What not to collect?

Post-connoisseurial dystopia and the profusion of things

Sharon Macdonald, Jennie Morgan

Imagine a museum storeroom lined with shelves and racks. These are filled with boxes and objects, labelled by number and name. On one shelf sit a dozen or so radios, mainly from the 1950s, hefty things with dials and wood veneer. On another are six seemingly identical stoneware bed-warmers from the early twentieth century. A tall shelving unit is packed with ceramics—teacups, bowls, jugs, plates—and other, unidentifiable things. A bedframe leans against one of the few bare areas of wall; a butter churn stands on the floor at the end of an aisle. In a corner, two tables and a desk with a computer are piled high with paperwork, ring binders, and yet more objects. A woman apologises when we enter: 'I'm so sorry about the state of this room. We're just in the process of trying to clear the mega-backlog. Not that I can claim this is new—to be honest, it's always like this!' She gestures us to sit down and tells us about what she describes as 'my big headache':

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> It's just so hard to know where to begin—and where to end. There's so much
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> that we *could* collect and that we *could* display, so many stories that we *could*

tell. Already, we have so much. Actually, we even have so much that we haven't fully catalogued or researched yet—our backlog is pretty scary, well, as you can see—those things on the tables over there waiting to be catalogued are just part of it. And don't even ask about digitisation. We are hardly alone in this. So many museums are in this position. Our storage is already filled to bursting point, so it is really hard to justify collecting more. But at the same time, we have a duty to future generations to actually try and show the way things are today. Are there ways of putting on the brakes and saying enough is enough? You want to know what we collect and why—and it's a good question. But to be quite honest, I think that sometimes it's more a matter of having to decide what not to collect—not that that makes it any easier.

The description and quotation above are fictional, in the sense that they are not literal descriptions or transcriptions (except in fragments) from a particular individual or any specific museum storeroom. They do, however, draw upon actual discussions that we have had, and speak in ways that we hope are truthful to the comments and feelings expressed by curators who we have met during our research fieldwork, and who we quote directly in the rest of this essay.[1]

That research field is museums, primarily those within the UK that have a remit to collect recent and/or contemporary everyday life. Our focus here is on what for many curators working in this context is a major challenge, and one that for some at least makes them feel that the role of curator has changed significantly from that of curators of a previous generation. The challenge is what to collect for the future, and how to cope with what has already been collected in the face of what is perceived as a proliferation of possibilities. While selecting what to preserve for the future can be

said to have been a central task of curators of previous generations too—some would say this is the central role of curatorship—this, according to many curators of the contemporary everyday, no longer works, and can no longer work, as it once did. Unravelling the reasons for this and its implications for the changing figure of the curator is the aim of our chapter.

At issue, we maintain, is not just a practical challenge of the number of things that can potentially be collected and kept for future generations (though that is not irrelevant). Rather, we argue, our curator's predicament is also a function of shifts in ways of understanding the curatorial role; material culture and its value; and the relationship between curators, other people and things. Although our curator, and many like her, may sometimes feel the situation in which she works to be somewhat dystopian, this does not mean that she is, and others are, without utopian hopes and ideals. Indeed, the sense of dystopia is in part at least a function of utopian striving, sometimes for goals that, if not conflicting, do not always mesh seamlessly.

Profusion: politics, economics, and (alternative) values

Our research is part of a larger project called *Heritage Futures*.[2] The theme on which we work is called 'Profusion'. It focuses on the apparent challenge of mass-production and mass-consumption for selecting what to keep for the future. How in the face of there being so many more things produced today—beginning with industrialisation and mass-production, especially since the mid-nineteenth century, and then accelerated by post-Fordist production since the 1970s—is it decided what will be kept for the future? As research field sites within which to look at this challenge we focus on a selection of household practices, and investigate museums

that have a remit to acquire from the present and recent past. It is on our museum study that we draw in this essay.

