2016, 68; 69).

There is, however, a paradox here: museology and museum practice have not only been integral to a broader renewal of interest in the object world and materiality but are also a vital part of a turn away from the narrow understandings of the material usually associated with museum collections, toward a more expansive perspective on objects that focuses on their inherent immateriality as well as material fluidity. Recent debates within the International Council of Museums (ICOM) over proposed changes to the globally accepted definition of a museum highlight how global understandings of museums are shifting from collections of objects toward being recognised more prominently as social and political spaces.[2] In advance of their annual meeting to discuss the proposed change to the definition in Tokyo in September 2019, ICOM initiated an open call to 'members and other interested parties' to submit definitions of their own to a central website.[3] Many of the submissions, as well as the proposed new definition, moved away from the language of objects and collections to a socially focused language of collaboration, participation and inclusion. Surveying the proposals (unattributed but for the national affiliation of authors), few refer specifically to objects or collections. Instead, museums are described as affective spaces (Greece: 'The factory of our dreams'), committed to notions of the public sphere, social justice and identity construction (Colombia: 'The Museum is a Cultural Horizon where human life forms converge with nature and the universe'). The majority of the submissions used the terms 'heritage' or 'asset' rather than 'collection' and located objects at the service of the framing of ideas about identity, humanity and citizenship rather than as ends in and of themselves.

Even though the new definition was rejected at the time, and remains controversial pending further debate, it is clear that museums today are widely understood as spaces in which historic 'regimes of objecthood' are being challenged as much as upheld (see Harrison et al. 2020). It is also increasingly recognised, especially within conservation and collections management, that objects themselves are not fixed and immutable but are continually changing their material form, as well as shifting in terms of meaning and value (Wharton 2012; Clavir 2002; Sully 2007; Grünfeld, this volume). In a meditation on museological impermanence, *Curated Decay* (2017), Caitlin De Silvey explores a number of different sites and institutional frames that are experimenting with the idea of leaving heritage objects and sites to 'decay', rather than fixing, repairing or conserving them to prior states of being. To 'curate' decay is to acknowledge the fragility and continual erosion and transformation of the material world as a worthy visitor experience. It

also signals how museums and heritage sites must regularly evaluate what is worth preserving in an economic landscape of limited funds within a political economy of, in DeSilvey's terms, 'post-preservation' (2017, Chapter 1). The notion of 'curating decay' therefore links the acknowledgment of material transformation as being fundamental to all heritage objects, to the emergence of an aesthetic interest in decay and decline and to regimes of value in which only some, not all, things may be preserved. In the case of Mullion Cove in Cornwall, the National Trust has made the decision to leave the harbour to erode, rather than invest in its rebuilding each time it is damaged by rising tides (DeSilvey 2017, Chapter 3). As much as these decisions reflect an evolution of concepts of preservation and conservation, and a form of renewed attention to the imperatives of the material world, they also reflect cost–benefit analyses and the decision-making of heritage regimes under conditions of austerity, reflecting an economy as well as a philosophy of care.

This notion of institutional care jostles with conceptions of care that have emerged outside of institutional frames, where care has become a powerful lens through which to expose existing power relations and inequalities (see McAtackney, this volume). For instance, in many ethnographic collections, the mapping of cultural values onto the permanence or impermanence of artefacts, and the discussions about care that follow, are increasingly bound up in fraught discussions about colonial history and repatriation in which the remit of museums to define the conditions of care for collections is challenged by community groups, source communities and other stakeholders. In a notable example, the G'psgolox totem pole, which was collected from the Kitamaat Village in Haisla territory (British Columbia) in 1929 under contested circumstances and eventually gifted to the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm, was the subject of a lengthy repatriation claim that surfaced competing definitions of care and visions for the future of the pole as a permanent museum object. When contemporary Haisla descendants realised the pole was in Sweden, they initiated a repatriation request. The subsequent negotiation over many years (1991–2006) could be seen as an exemplar of opposing philosophies of impermanence and preservation: the Haisla community requested the return of the pole and emphasised that their aim was to both connect to Indigenous customs of care and to effect a form of restorative justice and cultural healing that would only be achieved if the pole were returned to its place of origin and left to decay into the earth. They generously offered to carve a replacement pole for the museum in exchange for the original. Initially, the Stockholm Ethnographic Museum agreed to the repatriation on the condition that the pole be returned to be

cared for in a museum setting, which, at the time, was far beyond the means of the community (see Jessiman 2011 for an overview of the lengthy negotiation).

