Sensory engagements with objects in art galleries:

material interpretation and theological metaphor

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Abstract

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This thesis aims to explore sensory engagements with material objects. In other words, it investigates the physical encounter between a person and a thing, particularly through a focus on the sense of touch. It does so within the art gallery context.

It looks at the capacity of such embodied practices to inspire creative response to objects, an approach which, the thesis argues, does not necessarily rely on knowing contextual information or fact, but rather allows for responses including imagining and making. The research coins the term 'material interpretation' to describe such an approach to the interpretive process.

The work is interdisciplinary in nature: building on studies of materiality in the museum context, it draws especially from sensory anthropology and studies of material culture. Significantly however, the research develops an entirely new field of critical dialogue. Uniquely and unusually, by bringing museology together with concepts from the discipline of theology, the thesis develops an unprecedented approach to exploring interpretation practice through a lens of what it calls 'theological museology'.

Arising from the researcher's professional practice and experience of interpretation projects in which such sensory engagements with objects were given priority, the research comes from a practical grounding. As such it argues that material practices be embedded within the institution through a strategic approach to creative and inclusive interpretation.

The research takes a qualitative approach and is based on case studies. These include exploring a collection in storage (the Mary Greg collection at Manchester Art Gallery); projects based on artist-made interpretive objects called Object Dialogue Boxes (including at Museums Sheffield); and the creative use of a city's handling collection (the Artemis Collection in Leeds).

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Chapter One: Introduction

It is good, at certain hours of the day and night, to look closely at the world of objects at rest. Wheels that have crossed long, dusty distances with their mineral and vegetable burdens, sacks from the coal bins, barrels, and baskets, handles and hafts for the carpenter's tool chest. From them flow the contacts of man with the earth, like a text for all troubled lyricists. The used surfaces of things, the wear that the hands give to things, the air, tragic at times, pathetic at others, of such things – all lend a curious attractiveness to the reality of the world that should not be underprized.

(from *Toward an Impure Poetry*, Neruda 1961: 39)

Preamble

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. Home of Jim and Helen Ede.[1] In many ways this is where my journey begins, or, at any rate, it is a point of departure for some of the ideas contained within the pages that follow. It is 2001 and I have been studying the writings of the medieval mystical theologians for several years as an undergraduate in Birmingham and as a postgraduate in Cambridge. I am not sure what kind of career can come from such a course of study - I have not chosen to study theology for any instrumental purposes - I simply know that I love reflecting on and playing with theological paradox and wondering *why*. I also know that I love art, and I love things, finding interest as much in the humble and everyday as in the beautiful and deliberate.

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[1] Harold Stanley Jim Ede (1895-1990) studied at Newlyn Art School and, after being called up during the First World War, then returned to the Slade School of Art. He worked briefly at the National Gallery, before joining Tate as an Assistant Curator in 1921. It was here that he got to know many avant-garde artists, including Ben and Winifred Nicholson whom he met in 1924, and it was from Tate that he also acquired a collection of the works of sculptor Henri Gaudier-Breszka. His anti-establishment views led Ede to leave Tate in 1936 when he moved to Morocco with his wife, Helen. They moved to Cambridge in 1956 and renovated Kettle's Yard, which they donated to the University of Cambridge in 1966, when they moved to Edinburgh.

I love thinking about the relationships between people and things, and the paradoxes and wonderings why of theology, and I enjoy sharing this thinking with others. And so to end up working for the Education Officer[2] at Kettle's Yard feels like a perfect coming together of everything, under one roof:

Kettle's Yard is in no way meant to be an art gallery or museum, nor is it simply a collection of works of art reflecting my taste [...] It is rather, a continuing way of life [...] in which stray objects make manifest the underlying stability which more and more we need to recognise if we are not to be swamped by all that is so rapidly opening up before us.

(Ede 1996: 17-18)

Figure 1: Kettle's Yard, Cambridge.

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[2] At the time, this was Sophie Weeks, who has a background in fine art and philosophy.

In his unique and visionary book about Kettle's Yard, *A Way of Life*, Jim Ede has interspersed black and white photographs and stories of the objects and artworks that have come to be in his house, with quotations including from the poetry of Michael Drayton (1563-1631), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), William Blake (1757-1827), Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), and T.S Eliot (1888-1965) to name but a handful. In addition, he reveals his profound spiritual belief in 'that union with God which I believe to be the essence of man's nature' (1996: 59) through quoting from religious texts of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, and particularly from that category of writers often described as 'mystical': from St Augustine (354-430), to the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (late fourteenth century), to Meister Eckhart (c.1260-c.1328), Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c.1416) and St John of the Cross (1542-1591). Indeed the many library shelves within the house are laden with such texts, both western and eastern, which all visitors can leaf through at their leisure. This ability to both rummage and reflect is part of the uniqueness of Kettle's Yard.

While visitors cannot touch every 'stray object' in the house, nevertheless, they can sit upon the chairs, brush their hands along the surfaces of furniture, pick up volumes of poetry, make themselves at home: 'it is so exciting to be brought so near, almost to touch each object, lift it up and feel its so close vibration' states Ede (1996: 74). For him, touching things is (at least) as important as seeing them: 'sculpture should always be touched, at least in the mind, the hands exploring the miraculous continuity of planes, the coming together of masses…' (1996: 169). Even where physical touch is not possible, one can imagine what it might feel like to run one's hands over the contours of a sculpture, feel a pebble, or be tickled by a feather.

Each afternoon, the Edes had an 'open house' for students to visit and explore their house and the things in it, and they also established a picture loan scheme, still ongoing, whereby students could borrow works from the collection to have in their

college rooms for a term at a time.[3] So as well as the high value placed upon the direct sensory encounter with objects in the house, this borrowing scheme turns the collection into a lending library for artworks, another demonstration that the Edes' vision of Kettle's Yard is as a place very different from a typical gallery or a museum where material engagements with objects and borrowing things is not usually possible. This difference is also played out through a lack of interpretive labelling on the walls: it is not by some radical curatorial act that there is no interpretation, rather it is a case of the things displayed here being part of a home. While there are booklets listing the works in each room of the house for those who want to find out more, there are no labels next to the pieces. They are left primarily to speak for themselves, or to be interpreted not through the written text, but through emotional and sensory response, dialogues imagined through the juxtapositions of objects, or dialogues made real with fellow visitors and room guides. Interpretation is through immediate relationship between person and thing, rather than through text. To borrow Nicholas Serota's terms, this is a place where experience is interpretation (Serota 1996).

These unique features of Kettle's Yard, which were to me second nature in my first ever role as a volunteer in the sector, have inspired much of my own practice in the years since. And perhaps what these pages describe, is a reflection on some of the values upheld by Jim and Helen Ede: rummaging and reflecting.

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[3] 107 artworks from the loan collection were lent to 80 students for the academic year 2013/14. From http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Annual-Report-2013-14.pdf (accessed 17/08/15).

Research statement

Each object is a miracle. (Ede 1996: 35)

Figure 2: Inside the house.

In her recent volume, *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, social anthropologist and museum studies scholar Sandra Dudley notes 'it is perhaps especially remarkable that more work has not focussed on the physical and sensory attributes of objects and their implications for the uniqueness, actual and potential, of the museum experience' (2012: 5). Indeed it could be argued that museums are suffering from something of an identity crisis. It is the contention of many that 'collections are at the heart of a museum' (Pearce 1994: 125). Yet for recent museological publications to include titles such as *Do museums still need objects?* (Conn 2010) and for current professional articles to suggest that the priority for museums should be 'impact', not collections (Davies 2012), the very role of the object in a museum finds itself under scrutiny.

What is clear is that without objects, museums would not exist as the institutions we know them to be. At the heart of this research lies the contention that museums and galleries are about *things*, and moreover, that these things *can and do* inspire people to engage with them, especially where strategies have been developed to enable this.

While sensory engagements in museums are of course not limited to experiences of handling objects (see for example investigations of the impact of the architecture of the building (MacLeod 2005), the design and narrative of the exhibitions (Hourston Hanks 2012; Fraser & Coulson 2012), or studies about visitor movement in space (Lewis 2014)), the focus for this thesis is an intimate investigation of the role of the sensory encounter with objects through touch, and the ways in which this enables an affective art gallery interpretation experience. In particular, the thesis focuses in at a micro-level on one particular aspect of Dudley's statement above, to explore the role of touch, and the potential that this has for enabling one to 'be touched' during a gallery visit.

The research questions, and concomitant recognition of their significance to gallery practice, have arisen directly from professional experience, and include the following:

- What does it mean to engage with objects through the sense of touch within art gallery interpretation practice?
- What are some examples of this sort of interpretive practice?
- Why is such touch-based engagement important within the gallery context?
- How do museum practitioners, artists and teachers reflect on their object-based interpretation experiences within art galleries?
- How might such material engagements with objects help develop art gallery practice in other areas?

The thesis aims to develop work around touch found in museum-based literatures

(including Pye 2007; Chatterjee 2008; Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006; and Dudley 2012), often closely connected with a 'material turn' in anthropology (for example Edwards & Hart 2004). One important objective for the research is thus to build upon, and contribute to, a growing multi-disciplinary literature (including within material culture, anthropology and museology) on the roles of object engagements, but here specifically in art gallery interpretation (see Meszaros 2011; Fritsch 2011; and Whitehead 2012). As well as having theoretical implications, this thesis also aims to change and develop existing practice within the museum and gallery sector, not least through a new appropriation of material engagements with things. Marrying practice with research is an underlying tenet of this thesis.

The methods used to explore the research questions are qualitative, based on investigating existing practices of touch-based interpretation in art galleries. Largely based on in-depth interviews with, and thematic analysis of the reflections of, those working with objects in such a way, three case studies are examined. All these involve projects in galleries where touch is central, yet equally, the nature of these projects themselves is very different. The projects are described in *Chapter Two*, but include exploring a collection in storage (the Mary Greg collection at Manchester Art Gallery); projects based on artist-made interpretive objects called Object Dialogue Boxes (including at Museums Sheffield); and the creative use of a city's handling collection (the Artemis Collection in Leeds).

Research rationale and contexts

Important because the sorts of touch-focussed practices with which this thesis is concerned are not yet widespread ones, in particular the thesis argues that material engagements give rise to imaginative (as opposed to historical, factual or contextual) interpretations of objects and artworks. To develop strategies for such sensory engagements with objects in art galleries can give rise to new institutional thinking about interpretation. The research also builds on professional and theoretical

discussions around the so-called 'Catch-22' of the museum:[4] access versus conservation. It is concerned with postmodern interpretive and constructivist theory that questions notions of objective truth, hierarchies of knowledge, and traditional singular curatorial authority.

While it is not an aim of this research to explore objects from such a perspective, one common approach to understanding museum objects is to explore them from a historical perspective. Simon Knell, for example, suggests that we need to better preserve and understand historic values since 'we have not abandoned object-oriented, reality-centred practice in order to pursue dreams and myths' (2007: xiii). Indeed, it could be argued that taking a historical approach to exploring material culture is the (oft-unquestioned) approach taken by most museum curators (Hill 2004; Whitehead 2004; and MacGregor 2011). Notwithstanding Geller's argument on the limitations of claiming to know an object just by holding it (2007: 63), the aim of this research however, is to explore the perhaps a-historic or more imaginative capacities of engaging with objects in a sensory manner and without historic or contextual information as the primary source of knowledge. It *is* to pursue the dreams and myths unreal to Knell.

Additional bodies of research can also be noted when briefly setting the scene out of which this research has arisen. One such is that growing area in current museological research on the social agency of museums (Sandell 2012 and 2007, O'Neill 2002 and Butler's current *Happy Museum* project[5]), and particularly on the role of touch as instrumental in improving health and wellbeing. Not least for those with visual impairments (Gallace & Spence 2008) or for hospital patients, the impact that physical contact with museum objects can have on the health and emotional response of audiences is being explored, particularly through object handling. Demonstrated at University College London (UCL) through the various *Touch and Wellbeing* programmes led by Helen Chatterjee (see Chatterjee & Noble 2013), and in work by

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[4] I have taken this phrase from the title of a conference held in 2009 at University College London as part of the AHRC EPSRC Science and Heritage program.
See http://www.ucl.ac.uk/conservation-c-22 (accessed 20/08/15).
[5] http://www.happymuseumproject.org (accessed 11/09/15).

Candlin 2010; Tomlin & Narkiss 2009; Chatterjee 2008; Pye 2007; and through projects like the *Who Cares?* programme (Renaissance North West[6] and the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN)), a body of research can now be drawn on to demonstrate the impact of such practice for social benefit.

The concept of handling objects is also nothing new in museum education theory and practice. Indeed it is often central to a museum's school learning programme (for example at the British Museum, Pitt Rivers, Horniman, Manchester and Reading Museums to name but a few who have undertaken research on their programmes[7]) as well as in its outreach programmes (particularly in reminiscence work), and there is a large body of research on the efficacy of object handling within the learning process (Were 2008; Trewinnard-Boyle & Tabassi 2007; Golding 2010; Hennigar Shuh 1994; Durbin, Morris & Wilkinson 1990). While my research project aims to rehabilitate the object into approaches to art gallery *interpretation* practice, this is certainly not to say that the process does not also contribute to the development of a more socially inclusive museum or enable the development of new strategies for engaging with learning. In fact, far from it. It is hoped that through this exploration of the material object and participation in opportunities for sensory encounters with objects in art galleries, it can be demonstrated that the gallery, through its objects, has the capacity to be a truly life-changing and life-affirming experience for audiences, ultimately moving beyond that unhelpful dichotomy situating people and collections as opposed.

Introducing the title

Sensory engagements with objects in art galleries: material interpretation and theological metaphor. Each term within the title of this thesis is deliberate, drawing

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[6] *Renaissance in the Regions* was a nationwide framework established in 2000 to support the growth of regional museums, particularly focusing on socially inclusive remits including learning, creativity, enjoyment and access. See full report at http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=12190 (accessed 18/09/15).
[7] See *Museum Practice Special Issue: Touch* (2013) http://www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/touch/your-handling-collection-case-studies for further examples of handling collections (accessed 17/09/15).

together as it does several key concepts, all explored here within unique art gallery settings: sensory engagements, objects, material interpretation and theological metaphor. Unlike the quotation at the start of the thesis from Chilean poet and politician Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), whose suggestion is to 'look closely at the world of objects *at rest*' (italics mine), rather this thesis takes it as something of an axiom that objects are *not* at rest, or at any rate, that the particular (and peculiar) objects being explored within this thesis are not at rest but are wide awake and active within the interpretive process. Later in Neruda's manifesto *Toward an Impure Poetry*, in which he speaks of the importance of looking to common objects to see 'the confused impurity of the human condition' as 'the poetry we search for', Neruda goes on to speak of 'the sumptuous appeal of the tactile' (1961: 39-40). It is out of a shared belief in the 'sumptuous appeal' that this work on objects in art galleries has arisen.