In setting up our research, we presumed that there is something specific and different about the challenge posed by so many things. Now, it might be contested that what makes it through one period of time to another has always entailed selection, some active, some accidental. There are always many more things that could have made it. While this is so, our reading of available scholarship suggests that there is something not just more acute but also more historically, culturally, and experientially specific about the contemporary situation.[3] This is not, however, simply a reflex of mass-production and mass-consumption themselves. That is, there is more causing the headache than an increase in the sheer number and range of available things. Part of our aim, therefore, is to delve further into what is involved in what Elizabeth Chin has referred to as 'the growing sense of too muchness';[4] and to highlight 'profusion' in ways that go beyond quantitative understandings.

Certainly, as curators of the contemporary everyday explained to us, their difficulties over what to collect are aggravated *both* by the quantity and the constant production of new things (models of mobile phones were an example we encountered several times), and also by a 'lack of time perspective' as one put it, from which one can look back and make judgments. Here, the question of what was sufficient a difference to warrant collecting something was often raised: 'Every new model of the iPhone?' As another pointed out, what also makes the task for the curator of the contemporary everyday particularly difficult is that the range of possible things to collect has not yet been 'thinned down by the teeth of time' or by what another referred to as 'time sift'. 'I have this slight fear', we were told, 'that sometimes people think that any contemporary collecting is a gamble … You know, has this been tested

by history and has it been found representative enough or vocal enough? Is it typical of its time?'[5]

Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that it is not only curators of the contemporary everyday who express concern about what to collect and who have mega-headaches over how much has already been collected and what to do with it. An international meeting of natural history museums in 1985, for example, described a dilemma of collections growing by about fifty million specimens per year.[6] This also serves to show that the perceived 'too-muchness problem' is not simply a reflex of mass consumption, although it may relate to it in more complex ways. What we see more widely, however, is a growing discourse within museums and museum organisations about questions of what to collect in the face of an apparent glut of choice, and about how to deal with expanding numbers of objects in sometimes already full storage spaces.

Quite when the idea that museums might have a profusion problem began to be articulated is something that we are still investigating and intend to write about elsewhere. Our reading of available literatures and conversations with museum professionals indicates that—within the UK, at least—the problem seems to have been discussed and debated with particular intensity in the last two decades of the twentieth-century.[7] In the UK, a 1989 report called *The Cost of Collecting*, commissioned by the Office of Arts and Libraries, was the source for the frequently quoted figure that eighty per cent of UK collections were in storage.[8] By 2003, the National Museums Directors' Conference could issue a report titled *Too Much Stuff?*[9] If that was not provocative enough, its subtitle, *Disposal from Museums,* referred to something that, as many curators have told us, was at that time 'something of a taboo' to even mention.

That there is an economic dimension to the sense of 'too-muchness' is undeniable. Looking at collections in terms of their 'cost', as the 1989 report, commissioned under the Thatcher government, was titled, was precisely the formulation that led to so much bandying about of the eighty per cent statistic (which later was revised upwards to ninety per cent). In theory, this statistic could have been used to praise the vast quantities of objects that museums care for—their extensive curatorial work behind the scenes. Instead, however, it has been almost invariably deployed in order to question the point of holding such collections. As the quote that opens *Too Much Stuff?* by David Rendel MP, put at the UK Government's Public Accounts Committee in 2001, shows, the implication of holding so much and not having it displayed was deemed to be a lack of proper public accountability: 'What percentage of the collection has not been on display during, say, the last ten years?'[10] Or similarly, as Jane Glaister, the Museums Association President from 2002-2004, stated in the *Collections for the Future* report: 'The cost of maintaining unused, stored collections must be taken into account and weighed against the benefits those 'assets' could realise for the museum and its users'.[11] The problem, she concluded, was clear: 'too much unused stuff, draining resources.'[12] Trying to quantify this 'drain' has occurred as cost analyses have been carried out, such as one UK museum service calculating that building additional storage space costs £1,000 per square meter.[13] Such neo-liberal framing, which emphasises 'accountability' in primarily auditable economic terms, and which continually seeks ways of 'making effective' and 'increasing profit' according to such terms, has certainly also shaped the sense that museums have a profusion problem. Austerity politics, with its prioritising of cutting costs above all else, of 'lean efficiency', has sharpened this further.[14]

