ELEPHANT ATLAS

A COMPENDIUM

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Alan Kane, 2018

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The Life of Objects

Photographs of the interior of collectors' houses often show the living spaces entirely filled with objects. The inhabitants experience these objects with their five senses, live amongst them and to an extent blend with them, identify with them, become them. Perhaps the collectors become objects themselves, part of their own collection.

Working in the museum field, and now working with the Cuming Museum Collection, getting to know the objects in the collection has been both inspiring and frustrating, in equal measure. So often I want to know more about where the objects came from, who made them, loved them, touched them, sold and bought them or lost them. Although I am not a collector myself, a frisson of the obsession to hunt, capture and keep objects close prickles me whenever I open a box in the store.

Uncovering more about the motivations of the Cuming family is challenging. Much has to be interpreted between the 'facts' and many times those 'facts' are scanty and tell us very little. The Cuming family, particularly the Richard the father, who started the collection and Henry the son who succeeded him, are central to this story. But the Cumings are not much more transparent in their movements and motivations than 'their' objects; objects whose 'lives', of course, did not begin, or end, with the Cuming family.

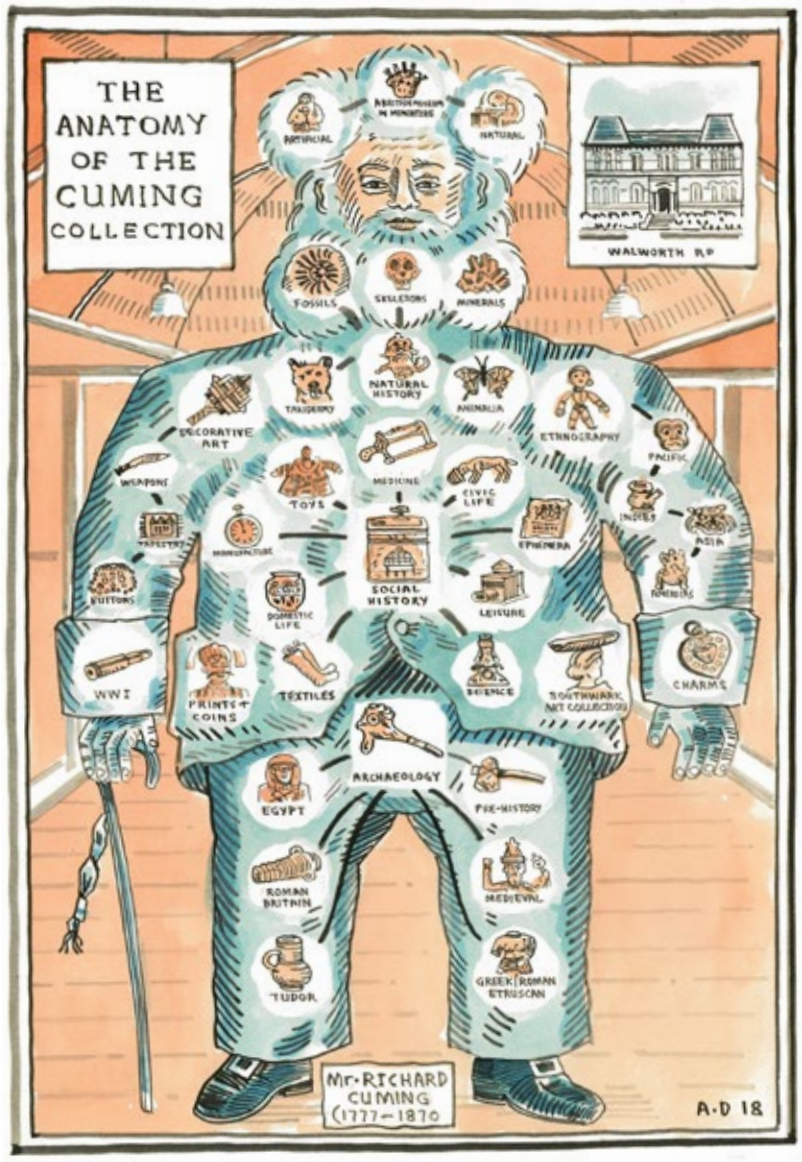
After living with humans until 'collected' by the Cumings, then spending their time on the study shelves and drawing room tables of the family's houses in Walworth and Kennington Park Road, the objects found themselves in a 'proper' museum, from 1906.

During the 20th century the objects (and many new additions) were subjected to study and to being boxed, wrapped, numbered and displayed in those glass cases beloved of museums everywhere.

Successions of curators cared for them and brought them out to be examined and arranged to be looked at by others. The origins of these things began to be explored and conversations opened up about who they really belong to. We've all been fascinated and frustrated by the collections but our desire to care for them and make them available to others is almost, perhaps, as strong as Henry's.

Or perhaps, arguably, even stronger.

Adam Dant, *The Cuming Museum*, 2018



In March 2013 a fire broke out in the Walworth Town Hall where the collection was housed, destroying part of the building housing the public galleries of the Cuming Museum. The loss of items was luckily small; the rescue plans worked and everyone involved in the rescue and aftermath did a great job. But the sense of guilt and anguish was enormous.

Perhaps it was because the sense of guardianship which museum workers feel, a sense of responsibility to preserve and to pass things on, and perhaps the complacency which can accompany this, had been rudely disrupted.

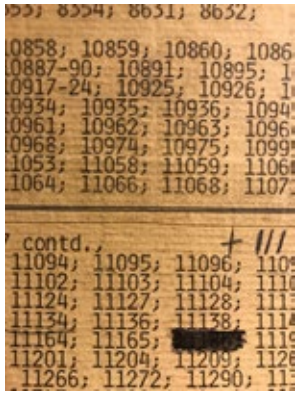
However the incident and the years that have followed, have been a time of forging new ways of accessing and exploring the collections. Working with the artists in this exhibition has had a powerful effect on me personally, after a difficult few years. It brought me back to the physical presence of the objects, perhaps experiencing them with my 'five senses' for the first time in a very long while. Not all of them are wonderfully revelatory but it reminded me that away from the glass-case or box, an object begins to 'live' again in the sense of being part of a human's life.

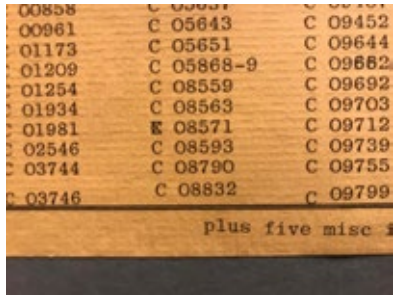
Handling objects is part and parcel of a museum's remit but it is essential to remember they are not, after all, just the museum's objects: they belong to us all.

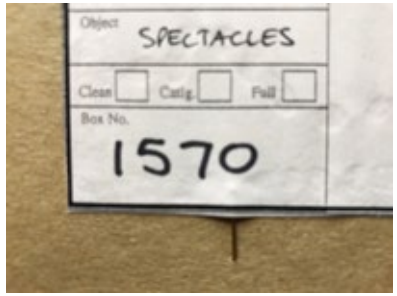
To smell and touch and weigh and hear the rustle of ancient things is as important a part of our cultural consciousness as to learn about their creation, their use, their owners, their history and context. Something that the digital surrogate cannot replicate.

In a way, it brought me back to something like Richard and Henry's experience; the intrigue and excitement of opening something up to look at for the first time or in a new light. But it also brought home to me the fact that this collection lives best and has its greatest value when it is shared.

Judy Aitken,
Cuming Museum Collection







ANDREAS
PHILIPPOPOULOS-MIHALOPOULOS

1. A Spectacle

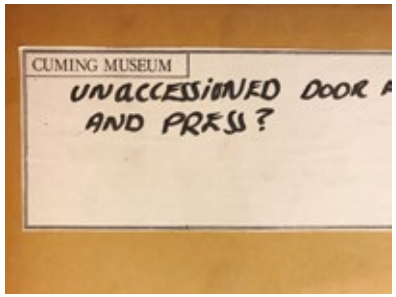
Stuttering, fits and bouts, sequences of gaps: we are thrown in the middle of a thickness: narrow corridors of metal shelves brimming with various sizes of carton boxes, musty smells circulating under harsh lights, cold even in the summer. *In the middle* means:[1] not at the start and never at the end, no direction and no horizon. But it also means: always at the start, free to choose direction, blissfully conjuring a new horizon at every point as we see fit. This is the Cuming collection.

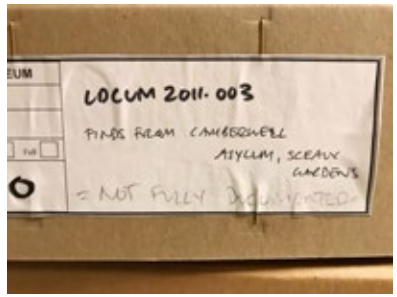
We think we can count, we think we can touch. But we can only count the gaps, and can only touch the boxes. We are reduced to digits, touching and representing nothing but absence. Ever since 2013, when the Cuming collection was squeezed into boxes, a soft, heavy viscosity has descended on the lids. The objects are often exhibited, studied, on loan; but mostly, they are boxed in, enumerated, shelved. They pulsate with the force of a trapped animal, shaking up the shelves and wanting out, riding the promise of a new glass-fronted home for them. But at the same time, they lure with a gentleness of a silent discovery.

