

# EXTREME COLLECTING

## Dealing with Difficult Objects



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Sally Price's lecture 'Silences in the Museum', presented at the 2008 William Fagg lecture at the British Museum, raised the issue of the muted voices of objects in ethnographic displays that had been stripped of their right to express their difficult histories. Drawing on her recent work *Paris Primitive* (Price, 2007) – an account of the formation of Chirac's Musée du Quai Branly – she narrates how anthropologists presided over representations of objects in contestation with art dealers in terms of whether to portray ethnographic context or aesthetic judgements. Price goes on to suggest that museums can erase the question of the historicity of collections and past collecting practices by becoming closed shops or walled institutions, brushing aside the opportunity for the museum to act as a space for cultural dialogue. The result, Price says, is that Chirac's new museum dream presents visitors with little knowledge about how collections come to be, or are imagined to be, due to political sensitivities.

The reason why I begin this introductory chapter with Sally Price's 'behind the scenes' exploration of the Quai Branly is because her work underlines how collecting truths are often masked in museum institutions. Her ethnography reveals the concerns echoed throughout this book and others (e.g. Vergo, 1989; Phillips, 2005) of the need to generate a critical museology, an engaged and informed dialogue reflecting on the process of collecting: the objects selected, how they are imagined and what they are intended to be. Such an approach emphasises not only how the act of collecting shapes cultural and historical representations to the museum public as well as forging a material archive for future generations to look back at, but the act of collecting is also a selective process which is as much about those objects brought forward as it is about those that are rejected.

This volume – *Extreme Collecting* – seeks to combine both theoretical approaches to collecting alongside practical ones from the standpoint of

those who deal with collections, in order to provide a series of fine-grained examinations of collecting practices that lie outside what is normally considered acceptable or mainstream museum practice. The impetus behind this project is to engage with two critical points that emerge from Sally Price's work. The first is that Price's work reveals the way the Musée du Quai Branly, like other museums, normalises collecting. From the birth of the public museum to the mega-museums of today, museums collect, store and display objects as a naturalised process. The amassing of encyclopaedic collections in colonial museums aimed to represent the world in totality – a material archive of a people's material culture. Such an idea has many associations with scientific ambition and with totalising aspirations on the part of Western scholarly disciplines. The cultures of collecting, then, may appear inherently difficult for museums to broach today, especially so for ethnographic objects.

A significant and expanding body of literature has delved into the cultures of collecting. Many focus on the history of European collecting, from the formation of the great Italian private collections, the *Wunderkammer*, and to the establishment of colonial museums (e.g. Elsner and Cardinal, 1994; Pearce, 1995; Pomian, 1990, to name just a few). While collecting histories have received most attention, the issue of contemporary collecting has received only some consideration, such as Knell's analysis of the future of museum collecting (Knell, 2004); public collecting such as record collecting (Shuker, 2010); or Altshuler's volume on collecting contemporary art (Altshuler, 2007). Other approaches examine collecting as a process, particularly towards exhibition or in the context of the art market. For example, O'Hanlon (1993) documents the kind of decisions and dilemmas he faced in the collecting of Wahgi shields for an exhibition on the New Guinea Highlands in the Museum of Mankind, London. Steiner (1995) reveals how collectors of African art face manipulation by middlemen who traffic artworks between West African makers and rich North American buyers. His ethnography reveals the different processes involved: hiding the provenance of many objects to play on Western preoccupations of authenticity; ageing the surfaces through chemical intervention; and presenting objects in ways to fool the collector into making a 'discovery'. Other relevant perspectives focus on the psychology of collecting. Baudrillard (1994) sees the activity of collecting as world-making, the collector as god-like, imposing an imaginary order on systems of objects, a process which itself is bound up with notions of nostalgia, neurosis and completeness. Similarly, Muensterberger (1994) sees collecting as an uncontrolled desire, an emotional hunger in the pursuit of objects. While psychological approaches dwell on the individual collector, emphasising how the activity of collecting is risky, time-consuming and compulsive, a small body of work engages with marginalised objects or 'offbeat' collections. For example, Nicholson (2006) examines the activities of sex collectors, individuals who collect erotica, pornography and suchlike, while Rubin examines America's offbeat museums, including

Mr Ed's Elephant Museum and the Museum of Questionable Medical Devices (Rubin, 2002). Martin (1999) argues, in his analysis of popular collection in the UK, that collecting by private individuals reveals changing moral and economic conditions that museum institutions ought to take note of. All of these studies highlight how the collecting passions of individuals often lie outside the area of mainstream collecting, especially of those of established museums.