As important as audit culture and austerity politics have been in playing into senses of 'too muchness', however, they are not their sole cause. Moreover, how to understand the 'value' of collections is neither fully predetermined nor settled even within a broadly neo-liberal framework. Over the last decade especially, considerable effort has been made by cultural institutions to emphasise the value of collections— and indeed of culture more generally—in ways that go beyond their public display and calculability in terms of visitor numbers. While these are almost always still framed within an overall discourse of 'benefit', the attempt has been to go beyond narrowly economistic notions of 'value', sometimes by drawing on ideas of different kinds of 'capital'.[15] What is going on here, we suggest, is as much about revising and even subverting neo-liberal models as implementing them. There is considerable evidence of attempts to recognise and give priority to some of the many things that are valued in museums in practice—which usually includes expanding collections of objects—rather than simply adopting what is being imposed by the audit-minded. Put otherwise, our curator's headache is not simply a result of having been told to collect less or dispose of much of what she already has, nor even by the fact that she does not have more colleagues to help her. Let us look here, then, at what else, from our fieldwork so far, seems to be involved, before then considering what the implications of this might mean for the utopian strivings of many curators of the contemporary everyday.

Collecting the everyday

Many curators stressed to us that they felt they were dealing with a problem 'that had built up over the years', or that was 'inherited', as they variously put it. It was a product of the way in which collecting had been carried out in the past. According to

one social history curator, this had been done in a 'rescue' mode, in which curators had worried that things were being lost—especially when, say, companies or cottage industries were closing down—and curators 'just went in and gathered it up en masse'. She also referred to this as 'over-collecting', and said that it often resulted in 'lots of duplicates' or holding multiples of the same kind of thing. As she put it: 'Our collection was built up very rapidly in the '80s and '90s and it was driven by what was becoming available, rescuing things from firms that were closing, and so on. And now we're at a point where we have to take a step back and say, "okay well what is actually important?"' Statements like these indicate curators grappling not only with the vast numbers of previously acquired objects, but also thinking about what to tell with and through these collections.

Rescue or salvage collecting has been the source of many kinds of collections, including ethnographic as well as those of folk-life; and it reveals how collecting the contemporary everyday is so frequently understood as collecting what will very soon have vanished (even if this later proves not to be the case). Typical of such modes of collecting is the ambition to collect as much as possible from the way-of-life that is perceived to be disappearing, resulting in what one curator described to us as 'pretty indiscriminate' collecting, evident too in the use of terms such as 'gathering up' and 'salvage'. Although studies have shown that this kind of collecting often did in fact entail selection, not least by ignoring items deemed somehow inauthentic,[16] it was nevertheless seen as very different from a more connoisseurial mode of carefully planned and executed identification and acquisition of selected objects.

Also necessary to prompting this kind of collecting was the development of the idea that the stuff of everyday life was worth saving and putting into museums.[17] In the case of ethnographic collections, their perceived exoticness and the potential to

understand very different ways of life provided motivation. So too for the case of folk-life collections, if on a lesser scale of difference. For many of the curators we met, however, it was predominantly ideas from social history, namely that museums should seek to represent 'ordinary people' and show 'everyday life,' rather than 'just the rich and famous' (as it was put to us), which also provided an impetus to collecting the contemporary everyday. While this sometimes led to rescue collecting, it also established a remit to document not just the exotic, the famous and the special, but also more mundane and ubiquitous material culture. The lines between this and more folkloristic collecting are not always clear-cut, but what is often referred to as 'social history' collecting grew especially from the 1970s.[18] Once the remit is established, then, that the everyday, ordinary, and contemporary are worth collecting, the problems arise of just quite what this means in practice—especially in a context in which these things are not necessarily on the brink of extinction but are constantly being produced. Where does it end? What not to collect?

From type to story

Also aggravating the selection problem, as we have already noted, is the profusion of new things and of slight variations of models. The idea of being able to choose just one thing to illustrate a whole category—the notion of 'type'—is seen by curators as having become much more problematic today. 'Is it representative enough? Is it typical of its time? Will future generations want this one?' are questions that curators say that they ask, and struggle to answer. Partly, this is due to the issue of many variations of products, as in the much-used example of mobile phones, which often also claim technical innovation. Or to give an example from our opening quotation, from a curator with six stoneware bed-warmers on the shelf: to viewers such as us, the

researchers, she said, these 'must look pretty much identical.' As she goes on to explain, they do 'in fact have various differences, especially different provenance and makers' marks'. So to take just one would obliterate what might be significant differences—differences that 'might be historically important'.