The archival spectacle unfolds only for the ones who have the time and dedication to look closely; but even then, it never unfolds fully. Every archive withdraws.[2] In its core, there is an impenetrability that can never be pierced through. The Cuming Museum Collection, however, is a notch more impenetrable than usual. No doubt, one can ask to see the objects in the boxes, look them up numerically in the archive, or browse some of them (1753 to be precise) online. Yet the object pales behind the digital, in its turn doubling up as numerical catenation and rough, carton surfaces. The collection has withdrawn behind a curtain of digits.

There is a space of course: past a set of large iron gates, through a sort of parking-cum-industrial yard, underneath a red fire-escape metal staircase, an inconspicuous blue door leads to the storage rooms that is the Cuming collection. This is very grounded, undoubtedly functional and not at all decorative space, but somehow, perhaps because of this, the collection seems spectacular in its promise.

1. Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. trans. Brian Massumi, London: Athlone Press.
2. Bryant, Levi, *The Democracy of Objects*, Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2011; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, Andreas. 2014. *Spatial Justice: Body Lawscape Atmosphere*. London: Routledge.



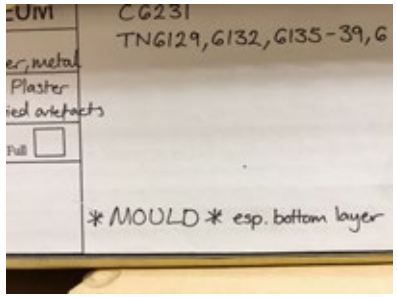


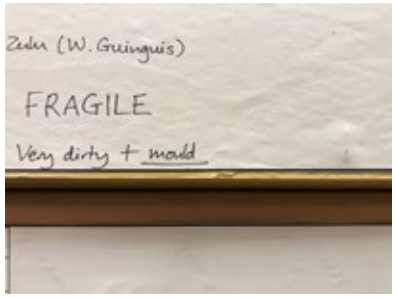
2. Not found yet

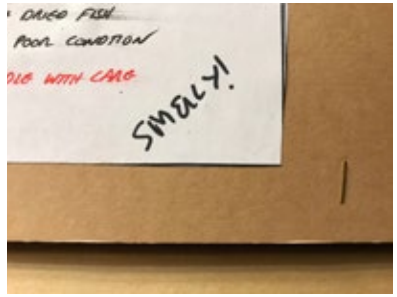
This promise, however, is hard to fulfil, even if one were to prize all the storage open. The boxes are filled with absence. There are large chunks of frothy absence, narrow wedges of compact absence, folded maps of time absence, horns of absent animalities and coils of absent vegetalities. The boxes are restless, the contents are shifting, the absences are all too manifest. There is a wanderlust around, a desire to belong and to become part of something.

For the objects of this boxed-up collection, to be seen is the Lacanian *petit objet a*, the desire for the ever-unattainable, the space of absence. Or is this perhaps our own *petit objet a*, the desire to not go unnoticed, an unuttered promise we have made sometime before our birth to live a life fully, openly and in plenitude? I walk amongst the aisles, fascinated by labels and promises, all too aware of my need to imagine my desire, to give it form and to fill the missing pieces in the boxes.

Underneath the desire of every collection for completion, there is a stronger desire for infinity. To collect means never to be done with: life extended – let me live just a little longer till I find that one last object that is missing from my collection, that will make my collection (and me) complete. Let me not die. But what happens to a collection that is sepulchrally deposited? How is desire extended from within boxes? And how is life?







3. Objects Withdrawn, Objects Connected

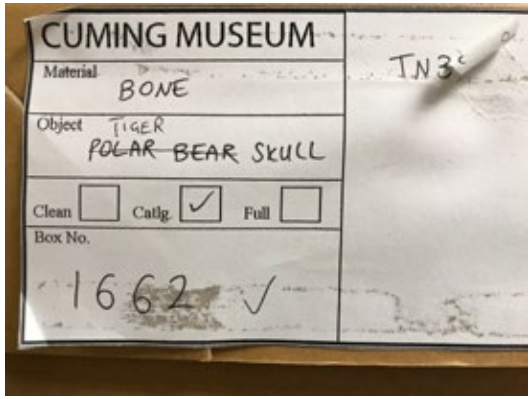
The absence in the boxes forms layers of humid sedimentation, accumulated dirt and frayed object dust. The collection is growing day by day, organically, tentacularly. The animate takes over the inanimate, and the two come together in a peculiar, faint pulse.

It is not just the archive that withdraws. The objects withdraw too. They regress into pure materiality beyond representation. They withdraw from communicating their value; they withdraw from connecting with other objects in this and other collections; they withdraw, finally, from their anthropocentric purpose.

Yet, at the same time, these objects are uncontainable. They exude smell, leak fluids, pulverise into dust. They connect with the visitor. The boxes are only a skin that attempts to contain them – and so are the labels that fight to hold the objects onto some stratum of representation. But the skin is porous and bursts with the object's smells, organic growth and fragility; and the labels only place a brittle façade between the object and the world. In reality, the labels are paper-thin. There is nothing behind them but their own sticky back: we are invited to a dance of representation that represents nothing but the absence of representation. We might be in the presence of pure materiality.

These objects are vibrant[3] – but even more, they are alive, in the sense that they are trammelled by a life, absolute immanence, absolute singularity.[4] To be alive means: to be connected to other bodies, and simultaneously to be withdrawn from them. To be alive is a paradox.[5]

3. Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
4. Deleuze, Gilles. 2001. *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*. trans. Anne Boyman, intro. J. Rajchman, New York: Zone Books.
5. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, Andreas, 2016, 'Lively Agency: Life and Law in the Anthropocene', in Irus Braverman (ed.), *Animals, Biopolitics, Law: Lively Legalities*, London: Routledge.

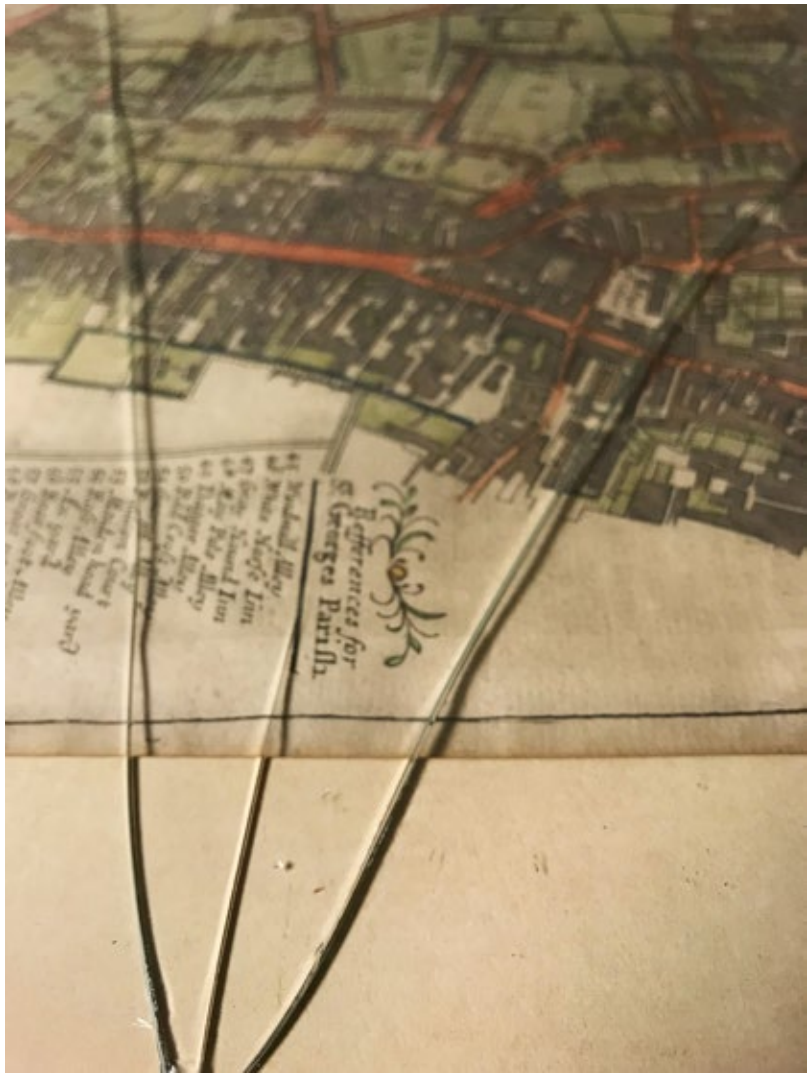


4. Tiger/Polar Bear

Skin is a membrane that distinguishes us from the outside. But we forget that skin also connects. We choose to focus on those membranous parts of the skin that separate between us and the outside, rather than the porous ones that connect. We often understand skin as an impermeable container that keeps things separate between inside and outside, and not a porous one that allows circulation between this and that side of the skin. Often, political decisions are based on this arbitrary focus of separation, reconfiguring the purpose of the skin, from protection (of the body from its environment) to attack (against the environment, the non-self, the other). Separation requires the rhetoric of differentiation (social, gender, race, religion, sexuality and so on) , and differentiation is still, sadly, despite all, categorisation and hierarchy-setting. Differentiation is skin-deep, but there is little that resists it.

When the skin goes, the structure underneath is thrown in the thickness of the outside. It is made to face its own vulnerability. A polar bear becomes a tiger becomes a bust becomes Judy. They all conflate, becoming one collective body. The presence of Judy Aitken, the permanent curator, storage manager, collection director, scholar of dedication and thorough knowledge, seemingly leads the pack. Scratch the skin though, and Judy is only one part of this collective body, herself also yielding to the weight, the current location, the desire for visibility, and above all the historical importance of this collection, pressing on the collective body with a force of such gravitas that everything in here sighs.

