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Curating museum profusion

Harald Fredheim, Sharon Macdonald and Jennie Morgan



Figure 11.1 Pots and pans on a museum shelf (photograph by Jennie Morgan, courtesy of CultureNL Museums).

Imagine a museum storeroom lined with shelves and racks (such as in [Figure 11.1](#)). 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 is a collection of similar looking copper and cast-iron pots and pans from the nineteenth 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’:

It’s just so hard to know where to begin – and where to end. There’s so much 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.¹

At face value, museums can be seen as agencies for managing profusion. They are designed to hold, organise and present an abundance of things; glass cases and labels project a sense of cleanliness and order. This is what the public expects of museums, and what museums expect of themselves. As our research revealed, however, in the face of a profusion of things, museum staff may struggle to maintain such order – especially behind the scenes in storerooms. One of our survey respondents expressed, for example, that she is ‘ashamed of the state of the collections at the moment so would prefer the public are not aware of the state of things’. While other museum staff who deal with collections – who today are often referred to as working in ‘collections management’ – may not share this feeling of shame, or may not do so to the same extent, our research showed clearly that a sense of struggle to select the ‘right’ things to keep for the future, and to care for the objects that already have been selected, is widespread.

In this chapter, we turn to our empirical research on museums to explore how staff working with museum collections experience the

profusion of things that could be collected, how they address the manifestations of profusion they experience, and, more generally, how they go about making selections of which objects to save for the future.² As explained in [Chapter 10](#), we identify these practices of selection as valorising – that is, they not only reflect value judgements but also, through selection, retention, care and disposal, create value (see Heinich 2009; 2011; Harrison 2013b). Below, we outline in more detail the methods used in our museum research, and discuss how the different methods have informed each other, before sharing some of our findings about how museums in the UK that collect everyday objects from the recent past or contemporary present perceive and address the profusion predicament. In doing so, we explore the professional practices of museum staff, providing their own views on how they decide what is significant enough to warrant keeping for the future. We also foreground the futures that staff see themselves working for, and reflect on the futures that current practices are creating.

Methods

The main empirical work done by the Profusion theme in the museums domain consisted of interviews with, and observations of, museum practice, a UK-wide survey and two knowledge-exchange events. The more qualitative research of interviewing and observing museum professionals was conducted first, providing a series of questions to be explored more quantitatively through a survey. These results were discussed with sector representatives, to provide further contextualising qualitative research material. We worked closely with the Arts Council England (Yorkshire) and the York Museums Trust, who provided an invaluable sounding board, helping us to formulate questions and approaches, as well as to network us with specific museums and organisations, and to participate in our theme-specific (as well as in one project-wide) knowledge-exchange events. The New School House Gallery, York (see [Figure 11.2](#)), acted as host for our first event – in which we invited Dr Zemirah Moffat, an anthropologist and professional home ‘declutterer’, to collaborate with us on leading a workshop for museum directors, collections staff and academics researching in related areas.³

The ‘domestic declutterer meets museum staff’ event was an element in a raft of research approaches designed to help us grasp how museum staff experience profusion, and their roles and possibilities in relation to it. Others included going to conferences and workshops of museum organisations, where we networked with key policymakers (such as the

Association of Independent Museums, the UK Museums Association, and the Collections Trust), especially when issues of contemporary collecting or disposal were on the agenda; reviewing literature produced by the sector; and visiting specific museums. The latter entailed meeting with various museum staff, sometimes more than once, and usually visiting storage spaces, in which case photography was generally used alongside observation and semi-structured interviews. One focus for this qualitative work was an in-depth case study with York Museums Trust, which facilitated visits to several of their museums including, repeatedly over a period of six weeks, the York Castle Museum (a local museum of items of everyday life of the recent past). We supplemented this case with a range of short visits to another eight museums with social history collections or departments, including those that had undergone considerable reorganisation and refinement of their collecting approaches. Our fieldwork provided opportunities to observe museum staff carrying out a review of collections, developing what they called 'rationalisation procedures' (to help refine what should be kept and what disposed of), and making decisions about disposal. This resulted in 21 recorded interviews, each lasting between one and three hours.



Figure 11.2 The New School House Gallery, York, host of our first Profusion theme knowledge-exchange event in 2016 (photograph by Jennie Morgan).