How 'historically important' is understood here tells us another reason why the idea of 'type' is not sufficient as a criterion for collecting the contemporary everyday. For history museums, type has often been less important than historical association with significant makers, individuals, places or events, the 'provenance' that so many curators mention. This usually produces singular objects, unique through their specific individualised associations. In social history approaches this is extended to a broader range of people and a more general way of life. This particular curator's expression of her task as 'representing how we live' articulates this, and, as she says, it sets up the problem of just what is 'representative'.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, this curator and many others with whom we spoke, also complained that despite the problems posed by the extent of collections, the collections also had 'gaps' or were 'uneven'. As one curator explained:

> We have really suffered from over-collecting of past curators in terms of people who have particular interests or even contacts, where it has meant that things have come into the collection that, perhaps, there's too much of one thing in terms of it being over-represented to the detriment of other areas that may have been neglected.

Similarly, another told us how:

You think about the things that people have collected and you think "would I have collected those?" "God, no, that doesn't tell the story in a way I want it to" […] I always joke about the spreadsheets. No one goes to a museum to see a spreadsheet. You just wouldn't go to look at that. It's not visual in the same way. But then loads of ephemera in the past, loads of stuff in the past just wasn't compelling. But it tells you about the time and what was important and what was priorities [sic] and what label was available and what the structures of power were […] Sometimes it's important to represent this story and it's important this story is told.

Even within profusion, then, there can be still be material lacunae, especially of things that were overlooked because they somehow did not seem 'compelling'. Many things, such as the spreadsheets (which this curator is actively trying to collect from organisations and individuals to represent working life) have not been noticed as worth collecting: even while, at the same time, numerous 'duplicates' built up elsewhere. For such curators, awareness of the risk of 'ephemera' being overlooked also contributes to their own concern to collect widely, so as not to be judged negatively by posterity, for having failed to collect what is later able to tell important stories about the current present.

The concern here is not only the potential lack of things capable of speaking about the contemporary, however. Curators also worry about whether 'the right kind of information' has also been collected. As many explained, in various words, this is 'a major problem' faced in dealing with 'backlogs' (as described in our opening quotation): 'we simply don't always know all that we want to, or that we should'. As one expanded 'sometimes all you have got is something like what it is made of—

which you can see anyhow—and a rough date if you're lucky'. Moreover, information about how the thing came to be in the museum in the first place may have been misplaced, or never recorded.

Describing the problem in terms of 'mega-backlog', however, does not fully grasp what so many curators felt was absent in the documentation that surrounded the objects in their care. Here, the word that resonated through curators' verbal reflections—used at the end of the quote above—was 'stories'. This is a word that we have observed and commented upon previously in museum settings, and whose prevalence can also be seen in literature about museums.[19] Among our interlocutors, it was mostly used in an unmarked way, as a taken-for-granted or self-evident way of expressing the curatorial task. But it deserves note, for it is expressive of an important shift in the curatorial role and introduces another layer of profusion.

Curators' use of the term 'story' does not deny the importance in many museums of historical accuracy—as expressed by one museum worker who told us about the importance of telling 'authentic stories'. Conceptualising the curatorial task in terms of stories is recognised as working differently from more categorical or disciplinary modes of organising knowledge. Mark O'Neill, previous Head of Glasgow Museums, emphasised 'storytelling' as being at the heart of a major redevelopment of Kelvingrove Museum (2003-2006), a museum seen as path-breaking for its refusal to stay within conventional disciplinary categories.[20] He describes how the reorganisation of the Museum was fuelled by curators being asked 'to suggest "the most interesting stories about the most interesting objects"',[21] a process that resulted initially in 'a list of about 200 potential stories'.[22] Although O'Neill argues that advantages of this approach were that it 'cut across disciplines, and … didn't require that gaps in the collection be filled with graphics, replicas, or

mediocre objects',[23] it also necessarily meant that objects that did not have interesting stories would be even less likely to find a place on public display.

