

## COLLECTING, EXHIBITING, AND INTERPRETING: Museums as Mediators and Midwives of Meaning

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### ABSTRACT

A commentary on Paul Mullins's article "The Banality of Everyday Consumption," this essay engages questions concerning domestic objects that might be collected in urban settings. It discusses challenges involved in documenting the complex meanings associated with such objects, what happens when objects are incorporated into museum collections and exhibitions, and how museum visitors interpret exhibitions in relation to their own expectations, assumptions, and narratives. [collecting, exhibitions, objects, narrative, visitor reception]

Paul Mullins's article on "The Banality of Everyday Consumption" raises a number of issues that cut across the articles included in this special issue.<sup>1</sup> His article moves from objects to things to artifacts to the kinds of information and discourses that surround and envelop objects (or which objects sometimes evade) to the incorporation of objects into that odd phenomenon called a "collection"—whether that collection is made by the people who use the objects to begin with or by museums themselves.<sup>2</sup> Then finally, he moves to how objects might and will be presented to an audience.

In this way, Mullins sketches the array and range of activities involved in any effort to make a collection in today's circumstances. Indeed, he indicates clearly that while making collections is an invaluable, important, and, in fact, critical thing to do, it is not at all an easy thing to do. His article thus has methodological implications above and beyond his particular substantive concern with the ephemera of seemingly insignificant bric-a-brac, which he seeks to examine to show how meaning resides in such everyday objects and to elevate objects treated as insignificant to the level of significance that they deserve. He examines the meanings and significance of everyday objects in light of the difficulties that such collecting entails.

In this essay, I will first consider the difficulties in collecting—not difficulties in acquiring objects themselves, whether they are obtained through an archaeological dig, by getting people to bring them to a museum, or by other means, but the difficulties involved in what is called "documenting" them. That is, what information is involved and how can it be collected along with the objects? Second, I will discuss what happens when collected objects are brought into those august institutions called museums to become part of a "collection." In doing so, I will also distinguish among different kinds of museums and their associated grand narratives. Finally, I will turn to what happens when objects are put into an exhibition context and interpreted by an audience. What kind of work gets done in the act of coming to a museum and viewing them? Along the way, I will note several methodological lessons about making, documenting, and exhibiting collections and about how to think of future visitors and their potential interpretations.

### OBJECTS, ASSEMBLAGES, COLLECTIONS: RECOGNIZING AND RECORDING MULTIVALENT MEANINGS AND CONTEXTS

Mullins's article is about everyday objects. These objects, he says, are readily available. The meaning attached to them is typically assumed, that is, there is often little explicit discussion associated with them. If there is discussion, it is a minimal discussion often associated with material qualities of the objects themselves, what he calls "material discourse." If people are involved with them, the stories they tell are often not about the bric-a-brac but about how these bric-a-brac were collected. That is, the stories and discussion are not about what an object is and what it means, which is what we scholars often think of when we try to do symbolic interpretation. Rather, they are about how an object happens to come into the place that it occupies in a home, or wherever it might be. In this case, our attention is largely on objects in domestic spaces.

While Mullins tells us a great deal about the iconography of the objects themselves through the work he has done on them, there seems to be more going on with their meaning and significance as objects brought into the home. Where interpretation fluoresces, if indeed it does fluoresce, is not around the object itself as a symbolic object, but around the

acts of acquiring and collecting an object and bringing it into a particular place. That is one of the main ways that people who acquired these objects appropriate them as a form of meaning for themselves. It is the social process of assembling a collection. We've paid attention to this in the context of museums, but it is just as important in the context of ordinary, everyday life (Cardinal 1994; Findlen 1994; Macdonald 2007; O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000; Stewart 1993). We need to recognize that objects are not just objects in and of themselves, but they are part of the assemblages to be found in homes. Their meanings and significance are related not just to the fact that a figurine of a domestic animal, for example, can represent domesticity or the aspirations of domesticity that we desire in our family, but to its role as part of an assemblage of objects that represent the array and multiplicity of identities that people assume or aspire to through their work, the conduct of their lives, and their interactions with others.

Anthropologists call this process symbolic mediation, that is, how an action, a thing, or an element of the environment itself comes to acquire meaning and the kind of meaning that it comes to acquire. This kind of meaning is not one largely relegated to the instrumental. To take the example of a hammer, if I had a hammer, I would hammer a nail. Clearly hammers carry more significance than that, for an object's meaning is not exhausted by talking only about its use value. As much of Mullins's work shows, objects' ideological significance within a particular social formation is only part of the story.

During the Victorian period, one place that interpretation flourished was in literature, particularly literature produced by scholars whose work documented an imagined domesticity, such as Dickens. But paradoxically, Dickens not only imagined domesticity but was himself domestic in the sense that he had the very bric-a-brac that he describes and talks about as part of his own domestic landscape.

We are dealing here with a multiplicity of urban spaces. Mullins's article largely emphasizes individual objects, but he also shows that objects cannot be contained in their singleness and their uniqueness, and have to be organized and thought about in terms of their assemblages as well. This points to potential tensions in the meaning of an object between what a single object stands for on the one hand and what it

stands for when part of a group. Do I have a little dog or do I have a set of animal figurines? And what, then, do the animal figurines mean? Or is it a larger group altogether: figurines as a whole? Or is it in fact a parlor?

