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Research in Context

ADAD5003

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Title: With emphasis on Welsh language, culture and identity, choose a theme all focus on creative practitioners relevant to your field of study and critically analyse your choices.

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The Welsh dresser is two-piece item of furniture that has become synonymous with Wales. In North Wales, the dressers are usually designed with an enclosed cupboard base and row of shelves with a solid back above. Welsh dressers and items similar to its style were initially found in houses of noblemen, before finding their way to households in all level of society (Davies, 1991). With my childhood Welsh dresser as a starting point, this essay aims to argue that objects can tell a story through their history, meaning and importance to the owner. Objects can also reveal a lot about the owner or the culture and heritage they belong to by their presence within a collection of objects, and evoke memories. The focus on objects and collections is highly relevant to my own practice as an artist as many of my exhibits are collections of found objects, or new pieces made from found objects. Other pieces are new pieces of work that are made up from collections of found objects. Within this essay, I will discuss my memories, my inherited objects, and my stories linked to these objects, while discussing the greater importance of objects and collections.

An 'object' can be defined in a variety of ways. A dictionary definition recalls the Latin origin of the word 'obicere', meaning to block. However, in philosophy, a definition is a 'thing which is perceived' and external from the self. An object is a material, tangible thing, but it can also be a vegetable, mineral, personal item and any number of other things (Candlin & Guins, 2009). Therefore, the word object does not separate the natural from the artificial world. However, for the purposes of this essay, an object is an item that has meaning for the person who owns or had owned it, providing a connection with another person or a personal experience. The object connects you with the person or the event. This is closer to Littré's definition which states that an object is "anything which is the cause or subject of a passion; figuratively – and par excellence – the loved object" (Baudrillard, 2009, p. 48).

Where objects comes from, why they are significant to the person who owns them, and what the object means are all ways that objects can tell a story. When displayed in a gallery or museum, objects are often curated within a collection to paint a picture of a certain time or culture. The way collections of objects are displayed can show a running theme of how objects have meaning and how these meanings can be

translated between cultures. An example of this is the tradition of Chinese willow pattern plates displayed on Welsh dressers for show (Davies, 1991).



Figure 1: A dresser from Blaenau Ffestiniog, Merioneth, about 1770-80 (T. Alun Davies)

Curators in museums often use decorative objects as a way to show the tastes of the period (Koerner, 2004). In Paolozzi's exhibitions, he believed that his chosen pieces could "convey something of its power and which express the ways it most differs from our own" (Paolozzi, 1985, p. 17). This shows the careful consideration that goes into curating collections of objects.

In contrast, while objects in the home are curated to look a certain way, evolving as new objects enter the collection, they are not curating to suit a certain epoch's aesthetic as with museum collections. They reveal part of the owner's history, tastes, experiences, hobbies and many other complexities of human identity. Cherished objects in the home can consist of antiques, objects from childhood or earlier experiences to modern items.

A definition of cherished possessions is objects that are “considered special by the individual; those that, in a particular way, embody goals, serve a valuable purpose, or reflect the identity of a person” (Wapner, et al., cited in Kroger & Adair, 2008, p. 6). Another definition of cherished possessions is “objects that are experienced as extraordinary and emotion-evoking rather than as merely functional” (Belk cited in Kroger & Adair, 2008, p. 6). Belk goes on to explain that people are usually unwilling to sell such objects as they are worth more in sentimental value than market value. There is significance behind these objects that is particularly felt if they are lost. I have felt this in my own experience of realising that my childhood Lego castle had been lost from my family home. This was significant to me as it evoked childhood memories. Even more significant was the loss of my Mum’s pearls which she had before she met my dad and was travelling around the world. Unfortunately, the set of pearls which should have come to me, have been lost. Losing these objects means that I have lost an heirloom that had travelled with my mum and had fascinating stories attached.

Jens (2009) stated that “the desire is not to be unique in the sense of total self-reliance or even social disconnection, but to achieve social status, acceptance, and a sense of belonging through the projection of individuality” (p. 331). This links into the idea of objects signifying social status and wealth, casting people in ‘socially desirable roles’ (Chapman, 2012). It also links into the uniqueness of each person’s collection. No two authentic collection of individual objects are the same. When thinking about my mum’s collections and the Welsh dresser we had in the family home, I remember an array of things she had collected from her travels. When she was a young woman, she travelled around Asia, picking up objects along the way. Later in her life, she would pick up items from charity shops that reminded her of her travels. The objects were a combination of items from locations she visited and objects that reminded her of that time. The memories these objects give me come from hearing my mum talk about her travels as well as us picking out objects together from charity shops.