I now briefly describe what is meant by each of the ideas contained within the title (which are of course discussed in greater detail throughout the thesis), before going on to explore some of the professional and practically-based contexts out of which the research questions have developed. The term *sensory engagements* is used in this thesis to describe tactile means of engaging with objects. In particular, it describes ways in which visitors and staff encounter objects in a physical, material, kinaesthetic and embodied way, especially through opportunities to touch and handle them in order to interpret for themselves. This research is perhaps unusual in its focus on the use of tactile objects within *art gallery* settings (places traditionally associated with the *visual*) rather than in museum environments. Yet the objects being explored are not sculptures or other three-dimensional items forming traditional permanent art displays in the galleries. What the objects have in common is that they are all used to enable what is referred to throughout as *material interpretation*. This is an idea central to the development of arguments within this thesis. Material interpretation is a term devised by the author to talk about ways in which sense and meanings might be made from touching objects (as opposed to interpretations derived from contextual information and text, for example). The author suggests that strategies for material interpretation through touch be embedded within institutional practice as a means to make creative engagement with collections possible. Yet in the concluding remarks,

the author goes on to suggest how the concept of material interpretation need not be limited just to touch-based interpretive strategy and might encompass the whole gallery experience.

The final term within the thesis title is *theological metaphor*. Objects in museums, as well as being physically manifest, knowable and present through their materiality in displays or through research, are also at the same time unknowable, mysterious and absent. This may be both literally, in a lack of access to many of them, as well as metaphorically, in their capacity to lead our imaginations beyond what is present, to wonder and reflect. Objects thus lie as a paradox at the heart of museum practice. And it is because of paradoxes such as these, that this thesis develops the use of theological metaphor – itself both paradoxical and dependent on use and understandings of paradox – as a means of exploring engagements with objects in galleries. Theology, as is argued in this thesis, is a discipline dealing in paradox and oxymoron, and as such shares some concerns with museum studies. With the 'object' at the heart of theology being, by definition, unknowable, theology attempts to speak of both the immanent and everyday, as well as the transcendent and utterly extraordinary, or that which is beyond words. This thesis develops a new interdisciplinary field of 'theological museology' by drawing the two disciplines into dialogue with one another.

While use of theology might initially seem an unusual way to explore tactile engagements with physical things, the thesis argues that metaphors and paradoxes derived from mystical theology present surprisingly helpful means by which the interpretive process might be understood, both on a microcosmic level relating to objects themselves, through to a more macrocosmic level relating to institutional strategies for, and practices of, interpretation. In particular, the terms 'cataphatic' and 'apophatic' are explained as metaphorical devices to explore museum practices. These terms are described and defined in detail in the latter part of *Chapter Three*, but in brief, 'cataphatic' metaphors in theology (also known as 'positive theology') refer to an abundance of speech or a proliferation of imagery used to describe God, whereas the 'apophatic' is about the failure of that language and imagery to be able to describe

a God beyond all human knowing (Turner 1995a). This thesis describes and explores the relationship between material interpretation and theological museology.

Figure 3: Social history objects from the Mary Greg collection at Manchester Art Gallery. (Alphabet counters 1922.534) Image © Ben Blackall for Manchester City Galleries, licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0.

Figure 4: Artist-made object for interpreting collections. Image courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

Professional practice

What now follows describes the professional contexts out of which the research has arisen. While undertaking research for my MA in Art Gallery Studies in the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester in 2004-5, I first came across the work of Norwich-based artists Karl and Kimberley Foster (also known as hedsor). My MA dissertation explored ways in which museum and gallery education programmes enabled school pupils to engage with religious and philosophical questions, and one of my interviewees was Bridget McKenzie, then Head of Learning at the British Library. She mentioned the development of something called an *Object Dialogue Box* made by these artists for use within the Sir John Ritblat Treasures Gallery at the British Library (see Figure 5). The term Object Dialogue Box was coined to describe the Fosters' work at that time.[8] The boxes themselves contain a series of surreal objects, usually amalgamations of two familiar things brought together to make something unfamiliar. The boxes and their contents are handled and used to enable the creation of imaginative connections between objects in the gallery. Dialogue and made-up stories inspired by this hands-on encounter result from a haptic experience with a curious thing. Visitors are invited to use the strange things as props, or navigational compasses which allow for playful connections to be made between this thing in their hand, and the art gallery or museum's collections on display. To return to experiences at the British Library: a physical book is arguably the epitome of something that has to be

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[8] Note that as of September 2015, Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster have redefined themselves as 'sorhed', 'a gradual evolution of hedsor'. The artists make this explanatory statement on their website:

> In our earlier work our objects were exclusively housed as collections in boxes and made in response to specific places or subjects. A colleague coined the name 'Object Dialogue Box' to describe the first box; it remained and for a time defined that element of our practice, as did the name hedsor. Over time our interest has expanded into different contexts. During a period of ten years a gradual change of focus has happened […] As a result we have ceased to use the term 'Object Dialogue Box' as it limits and defines too much. Similarly, the change in the approach to making objects sees the term 'hedsor' inverted to become 'sorhed' - we have undergone a practice based turn and the name has taken a corresponding turn.
> http://www.sorhed.com/thinking.html (accessed 14/09/15).

handled in order to gain any sense from it whatsoever.[9] Yet here, in the Ritblat Gallery, books were kept behind glass, unable to be read. The Object Dialogue Box was introduced as one way around this lack of tactility. Furthermore, it was a resource that posed exactly the sorts of open-ended questions in which I was interested, using its objects to enable visitors to develop narratives and reflect on questions that they themselves posed of items within the collections on display.

Figure 5: British Library Object Dialogue Box. Image courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

Soon after this encounter, and now working at Museums Sheffield[10] as Learning Projects Officer, part of my job remit was to oversee aspects of the schools' education programmes for partnership projects with the V&A. One such was an exhibition entitled *Palace & Mosque*, whose accompanying learning programme called for the

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[9] Of course, now there is now a ubiquity of e-books, which arguably are not physical (although a physical device is needed in order to read) but when this particular project emerged, e-books were not commonplace.

[10] Then Sheffield Galleries & Museums Trust (SGMT).

development of an object handling box.[11] Created by the V&A whilst its Islamic Middle East Gallery was closed for redevelopment, this touring show of Islamic objects from the V&A's collections had travelled worldwide from Washington to Fort Worth, Tokyo to Sheffield. Having been a teacher of Religious Education (RE) for a number of years prior to my museum career, I was keen not to develop a handling box of Islamic artefacts of the sort that every RE teacher would have in their classroom already (for example containing a prayer mat and a Qur'an stand), but wanted to use the funding available[12] to do something more creative that would not be able to take place *unless* the pupils were surrounded by objects in a museum collection (as opposed to something that could be used on outreach in school). It seemed that to commission an Object Dialogue Box would provide a unique and engaging experience for pupils visiting *Palace & Mosque*. Thus began a collaboration with Karl and Kimberley Foster which has continued to develop creatively since then.

Projects

Following involvement with *Palace & Mosque*, I continued to explore Object Dialogue Boxes within my gallery practice (particularly while working at Museums Sheffield as Learning Officer). In addition, a more general interest in tactile engagement with gallery objects emerged. Two projects in particular on which I worked in my next role at Manchester Art Gallery provoked a desire to undertake further reflexive research, and it was out of these contexts that the objectives for this doctoral thesis and its potential case studies emerged.

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[11] In addition to the handling box, the role also developed resources for teachers: http://museums-sheffield.org.uk/learning/schools-and-colleges/online-resources/classroom-resources/palace-and-mosque-teacher-toolkit (accessed 20/08/15).
[12] From the V&A's Strategic Commissioning project, *Image and Identity*, funded through DCMS and DfES.

Figure 6: Object Dialogue Box (closed) in the Ruskin Gallery, Museums Sheffield.

Object Dialogue Boxes

As has already been introduced, Object Dialogue Boxes are unusual artist-made resources containing a series of bizarre tactile objects used as interpretive devices.[13] Karl and Kimberley Foster's boxes have now been commissioned by galleries, museums and heritage sites across the country for over a decade (including the British Library, Norfolk Regimental Museum, Imperial War Museum, Museum of London, Harewood House in Leeds, Turner Contemporary in Margate, Nantwich Museum and Rochester Cathedral). The boxes and their contents are a means to engage visitors in materially interpreting collections, without necessarily needing to know any facts about those collections. As the artists state on their website:

> The key to the objects' success in learning is the establishment of an appropriate learning culture around them; a different way of thinking and understanding is needed for the objects to work at their optimum level. In some cases the introduction of an Object Dialogue Box can herald a change of approach in a learning setting, but if this is the case the shifts in learning practice happen gradually as a culture is built.[14]

Museums Sheffield's Object Dialogue Box is a hexagonal wooden shape, with intricate jigsaw-like sections (see Figure 6). On first glance, it is not apparent how the box opens. As can be seen in Figure 7, this box undoes with an unravelling mechanism, and as it does so, more and more of its strange contents are revealed.

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[13] There are of course other examples of artists who create different types of objects within boxes for museums and galleries that are not dissimilar from hedsor's work. See for example Education Officer Amanda Phillips' project at Leeds Art Gallery incorporating boxes made by ten different artists (Phillips 2005), and the work of Leicestershire Artworks Officer Lisa Webb and the *Held in the Hand* project (Foreman-Peck & Travers 2012). This research however focuses on the boxes with which the author has most professional experience.
[14] From http://www.sorhed.com/statement_one.html (accessed 17/05/15).

Figure 7: Unravelling the box.

Figure 8: More objects are revealed.

The following passage describes the excitement of unravelling:

> I get so excited every time I unravel the box. I wonder what imaginative
> journeys people will make today, and what I am going to discover from other
> people using these amazing peculiar objects. The box has an almost magical
> ability to transform people, to turn everyone into a storyteller who can be
> heard, yet paradoxically to allow people to be utterly silent and wonder. The
> box enables people to look really closely at intricate detail, to notice and share
> new things about the world and the collections surrounding them, and to think
> and reflect on what is and could be… What is also so unique is that the box
> seems to be infinitely applicable: it can be used anywhere, with any object, for
> any subject, and with anyone. I really believe every museum and gallery could
> engage people's imaginations and their collections in this way.[15]

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[15] The quotation is from the author of this research and is cited on:
www.objectdialoguebox.com (accessed 29/07/15).

Extensive evaluation of use of the box commissioned for use alongside the *Palace & Mosque* exhibition was undertaken as part of a Renaissance in the Regions-funded programme at Museums Sheffield (James et al. 2006).

Once I began working at Manchester Art Gallery, colleagues were keen to develop something similar, but tailored to Manchester's collections. The resulting commission was based on the symbol of Manchester, the industrious bee.

Figure 9: Manchester Art Gallery's Object Dialogue Box. Image courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

At the same time as commissioning this box, another project at Manchester Art Gallery was also underway. At first glance, this other project may appear to have very different concerns from those raised in the creation and development of an Object Dialogue Box. However, it was the combination of working on these two projects concurrently that led to the researcher beginning to see numerous parallels and overlaps. A lack of research on such interpretive projects based primarily on sensory engagements with objects was apparent, and the need to develop critical thinking and research in these areas was recognised.

Mary Greg
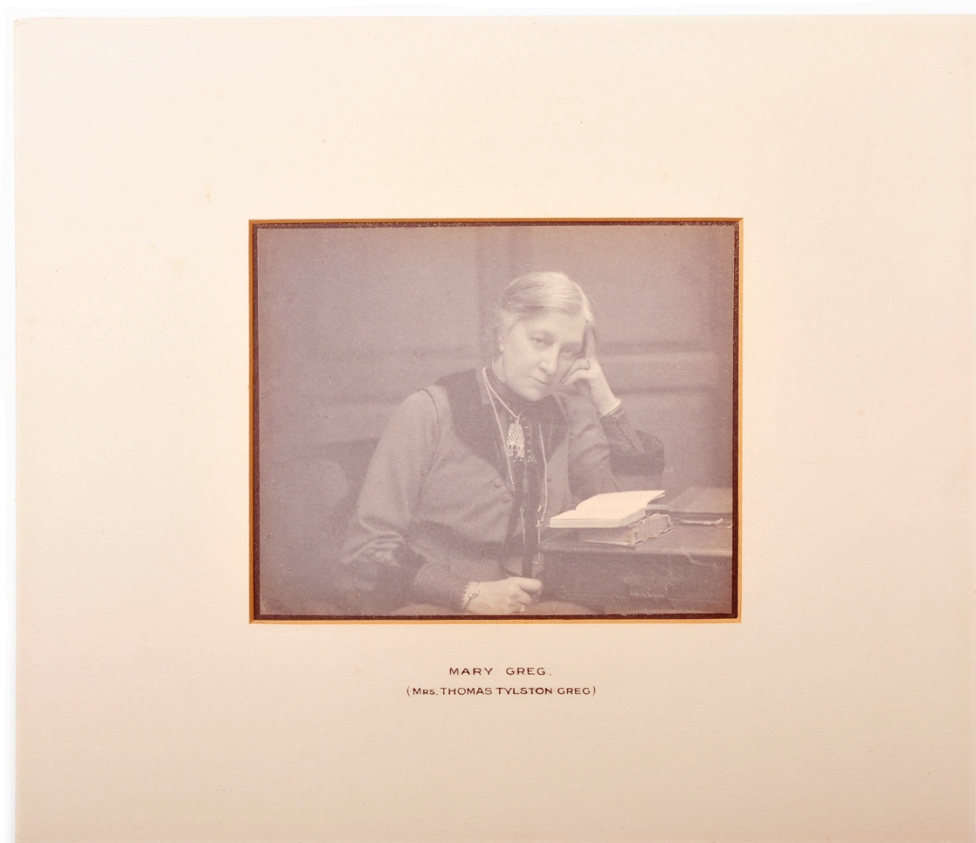
The Mary Greg project (or *Mary Mary Quite Contrary*) at Manchester Art Gallery might better be described as a *series* of creative projects inspired by a particular collection,

the Mary Greg collection of 'handicrafts of bygone times'.[16] This eclectic collection comprises over two thousand humble objects, ranging from domestic utensils and keys, to clothing and embroidery, to toys, games and children's books. Most of the material dates from the nineteenth century, with some purporting to be far earlier (for example, a Roman comb). Interestingly, Mary Greg even made some of her own items to donate, such as embroideries. Her 'bygones' collection was given to the gallery and enjoyed significant popularity in the 1920s and 1930s when Mary's dolls' houses had their own room at Heaton Hall. Her collections were also exhibited to much acclaim and huge visitor figures when Platt Hall first opened to the public in 1926 (outnumbering audiences to the important Thomas Greg collection of ceramics). Yet, for much of its life at the gallery, the collection has lain dormant. In storage for some 50 years, most of Mary Greg's objects (with the exception of a small display) have been housed, almost forgotten, in dark cupboards and drawers. In fact, the place of the collection is contentious within the art gallery: it has even been suggested that it might be better placed within the context of a social history museum, or even disposed of under collections reviews inspired by the Museums Association's *Collections for the Future* report (Wilkinson 2005), as it has simply not been deemed 'art'.