To help contextualise and further expand upon this qualitative work, we also undertook a survey on contemporary collecting and disposal.⁴ This was designed with many open-ended questions in order to be used predominantly qualitatively. Distributed widely to museums in the UK through email lists, via social media and directly to museums whose websites suggested they might collect everyday objects from the present or recent past, it received 93 responses from individual museum staff. Although this provided some quantifiable results, the numbers are not large and there may be various biases in who responded, so we resist using exact values in their interpretation, as shown on the reproduced data discussion cards in our visual essay on sharing experiences and responses to museum profusion (Chapter 12). In a further knowledge-exchange event, at the National Railway Museum, York, results of the survey were made available for discussion by participants, who included survey respondents from a wide variety of museums, as well as representatives from a selection of other organisations. By discussing the results in this way, we were able to feed back reflections by participants into the research process, and thus to further enhance our understanding.

Below, we first address how profusion is experienced by museum staff in our research, before turning to their strategies for dealing with it. By highlighting the relativities and repertoires of keeping and disposal, and the reasons why objects otherwise remain in or leave collections, we hope to add nuance to debates about how many objects museums are collecting and disposing. Ultimately – by thinking in relation to the domestic domain, as well as other Heritage Futures domains – we seek to contribute to thinking further about how heritage-making in relation to profusion might be approached differently in the future.

Experiences of profusion in museums

We also wanted to unearth the hidden treasures within our store, which had been obscured from us, possibly for decades, due to the sheer volume of material which had been collected.

(Russell n.d., n.p.)

This statement, about the rationale behind a major review and rationalisation project in the social history collection at the Museum of London, aptly illustrates how museum staff often describe profusion in their museums. Our research has identified three main sources of profusion in museums that together constitute the sense of ‘too-muchness’ we call

the profusion predicament. These are: (1) the sense of there being many things that have not yet been collected, but might be worth keeping for the future; (2) an abundance of accessioned objects already in store; and (3) backlogs of acquired objects that are yet to be formally accessioned. We discuss each of these in turn below but first note how concerns about profusion arose post-1980 in UK museums.

The Museum Accreditation Scheme, which was launched in 1988 partly in response to the growing numbers of independent museums at the time, addresses potential profusion by requiring bespoke collections development policies that outline what museums do and do not collect, as well as regulating and documenting disposal procedures (see MLA 2004). A year later, a report called *The Cost of Collecting*, commissioned by the Office of Arts and Libraries (1989), claimed that 80 per cent of UK collections were in storage – a figure that was widely discussed as indicative of problematic over-collecting.⁵ This became still more explicit when the National Museums Directors' Conference issued a report in 2003 with the title *Too Much Stuff? Disposal from Museums* (NMDC 2003). Other guidelines, such as the Museums Association's 'Code of Ethics' (2015), likewise include emphasis on careful selection and management of collections. (For 'effective' collections, see also Cross and Wilkinson 2007; Museums Association 2012.)

Although there has been a clear move towards more open discussion of deaccession and disposal, as we have charted more extensively elsewhere (Morgan and Macdonald 2020), quantitative studies (and also our own survey) do not demonstrate that this has resulted in a marked shift in collections development practice (Museums Association 2012). Nevertheless, we may be at a turning point. The Museums Association's 2018 *Museums Taskforce Report and Recommendations* argues that the defining challenge for collections development in museums is 'that many museums have full stores, [with] collections acquired inconsistently and gaps in collections knowledge'. Therefore, it is 'necessary to break the cycle of having too much material that is not being used or delivering public benefit, not enough information about what museums have, and insufficient capacity to manage collections and make confident and informed decisions' (Museums Association 2018, 5). The subsequent recommendations stress the need for museums to 'review the impact of collections development policy and practice over the last decade' and take 'a collective responsibility to resolve the gap between theory and practice' (Museums Association 2018, 6). So let us, then, turn to practice to explore how museums are experiencing and responding to profusion through the everyday performance of creating value and futures by selecting and caring for objects in collections.