Without skin, there is interchangeability. Or perhaps, a skin only very thinly covers the contingency and randomness of bodies. It is not that all bodies are the same. Rather, it is that all bodies (human, objects, animate, inanimate) are beyond easy distinctions. The Cuming collection screams this, even behind shut boxes.



5. Ever potential

The fantasy about orderliness has to do with purity and coherence. Throw away the clutter, organise your life, compartmentalise your issues, and you will be happy/cleansed/yourself. Of course, the fantasy refers to the outside of the organising affair. Outside, all is a sleek continuum of aligned stacks of similarly coloured surfaces with neat labels, generously sprinkled with accessibility, relevance and importance.

Inside, however, there is no space for this kind of fantasy. Orderliness gives way to a different kind of thrown-togetherness: inside there are foldings that rupture the sleek continuum of a plastic order and initiate a plasticity of sharing that redefines categories. Inside there is rupture. Inside there is a promise of different conception, of rousing discovery, of bewildering life-changing sights. Inside there is a different fantasy: that of remaining for ever potential, undetermined, quantum.

The rupture of the boxed-in collection is this: that the cat can be both alive and dead at the same time. A box left ajar can hide an object simultaneously solid and broken. Even a label that says ‘broken’ or ‘needs repair’ says nothing about the end of the object, and all about its various new lives as multiple.

6. Oceanic

The objects are enclosed in boxes, in turn enclosed in the storage space, in turn enclosed in a promise for an open future, in turn enclosed in the fire that put them there in the first place. The collection is in the epicentre of multiple folds, all of them thickly sedimented and more permanent than initially thought.

Within that enclosure, however, an unworking takes place that starts from within and radiates outwards. A process of incubation is at work, where the incubated takes charge of the incubating, and the objects come alive beyond the boxes.

The labels might frequently urge 'nothing on top', but the objects take control and superimpose themselves in a mode that is in the heart of the unworking[6] of the enclosure. They flout the need of (specific) order that is paramount to the working of the enclosure. They defy the lawscape of spatial distribution as determined by the labelled boxes, and take up space randomly, almost spontaneously, unworking the force that left them there waiting in the first place, in a semblance of patient expectancy. They can then afford to be playful, opening up from within the folds vast spaces of oceanic depth, inhabited by friendly Krakens.

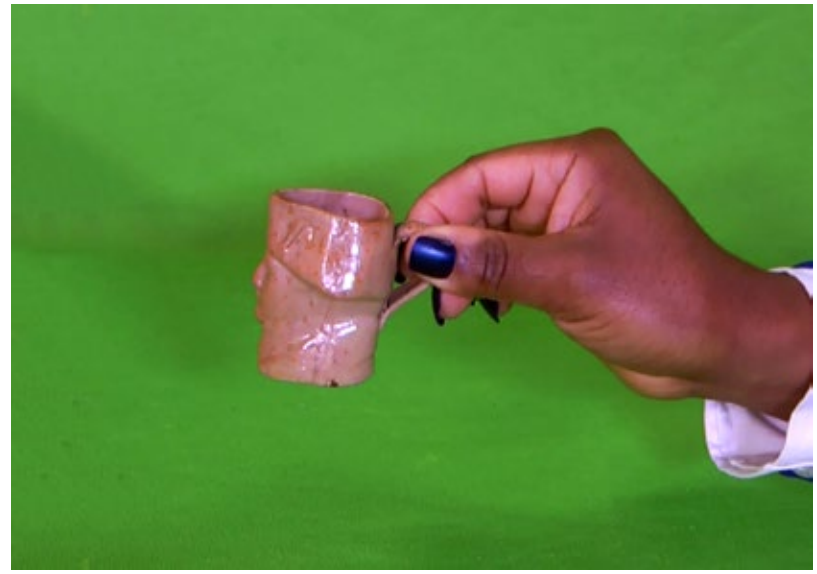
Occasionally, the objects will take up room directly on the shelves, freed from carton. This is not nostalgia for what has been burned down. This is the resilience of matter, blooming up in visibility, riding its desire for radiance.

This is a world unto itself. In here, there is a naturally controlled, stable temperature and humidity, says Judy. In here, the atmosphere is nearly always the same. It takes a long time for the outside to come in.

6. Blanchot, Maurice, 1982, *The Space of Literature*, trans. A. Smock, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

Object Actions Choreography, Video Still 1, 2018

Object Actions Choreography, Video Still 2, 2018



Object Actions Choreography, Video Still 8, 2018

Object Actions Choreography, Video Still 9, 2018

It is through a goods yard that the collection is entered. A back entrance for the goods. Through a door into rooms filled with the racked closed boxes that now constitute the Cuming Collection's contemporary civic suspension.

Exhibit I: The first object that can be seen is a monkey wrapped in plastic. An archive could ask for no more. But what political histories does this breathless presence represent? Gesturally, the monkey offers to be a guide. And there's something of the jester about it – proffering generously with an arm extended through its clear protective cape. More London street performer then jungle specimen. Readied for the crowd. It knows its place. A player. Eyes ablaze with an open face. Breathless but the most alive. We have a spirit. A totem through which material histories and the contemporary imaginary might be combine and political narratives be appropriately sampled.

Deleuze and Guattari allude to this, that by approaching from behind our questions form and fall in a different way. From be-hind, methodology can be understood anew, re-assigned to different pursuits, generating new objects of enquiry for a (now) unfamiliar terrain of encounters. And it is from behind that this collection gains its potency – for it has no permanent front. Its integrity and its stage are threatened and by virtue of this, more wild (non-academic) associative potentials arise. A meeting of the factive (archive) and the fetish (art) in the performative spaces of a communicative ideal within the academy. The monkey provides the lead gesture: a form of invocation, demonstrative, a didactic swish… place your bets.

It is through the insistence of the frontal (wherever it occurs: objects, institutions, people…) that a certain distrust can occur. And the need, as a recipient, to say 'that's too much'. There is a horror to such blatancy, its excess. *the-all-of-it*… given-up to the name, from within its secured frames, readied for the label. The object (like a prize) flooded by light and the promise to uphold a concentrated singularity, an exemplar of… Given the space, for both reach and retch. But it's not within a notion of frontality that this collection appears. Its civic suspension (suspension of the civic) – being now homeless – an opportunity instead for a new set of relations and agencies orchestrated through artistic and curatorial interventions. And given the spatial politics of London (the 'Elephant', which is functionally multi-directional) nothing could be more appropriate than to give a spin to this material legacy one more time.

PAUL TEBBS

Exhibits II, III, IV… : hand-made playing cards, 'fake' figurines, bones of this and that, an architect's visualisation for new council offices, more taxidermy, Southwark nuclear bunker details…

The frontal address is not shared by most animals either. The animal we assume can neither fix itself nor its objects through the front alone. For example, there is no portrait position natural to animality. Eyes to the side… fidgety and flighty in body, shrill in sound, alert to danger, primed for escape. Monkey perception appears as a gapful sequence of shardful glances. And it is with this cut and discontinuity that we might navigate such a non-hierarchical blessing of cultural signification. Things of the street and whim. Chancers together. We are both close and far from Herzog and Kinski, mad together, in the jungle requiring a boating vessel to perform the opera.

There is a luminosity to appearance through a front (despite 'front' being such an ugly sound): directed towards legibility, readied for exchange… facial… the face… already under the cultural/social/political obligations to become recognizable. It is through the virtue-ality of illuminated frontage that a place for cultural exchange my take form. The cultural imperative to bring faces to an experiencable. To bring to that which is… deserving… to an us. But to receive from the front is alarming too, no? Petrifying. Am I adequate? And by what measure? Above all, what is wanted of me by this assemblage of… an array of it's? Facing is always too much. Ubiquitous, ludicrous, unquantifiable, to miss.

Being a cultural witness is not only to produce legibility in service of cultural vitality. Heidegger understood that the 'world' of a work of art can wither. And the film-maker Chris Marker names a film 'statues die too'. Audiences wane. Artforms become audienceless. And – in some cases – there is no timely resurrection…. no cognizable form of dynamic thought or behavior to be organised from the encounter. Like the form of life within an animal, the forms of life found in an object can provide only limited grounds of commonality – through which an understanding might emerge. Instead, opacity and indifference. A puzzlement for optimism. But, as we know, the dead and deathly are routinely consumed.

The 'front' is also, the face-to-face of men at war. And there is no plural to such a front – it doesn't include its consitutive opposite – the other front it is facing. The front's logic points forward in one direction past its obstacles. A front moves forward until it's a border.