In 2006, artists Sharon Blakey and Hazel Jones, both makers and lecturers in the Manchester School of Art at Manchester Metropolitan University, had displayed work in response to the stored archive in the library's Special Collections. *Out of the Ordinary* was their resulting exhibition, exploring the values given to objects in museums. It involved them undertaking a 'trawl through the stores' and a discovery that their fascination 'lay in those things that were not 'treasured': unused and broken frames, old labels, the vestigial recordings of a museum object's life… objects that museums dare not throw away because we understand that they may have significance in the future' (Boydell et al. 2006). It was only through close physical examination of the objects that the intrinsic aspects of the objects, such as patina, detail, wear and tear, could be fully recognised.

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[16] See the extensive project blog at http://www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk (accessed 18/09/15).

Figure 11: Quizzing glasses by Hazel Jones. Image courtesy the artist.

Figure 12: Spoons by Sharon Blakey. Image courtesy the artist.

One visitor to this exhibition was the then Interpretation Development Manager at Manchester Art Gallery, Liz Mitchell. She immediately made a connection between the work that Blakey and Jones had created for *Out of the Ordinary*, and the potential to explore the Mary Greg collection at Manchester Art Gallery that she had spent much time cataloguing during her early years at the gallery as Documentation Assistant (Woodall 2010b; Woodall, Blakey and Mitchell 2011; Blakey and Mitchell 2013; Trustram 2013). Between 2007 and 2010, the Interpretation Development team at Manchester Art Gallery[17] had a distinctive remit to devise creative projects to engage audiences with the interpretation of collections. Because of the experimental nature of this role, the team was able to develop new ideas away from the glare of the institution's wider strategic goals. In short, it could take risks and play both with ideas and with things. Exploring the Mary Greg collection was one such project which gave rise to various additional ways of looking and exploring things. The idea was that free and open access to the stores, initially by artists Blakey and Jones, might uncover objects and stories, and inspire new creative work, enabling a forgotten collection to be restored, reimagined and revalued. The artists were invited to come and explore and they eagerly accepted. After some months of regular visits to see the collection, these open-ended, creative and joyful experiences, affectionately known as rummages, had produced a vast outpouring in sketchbooks, research, making, and on the project blog. But if just two artists could discover so much and be so inspired, what would be the potential for opening up the collection to further rummaging by others?

Answers to this are described in greater depth throughout this thesis: for now, it is simply important to recognise that the research questions and objectives of this doctoral project have arisen from practice, from recognising trends and similarities even within different organisations, from working with a variety of objects in a direct and physical way, and from what – at the time of developing the research – were arguably uncommon sorts of touch-based projects that challenged traditional institutional practices of curatorial interpretation and didactic learning.

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[17] In existence for just 3 years, this team is now defunct due to gallery restructuring.

Figure 13: Keys from the Mary Greg collection.

Thesis structure

While the thesis is traditional in that it follows a pattern with an introduction, methodology (research design), literature review (contexts), and conclusion (see manuals such as Phillips & Pugh 2000), the data and analysis chapters which form the main bulk follow a conceptual model which requires explanation. There are three such chapters, and the data is deliberately linked with its analysis in each, rather than separating the two. While each of these three chapters focuses on particular aspects of a project or case, these are not explored separately through venue or case study (for example, findings relating to the Mary Greg project at Manchester Art Gallery are not contained within a single chapter, but neither are all case studies referred to in every chapter). Rather, data is analysed in each of these three chapters through conceptual themes which emerged from the research.

The thesis takes the encountered object as its starting point, specifically starting with the encounter between object and person through touch. Everything written stems from the microcosm of this interaction between the material thing and the person engaging with it. The structure of the thesis can be visualised as though it works outwards from the microcosm of this object encounter itself, to the macrocosm of the institution in the world. Each chapter moves further away from the object encounter in itself, towards different aspects of the object and its engagements in the world in a sequential and spatial way. The conclusion uses Bachelard's notions of intimacy and immensity to suggest ways in which the research might develop from intimate material interpretation on the level of handling the object, to a more immense material interpretation on the level of the exhibition and art gallery itself.

So the first analytic chapter is entitled *Encountering things* and it looks at ways in which visitors and staff are confronted with the actual physical material stuff of the gallery – that moment of object encounter and interaction between person and thing – within the various case study projects. The second analytic chapter, *Talking things*, explores the object going out into a world of relationship with others, particularly focusing on speech and talking, and the sorts of conversations elicited between people whilst they are engaging with the physical object in predominantly tactile ways. The third such chapter, *Knowing things*, explores interpretation and what happens when these conversations with and about objects are internalised in the mind, and used by individuals to create their own meanings and reflections on where these have come from. Each chapter also explores the ways in which material engagement and interpretation have impacted upon the workings of the institution.

Diagrammatically, the thesis structure might look something like a crescendo mark in a musical score, whereby the object encounter is like the pianissimo or thin end of the wedge, and then each subsequent chapter gets louder, moving further away from the object encounter per se, to focus upon its wider impact upon audiences and the institution in the world as the fortissimo at the open end of the wedge (see Figure 14). Arguably, this could also be conceptualised the other way around, whereby it is the object encounter itself that is at the loudest point of this interaction, and each

subsequent chapter narrows down the focus to becoming something more quiet and focused within the institution: it is perhaps more a case of visualising the structure as a both/and, rather than an either/or here. To borrow from theological language, hinting towards what is to come, perhaps within this thesis, the object encounter is both the alpha and the omega (Revelation 1:8).
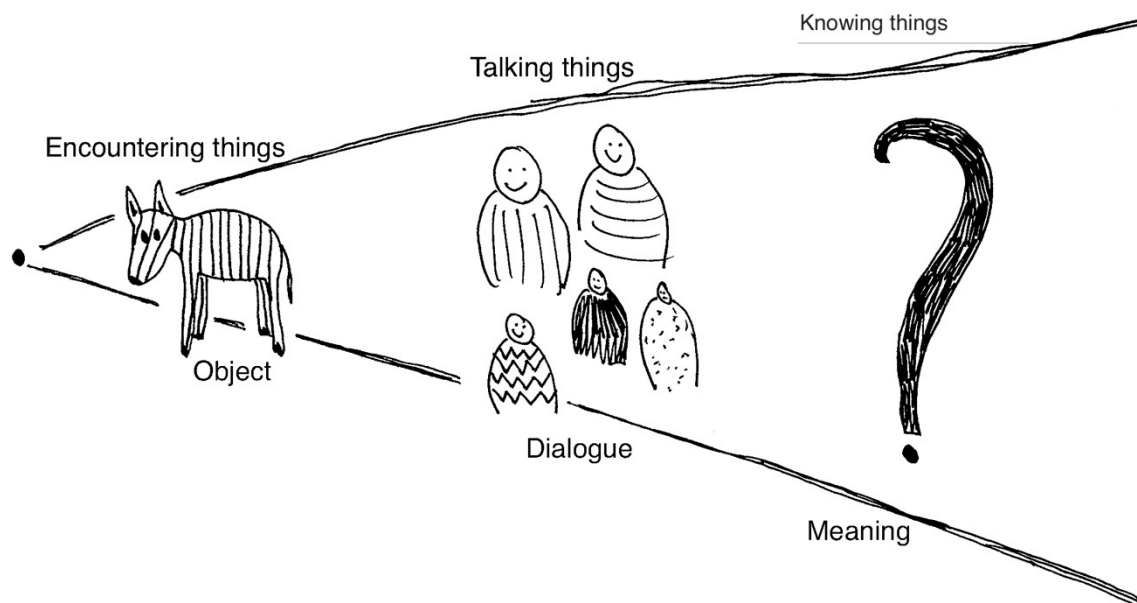
Figure 14: Structure of thesis.

In addition to the sequence of chapters working in this spatial manner, each individual chapter itself also works in a particular way, following a certain pattern, which has come both from the data itself, but also from reflecting on concepts derived from prior engagements with, and understandings of, theological metaphor and paradox. This is further elucidated within the literature review and throughout the thesis, but it is important to note here that each chapter can be seen almost like a figure of eight which is in continuous flow between a pair of binary opposites (see Figure 15). The capacity of objects to be at once both present and at the same time absent within the museum settings has already been stated. This binary pair of *absence* and *presence* provides the structure for the object-centric chapter, *Encountering things*.

Figure 15: Structure of chapters.

Each chapter explores its key topic through a similar binary pairing, just as much theological writing does likewise. *Talking things* uses the binary pairings of *dialogue* and *silence*, as the means by which to explore the capacity of material engagements to enable conversations. *Knowing things* uses the twin concepts of *knowing* and *unknowing* to explore the meanings made from object engagements (see Figure 16).

Chapter	Focus	Cataphatic	Apophatic
Encountering things (four)	Engagement with material object itself	Presence	Absence
Talking things (five)	Conversations between people during object engagements	Dialogue	Silence
Knowing things (six)	Interpreting the object and making meanings	Knowing	Unknowing

Figure 16: Table showing thesis structure.

Closing remarks

> Whatever else can be said of them, objects endure. And in that endurance they offer people the simple pleasure of looking at and the thrill of being in the presence of real things, made by human hands through time and across space or fashioned by nature in all its astonishing variety. Museums filled with objects may provide an education or lessons in moral uplift, but perhaps more than anything they offer the opportunity to see things in three dimensions – things that are beautiful or odd or horrifying or consoling. Museums – some of them anyway – may not need objects anymore, but without objects we all may miss the delights and surprises that come with looking. (Conn 2010: 57)

Where Conn speaks of the 'pleasure of looking', this thesis argues that 'being in the presence of real things' may call for the necessity of touch as a way of interpreting objects – and so understanding the very institution in which they are housed – anew.

Chapter Two: Research design

Overview

The previous chapter introduced the research questions, aims and objectives of this thesis, and described the particular professional context out of which those arose: these of course have implications for the design of the research. This chapter sets out my methodological approach to exploring sensory engagements with objects in art galleries: how did I find out the things that I set about finding out? To summarise briefly, the research was qualitative and interdisciplinary, and uses a variety of methods to explore three case studies. It thus bears something of the flavour of Jim Ede's approach to Kettle's Yard introduced in the previous chapter (Ede 1996): as an approach to the study, and like the study itself, it could be described as a 'reflective rummage' (by which I mean that it critically and reflexively uses and explores several different methods to triangulate the various findings).

The structure of the chapter is such that it unpicks these ideas, initially situating the research design within the broad context of being an interdisciplinary and qualitative study. Having explored some of the features common to such studies, I then discuss the 'bricolage' approach taken to case studies, summarising how I went about choosing the cases, and then briefly describing the cases selected. This is followed by a critical overview of the various methods used to capture data within the case studies, including their limitations, and I then explain how each method was used to collect data. After a brief description of how the data was analysed, final reflective sections look at the complex role of the researcher within the study, and the ethical considerations taken into account.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research is defined variously, and as a field in its own right, but most agree that it uses multiple methods and various empirical materials to develop a holistic picture of the phenomenon being explored (Denzin & Lincoln 2003; Creswell 1998). As Jennifer Mason states, it is 'a highly rewarding activity because it engages us with things that matter in ways that matter' (Mason 2002: 1). Creswell gives several reasons as to why one might choose qualitative research methodologies. These include: to explore how and why something is happening because the topic needs exploring; to give detailed views of the topic in a natural setting; to be able to write in a literary style often bringing oneself into the study; to undertake the study because audiences are receptive to it; and finally, because it offers opportunities for the researcher to be an active learner in the process (Creswell 1998: 17-18). Qualitative research recognises personal perspectives and interpretations (Lester 1999), and since the study comes from experience, it is important to position myself within it.

So, my research aims and objectives pointed towards a qualitative methodology (as opposed to a quantitative one) as being the most appropriate strategy for exploring people's sensory engagements with, and material interpretations of, objects. It is the paradigm that allows for detailed and nuanced exploration of the particular settings and activities involved, while incorporating the voices of both participants and the interpretations of the researcher.

The epistemological framework for this research is an interpretivist one: this is a flexible method, sensitive to context, and aims to produce a holistic yet contextual understanding of the research area (Mason 2002: 3). In particular, qualitative research values 'the understandings, experiences and *imaginings* of our research participants' (Mason 2002: 1 italics mine) and so was considered a pertinent strategy to find out about creative engagement with objects in art galleries and the sorts of imaginative responses they might elicit, as well as the effects that this sort of work might have on the wider activities of the institution. In this study, it was important that whatever

methods used would enable the research to be 'characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive' (Mason 2002: 24).

Museum Studies is of course an interdisciplinary area of research, drawing on a vast and diverse range of disciplines, traditions and methods from the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences. It might even be referred to as a 'post-' or 'trans-' (or even 'pre-') disciplinary field because it is often based on its research questions and projects, rather than coming from a particular disciplinary background (see Sayer 1999;[18] Greckhamer et al. 2008; Walklate 2012). This research project is one such, as it borrows from several disciplines to underlie both its theoretical framing and its methodological one. While not a phenomenological study per se, it takes some principles on board, for example in identifying participants with experience of the particular phenomenon being explored (those who had worked closely with objects in art galleries), and in using 'sampling which is idiographic, focusing on the individual or case study in order to understand the full complexity of the individual's experience' (Bailey 1992: 30, cited in Rudestam 2007: 106). In other words, those studied, or contributing to the study, are the 'experts' on the individual and lived phenomena in the world (see also Moustakas 1994).[19]

Case study

This qualitative investigation used a case study approach, which is now explored. Case study is defined in various ways: some choose to describe it as a methodology or strategy (Creswell 2007; Denzin & Lincoln 2003; Yin 2003, 2009; Gomm et al. 2006), but others simply refer to it as an approach (Simons 2009: 3). Educationalist Helen Simons describes case study as 'a study of the singular, the particular, the unique', noting that the short stories of Katherine Mansfield could be considered the ideal

[18] Sayer argues for postdisciplinary studies, stating that these emerge 'when scholars forget about disciplines and whether ideas can be identified with any particular one; they identify with learning rather than with disciplines' (1999: 5).
[19] Phenomenological research is a vast topic in itself, and not one which is appropriate to discuss here. This study simply borrows ideas from the phenomenological process which is grown out of the philosophical writings of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

prototype (Simons 2009: 3). This potential of the case study as a means to tell stories that present evidence of particular and sometimes idiosyncratic events was especially appealing, given that one aim of the research was similarly to investigate stories that might emerge from material encounters with objects.