In other words, it is not only the collection, it is also context that shapes and defines an object's meanings. How are single objects and assemblages placed and displayed, whether in familiar contexts or unfamiliar ones? And to follow Jonathan Swift, contexts are a lot like fleas. There are big contexts and little contexts, bigger contexts and littler contexts, and so on *ad infinitum*.<sup>3</sup> The problem with the concept of context is that it is an infinitely divisible and infinitely expandable concept. That is both its utility and its curse (Duranti and Goodwin 1992).

It is not surprising that the impetus for the kind of work Mullins describes comes from archaeology because archaeology tends to deal not directly with context so much as with objects and with context perceived indirectly through the screen of remains from archaeological sites. Luckily, the work he has been doing has been able to draw not just on archaeological sites but also on representations of those sites in literature, offering some insight into iconography. In other words, Mullins's work is historical and works with a range of sources. Throughout, however, he stresses that we must treat objects as embodied symbols and as having the properties of symbols—including being polysemic, that is, having a range of meanings and multiple referents. He argues that they should not be treated simply as signs, as possessing single meanings, despite the tendency in scholarship to reduce the symbolic status of objects to sign reference, particularly when concerned with ideological analysis.<sup>4</sup>

This means that theories of objects that take them as representing, standing in for, or reinforcing some sort of order, while not wrong, are largely incomplete. They reduce the symbolic, with its penumbra of reference, to the ideological, and objects come to be seen simply as supporting pillars of a social order. Or more precisely, they come to be seen as pillars of a classificatory scheme through which the social order is created and re-created, a scheme that inscribes difference and places it in a hierarchical system. But if that is so, why is it that some of the strongest pillars of support are to be found among members who are, in

certain respects, not ideologically central to the system? For instance, if we consider this sitting room in the home of an African American teacher in New Orleans, Louisiana, around 1900 (Figure 1), one might see the owners as centrally part of the system in some ways and yet ideologically not as central.<sup>5</sup> The parlor includes figurines on the mantle, a full bookcase, framed photographs, guns, musical instruments, and an American flag. Objects are used by people in a range of social positions because as symbols, going beyond the single reference they might have as signs, people can engage with them not only in terms of who they are but also who they desire to be or who they think they are, even when significant others, or insignificant others, treat them as if they are not part of the social order.

Simply possessing and displaying certain objects can engage people in a debate and discourse even though there is no overt debate and discourse available around them. I dispute who I am or assert who I am—which can be the same thing—not through my direct engagement with you but rather through the arrangement of things on my desk, in my parlor, or around my house. It is critical to understand, then, that we need to look at objects and arrays of objects that may not seem particularly important not only through the lens of system maintenance but also through the lenses of historical and semiotic change (Kratz 2012). We also need to be sensitive not just to change but to the very possibilities



Figure 1. This image of the parlor in an African American teacher's home in New Orleans, Louisiana, ca. 1900, was included in the albums portraying African American life that W. E. B. Du Bois presented at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-51558.)

of change, to the change that may not happen. We need to be sensitive not just to the world that we have, or the world that we have lost, but also to the world that we seek and may aspire to and may never find.

Let me provide an example. We lived in a house in Atlanta, Georgia, in a middle-class neighborhood of upgraded Craftsman cottages between two other cottages. On our right was a house with a backyard that had a black lawn jockey figure and on the left was a house whose backyard had a lifelike figure of an African American boy seated on their stone wall.<sup>6</sup> I never spoke to the two families about their figures, but the family on the right with the lawn jockey was white and the family on the left was black. Looking out to the backyard, I always felt like I was in the middle of some exchange. Was one a commentary on the other? And which was which? Moreover, the objects could have been reversed, and the meanings could have been reversed as well. The fact of the matter is that lawn jockeys are collected by white and black alike. The whole phenomenon of African American collecting of black memorabilia is a subject that is much studied (Buster 2000; Goings 1994; Harris 1998). One suspects, though, that even now the meaning of collecting a black lawn jockey figure for a middle- or working-class white family in Atlanta, Georgia, might be a little different from what it would be for an African American family of various classes.

Symbolic meaning is not natural but arbitrary. It does not depend solely on something like the shape of the object or the customary meaning associated with it. But if it is arbitrary, that is not to say it is totally random. It is both arbitrary and determined at one and the same time.<sup>7</sup> It is laden with meanings whose subsequent meanings are dependent on the primary uses of the objects. That is, in philosophical terms, they are parasitic, one feeds upon the other. To stay with the same example, one does not just collect lawn jockeys because one thinks they are “pretty,” but because they have meanings that some people may be able to articulate pretty well. So if a black person collects lawn jockeys, they may not be able to tell you why. Yet they do indeed collect them because they themselves are black and the figures represent a history of being black, and that might mean having both a marginal and a middle-class stake in society.

Now that may be complicated and convoluted, but it gives a sense of the morass of layered meanings that can be involved. It also means I am happy I never asked our neighbors about their lawn sculptures! Nonetheless, this example provides a sense of how sets of meanings develop, as many anthropologists have taught us, including Victor Turner (1967, 1975). It is a question of context and a question of purpose in placing objects in particular ways, and contexts and purpose are not the same thing. Symbols can be both expressive *and* instrumental, but they do in fact affect and shape the way an object is placed in a setting. In this case, we have not only the collection of figurines and memorabilia, but the lawn jockey also illustrates an important aspect of symbolism that objects can embody, namely that its context and relations to other contexts shape the meaning.<sup>8</sup> Only nuanced research can get at the specific configurations of meanings that objects have in context. To return now to the figurines in Mullins's example, they happen to be single objects inside the house, but immediately upon looking at how they are used and placed, we find we are dealing with arrays of objects.