All the things that might be worth keeping for the future

Choosing what to keep for the future is a daunting prospect, especially when doing so for society rather than for oneself. As one curator told us, 'the important thing as a curator is to try to be objective ... and I think that is obviously where it's very different from what you might do in your normal house'. Despite this particular curator's aspiration to 'objectivity', many of the curators with whom we spoke expressed less confidence in there being an objective position – and many spoke instead in terms of 'stories', thus suggesting more subjective modes of selection, as we discuss further below. That 'contemporary collecting' was perceived to be an especially challenging form of collecting was also evident from responses to our survey. As a curator at a local authority museum put it, 'what is material culture in the twenty teens? I get that the Museum of London or the V&A might be able to make a reasonable stab at this but local museums? Might we end up with the twenty-first century equivalent of multiple Victorian mangles? Is that OK?'

There is also a growing awareness of the ephemeral nature and rapid pace with which things can come and go, which forces the issue of collecting despite uncertainties around which objects to keep for the future. As one curator who showed us the industrial history collection with which he works put it:

One thing is that, in a way, we're too late now if we want to collect some objects. Some gaps in our collections will never be filled because there's simply nothing left, and perhaps decisions were made in the past about what should be kept and what shouldn't, which we might look back on now and say 'well, maybe we would have done it differently'. There's lots of things that have been preserved en masse – railway locomotives, traction engines ... whereas there are other objects that we don't collect.

These connections drawn between concerns about selecting the 'right' objects to keep for the future and critical assessments of past collecting practices that contribute to current profusion predicaments are good examples of the future projecting we observed curators to be engaged in as they navigate profusion. Concerns about how past collecting has caused both 'gaps' and 'duplicates' in current collections shape how museum staff think about collecting for the future.

The local authority museum curator quoted above also explained that selecting what to keep was being made more difficult by mass production, not only because there are more things from which to choose,

but because mass-produced objects seem to her to not be sufficiently meaningful for telling more local stories. Neither, however, does she regard very individualised or personal objects as sufficient to do this:

Are objects instruments of reflecting social history and were they ever adequate to this role? In mass production era are they meaningful enough? In an LA [a local authority museum] your job is more or less about reflecting the history of your borough and its residents. But if nothing is especially borough-typical (everywhere has a Tesco for example) what do I seek? We did a project about loss and lost objects a couple of years ago and most of our youth group identified either a piece of jewellery someone had given them or their mobile and mobile charger as the things they cared about. I've no shade to throw on either of those but if my job is to tell the story of my borough then the very personal or the extremely ubiquitous somehow don't quite cover it for me.

The profusion of mass-produced items, and the accelerated appearance and disappearance of new things, is undoubtedly a challenge for many collections staff. How many models of mobile phones to collect was an example that was given several times. More recently, the sense that museums should also be collecting digital objects – whether computer games and software, images, videos, documents or social media – has added further to the profusion of things that could be collected, although one curator stressed that despite rhetoric that may suggest the relative 'newness' of digital collecting, this is something that museums have 'been dealing with for years'. Our research provided many and diverse examples that curatorial ambitions for such collecting could occur – especially that focused on social media associated with contemporary events (for example, 'Brexit' (the exit of the UK from the European Union), the Scottish Independence referendum, the Arab Spring, the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements). As one curator responsible for digital collecting in her institution put it, 'contemporary collecting and digital is one, because digital is the medium to document contemporary stuff that's happening'. Continuing, she reasoned that, 'all these things are happening digitally now', which thus requires – in her view – museum collecting to respond in order to 'document' these social and political movements, as well as the everyday experience of them. Equally important, however, was curators' wish – and sense of duty – to collect in such a way as to represent greater social diversity. Collecting to address what were regarded as imbalances in previous collecting was frequently articulated as an ambition, or an area of practice

being developed, although we found less evidence (in our fieldwork and survey) of such ambitions being fully integrated into collecting policies or practice in a way that curators themselves perceived to be entirely satisfactory. More typically – and paralleling the rise of ‘cultural diversity’ as a conservation target discussed in Part II, Diversity – it was expressed in terms of a need to collect objects from ‘different communities’ or as ‘diversifying the collections’ to be able to tell many different ‘stories’ in the future.