Of course one of the main difficulties with the case study approach is in selecting the cases, knowing how many to select (since arguably the more cases, the more 'diluted' the research), and knowing where the boundaries of those cases are (Creswell 2007: 76). Case study 'involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a *bounded* system' (Creswell 2007: 73 italics mine), so it was important to be clear on what this bounded system was. While it was always central to the research ideas to explore the two projects outlined in the *Introduction*, Manchester Art Gallery's Mary Greg project, and use of the Object Dialogue Boxes at Museums Sheffield and/or Manchester Art Gallery, nevertheless, it was important to investigate whether similar practice was taking place anywhere else, not least because of the close associations the researcher had with both institutions.[20] In order to do this, commonalities between the Object Dialogue Box and the Mary Greg projects had to be established.

Having worked on both projects (including working on both concurrently while at Manchester Art Gallery), I could see close links and resonances between how the Mary Greg collection and the Object Dialogue Boxes were being used. Although different from each other in many ways,[21] these projects share several characteristics. Both are object-focused (although their objects are not typical of an art gallery's collection); both involve sensory (touch-based) engagements with these objects; both take place within an art gallery (rather than a museum) and uniquely, both use creative and imaginative approaches to objects (as opposed to historical or contextual ones) as a

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[20] Researcher reflexivity and positionality are some issues posed by undertaking insider research which are explored in the last section of this chapter.

[21] The Mary Greg collection is accessioned, whereas Object Dialogue Boxes are not; Mary Greg's objects are 'primary' material of the art gallery, whereas Object Dialogue Boxes might be considered 'secondary' (in their function as interpretive resources, rather than in their property of being an art object); Mary Greg's objects have a relevant historical context whereas Object Dialogue Box objects do not, and so on.

central strategy for visitor and staff engagement. Both also appeared to have had some sort of wider impact on the practices of the institutions.

Overview of case studies

Rather than having to select places in which to collect data to answer the research questions, the research design happened the other way around: I already knew something of what it was I wanted to explore and where would be best to explore it, because I had been working on the ideas for a number of years. But since it was impossible to undertake research on these in an objective way (since I was implicated within their creation), I wanted to discover whether this sort of material interpretation practice was taking place at other galleries elsewhere. To this end, and to develop richer data, there was a need to explore whether a wider set of case studies, where the researcher's own subjectivity might play less of a role, might be useful.

Preliminary research in the UK was undertaken in 2011-12, largely through personal contacts and using professional networks and email lists (such as the Group for Education in Museums' (GEM) jiscmail list[22]). Contact was made with a range of individuals and institutions which made it clear that similar material interpretation practice in art galleries was not particularly common.[23] What was clear however, was that certainly Object Dialogue Boxes existed in several venues, so as well as deciding to look at those in Manchester and Sheffield, to give balance to the study, I selected another site with an Object Dialogue Box (with which I was unfamiliar) as a case study venue: Turner Contemporary in Margate. The Learning Team at Turner Contemporary commissioned their box when the new gallery opened to the public in 2011. There is

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[22] http://www.gem.org.uk/pubs/jiscmail.php (accessed 25/09/15).

[23] Many art galleries of course use tactile interactives and have hands-on activities or dressing up facilities, but these tend to have been established as part of a learning agenda, rather than a specifically interpretive one (see conference proceedings from *Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design Conference*, 17-18 May 2002, London: V&A http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/conference-proceedings-interactive-learning-in-museums-of-art/ (accessed 25/09/15) and those from *From Content to Play: Family-Oriented Interactive Spaces in Art and History Museums,* 4-5 June 2005, Getty Museum, Los Angeles https://www.getty.edu/education/museum_educators/content_play.html (accessed 25/09/15).

no permanent collection at Turner Contemporary, so while the box is used in a similar way to the boxes in Manchester and Sheffield, its context is slightly different, and I was interested to see whether this had an impact.

As part of my search to find other possible case studies, I developed a brief online questionnaire for museum professionals (see Appendix 1). This was to be used not as part of the research itself, but simply as a tool to find possible additional research organisations. The survey focused particularly on galleries' experiences of, and strategies available for, *handling* different types of objects. The questionnaire was again promoted through the GEM jiscmail discussion list. Twenty-five people responded, four from outside the UK. However, the focus was very much on logistical questions about object handling, and as such although it provided interesting insight, it was not used as a source of data for the wider research: it did not dig deep enough into approaches to object engagement within art galleries, not least since many of the respondents were from museum settings and not galleries.

Scope of research

By spring 2013, I had identified two further potential case study institutions: Leeds Art Gallery[24] (especially in its collaborative work with the Artemis Collection[25] run by Leeds City Council); and the Betty Smithers Design Collection[26] at the University of Staffordshire in Stoke on Trent.

Leeds Art Gallery has a tradition of working creatively with artists (Phillips 2005), of engaging in sensory ways with the art collections, but particularly of working in close association with the Artemis Collection, which is the city's handling collection of objects for schools. Leeds City Council is one of the few remaining local authorities to have such a loan scheme of objects, artworks and artefacts used predominantly to

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[24] http://www.leeds.gov.uk/museumsandgalleries/Pages/Leeds-Art-Gallery.aspx (accessed 25/09/15).
[25] http://artformsleeds.co.uk/artemis/ (accessed 25/09/15).
[26] http://www.staffs.ac.uk/academic_depts/artanddesign/facilities/design_collection/ (accessed 25/09/15).

support curriculum-based teaching and learning in schools. It consists of over ten thousand artefacts and three thousand works of art, which can be borrowed by any educational institution in the area. Although Artemis operates separately from Leeds Museums & Galleries, staff across the two organisations work closely together, and Artemis objects are frequently used by the Art Gallery to support their formal and informal learning programmes, particularly when working with artists to engage audiences in creative ways. Works from Artemis are also used in Leeds Art Gallery's newly re-established Picture Library.[27] The Artemis Collection also undertakes its own object-based creative projects including one entitled *Get Stuffed!* which took place in the summer of 2012.[28] Working together with artist Lord Whitney, the project involved families from across Leeds being able to borrow objects – in this case animals from its taxidermy collection – to take home with them for a 'holiday' where they were then documented by photographer Liam Henry. Through contact and lively discussion with the education officers at both Leeds sites, it seemed that this would be an appropriate additional case study: users of both venues regularly had opportunities to handle objects, and both institutions' approaches to interpretation were creative and idea-driven.

Overlapping with some of the aims of the Artemis Collection, the Betty Smithers Design Collection at the University of Staffordshire in Stoke on Trent, is a teaching collection of twentieth century objects, which can be borrowed and used by university staff and students. Established in the early 1980s, the collection was created to support and inspire those studying History of Art and Design-related courses. The collection consists particularly of small-scale products for domestic and office use (from radios to vacuum cleaners to hair-driers), as well as plastics (from cups to photograph frames), and a large collection of costume and textiles. Housed in a small area in the main building on campus, the collection is not yet an accredited one. Unusually, and perhaps even uniquely, students are able to borrow from the collection, taking artefacts home with them to inspire and inform their studies: in that

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[27] http://www.leeds.gov.uk/museumsandgalleries/Pages/leedsartgallery/The-Picture-Library.aspx (accessed 25/09/15).
[28] http://www.leedsinspired.co.uk/events/get-stuffed (accessed 25/09/15).

sense, the collection is more like a lending library than a museum or gallery (Carr 2006). Students can even use these objects: for example things borrowed might become props in a stop-motion animation, a photo-shoot or even a fashion show.

All three of these additional institutions have a strong tradition of working closely with artists and creative practitioners within their collections interpretation, and they were organisations with which I had developed personal rapport and had trusted relationships with members of staff. I thus began my research by collecting data across all five UK institutions: Manchester Art Gallery, Museums Sheffield, Turner Contemporary, Leeds Art Gallery and the Betty Smithers Design Collection.

One of the problems with qualitative research however, is the volume of data generated. It soon became clear, once I embarked on the data collection, that although incredibly rich and diverse, there was simply too much of it. The scope of my research needed tightening, and in my analysis, I decided to focus just on the three art galleries with permanent collections, not least since they were reasonably comparable sites in northern England (in close proximity to my home), and thus presented fewer logistical issues. Rather than defining the case studies by site, however, I defined them by project.

1) Object Dialogue Box (Museums Sheffield and Manchester Art Gallery)
2) Mary Greg Project (Manchester Art Gallery)
3) Artemis Collection (Leeds Art Gallery)

Each of these projects takes place in a large regional gallery, and at the time when the research was being designed, the venues had a history of being funded through Renaissance in the Regions.[29] The sites are briefly described below, before I turn to discuss the methods used to collect data.

Overview of sites

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[29] http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=12190 (accessed 25/09/15).

Museums Sheffield (formerly known as Sheffield Galleries & Museums Trust) became a Trust in 1998 when it was established to run the council's non-industrial collections including the Millennium Galleries (now Millennium Gallery), Graves Art Gallery (now Graves Gallery), Weston Park Museum, and Bishops' House (now run by the Friends of Bishops' House and owned by Sheffield City Council). In 2013-2014, its sites received over 1.1 million visitors, and reached over 20,000 school children (Museums Sheffield 2014).

Manchester Art Gallery is part of the Cultural Directorate of Manchester City Council, and the Mancunian Museums and Galleries partnership with the Whitworth Art Gallery and Manchester Museums. It was reopened in 2002 after a major expansion project. In 2013-2014, the gallery received 490,000 visitors, and unusually, the audience profile there matches that of the local population, with a large growth in visits from black and minority ethnic communities and disabled people, and large numbers of family audiences attending its dedicated programmes (Manchester City Council Art Galleries Committee 2014).

Leeds Art Gallery is part of Leeds City Council and, in 2013-2014, its nine sites (Abbey House Museum, Leeds Art Gallery, Lotherton Hall, Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills, Leeds City Museum, Temple Newsam, Kirkstall Abbey, Leeds Discovery Centre and Thwaite Mills Waterfall) received over 1.25 million visitors and worked with over 50,000 people on outreach programmes (Leeds Museums & Galleries 2014).

Methods

The term 'bricoleur' is often used by theorists to describe the task of the qualitative researcher (Costley et al. 2010: 90). Derived from concepts originally propounded by Lévi-Strauss (1966), Denzin and Lincoln use the term to speak about the multiple methods of such research: 'the researcher… may be seen as a *bricoleur,* as a maker of quilts, or, as in filmmaking, a person who assembles images into montages' (2003: 5). The ensuing bricolage is the 'pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to

the specifics of a complex situation' (2003: 5). In this qualitative research project, multiple methods are used in such a way, to create a montage of triangulated data about the particular cases, in order to arrive at some rich conclusions about the practices of engaging with objects. Rather than the case studies providing evidence just for the specific studies alone, through this process of montage and triangulation, this research aims to speak to a far broader set of concerns and contexts, not least on the possible impacts and implications of material interpretation across the gallery institution, and more widely within educational, socially inclusive, health and wellbeing contexts, and so on.

In this bricolage approach to case study, I used various methods, both to generate and to capture data to differing degrees. The main sources of data were through reflective interviews and participant observation (including through running a workshop), but in addition, I analysed documents (which in this instance were mainly blogs and online material), and the research also uses images. I now explore each of these methods, and explain how they were used to generate and collect data.

Interviews

Kathryn Roulston's work on 'reflective interviewing' (2010) was particularly influential in planning my fieldwork. She uses the term 'romantic' to describe her approach to interviewing, one in which the researcher may contribute ideas and co-construct data. In addition, the work of Jennifer Mason on 'creative interviewing' was also influential (2002). Inspired by Robert Burgess' statement, now some 30 years old, on semi-structured qualitative interviews being 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess 1984), Mason speaks of interviews as 'interactional communicative exchanges' which have an informal and conversational style. They are tailored and customised to particular people and are not fully scripted.

Denscombe notes that undertaking interviews is more complex than one might imagine: they 'involve a set of assumptions and understandings about the situation which are not normally associated with a casual conversation' (1998: 109) and need to

adhere to some sort of agenda, even if a loose one. The interviews in this research were semi-structured and undertaken in a one-to-one setting (1998: 113). Benefits of interviews for these purposes include the depth of information ascertained and insights gained, although of course they were time-consuming and there are considerations to be made about their reliability, as well as the impact of the researcher on the interviewees' responses (1998: 135). I devised a series of interview questions around themes relating to my overall research objectives, but allowed for open-ended and free-flowing response from the interviewees. Each interview was structured in a different way, with the exception of the opening question. Despite openness to the direction of the interviewee, certain main headings were always covered (see Appendix 2 for example interview questions). However, not all questions under all headings were always asked, and neither were they asked in a particular order, as the conversational style often elicited information which combined several of the areas, and it was important to allow a open dialogue.

Each interview began with contextual questions about the organisation (or project) and the role of the interviewee within this. This was then followed with questions about practices relating to engagement with material objects, and types of audience involved in this work. A third series of questions asked for reflections on the value of dealing with imaginative rather than factual interpretations of objects and artwork. Next, I asked about aspirations or fears about this sort of material engagement and imaginative work, and we talked about any developments in working approach or institutional practices resulting from this engagement with objects. Finally, I asked interviewees a personal question about how they might reflect on their own feelings of awe when they encounter 'resonant' or 'wonderful' objects in a gallery (see Greenblatt 1991).[30] In the spirit of Roulston's reflective approach, as more data was gathered and themes began to emerge, additional questions were added into subsequent interviews to engage directly with these new areas. For example, after several respondents during the first half dozen interviews talked about 'serious play' in relation to object engagements, I then worked this into the following interviews where

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[30] I did not ask this using Greenblatt's terminology, but usually described it as 'the wow moment'.

it seemed appropriate to do so. That I had the ability to be responsive not only within each individual interview, but also to the growing body of interview data, was particularly refreshing and tallies with Irving Seidman's observation:

> As a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language. It affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration. Finally it is deeply satisfying to researchers who are interested in others' stories. (2013: 13)

I would describe myself as one such: someone with a deep interest in the stories of others. My style of interviewing was relatively informal: since I already knew most interviewees, it was not possible to be otherwise. Interviews were mostly situated within the interviewee's place of work, usually in a quiet office or meeting room, although some took place in domestic settings, particularly where the interviewee worked as a freelancer. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Interviewees comprised people with close affiliation to some of the material interpretation projects I wished to explore. They included museum staff from across teams (collections, learning, and conservation) including some in senior management positions who I knew to have been involved either centrally, or peripherally in the development of particular object-based projects. In addition, teachers (mainly senior lecturers at university level) and artists using collections within their own creative practice were also interviewed. Each of the individuals identified was somebody who I felt, either through years of experience working alongside them, or because of preliminary telephone and email conversations, would be able to provide useful answers to the research questions. A summary of all interviews carried out is included in Appendix 3.