Also significant in the proliferation of the term 'story' is that it is so often used in the plural. This recognition that there are many different accounts of the past that might be told itself signals a museological approach to the past that understands this in terms of multiple players with different viewpoints—each of which might *tell* a different story. Significantly, and returning to the pointing out of perceived differences between what to us appeared to be similar stoneware bed-warmers, this curator also understands distinctions to arise from each holding the *potential* to tell many different future stories; stories that might emerge through further research, the possible roles they will play in exhibitions, or through the connections and links that might (even if quite unexpectedly) be made to other objects in the collection, not only by her but also by external experts and visitors.

Influenced by critical historical and museological approaches that question traditional typological and disciplinary classification, and shaped by a politics that seeks to recover and introduce multiple and marginalised voices into museums, and often embraced with considerable enthusiasm and political commitment, the story-emphasis nevertheless also contributes to our curator's profusion headache. Which objects should be collected to help ensure that stories can be told in the future? Is it possible that for some things a story might never be found? How is a curator to decide which stories are told? And is she or he even the person who should, or is able to, make such decisions?

Who decides, whose stories?

Such questions are undoubtedly ones with which many curators struggle, as we have found in our research. In response to a question about what she sees as her biggest challenge, one curator replies: 'The challenge is just the scope […] And the easiest thing to collect is everything […] It means so much to you to be able to tell different stories in a museum.' Yet even though 'collecting everything'—were this even possible—might seem to allow any stories to be told, it only does so if that collecting has been of the immaterial alongside the material; that of the kinds of rich contextual information we have flagged.

Compounding the dilemma here is the doubt expressed by some curators about their own authority to impose limits by making selections. They ask such questions as 'who can decide?', 'who can say?', 'how can we know what others will find interesting?', and 'how can we know what people in the future will want to know about us?' Again, one possible response to this has been to suggest ubiquitous collecting, as Neil Cossons, Director of London's Science Museum did—perhaps more as a thought-experiment than an actual proposal—back in 1992.[24] Take one of each new type of thing off the production-line, he suggested, and put it, nice and pristine, into 'a long shed' and then 'at intervals of 25, 50 or 75 years we'll open the door … and look at what we've got. And we'll throw some of it away'.[25] But as we have already noted, the idea that 'one of everything' be collected, as Cossons suggested, immediately raises the mobile phone dilemma outlined above, and is compounded by the potential limitlessness of accompanying information and stories. His idea of only collecting the brand new would mean that no stories of use would have accumulated. Such

objects would lack just the kind of 'stories of use' and 'personal stories' that many curators said made them interesting. Nevertheless, the idea of trying to 'hold things for future generations, the next load of curators, to make the decision' was voiced by some with whom we spoke. But again, there was usually a quick realisation that this did not help to limit collecting in the present or its inevitable selectivity.

What we see here, then, is that a logic of recognising that future generations may have different interests—and the strong sense of responsibility towards such future generations—itself leads towards collecting as much as possible. In other words, particular curatorial logics, especially certain moralised assumptions about how it is proper to behave in relation to the future, generate dilemmas over how to set limits or decide what *not* to collect. The perception of profusion, then, is not only—and perhaps not even primarily—a consequence of neo-liberal evaluations in terms of 'value for money'. This does not mean, however, that these curatorial logics exist outside time. On the contrary, we have perceived a particular constellation that has emerged over time, with various impetuses. Moreover, it also involves a particular historiographic sensibility in which, rather than believing values to be universal and transcendent, the assumption is more relativist; that subsequent generations may want to tell different stories.

In addition to a temporal relativism, curators also speak of a relativism of social diversity. Most often, this is articulated in terms of different 'communities', that members will 'have their own stories' that they would want to see in the museum or collected for the future. The social

history movement, which, as we have noted, was important in propelling the growth of contemporary everyday collecting, argued that museums and collections needed to rectify previous failures to represent the everyday life of the majority of the population, especially the working class and women. The remit was further expanded with the influence of identity politics, which argued for recognition of a wide range of what were at first often called 'minorities' and then, increasingly, 'communities', self-identifying or identifiable on bases such as sexuality, ethnicity, and locality (though the last already had significant presence through village, town, and city museums). All of this proliferated the range of those who curators of the contemporary everyday saw as potentially having their own stories to tell, through their own (even if mass-produced) objects. This set up a task for curators that one curator describes as 'bringing in diversifying voices', or in the case of her museum, 'to make sure our collections are as diverse as the city we live in'.