The question of what the 'mainstream' constitutes leads on to the second point that this book attempts to engage with: that is, the constitution of the silences within the museum that Sally Price discerns. For Price, the silences are analogous to musical interludes – the in-between-ness that marks out the beats of jazz music – the negative space that imbues the composition with substance. The absent spaces of contextual information accompanying the displays inside the Quai Branly leave a trail of empty utterances in place of the difficult histories of nineteenth-century collecting. While one could argue that museum silences may be the answer to dogmatic museology that eventually excludes alternative voices and narratives, it also raises the question whether this composition is simply of narrative form.

One way to address this is to return to the collecting endeavours within Western museums: those that have thrived on collecting practices that perpetuate the encyclopaedic. Museums hold universal collections of material from across the world and from all periods of human culture and history. This encyclopaedic representation of the world through objects thrived on objects that could be seen, brought forward and retrieved through European collectors' networks. Gosden and Larson's book *Knowing things* (2007) – a history of the network of objects and collectors at the Pitt Rivers – typifies how collections were built up competitively around shared categories of objects and notions of completeness through interactions between curators and collectors who dispersed similar types of objects amongst different museums. This leads, as Brian Hayton says, to more of the same, an outcome of what he calls 'safe collecting' in which the same archetypal corpus of objects is represented in different museum collections (Hayton, 2007).

Hayton's comments come at a time of crisis within UK museums about questions of what to collect and, controversially, what to dispose of. Two recent reports, *Collections for the Future* published by the Museum Association (2005) and the Art Fund's (2006) *The Collecting Challenge*, stress the need for museums to actively develop their collections with a renewed commitment to acquisition and disposal. The reports found that many museums do not have access to the curatorial expertise they need to develop their collections and that there is a general lack of support for active collecting. While both reports advocate for continued active collecting, neither points towards the type of collections that museums ought to be acquiring. This obviously raises the question as to whether museums should collect more of the same, given their commitment to sustain the continuum of collection up to the present day and into the future, or collect outside

of their historical focus, beyond the mainstream, perhaps leaving behind notions of safe collecting, if this is possible at all.

It was the desire to debate such questions that led my colleagues Jonathan King and Robert Storrie at the British Museum to meet with me, in 2007, for a discussion of how to open up a new dialogue on collecting that would challenge mainstream notions of museum collecting. Our response was ‘extreme collecting’ – a term used to denote those difficult objects that lie at the fringes of what is normally considered acceptable practice in museums. Funded under the auspices of the AHRC Research Workshops (Museums & Galleries) Scheme, we organised four monthly workshops at the British Museum from December 2007 to March 2008, debating those objects that resist being collected for reasons of their size, scale, materiality, ordinariness, mass production, or for their political, legal or ethical nature. The workshop series thus aimed to facilitate a critique towards the rigidity of museums in maintaining essentially nineteenth-century ideas to collecting and to move towards identifying priorities for collection policies in UK museums which are inclusive of acquiring ‘difficult’ objects. Effectively, the workshops delivered the first ever series of public debates around objects that are rarely collected by institutions and of which little is understood about policy and practice in the public domain. In doing so, this volume comprises mainly papers presented at the British Museum (with the exceptions of McEnroe, Tubb, and Geisbusch) and offers an insight into some of the key debates about extreme collecting as a way of thinking through the weighty silences in museums.