This fieldwork process began in May 2013 with the majority of interviews taking place in June 2013, and with one taking place in 2014 and one in 2015. Altogether, I interviewed 17 people from different organisations, with a variety of professional backgrounds. At times, the interviewees were able to answer questions about two different projects during one interview (for example where they had been involved in

the Object Dialogue Box project and the Mary Greg project at Manchester Art Gallery). Interviews were recorded using an MP3 recorder (and on an iPhone as backup) and field notes were made throughout. Following this, the interviews were transcribed word for word, totalling just under 171,000 words of audio transcription for analysis. Significantly, this raw data from interviews cannot be seen as representative of 'knowledge' until it is interpreted, situated and constructed into new understandings, as will be demonstrated in the analytical sections of this research. Rather than use any software (such as NVivo) to code and analyse, because the interviews were often so philosophical, or so particular, it felt more appropriate to devise an analogue method in which I could immerse myself in quite a physical and embodied way: I have a visual memory and to use coloured felt tip pens was my preference. Having read the interviews and my notes, recurring themes were allocated different colours, and all interviews were printed out and highlighted in different colours to represent the similar and different themes.

Participant observation

Most of the projects discussed during the interviews also involved a variety of workshop activities for different participants. These ranged from object handling within the galleries, to outreach sessions in different community or school settings, to exploratory 'rummages' in the gallery's stores (explored in *Chapter Four*). It was thus important to observe some of these actually taking place, to get a sense of the sensory engagements that interviewees were talking about (see Appendix 4). Although Denscombe has stated that 'the key instrument of participant observation methods is the researcher as a person' (1998: 152), one advantage of participant observation is that it can be used when 'there are important differences between the views of insiders as opposed to outsiders' (Jorgensen 1989: 12). As with the reflexive interview technique, the role I took on here as participant observer-researcher was significant. Whereas it is difficult (or impossible) for me to be an 'outsider' in this research, nevertheless, the distinction between the method of interviewing and that of observation, lies in the types of people providing the raw data. Whereas the

interviewees were mostly those from similar backgrounds and with a deal of familiarity with gallery processes, those observed in the workshops were not. These participants did not have any background in museums, and neither were they necessarily particularly interested in my research project. This meant that they came at the objects with different sets of expectations and beliefs about how they might be used.

Audience researcher Virginia Nightingale notes that observation is reliant on cooperative interaction and communicative exchange between researcher and research participants. It thus needs to be part of a self-reflexive process (Nightingale 2008: 105). Because this research asks about sensory engagements, it was important that I actually observed these taking place, rather than just hear people give their accounts some time after the event. For many theorists, observation is the most important method: while Adler and Adler argue that this is because it rests on something that is constant, namely the researcher's own knowledge (1994: 389), others of course recognise within this the possibility of 'observer bias', but for Nightingale, the fact that observation involves an exchange with the research participants acts as a 'corrective to the assumptions inherent in the researcher' (2008: 105).

Participant observation is a tool often used within the long traditions of ethnographic research (see Macdonald 2002). Although this study is not an ethnographic one, nevertheless it does shares some of its characteristics, not least in advocating first hand experience (Atkinson et al. 2001). In her ethnography of the Science Museum, for example, Sharon Macdonald notes:

> While ethnographic research often has the useful capacity to redefine itself and move beyond its original remit, it does nevertheless inevitably begin somewhere and with particular players. Most often these are human players… actor network theory, has, however, argued that we… should recognise that non-humans (particular technologies or objects for example) may also be actors and exercise agency. (2002: 7)

While I discuss ideas of agency in detail in the following chapter, it is important to note here, that in undertaking participant observation, seeing how participants interact with the objects themselves, was of course essential in this research. Observing not only how various audiences and staff behaved towards each other, but also noting how they engaged with the objects in sensory ways when in these settings was essential. In these workshops, I also listened to the stories and questions provoked by the objects, and as a participant, occasionally asked people for their responses to particular activities. I collected data as field notes and took photographs where permitted. The research involved observations of several workshops ranging from an Older Adults' group using the Mary Greg outreach collection, to a Special Needs primary school group at Turner Contemporary, to university student groups using the Object Dialogue Box at Museums Sheffield. In each case, field notes were made of the conversations elicited by the objects, as well as an overview of the session itself, and any other key observations, and I reflected on this after the event in a journal.

Since gaining participants' consent was necessary, I introduced myself as a researcher at the start of all these sessions. It is not clear how my presence in the sessions impacted on the participants, although as a participant observer, I joined in with the activities and general discussions, so my presence inevitably did have some impact (Denscombe 1998: 63). Indeed I even led one of the sessions, so had a multi-layered persona – as workshop leader, participant, participant observer and researcher (Costley et al. 2010). My research is not a visitor study, so who these audiences were, is much less significant than what they were doing and how they were engaging materially and imaginatively with the objects during the sessions. I was also interested in the things that people did not talk about or do – so for example if they were discussing what they were going to be having for lunch while handling an artifact, and not focusing on its material and emotional qualities at all while speaking, or even if they did not pick something up – I would make a note. Each workshop I attended was run as part of the formal or informal learning programmes, or as an addition to the programme as in the case of the session I ran at Museums Sheffield. My observation schedule focused on noting how people used their senses to engage with objects, as

well as noting imaginative links they made between these objects, the collections and wider ideas. Descriptive writing and images of these sessions are used throughout the analysis of data to tell the stories of particular sessions.

Additional methods

Alongside the interviews and observations, other methods were used to corroborate a richer tapestry of data. One such was the analysis of documents. As noted by Patrick Love, 'documents are part of the fabric of our world' (2003: 83), but significantly within this research, use of documents is important not because they too can be perceived as material objects and studied as agents in their own right, but because they are the one form of data that the researcher has neither been involved with nor instigated (Silverman 2002): as such the document provides a different take on the topic, not from the researcher's own perspective. Theorists divide documents into differing categories, for example: personal, official, and popular ones (Bogdan & Biklen 2007), but in this research, the main sorts of documents I used were websites and blogs, usually diary-style entries written by participants in a personal and reflective way. The Mary Greg blog was a significant source of this 'secondary' data, as were the websites of Karl and Kimberley Foster, and the Leeds projects.

In addition to documents, the research also makes use of photographic material and diagrams. There is a growing body of research on visual research methods (Pink 2006; Tinkler 2013; Edwards & Hart 2004; Barker 2015). For example, in her recent volume *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research*, sociologist Penny Tinkler notes several ways that photographs can be used in research, from studying found photos, to researching practices of photography, to participants actually generating photos as part of the research, to using photographs to generate interviews (2013). While these are not ways used within this thesis, whose images are used to illustrate, rather than as research *per se*, nevertheless, images are used because they do something that text and narrative cannot do: they present all the visual information to the viewer at the same time (Marion & Crowder 2013). In her article for *Museological Review*, Lesley

Barker explores the potential contributions of visual research to museology, noting that because museums are sensory spaces, they provide a unique place for developing visual methods further (Barker 2015; also see Kirk 2014). Although this research does not aim to develop such methodological discussions about visual research in museum studies, nevertheless, it has been important to use photographs throughout to give the reader a sense of the types of objects and material engagements being discussed: language alone would have failed to do the research justice. Pink notes that any research on sensory experience presents a methodological question, since experience is such a complex matter: we cannot sense the world as someone else does (Pink 2008: 135), but using photographs to show what happened in workshops, and to demonstrate how people handled objects, for example, is an important tool within this thesis.

Insider research

All research is situated (Costley 2010: 1). It is important, in a piece of ethical research, to be transparent about that situated-ness (Marstine 2013: 1). Alluded to within the *Introduction* and throughout this chapter, my role within this research is complex. Having been involved in instigating several of the case study projects in my career prior to undertaking doctoral research, I am something of an 'insider'.[31] Yet, no longer working within those institutions, I could be described now as an 'outsider'. I have close ties with some of the interviewees (so am an 'insider' in their social worlds), but less so in others where I am an 'outsider'. Mercer refers to the insider/outsider dichotomy as a 'continuum with multiple dimensions' along which all researchers constantly move back and forth dependent on a number of factors (Mercer 2007: 1): my role within this research project is just so. Being transparent about this is vital, and ultimately can be rich and productive:

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[31] These terms are defined as follows. An insider is 'someone whose biography… gives her [sic] a lived familiarity with the group being researched' whereas an outsider is 'a researcher who does not have any intimate knowledge of the group being researched, prior to entry into the group' (Griffith 1998: 361).

When researchers are insiders, they draw upon the shared understandings and trust of their immediate and more removed colleagues with whom normal social interactions of working communities have been developed. (Costley 2010: 1)

There are numerous volumes and papers dedicated to unpicking the role of the researcher within the research process, and Mercer provides a useful overview of some of these (2007; see also Wilkinson 2014). Such reflections give the phenomenon different names (often dependent on the discipline from which they arise, or the identity politics of the researcher): these include 'positionality', 'reflexivity', 'insider research' and 'participatory research' (Salzman 2002; Finlay 2002; Mercer 2007; Takacs 2003; Rose 1997). In her paper on the subject, in which she links reflexivity with power relations, feminist geographer Gillian Rose states:

The task of situating knowledge is 'to shed light' on the research process, although this should not be seen as 'navel-gazing'… The relationship between the researcher and the researched should be 'made visible' and open to debate. (Rose 1997: 309)

Another theorist even links such discussions with personality traits and one's emotional intelligence (Moser 2008). This section exists as a reflection on how my own epistemological and ontological positions might have biased and affected the research. All research is of course biased: I would not be writing a thesis, no matter what the discipline, if I did not have a personal interest, belief, or some sort of opinion about it. As David Takacs has stated: 'knowledge does not arrive unmediated; rather, knowledge gets constructed between the questioner and the world' (2003: 31): whatever I find out is interpreted by me as the researcher. The research objectives arose out of a conviction that there was something worth exploring within the projects with which I had been involved, and it is unlikely that I would have discovered this had I not worked on those projects. I also wanted to explore potential overlaps with those projects in Leeds with which I had not been involved, because the research aim came from a conviction that to explore sensory engagements would be useful to future

gallery interpretation practice, and so to see the phenomena of material interpretation from a variety of perspectives, including unfamiliar ones, could only strengthen the arguments made.

Yet of course, my position is arguably a double-edged sword (Mercer 2007). There were numerous positives: it was easy for me to gain access to the case study venues in Manchester and Sheffield because I was known by them; it was easy to 'get stuck in' straightaway because I had understanding of institutional contexts; I already had an established rapport with interviewees. But on the other hand, interviewees' responses may have been affected by this rapport, or by knowledge that they were part of a research project about something that they either enjoyed, or did not enjoy, as an intrinsic part of their role; assumptions may have been made about my knowledge of activities which had changed since I left the organisation; value judgements may have been made based on my 'new' role as a researcher rather than a colleague. And the fact that I came to the Leeds projects from an outsider perspective meant that I could never have such a deep and nuanced knowledge of practices there. This however shaped interviewee responses to me: they were extremely open and honest. Indeed sometimes it felt as though interviewees were using the opportunity of being away from their desk for an hour or two, to discuss issues that had been bubbling away under the surface for some time. While this section cannot possibly describe every permutation of my own positionality and that of the interviewees and other participants, it has nevertheless served as a reflective, reflexive and transparent space. To continue with this line of reflection, I now turn to look at research ethics.

Ethics

As the 'system of moral principles', ethics pervades every aspect of life, not least research. An ethical approach to research is thus one that 'conforms to moral principles' is 'morally right, honourable, virtuous, and decent'.[32] Because human participants were involved in the research, the due process for seeking ethical

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[32] From *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (accessed 25/09/15).

approval from the University of Leicester was undertaken in accordance with the regulations.[33] Although not directly working with children or vulnerable adults, the research is highly person-centric. It was thus necessary to gain ethical approval from the University of Leicester, and to gain informed consent of the participants. All participants were given an information sheet about the nature of the research (see Appendix 5) and the opportunity to ask any questions about the study, as well as the option to withdraw from it at any time. Different consent forms and information sheets were created pertaining to different audiences. None of the participants requested to withdraw from the research at any stage, although they had opportunity to do so if they wished to. All were happy to sign the consent forms (see Appendix 6), and some were keen for their names to be used, and even for the research not to be anonymised. For the sake of consistency however, all interviews have been given a code and date: this is used, sometimes alongside job descriptors, where this is appropriate. On occasion, where consent has been given, it is obvious who the participant is, and sensitive judgement has been made around the use of their words, names are used (for example in the case of artists Karl and Kimberley Foster: since it is obvious that they are the only people involved in the study who have actually made the Object Dialogue Boxes). The research adhered to all ethical protocol.

Having critically discussed the research design and methods, the next chapter explores the contexts in which the research is situated.

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[33] http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/ethics/code (accessed 24/09/15).

Chapter Three: Contexts

I have a crazy,

crazy love of things.

I like pliers,

and scissors.

I love

cups,

rings,

and bowls –

not to speak, of course,

of hats.

I love

all things,

not just

the grandest,

also the infinite-

ly

small –

thimbles,

spurs,

plates,

and flower vases.

Oh yes

the planet

is sublime!

…

(from *Ode to things*, Neruda 1994: 11)

Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's poem about things captures something of the essence and drive of this research project. He loves things. He not only recognises the beauty of things within themselves, but he situates this in a profound emotional, sensory and embodied connection between object and person.

> …
> I pause in houses,
> streets and
> elevators,
> touching things,
> identifying objects
> that I secretly covet:
> this one because it rings,
> that one because
> it's as soft
> as the softness of a woman's hip
> …

(Neruda 1994: 15)

Importantly, he also recognises that it is through such a material relationship with objects that he might have something of a realisation of what he here calls the 'sublime'. For Neruda, sensory, tangible, physical things can lead us beyond, to something awesome, immaterial and intangible. The marriage of this material relationship with things, and the unusual and distinctive use of theological metaphor to explore such relationships is at the heart of this thesis.