Accessioned objects already in stores

These ambitions of further developing collections and filling identified subject ‘gaps’, which were sometimes formalised as ‘priority areas’ in collections development policies shared with us, are complicated by the absence of gaps on most shelves in museum stores. These subject or conceptual ‘gaps’ or ‘deficits’ may also relate to changes in the kind of information being recorded about objects. It is now widely acknowledged, and is supported through our findings, that museums today want to present objects with more information about the individual lives and events with which they were entangled, or what is often referred to as ‘telling stories’. Some collections staff tell us that this shift towards richer contextual information has been particularly influential in making existing objects in the collections less usable than they were previously. While the objects could illustrate a particular type or category they are now perceived as not having sufficiently relevant or significant stories to tell.

In the acquisition meetings that we observed, participants typically considered, discussed, and sometimes vigorously debated, the kinds of ‘stories’ that objects might tell. Objects regarded to hold potential to tell not only a story, but different kinds of stories, appeared to be especially appealing. Conversely, those items without a story, or with only one, were less likely to be collected, unless another feature added significance (such as being particularly rare; of use for researchers; holding social, historical or cultural value; filling a collections gap; or being needed for an exhibition). This strategy of seeking to acquire fewer material things overall, but ones that can tell more, and more diverse, narratives, is a prevalent response to managing profusion in museums. Coupled with the quest for more ‘diversity’ introduced above, this results in a situation in which – when evaluating both existing collections and what might yet be acquired – there is a sense of what one curator described as ‘a great volume of material’, but that it is at the same time potentially insufficient for the uses museum staff now intend for it. As one social history curator put it:

I think it's our instinct as curators to try to collect. Particularly in social history, there are so many different stories to try to tell and I think politically the focus on inclusion and trying to represent all communities, all people, all stories, is a real driver and we're very conscious of where the gaps are.

Despite widespread 'respect' for the decisions and actions of their predecessors – a point made repeatedly by our interlocutors – many museum staff working with collections referenced what they regarded to be poor collections decisions made in the past. Many professionals whom we visited and interviewed, and virtually all of our survey respondents, said that they have objects in their collections that they would not collect if building the collection from scratch. A curator in one of the museums we visited put it this way:

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.

Another, rather bluntly, said: '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.'

Museum staff responding to our survey identified improving documentation and collections care as their primary responsibility to future curators and publics, and they were eager to pass on the collection 'in a better state' than it was in when they had received it. A collections manager at an independent former local authority museum in Yorkshire described how this commitment shapes her current practice:

The disposal procedure is so time consuming and you're usually dealing with a 'the sins of our fathers' scenario where ill-informed and indiscriminate collecting in the past has led to masses of unsuitable material clogging up stores. So, my approach to collecting is to consider whether I will be creating similar problems for my successors, which encourages me to be much stricter when making acquisition decisions.

This collections manager explains how past collecting decisions not only weigh on current collections staff in the form of reminders of the fraught nature of selecting the 'right' objects to keep for the future,⁶ but also how

the very real physical manifestations of these decisions also present real challenges in fitting new acquisitions into already 'full' storerooms. A full museum store, as described in our opening vignette, is the most readily recognisable manifestation of profusion in museums, and one that adds to collection staff's experience of profusion as a predicament in several ways.

There is the pragmatic and very real challenge of not being able to fit more into what is already squeezed, with curators sometimes describing this to be 'a massive issue' or their organisation being 'at a critical level' in terms of needing storage. This not only reduces collecting (as the surveys we cited above illustrate) but may also shape what is collected. For example, we learnt from sitting in on meetings where decisions are made about possible acquisitions, that the size, storage implications (such as if items require specialist or conservation-grade enclosures) and present or anticipated future conservation needs are often all considered. Perhaps most challenging of all is that these needs are not always known for objects already in store, especially those that are yet to be catalogued and make up part of what is often referred to as 'backlogs'.

Backlogs of acquired objects yet to be formally accessioned

Documentation is a major concern for a large proportion of the collections staff with whom we have interacted, and collections reviews often highlight errors and absences in documentation systems, with forgotten objects sometimes being 'discovered' in storerooms. Many museums complain about having poorly provenanced items that may have no contextual documentation whatsoever. Some museums have not fully migrated their documentation from systems used in the past, especially if transferring from paper to digital records. Objects sometimes disappear in the cracks between systems, through records being lost or by not having been properly documented when brought into the collection. As a result, several curators we engaged with have described situations in which further collecting has been put on hold until they are able to 'get a handle' on their existing collections. Our survey also more specifically revealed that this is especially common in museums with large accessioning backlogs. This refers to objects that have been acquired – that is, been brought into the collection – but that have not yet been added to formal accession records. Many curators understandably feel it is irresponsible to add to a collection when they do not know what they already have and do not know when they will find the time to process objects that have already been selected:

I think looking back we're still dealing with the mass of acquisitions that came in, in the '70s and '80s. Accreditation has been a huge driver in helping us manage that in a consistent way and in a professional way and making sure that when something is collected it doesn't just arrive in the museum and then sit in a cupboard of doom – we have a number of cupboards of doom – for ten years and then people like us now come along and have to try to deal with that when we're lucky if there's an entry form, never mind any sort of cataloguing information. So, I don't think it's a bad thing that has stopped. There's a much more rigorous approach to the collecting we do now, so that the documentation is in place and we're not leaving black holes for our successors, but that all adds to the barriers, I suppose, to collecting in a wider way.

Many of the respondents to our survey explained that they could not give accurate figures about how many objects they collect and dispose of on average each year because the numbers fluctuate greatly and because the numbers of objects accessioned and deaccessioned do not accurately reflect how many objects are acquired and disposed of. This is because backlogs of objects that have not yet been formally accessioned in museum registers can be the main source of objects added to accession registers or removed from collections. One collections development officer responding to the survey explained that 'in 2017, 1,409 new records were created, but many of these would have been for objects that were acquired many years ago, but for which appropriate documentation had not yet been created'. These backlogs are recognised as a significant problem in the sector, and museums are required to have a plan for how they will be overcome as part of the accreditation standard. Their size is measured periodically in surveys administered by the regional Museum Development Network, and in 2018 the Collections Trust launched a programme of support to specifically help museums 'banish the backlog' (S. Brown 2019).

Strategies for addressing museum profusion

In the face of the profusion predicament, museum organisations, museums and curators – individually or in concert – have developed strategies for dealing with it. Some of these are relatively instrumental and formalised – namely policies and procedures for collections development, significance assessment and rationalisation (see [Figure 11.3](#)), whereas others are more by default or informal, such as not, or rarely, collecting due to lack of space.



Figure 11.3 Infrastructures for managing profusion include policies and procedures for collections development, documentation and significance assessment (photograph by Jennie Morgan, courtesy of York Museums Trust).

Making selections: Collections policies and assessments

Museums use collections development policies to outline what they do and do not collect. These operate primarily to limit what is collected and provide curators with institutional support to let some things go. Required for museum accreditation, they are also widely felt by our survey respondents to help them make better collecting and disposal decisions, most importantly by countering what they describe as ‘individual bias’ and the accepting of ‘unsuitable donations’. One specific form of excess that these documents are considered to safeguard against is curatorial enthusiasm (or ‘passion’, as it was sometimes described) for collecting from narrowly focused areas in their subject. At one museum we visited, a registrar showed us one such example catalogued in the electronic database: a ‘collection of 176 fruit wrappers’ purchased from a local market.

Collections development policies outline what museums want to collect in quite broad terms. As in various other areas of cultural and natural heritage management, more specific tools have also been developed, especially what are called ‘significance assessments’ – in which individual

objects' 'significance' is judged according to a range of criteria through formal processes (see Macdonald and Morgan 2018b). Unlike collections development policies, processes for formal significance assessments are not a requirement for accreditation and our results suggest that their use varies greatly across the sector. While some museums have shown us their formal templates, others report that they consider similar criteria, but through less formal processes, including curatorial judgement gained from accumulated experience of working with collections. Nevertheless, our survey results suggest that museums' processes for assessing significance, whether formal or informal, are overwhelmingly felt to help make better decisions. Common to these approaches is understanding the 'significance' of an object as the sum of its cultural values and its usefulness as a museum object.

Both collections development policies and significance assessments are positioned by museum staff to be more objective and collective mechanisms by which museums make strategic decisions about potential acquisitions. Several of our survey respondents mentioned that formal policies are helpful in relation to the sometimes diplomatically awkward matter of rebuffing an offered 'gift' – 'without putting donors off should they find other items of interest in the future', as one curator at an independent museum in Scotland put it.