## Difficult objects

Some of the key debates generated throughout the Extreme Collecting series revolved around the notion of difficult objects in museum collections: what these objects constituted, how to deal with them, and what could or could not be understood as ‘extreme’ in the context of collecting. Stephen Quirke, curator of UCL’s Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, explained how he saw Petrie’s own collection entirely in terms of their ethical difficulty. This had come to the fore more than ever after he designed a new exhibition space for the planned relocation of the existing museum to a new site in UCL’s proposed Institute of Cultural Heritage (now defunct). Petrie’s fieldwork was seen as heroic in the early days of archaeology even though it was carried out in the shadow of British military occupation in the nineteenth century (Quirke, 2007). While his collecting was not a politically neutral activity, Quirke adds that current narratives about Petrie leave out the people and the nationalist discourse current at the time, thus highlighting Price’s silences in the museum.

Difficult objects not only relate to war, violence and colonial practice, but also include those that pose legal or ethical challenges. The collecting of illegally imported animal products through customs seizure is a good example

of extreme collecting. Endangered species may be offered to natural history museums to fill gaps in collections or used in permanent displays (see Sewell, 1997). Thus, while natural history museums may actively campaign against the trade in rare or exotic animals, their collections may benefit from illicit activities as a consequence. Similarly, Steven Rubenstein takes up the issue of collecting human remains, concentrating on ethical debates about their display in Western museums and their reception by a socially mobile source community (Rubenstein, 2004, 2008). Examining a collecting of shrunken heads and contrasting approaches to their display, he alternates between a museum/Western perspective and the perspective of the descendants of the community that claims the heads as trophies. His work reveals how shrunken heads (*tsantzas*) were originally valued by the Shuar owners as war trophies in the Ecuadorian Amazon. But they were desired in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by visiting whites as ‘another precious commodity’ from the Amazon and eventually by museums as material evidence of Shuar culture. Rubenstein explores the difficulties that surround this particular class of human remains through his investigation of what the heads meant to the various parties who came to possess them. Rubenstein’s work reveals how listening to different communities reveals often opposing views on the ethical and political dilemmas around ‘difficult’ objects. Difficult questions about human remains, colonial science and display are addressed explicitly by several contributors in this volume.

### **Matter and substance of collecting**

If extreme collecting concentrates on difficult material, then it is also concerned with the difficulties that may arise in the very substance of the material collected and the mechanisms for dealing with this. Such forms of collecting include those contemporary art installations that dwell on the gigantic or merge with the museum space (such as Doris Salcedo’s *Shibboleth* exhibited in the Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern in 2007/08), making them near impossible to collect. While museums and galleries are responding to site-specific installations by drawing up service contracts between artists and curators to oversee the (re)installation of key artworks (Altshuler, 2007), little debate seems to address the extreme nature of objects that literally self-destruct or become embedded in the fabric of the exhibition space.

The often fragile nature of many objects means that they are not sustainable, such as foodstuffs, featherwork and even plastics. An extreme case of collecting and object destruction is the wonderful collection of contemporary food packaging and promotion by Robert Opie, avid collector and director of his own museum – the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising – in west London, which he established in 1984. Opie has been collecting for the past forty years. He talks about the importance of saving the everyday things of society: ‘It is often the ordinary items of daily life that typify a culture and lifestyle, more than any extraordinary thing can ever do’

(Opie, 2008). What is telling is Opie's story of his collection of Heinz baked bean cans, a material history of iconic food packaging design over fifty years or so, and how the existence of his collection is now under threat from changing materialities due to environmental regulations. Whereas older food packaging is designed to last, contemporary aluminium cans begin to self-destruct after two years; the contents oozing through the packaging as the metal rapidly decays. This points to how the ephemeral and unstable nature of many contemporary materials leave silences in the museum, unable to speak due to their inevitable self-destruction.

### **The mundane, the ordinary and the public**

For curators and collectors, the extreme may involve a fervent desire to amass large quantities of similar objects, a practice which may be tied into notions of completeness (e.g. Baudrillard, 1994). But the mass-produced, mundane, everyday and ordinary are a class of objects which connoisseurs and museum curators tend to avoid. In anthropology, much attention has focused on cultural readings of tourist art and the souvenir (e.g. Steiner, 1994; Phillips and Steiner, 1999) through the lens of authenticity. Extreme collecting intends to engage with debates about collecting large quantities of ordinary objects and to consider the implications of this as a material archive for future generations. Jack Lohman (2008) tackles this in the context of the collections at the Museum of London when he explores the mundane-ness of much of the material under his care. Yet he also points out that while this is largely true, much of the material was of a personal and affective nature, such as collections relating to the London Docklands area. The 1980s closure of the docks led to the collection of 50,000 items of port heritage, including thousands of hours of oral history. The pressure of managing such collections of extreme physical scale (both large and small, such as river barges and pieces of rope) forced the museum into initiating a rationalisation project for defining criteria of disposal.