In fact, it is so nuanced, and so ephemeral are the meanings, that often all we have are the more conventional systemic meanings. That leaves a considerable amount of interpretative work to get at the other sorts of meanings involved. How a museum collecting the objects can document all this for collections is indeed an important question. In urban contexts, this means that objects are often treated as univocal signs of class difference, gender, and other categories treated in a crude and relatively ahistorical manner, categories that should be the beginning of an analysis but are often the end of the analysis instead. In other words, analysis starts with a single association or meaning, but it does not always reach beyond that to symbolic analysis to add other layers of meaning and history. How to get at those layers is indeed the problem, but it is important to recognize that even if we do not get much beyond simple assertions of dominance or difference, that may not be all there is.

Mullins's article has argued this convincingly. The solution proposed is that collecting objects must be accompanied by specification of context, collection of oral materials (presumably based on interviews), newspaper reports, and an array of media representations, as well as other kinds of material. Yet, why do

we even have objects if meanings are easily, discursively available, and if the creative aspects of people's activities, which feature prominently in Mullins's article, are so prominent in consciousness? But of course they are not. In a sense, the article argues for an every-person-as-artist kind of model, with the artistry shown through the arrangement of things and not necessarily through making them. As anybody who works with artists knows, they are not always the most articulate people about their own work. Sometimes they are even obdurately inarticulate, as a matter of principle.

Meanings are attached to things because objects provide vehicles for people to think with and more importantly to feel with. They offer a material way to combine feeling and thinking as opposed to working with abstract concepts alone. But thinking is not always speaking; meanings are not always articulated or easily articulable. Social differences are one set of categories and might be our analytical way of talking about a set of meanings and feelings, but that is not necessarily how others address them. In fact, one theory of symbolic forms that runs from Emile Durkheim to Victor Turner argues that symbolic meanings tend to be attached to things and become prominent because the sensory, visceral aspects of some things lend to abstractions a certain psychic energy, creating affective states that might range from attachment and loyalty to disgust and other reactions. These symbolic syntheses can be either order-producing or social-change inducing and are used by despots and revolutionaries alike. Turner (1967), for example, talks about the *mudyi* tree, which is a symbol in male and female initiation rituals practiced by the Ndembu people of Zambia. The white latex of the tree is associated with referents ranging from semen and mother's milk to abstractions related to matrilineality. Another example would be the range of associations that connect the American flag with blood, guts, bravery, and patriotism.

Freudian undertones exist here about which I have always been a little dubious, but there is no question that commitment to something or disengagement from something can be produced, conjured up, or heightened by the complex sensory and ideological references that symbols invoke in relationship to things. But that is fancy language and a powerful claim, while in contrast we started out talking about

little porcelain dogs. So the question is: Do little porcelain dogs do the same kind of thing that the *mudiyi* tree or the American flag is believed to do? I think little porcelain dogs might indeed have the power to do so, though they may do so *sotto voce*, as it were, rather than through loud, dramatic declarations. Further, it may not be the particular objects in and of themselves so much as their being a part of an array of objects through which people make the very textures of their lives.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the case, however, the multivocality of symbolic forms is not random but is indeed complex and related to system, purpose, and context.

Nor is all this symbolic knowledge and meaning necessarily conscious, so a key question is: How does one collect it, if it is not conscious? It would be wonderful if we could just say, "Alright, I've got an intern working on this project. Let's send the intern out, select an interesting neighborhood, select house number five randomly, and tell the intern to go in, collect all the figurines, and find out what they mean." But the problems are not small. To start with, there is a universal aspect of our social and cultural life, that is, that meaning may be implicit and rendered as often in action as assertion. We mean by doing, and a lot of that doing is definitional in nature. We do through our body; we do through our actions; and we often do through our clothing or the things with which we surround our body. We dress like a man or a woman. We dress like, or act like, an American, feel like a student, or are told not to be a child—as if all of this were transparent. So even when some of the doing is spoken or referred to verbally, it may be done in a very compressed, compact, and oblique form.

There are two issues here. The first is that meaning can be tacit or implicit and often bound to context. The second is that telling can often get in the way of meaning. The anthropologist Meyer Fortes used to tell the story of the millipede and the crow to illustrate this. The millipede encounters a crow one day. The crow looks at the millipede and says, "You know, I've always wondered about you millipedes." He says, "How do you know what leg to move and when to move it?" The millipede thinks about it and thinks about it. The more the millipede thinks about it, the more paralyzed the millipede becomes until he no longer knows what leg to move and when to move it. At which point, the crow gobbles up the millipede and goes on his way. In other words, there are certain

ways in which knowledge itself is problematic if it is formulated discursively.

Moreover, what we know is often appropriate in one context but not in another—that is another methodological stricture to remember. This is the case whether we know something explicitly or implicitly. In my fieldwork with East African agropastoralists, I often found that women were the ones who knew the most about where the cows came from and to whom they belonged, as well as other complex knowledge about the herds. But they were not supposed to know about such things, so you would have to find different ways to get women to talk about their knowledge. Similarly, sometimes the best way to find out about clan and lineage matters in a patrilineal society is to get a group of men talking inside the house but to have a woman sitting in the doorway whispering the answers. What this underlines is the importance of paying attention to how things are said and who gets to say them, as well as when and where.