The case can be framed as surfacing two competing views of the object world, with the museum emphasising the importance of preserving a material artefact for display and community stakeholders highlighting the need to preserve ancestral spirit, connections to place and material lifecycles. But this dichotomy is also, by definition, a conversation about colonial histories, inequality and power in museums and over collections. Eventually, after the debate garnered global attention through Gil Cardinal's film 'Totem: The Return of the G'psgolox Pole' (2003), the pole was returned to the community, who had managed to raise sufficient funds to house it in a museum-like setting. In 2012, the community decided to move the pole back to the Kitlope Valley and leave it to return to the earth (Björklund 2018). Here, discussions of permanence and impermanence link cultural and cosmological framings of the material world and object biographies to broader issues of the politics of recognition, sovereignty over collections, colonialism and ongoing inequalities over access to land and cultural and political self-determination.

In this chapter, the debates that have arisen around ethnographic collections form the backdrop to an exploration of the emerging conversation about care in other museum contexts and pick up on the notion of care as something unsettled and filled with ambivalence (Cook and Trundle 2020). What responsibility do museums have to collect or preserve the knowledge about making that is embodied in people? How can museums care for the social networks and experiences that define these kinds of work into the future, beyond the life of an artist or even an artwork? In ethnographic collections, these kinds of questions are also, by definition, questions about cultural protocols, alternative forms of knowledge and cultural expression, and alternative ownership and rights regimes (see Geismar 2013; Morphy 2021). The legacies of colonialism and ongoing sovereignty claims are also always present and underpin the focus of conservation as 'the care of what has been transmitted through the generations and the guarantee to transmit this to future generations' (Wijesuriya 2007, 67; see also Sully 2007).

In the rest of this chapter, I explore how these issues are arising within two projects that grapple more explicitly with how to bring precisely that which is *not* recognised as residing in object form into museums: the recognition, collection and preservation of the skills embodied within people that are vital to both the making and care of

collections. In the case of contemporary photographic technologies, the knowledge-base is not conventionally a part of the portfolio of skills held by museum conservators and it requires collections managers to look outside of the museum toward wider networks of practice. Both of the projects I discuss here question the ethics of care and the social responsibilities of collecting institutions and both explore how museums might engage with social configurations understood to be fundamentally precarious and impermanent. It is also true that the social is increasingly instrumentalised within museums: participation and collaboration are now commonly defined as measurable outputs of museum work (see Jackson 2011, 10) and intangibles such as 'artist's intentions' or 'source communities' may become new objects of collection, frozen in time and space.

The subject positions of museological impermanence

Much of the literature in museum studies and museum anthropology is implicitly presented from one of two institutional vantage points. The first, and by far the most common, we might understand as the subject position of the visitor (or visitor-scholar), who explores the meanings of objects as they are choreographed into exhibitions. This perspective has been influentially developed in the writing of such critical museum visitors as James Clifford (for example, 1988; 1997; 2013), Sally Price (1989) and Tony Bennett (1995). More recently, this approach has been further extended into studies that focus on the museum's visitor experience, from a generic public to specific stakeholder groups (for example, Simon 2010; Janes and Sandell 2019). A second subject position might be best summarised as 'curatorial' – accounts that present the work of museums from the other side – focusing on the institutional processes and practices that produce knowledge. Such accounts are exemplified by a growing ethnography of museums (for instance, Macdonald 2002; Shannon 2014). In both of these positions, collections provide fixed points within this fluid sociality, gathering people, meanings and values around them.