Moreover, several survey respondents flagged that putting a collections development policy online helps keep unwanted donations from ever making it to the museum. While this might be the perception of museum staff, our homes study did not indicate that people who approach museums with donations are necessarily reading these policies, and (as we discuss in Chapter 13) typically approach museums motivated by other goals than helping them to acquire objects in identified priority areas.

Any such guidelines need to be put into practice – which might also bring them up against further material or unanticipated considerations. One curator we visited to talk to about social history collecting explained how she went about the process in ideal cases. First, she considers a new acquisition's 'relevance' to specific areas of the museum's collecting policy, or how it will 'enhance the collection' (including if it would address any perceived gaps or weaknesses). She then described a 'secondary' level of considerations, including 'the history of the object, its background and context' (or what is usually talked about as being 'provenance'), and also the proposed acquisition's 'use', including its 'display' and 'research' potential (or 'what we could do with it', as she put it). 'It can't just be something that you're just sticking in a box and never having display potential,' she summarised, adding that a new acquisition would

be more likely to be collected if it had the capacity to ‘open up different strands of potential interpretation’ so that it could be ‘used in very different ways’ – that is, as we discussed above, tell multiple kinds of stories. In many ways, what is involved here is providing formal and informal procedures that help to remove the disquieting sense that one might be getting it wrong, including by limiting the extent to which decisions are felt to be ‘subjective’. It is also about using documentation of processes to try to show future curators that ‘we tried’, as it was sometimes put to us.

Yet in practice, there can still be other considerations that come to bear. As we noted above, some curators described a tendency to be more lenient about accepting objects that do not take up much space. Moreover, as one curator from Scotland noted in response to our survey, ‘[policies] are guidelines and can still clearly be bent if you wish to acquire something, or conversely can be enforced to the letter if you don’t. There is still flexibility in them, which is useful.’ What is particularly interesting here is that he identifies the room that policies leave for subjective curatorial judgement as *useful*. While some curators find the seemingly objective nature of policies reassuring, others value the space they provide for individual judgements within this structure.

Infrastructures for containing it all: Collections review and storage solutions

During many of our visits to museums, we met collections staff either undertaking – or who had recently completed – collection audits (see Figure 11.4). One typical outcome of such audits is the reorganisation of the storeroom to maximise available space, and museum staff showed us, often with a sense of pride, newly installed dedicated ‘storage solutions’, such as archive boxes, modular shelves, enclosed units and sliding racks. Here, collections review, leading to storeroom reorganisation, is intended to address profusion in museums by literally attempting to better contain it all by improving storage systems. While on tours of museum storerooms, we learnt about different modes of storing collections, which revealed a wide spectrum from ‘open’ to ‘deep’ storage. The latter suggests that one profusion strategy might be a partial removal of objects by containing them in the farthest recesses of facilities, usually off-site from the museum exhibitions and offices of museum staff. Although we did not learn of any actual examples, staff also considered future possibilities for more ‘joined-up’ approaches to storage across the sector – for example, by housing the collections of several different museums from one region in a centralised facility. While collection audits, also called



Figure 11.4 A social history curator works in the storeroom at our partner organisation, York Museums Trust, on a collections audit. This process is sometimes used by museums to reorganise collections in storage (photograph by Jennie Morgan, courtesy York Museums Trust).

‘reviews’, are becoming increasingly common, there is no central or linked database for collections across the UK. We have repeatedly been told that it would help museums to act on their audits – either by adding or removing objects from their collections – if they had a better sense not only of what they, but also of what other museums, already have.

These kinds of themes were illustrated when we attended a professional training event in Manchester on the topic of collection reviews. Here, it was stressed that a collection review can lead to many different outcomes, which may or may not include disposal. This corresponds well with our broader results, which highlight that most reviews lead to a very small number of disposals, but instead focus on enhancing staff

understanding of collections or lead to a reorganisation of storage. As a result, the term 'rationalisation' is increasingly used rather than 'disposal'. In one of the rationalisation projects we learnt about through our museum visits, this was explained by one curator as follows:

This isn't a disposal project, it's actually the collections that are left behind. It's as much about them as what we're disposing. It's what we're keeping, we're doing it for those objects, really, as much as anything and so that is, for us as a museum, a very important outcome. That what we're left with is a refined collection. We want to be able to use it. It has research academic potential that we can start to release because we can manage it better.