Figure 2: Top half of Mum's Welsh dresser, own photo (2022)

The photo shows the top half of my Mum's Welsh Dresser. It was bought as a set in the 1970's with a matching pine table and 6 chairs when my parents first got married. This display was ever changing and growing. In this display, there is a mismatch of curated objects including beach finds, driftwood, feathers, necklaces from the far east, painted shells and ceramics which I made as a child.

As well as being an example of a cherished collection, these objects can provide a comforting sense of self during major transitions of life, such as moving home or children moving away from the family home (Kroger & Adair, 2008). Mum had kept these items after I had moved out, providing her memories of me as a child.

In support of this idea, Erikson et al. interviewed older people living in care facilities. They noted that they were “struck by the evident concern of those who had moved into these diminished living areas to keep together old, familiar things. ... This supportive continuity that familiar objects offer us as we age can, of course, be a solace and a pleasure (Erikson et al cited in Kroger & Adair, 2008). This reminds me

of how upset my own mother was then she lost a lot of objects in a flood in 2020. People can be devastated about losing things, especially objects that they have inherited from others as these become part of you. These are items that cannot be replaced as it is the sentimental value that makes them important, not their monetary value or practical function. What seems trivial for others is important for the people who own the objects. This is more significant to older people, for whom these objects provide comfort and peace from the memories and personal meaning they hold. I have lost my own belongings in a flood, including some art books I won at school at the age of 18. These were important items for me, so I dried them out and kept them. They are no longer usable as the pages are stuck together, but the books covers still hold significance for me as a mnemonic object. These are objects that can trigger a memory (Worthen & Reed-Hunt, 2011). Psychology can explain why mnemonic objects are important when they are objects from a transitional time, such as adolescence. "Children come to invest in 'transitional objects'". For me, these objects provide a sense of belonging from a time when I was preparing to leave school and move into adulthood (Sennett, 2008, p. 158).

Social Psychologist Helga Dittmar, conducted research for her book about the meanings of material possessions and social nature of objects. Her research touches on how people identify themselves and other through objects associated with them, linking certain objects to wealth and social status. She questions the idea of Western individualism and if westerners are more individualist than other regions (Carrier, 1994, p. 736). This could be because of the implication that ownership of certain objects is related to wealth. This is where 'ostension', meaning how the object signifies the social group of the person who owns it, is more important than aesthetics or the practical function of the object (Dant, 1996).

When discussing the relationship between people and objects, Marilyn Strathern explains that "societies reveal themselves by the way they personify goods... personification generates social worlds by articulating relations within them among persons and things and persons" (Strathern cited in Koerner, 2004, pp. 29-32). This suggests that people give objects more meaning than the object in itself. Ferro (2019) echoes this by suggesting that our perception of an object changes the object's status from a 'thing' to an 'object', which can be changed by our feelings towards the objects. For instance, some objects could be deliberately altered and

changed into something else through cutting up, painting or any other type of adornment, whilst still maintaining the personal meaning of the original object. "When we consider a thing as an object and not as a simple entity, we are already putting it into relation with a subject" (Ferro, 2019, p. 579). This gives objects a greater meaning and a relationship with the person owning it and their experiences related to the object. Merleau-Ponty describes this as the visible and invisible aspects to which consciousness can be directed towards objects (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Ferro (2019) questions that if humans disappeared, would objects also disappear, as it is our perception of them that makes them objects? This idea links to Stallabrass (2009) who stated that, "Abandoned objects have crossed a great divide from which they can never return. Commodities are of course signs in a system of value, both monetary and social, which is lost when they are abandoned" (p.416). As a reaction to this, most of my art practice comprises of found objects that have been given new meaning through being repurposed as art. Before becoming a new object, they were lost things; 'rubbish'. My chandelier is a collection of these lost things, sculpted into new forms giving them a new purpose and creating an art piece with a story (fig 3). Chapman (2012) mentions that for a lot of people, our relationship with objects is short lived, with goods and purchases ending up in landfill. My own collections and art are about maintaining objects. This sentiment is similar to that of poet William Carlos Williams who stated that there should be "no ideas but in things" (cited in Sennett, 2008, p. 146). This suggests that ideas can culminate in meaningful 'things', especially things that are made meaningful by having been touched by others.