This is not a digression. It does not take us away from things because things reside in space, and we often turn space into place through the implicit attribution of meaning. We give it the same kind of symbolic significance that we attribute to things, and we often do so through the placement and arrangement of things. Let us return for a moment to the example of the African American parlor in Louisiana in Figure 1. That is an exquisitely artful place through which meaning is made not by didactic assertions of identity but through the arrangement of stuff. I'm sure that if we had more information and analysis, we might be able to unpack the arrangement and reasons why certain things are off to the left or the right and so forth. I suspect that some aspects of the arrangement are extraordinarily overdetermined. Take the smoking Turk figure that Dickens kept on his desk.<sup>10</sup> In the study, it can be one thing. In the parlor, it might be another, but *what* it might mean is hard to tell. And in the museum, it could well be a third thing altogether. These problems of meaning are even more vexed than I have suggested, however. First of all, we need to consider what Michael Silverstein (1981:10) calls "the limits of metapragmatic awareness," a concept that can help us to differentiate between meanings and practices that are relatively available discursively and those that are not so readily available, especially in contexts of significant change. One

thing Silverstein shows in relation to language is that people are more likely to be able to talk about the grammatical structures they use when they are contiguous in a sentence, but when a grammatical function is marked by discontinuous elements, people may have difficulty talking about it.<sup>11</sup>

What is true for language, in this case, is also relevant for symbolism (Kratz 2010:18–25). People might be able to talk about what Turner (1967) and others, such as Sherry Ortner (1973), call “key symbols” in ways that can be relatively eloquent. But what about when symbols are in a minor key, for instance when you move from the American flag, which is in the photograph of the New Orleans parlor, to the dog figurine? If you could talk to the teacher whose parlor it was, you might find that you get more commentary on the American flag than you would on a set of figurines in the study. Maybe not. But commentary could be confounded if the figurines are dispersed in various ways throughout people’s lives and homes rather than just collected together in one place (to parallel Silverstein’s discussion of discontinuous grammatical structures).

The problem is that the creative and ephemeral aspects of meaning, which I think are of particular interest to Mullins, may be less scheduled by the dominant social order and power, another feature that may be relevant in thinking about social correlates of the limits of metapragmatic awareness. Rather, they tend to take the form of what Raymond Williams (1977) calls the “emergent” or “structures of feeling,” which are two separate things.<sup>12</sup> Williams (1977:123–135) refers to structures of feeling as pre-emergent patterns of meaning that are embodied more in arrangements of things and relationships than in anything that can be explicitly said at the time. His example, curiously enough, is our friend Dickens and social class. Williams points out that in his stories and novels, Dickens does not have—nor does anyone at this point in time—an articulable theory of class difference, particularly in relationship to mode of production and status. Rather, what happens is that the dominant Victorian theory is reversed. The dominant theory at the time was that one’s character determines who one is in social life. If you are a lazy person, you are naturally going to wind up in the poorhouse. This is reversed in Dickens, so that if you are in the poorhouse, then you are seen as lazy. There

is a way in which Dickens reverses figure and ground, symbolically speaking. For Williams that has to do with the shifting structures of feeling at the time. There is a different set of meanings and understandings that Dickens does not explicitly articulate—they are not available to him to do so because they are, Williams says, “in solution” (1977:133–134). They have not precipitated out as yet.

When making a collection, then, there are a number of methodological difficulties to deal with if we are to understand and document the many ways that objects are used to hold and create meaning. These include: (1) how to recognize and record the configurations of multivalent meanings involved; (2) how to include the significance of acquisition narratives and the social process of collecting; (3) how to document the way objects take on meanings both individually and as part of assemblages and arrangements; (4) how to incorporate the contextually variable nature of meaning; and (5) how to grapple with the way that meanings can be not just discursively available but also implicit and made through practice. In addition to these methodological challenges, there is a problem with the way Mullins’s article describes the relationship of agent to thing. It is missing a critical term. He describes how meanings are ascribed to things, what these meanings can be, and how these meanings can be expository of the dominant order (usually through how things represent categories and classes of people and objects, and how they should or might relate to one another). He describes ideal social relations, and the article offers an excellent discussion of the more fragile, ephemeral, but oh-so-critical set of meanings that can be personal. Mullins pays particular attention to how these can be inscribed and inserted into domestic space. It is often far easier to talk about the ideological or political order, in fact, than it is to talk about the domestic order.

Mullins counterposes this to the creative and ephemeral aspects that are open to change. But he does not take into account how meanings, especially those attached to things, can be backward looking. Objects are prominent resources for invoking a world that seems to have been lost, for nostalgia, which could be related to identities, playfully enacted (as colonial nostalgia often is), or called upon in defense of an existing order. In other words, there is another set of meanings and relationships through which

things can be expository. These are neither expository of the dominant order nor reaching toward a possible new order but rather are ways of valorizing and thinking about the past that can then be brought into relationship with the dominant order or with a new order that is contingent. This relates to the category that Williams (1977) refers to as the “residual.” Williams uses these three categories—the dominant, residual, and emergent—and all are relevant in thinking about the ways that objects might convey meaning.

Let me turn here to the words of Karl Marx, who is an eloquent theorist of the residual when he talks about costume in his introduction to the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, written in 1851 and 1852. Marx (1869) argues that the turn to the past here is a means of defending an existing order in a situation of crisis—although it can also be a way of challenging an existing order. Marx begins chapter 1 as follows: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” (1869:Para. 1). For Marx, the residual is always farcical. He goes on, noting the historical pairings of the moment and commenting on relations between past and present:

Caussidiere for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848–51 for the Montagne of 1793–95, the nephew for the uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances of the second edition of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it out of self-selected circumstances, but out of circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. [Marx 1869:Para. 2]

In this case, we will call it the residual. Marx continues, talking about the grip that familiar past forms can hold in moments when people are reaching for new ideas and practices. A language-learning analogy describes the moment when revolutionary understanding has fully emerged.