I have deliberately begun the contextual literature review for this research with a poem because poetry, as art, can take us beyond a conception of 'fact' or 'objective truth': poetry can be a journey into an imaginary, emotional, even embodied realm. Indeed in this sense, we might see resonance with what I refer to as the theological, as will shortly become apparent. Objects, or things, as in Neruda's poem, perhaps do this

too, taking us beyond themselves to something non-linguistic, as will unfold in due course. Like what might be described as Spalding's polemical view in *The Poetic Museum*, it is a contention that will be explored throughout the thesis that this poetic, imaginative –theological – realm might be explored and experimented with to a much greater degree than currently occurs in much museum practice, and that it is through engagements with material objects that a more imaginative and sensory interpretive practice can take place:

> Museums today are like trees in winter: their collections, like closed buds, all holding tight their secrets. They need to become like trees in summer, their collections flowering in the minds of each visitor. The poetic museum will then not be just a repository for past thoughts and fading memories, but will become a palace of wonder and discovery… (Spalding 2002: 167)

While this was written over ten years ago, perhaps as a response to individual professional circumstance,[34] and there are currently of course many museums and galleries which are much more like 'trees in summer', nevertheless, the somewhat Ruskinian contention that museums need to provide space for musing (Spalding 2002: 76) rather than being 'categorical' and 'didactic' (2002: 9) is one of the underlying beliefs leading to this research. Located within studies of museums, it is, like many others, a piece of research that straddles across disciplines. Arising from professional practice, the research comes from a particular context, situated somewhere in the 'spaces between' learning and interpretation in art galleries, creative approaches to sensorially engaging with objects, medieval mystical theology, and sensory studies of material culture. The literature under review is equally wide-ranging, from complex and philosophical to highly practical. It also firmly comes out of a conviction that research and practice are intrinsically linked, and that really their separation is a false one (see Pearce 1992: x; Parry 2007: xiii; and Simon Knell's Series Preface

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[34] Spalding does not shy from talking about his unsuccessful application to become Director of the V&A, and his criticisms of the eventual decision of the successful candidate, Elizabeth Esteve Coll to sack senior curatorial staff; as well as the abolishment of his own post in 1998 as Museum Director in Glasgow in a move to replace the post with a 'leisure management-style system' (2002: 11).

introductions to all the Routledge *Leicester Readers in Museum Studies* e.g. Dudley 2012).[35]

This thesis might be one attempt to do such. In this chapter, I first problematise and attempt to define what is meant by interpretation within art galleries, before putting forward an approach which I will call 'material interpretation'. I then explore what is meant by object, thing, and materiality, through looking at writings from the disciplines of material culture and sensory anthropology as well as historical studies. I explore some of the ways in which a materially based educational strategy (which I later explore and link with interpretation frameworks) is already playing out within various inclusive agendas, and will suggest that a wider understanding *material interpretation* might be a useful tool in investigating and developing art gallery practices. Finally, acknowledging that no matter how hard we might try to define, label and theorise, I suggest that we, as fallible, subjective and embodied human beings, can never fully grasp everything, and that in consequence, recourse to theological metaphor might be a useful tool to help us explore some of these complexities.

Interpretation in art museums

The research is born out of a professional background in learning and art gallery interpretation. Yet this is a contested field, with the very designation 'gallery interpretation' ironically *interpreted* in numerous ways, its openness both 'its strength and its weakness' (Meszaros 2006: 10). In order to arrive at a shared understanding of the term and its use within museum practice as well as within hermeneutic theory, it is necessary to paint a brief picture of the histories of the term and ways in which it has been, and is currently, understood critically, particularly within art galleries. As will become apparent, this leads me to argue for a (new) materially focused understanding (and doing) of interpretation, which develops and complements the handful of existing volumes on predominantly textual art gallery interpretation. These tend to develop language-based metaphors for describing the interpretive process (from Meszaros'

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[35] Although of course, this thesis as a written piece of research is more demonstration of a product-driven culture than a process-driven one.

use of Derridean deconstructive hauntology (2011), to Whitehead's use of cartography (2012), to an over-riding preference for speaking about interpretation as text – both literally and metaphorically (for example Fish 1980; Serrell 1996; Parsons 2010; Anderson 1989). In some ways, the ideas put forward about a materially focused interpretation might be considered more as akin to Susan Sontag's 'erotics' rather than her criticised 'hermeneutics' of art (1964: C9).

Yet I also acknowledge, that since this is both a review of *literature* and itself written (even though arguably the written is in material form as a bound thesis), it does not, and cannot, do justice to the sort of material interpretation for which I am attempting to argue. As Christopher Tilley notes: 'Thinking about material culture inevitably involves its transformation into linguistic concepts. However much we might try to escape from language, we are trapped in its prison house' (Tilley 1994: 73). So without wanting to sound entirely cynical, the Herculean task of writing about material interpretation is ultimately, and reasonably, doomed to failure. Yet, being reflexive and transparent about this, and the task of interpretation itself, and particularly at how we arrive at particular interpretations, is something I argue, following Meszaros (2011), that institutions need to do.

In November 2008, the V&A Museum held its inaugural conference at the newly opened Sackler Centre for Arts Education, *Fear of the Unknown: can gallery interpretation help visitors learn about art and material culture?* which was in turn part of the museum's extensive and strategic FuturePlan developments.[36] This three-day event has been described as 'the first major international conference devoted to exploring the role of interpretation as museum practice' (Fritsch 2011: 1) in which the nature and scope of gallery interpretation was debated with an international panel of speakers, academics and practitioners. In particular, the focus lay on defining interpretation as a museological practice, particularly discussing its relationship with learning and curatorial priorities, and situating it within various theoretical frameworks. Note that 'material culture' was also part of the conference title, and it is

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[36] See http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/f/futureplan/ (accessed 24/07/15).

to this (or to its lack) that we shall return in due course.[37] As a participant at this conference alongside my colleagues from Manchester Art Gallery's newly established Interpretation Development team, ideas discussed during the three days came to have particular resonance in defining our team's mission and in shaping our subsequent projects and programmes of activity.

The conference organiser, Juliette Fritsch (then Head of Gallery Interpretation, Evaluation & Resources at the V&A, and now Chief of Education and Interpretation at the Peabody Essex Museum, Massachusetts) makes a telling comment about the 'discipline' of interpretation in her edited publication based on the event, one which resonates strongly with this author. She talks about the 'dinner party experience' for those working in gallery interpretation: when asked 'what do you do?' to answer 'I work in gallery interpretation' often engenders bafflement and inevitably leads to more questions. To a layperson, a career in interpretation may have more connections with being a language translator than it does with a discrete area of museum practice (see Fritsch 2011: 234). Indeed in the popular imagination, the term certainly conjures up something to do with linguistics and text, something required in a diverse and multilingual society.[38]

Yet the same is arguably true even within the sector itself: a brief investigation of museum job titles including the term 'interpretation' includes such varied roles as those dedicated purely to text writing and labelling for both collections and temporary exhibitions, exhibition design, performance and re-enactment (live interpretation), devising in-gallery and digital interactives, managing informal learning programmes and so on (see Hooper-Greenhill 2000a: 103-123). There is no consensus and no 'one size fits all' system in what Fritsch describes as a relatively new professional

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[37] We might also contrast this title directly with the seminal work of Eileen Hooper-Greenhill on the interpretation of *visual* culture, rather than material culture (see Hooper Greenhill 2000a).

[38] This is also substantiated by metadata when searching on Google: the top hits all relate to interpretation as an act of explaining something, mainly connected with language and translation, but also including the interpretation of dreams, and interpretation of religious texts.

discipline,[39] the rise of which she notes as concomitant with what Suzanne MacLeod argues to be 'significant architectural and spatial change' during the last decades (MacLeod 2005: 11) and also with a rapid rise and broader understanding of educational and visitor research following on from the work of constructivist pedagogical theorists such as Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, for whom 'the educational role of the museum is now understood much more widely, to include exhibitions, displays, events and workshops' (see 1999: 3). Fritsch notes that while education and learning are concepts imported from the wider world beyond the museum, 'interpretation' is a unique concept (Fritsch 2011: 246) and similarly, Whitehead argues that emergence of a few departments of interpretation is a recent phenomenon, not yet widespread, and that it has largely arisen from the 'collapsing of boundaries between the interpretive work of curators and educators in the art museum' (Whitehead 2012: xii). As recently as 2000 though, understandings of interpretation differed radically from how they were understood only eight years later during the V&A conference, and the area has been described as 'the least studied of all aspects of museum work' (Meszaros 2006: 10). In 2000, Hooper-Greenhill notes a discrepancy in theoretical understandings of the term, compared with how it is used in practice. She states:

> In the museum, 'interpretation' is a process that is undertaken on behalf of someone else. Museum staff undertake 'interpretation' for museum visitors. In other words, 'interpretation' is something that is done for you, or to you… A more cultural and constructivist model may well be in place in the education department, but does not always influence thinking about visitors in curatorial circles. (Hooper-Greenhill 2000b: 143).

This statement appears to be something of a generalisation, perhaps unhelpful in its setting up of curatorial and educational activities as being opposed, and with its implied reflection that the constructive learning model is more egalitarian or

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[39] Of course, this may also be true of other roles within the sector, but it is particularly noticeable for interpretation jobs. See Fritsch 2011: 1.

democratic than the traditional curatorial and didactic approach.[40] Other writers, however, recognise more nuanced understandings of museum interpretation, and view it as having been a distinct element of gallery practice for almost half a century.[41] Artists practicing modes of institutional critique for example, are certainly not undertaking the practice 'for' the instruction of the visitor. Rather it is a process whereby 'visitors themselves are acknowledged as significant, if not always central, to the process of meaning making' (Robins 2007: 23). Interpretation is, or can be, a collaborative and participatory process. The notion that it is indeed a process (as opposed to a product) is an idea also taken up by Chris Whitehead, who argues that a focus on the processes of interpretation – which he understands largely in art historical terms – might be a way to 'ground' art (Whitehead 2012: 37).

Oft-cited in literature on museum and gallery interpretation, despite having been written almost 60 years ago, and not even for a museum or a gallery context, is the work of philosopher and US National Parks and Heritage expert, Freeman Tilden (1883-1980). In his famous publication on outdoor heritage, *Interpreting our Heritage* (1957) Tilden defines interpretation as: 'an educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information' (1977: 8). This is slightly different from the proclamation made by George Brown Goode as long ago as 1878 when in a paper given to the American History Organisation, he describes 'an efficient museum' as one in which there is 'a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen' (cited in Francis et al. 2011: 153). Whereas for Brown Goode, a museum might be like a sort of three dimensional encyclopedia of knowledge, for Tilden, the emphasis lies more on the experience of the viewer. While some of these ideas might need unpacking, nevertheless, that interpretation is something more than the communication of 'factual information' – indeed that it is a 'revelation' is an important point, arguably

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[40] See for example arguments about 'whatever' interpretation propounded by Cheryl Meszaros (2008, 2011), who argues that such a distinction is not helpful.

[41] See for example Claire Robins' paper on the history of artistic interventions as interpretation, which she traces back to the late 1960s through the practice of institutional critique (Robins 2007: 24)

separating its processes from those of didactic formal education. Another key point for the purposes of this research is Tilden's insistence on 'the use of original objects' and 'first-hand experience', ideas to which we shall return, not least because they might be concepts less familiar within an art gallery context.

Tilden established six principles for heritage interpretation, the traces of which can be found in many of the different associations' missions, practical guidelines and interpretive strategies that deal with heritage and museum interpretation today.[42] These 'founding' principles are:

1. Interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile. Interpretation should be personal to the audience.

2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. Successful interpretation must do more than present facts.

3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts. Any art is in some degree teachable.

4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation. Interpretation should stimulate people into a form of action.

5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part. Interpretation is conceptual and should explain the relationships between things.

6. Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. Different age groups have different needs and require different interpretive programs (Tilden 1977: 9).

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[42] See for example the UK Association of Heritage Interpretation: http://www.ahi.org.uk/www/about/what_is_interpretation/ (accessed 24/07/15); the South West Museums Federation: http://www.swfed.org.uk/resource/interpretation-policy-and-planning/ (accessed 24/07/15); the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's policy: http://www.tenement.org/docs/interpmeth.pdf (accessed 24/07/15).

There are various key thoughts upon which to pause: interpretation should be 'personal', 'revelatory', 'an art', 'a provocation', 'conceptual' and responsive to 'different needs'. In this regard, it might feel very different from a traditional text label within a gallery, which, it might be argued, cannot always do all of these things, since it is by nature static and often is little more than a signpost of information. Interpretation is understood not as something entirely didactic, but recognises that individuals construct their own meanings according to personal experience (akin to Hein 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 1999; Falk & Dierking 2000) and those meanings are made through a variety of learning styles (Gardner 1999). So why is it that in so much of the literature that has followed, the over-riding emphasis in discussions of interpretation has been placed on the textual, the unchanging, the didactic styles? Despite Hooper-Greenhill's acknowledgement that ' objects are not the same as words' (2000a: 103) and that 'understanding objects… is not the same as reading texts' (2000a: 114), nevertheless, manuals for 'how to do' textual interpretation 'right' are far more commonplace within the literature than books giving theoretical arguments as to *why* we might interpret, *who* might do the interpreting, and *how* they might do it (see for example Serrell 1996; Black 2005; Ham 1992; Veverka 2015), and indeed what interpretation is and why it might be important to be transparent about this within museums (see Meszaros in particular). Even for Tilden, with his exploratory and individualised approach to interpretation, nevertheless it still is largely textual in nature. What happens if we move away from text when thinking about interpretation strategies?

In her vision for the post-museum,[43] *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, Hooper-Greenhill paints a picture of the role of material objects within interpretation. She traces the significance of object-based teaching methodologies back to the nineteenth century (2000a: 105), and goes on to discuss a separation between 'material culture studies' and 'visual culture studies'. While she acknowledges the value of material culture studies, she implies that it is because these studies are

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[43] Amongst other characteristics, Hooper-Greenhill sees the 'feminised' post-museum focusing on the use rather than accumulation of objects, a concern with intangible heritage, and a move beyond the architectural building: it 'may be imagined as a process or an experience' (see 2000a: 152-153).

object-centric, rather than focused upon pedagogy (and so the very relationships between object and subject), that these studies 'have very little to say about the relationship between objects and museum visitors' (2000a: 107). Instead, using theories from sociology and art history, she posits visual culture studies as a way of better understanding how objects might be meaningful to museum visitors, rather than using material culture studies (2000a: 108). Yet despite this, it can be argued that her separation between these two areas of study become blurred, and are perhaps unhelpful divisions. Rather than actually separating out the visual from the material in the arguments that follow, Hooper-Greenhill notes that it is through 'embodied interpretation that objects become meaningful' (2000a: 116). And embodied is not, of course, limited simply to the visual:

> The peculiarity of knowing objects lies in the experience not only of looking, and having a conversation, but also perhaps touching and smelling. Objects are interpreted through a 'reading' using the gaze which is combined with a broader sensory experience involving tacit knowledge and embodied responses. (2000a: 119)

Yet despite her insistence on the embodied nature of an interpretive experience within a museum, as with many other museum theorists whose work is so influenced by structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodern ideas and their links with text, author and reader (for example Pearce's use of semiotics), its relationship with the textual has over-ridden a focus on the experiential and emotional encounter with a material thing. Likewise, the focus in museum practices of interpretation has tended to be narrow, not embodied, prescriptive and text-centric (see Barrett 1994 & 2002; Charman & Ross 2004; Louise 2015). Even in her purportedly materially-centred book, Fritsch states that 'it is perhaps inevitable that a volume of collected works about museum gallery interpretation discusses the nature of text as interpretation to such a degree' (Fritsch 2011: 8).