Anouska Komlosy (2008) stresses how important it is to collect the everyday. Like Lohman, who deals with masses of objects, Komlosy asks: what can collections of such material teach us and how should such material be collected? Drawing on her own experience of collecting for the British Museum, her answers lie in the analysis of a simple outfit, now a 'collection', that once belonged to a Tai female elder in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan. Understood within its ethnographic context, she argues how this small collection could tell us about Tai cosmological understandings, perceptions of gender and ethnicity, and about everyday economic transactions and societal change. Such collections, she says, provide a site of dialogue between source communities and those who want to understand those communities and encourage others to learn about them. In the stories they can tell they open a window through which to approach other ways of being and be

inspired by them. Thus, the collecting of the ordinary and the mundane raises questions of a biographical nature, a focused approach to collecting serves as a mirror to represent society at large or those, such as the people of the London Docklands, who are marginalised.

The collecting of the mundane, ordinary or mass-produced is especially interesting given the heightened mobility of objects and collectors. In particular, the dynamics of globally networked collectors connected through new technologies such as the Internet opens up extreme collecting practices in order to acquire objects distributed in different locations. Such technologies open up new possibilities for collecting, storing and display while destabilising our traditional understandings of the collected object. For example, French theorist André Gunthert explores the public photo sharing website Flickr and uses this to consider the relation between archive and collection. Flickr is extreme in the sense that thousands, if not millions of images can be uploaded onto the site and viewed by anyone. Gunthert suggests that two important points emerge in considering Flickr as an archive: firstly, the ephemeral nature of images, as photos can be changed and removed at any time; and secondly, the possibilities of searching for an image. He argues that it becomes problematic to consider Flickr as an archive in its traditional form because of its instability. What becomes apparent is that while such a system of archiving highlights the process of socialising images through tagging as well as the mapping of images through geo-tagging, these digital technologies allow for the materialisation of new forms of personhood as users' images compete for unique tags in order to earn 'fame' on the worldwide web. Tagging not only attracts visitors to your photo site, but quality and content of your photographic images are like a hook (much in the same way as Gell's (1996) hunting nets), guaranteeing sustained visitor numbers. Gunthert gives the example of the English photographer Miss Aniela whose archived images on Flickr led to her emergence into the mainstream through her online discovery and subsequent gallery exhibition in 2007. Here, the collection takes material form through access and retrieval from the digital archive.

If public collecting of the everyday and mass-produced raises issues of scale and management as André Gunthert says, then it also raises important legal issues. Andrew Burnett, Keeper of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, addresses this through collections of last resort (Burnett, 2007). In drawing out the collecting history of coins and medals – of which the British Museum holds more than one million – he spells out how widespread public participation in collecting has led to the uncovering of a great amount of information about Britain that otherwise would be lost. His concern is to focus on the emergence of a dialogue between museums and users of metal detectors in the 1990s as a form of extreme collecting, which up until then had not existed. As a result, the British Museum now acquires from collectors who used their metal detectors to search at archaeological sites, paying compensation for archaeological material located in the UK. This

form of collecting is outlined in the British Museum acquisition policy:

There may be occasions when acquisition outside of the application of this policy is considered, as for example could occur if cultural or archaeological objects were otherwise under threat of destruction. The Museum may sometimes also act as a repository of last resort for antiquities, especially when it may reliably be inferred that the object(s) concerned originated within the United Kingdom, and where such payment as may be made to acquire the object(s) is not likely to encourage illicit excavation. (British Museum policy on acquisitions, approved 24 April 2007)

While this case may have positive results for the unearthing of knowledge of our past, for Burnett, collections of last resort are an extreme form of collecting that undoubtedly raises ethical questions about the role of museums in engaging with public collectors and the market at the fringes of what is normally considered acceptable.