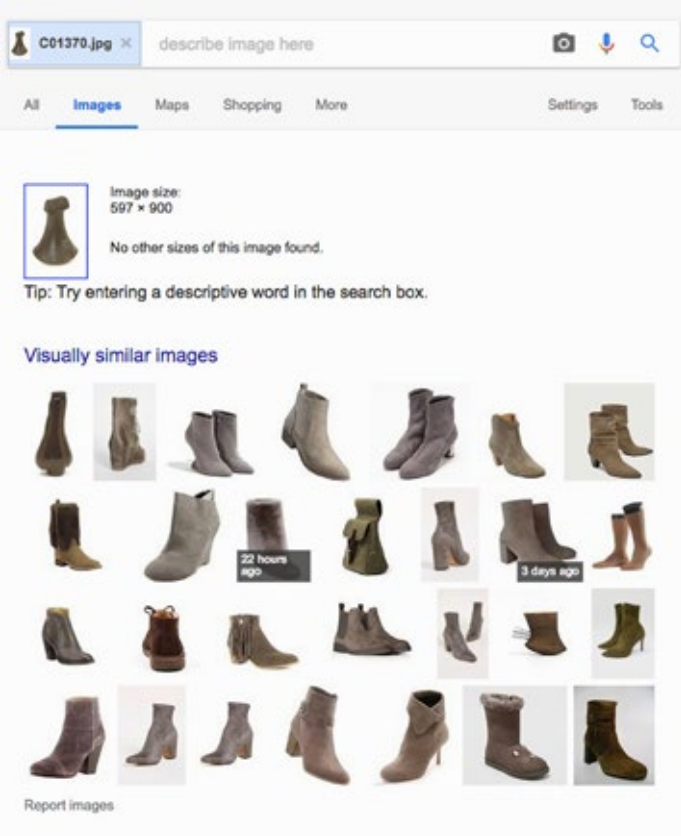
To have 'front'. To 'front-up'. Front National. National Front. Y-front… A history of working class men.

Exhibit… : A book. Magic in Modern London by Edward Lovett written in 1925. A chapter entitled 'A Tale of Two Soldiers'. Lovett meets two men recuperating at the end of a pier on a summer's day. They cannot be understood. War damaged. They wear snakes inside their hats to avoid sunstroke. It was a fancy but it doesn't help their cause. My grandfather leisured outside of London on the south coast too. The magic of dancehalls. The Kursaal. His profession was protected so he didn't see the front the soldiers shared. He cast tank plates instead, artillery, and the complex forms of boat propellers. A mode of arms making. With any spare brass he cast ornamental elephants and dolphins to decorate the home, to prop open doors. Those mens' faces were strange he said. They registered no understanding. Of his own face my grandfather experienced only an excess of both flesh and fold in relation to them. A wobbling before their stillness.

Exhibit… : Another chapter of the Magic in Modern London, entitled 'Tattooing A Girl's Arm'. A girl says, "No! Oi don't moind." Lovett had asked her – a girl of the 'factory class' – whether he could see her arms being tattooed. She obliged. When engaged such girls would have the boy's initials inscribed on their arms. When 'disaster struck' and the engagement was called-off the intitials were turned into floral patterns. The girl had an armful of flowers now. 'Kiss my elbow,' she told him, 'I'll let you enter my garden.'

Since the posited origins of art, animals continue to inscribe its fate. In a photographic series primates roam amongst classical statues furnishing famed temples of high culture. There are no humans except in pale sculptural form. It's hard to tell what's happened. Has evolution regressed? Were the sculptures a mistake – a strange turn? Legibility is under threat. Where the muzzles of the primates extend through a curiosity towards the dead white forms, it's only the fattened marble limbs that protrude back. The 'contemporary' face a mere plane by comparison to its evolutionary cousin. A displacement of power from the face (the jaw now subdued by cooked food) to the thigh and stomach (the food's depository). We are be-hind again.

Result of Google search by Image from Cuming Museum documentation of 'Pestle 1800-1840', viewed 28 January 2018. https://tinyurl.com/y9p54xwc



The French Neo-classicist painter, Jacques-Louis David, would often commission a cabinetmaker to produce furniture to perform specifically as props in his paintings; cabinets 'as' cabinets in complete clarity, not ones which are pervaded with socio-political or personal, familial history but cabinets to act as cabinets. Objects in collections, both in vitrines and archival storage boxes are imbued with the burden of representation and history that David's cabinets were free of. To document them or to re-frame them relinquishes them of this, creating new trajectories, scenarios and potential understandings.

Rejecting an object's assumed utility and instead using it as a position of re-understanding, a new freedom is established; the object is "freed from the conditions of time and space which govern it."(Melville, 2005) Photography serves as a device for this; the camera's extended gaze allows for new facets to be seen and relationships to be drawn from them, abstracting the object from its context.

There is a distinct tension between camera and object or an object and its index. Graham Harman argues "We cannot possibly exhaust the depth of their [an object's] reality even when turning our explicit attention to them" (Harman, 2016). Photography is illustrative of this sentiment, through precipitating or enabling an isolation of an object and an acceptance of the limitations in our understanding of it. The isolation of the object through the frame, highlights the inexhaustible nature of the object and the photographic medium. The photograph then stands in opposition to a museum collection or archive. Where an object is forced into a limited perspective by its deemed cultural and monetary value, its understanding and potential for interpretation is bracketed and hemmed in by its specificity.

Every object is multi-faceted, and everyone's experience of it, specific and unique. A collection is at loggerheads with this, refusing to acknowledge an object's permeable form or reinterpretation, through its context or lack of it. Harman uses the analogy of a bridge; "the bridge has a completely different reality for every entity it encounters; it is utterly distinct for the seagull, the idle walker and those who may be driving across toward a game or a funeral" (Harman, 2010), all object positions are constantly shifting and negotiating one another, constantly creating new realities for each other to exist within.

Through photography we are able to force an object into a permanent autonomous zone, rejecting the specificity of an object with a series of value assertions orbiting it, allowing it to be seen with renewed clarity, or a fuzzying of vision, each being equally effective. Sarah Hamill says, “photography is made to convert matter into something animate and strange, something distant and ephemeral, giving its viewers a framework for re-envisioning the category of the sculptural” (Marcoci, 2010). Through photographing an object, we can oppose functionality and renegotiate and reimagine it through new contexts; an object is “freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it” (Harman, 2010).

Photography empowers the object, removing it from its reference points as an anonymous well-behaved object serving its defined function. The isolating effect of the lens makes it present, or pushes it into the void between present and invisibly functioning as expected. Benjamin observed that the photograph “reactivates the object reproduced” (Marcoci, 2010), it engenders the object with something other than what it is indexing, Malraux echoes this sentiment; “photography democratizes art by dislodging the original from its context” (Marcoci, 2010), this is key, through re-framing the object it is decontextualized, allowing it to be recontextualised. Photography finds alternative spaces for objects to exist, framing and pausing the oscillation of an object’s context, enabling the viewer to reconsider the position of an object world in which they partake.

Photography acknowledges the exhaustive depth of an object’s reality. It relinquishes context, prompting autonomy.

Through the lens, we see the other curios.

Harman, G., 2010. Towards speculative realism: essays and lectures / Graham Harman. Zero Books, Winchester.
Harman, G., 2016. Object-oriented ontology.
Melville, S. (2005). The lure of the object. Williamstown, Mass,: Yale University Press.
Roxana. Marcoci, 2010. The original copy: photography of sculpture, 1839 to today / Roxana Marcoci ; with essays by Geoffrey Batchen and Tobia Bezzola. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The Oak Tree.

Magic in Modern London, Video still, 2018

Horses have always enjoyed such a high reputation.

What more a delightful legend
than that of the horses
of the Chariot of the Sun,
or the horses of Aurora!

Or Sleipnir,
the eight-legged grey horse
of Odin
who could traverse either land or sea?

To say nothing of Cyllaros,
Castor's horse

Or Bucephalus,
of Alexander the Great

Or Xanthus,
of Achilles

Or Buraq,
who conveyed Muhammad
from earth
to the Seventh Heaven?

Horses can see beings
which are invisible to human eyes,
which explains
their mysterious wild rushes.

Pixies and hags steal horses
through keyholes
and all over the country
and all through the night,
they race them.

The horses then stray
or are found in a sweat.

Like when you wake from a nightmare.

Stones with holes in
are hung up in the stable
to prevent the entrance
of undesirable beings.

Magic in Modern London, Video still, 2018

Object. Noun. A material thing that can be seen and touched.

Hold me. In sight. On site.

There are those who want me to disappear. Each hair, each bone, each strip of cloth, each chain, each face, each eye.

Hold me.

Hold these stories in the palm of your hand. Known. Imagined. Inferred. Invented. A coat, made and re-made, wrapped and given. A crocheted blanket. A birthday card. A tiger's skull. A gypsy doll. The hard stare of a monkey.

They are not dead, these things. This monkey skipped from branch to branch, lifted its eyes to the sky. A child held this doll, told it secrets, made it dance. This skull had flesh and fur, the soft jelly of eyeballs, searching for prey.

In sight.

I am material. Visible. I matter.

On site.

I have matter. I occupy space. An inconvenience. A gift.

Collection. Mass Noun. The act or process of collecting something or someone.

Hold me. Together.

We are linked by association.

Someone chose us. Placed us side by side. Made meaning in the spaces between.

One photograph after another.

A woman twists white wool. A man threads a needle. A gun. Plastic wrapping. Human hair. Beads. We come from across time, across space, and here we are. Together.

Object. Noun. A person or thing to which a specified action or feeling is directed.

I am talking to you.

Here in Central London's new green heart, you can choose between a wood and an orchard if you have a million or so to spare.

There was something there before this. There are stories in the ground.

Look at us. We are trying to tell you who you are. Who you were. Who you might be.

Collection. Noun. A group of things or people.

Gather. Together. Here in the heart of London. Bone. Flesh. Fur.

Together we are louder. Together we are larger. Together we are harder to ignore.

Tiger. Monkey. Doll.

Hood. Hat. Hair.

Curate. Verb. Select, organise and look after the items in a collection or exhibition.

