

## Part IV Response

# Letting people in, letting objects out: countering the dislocations of collections management practice

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### Introduction

In exploring the notion of the publics of collections management, the professional language of the day requires us to consider impact and engagement, inclusion, audiences, access and outreach. But how can these ideas be made explicit and fully embedded when considering the practices of conservation and preservation, storage, documentation and digitisation? Are carefully mediated handling sessions enough and do they compromise both public engagement and the collection objects? How do we balance care of and risk to purportedly fragile artefacts against the human need for connection and contact with objects of cultural significance? What barriers does collections care uphold, inadvertently or otherwise? These four chapters and the projects they describe go a considerable way towards interleaving understanding of human-centred approaches more usually associated with the public-facing display and learning elements of museum work, with the practices of collections management.

As a former collections and documentation manager, the detailing of the myriad tasks that the organisation and care of artefacts requires is both familiar and heartening to see set out in these chapters. There is real labour, careful consideration and thought in this work. But the resource limitations of space, time and staff, of conflicting priorities within institutions with budgetary concerns and differing agendas described, are also dispiritingly recognisable. More compelling are the accounts of the impact that adjustments to collections management practice can

have on the relationships between people and things, and the recasting of collections management as an area where contact with publics can and must be renegotiated.

These essays are an important extension of the recurrent moves towards more equitable and ethical museum practice. They expose the tensions that operate within museums, where traditional notions of preservation have been allowed to perpetuate controls around access and ownership.

In the first chapter, Cindy Zalm's welcome account of the work taken forward from the much-lauded *Words Matter* project (2018), *Words Matter: Decolonizing the Registration and Documentation of the Dutch Ethnographic Collection*, we gain an insight into how the initiatives to address racist and colonial language have been extended and continued into various aspects of collections management in the National Museum of World Cultures, a consortium of four museums in the Netherlands.

Zalm charts the trajectories of these Dutch ethnographic museum collections, from early establishment, through more recent bureaucratic, politic reorganisation, to the current fundamental reassessment of how museums created by and in the service of empire and colonisation should be engaged with today. In giving a detailed account of each of the museums' histories and ambitions over time, she not only expands understanding of the contexts of the *Words Matter* project and the urgent need for the work it proposes but shows how Dutch colonialism and museums are intertwined in an undeniable, ongoing and explicit relationship.

This exploration of and accounting for a museum's institutional history is crucial, though often overlooked, in unpicking why a collection is as it is. Engaging with the changes in priorities, purpose and collecting focus during a museum's history helps to deconstruct public perception of the immutable monolith of the museum as institution. Destabilising the idea that things have always been done this way, that traditions of collections practice may evolve, but only as far as they maintain a highly controlled access route for the museums' publics, require challenge and critique. Zalm's account explores the moves within the NL museum sector to reflect on the legitimacy of ethnographic museums and the projects initiated to make change. The best known, internationally, of these projects is *Words Matter*, which came out of the work of Hodan Warsame and Ilias Zian at Museum Volkenkunde and addressed colonial language in descriptive and interpretative display texts. The publication that resulted from the project has been a benchmark for addressing the issues of interpretation texts and object description.

Zalm uses this combination of institutional histories and the problematisation of language to draw a line between colonisation, museum documentation and the collections database. In detailing the process around the recording of information within the museum and the various recordings of information from card index to database to online catalogue, she shows how the language of colonial capture (both literally and in terms of information) is repeated and embedded in institutional practices of collections management, and via the Internet, subsequently exposed, established and repeated to the public.

In the second chapter, *Rebuilding Collection Infrastructure: Thinking Beyond Best Practice Collection Care*, Alice Beale describes her experiences at the South Australian Museum and addresses the barriers that face communities of origin, in this case Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other First Nations peoples, when their own cultural heritage must be accessed via the museum. She describes how the prioritisation of economy of cost and space, the practical expediency of both physical storage and the implementation of material or geographical categorisation can undercut the personal, religious or cultural significance of the artefacts.

The essay highlights how stored collections, like museums themselves, are not neutral, safe or without power dynamics as a space of encounter. As Beale observes, the physical safety of the collections has often been prioritised over a cross-culturally, informed response of a wide range of potential publics. How then do we shift from a preservation mindset to one of meaningful encounter that respects the agency of the artefacts and their significance? Beale continues to extend notions of cultural awareness and reparation to the practicalities of achieving 'safe and culturally appropriate access' as she explores storage methods and housing as a barrier to engagement for those people with pivotal historical and current connection with them. However, practitioners need to consider what constitutes appropriate access, and who and how the decisions around this are made.

This chapter addresses both the impetus to provide as much access as possible to a collection's publics, and especially to specific communities of origin, and the predictable institutional resource limitations needed to make this happen. It is a very recognisable quandary. Beale details the barriers that pragmatic divisions and organisation by material and environmental needs throw up, and further the dislocation and decontextualisation that occurs for those whose material culture and heritage is contained and classified through scientific method and conservation priority. How do we now balance a more human-centred

approach to access and collections that requires contact, use, values, respect and presentation that may directly conflict with the scientific precepts of preservation and risk, and the practicalities of space and cost limitations? Beale observes how display and digital presentation are routinely presented as solutions to this issue, but these methods are already highly selective, mitigated by a set of criteria that are based on western concepts of worth and significance and further moderated through the interpretative agenda of the museum as institution. Beale's observations on the patterns of academic research enquiry and changes towards more community requests are also worth considering. Are they the result of more appropriate access provision within the organisation or is the provision changing to answer and respect this type of engagement?