Here, I posit that it might be productive to explore a third kind of museum subject position (one of a potential multitude), a different perspective on the relation between the material and the social that highlights concepts and practices of maintenance and care. Conservators have traditionally assumed the role of the silent technicians charged with keeping objects in museums stable, using both artistic and scientific

techniques. Historically, their labour has been, for the most part, invisible to the public, concerned with stabilising objects before they enter into the museum's social spaces. It is only recently that conservation itself has been recognised as a social activity (see, for example, Wharton 2012). Conservators are also, traditionally, the practitioners that quietly explore the interface between the social and the material *before* the object emerges into the processes of signification within exhibitions.[4] They are also frequently gatekeepers behind the scenes who manage the possibility of engagement with both curators and communities, often deciding what is and what is not possible in terms of using the object, whether for research, display, or engagement (see Clavir 2002). The conservator's role is therefore not merely to stabilise material form but also to authorise 'care' for collections and manage the physical interactions that we have with them.

Definitions of 'collections care' powerfully circumscribe the kinds of relations that can be had with collections. In the present day, conservators work with a range of different methods drawing on technical art history or material science, and increasingly with social research methodologies that enable them to understand cultural values and protocols, artists' intentions and networks that produce objects and authorise the conditions of care (for example, Wharton 2015). The remit of collections care requires reflexive practice as well as knowledge of not only the material structure of collections and the atmospheric structure of the institution but also of the conceptual scaffolding that supports the objects and enables them to continue to exist in the museum in ways that sustain the intentions of their makers. Shifting our analytic focus into the subject position of the conservator might help us to bridge some of the tensions between the material and the social, the fixed and the malleable, the permanent and the impermanent that exist within other interpretive frameworks we tend to use to understand museum collections. Rather than understanding objects as fixed points around which, and within, meaning and social action are articulated, the theory and practice of conservation can enable us to add a number of other questions. How is the social contained within the material? What institutional forms and practices can mobilise and conserve the social? How is impermanence managed through processes of care? In the following discussion, I explore how these questions emerge in two museum-based research projects.

'Finding Photography'

'Finding Photography' is an ongoing collaboration between me and Pip Laurenson, Head of Collections Care Research at Tate. The project is closely aligned with a larger project entitled 'Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum', also led by Laurenson.[5] 'Finding Photography' brings anthropology and museum conservation into conversation with one another to explore the networks of materials, technologies and skills that underpin contemporary fine art photography, drawing on both ethnographic and conservation research methodologies. Photography is an interesting case study to think through concepts of impermanence as it is particularly enmeshed within ongoing technical processes of obsolescence and is also seen – through fading, crackling, discolouration and other material responses to light – to be a fragile and impermanent medium. The fast-changing world of commercial photographic processing and printing is often perceived to have moved away from the recognisable skills and crafts of photography (for instance, in the darkroom) to a largely black-boxed series of automated tasks that can be delivered within software and hardware, from digital cameras to printers. Knowledge of these processes is not part of traditional museum conservation, and photographic conservators often have a background in paper conservation, which can leave large gaps in their knowledge when working with digital technologies. 'Finding Photography' explores how photographic craft is developed, recognised and maintained in a commercial industrial setting where practitioners have to work around the reality of materials and machines becoming obsolete and extend their skillsets from one form to another in short periods of time.[6]

From the vantage point of Tate collections-care researchers, the project has a practical ambition: to inform conservation decision-making around contemporary art photography by enabling conservators to better understand artist networks and techniques connected to these processes. However, the project also opens up larger questions about the responsibility of museums to understand, and potentially support, broader social networks underpinning art, especially those that are vulnerable to rapidly changing socio-economic and material circumstances. This mirrors some of the concerns arising around other heritage collections in which critics may ask why museums are interested in preserving objects while not actively intervening in the decline of making communities or social worlds vulnerable or at risk from war,

climate change or other crises that impact the continuity of practice and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and tradition.