I am cared for. I am taken care of. I am handled. Valued. Organised. Labelled. Made sense of. Shared.

See me. Touch me. Hold me. Together.

Object. Verb. To say something to express disagreement or opposition to something.

I object.

Do not make me invisible.

Do not ignore my stories.

Hold me. In sight. On site.

Do not lose me.

Nut doll, C10321, Cuming Collection, 2018

Wooden apple, shared by Isobel, *Collecting Home*, 2011

I saw the notice about Collecting Home exhibition outside Walworth City Garden Farm. Perhaps that is why I immediately thought of the wooden apple as my significant object. It's faded now, and showing signs of age, but I have had it since I was very small.

My mother, a trained nurse and midwife, opted for private nursing when her children were young so that she could more easily arrange her working hours around family needs.

One of the elderly people she nursed was Mrs Gates of the family firm Cow and Gate. I wasn't old enough for school, and all the nursery schools were full. So I went to work with my mother. I played in the kitchen under the watchful eye of the maid, in the garden under the watchful eye of the gardener, and in the nursery under the watchful eye of no one.

There was a cupboard in the nursery full of toys that had belonged to Mrs Gates' children, now in their fifties or sixties. I was allowed to play with them. There were two things I particularly liked; a small step ladder that meant I could access the higher shelves; and this apple. Like most children, I was fascinated by things that seemed to have secret places, and when I found the apple came apart I was thrilled. It felt like I had made a wonderful discovery.

When Mrs Gates died I was given the apple. Maybe my mother was asked if there was something her little girl would like. I was just pleased to have it, though I still hankered after the steps.

Mantlepiece, shared by Joan, *Collecting Home*, 2011

Whale Bone (baleen), 2018

The man in I.T.

"*She's a mac user*"

The phrase muttered to his colleague, in my opposite direction, conjures an array of associations, from which I feel utterly disassociated. He asks me to log in to my account, and as I do, he looks away, exaggeratedly.

I press Return, and together we look at the screen, my Outlook profile void of content, an icon on the screen with the generic outline of a figure. There must be a name for that – unpopulated? I feel uncomfortable, awkward as I stumble through my account of what happened, aware that the chronology doesn't make sense, that my accounting of, my accounting for not being able to open any of my documents is fragmented, partial. The basic message I am trying to relay is that I have lost all my data, and I'm hoping the people in this office will be able to help retrieve it. I am trying to explain what happened, and when.

"*The file seems corrupted… the file names have changed… I can't open them anymore.*"

"*Excuse me, can I interject*"

The colleague slides over on his chair, its castors on wheels, a spinny chair, my daughter would call it. And round she would spin, squealing with delight.

"*Those were not real files. The application you were using writes temporary files. Those files you were writing in were not real files. Your material was not being saved*"

He slides away, his back to the window, face in shadow, a church steeple behind him, and a flat office block roof with a giant puddle, a rusty fire escape, an old air conditioning unit clunking away on its 12 monthly service contract.

It takes a while to adjust both to the bluntness of the delivery, and to the consequences, but even at that moment, I'm conscious that on some level it's a loss that makes me feel free.

The collection

The collection, when I find it, has a different kind of mass, weight, volume; a very material presence. It's not far from the IT department of college, and maybe if I had have sought it out from that crittal window up there on the 14th floor of the tower block, home of LCC's IT department, I would have seen it there, far below, half a mile to the east.

The collection has survived intact since its inception in 1806 when its founder, Richard Cuming, purchased many 'significant items' from the sale of Sir Ashton Lever's Leverian Museum. The collection now holds over 30,000 objects and artworks, many of them reflecting the lives of ordinary people of Walworth. It was donated to the Borough of Southwark when Richard's son Henry Syer Cuming died in 1902. It survived, intact, moving to Walworth Town Hall, where it was popular with generations of families, kids and art students as I remember – but in 2013 there was a fire, and the collection has been wrapped in storage ever since. For a while, I've wanted to make something out of the collection, do something with it, be inspired by it, but repeated visits yield nothing. Each time I explore, I experience a weariness that I can't overcome. I can't seem to find a way in, a way to make it my own.

I'm sitting at a desk, perched, uncomfortably at its corner, at my knees an electric heater that's wafting warm air into the cold space.

"It takes a while to get going"

I wander around, the narrow corridors created by the boxes themselves, mostly white plastic stacked floor to ceiling, with identification codes and descriptions.

A taxidermied baboon is wrapped in thick, opaque plastic. I can just make out its face, the curve of its body, its hands, its feet. Its once fleshy, flashy magnificent arse so withered, so dry, not a lick of condensation, no smell. No wetness inside, no breath, nothing. Like the collection itself I think, so far from an ideal state of being, suspended between the future and the past. Not even a photograph could bring it back to life.

I open some boxes here and there, and come across an object, buried in tissue. I pass over it quickly, experiencing it as a hunk of wood, whilst knowing that doesn't make sense – it's too heavy to be wood, and the texture isn't right.

A few days later, I have another look. I find it again, as I thought, in a container labelled 'Whale bone, baleen'. Like that, in the singular. Despite the label telling me it's whale bone, I can't stop playing in my mind with the possibility that it's wood. An old husk of wood, maybe scythed off a door, it has a vertical side. And what, I wonder, could have produced that burn mark? Its bark is a beautiful light olive brown with a lighter beige colour inside. It has a porous texture, like coral, or a sponge that has been dried out to the extent that no amount of water would ever infiltrate or soften the dense brittle structure of its core. I look at it from different angles, trying to connect my experience of it with the grim reality of the text. I turn it in my hands, and as I do it seems to splinter with tiny crystalline grains.

What is that? Salt? Sand? I'm confused. What is it?

It's a bone.

I find that impossible to process. I wrap up the thing and pack it away in its box.

My ear

And my eardrum thumps, a painful distraction that has persisted for weeks. It had burst on a Wednesday morning, while I was teaching at college. A suspected perforation the doctor said on the day, but we didn't at the time know for sure because the view through the otoscope was obstructed by thick brown fluid. It was the last time I rode my bike. I haven't ridden since, and those two unrelated events have converged in my mind, a muddling up of cause and effect.

I press my phone to my 'other' ear, the good one. I'm talking to my mum, and nothing feels right.

"*You shouldn't put cotton wool plugs in your ears you know*"

Advice delivered as a warning, something inferred, and then:

"*Cotton wool has tiny fibres that can aggravate the sensitive skin inside the ear. It happened to me.*"

Bow

It's half term, and my son arrives home from a trip to the park. A design featuring the skeletal bones of a bronchiosauras is ironed in green felt onto the blue jersey fabric of his top. It's strangely technical, somewhere along the line, specialist knowledge would have been consulted. If I look carefully I can just discern the edges of the printing plate, and I wonder about the method of production, whether it was produced from a digital file or an analogue image scanned. Was it rights free, how many generations are there between this version of the image and the hand that originally produced it.

His cheeks are burning with cold.

What did you bring back from the park?

A stick lands beside me on the kitchen table, crudely fashioned into a bow with a single piece of yarn tied to either end. The bark is glossy and smooth, a lovely warm tone, auburn and bright.

I pick it up and like his cheeks the twig is cold, a beautiful echo of the forest, so fresh, and inside me, a longing.

Bone

Judy tells me how in the 1990s, a curator of the collection oversaw a complete overhaul of the way it was archived. He reclassified it according to a different set of criteria – so instead of the categories being defined by natural history, social history, or the cultural context or place of their origin, the objects were classified according to their material – which is why there is now a box which contains only items made from whale bone (baleen), as well as fragments of bone itself.

I return once more – I need to see the bone again. We meet and talk, and I go once more to the box, this time alone. I find the bone and the other objects in their unmarked tissue wrapping, all crinkly and white. I don't usually like the process of unwrapping, the claustrophobic ritual of it, the subtle strain of producing the right response, the thrill of expectation, gently dulled. But today it feels right, to be digging around, seeing things anew. I find out later that most of what I find is politely named 'scrimshaw' – three dimensional artefacts that are hand carved out of whale bone or ivory. I find a jagging wheel that is used to pierce and trim a pie crust, a piece of carved corsetry, made by a fisherman for his love, a bottle stop.

Right at the bottom is another box, that takes up half of the main white plastic container. I'd not seen it before. I open it, the labour of unwrapping, the crinkling of the tissue.

Another piece of wood?

This piece is heavier, more regular in shape. It's darker than the one I saw the other day, although the label says it's been cleaned. Ugly welts are etched, deep in its surface, thunderous blows pounded down repeatedly with a heavy blunt knife, or an axe. I wonder at the force of the brutality, such wild indifference. And then I feel ashamed.

I read the label.

SHAFT of an ULNA and VERTEBRA of the
RORQUAL or FIN-WHALE (Balaenoptera).
Found 15 feet below the surface of the
road on the site of Coleman Street,
Gresham Street, 1868.
Exhibiting tool marks.

"15 feet below the surface of the road"

Twice as deep as a grave… below the water table

I go to the site; the junction of Coleman Street and Gresham Street in the city of London, near Moorgate. The pavement is smooth, inscrutable, flattened wads of chewing gum, those bursts of spray paint that contractors make to relay information between them, authorizing works. I've passed by there before; I cycle up Gresham Street sometimes on my way home from work. Later I realise that the bone was found 150 years ago this year. A commemoration of sorts, a mark of remembrance, spontaneous, accidental, displaced.