Figure 3: The Wearable Chandelier, own work (2023)

As discussed above, certain objects can tell stories through the memories they trigger. Other objects tell stories through their journey through time and sometimes geographical locations. A lot of my mum's objects came with her from Hong Kong. Others have been passed down through generations. Passing on cherished items can be a symbol of connection. Kroger & Adair (2008) interviewed people in late adulthood to talk about their connections with their objects. One interviewee stated

that a china tray that belonged to her grandmother and then her mother before being passed to her, gives her joy to look at because it makes her think about her family.

William Morris asked that people “have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful” (cited in Adamson, 2018 p.8). This shows the importance of things that have meaning. “Let’s now think of things as ends in themselves, props to put in the mantelpiece. Rather, let’s consider them as points of contact between people” (Adamson, 2018, p. 8). This links to the idea of objects as a way to start conversations about experiences and share these with family. When looking at objects at home, I would ask questions about them, which would then prompt conversations about how and where they were acquired. Similarly, when visiting my Uncle, I was fascinated with his themed collection of Victorian styled objects and asked about each one he had. Though his many objects and theatre posters, I learned about his past as an actor as well as his taste for Victoriana and horror films.

Through objects, part of the story remains after the person telling the story has gone. My mum had many photographs of her travelling through Asia and Russia. Through stories my mum told, I know about a lot of the people she met while travelling, so these photographs can help me to fill in some of the gaps in the stories by working out who the people are in the photographs. “The photograph infuses almost all levels of memory, even those of which it is not directly part. It constitutes a meta-value of memory construction, its tentacles spread out, blurring and constructing memory in its own insistent image” (Edwards, 2009, p. 331). Other objects can tell similar stories by combining known stories with what can be gleaned from the objects, creating stories from partly known facts.

Objects are important for telling stories, but many objects have lost their provenance. This means that without someone who remembers the history of the object to tell it, the story can become lost. To help with this, important objects are sometimes entered into accounts with information about their history, especially for objects entered into museums. Accounts can help objects talk by providing a description and “scripts of what they are...” (Cole, 2013, p. 111). Traditional Welsh dressers were labelled with their place of origin, showing their journey and history (Davies, 1991).

This helps us relate to them and understand more of their story, or as Cole (2013) puts it “allow the objects to be heard” (p. 111).

As an artist using found objects, I have a fascination for how other artists display collections. The examples below are several artists who display collections in different ways, from mundane items, to shrine-like spaces.



Figure 4: Thames Dig, Mark Dion (1999) This objects were collected from an archaeological dig and displayed in a dresser similar to the Welsh dresser.



Figure 5: Füsün's Tears by Pamuk. The artist displayed objects found in markets representing the attachment people have to their objects stemmer from personal heartbreak and sorrowful life histories.



Figure 6: The Empty House by Pamuk. This collection represents how objects are adrift from their original settings



Figure 7: Damien Hirst, *Installation of Pharmacy at Tate Modern*, 2012.



Figure 8: Joseph Cornell, "L'Humeur Vagabonde (Restless Mood)," 1955 box construction, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Robert and Aimee Lehrman. The artist elevates pebbles, shells and other ordinary objects "into the realm of the divine," the writer says Credit...The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; via National Gallery of Art.

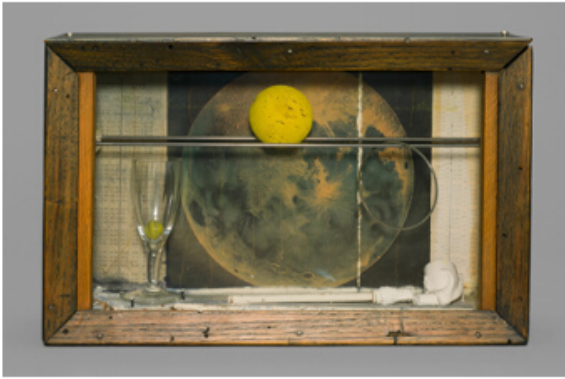


Figure 9: Joseph Cornell, Untitled (Soap Bubble Set), 1957.