In this thesis, and the case studies upon which it is based, interpretation is not primarily understood as a textual encounter. Rather it is an investigation of materially-

based, embodied and sensory interpretive techniques as a counter, complement, or alternative to the tradition of text-based interpretation. Text is perceived to be a limited strategy for making meaning from works of art and objects: in order to develop ethical modes of interpretation, we need to see beyond the limitations of text. Even where text is written by numerous authors with a range of perspectives, nevertheless, it cannot allow for infinite possibilities. As Fritsch suggests:

> Ethical interpretation is about multiple voices of interpretive authority including museums' own potential uncertainty of authority over knowledge. This includes emotional interpretation, a notion of poetic rather than didactic interpretation, which understands a museum's own body language and how it transmits its own messages, combined with a critical museology that equally values the participation, authority and voice of the visitor. (Fritsch 2011: 9)

Yet there are problems with such an open-ended way of understanding what interpretation can be. The scholarship of the late Cheryl Meszaros (1955-2009) is famous in its rallies against what she refers to as ''whatever' interpretation.' (Meszaros 2006, 2008, 2011). Tracing museum interpretation back through a philosophical lineage, in her article for *Visitor Studies Today*[44] she notes the differences including between hermeneutics and structuralism as ways of understanding interpretation, which are explored below. Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek *hermeneuein*, which means 'to interpret or translate'. It is associated with the Greek god Hermes, messenger to the gods, and interpreter of their messages for human understanding: he acts as a go-between.[45] Hermeneutics is thus largely concerned with the dynamics and relationship between tripartite schemes of author, text and reader.[46]

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[44] Meszaros received some critical response to this article, not least as she was not perceived to be an expert in the field of visitor studies (see Knutson et al. 2006).

[45] See Porter & Robinson 2011: 3. Although a largely theological and biblical approach to hermeneutics is presented in this book, nevertheless, the key philosophical principles are translatable into studies of museums.

[46] This is a generalisation, and of course those such as radical deconstructionists would argue that such a task as to discern either the author's intention, or the real truth of something is impossible (Porter & Robinson 2011: 6).

In her brief summaries of hermeneutics as compared with structuralist ways of understanding interpretation, Meszaros first explores the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Dilthey (1833-1911). For these two scholars, all efforts were about understanding the author and the context within which s/he was writing: interpretation is the interaction between the text and the interpreter (Meszaros 2006: 11). A blow to the enlightenment project, meaning is situated, finite and located in human knowing, rather than in some kind of objective truth. Criticised later by Gadamer (1900-2002) for giving too much prominence to the intention of the author, Gadamer's distinctive understandings of hermeneutics is somewhat different. For him, hermeneutics is not about fixed meanings of texts (or objects). Rather it is a dialectical approach or a constant dance of questioning between text and interpreter, in which both participate together: as such, it is relational, needing a third force, which for Gadamer is 'method'. It is not possible to get to a truth independently from the method by which one gets there – although somewhat paradoxically, 'the forces that shape interpretation withdraw in the act of interpretation' (Meszaros 2006: 12). Meszaros pleas that these forces be acknowledged and made transparent in the process of museum interpretation.

She also traces the lineage of interpretation through structuralism and its insistence that the text itself is what speaks to us, rather than a reliance on the supremacy of the author, but then notes that the post-structural turn gives power to the viewer who makes his or her own meaning. How are we to account for all these different perspectives within the workings of an art museum? How might we navigate our way through the choppy waters of interpretive and hermeneutic theory to arrive at a suitable definition? A reading of Meszaros suggests that there is a spectrum of different approaches to interpretation, with chronology shaping each of the different philosophies as we trace them from the enlightenment modernist project, through connoisseurship, to hermeneutics, structuralism and poststructuralism. She refers to these as the 'ghosts of interpretive authority' (Meszaros 2011: 42).

At one end of the interpretive spectrum lies the ghost of a kind of innate knowledge, inherent within the artworks themselves, and perceived by the good judgement of the expert viewer. She discusses Bourdieu's notion of connoisseurship here (Bourdieu 1984). For Bourdieu, good taste is a matter of breeding and a product of the 'habitus' of the connoisseur. Meszaros speaks of the 'ghost of Bourdieu' as lurking within the white cube gallery spaces (see O'Doherty 1999), in institutions where there is a total lack of any form of interpretation whatsoever, but where those who are privy to its systems of knowledge are those who can interpret and experience fully the works of art. Of course, this is extremely problematic, politically, socially, democratically in an age where galleries are for all to enjoy (see Sandell 2002, 2007; Silverman 2010). Yet it is a view of interpretation which some authors writing from an art historical perspective still uphold (see Whitehead's discussions on curator Robert Storr, 2012: 40).

On the other hand, a shift towards the supremacy of the audience during the middle of the twentieth century, drew the interpretive focus away from text and object, and towards individual meanings made. This is what Meszaros calls the rise of 'whatever' interpretation, and for her, this extreme individualism is highly problematic for it both:

> preserves and protects the elite social and economic order of contemporary art (an act which pays artworld dividend), while simultaneously causing feelings of cultural dispossession and self-doubt among the uninstructed…
>
> (Whitehead 2012: 41)

Critical of the sort of constructivism offered by numerous museum education theorists, and by museums' acceptance to use what she calls the 'pedagogy of display as the primary interface between art and the public' (2011: 37) (for example, through labels), Meszaros is sceptical of the ideology of 'anything goes', an interpretive strategy so largely dependent on the reflections of the viewer that it fails to pay any respect to other interpretive traditions, including the art historical canon or curatorial authority, for example. Key to our approach to interpretation, Meszaros argues, is a

recognition that we do not interpret in isolation: we need all these ghosts of the past to inform how we come to make meaning from a work of art.

Using Derrida's notion of hauntology, and his work on absence and presence, Meszaros likens interpretation in museums to the 'double logic of the supplement' (Derrida 1994: 144). Paradoxically, this 'supplement' (for which we could substitute the word 'interpretation') either adds to itself – or to what is already present (in which case it is rendered pointless),[47] or it covers a lack of something – or what is absent (in which case it is unwanted as a reminder of our own deficiencies). She proposes that the art museum 'can accept its public responsibility by creating critical spaces of interpretation that render visible the spectres of interpretive authority that haunt contemporary practices' (Meszaros 2011: 37). Critical of a constructivist approach which she argues goes no further than 'whatever' and offers no opportunity for change, Meszaros instead posits a 'critical pedagogy' whereby content is made 'meaningful to the individual in order to make it critical so that it will be transformative' (2011: 45). Rather than the individual 'whatever' interpretation being the end-point of our journey around a gallery, it should instead form the beginning of that interpretation. So to clarify, while an object might move me, excite me, challenge me, provoke me in highly personal ways, this opinion should then lead me to reflect on the question: 'how did I come to that opinion?' (Meszaros 2011: 45).[48] It is this highly nuanced understanding of the possibilities of and for interpretation – and particularly how these are played out within the institution – with which I wish to engage in this thesis.

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[47] See Sontag's arguments in 'Against Interpretation' which are similar here: interpretation 'violates' the art because 'it indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else. (Sontag 1964: C6).

[48] Exactly the same sort of idea is given for secondary school assessment in teaching for example Ethics and Religious Studies: pupils are encouraged not just to give their opinion, but to use their knowledge and skills of argument to explain how they came to this solution (see Wright & Brandom 2000; Wright 1999). When explained as such, Meszaros' arguments seem simple and obvious, yet it is not true that this sort of analysis of interpretation and reflection upon it is made transparent within museum settings.

Again, the primary mode of interpretation which Meszaros describes is a textual or linguistic one, but of course there are numerous others, which also bear relation to this study. In one of the other few key contemporary texts on alternative approaches to art gallery interpretation, Whitehead too asks whether display should be interpreted as if it were text. He cites artist and critic Robert Storr who reflects that galleries are like paragraphs:

> the walls and formal subdivisions of the floors are sentences, clusters of works are clauses and individual works in varying degree operate as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and often as more than one of these functions according to their context. (Storr 2006: 23)

Yet for Whitehead, text alone is not enough as a way to understand museum interpretation. Instead he sees museums, even with their 'scrumpled geographies'[49] as maps, presenting both 'geographies of the world and geographies of knowledge' (Whitehead 2011: 55). Interestingly, using the work of critical and historical cartographer Brian Harley (1932-1991) enables reflection both on what is present, as well as what is absent, noting the 'excluded' and 'silenced' things on maps as in museums. Even for Whitehead though, who argues for a broad definition of interpretation as 'not just the label on the wall, but everything which precedes, surrounds and follows its production and consumption' (Whitehead 2012: xi), through the examples that he gives, it still feels as though he understands interpretation from a textual perspective.

So how might we extend interpretation beyond the hermeneutic and text-centric? In her paper for engage Scotland, Heather Lynch notes three distinctive types of interpretation: 1) text (panels and labels), 2) multi-literacy (including talks, studio visits, resources rooms, websites), and 3) participatory (workshops, tours, discussions) (Lynch 2006: 30). Noticeable through its lack is any emphasis here upon objects, the sensory and material interpretive responses. This lack of reflection or research on a

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[49] This is a phrase Whitehead borrows from cultural geographer Professor Kevin Hetherington (see Hetherington 1997: 214).

material form of interpretation is common. Even within non-textual ways to describe what interpretation is and does, there is an over-riding admission that *people* make - and indeed are - the best sort of interpretation (Fritsch 2011: 102). Although there is a large body of research on particular types of personal interpretation, these are usually framed in the language of museum pedagogy, and often come from a historical perspective. So for example, these might include research on traditional educational methods such as use of tour guides (e.g. Best 2012); first and third person interpretation (e.g. Roth 1998); re-enactment as practice-based research (for example in the work of re-enactor Ruth Goodman and in the research of food historian Annie Gray who have popularised this for television), as well as museum theatre, for example in the work undertaken at the University of Manchester (Jackson & Kidd 2008; Jackson & Rees Leahy 2005). There are of course numerous additional publications which deal with the personal and social nature of museum learning, including learning through reading as well as through interactions with others (Falk & Dierking 2000; Leinhardt & Crowley 1998; McManus 1989).

Other modes of interpretation that are not necessarily delivered by people, might include, but are not limited to interpretation through use of interactives, both physical and digital. While this thesis does not explore interpretation through interactivity per se, nevertheless there is much overlap between the two areas of gallery practice: it could be argued that interactivity is a subset of interpretation. There have been at least two major conferences dealing with interactivity within art museums, held respectively at the V&A in 2002, and at the Getty Museum in 2005.[50] Although both of these conferences argued for a wider understanding of interactivity than it being something simply 'added on' and 'for children', nevertheless, that interactivity is often associated with informal learning, play and families is a widely held view, especially in art gallery practice, where 'interactive spaces', ghettoes separated from the main

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[50] Conference proceedings can be found online:
http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/conference-proceedings-interactive-learning-in-museums-of-art/ and
http://www.getty.edu/education/museum_educators/content_play.html (accessed 20/07/15). These publications formed the basis of the author's research trip and subsequent report for the Group for Education in Museums to inform a proposed redevelopment of the Clore Interactive Gallery at Manchester Art Gallery (Woodall 2010).

museum space might be commonplace ways of ensuring these engagements (for example at *Big Art for Little Artists* at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool,[51] or *The Family Gallery* at the New Art Gallery in Walsall.[52] See also Edwards (2005) on the Getty Museum's Family Room). In their paper, Adams and Moussouri argue that interactivity within art museums is viewed differently from that within science centres, since in an art gallery, interactivity is not central to a primary 'object-centred mission'. For them, there are two models for interactive spaces: they either interpret art, or they are works of art in themselves. They define interactivity as a 'family of experiences' which 'actively involve the visitor physically, intellectually, emotionally and/or socially' (Adams & Moussouri 2002). Perhaps an over-riding difference in approach though when compared with interpretation, is that interactivity tends to start from the perspective of the visitor, and often with visitors' relationships with other visitors, whereas arguably interpretation (particular of the sort being discussed in this thesis), comes from the perspective of the object and the relationship between object and visitor (its materiality).

Critical of the current preoccupation of art museums to have interactives derived from an over-riding problem with today's 'new orthodoxy that is intent on solving political issues in the cultural sphere' is commentator, journalist and convenor of the Manifesto Club,[53] Josie Appleton (2002). Using arguments similar, yet less nuanced, to those of Cheryl Meszaros on the 'supplement', Appleton is critical of art museums, arguing that they have 'lost their way' and that in their insistence to have interactives, they have forgotten that they are the experts:

> Curators have a certain responsibility to come to conclusions on the basis of their knowledge. Which is not to say that curators will always be right. But even when they are wrong, the fact that they have committed themselves to a particular interpretation could none the less make the exhibition interesting…

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[51] http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/bigart/ (accessed 21/07/15).
[52] http://www.thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk/families-and-kids (accessed 21/07/15).
[53] This organisation is described as campaigning 'against the hyperregulation of everyday life'. See http://www.manifestoclub.com/about (accessed 24/07/15).

That a person is convinced about their theory or their story gives their creation a force; it makes it interesting to other people. (Appleton 2002)

While many of her arguments go against the grain of an inclusive model for museum practice, nevertheless, I agree that art galleries need to be transparent about where their interpretive positions have come from, and that this is the key to an ethical stance in art museum interpretation.

It is time to engage with a materially based interpretation. Objects are what we have. So, within this thesis, interpretation is understood as a materially-based process, and the case studies selected are deliberately projects in which reflection on both the materiality of objects and their interpretation as material interpretation have been encouraged, either explicitly or implicitly. In 1964, Susan Sontag famously stated that: 'Interpretation is the revenge of the intellectual upon art'. She goes on:

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.
Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.

The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.' (Sontag 1964: C9)

In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art' (Sontag 1964: C10)

In what now follows, I explore ways in which we might 'recover our senses' within museums, and develop something of this 'erotics'. And I do this by recourse to anthropological ideas around material culture and materiality.