When the present has given up on the future, we must listen for the relics of the future in the unactivated potentials of the past.[1]
– Mark Fisher

1. Mark Fisher - The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology

My home road with tufts of hair
That catch'd between my toes
Where sand would spread out under
My weight marking my sandals with travel

Corn husks blowing past into open gutters
doors left wide with families staring out
Fresh sweat on my neck back
Tempting to stain my collar

A shadow larger than my mothers warning
moved the stones to dance
And the moment I looked up
the village was in flames

"Found in 184-

Creaking floors, wrestling bodies behind paper
cries along the hall slipping their last into eager hands
If only pity had time it would have stayed
to watch those leave the bathing house

Use the cover of night
To warm and hide the soul
Whispers of smoke from mile long pipes
Trap the local voices

wooden flats soothingly crunch on snow
Long tails dragging to the floor
Yet in waiting, the torches alight one by one
These are no visitors I scream.

"Found in 169-

An alley with fish scales reflecting light and day
And a rhythmic slamming of doors at sun down
would have the alley full of cats looking for bones
dogs sniffing trouble amongst the piss

body bent over the stench I sat
looking for a familiar god
But in each pocked face I found its own devil
mocking my neck, mocking the skin

Rain washing cobbled streets paved with shit
The hollering of the babe, the shrieking of the miss
Laces and lesser men blackened under the moon
Bellowed the smoke as it rose higher than you

"Found in 172-

Imagine we in them behind the glass
And disbelief at the traditions they lay faith in,
To look for the person in the shoes
to find the human in ourselves

oh what a treasure!
the mu/se/um provides a narrative
that sweetens ownership and comfort
Than to face a truth so ugly it fits with pride.

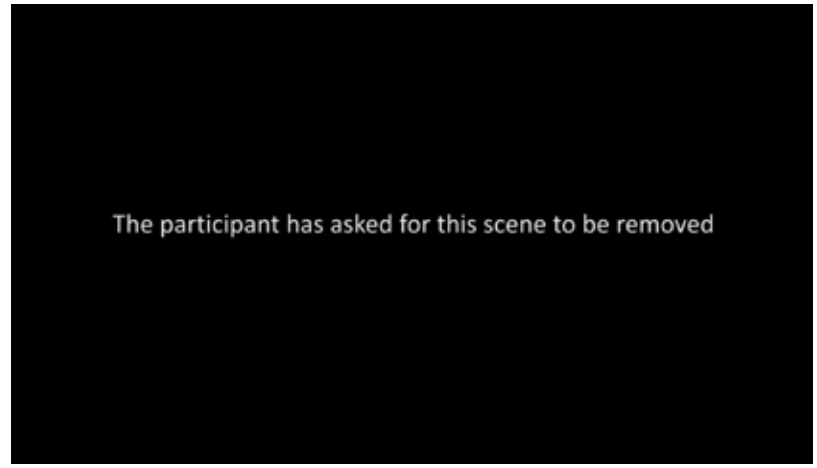
there is no humanity on this great shore.
The bill has now been paid in full
How taxing it was to hide
So.

be sure. none of me will be
found and bound behind your walls
I will burn my shoes
rather than have you own them.

Suplemento (Supplement), 2018
3 pages - printed, bound and torn

LALU DELBRACIO

The Compulsion to Collect, video stills, 2018
Videography: Charlie Cattrall



Work No. 39 Co-created by
© Boyle, Smith

Compulsion 2018, Installation

Images produced during the 'Compulsion to Collect' workshop - an experience devised by Marcus Boyle that challenged participants to explore the beliefs and behaviours associated with collecting, and to express these thorough co-created images.

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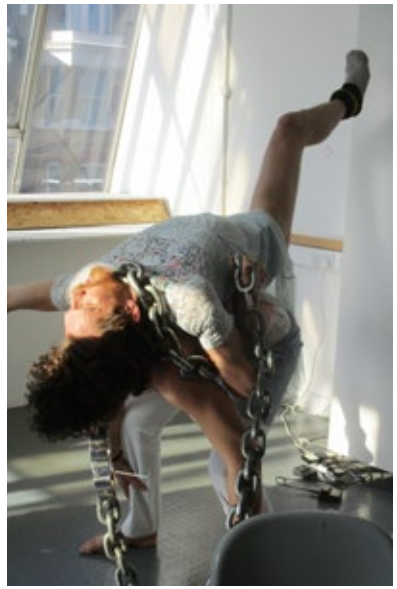

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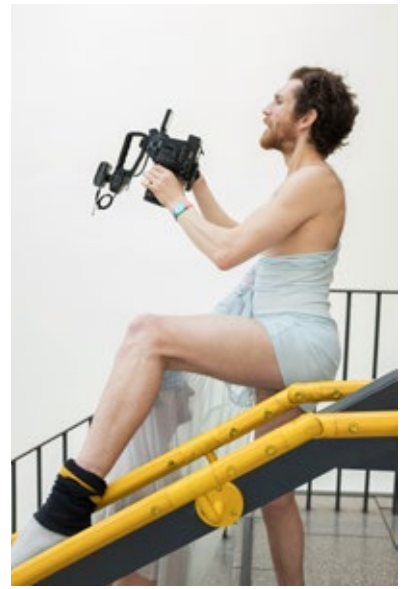

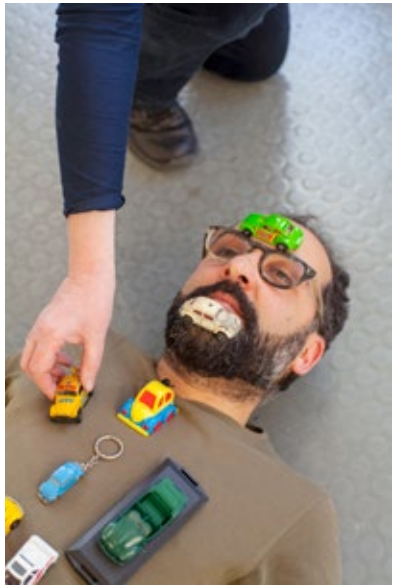

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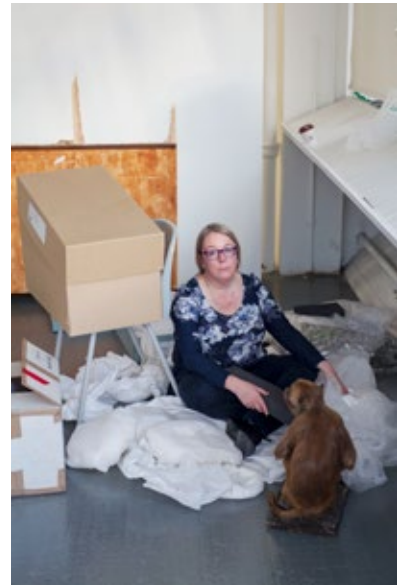

Work No. 43 Co-created by
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Work No. 45 Co-created by
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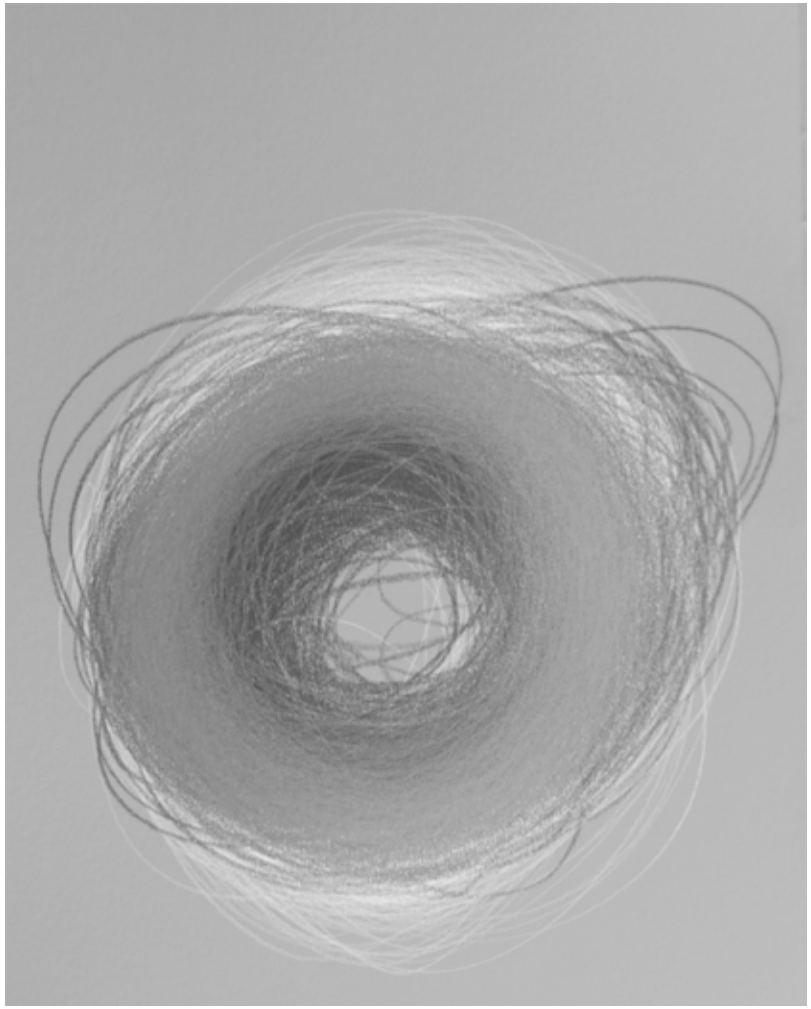
From the series *Potent Charms*, 2018



From the series *Potent Charms*, 2018

A POTENT CHARM

Eyes closed for 12 minutes a day I draw circles, allowing the movements of the train to affect my ability to draw such a simple shape. I have a high pile of note books, full of optical shapes at times circles, at times spirals. In my mind these drawings are a way of bringing good fortune to the day. My homemade charms/talismans.