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied in revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that

did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes, in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul. . . . In like manner, the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother language, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue. [Marx 1869: Para. 2]

Marx offers a powerful statement about how the complex relationships among identity, history, and things such as costume can be invoked through the symbolic functioning of what Raymond Williams (1977) calls the “residual” in social formations. Though Mullins’s article does not use Williams’s terms, the dominant and emergent can be identified in his analysis. The conceptual work of the residual needs to be added to the mix as well. All three might operate in the symbolism associated with a single object or an array of objects.

If we return now to the domain of objects, what we have seen is that the various ways that we attribute symbolic value to things involve complex and contingent relationships that not only relate us to our present and to who we may be but also thrust us back into a past that we may enjoy, challenge, or use in different ways. To see how the residual can support the dominant order in display situations, one need only go to Walt Disney World. There one can find explicit elaborations and representations of gender conflict, racism, and so forth, all presented as in the past, in costume, in relationship to a conflictless present and a utopian future (Kratz and Karp 1993; Wallace 1985). The residual functions as a way of turning at least one aspect of Disney World into nostalgia.

So far I have sought to unpack the surprisingly intricate aspects of how things can serve as symbols and to show how this theme leads us not only back to ideology and power but also to identity and the complex multiplicity that all members of society

experience as social agents. To say that things operate as symbols is also to say that the meanings symbols embody are attached to contexts, that contexts are produced by knowledgeable actors (not necessarily discursively able actors—that's different), that the meanings through which action and interaction in context are produced are often neither articulated nor even available as part of the everyday discourse of actors, and that there are formidable, but not insurmountable, methodological issues involved. Or, as anthropologists like to say, "it's complicated."

### EXHIBITIONS, NARRATIVES, AND CONUNDRUMS OF RECEPTION

Let me turn now to issues involved with transferring objects from their naturally occurring settings to the museum context as they become part of a collection, are incorporated into exhibitions, and are interpreted by visitors.<sup>13</sup> Additional layers of institutional and symbolic complexity may well be added in that transfer and the new museum context. Museums are themselves complex organizations that attribute symbolism and meaning to things and use them in their own contexts, framing them to exhibit the meanings they select or attribute to them. In addition, objects may be given meanings in museums as they lie in a seemingly passive state in storage drawers. These endeavors, often called "collecting and exhibiting," are fraught with their own difficulties and problems—not least of which is that museums claim to collect and exhibit for their audiences, who themselves show a stubborn tendency to interpret objects and meanings on their own terms. Moreover, museum staff are trained professionals caught up in institutional and disciplinary narratives of their own, which indeed creates real problems for making assertions about collections for the future. Their institutional and disciplinary narratives can have as much effect on how objects are presented as the meanings attached to them in their so-called naturally occurring settings.

The following four stories about the meanings and interpretations that visitors attribute to exhibitions and objects illustrate some of the conundrums involved. The first is an example related to the old Africa Hall, which was on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., until 1992. (It was eventually replaced



Figure 2. This diorama of a Neanderthal burial ends the Ice Age exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. It once led directly into a transition to the former Africa Hall, which was closed in 1992. (Photograph by Corinne A. Kratz and Ivan Karp.)

by the *African Voices* exhibition that opened in 1999.) One entry led into the Africa Hall from the Ice Age Hall, which ended with a diorama of a Neanderthal funeral in which a standing man, dressed in skins, held his arm up, looking out in a kind of mystical way (Figure 2). If you followed his gaze into the adjoining hall, he seemed to be looking right through a doorway into a house built by the Himba people of Namibia, circa 1914. They were shown wearing traditional clothing, which in 1914 was derived from missionary costume (Figure 3).

So the Ice Age seemed to look into colonial Africa. As people moved from one hall to the other, some assumed they were engaged with and seeing an evolutionary sequence. The museum received letters about school groups in which white kids teased black kids about being close to Neanderthal man and other comments showing such evolutionary interpretations. Visitors were trying to make sense of this transition between exhibitions and seemed to ask themselves, "What's going on?" In what common-sense world would you see a Neanderthal man dressed in skins and a woman dressed in Victorian garb and assume you are moving from one evolutionary stage to the next?<sup>14</sup>

The broad narrative of the institution, the National Museum of Natural History, is devoted to evolution, and that overcame whatever one tried to do in specific exhibition halls. Generations of curators had tried to move the Africa Hall away from this conjunction, but it never happened. I once wrote a memo, a bit tongue in cheek, but not much, suggesting that if they would not move the halls, then we



Figure 3. This diorama of a Himba house in Namibia, ca. 1914, was at the entrance that led into the former Africa Hall from the Ice Age Hall. (Smithsonian Institution slide no. 71-418. Reproduced with permission.)

should put up signs saying, “You are now entering an evolution-free zone.” My suggestion was not followed. The story makes the important point, though, that visitors construct narrative continuities, even if unintended, across exhibitions within the same museum. Visitors to the Field Museum’s African exhibit, on the other hand, may well miss a narrative and didactic point that *is* intended and in fact built into the very architecture of display. That exhibition includes an elaborate section representing a research station in the Great Rift Valley, where visitors walk along a kind of catwalk. It goes up and down, up and down—which is supposed to indicate that you are passing through different altitudes and ecological zones. So when it goes up, you are in one ecological zone and then you go down into another zone and so on. However, to my knowledge and memory, no label actually explains this. If ordinary visitors recognize that they are being taught this complex ecological story about microzones as they walk, I would be surprised.<sup>15</sup>

The next two stories begin to sketch the range of expectations that visitors might have concerning exhibition design and cultural display. I once took a very distinguished art historian through the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History; she was a pioneer in the critical school of art history concerned with disrupting art historical stories. As we walked through the museum exhibitions, she was nodding, and looking, and finally she paused and said, “Well, if they want to read books, why don’t they

go buy books? Why do they have all these texts on the wall?” Museums for her were a visual experience, completely. Objects were paramount, textual explanation and narrative an intrusive distraction.