Social diversity—and the potential fragmentation within that— adds to the range of what needs to be collected.[26] Within the UK, this is typically framed through a discourse of museums as having the capacity to be agents for social change and/or inclusion.[27] The anxieties that curators express over the potential difference of perspective of future generations is reproduced here too in the form of anxiety over which identities should be represented and how they should find their way into the museum. It is also sometimes reflected in a commitment to representing as many differences as possible, and finding ways of involving 'communities' about what might be included in the museum collection. Irit Rogoff refers to this as part of an 'additive

mode at whose heart is a very old Enlightenment conceit that cultural institutions are universalist and infinitely expandable—they can stretch and expand to include every one of the excluded, elided and marginalized histories'.[28] In her view, this needs addressing through some kind of acceptance of limits and reduction, though quite what this might mean in practice is left unstated. One way would be through connoisseurial ideas of superior quality of some sort. Occasionally, we witnessed curators talking about their own selection of 'the best examples' of certain objects. Yet more often, curators expressed concern over how to find ways to 'allow new people and new ways of participating in collecting'.[29] As one curator said, when reflecting on contemporary interest in curation (and the proliferation of the word used in settings beyond the museum), 'Let's open it up! What I do, why couldn't somebody else think about what is important about their life and send it to me? They're the expert. I'm just going to help a museum process it'.

What we see here, then, is a significant shift in the role of the curator, away from an expert of objects and more towards being a mediator between the museum and the many potential people and objects that the museum might include. As we discuss in the next section, the idea of the curator as a mediator—and a concomitant revision of the required expertise—has become widespread in these kinds of museums, and indeed in many others. In itself, however, it does not necessarily solve the profusion problem.[30]

Discussion: the curator as mediator

Curators of the contemporary everyday, and those working in museum organisations that interact with them, sometimes themselves contrasted their role with an imagined 'classical curator', what we are calling the connoisseurial curator. We should be wary, however, about setting this up as too strong an opposition. The connoisseurial curator who was fully confident of his (as the connoisseur is almost invariably imagined) superior, refined taste, which he exercised in the formation of highly selective collections, imagined as examples of universal, incontestable quality and value, may be something of a straw man. Its invocation by curators with whom we spoke was as much a way of explaining their own position and difficulties as a description of a singular state of affairs. Nevertheless, the idea that the curator nowadays is more likely to be an expert in mediating the relations between people and objects than an expert in the objects themselves is very prevalent. Curators today are more likely to be thought of as 'collaborators and brokers' rather than 'experts'.[31]

There are many factors involved in reshaping the role of the curator, and even sometimes displacing the curator altogether.[32] Here we have focused on how curatorship is reshaped for curators of the contemporary everyday as they deal with questions of what to collect, what to keep and, sometimes, what not to keep. As we have argued, the sense of facing an increasing profusion of things is experiential and cultural. This is not to say that it does not have a material realisation. There are many things that curators might collect. However, this perception of 'muchness'—and sometimes of 'too-muchness'—is not only created by a burgeoning material world. It is also a product of seeing more and more things, and more and

more people, as deserving a place in museums. It is a product of museal

logics in which 'value' has become considerably relativised. Not only does

this mean that curators are reticent about claiming authority over what will

be judged of value in the future, they also worry about this in the present.

Increasingly, they see themselves as not having the authority to make such

decisions but as needing to delegate to others who are seen as having greater

rights to make them. In describing this state of affairs, our aim is not to

judge it, though if pushed to do so we would broadly agree that it is a good

thing, as do almost all of those with whom we have spoken. But what we

also see, however, is that it autonomously propels more and more collecting.