### **Collecting from the perspective of indigenous people**

While much literature focuses on collecting from the perspective of Westerners, how do national museums and cultural centres outside the advantaged world of the West view collecting? There, institutions are under constant pressure to improve capacity and develop skills, often primarily for purposes of tourism. The preservation of archaeology and the past, and of natural history often takes precedence in this process. This may mean that systematic collecting of contemporary heritage, of the extraordinary as well as ordinary, is a low priority. Rich museums in the advantaged world may therefore continue to be the primary place of deposit for collections of ethnography and material culture from, for instance, Africa and Melanesia. But how do museums in these areas regard Western collections of their contemporary heritage? How can Western museums best serve source communities for a time beyond the twenty-first century?

Salome Samou – a museum and cultural heritage expert from the Solomon Islands – describes how people have been engaging in extreme forms of removing cultural artefacts and heritage from the Pacific nation and taking it to outside buyers. There is an economic rationale: due to poverty and people's need for money and basic necessities, collecting is about what can be brought forward in certain contexts. Forms of collecting such as this – no matter how illicit they are – have led to the florescence of new markets in fake cultural artefacts, which are sold in craft shops in the nation's capital Honiara. In this sense, the trading and selling of heirlooms, war relics and cultural treasures has led to the emergence of a public sense of their value and a flourishing new market economy in tourist art and authenticity.

Similarly, Ghanaian archaeologist Kodzo Gavua explains how collecting in Africa has been dominated by Europeans over the years. Due in part to economic factors, and to the absence of concise collecting policies and plans, he explains how collecting is generally not normal business for museums

in Africa. Rarely do private collectors donate their collections to African museums, nor do they establish private museums on the continent. Critical of the African art market for its reliance on authenticity and value, Gavua advocates that collecting in Africa must be guided by a new way of seeing; a new collecting paradigm that can guide the collecting and preservation or display of objects, which would inform and excite the public about positive aspects of the lives of Africans beyond the continent's 'mysterious' past. A new collecting philosophy would thus be necessary, he suggests, as the way of seeing that has influenced much collecting in Africa is no longer tenable in a world of increasing interaction between peoples of different geographical, social and cultural background.

### **Book structure**

The contributions in this book are divided into three sections. The first section deals with difficult objects, those often recognised by museums that pose particular ethical problems due to associations with past events such as genocide, war, violence or death. Suzanne Bardgett focuses on the process of collecting for the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum that was created between 1996 and 2000. She describes how one of the biggest challenges facing the curatorial team was to amass sufficient original historical material to fill the showcases, given that a process of mass annihilation necessarily leaves little evidence behind. Her chapter examines how the Holocaust Exhibition Project Office set about finding such material, the kind of material acquired, how the related stories were gathered, and how relationships continue to be sustained today.

Two chapters deal with the sensitive and emotive issue of human remains in museum collections. Stephen Quirke begins his chapter with the revelation by the archaeologist Petrie of the uncovering at an archaeological site of a human arm adorned with jewellery. Dwelling on the act of separating the arm and jewellery into their separate collections, Quirke uses this to comment on how one not just encounters acts of violence in the process of collecting, but also how the 'anaesthetic of analysis' is equally violent. He goes on to focus on the collections of the Petrie Museum and a range of ethical issues relating to human remains, colonial history and archives which he considers difficult. Jack Lohman's chapter, like Quirke's, deals with the issue of human remains in museum collections. While Quirke weighs up the justification for the display of ancient Egyptian human remains in the Petrie Museum, Lohman tackles the debates for and against repatriation of human remains in the United Kingdom. In recognising how current debates either support the scientific argument for the retention of remains or the religious and moral grounds for their return, he puts forward an alternative view modelled on the notion of healing in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. In conceding that we may not be able to return collections of human remains, he instead argues that

through reconciliation and debate we may eventually accept the truth that there exists more than one [Western] worldview.