Another time, in the days before the collapse of the Soviet Union, I was asked to show a high official from the Soviet Ministry of Culture, who was visiting the Festival of American Folklife at the Smithsonian, through the National Museum of Natural History.<sup>16</sup> After we went through the museum, we stopped outside to look at a performance space for the festival where young kids from Washington, D.C., were demonstrating breakdancing. We paused, we watched, we contemplated. And then the deputy minister turned to me and said, “Where are their folk costumes?” I was tempted to say, “They left them in Africa,” or “They lost them during the slave voyage.” But again, as in the previous story, this shows that visitors, even a sophisticated scholar or a diplomat traveling the world representing the Soviet Union, bring certain sets of expectations, assumptions, and narratives to interpretation of exhibitions. In this case, a cultural display defined through the category of folk culture created an institutional orientation that shaped his expectations, perhaps also in relation to Soviet notions about folk culture.

My fourth and final example is from another natural history museum and shows how visitors’ interpretations and attention can be shaped through expectations passed on from others. The Wattis Hall of Human Cultures, formerly on display at the California Academy of Sciences, was in some ways a truly bizarre exhibition (Karp and Kratz 2000:210–217). In a large rectangular room, the hall showed the cultures of the world arrayed according to two grids: wet/dry and hot/cold. For instance, wet, cold cultures would be at one end and were represented by Netsilik Eskimo. Each cultural display featured a life group (like a diorama), each of which included a canonical animal. If you went to Oceania—which would be a wet, hot culture—there was a New Guinea display with a Dani woman bent over to dig in a garden standing next to a pig in such a way that it might be hard to tell which is which.<sup>17</sup> All labels for African and Pacific cultures were in the present tense, those for Native American displays were in the past and present tense, and labels for the Japanese display were consistently in past tense. It seemed that every single

problematic technique of representation was contained in this hall.<sup>18</sup>

As we were documenting the hall in 1990, something striking occurred. We were near the display on “Aborigines of the Western Australian Desert,” which included a man lying with his domestic animal, a dingo (Figure 4). We were the only people in the hall. Then, suddenly we were surrounded by a noisy crowd of little people. It was a school group. They ran into the hall, pushing and shoving, yelling and laughing. But then it was as if they lined up, taking turns to get into the one corner where, if you bent over, you could see the penis on the seated Australian man in the display. This was clearly not something they discovered that day, coming into the hall; it was cultural knowledge that had been transmitted and prepared them for how to approach the exhibition.

Taken together, these stories sketch some of the diverse factors that shape how visitors create meaning through objects and exhibitions. The varied expectations that visitors bring about the priority of objects, the topic of an exhibition, and museums themselves combine with their interpretations of institutional orientations and exhibition design and content as they forge connections and meanings, fashion interpretive narratives, and sometimes miss intended messages. Visitors’ interpretive work in exhibitions necessarily retains a certain indeterminacy even as it



Figure 4. The hot, dry corner of the Wattis Hall of Human Cultures began with a display on “Aborigines of the Western Australian Desert.” The display seen behind that was “The Gabra: East African Herders,” with a life group showing a Gabra woman with a camel. When we were visiting the hall in 1990, schoolchildren squeezed into the space between the displays in order to get a better view of the Aboriginal man seated with his back to the camera. (Photograph by Corinne A. Kratz.)

is shaped by exhibition content and design (Kratz 2002:212–218). When we think about collecting urban material for future exhibitions and visitors in the next century, the indeterminacy multiplies.

How, then, are we to understand these complex social formations called museums and how they represent and how those representations are interpreted? Museums are engines that make their own narratives, based in part on how they define their disciplines, goals, and relationships to communities, as well as a variety of other things. It seems that every point in this process is overdetermined. Nonetheless, let me distinguish five such narratives or styles. This will greatly oversimplify the situation, and I want to be clear that the exhibition styles I describe here are ideal types, rarely found in this stark, pure form. However, I describe them to make the point that museums use narrative devices that are more often visual in nature than verbal. The museum is a visual experience, although all museums use a combination of the visual, the verbal, and an array of sensory material to create an exhibit. The complex ways these are combined and used are only now beginning to be unpacked (Kratz 2011), and the roles that objects and collections will play in new approaches to exhibition design and experience that develop in the coming century remain to be seen.

The first style could be called the white cube (O’Doherty 2000). In the white cube exhibition, the emphasis is on visual experience. The form is based on the assumption that certain experiences are visual and elemental, and that we all respond, or can be trained to respond, to such basics as form and color. If we were to use Williams’s (1977) terms, this is the dominant exhibition form for the art museum, although that has been changing. This display form is the response of art museums, particularly contemporary art museums, to the domination of modernism in art itself, and this form of representation took over the museum. Of course, it did not take over the Metropolitan Museum to the same degree that it took over the Museum of Modern Art; the Metropolitan still has displays like the Chinese scholar’s study, for instance. But these are ideal types, after all.