In itself, more and more collecting does not necessarily have to be seen as a

bad thing. Yet we acknowledge the 'indigenous' perception of it as

problematic—something that we were told again and again by curators

whom we met.[33]

  In using the term indigenous we do so to point out that we are looking at a

particular way of seeing the world that is rooted in particular locations, even if these

cover a large and many-country area. The sense of need to save for the future, to

'represent' as much 'diversity' as possible, and to preserve both objects *and* stories, is

part of a particular contemporary museological way of seeing that is neither

historically nor spatially universal. In many ways, this is a utopian world-view; it is a

hope for an impossible form of collecting. This impossibility is in part a function of

economistic ways of looking at collections, which may be part of a new spirit of

capitalism that financialises everything.[34] This way of seeing regards utopian,

ubiquitous collecting as simply too expensive. And what is deemed too expensive is

also, in this particular logic, regarded as irrational. Yet what we have seen in curators'

own words, and in their struggles to tidy their desks and find space on their shelves for yet more things, is that the sense of too-muchness is not only generated by neo-liberal financialised models with their quests for efficiency. It is also a product of the limitlessness of politically, socially, and materially utopian ideas that are as much about the operation of a world that evades and even defies the market. Here, we refer to our wider arguments, partly developed and to be further developed elsewhere, in which we suggest that museums and heritage are important alternative repositories of value from those of economistic systems.[35]

In *The Order of Things,* Foucault points out how sixteenth century ideas of *resemblance* created a kind of limitless way of knowing that he describes as 'plethoric'.[36] That is, a way of seeing—and indeed of collecting—in which the search was for more and more resemblances, of many different kinds, inevitably resulting in an endless project that could never be contained. Although he saw this as an episteme that has largely been superseded, it seems to us that the curatorial dilemma that we have described here is rather similar. A quest to capture the everyday and ordinary, and social diversity, all in their detail, propels what, as mentioned above, Irit Rogoff calls 'the additive mode'. It leads to needing to collect more and more. This is, we believe, part of the 'structure of the space of possibilities' of which Manuel DeLanda, inspired by Gilles Deleuze, writes.[37] As with the assemblages that he discusses, what we are dealing with here is not just a set of ideas but a material-idea assemblage, with its own propulsions and effects. It is created and realised in shelves and shelves of stored objects, in expanding databases, new work practices, and in curatorial headaches.

To write that any utopia has a 'dark side'—a dystopia—would be simplistic. Nevertheless, the dystopian anxieties of curators who we have met in our work can be

seen in part at least as functions of their very admirable utopian ambitions. Perhaps

here we could call for a pragmatic utopianism that argues for holding onto one's

ideals but also being practical and realistic about achieving them. This indeed is

something that we also witnessed underway within our fieldwork, with many

meetings, proposals, and creative ideas being devised to try to address the perceived

profusion problem. Describing and discussing these would, however, be too much for

one essay.

Endnotes:

[1] We spoke to both male and female curators and quotations included in this essay are from both. The number of female respondents, however, substantially outweighed the number of male.

[2] For more on *Heritage Futures* project funded by the UK's AHRC see: https://heritage-futures.org. Accessed 1 December 2016.

[3] For example, B. Czarniawska and O. Löfgren (eds), *Managing Overflow in Affluent Societies* (London: Routledge, 2012) and B. Czarniawska and O. Löfgren (eds), *Coping with Excess: How Organizations, Communities and Individuals Manage Overflows* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013).

[4] E.Chin, *My Life with Things: The Consumer Diaries* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

[5] On contemporary collecting by Indigenous curators, see comments by Matariki Williams in McCarthy et al, this volume.

[6] J. Waddington and D. M. Rudkin (eds), *Proceedings of the 1985 Workshop on Care and Maintenance of Natural History Collections* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1985). https://archive.org/stream/proceedingsof19800work/proceedingsof19800work_djvu.txt. Accessed 30 November 2016.

[7] S. J. Knell (eds), *Museums and the Future of Collecting: Second Edition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

[8] B. Lord, G. Dexter and J. Nicks, *The Cost of Collecting: Collections Management in UK Museums* (London: Office of Arts and Libraries, 1989).

[9] National Museum Directors' Conference, *Too Much Stuff? Disposal From Museums* (London: National Museum Directors' Conference, 2003).

[10] *Ibid.,* p. 2.

[11] H. Wilkinson, *Collections for the Future* (London: Museums Association, 2005).