As this quotation shows, while space is an important factor, rationalising collections is also about the capacity to care for and use objects effectively, not merely about having enough space on the shelves.

The digital

We remained open in our study to tracing if and how digital technologies were deployed in relation to profusion predicaments in museums. We found no instances in which objects were being digitised rather than physically kept by the museums in our study, and when we discussed this possibility with them, they usually responded negatively. 'Heavens no!' declared one, 'that wouldn't be right, would it? We are supposed to keep the real things.' Indeed, rather than solving any sense of a profusion predicament, digital objects and technologies generally seemed to exacerbate it.

They did so, first, by adding another set of 'objects' that might potentially be acquired. With regard to collecting social media using automated software, one curator surmised that 'you could easily binge collect'. Another curator saw such collecting as well-nigh impossible, as 'the digital can be so broad and it changes too fast'. Problems of collecting the digital were also seen as arising from the fact that the 'technology' and 'infrastructure' required to translate 'captured' digital content (such as tweets inputted into an Excel spreadsheet) from a mass of content into usable museum resources are not yet sufficiently developed. In addition, curators spoke about the difficulties of navigating copyright, or of the future preservation challenges of software and hardware required for using digital objects. One curator, who collected video games from the 1990s onwards, reasoned:

... all these hardware and software are now completely obsolete. Even if it was a video game from the '90s that was created on Windows, it was Windows 95. Windows 95 is totally incompatible to whatever Windows we have now ... So you either had to find a Windows 95 computer to extract the file and then simulate it to a Windows 2010, which has to be refreshed and integrated as Windows progresses.

Although there was a widespread sense that the digital could not replace collections of physical objects, the use of electronic and online databases is seen by many curators as helping to keep information that they believe should be collected about collection items.

Mostly, however, we encountered a sense that creating digital records, and digitising objects and information about them, were adding to, rather than ameliorating, the 'backlogs' discussed above. So, not only was the digital not regarded as a satisfactory solution for limited physical storage space, it was also pointed out to us that digital storage is not resource or cost free. 'The two big conceptions of digital is that digital is free or cheap', one curator told us, noting that 'people don't understand how big files are, or [that] you have to have different files, like your raw file or digital preservation file, and then your access files. That's a lot of storage'. For these and other reasons, then, the digital is considered – in its own ways – to be complex, desirable and offering some potential future avenues for addressing profusion, but also simultaneously adding to it.

Curating loss: Rationalisation, transfer and disposal

Permanently removing objects from a collection is increasingly recognised as an important element of responsible collections development, and the Museums Association's 'Disposal Toolkit' (2014) outlines how museums can go about doing this without breaching their 'Code of Ethics' (2015), which is enforced by accreditation. Despite efforts to facilitate permanently removing objects from collections, disposal is still widely considered a last resort. A curator at a local authority museum explained that she has 'a number of things earmarked for disposal and would follow the disposal criteria of the sector of course, but I am still currently hanging on to things as I don't quite feel ready'. This sense of not feeling ready, or the emotional difficulty of going through with disposal, is something we have come across repeatedly – also retrospectively, as in the case of a house steward at a National Trust property in South East England, who explained that she has 'had to accept the loss of items from

the collections for good reasons, even though I found the process painful'. Such comments indicate that the emotional cost of letting go might even potentially be experienced as too great for museum staff to actually do it. We certainly learnt of objects that, although the formal decision had been taken to release them from collections, remained in museum storerooms, often awaiting a 'suitable' new location to be found. Curatorial concern with 'suitability' for future trajectories of objects perhaps reveals the kinds of affective and moral judgements underpinning the act of letting go.

The procedures that need to be followed – the forms to be filled in and the identification of possible new homes – can also, paradoxically, require such a degree of work as to render attempting to dispose of items more effort than museum staff feel able to undertake. This is why a documentation and collections officer in South West England retains hundreds of identical milk bottles. She explained that 'we don't need them all and being local they are of no interest to anyone else, which makes it simpler for us to leave them taking up space in the store than to attempt disposal'. While we had agreement to spend time observing a social history curator doing a collections rationalisation, with one intended outcome being identifying possible items for disposal, our visits were curtailed because the curator had to put this work 'on hold' as it could not be fitted in with other commitments. These anecdotes suggest that many collections staff may already intuitively know what was recently demonstrated by a study focusing on archaeological collections – namely, that rationalisation projects are generally not a cost-effective means of providing storage space (Baxter et al. 2018). Nevertheless, most of our survey respondents did not feel it should be made easier to dispose of objects from social history collections.