Beale gives a meticulous account of the invisible labour and logistical complexities of dealing with a vast array of artefacts, and details coping with the impact of a variety of worrying environmental disasters on stored collections. But while the focus on access is woven through all decisions, resulting in a concerted effort to make a shift from physically to culturally safe access and what that might look like, further exploration of the process of decision-making and the positionality of staff involved in this process is needed. This type of co-working approach in collections care can only enrich mutual understanding and greater collaboration around collections work.

The enrichment of object information through genuine co-production and active challenges to collections gatekeeping is also addressed in Chapter 20, *Facilitating Community Access to African Collections: Developing Collaborative Practice to Unpack Museum Protocol and Terminologies* by Johanna Zetterström-Sharp, JC Niala, Juma Ondeng, Horniman Museum and Gardens. As with the first chapter in this part, the thinking behind the Horniman's projects starts with consideration of the language used in museum collections cataloguing and how this limits access and distorts understanding. The introduction contains a brief but invaluable framing and selection of recent literature on the specific intersection of museum object information, digital remediation and ethnographic museum collections.

Their discussion around the pros and cons of digitisation and digital access moves away from the polarities of the usual arguments of digital solutionism or digital limitations to an approach that recognises both, additionally incorporates user preferences and embraces varied routes into the collections and diverse ways of thinking about the collections. The inadequacies of much collection information, despite a generation of work digitising objects to facilitate access, is highlighted across all these

chapters and the Horniman team explore in detail the harms it causes. Absent, incomplete and incorrect information (especially the misuse of names, places, peoples and things) is repeatedly, and rightly, identified as a barrier to access, but the work at the Horniman attempts to address the specific issues this causes for communities of origin, (here researchers and community groups from Nigeria and Kenya) not least the devaluing and disregard it implies by the holding institution.

This, as their discussion carefully details, is especially true for diverse publics who have been made to feel uncomfortable when attempting to navigate the archaic vagaries of museum and archival conventions. But rather than problematising the existing colonialist tropes and racist pejoratives pervasive in Western systems of classification and descriptive texts, the Horniman team look towards accurately using the source or local language, when naming or describing art and artefacts and the direct affect this has on understanding, retrieval and connection.

This concern that there are publics ‘who may not feel that museums are spaces for them, but for whom the collections are personally significant’ (p. 386) is also articulated by Alice Beale in the previous chapter. It may seem counterintuitive that collections care is a space in which this can and should be addressed, but as we see in the South Australia Museum and at the Horniman, a concerted response to less mitigated and museum-directed access is becoming increasingly recognised and enacted as key to understanding and facilitating public engagement.

In the last chapter of this part, *Who Cares: Caring for Art and Artefacts in the Public Realm, Ethical Considerations*, Susan L. Maltby describes an ostensibly different type of encounter between objects and their publics, and looks at what happens in collections care when the object is placed in an environment beyond the control of the museum. Maltby exposes the complexities of the practical conservation of large-scale sculpture and monuments in the public realm, without the protections of a managed space and controlled environment. She describes the real and destructive impact that unmediated physical encounters between unmanaged publics, uncontrolled environments and objects in the space of the public realm can have.

This essay is perhaps a pragmatic counter to the impetus to allow greater, potentially more risky access to the art and artefacts of cultural heritage, but the key element is the articulation of how we need to navigate this conflict of interest around ownership, preservation in the public realm, interaction with the built environment: is it vandalism or extreme engagement? Whose good is preservation for?

## Conclusion

One of the persistent themes which runs through these four chapters is one of dislocation and disconnection: artworks and artefacts separated from people and places, their meaning recontextualised and their value reconstituted within the museum setting or on contact with their potential publics. This separation can be physical, metaphorical, linguistic, organisational or spiritual, and as demonstrated in these perceptive accounts of past and present practice, is hard-wired into the traditional methods and structures of collections management.

In museum collections care, decay and deterioration are inevitable and constant, organisation of space and storage has been ostensibly practical not performative, documentation was about keeping order and digitisation is essentially image capture. These are all just issues of housekeeping surely, but as evidenced in these essays these behind-the-scenes decisions have a significant impact on the potential publics of the museum. The accounts of work recognising and grappling with these impacts as presented in this part crucially map the complicated path from the supposedly neutral practicalities of collections management to the highly determined, dominant ontologies of the museum collection presented to its audiences as definitive cultural knowledge.

Each of these chapters evidences the barriers that well-meant, but resource limited 'best practice' creates, be it the physical distance of storage facilities or the imposition of culturally inappropriate systems of categorisation. This seems counter-intuitive when surely at worst collections management is simply keeping things with a semblance of order, and at best its purpose is to preserve material culture in a notional perpetuity, and thus ensure access to now and future audiences. Yet the concern of the work described in these case studies is to acknowledge and account for these disconnects, and to remake the lost or broken relationships between people and things by exploring and reflecting on the effect that collections care and management practices have on the professional treatment and perception of objects, and by extension the treatment of the humans who relate to them.