Returning to the Cuming Museum after 20 years of absence, I am as seduced by the talismans in their collection as I was first time around. Back then I was looking for items related to English Witchcraft, a specific task that took me around England in my search. Returning is like coming full circle, finding old friends.

I want to be drawn to the strikingly visual objects in the collection, those understood to be important. But as the Hag Stone sits in my hand I know it is to these understated almost forgotten, objects tucked away at the bottom of the box that I will return.

Carved by the sea and imbued with powerful magic, they are gathered from the shore and hung on the threshold of a home to ward off evil spirits.

In the Cuming Museum they are a bundle of misshapen shapes and sizes piled high in boxes and with random labels to match. They came from Edward Lovett, famous for his collection of talismans from Londoners in the 1920s.

With my circular drawings, I am doing something everyone can do, draw a circular shape, collecting stones with holes from the beach; creating talismans.

to the past, into the present, into the future with some young people (some actors) from waterloo community theatre 🙌🎭

starting point the cuming museum collection. wander round, look at whatever we want, judy (the curator) allows us to roam, she unpacks and repacks things at our will, giving us back stories (where is this from?) it is strange these things are from anywhere, who gave permission for them to be taken? no one, tbh

we photograph things
miss jacobs wants to photograph a plate. yeh sure, but – can we talk about this plate? miss jacobs listens for a little while i say why i think this plate is a repulsive object

miss jacobs is a young person and a member of waterloo community theatre. miss jacobs is their pseudonym. i had forgotten the ease and joy of giving your own name. i was barney i was tom i am tiger when i am jessie (jesse, sometimes)

ok i say the next day (miss jacobs seems to have stayed away) shall we write our names down so we don't forget them (create a new space for a while while we hang out) ok then

CHICKEN & CHIPS
RIBS & CHIPS
SOFTTOM
OUTSIDETHE BOX
SUSƎ⅃
BUBBLEGUM GIRL
BOBBY ANGST
and more, they chop they change

a few weeks later i'm on the phone to you, you're driving and have an earache. i'm not sleeping but awake to catch a plane

you've read my first draft, can see some potential

you tell me a story judy had told me when i visited cuming for the first time about how in the 80s the curator at the time pulled everything out of the boxes gave them new labels, put the bones with the bones, the china with the china, animal heads with animal heads plates with plates.

you say, maybe it would be interesting to think about re-naming?
yeh, i think. maybe it would

ok so when a baby is born, do we succeed in naming them? my parents were semi-successful. top marks for a name with no both some little gender. but it doesn't always fit (it fits at the moment, i guess)

when i say to this group, let's give our selves names for today, for these hours together, for this room they jump onboard with approval. this ease (that i remember so well) in giving yourself a name, something to call and be called is so easy

both easy and slippery, they chop they change

the names don't stick, the post-it's fall off our clothes as we move around the room, travelling slowly, travelling together, travelling like the shapes in the ceiling above, travelling like the shapes in the tiger skull

by the next week some names have changed, some been forgotten, some post-its have survived but we lost others

when these objects are taken, the place they are taken from never really succeeds in staying with them. we name them, put them in boxes and today i talk about them in emails in inboxes place that email in the 'cuming museum project' folder and reply re: Cuming

it's a violence, an arrogance, a strange sense of self that never seems to be lost

so, in hanging out and travelling to the past, into the present, into the future with some young people (some actors) from waterloo community theatre 🙌🎭 what might we change?

we wonder round, look at whatever we want, judy (the curator) allows our chaos to unfold, she unpacks and repacks things at our will, giving us back stories (where is this from?) it is strange these things are from anywhere, who gave permission for them to be taken? no one, tbh

we photograph things
miss jacobs wants to photograph a plate. yeh sure, but – can we talk about this plate? miss jacobs listens for a little while i say why i think this plate is a repulsive object

sometimes it's about travelling away from the violence, we look at objects we photograph them we project them distort them lay and overlay our limbs fingers thumbs heads and draw

we choose the lines we want to keep, the lines we want to include, and the ones we want to leave out

we re-write what we can, try to talk about what we can't

and then we make plays, imagine new worlds new futures new ways of being together of meeting one another – we make it surreal we make it *real*

Object number: C01202
Ivory Figure of St Anne, 18th Century
Object/Work: 15 x 35 x 100 mm
Small figurine of St Anne wearing long robes
with her hands clasped.
Not found

CUMING: A NATURAL SELECTION

TEETH AND TUSKS

'*One day the Germans would come, the next day the Russians. The Russians didn't put you in a barn and burn you alive, they just shot you straightaway. Oh yes, they used to make the whole village watch. That was the point. Every village for miles around decided to store their belongings and documents in the town hall vault for safe keeping but soon after the building was set alight and we lost everything.*'

In March 2013 I had just started working on a new residency at Ceredigion Museum in Wales. In the warmth of the building's attic store, I found myself surrounded by thousands of thick brown archive boxes stacked up to the eaves. Their contents lay cocooned in beds of semi transparent paper, swaddled and unseen for decades. I heard the door open and a voice say 'That museum you recommended I go and see when I was in London, well it's burnt down'.

I had worked with the Cuming Museum some years earlier on a couple of projects, engaging young people with its collections. Back then my fascination lay in the fact that the Cuming family were not interested in purchasing objects considered fashionable or expensive at the time. Rather, they purposely purchased fakes; everyday and ephemeral objects from around the world.

It was a year after the fire before I got back in touch with the curators, Judy and Catherine. Now displaced and relocated, the meeting took place in Southwark Council's brightly lit communal offices, their presence incongruous with the sanitized environment. As we sipped tea from plastic cups dispensed from the office machine, I learnt that most of the damage from the fire had taken place in the galleries and had affected the objects on show. The store, where most of the collection was held, had remained untouched; the survival of the un-selected. In the subsequent months, I heard how they had compiled a 'loss list', which itemised the few objects not found.

One lost piece listed on the Excel spread sheet immediately drew my attention. A small heavily lined figure, with a melancholic pose. St Anne, the patron saint of lost objects and those who search for them.

Over the next few months I regularly met with Judy and Catherine at the makeshift store. We spent many hours sifting through the scarred disfigured remains of the collection; severely charred wooden statutes, vases shattered into infinitesimal pieces and taxidermy creatures still saturated to the core.

These emotionally laden visits shaped a series of workshops with local participants including families visiting Peckham Library, a young women's art group at Camberwell Leisure Centre and an elder woman's art group run by Inspire at St Peter's Church off the Walworth Road. I wanted to work with people at different stages of their life, with different perceptions and experiences of loss.

The sessions began with showing the group three display cases.

The first contained an object that had miraculously survived the fire, an earthenware ceramic pot found undamaged under a pile of rubble. The vessel had in effect been re-fired by the blaze, toughening it further and giving it a darker hue.

The second object damaged in the fire was a 2,600 year old painted carving of an Egyptian hawk; its black back, facial features, vibrant red wings and yellow breast washed away by fire hoses. The object had originally come from the top of a canopic chest, a sacred jar that contained organs removed from a person before the process of mummification took place. The hawk represented Sokar, the god of rebirth and rejuvenation. Its latest reincarnation had left it bare, stripped back to a wooden carcass.

The third case was left empty.

This vacant space provided the opportunity to introduce St Anne to the group. Each participant was asked to write a short description of an object without naming it; an object they remembered but had been lost. Each passage was then read out and the group was invited to draw what they thought the object was, creating multiple versions from a single description. Often the group would draw more or less the same thing from the image collectively conjured in their minds – on other occasions each person sketched seemingly disparate objects, revealing the dissonance between one individual's experience and another individual's perception of the same experience. What might it mean to an individual if their personal account of a lost letter is interpreted as a diary or a car key? Something is lost in the space between narrative and interpretation that relates to the gaps and holes redolent of histories that lie in the shadows.

My parents were post war migrants who came individually to this country. Other than a few small black and white photographs of relatives taken from the front, they arrived alone and without any personal possessions. They were both born near Minsk. This borderland was Polish territory during the pre-war years but was under Russian occupation when they fled.

Half a century later my dad died. On the day he was cremated the coroner handed me a small plastic sleeve containing his entire worldly belongings. Here were the objects he had kept, collected in the same acid free polythene bags used by museums to store small items. My father's archive held in one hand. In the moment of handover a fragment from the edge of an envelope escaped the unsealed pouch and fluttered like a sycamore seed in the space between us. We watched in silence as the scrap of paper gently spiraled downwards. When it eventually landed on the floor we both stared at it. The paucity of my dad's possessions had given this fragile slip of paper greater significance. I lent down and picked it up.

'*The ability of sycamores to grow in the shade of their parent and to create dense stands is one of the reasons this tree, introduced from central and southern Europe in the 15th century for pleasure gardens, has had a bad reputation. Zealous defenders of native species used to advertise "syccie bashing" events, getting people together to remove this invasive alien… A tree of good luck, bad luck and creativity, it is now a part of us. As the little seed drones twizzle through the grey winter air, their keys are tuning the locks of the future.*'
Paul Evans – The Guardian

One image of St Anne exists. It was taken from the front. We double-checked but could find no record of what she looked like from the back. Stuck in a two dimensional world, her borders were restricted by this one shot. There was no way to know where her boundaries began and where they stopped. St Anne, the patron saint of lost objects; all front and no back.