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Cited from Museums Association *Collections…Love Museums*. www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/love-museums/facts-and-figures. Accessed 20 November 2016. For a well known discussion of 'output analysis' see S. Weil, 'Creampuffs and hardball: Are you really worth what you cost or just merely worthwhile?' in S. Weil, *A Cabinet of Curiosities: Inquiries Into Museums and Their Prospects* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), pp. 33-38.

[14] This is indicated, for example, through the annual UK-based surveys the Museums Association has been undertaking since 2011 looking at the implications for museums of public funding cuts. The most recent report found that 'financially-motivated disposal looks set to rise', with eleven per cent of respondents considering this within the next year; that 'fundraising' and 'income generation' were top priorities for museums; and that some respondents were considering collections rationalisation to reduce storage costs. See Museums Association *Cuts Survey 2015* (London: Museums Association, 2015). www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/funding-cuts/cuts-survey. Accessed 30 November 2016.

[15] See UK Arts Council, *The Value of the Arts and Culture to People and Society: An Evidence Review* (London: Arts Council, undated c. 2014). This also summarises various earlier reports and studies. Economic value remains highly prized in this report but is also accompanied by other values, such as health and wellbeing, and

society. Internationally, the 'Burra Charter', first developed in 1979 by Australia ICOMOS, to 'rank' the 'significance' or relative 'worth' of individual objects, or whole collections, has been influential in suggesting alternative notions of value.

[16] J. Clifford, 'The Others: Beyond the "salvage" paradigm', *Third Text*, 3:6 (1989), 73-78.

[17] S. Macdonald, 'Musealisation: Everyday life, temporality and old things', in S. Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London: Routledge, 2013), Ch. 6.

[18] See S. Macdonald, 'Collecting practices', in S. Macdonald (eds), *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 81-97. On history curating, see also Labrum this volume.

[19] For an ethnographic example see L. Bedford, 'Storytelling: The real work of museums', *Curator*, 44:1 (2001), 27-34. For a discussion in our own work see S. Macdonald, 'A people's story? Heritage, identity and authenticity', in C. Rojek and J. Urry (eds), *Touring Cultures. Transformations of Travel and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 155-75. Also J. Morgan, 'Change and Everyday Practice at the Museum: An Ethnographic Study' (PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 2011).

[20] M. O'Neill, 'Kelvingrove: Telling stories in a treasured old/new museum', *Curator*, 50:4 (2007), 379-99.

[21] *Ibid.,* p. 385.

[22] *Ibid.,* p. 386.

[23] *Ibid.,* p. 385-6.

[24] N. Cossons, 'Professionals and museums 2. Rambling reflections of a museum man', in P. Boylan (eds), *Museums 2000. Politics, People, Professionals and Profit*

(London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 117-26.

[25] *Ibid.,* p. 123.

[26] See ICOM *Documenting Diversity: Collections, Catalogues and Context* conference report, 2015. http://network.icom.museum/cidoc/archives/past-conferences/2015-new-delhi/. Accessed 30 November 2016.

[27] For example, R. Sandell 'Museums as agents of social inclusion', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 17:4 (1998), 401-408 and R. Sandell, 'Social inclusion, the museum and dynamics of sectoral change', *Museum and Society*, 1:1 (2002), 45-62.

[28] I. Rogoff, 'The expanded field', in J-P. Martinon (eds), *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 41-48, p. 44.

[29] See L. Meijer-van Mensch and E. Tietmeyer (eds), *Participative Strategies in Collecting the Present* (Berlin: Panama Verlag, 2013).

[30] On co-curating see Mallon this volume.

[31] N. Proctor, quoted in L. Meijer-van Mensch and E. Tietmeyer (eds), *Participative Strategies in Collecting the Present,* p. 10.

[32] See M. Viau-Courville (eds), 'Musées sans Conservateurs/Museums without Curators', special issue of *Thema. La Revue des Musées de la Civilisation*, 4 (2016). See also Onciul this volume.

[33] Here we use the word indigenous as meaning the perception of those curators themselves – who in no sense would probably think of themselves as an Indigenous native or tribal group (with a politicized capital I).

[34] L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello, 'The new spirit of capitalism', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 18 (2005), 161-88.

[35] For example, S. Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[36] M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* (London: Routledge, [1966]1989), p. 30.

[37] M. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006).