The second approach shows an array of varied forms within a particular category. This was often found in colonial exhibits but is also used to illustrate change, particularly of an evolutionary kind. The

literature on colonialism in museums has illustrations of colonial and ex-colonial officials' displays, for instance, showing an array of spear types, with a wall of beautiful spears.<sup>19</sup> That is an aesthetic display of their forms. If you put this approach to didactic purposes, you might get something like the Pitt Rivers Museum. There you might see a display of all different kinds of lamps, which would allow you to see the evolution of the lamp from the whale oil lamp to the electric lamp and so on.

The Pitt Rivers is often called an evolutionary museum, and the claim is often made that the exhibitions have not changed. Over the years, however, various objects within the permanent exhibitions have been changed.<sup>20</sup> The evolutionary messages in the permanent exhibition were lost in many of the displays, so now they are mainly functionalist displays. The example of the lamp display would address the question of how we solve the problem of lighting our houses and show all the different ways to do so. If you take evolution out of this display approach, you get functionalism. This can be a useful display style in postcolonial situations where ethnic differences are being downplayed. For instance, the Nairobi National Museum in Kenya long arranged displays by form and function, putting together all the spears or baskets of the various ethnic groups of Kenya. Functionalism serves multiple purposes as a mode of display.

A third type of display features the life group or diorama as a way of invoking the real.<sup>21</sup> Exposure to an ideal, lifelike representation enables visitors to experience something, usually nature, in its pure form. There is exquisite attention to detail, particularly in the diorama, and it is supposed to be like seeing animals in the wild, not in the zoo. Despite these assumptions, Donna Haraway (1984) famously observed that many animal dioramas show a curiously consistent domination of male over female, which does not always represent what goes on in nature itself. Art historian Susan Vogel (1988) did a striking exhibition in which various collectors were shown in relationship with their objects, assuming the same postures of domination. But the main claim in this kind of display has to do with the relationship to reality.

Fourth, there is the display of a representative object that is taken as standing for a class of objects or for a type of social or cultural form. The object is often combined with a contextualizing photograph,

perhaps a field photo. So in this kind of display, the individual object stands for the type. Examples of this can be found among the older exhibits in the Field Museum or many other museums.

Finally, some displays emphasize the combination of text and thing, with the text setting an object within a historical narrative. In this case, the object exemplifies a historical experience or a particular period and type of life, often in combination with photographs and memorabilia. This is one of the main forms of display found in history museums.

These five ideal types map onto different genres of museum and exhibition. Type 1 is typically taken as characteristic of the art exhibit. Type 2 is used for evolutionary exhibits, not often found these days in relation to cultural forms. Type 3 has been associated with natural history exhibitions, and when used for humans, it often assimilates culture to nature. The fourth type evokes ethnographic exhibits that seek to illustrate types and forms, while the fifth is common in history exhibits. But each of these display types can be and has been used in different museum and exhibition genres, and they have often been combined in recent decades (Kratz 2013). Indeed, depending on the exhibition focus and approach taken, each of them might be used in creating displays of contemporary urban objects and life, and combined with other display modes to create a layered visual narrative.

These display types all carry strong narratives, but they themselves are composed of different media of exhibition—including light, color, text, space, and sound—through which they produce their effects (Kratz 2011). In all of these exhibitionary approaches, the complex symbolic aspects and contexts involved in the use and display of objects prior to collecting are subordinated, at least in part, to other purposes. How, then, are we to grasp the relationship between the recontextualization of objects in museums and their prior contexts, symbolism, and meanings? Is the bathetic decline from the glory of Dickens's desk to being an instrument in illustrating a museum story the inevitable fate of bringing the object into the museum, even if it is possible to collect or recover its meanings in the first place?

But we also need to return here to the problem of audiences, which are themselves composed of active agents. The major issue is that how visitors deal with exhibitions shows radical differences from how the

exhibitions are designed or presented (Karp and Lavine 1991; Kratz 2002). There is a fundamental difference between the logic of production, which is far more linear and discursively oriented, and the logic of reception, which operates in fits and starts and tends to work by means of contrast and opposition, if not through indirection.

Reception, especially in museums, is not easily expressed, articulated, or understood. This brings us back to exactly the same problem that Mullins raised with respect to objects, except now we are talking about museum visitors rather than the working-class households. Reception is not easily articulated and understood, and often such learning as occurs happens in bits and pieces. The reception product, as it were (i.e., interpretation and learning), can also be much delayed. If an exhibition affects a visitor, it may take time and other experiences to activate that effect and bring it to some form of consciousness, such as through a conversation. This is why visitor researchers now recommend audience research over time. Visitor responses and reception need to be studied not only at the point of the museum visit but also months hence. Furthermore, learning often does not happen unless there is a predisposition to do so. Visitor research shows, for example, that the people who come out of ecological exhibits ever more committed to the cause of natural conservation are the people who come in with the predisposition and knowledge to support it (Bickford et al. 1996).

The feature of reception and aspect of the audience that I want to stress, however, is one that I have written about before, namely that visitor identities are neither coherent nor whole. The identities that audience members bring to an exhibition are plural and contradictory.<sup>22</sup> The subject positions occupied by visitors are, as for all of us, complex and range across a plethora of possible identities that are not selected on the basis of systematic thought but rather operate more like the way the millipede walks. It is the millipede and the crow all over again. We use different identities the way millipedes use legs—as they are necessary, without being fully conscious of how we do it. Yet the complex nature of our identities is the base through which we can engage our sympathies and appreciate how other people come to attach meaning to objects. This happens especially if we see or experience this process through contrast and

opposition, by juxtaposing cases that combine parallels and differences: *like* what we do and *different* from what we do at the same time.