This notion of restorative justice is taken up indirectly in Kathryn Walker Tubb's chapter on the collecting of illicit antiquities by museums. Examining the thriving trade in illicit antiquities, she begins by stating that unless an artefact is uniquely identifiable, then recovery is extremely unlikely. Her paper focuses on a series of case studies in regions experiencing war, civil unrest and natural disaster, and exposes the legal contestations and claims to cultural property that has been illicitly acquired from Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq. While accepting that finds looted from archaeological sites are virtually untraceable and litigation extremely expensive, she hopes that museums can educate people into the harmful effects of the public's casual acceptance of the market in antiquities.

The final chapter in this section deals with eugenics material at University College London. Natasha McEnroe engages with a set of objects that have remained forgotten by the institution but now find themselves facing a fresh lease of life through the process of exhibition. Focusing on the collection of the UCL eugenicist Sir Francis Galton, she discusses how the collection is about legacies: of past collecting practices, of extreme views about race and civilisation, and of an institutional history that many want to forget. The controversial nature of this collection has implications for its curation today no more so than in the handling of the Galton archive and the protection of personal data. McEnroe states that the key issues are data protection and privacy: legally, museums and libraries may be permitted to place private information about nineteenth-century individuals in the public domain, but there are important ethical implications for doing so as it may cause distress to living descendants whose ancestors Galton documented in terms of their criminal habits and mental health.

The second section of this volume comprises a series of contributions examining the collecting of ordinary, mundane or mass-produced objects. This is addressed with the knowledge that the size of many museum collections today now means that many objects will never be displayed. Instead, collections – for instance of archaeology – act as a future resource, a database never intended for exhibition. This is highly problematic for many museum professionals, but, conversely, any reluctance to collect also conflicts with the sense that museums have a duty to preserve material for future generations. The question is: if museums are to adopt a more strategic approach to collecting for the future, how best are they to develop collections of the everyday and record the mundane without turning museums into unmanageable time capsules?

This issue seems even more critical today with widespread public participation in collecting. In an attempt to identify everyday collectors and to learn about what they are collecting and their collecting practices, Susan Pearce addresses public collecting in the United Kingdom. Tea towels, wrapping paper and other everyday 'junk' may be considered boring or

trivial, and yet, she argues, it may have historical interest several decades from now. Drawing on Giddens' notion of ontological security, she argues that people very much see their life in their collections. Affective collections thus give people the confidence to 'go on being who they are', but inevitably pose problems for the curator to deal with, echoing Lohman's earlier sentiments about the Docklands collection at the Museum of London.

The mobility of objects together with increasing access through the Internet poses particular problems not only over what to collect, but also how to organise such collections. These issues are addressed by the American anthropologist Richard Wilk – a collector of everyday Japanese eighteenth- to twentieth-century mass-produced prints known as *ukiyo-e*. He argues that collecting can be seen as a way in which people simultaneously organise the differences among things and the differences among people. Using the framework of 'common difference', he concentrates on the ways collectors focus attention on particular forms of difference, which are organised through classifying practices. In the process, other forms of difference are ignored, suppressed and unauthorised. Acts of collecting also organise people into communities with recognisable and domesticated differences. He therefore argues that there are two distinct levels of selection in collecting: the first, among the various varieties defined by recognised dimensions of difference, and the second, the authorisation of which differences are legitimate and recognisable. Wilk asserts that the explosion of collecting through computer-mediated communications such as eBay has expanded and enriched the former form of selection, but is transforming the latter, by creating competition for legitimising authority, opening up the possibilities for more 'extreme' kinds of competition among collectors. By making it possible for anything and everything to be collected, the Internet also undercuts previous forms of curatorial selection.

As a collector of *ukiyo-e* prints, Wilk describes how a new market exists in online trading, of which the largest is eBay. Collectors put their own *ukiyo-e* online for sale, resulting not just in the buying and selling of prints, but also in a new form of digital collecting, whereby communities of collectors trade and sell CD compilations of their collections of Japanese popular prints. These new digital economies have obvious implications for the way we collect in the future and for the status of the original print. The use of new technologies in collecting is dealt with in Geisbusch's chapter in which he describes how people collect sacred artefacts through online auctions such as eBay. Such sites radically open up new modes of supply and collecting, much to the alarm of the Catholic Church which is trying to regulate and disrupt this new form of trading.