'Finding Photography' started with a single artwork in Tate's collections, *Corridors* (1994) by Catherine Yass.[7] Working with the artist and her networks, we sought to unpack the skills and connections that underpin this work (a colour transparency light box) in an environment of rapid technological change. We used the archaeological method of *chaîne opératoire* (see Coupaye 2009; and Sellet 2016 for an overview of the history and application of the methodology) to reconstruct the technical processes that Yass followed during the making of *Corridors*, tracking the changes she made to her practice as the materials and processes she was working with became obsolete. We also undertook a short stint of observational fieldwork and interviewed some of the commercial printers that formed a part of Catherine's networks, in particular at Bayeaux in Fitzrovia. Our project developed an awareness of how much craft and artistry underpin the industrial processes of photography, and of the work that goes into stabilising images across an ever-changing range of materials and processes. We started to challenge some of the narratives of impermanence that were concerning conservators evaluating reprinting as a conservation strategy for photographic prints when the substrates, chemicals and machines that had produced them were no longer available. Working with Yass and her network exposed how powerful narratives and practices of resilience, flexibility, translation and persistence worked alongside those of obsolescence and precarity (Geismar and Laurenson 2019):

> Unless the government moves the retirement goalposts, I've got about 10 years. It's my mission to keep them going for at least that long. It might not happen. We're very close to being priced out of [these] premises and moving the kit would possibly be financially prohibitive. Again, it's costs. Rent in London is stupid. All the landlords are greedy (J, photo technician and consultant, Metro Imaging, interview 2 February 2018).

When we asked printers what the most important skills of their job were, all of them talked about how social skills are fundamental to their successful craft. One vital skill is to manage the relationship with the artist within the constraints of both time and materials – knowing when to hold firm and stop making test prints, or to create limits or boundaries about the time that an image is taking to make. At Bayeaux, clients can pay an extra amount to have more dedicated time with one of the skilled
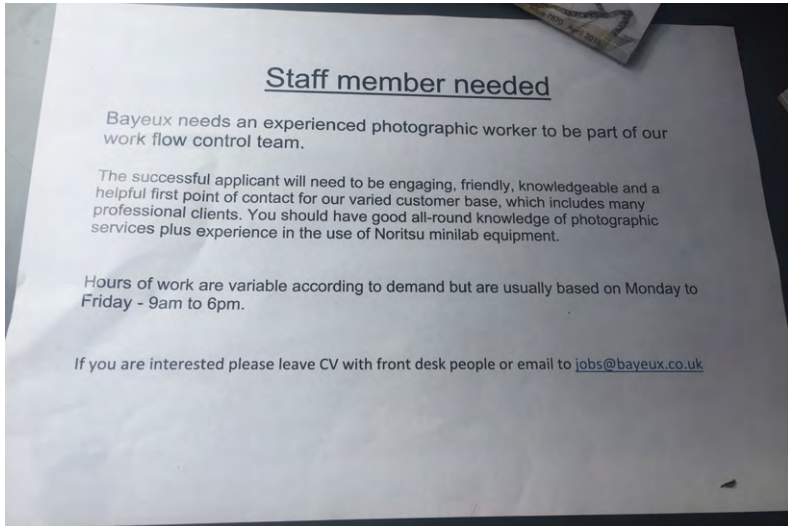
12.1 Job advertised in the lobby at Bayeaux detailing the social skills needed for the position. Photo: Haidy Geismar.

technicians, measured in half-hour increments. In turn, technicians need to establish a balance between being responsive to the demands and vision of the artist and managing the constraints of cost, space and labour. It is through the entanglement of this social negotiation and constraint, mediated by the experienced eye of the printer, as well as that of the artist, that the 'finished' image emerges.

Trying to capture the network on which Yass depended for her practice also demonstrated the powerful ways in which the contemporary art world structures these relationships. Despite working intensively on the images, photo technicians must also work hard to situate their work as technical support, disavowing discourses of either art or craft. They are careful to discuss their work using terms like 'support' and 'problem-solving', avoiding words like 'creative' and downplaying notions of skill that might link them to a more craft-oriented discourse. This mirrors an emerging lexicon focused on technical expertise across studios that support artists' work. In a recent volume celebrating Mike Smith Studio in London, which has underpinned the practice of a generation of contemporary artists in the UK, Germano Celant describes the work of the studio as embodying all 'technical functions, those deriving from knowledge as much as from discussions and intuitive modifications . . . an interface where all the data are accumulated to arrive at the definitive result . . . This is a specific knowledge based on the "technique of

transforming", so is very flexible and open to solutions in the course of production' (Celant 2003, 15). Here, studio workers are technical enablers, flexible and responsive to the creative energies of the artist, rather than creative practitioners, or artisans, in their own right.