Wanting to raise her out of her flat existence, I commissioned a digital sculptor to develop a relief of her slim front. This would then be 3D printed to recreate multiple life size reliefs of the ivory model. For the unknown back, I melted down dental wax and hand carved an imaginary back representing each lost object the group had creatively responded to.

This soft, amorphic material, malleable in high temperatures, was in stark contrast to her hard original ivory form. Like the borderlands where my parents were born, its outline is never set, time is not rigid, memory is not fixed.

The installation was first shown at Platform Platform. Each figure was positioned on a tall thin plinth. Painted in soft shadow grey, the sombre pedestals played with the iconography of bereavement and how we memorialise and hierarchalise images of loss in our public monuments. To see St Anne from all sides, slim openings had to be negotiated. The piece was vulnerable; fragile.

When it was time to take the work down, I noticed the wax backs located near windows and glass doors had gradually darkened like an ageing set of discoloured teeth. I carefully wrapped each figure and placed them into a box.

In 1872, Henry Syer Cuming, while commenting on the changes to the church of St Mary at Newington, was moved to write: "*Dwell where we may, there is a natural, innate and laudable desire to learn something about the locality*".

The population of 19th century Southwark was overwhelmingly poor. Stretching from Bankside in the west to Surrey Docks in the East, and with Dulwich not yet acquired, this part of the County of London contained large areas of sub-standard housing for a population of dockworkers, leather workers, hop workers and families who had been evicted from central London during the late Victorian slum clearances. From his family home at 63 Kennington Road with its proximity to theatres, parks, a zoological garden and well-tended squares, Henry Syer Cuming was somewhat sheltered from the worst examples of the pressing poverty around him. He was determined to carry on his father Richard's mission to create a "British Museum in miniature" south of the river.

Although it reflected little of the experience of Southwark's then population, the original collections of objects and archives which would grow into the Cuming Museum can be seen as part of a heritage sector which was still, in part, an outgrowth of its late Victorian origins. The South Kensington Museum (forerunner of today's Victoria and Albert Museum) was originally a vast repository in which the arts and handicrafts of imperial subjects were categorized, ordered and ranked by their British rulers. Sitting beside its neighbouring Imperial Institute, the Albert Memorial and the Royal Albert Hall, its consciously didactic function could not have been clearer. Here, in the heart of the capital, selections of the monarch's imperial prizes were displayed to encourage what Eric Hobsbawm has described as 'giant new rituals of self-congratulation' on an almost planetary scale amongst indigenous Britons. On a smaller, more suburban, scale the exhibits on view at the Horniman Museum were less about the folklore and traditions of the peoples from which they were taken and more to do with the 'stoutly-earned results of a wide-spread dominion…the fruits of British pluck, endurance and industry'. Tea trader Frederick John Horniman's original intention was to bring the world to Forest Hill via his private collection of artefacts. As was the case with the natural history displays, the ethnographical collection stood as a testament to British expansion into and documentation of the world at large.

During this same period, a common entertainment was the 'Human Zoo'. Large-scale public displays of people of colour (Singalese, Tamils, 'Bedouin Arabs', Matabeles, Swazis, Hottentots, Malays…) in so-called 'native villages' were enormously popular. 'Natives' could be observed going through the motions of snake-charming or performing a 'superstitious bush dance'. For decades, these expositions provided a multi-purpose ideological cement through which the lowliest Britons could feel themselves wedded to notions of progress, racial superiority and the global mission of Christian civilisation. In presenting not only African arts and crafts but especially African bodies to public scrutiny, exhibitions like the 'Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations' at Crystal Palace in 1851 solidified once and for all in the public imagination the idea that peoples of colour were objects, and moreover objects that could be validly understood through European interpretation alone. Otherwise people of colour are mentioned as either grateful recipients of imperial benevolence or agents for the moral advancement of white people – both these elements are noticeable in the popularity of the Crimean nurse Mary Seacole and Martha Ricks (a Sierra Leonean of advanced years who made a quilt for Queen Victoria and travelled to London to present it personally).

Heritage, as defined by the late Stuart Hall is a representation of the nation's collective memory. He added that 'those who do not see themselves reflected in the mirror cannot feel that they belong.' On that basis alone it is clear that people outside the curatorial classes would not only encounter problems when seeking a reflection of their experience in archive and heritage environments, but they would largely feel overlooked, forgotten and, in a very real sense, excluded.

Contemporary Southwark is amongst the most diverse parts of Britain in terms of ethnicity and income. Non-UK born residents constitute over one-third of the whole. Southwark is the 41st most deprived local authority in England and the 12th most deprived borough in London. Over 300 different languages are spoken. Yet running in parallel and in concert with this ethnic diversity is an increasing disparity in wealth.

Some of London's best-known tourist attractions are to be found here including the Tate Modern, Borough Market and Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. These combined with proximity and ease of access to central London have led to parts of the borough being redeveloped for homes, investment opportunities and entertainment hubs for global buyers.

In particular, the area neighbouring, and in parts including, the site of the old Cuming Museum is currently subject to enormous transfers of wealth and populations as the residents of the former Heygate estate are displaced and the whole social character of the neighbourhood is changed to favour and cater to a global investor class.

There is still genuine cultural resistance and mistrust from most working class and minority people towards the heritage sector. It has a uniquely low image and poor profile. The crude view is that museums, galleries and archives are still places which tend to be *about* them rather than *for* them. Despite these reservations, there is a growing awareness of collections belonging to the public, of a need to serve all municipal taxpayers equally.

How can the thousands of objects Henry Syer Cuming left to Southwark in 1902 speak to such transient and divergent populations? Do the collections have the potential to create shared meaning?

Local authority museums need to be increasingly ingenious and able to manage an array of funding pressures from outside agencies with widely varying agendas. Do they have what it takes to safely straddle the worlds of market forces and social inclusion? Can they bridge the cultural and economic gaps of a city such as London, in flux? What is the museum's role when, as in the case of Brighton and many other Local Authorities, the 'Art, Recreation and Tourism' section is rebranded to 'Culture and Regeneration'?

All this is happening against a background of deepening austerity. There is no statutory requirement for local authorities to provide museums. Unlike a library service, local government spending on museums is usually optional. Budget cuts seldom pass them by. As the size of the state is reduced options for local heritage will diminish.

With most of the Cuming collections currently in storage, as many museum collections are, it is however an ideal time to consider how they could be made available in creative ways.

For example, schemes like 'Adopt an Item' scheme whereby schools, community and cultural organisations and individuals could adopt an item for a year are well tried. But there could be a chance to not just "adopt" but for this adoption to be part of fostering a more in depth relationship with previously little understood pieces; particularly, for example, from the ethnographic collections.

Working with the collections in new ways would mean people would be able to delve into the richness and diversity of the stories behind the objects for themselves. It is only by putting people's voices into the organization's collecting policies, staffing culture, exhibitions, curatorial practices, public programmes and cultural events that objects, histories and stories live and thrive.

The challenge is to open up access to the collection, perhaps by more partnership loans and exhibiting them in other suitable institutions, without breaking up the collection or removing its importance and connection to Southwark and its people.

The future for the Cuming collections is to respond to the needs and aspirations of a host of new users who will take their place at the heart of the whole borough's heritage. For in changing times there is more than ever something 'to learn about the locality.'

Dedicated to and in recognition of the value and cultural significance of the Cuming Collection to the local community and beyond.

This book was published to coincide with the exhibition *Elephant Atlas*.

ELEPHANT ATLAS
New Art, Writing, Performance and Workshops at LCC, inspired by Southwark's Cuming Museum Collection.

16th March - 4th April 2018

Main Galleries
London College of Communication
Elephant and Castle
London SE1 6SB

Exhibition curated by Judy Aitken and Sophy Rickett
Exhibition design by Ben Cave

Elephant Atlas: A Compendium
Publication edited by Sophy Rickett
Publication design by Ben Cave

British Library cataloguing-in-publication data.
A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-9575086-8-2

Published by Studio At The Elephant.

ual: london college of communication

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Supported using public funding by
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In spring 2013, the London Borough of Southwark's Cuming Museum Collection was displaced by a fire which damaged the building in which it was housed. Since then, the collection, which includes art, sculpture, ethnography, natural history and objects reflecting the lives of ordinary residents of Southwark has been finding new ways of engaging audiences in its work.

For the *Elephant Atlas* project, fifteen artists and writers were commissioned to produce a work draws inspiration from this unique context. Working across photography, illustration, installation, artist film, creative writing and participatory practice, they have explored many diverse ideas, including the legacy of colonialism in contemporary society, the notion of how an original trauma or loss might stimulate new forms of growth, the pathology of collecting and the rich diversity of oral histories.

At this moment in its continuing history, *Elephant Atlas* explores some of the questions that the Cuming Museum Collection presents to its local community. More broadly, it begins to consider how museums might find alternative innovative strategies for making their collections available to the public in the current political and economic climate, physically, as well as an online.

The Cuming Museum Collection is a repository for the histories of a community; a way to imagine and re-imagine the lives that were lived here before, their politics, preoccupations, beliefs, ways of life. *Elephant Atlas* celebrates and explores it, and its current condition in all its delightful, yet challenging diversity.