Figure 10: Joseph Cornell, Untitled (Yellow Sand Fountain), Early 1950's



Figure 11: Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (For Trista)*, 1969.



Figure 12: Joseph Cornell, *Soap Bubble Set*, 1940 (reworked 1953).



Figure 13: Claudio Costa, *Ontologia Antologica* (Anthological Ontology), 1994.



Figure 14: Karsten Bott, *Trouser Pocket Collection*, 1996.

Gathered by the artist from the street and small enough to fit into a trouser pocket. Displayed as if ancient pottery, even the broken and obsolete acquire significance.



Figure 15 : Neil Cummings, *The Collection Yellow*, Detail, 1998.

A set of previously used yellow bottles by the artist, in a series of glassless vitrines showing found materials and recycled items.

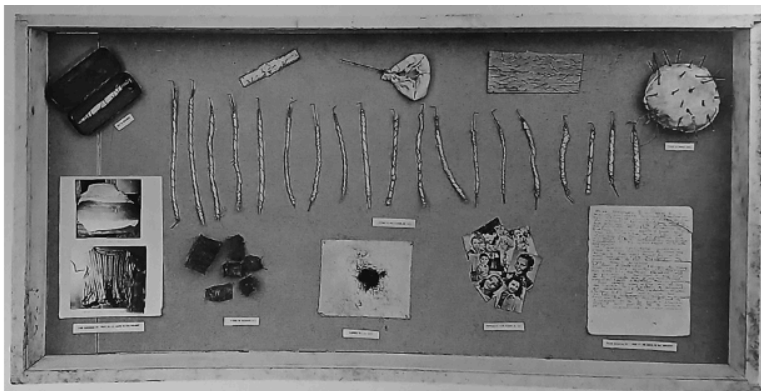


Figure 16: Christian Boltanski, *Vitrine de Reference*, 1971.

This is one of a series of works from the early 1970's which relate to his earliest memories. Vitines used are vessels/containers to preserve fabricated and found objects, personal keepsakes. Displayed as if they are an archaeological study, exhibits, assuming the role of a contemporary relics, fossils from the past in the context of modern civilisation.



Figure 17: Ilya Kabakov, The Man who never threw anything away, From Ten Characters, 1985-88. 1995.



Figure 18: Peter Blake, A Museum for Myself, 1977.

Blake's working environment is surrounded by many objects that it is seen by him as a museum in itself.



Figure 19: Richard Wentworth, Questions of Taste, 1997.

A display of ancient Egyptian drinking vessels from the British Museum juxtaposed with modern drinking vessels found discarded withing the museum's vicinity.



Figure 20 : Christian Boltanski, Inventory of the Man from Barcelona, 1995.

Private objects from a home in Barcelona, given a special significance and dimension with museological framing when viewed in a new context.

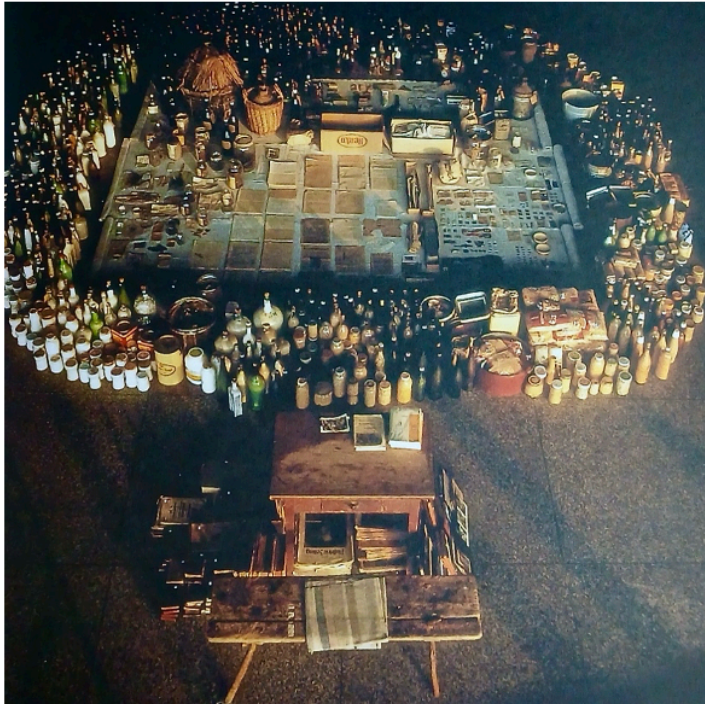


Figure 21: Nikolaus Lang, For Mrs G. Legacy – Food and Religious Hoard, Bayersolen, 1981-82.