Encounters on the shop floor

In 2016, 'Finding Photography' was invited to become part of another research project run from the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). Led by Marta Ajmar, Deputy Director of VARI, and Roger Kneebone, Professor of Surgical Education at Imperial College, 'Encounters on the Shop Floor' explored the nature of embodied knowledge across a range of different making practices, in dialogue with academics and museum professionals.[8] The project brought together a diverse set of scholars and practitioners to work collaboratively to understand the significance of embodied knowledge in the transmission of ideas through processes of making.[9] The project team was interested in how insights from within skilled craft practices could make, inform or be transferred into other practices (for example, between pottery and guitar-playing or embroidery and surgery). By making connections across making practices, the project aimed to develop a language for talking about the relation between making and knowing, and to construct an argument for taking embodied know-how seriously, especially at a time when art and design subjects are being cut from school curricula, and digital skills are perceived to be more central to learning at all levels than other crafts (Durham Commission 2019; Kneebone 2020).

The project took a number of forms alongside academic conferences and meetings, including several making and doing sessions in which participants reflected on their own practice by teaching others to do what they do. Sessions were also held with educators exploring pedagogies focused around embodied learning, and thinking about how this project might intervene in the contemporary landscape of teaching design and technology within the UK National Curriculum and placing learning-by-making more centrally within higher education. The group of disparate practitioners split into smaller 'design clusters' and worked collaboratively to explore a more specialised question across different practices and forms of making and doing. Pip Laurenson, Catherine Yass and I joined through 'Finding Photography', continuing our work with Yass and her worlds of photographic processing. In an example of another cluster, potter Julian Stair and classical guitarist Pétur Jónasson explored the

nature of touch across their practices, comparing body–hand interactions and creating a typology of touch and pressure that drew connections between making music and pots. Using film to simultaneously record images of the role that touch plays in their practice, and their reflections on this, Stair and Jónasson are developing a lexicon or typology of touch. This work is feeding into the V&A's work aimed at addressing the loss of embodied knowledge of making from the school curriculum, and the group has already been invited to present about the future of design and technology in education to the All Parliamentary Design and Innovation Group in the House of Commons.[10]

Skill and loss

> The traditional industry is limping along. I described 2004 as when the digital apocalypse happened. A lab like Metro went from well over 200 employees to around 20 in 2008 (J, photo technician and consultant, Metro Imaging, interview 2 August 2018).

An important starting point for the 'Encounters' project is the belief, shared by many of the practitioner-participants, that embodied skills are being lost to rapid changes led by an economy focused on knowledge and information, rather than on production and making. This, in turn, was perceived by project members as devaluing hand-work in favour of 'cognitive labour'. Project members described chemistry students arriving at university without ever having handled lab pipettes, or humanities students who struggle to write with a pen or pencil. The perception of hand-work or skilled practice was that it was perpetually being superseded, especially by digital technologies and shortcuts that were described by many of the project members as disembodied, distancing the hand from processes of making and shifting embodied skills into pre-programmed operations of both hardware and software.

In this context, we found that the knowledge-base we had been developing in 'Finding Photography' raised a number of provocative questions about how understandings of skill and knowledge interconnected with ideas about materiality and impermanence. While the advent of digital technology had certainly dramatically altered the photography printing industry, we found that many of the embodied skills gained through traditional, non-digital printing in the darkroom were still present within commercial and industrial photographic

12.2 Analogue and digital practices at Bayeaux. Photo: Haidy Geismar.

printing. While skilled practitioners imagined themselves not as craftsmen or creatives but as 'technicians' or workers who support and facilitate the work of the artist, they also described a number of ways in which they were translating skills from the darkroom into the world of digital or machine-based processing.

> It's just a matter of getting used to the machine but that's why you're a technician, that's part of it, being the technician part isn't it? (B, CPL, Edenbridge, interview 23 August 2017).