While Geisbusch's chapter takes the collection of objects from the perspective of a non-collector and non-connoisseur, Lidchi's chapter is a highly personal account of collecting jewellery from the American Southwest for the British Museum. Her chapter draws out the multitude of considerations that arise when collecting is undertaken in an environment

determined by the vigour and dynamism of the art market and a flourishing tourist trade. Bringing in different advocates and experts to view some turquoise jewellery, she describes some of the difficult decisions curators must engage with in the collecting process, especially when purchasing material from a pawnshop.

The third section of the volume focuses on 'extreme matters' and deals with issues of scale: time, size and space. The chapters address the collecting of oversized objects, objects that are prone to decay, especially those that are not normally collected, as well as those that challenge the physical space of the museum itself. This section begins with the collections of the Imperial War Museum which houses many large objects and also many items of an ephemeral or potentially ephemeral nature. Cornish presents a compelling account of the problems of acquiring and displaying such objects from the moment of the Museum's inception in 1917, and illustrates how extreme objects (size) relate to extreme events (warfare and mass destruction). He shows how the new institution's 'mission statement' ensured that those responsible for collecting could not disregard ephemeral items which were redolent of the experience of servicemen or war workers. Likewise they could not ignore the military technology of the war.

Susan Lambert demonstrates how twentieth-century collections of plastics pose extreme museological issues: are museums and plastics a contradiction in terms, the one to do with the old, the rare, the precious and the permanent, and the other with the new, the ubiquitous, the cheap and the ephemeral? She explores some of the reasons why museums like the Victoria & Albert Museum may have been slow to acquire plastics, and why, nowadays, museums, whatever their subject area, should and in fact cannot help but collect them. Her chapter examines the aspirations of the Museum of Design in Plastics within a wider framework of collecting, and discusses documentation in relation to the mass-produced and ephemeral, and within this context questions the object's primacy and the value traditionally attached to 'good condition'. Such issues of condition are germane to conservators of plastics as, like Opie's baked bean cans, museum curators are fully aware of the unstable nature of plastic objects in collections.

Brian Durrans takes up the collecting of the everyday by approaching the issue of time capsules. Speaking of the present to the future and of the imagined future to the present, he says that time capsules confront, tackle and alternatively embrace or evade the everyday. Time capsules are simultaneously expressive and instrumental, clichéd yet obscure, warmly domestic or coldly official, the business of committees and of eccentrics, homely or conniving, known to all, understood by none. Durrans reviews the field from the perspective of what these diverse endeavours make of the everyday in the conventional sense of normally overlooked experience, in terms of what one collects to put inside a time capsule that will ultimately be unearthed in the future as a representation of the past.

The volume ends with an interview – conducted by J. C. H. King – with the extreme collector Robert Opie. The interview reveals how Opie collects, stores and sustains his collections of contemporary and historic advertising, as well as food packaging in a museum in London.

## The extreme

The collection of papers in this volume clearly points towards the extreme as it is slowly finding its place within mainstream museological discourse. For the art historian Rosalind Krauss, the extreme is not about physical objects and their collection, but the physical space of the museum and its relation to artworks on display. She argues that the late capitalist museum is characterised as a movement from diachronic to synchronic representations – from encyclopaedic to intensity, forged through the new emphasis placed on the museum space (Krauss, 1990). The museum is thus an extreme experience, in which the fabric of the museum intertwines with the substance of the objects on display.

This is an important argument taken up by Ruth Phillips (2005) when she points out how grand new museum projects may be ‘primarily spectacles of architectural virtuosity’. But we must not let architectural spaces and aesthetics overshadow the difficult issues that objects carry. The debates emerging from this book suggest a move by museums towards incorporating difficult subjects into practice and policy, yet much more needs debating. We still know little about how objects at the fringes of acceptable collecting practice reconfigure cultural representations, generate multiplicities of meanings and value as well as put down new challenges to expertise, authority and collaboration. As we move into the ‘second age’ of museums, any added impetus behind transforming the museum space into a political space offers a fresh opportunity for museums to examine their own epistemological, historical and material structures. In an age of new technologies, new materialities and a changing language of political and ethical sensibilities, integrating the ‘extreme’ into practice and policy may well help us address the gravity of the silences in the museum.

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