Yet, juxtapositions that combine parallels and differences have effects that can only be partial. This seems to be the space where the hard work of acquiring and collecting objects, including urban objects, emerges into the sphere of exhibiting. This is the space where exhibiting contains the potential to connect meaning-making related to objects, with its situationally determined and complex structures, with the different but equally situationally determined and complex structures that shape how meaning is made in reception. In other words, the meanings we attribute to objects in everyday life can then be connected to the ways that we process them in museums, as members of the audience. This can be quite different (both cognitively and in practice) from the ways that we make meaning in scientific reports using discursive prose. Museum professionals are the midwives to that partial and somewhat incoherent and infrequent conjunction, but it remains an ideal for and justification of the process of collecting and exhibiting.

The great 17th-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico is famous for saying, “Is it not true that we can only know what we make? Then only God can understand nature, because it is his creation. Man, on the other hand, can understand civilization, because he has made it” (1744, quoted in Shotter 1974:Para. 33). We may only know the world and work of meaning, according to Vico, because we are meaning makers—because what we do in our parlors we bring into museums themselves. It is this human faculty that must stand front and center in how we imagine we might collect and exhibit contemporary urban objects.

#### NOTES

1. Ivan Karp died in September 2011, three months after the symposium in Chicago. Corinne Kratz edited this article into its present form, based on notes from which Karp spoke at the June 2011 symposium, a transcribed recording of that presentation, their conversations about the presentation, and their years of collaborative work. She also attended the symposium. The first person pronoun “I” refers to Karp here; some of the footnotes added by Kratz explain terms or distinctions that Karp makes.
2. While “object,” “thing,” and “artifact” could all refer to the same thing, Mullins distinguishes among them

- because the terms offer different perspectives and different conceptual emphases.
3. The reference here is to the following verse from Swift's (1733) *Poetry, A Rhapsody*:
 

So, naturalists observe, a flea  
Has smaller fleas that on him prey;  
And these have smaller still to bite 'em;  
And so proceed ad infinitum.
  4. Karp follows here the distinction that Mullins makes between symbol and sign, and the associated properties of each, a sense that follows Victor Turner (1975:150–151) in treating signs as univocal and only symbols as multivocal. However, this is very different from the terminology and understandings used within a Peircian semiotic framework, in which symbols, icons, and indexes are all different types of signs, with philosophically well-defined relationships. In that framework, what Mullins discusses as a univocal sign associating an object with a particular class or identity would be seen as an emphasis on a particular indexical meaning.
  5. During the symposium discussion, a photograph of the sitting room in a middle-class African American home in Louisiana became an example used a number of times, with contrasts drawn among the kinds of meanings conveyed by objects shown, such as a U.S. flag, knick-knacks, and so on. We have not been able to reconstruct who showed that image and when it was taken, but the photograph in Figure 1 can make the same points.
  6. The black lawn jockey figure is a yard decoration with contradictory interpretations, seen both as a form of caricatured racist memorabilia and as having historical connections to houses associated with the Underground Railway ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawn\\_jockey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawn_jockey); <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/antiblack.htm>, accessed November 28, 2012. See also Goings 1994).
  7. See Friedrich 1979.
  8. We might also ask just what is being remembered here in different situations? Is it a social order that no longer exists that we cannot talk about because we are white, but we can still put a lawn jockey in the yard? Or a social order that continues to exist that I do not even want to talk about because I am black, but I can still put a lawn jockey there?
  9. After all, we may not place great economic value on them if they are cheap reproductions, and we are talking about an audience in an age of mechanical reproduction.
  10. The figure is now in the collection of the Charles Dickens Museum, which was created in his house in London on Doughty Street. The museum is currently in the process of digitizing photographs of its collection, but the figure can be seen at <http://19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/viewFile/474/334>, accessed December 23, 2012.
  11. This is the feature Silverstein (1981:6–9) calls “continuous segmentability,” using as an example the way that Wasco-Wishram Chinookan speakers mark augmentative–neutral–diminutive gradations by altering features of some consonants and vowels wherever they occur in a stretch of speech, that is, discontinuously. Silverstein also identifies several other features related to how readily people can explicitly recognize and talk about grammatical structures.
  12. “Structures of feeling” is a rather misleading phrase because Williams is referring neither to structures nor feeling.
  13. That odd phrase “naturally occurring” surely contains and conceals another set of complexities and assumptions.
  14. The evolutionary interpretation made no sense for several reasons. First, the Neanderthal diorama portrayed the Ice Age, while Africa had pluvials, that is, wet ages, not ice ages, that took place well before Victorian garb came to the Himba of Namibia. All these arguments could be made, but they seemed to make no difference in the face of the broader institutional narrative.
  15. The only reason we know about this is because we were consultants when the exhibit was being developed. Kratz also served briefly as content coordinator for the exhibition in 1990.
  16. This might have been in 1988 when the festival program included “Music from the Peoples of the Soviet Union,” and Karp was curator of African Ethnology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.
  17. See the photograph of this pairing in Karp and Kratz 2000:213.
  18. Unfortunately this exhibition is no longer with us, though I think it should have been enshrined as display history.
  19. See examples in the illustrations for Arnoldi 1992.
  20. There have been many other changes outside the permanent exhibitions, with innovative, ongoing work on interpreting collections, temporary exhibitions, and so on.
  21. Life group and diorama are not quite the same thing, but for present purposes here I treat them as similar.
  22. This has been a theme in much of Karp's work. See for instance Karp 1992 and Jackson and Karp 1990. An online archive of his published papers is available at inter-

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