Work of Lang since the 1970's has strong parallels with displays in museums of ethnographical, anthropological and archaeological objects. This installation consists of a vast collection from an old lady's house equalling a lifetime's accumulation.



Figure 22 : Herbert Distel, Museum of Drawers, 1970-77.

Distel invited artists to create a miniature work of art for his miniature museum of which he created and curated.



Figure 23 : Lisa Milroy, Plates, 1992.

Actually a painting but of a group depicting familiar objects. Depicted like museum artifacts.



Figure 24 : Soft paste porcelain, printed underglaze, Spode factory, Stoke-on-Trent, (pattern 2414) 1815.

Very similar to a bowl that Mum brought back from Hong Kong.



Figure 25 : Figure of Guan Yin, the Chinese Mother Goddess, soft paste porcelain, Chelsea, 1750. My Mum had a statue very similar in wood, maybe rosewood, picked-up on her travels in the Asia. Which I have now inherited.

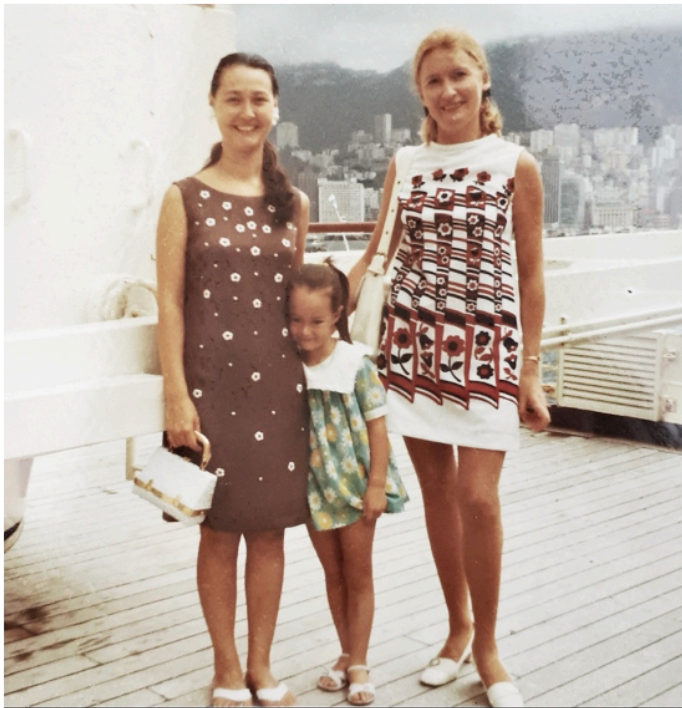


Figure 26 : Mum and Arlene with her daughter (from Memory), Looks like the ferry to Kowloon Island, Hong Kong, Sometime 1969-71.



Figure 27: Mock-up Mum's Welsh Dresser, Own Work (2024).



Figure 28: Detail: Mock-up Mum's Welsh Dresser, Own Work (2024).

Placing a group of objects together in a gallery, museum or home elevates the objects giving them an aura of significance as well as personal associations.

Whether the objects are seen as archives of contemporary history or ancient relics, they are creating emotional links between peoples individual lives and the history of their environment at that moment in time.

Putting found and collected objects onto the Welsh dresser at home gave significance to them 'museumizing' and elevating their status to something worthy of display. Creating a monument to the presence of the living as well as a memory of the dead.

I find this is true within my own art practice, by giving an object a pedestal or a display in a box this gives it power, a voice, a story. Thus creating a distance between the viewer and the object as in a museum environment, giving the power to seduce and spike curiosity to the passerby. Giving the opportunity for objects to speak to us.

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