A major concern for collections staff is how potential news of disposals will be received by members of the public, and a number of curators with whom we have engaged have called for more care around the language used for what is increasingly referred to as collections 'review' or 'rationalisation' projects. This finding is supported by an earlier public consultation on disposal by the Museums Association (2007, 11), which found that 'the word "disposal" conjures negative connotations, including suspicion, shock and scepticism'. One of our survey respondents argued:

We need to get away from using the word 'disposal'. To the public, it implies putting an object in the skip. 'Deaccessioning' is ghastly museum jargon. We are now using the word 'transfer' as our first preference, and then 'removal' for those cases where, after advertising, the item has not been placed in the public domain and is going elsewhere, or is being recycled.

'Transfer' is already widely used to distinguish objects that move between institutions that provide public access from more controversial sale, recycling or destruction, and our interactions with museum staff suggest that such 'transfers' are felt to be far less emotionally charged than outright 'disposal'.

In practice, the vast majority of decisions that lead to permanent removal of objects from collections are relatively uncontroversial, as they take the form of transfers to other institutions or the destruction of objects that have deteriorated beyond repair or consist of dangerous materials. Less than a third of our survey respondents have disposed of objects for reasons other than poor condition in the last five years, and several of those who have done so explained that this was for safety reasons or because they have duplicates. However, as demonstrated in this chapter, this does not mean that museums do not keep objects that, if they were faced with collecting them now, they would no longer collect: for a variety of reasons, such objects remain.

Increasingly, as part of the greater openness to discussing the removal of objects from collections, creative forms of 'de-growing' collections are being contemplated, and even being put into practice (Morgan and Macdonald 2020). One example involves donating tools to charities that refurbish them and put them back into use. A recent Museum of London collections review and rationalisation project focusing on its social and working history collections disposed of just over five thousand duplicate and surplus objects (Stephens 2015; Mendoza 2017, 45–6). Many of these objects were transferred to accredited museums, yet a key aim was to seek more innovative routes and recipients for disposal. The museum gave over one hundred duplicate objects to the 'Workaid' charity, which redistributes items (such as tools, sewing machines and books) to communities for the learning of new skills. The museum also gave duplicated traditional tools used in manufacturing (such as carpentry, shoemaking and metalworking) to universities for teaching students about historic crafts, and for use in training this new generation of craftspeople (Russell n.d.). Several respondents to our survey expressed an interest in working with artists to similarly transform disposal projects in generative and socially meaningful processes (see Das (2015) for a similar example of a UCL-based project). This clearly resonates with the approaches described in Part V, Transformation, which seek to 'transform loss', and we see great potential for work along these lines in the museum sector in the future.

In this chapter, we have explored how profusion is experienced by the museum staff working with social history collections in the UK, and have outlined some of their strategies for dealing with it. We have explored some of the relativities and repertoires of keeping and disposal that we have observed, and we have discussed reasons why objects variously remain in or leave collections. We turn now to our visual essay on one of the knowledge-exchange events that informed our findings, before moving in the following chapters to explore how profusion is experienced and approached in homes.

Notes

1. This is a semi-fictionalised description based on a composite from our research. It also features in Macdonald and Morgan (2018a).
2. Some of the results discussed in this chapter have been published previously in Fredheim, Macdonald and Morgan (2018), Macdonald and Morgan (2018a), Macdonald and Morgan (2018b) and Morgan and Macdonald (2020).
3. For further information about this event see: 'Meaningful Objects: Stories and Videos from the Domestic Profusion Workshop' (<https://heritage-futures.org/curating-domestic-profusion-workshop/>).
4. For more extensive results from the survey, as well as further information about its design and questions, see Fredheim, Macdonald and Morgan (2018).
5. For further discussion see Macdonald and Morgan (2018a) and Morgan and Macdonald (2020).
6. Rodney Harrison discusses this as the 'affective weight' of objects that forms part of the 'curatorial responsibility' or burden in *Reassembling the Collection* (2013c).