The transfer of human skill into machines has been conventionally framed through the politics of alienation and capitalism, in which workers are distanced from their own labour (and therefore from their own agency and creativity) through processes of industrialisation (see, for example, Gibson 2019). We found that the story in the world of photographic

processing was more complex. Photographic processing is clearly imagined as both commercial and craft-like, industrial and artisanal at the same time, with people identifying strongly with the machines – the cameras, printers and enlargers – that they worked with:

> We had 30 printers there and they were all skilled people. We did, there were printers that only went up to about 30 x 20 inches and the biggest room was 30-foot-wide so you were printing one piece of paper 30-foot x 6-foot print. I've used that, I've been in every room. I've done every room in that place . . . So we used to have an army of girls on the various mezzanines. They used to get every printer . . . and they'd spot all the white dots out, basically, with a little artist's brush, you know, tiny little small ones and they had these dyes which they could mix up together . . . That's what my wife used to do. That's where she started off, that's where we met, in there (B, CPL, talking about commercial hand printing, interview 23 August 2017).

Understandings of skill in the world of commercial photography are framed by the skilled ability to enable machines to successfully translate the vision of the photographer into final form, working across a range of technical and material environments, understood as constantly in flux. This social work was supported by a do-it-yourself ecology in which skills migrated across platforms, machines were cajoled into use long after their supposed obsolescence, and complex networks of reciprocal labour developed both within and between studios. That is, jobs were often being undertaken by many different hands, sometimes without the client being aware of how many people were working collaboratively to produce a finished work. In this way, past practice is always incorporated into new media, and precarity is not simply a form of erasure but may also enable some kinds of persistence and resilience. We were working with people who often effaced their own labour, who did not articulate their work in terms of a skilled practice – in part, because it was necessary to do so to support the creative practice of their clients. One should certainly read these different approaches in terms of how labour is structured by class hierarchies of value, especially in the art world. However, we are also interested in how they might inform and, indeed, open up the art museum's understandings of social care.

Infrastructures of care

Earlier, I proposed that the subject position of the conservator is an important place from which to ask questions about how the museum can collect and care for the impermanent and intangible. While the etymology of 'curate' comes from the Latin *cura* or care, today caring is a term that is institutionalised in museums more in relation to 'collections care' – the domain of conservation as well as collections management. Caring not only signifies practices of consideration and concern but also implicitly speaks to techniques and technologies of maintenance, preservation and repair (Mattern 2018). In turn, care in museums is also a technique of applying institutional authority to ensure that the web of value that the museum produces is made material and, as such, may be seen as an important form of power over collections.

Social theories of care have emerged out of the intersection of feminist thinking and science and technology studies, exemplified by the work of Susan Leigh Star (for example, 1990), Donna Haraway (2016), and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). Feminist theories of care emphasise how care-taking practices are often invisible or go unrecognised (Tronto 2015). Within social theory, care has emerged as a way to look within and between the nodes and connections visualised on the flat plane of the network, to manifest invisible and marginal labour and position care as a form of world-making through maintenance, making visible the infrastructures of support that enable networks, or objects, to emerge into the world. There is therefore a tension between top-down forms of care (care as control, care as a form of visibility) and theories of care that foreground the invisible and the powerless.

Discourses of maintenance and repair also puncture the material completeness or processes of artistic creativity that have traditionally underpinned our understanding and interpretation of art and other forms of material culture, 'trained as we have been in technology and the social sciences by the primacy of production and design' (Jackson 2014, 225) and exhibition as processes that define objects (see Bennett et al. 2016). As Jackson argues, the language of care works on two planes: both speaking to the ongoing work of maintenance but also opening up our understanding of how our relations to things may be structured through moral and ethical frameworks (Jackson 2014, 232; Drazin 2021, 244).

This conceptualisation of care emerged within 'Finding Photography' and also 'Encounters on the Shop Floor', which both started with the intention to make visible the relationships of knowledge and expertise

that supported material practices of making. I want to end here by considering the implications of these conversations about skill, labour and expertise for practices of care in the museum, to return to the lessons learned in the ethnographic museum and to draw on both to start to theorise the role of impermanence as an important component of caring for social relations in museums. Both of these projects are de facto explorations of impermanence that enquire into the importance of social networks and embodied experiences within the context of a broader narrative of precarity and obsolescence. 'Finding Photography' directly engaged with the rapid (often inbuilt) obsolescence of commercial photographic technologies, which are only amplified within the realm of digital media. Understanding photography in terms of networks of materials and skills links the museum collection to broader social worlds of apprenticeship and training, global supply chains and material infrastructures, and the politics of gentrification in central London that has put additional pressures on the working lives of photo-technicians in Soho, Fitzrovia and Clerkenwell. 'Encounters on the Shop Floor' took as its starting point a similar perception of precarity and obsolescence, again perceived to be built into the information and digital economy, which is understood to devalue manual skill and craft in favour of a more conceptual focus on design. Here, manual skill (in the project parlance, 'the hand of the maker') is perceived to be under threat and in need of protection and preservation to constitute the next generation of skilled makers and practitioners.

The idea that museums are spaces that conserve the social in the form of collectible objects is a foundational part of the history of the ethnographic collection and it is instructive to look at how museum anthropology has, in acknowledging this, provided some useful resources for other kinds of collections. In the nineteenth century, anthropology was, in part, born out of museums through a drive to preserve the material remnants of what were perceived to be disappearing worlds: cultures under threat from the ravages of colonially borne disease, the hard-nosed intolerances of missionaries and the radical transformations brought in through the imperialisms of capitalist modernity. In large part, the perception of cultural fragility or impermanence and the nostalgia for a more authentic past practice (tradition) drove the invention of the ethnographic collection, accompanied by a research process that came to be described as 'salvage anthropology' (Gruber 1970). Today, museum practitioners increasingly recognise that objects alone cannot activate knowledge, and preservation and collecting initiatives are extended into the social worlds. This is most prominently embodied within UNESCO's 2003 Convention for

Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which has shaped a politics of recognition (and practices of collection) for the immaterial, attempting to maintain an immaterial form of permanence (see Hafstein 2018). This is also reflected in contemporary debates that frame repatriation as a form of ethical relating (Sarr and Savoy 2018) and by the emergence of categories such as guardianship as new forms of institutional responsibility that foreground care-taking over terms relating to the ownership of collections (see Geismar 2008; Marstine 2011).

The discourse of the new museology (see, for example, Vergo 1989) that underpins many of these shifts in museum practice is often characterised as shifting away from objects and toward people, but this can, in fact, be misleading. Many museums still remain objectification machines, drawing on historic 'object logics' (of ownership, preservation and display) as templates for practice. And this tendency toward objectification has been a primary critique of collecting, from salvage anthropology to intangible cultural heritage. 'Finding Photography' and 'Encounters on the Shop Floor' raise questions about how to care for the social worlds that surround, and are intimately entangled within, these object worlds. Both projects implicitly ask institutions to reflect on their responsibility for bringing social worlds of skill inside the museum and recognise how the question of impermanence, in fact, becomes a question of care and ethical responsibility. In turn, both projects have unearthed the persistence and resilience of material knowledge (and social networks) as they adapt to, and accommodate, material, economic and political transformation.

'Finding Photography', however, also draws attention to the longer history of institutional responses to broader social change in which museums may be seen to be paradoxically both reactionary or nostalgic storehouses of precarious traditions, as well as the very laboratories that help produce cultural practices or processes of design and making. Both of these projects expose anxieties around authenticity and containment that are generated by the museum in its role as a collecting machine. In the case of digital technologies, they are often viewed as fundamentally ungraspable, black-boxed, ephemeral – defined by built-in obsolescence that seems to refuse the key tenets of the museum as an objectification machine (complicating definitions of the object, challenging intellectual property and ownership, and so on; see Domínguez Rubio and Wharton 2020).

Simultaneously, these same technologies are also underpinning the new forms of collecting and archiving that museums are currently embracing, including aspirational projects to bring the museum online as the form and aesthetic through which people increasingly understand

participation and inclusion (Simon 2010). Even within the celebratory hype surrounding the digital in museums, these projects present a more cynical view in which digital materiality and practice are understood to be perpetually erasing past materialities and practices, as a hyper-capitalist mode of production that is continually overwriting itself (see Geismar 2018 for a more sustained discussion of perceptions and understandings of digital technology in museums; see also Cameron 2021).[11] The questions raised in this simultaneous embrace and refusal of the digital echo some of the paradoxes this volume is exploring in relation to impermanence. Can immateriality and impermanence be brought into museums without creating new institutional structures and objects to be preserved into the future? And what might museum conservation and care look like without objects?

The practices of care may be seen to bring the concept of impermanence into the conceptual frames through which museum workers understand their collections, challenging the capacity of museum technologies of collection, conservation and display to grapple with precarity and immateriality. Both of the projects I have described raise questions about the ethics and responsibilities of collecting institutions to collect and conserve the social forms of knowledge that lie within skilled practitioners. As Pip Laurenson commented on an early draft of this chapter: 'I think making visible the social networks supporting these works is different from claims of collecting or conserving. I am interested in quieter claims about the significance of simply noticing and paying attention to these networks' (personal communication, June 2019). What new practices, and indeed objects, might this quieter form of attention produce?

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   See, for instance, the grant awarded to the British Museum from the Arcadia Foundation, focused on endangered material knowledge. https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/departments/africa-oceania-and-americas/endangered-material-knowledge-programme (last accessed 30 October 2021).

2   The current definition, dating to 2007, defined a museum as 'a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment'. In 2018, ICOM proposed the following new definition:

> Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.
>
> Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

Source: https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/ (last accessed 29 October 2021).

3   https://web.archive.org/web/20191111121220/ https://icom.museum/en/news/the-museum-definition-the-backbone-of-icom/ (last accessed 29 October 2021).

4   Some institutions, for instance the Getty Institute in Los Angeles, the Whitney Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, have started to display the work of conservators in museum galleries. This, however, is by no means commonplace across the world of museums and tends to focus on conservators as technological masters rather than social agents within museum processes of interpretation and meaning-making for collections. See, for instance, this presentation of conservation within the Acropolis Museum in Athens, Greece: https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/multimedia/conserving-karyatids-laser-technology (last accessed 20 October 2021).

5   Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation:". . . Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum", builds on Tate's pioneering research and expertise in this area of conservation; responding to Tate's bold acquisitions policy. It will contribute to theory and practice in collection care, curation and museum management, and will focus on recent and contemporary artworks which challenge the structures of the museum with a particular focus on time-based media, performative, live and digital art.' https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/reshaping-the-collectible (last accessed 30 October 2021).

6   See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O479TjbmMo4&t=75s for a short video about the project produced by Tate (last accessed 29 October 2021).

7   http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/yass-corridors-t07069 (last accessed 29 October 2021).

8   The project is a flagship of the V&A Research Institute (VARI), a five-year programme of projects and partnerships supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Working within VARI, 'Encounters on the Shop Floor' is a collaboration between V&A, Imperial College London, UCL, the Royal College of Music, Tate, the Art Workers' Guild and a group of artists, makers and performers. '"Encounters on the Shop Floor" is a . . .collaboration between museum professionals, medical practitioners, scientists, educationalists, anthropologists, historians and art historians, performers, artists and designers to explore and develop apt ways of articulating and championing the significance and value of the knowledge created through making, sometimes called "embodied" or "tacit". Encounters aims to create and showcase new models for the inclusion of learning through making in education.' Source: https://www.vam.ac.uk/research/projects/vari-encounters-on-the-shop-floor. The Principal Investigator is Dr Marta Ajmar (VARI) and the Co-I is Prof. Roger Kneebone, Imperial College London.

9   Some images from the project can be found here: https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/encounters-of-a-museum-kind (last accessed 29 October 2021).

10 https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/apdig/news/make-and-create-design-and-innovation-practice-based-research (last accessed 29 October 2021).

11 Exemplified by claims about the participatory museum, which inscribes the visitor as consumer, for example: 'Rather than delivering the same content to everyone, a participatory institution collects and shares diverse, personalised, and changing content co-produced with visitors' (Simon 2010, 'Preface'). http://www.participatorymuseum.org/preface/ (last accessed 29 October 2021).

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