Museum materialities

In her edited volume *Museum Objects*, social anthropologist and museum studies scholar Sandra Dudley argues strongly that: 'it is time to see a materially focused, material culture studies back in the centre of museum practice and museum studies' (Dudley 2012: 5). Having explored the concept of interpretation within art galleries, drawing attention to an emphasis on *material interpretation* of objects within this thesis, I now turn to explore the broader notion of, and current interest in, what is meant by *materiality* in museums (see Dudley 2010 and 2012 in particular). In this section, I explore briefly the basis for much of this work as found within particular anthropological studies and interpretations of material culture, and I explore the turn towards sensory and embodied experience within anthropology, particularly as found within accounts of sensory and aesthetic anthropology (Dudley 2010: 2).

Following that, I explore ways in which museums have engaged intrinsically with material and sensory experiences of objects historically, and I explore the demise of touch in particular alongside a rise of modernist ideas of ocularcentricity. I then mention some of the current research being undertaken into the role of different senses within museums,[54] and in various programmes of what might be defined as more instrumental activity across the museum institution, for example through learning and health and wellbeing activities.

Objects in museums

This thesis prefers to use the phrase 'objects in museums' rather than 'museum objects' since the objects housed in them have been removed (sometimes violently) from their contexts (Vogel 2003: 653; Classen & Howes 2006: 200; Ouzman 2006: 274). In the following section, and building on definitions of object already outlined,

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[54] Interestingly, while this research is notably about experiences of materiality within art galleries, much of the research that has taken place up to this point has been largely concerned with museum, and not gallery, practices.

we shall explore what is meant by an object – specifically as it is understood within the context of a museum. Arguably a doyenne of critical explorations of the roles, meanings and contexts of objects in museums, even the eminent scholar Susan Pearce notes that to define such terms is problematic, and in her seminal text *Museums, Objects and Collections* (1992), she states that throughout the book, 'thing', 'object' and sometimes 'artefact' are used interchangeably (1992: 6).[55] For Pearce, objects are simply (and concurrently, and complexly) 'lumps of the physical world to which cultural value has been ascribed' (1992: 4). Using the anthropologist and archaeologist James Deetz's words, she also acknowledges that the wider physical and natural world – the landscape, nature and so on – is also an object: 'Material culture is that segment of man's physical environment which is purposefully shaped by him according to a culturally dictated plan' (Deetz 1977: 7, cited in Pearce 1992: 5). Museums are full of such 'lumps of the world'.

Interestingly, and an idea to which we shall return, Pearce's book is subtitled 'a cultural study' rather than 'a material study' and this has profound implications for the sorts of contents included, and the ways in which objects are, and I would argue, subsequently have been, understood across the sector. Perhaps too this emphasis on the cultural role of objects, rather than on their materiality, influenced and shaped the direction of collections and object studies in museums (and beyond) over the following decade or two, just as the focus of 'material culture' studies has arguably been on the cultural aspects of things, often to the detriment of a focus on their materiality as will be explored in due course (see Dudley 2012: 5).

Pearce positions her interpretations of material culture studies within a broader context of social and critical theory (1992: 7-11), yet there are other frameworks within which we might also situate materiality in museums. In her ground-breaking work on ways of rethinking objects in museums, with which much of the thinking behind this thesis is aligned, Dudley calls for the return of the object into material culture studies and studies of museums:

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[55] As does Dudley 2012.

not in the positivist, static form and role it held in the past, but through a gentle twenty-first-century revolution in which the object is once more at the heart of the museum, this time as a material focus of experience and opportunity, a subtle and nuanced, constructed, shifting thing, but also physical, ever-present, beating pulse of potential, quickening the institution and all that it is and could be. (Dudley 2012: 5)

Drawing on phenomenological approaches (as with literature on sensory culture), she aims for a new emphasis in the study of museums (Heidegger 1978; Merleau-Ponty 2002). This thesis follows in a similar trajectory and aims to thus rehabilitate the object – the material of the museum – back to the heart of what it is that the museum is. Before exploring some of the concerns and setting the scene within an anthropological context, I will set the scene by looking at the current state of affairs in the UK, building on the explorations of interpretation in the first part of this section, and giving a brief overview of where this state of affairs – the 'demise of the object' may have come from.

Over 80 years ago, in 1931, the UK Museums Association ran a short course in curating, in which handling was the key element (see Candlin 2010: 95). From 1933, right up until 1998 when the new Associateship of the Museums Association (AMA) replaced the Museums Association's diploma, working with objects was still of central importance: training to become a museum professional was almost synonymous with training to become an object or collections curator. Part of the qualification involved a practical examination in which the handling, identification and classification of objects was central. By the 1980s, these core object-based training courses for the diploma were run at the University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies, immediately making the practice of handling objects an academically rigorous one as well as a practical essential.

But by as early as the 1970s, new activities were being expected of curators so that the then director of the Museums Association, Trevor Walden, pertinently postulated

that 'we expect 'interpretation' to be one of the many skills which may be properly demanded of a competent curator, but… I think it may not be long before we regard it as a proper field of specialisation in its own right' (cited in Candlin 2010: 106). This separation of professional disciplines within museum practice became instilled into museum debate and practice when in 1989 at the V&A, the museum's director, Elizabeth Esteve-Coll decided (with support from Margaret Thatcher's government) to separate the conservation from curatorial departments.[56] The process of object handling, she believed, was 'not connected to the production of knowledge about the collections' (Candlin 2010: 108). The disciplines of curatorship and collections management began to fall into separate camps in many institutions. With a growing field of skills required in museums throughout the 1990s, including in engagement, education, outreach, exhibition development, digitisation, marketing and so on, the Museums Association replaced the diploma with a revised associate membership (AMA) dependent on continuous professional development. As MA director Mark Taylor has stated:

> There used to be a practical where they gave you an object and you had to describe how you would display it, which used to reduce people to wrecks… We felt unable to continue with an exam like that, but also the range of skills needed to drive a museum was much wider than whether you knew the history of open-air museums since 1950. (Nightingale 2008: 32)

The AMA was further revised in 2008 to correspond with such changes which saw a shift away from the objects themselves, particularly towards a focus on people's engagement with them through learning and education programmes, both formal and informal, and through a variety of socially inclusive policies to increase diverse audience attendance at museums across the country (Sandell 2002).[57] Much has been

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[56] This decision was supported by many, including Christopher Frayling at the Royal College of Art, but was also deeply divisive and frowned upon by numerous museum and art professionals including former V&A director, John Pope-Hennessy who deemed it 'uneconomical and asinine' (in Candlin 2010: 107).
[57] As a recent participant in a new MOOC run by FutureLearn on behalf of the University of Leicester and National Museums Liverpool (https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/museum

written subsequently, and critically, on the dwindling relationship between museums and their objects in an age of inclusivity (Appleton 2002; Conn 2010). Historian Steven Conn traces what he calls an 'object-based epistemology' through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to explore this demise of the object, his contention being that 'the place of objects in museums has shrunk as people have lost faith in the ability of objects alone to tell stories and convey knowledge' (2010: 7). This thesis argues that although Conn's observations on the place of objects may be correct, nevertheless, these material things are about so much more than simply telling stories and conveying knowledge. Museums and galleries need strategies to resituate the very things that make them, to which the thesis now turns.[58]

What is an object? What is a thing?

It is not the sole aim of this research to engage with the many permutations of the idea of 'object' in different disciplines. Yet clearly it is important to engage in a brief overview of some of the different ideas about what an object is in order to arrive at a definition suitable for this project, since objects are central to this research and are central to museum practice.[59] In addition, I shall also explore the word 'thing' as an insightful alternative since within the literature of museum studies, as within this thesis, the two are often used (not unproblematically) interchangeably.[60] Following an exploration of dictionary definitions, this section very briefly looks at and critiques traditional conceptions of mind-body dualism to set a wider contextual scene for the research.

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[58] The new draft *Code of Ethics* (July 2015) from the Museums Association still focuses on the knowledge potential of collections, but it does recognise collections as having a wider potential to 'engage' the public: http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=1149505 (accessed 20/09/15).

(accessed 24/07/15)), many of the conversations from participants noted how the emphasis of the course entitled 'Behind the Scenes at the 21st Century Museum' was largely on social issues, rather than the objects that they understood to be behind the scenes.

[59] This statement is debated by some, as can be seen for example, in those that arguably eschew object-centredness for the social or educational impact and people-centricity of museums (Silverman 2010; Hooper-Greenhill 1994 et al.).

[60] Although also, as will be demonstrated, sometimes their meanings can be understood very differently (see Brown 2001).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'object' is derived from the Latin 'obiectum', meaning 'something presented to the senses'. In current parlance, this is broadened out to refer to any 'material thing that can be seen and touched'.[61] It implies a viewer, or a subject doing the sensing through sight and touch, and it further implies that sense experience is what is needed to understand that something is an object. Note that just sight and touch are mentioned here as the senses by which an object can be explored. Slightly more all-encompassing (and more contradictory) is the word 'thing', which can be 'an entity of any kind' and 'that which exists individually (in the most general sense, in fact or in idea); that which is or may be in any way an object of perception, knowledge, or thought; and entity, a being.'

In philosophy, a thing is 'that which has separate or individual existence'. So here, a 'thing' does not necessarily have the sensory connotations of 'object', even though it too might also be 'a material object, an article, an item; a being or entity consistent of matter, or occupying space'. It does not necessarily even need to have a viewer: it can exist independently from the subject. Indeed, sometimes even in its very definition are contradictions, since a 'thing' is also described as 'an actual being or entity as distinguished from a word, symbol, or idea by which it is symbolised or represented; that which is signified.' There are thus complexities often relating to its tangibility or intangibility: a 'thing' can be both material and immaterial. Added to this, 'thing' is often used as a vague word for an object which it is either difficult to denominate more exactly (what's that thing over there?), or which the speaker does not want to specify more precisely (what is that thing you are doing?). Indeed sometimes, and in ways that have much resonance with this project,[62] 'thing' can also be used 'indefinitely to denote something which the speaker or writer is not able or does not choose to particularise, or which is incapable of being precisely described'. This will be

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[61] The word has several additional meanings: it can both be 'a goal, purpose or aim; the end to which effort is directed; the thing sought, aimed at, or striven for' but also it can be the 'person or thing to which a specified action, thought of feeling is directed'. In philosophy, the object is often understood within a dualistic framework as being the opposite of the subject, or anything that is external to the mind. Indeed there is an entire field within computer science that defines object in various ways.

[62] As shall be revealed during discussions of a theological framework for the research.

discussed further during exploration of some of the theological metaphors which have come to underpin this research. Again, pertinent here, the aligned adjective 'thingish' is often set up in opposition to something 'imaginary'. So, the term 'thing' is arguably more nuanced than the term 'object', at any rate within the dictionary definitions. While the terms are used somewhat interchangeably in the arguments that follow, I will return to these distinctions in due course in discussions of a theoretical framing for the project.[63]

Discussions about objects can be found across numerous disciplines, not least in philosophical debate about subject/object distinctions. Candlin and Guins note that object is a 'sprawling category' (2009: 2) and within their guide to 'thinking about and thinking through objects', they present 'epistemological vantages for the study of objects' through the various lens of different disciplines and methods including anthropology and material culture studies, science and technology studies, technoculture and digital media, and finally critical theory (Candlin & Guins 2009: 2-4). Objects might have practical use (a spoon, a wheelbarrow), or symbolic purpose (a gravestone, a lucky charm), or sometimes both of these concurrently (a key). They might be natural (a rose, a cliff), manmade (a pot, a painting) or even a combination of the two (a basket, even a fossil extracted from its rock). They have meanings (and uses) that are socially constructed (a chair, a dolls' house). They wield power (a crown, coins) and sometimes they relinquish power. They might do both of these at the same time, toying with questions of ownership, commodity, elitism, gift-giving. Objects both tell their own stories and are used to punctuate grander narratives. They might provoke and inspire learning, imagination and emotion. Objects surround and pervade every aspect of our embodied and material lives.

Recent years have seen something of a rise in literature about objects, things and material, which cover all the areas mentioned above (for a selection giving overviews, see Candlin and Guins 2009; Dudley 2012; Turkle 2007; Miller 1998; Brown 2001). From a range of perspectives, there are some key thoughts and scholars that are

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[63] Cf. Bill Brown's distinctions between 'object' and 'thing' (2001).

worth noting for setting the scene in what we might see as a demise and resurgence of object-focused scholarship.[64] Paradigm shifts in philosophy have inevitably played their part in our understandings of objects. Harking back to Plato's famous theory of the Forms in the allegory of *The Cave* in Book VII of *The Republic*, as well as in *The Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, most modern readers have equated his description of the cave and its objects with a dualistic way of understanding the world, a metaphysics whereby the rational and real world of the soul or intellect is elevated at the expense of the sensory realm which is illusory and constantly changing.[65] The Forms are both a-temporal and a-spatial: objects we perceive merely mimic them, such that a table as we experience it is a representation of the true form of Tableness. We live in the changeable world of illusory shadow, mere opinion or *doxa*, as opposed to the immutable and true reality of the Plato's Forms, pure knowledge, or *episteme* (Plato 1987: 514a-515e). One may therefore read Plato as separating the world of sensory experience, of bodies, of things as they exist in space, from the world of ideas, of knowledge, of reason – indeed of soul.[66] Of course Plato lived in a world without the modernist institutions we know as museums, yet this is fascinating in relation to them, for a Platonic view read as dualistic in this way, would hold that we can never know things in their entirety – knowledge derived through things in museums is an imperfect version of the truth of the Form of that thing. This might on the one hand challenge the entire museum project, or on the other, it might mean having an openness both to multiple interpretations and a recognition that we can never fully grasp meanings, so leaving museums open to multiple possibilities and to the realm of the imagination.

While this is not a survey of the history of philosophy, skip forward some two thousand years or so to a rather different dualism propounded by Descartes at the start of the Enlightenment with its focus on scientific rationalism. For him, there are

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[64] I do not pretend that this is in the slightest comprehensive but just provides a snapshot.
[65] This reading of Plato as a dualist is contested (Pickstock 1998).
[66] This is both problematic and deeply exciting for museums: if we cannot know anything through flawed sense experience, then how and what do we know about objects within museums?

two different types of substance: matter and mind. In his famous *cogito* argument, reason is elevated above the material world:

> Am I so dependent on the body and the senses that without these I cannot exist? But I had the persuasion that there was absolutely nothing in the world, that there was no sky and no earth, neither minds nor bodies; was I not, therefore, at the same time, persuaded that I did not exist? Far from it; I assuredly existed, since I was persuaded. (from *Meditation II*)

Interestingly for Descartes, all knowledge is also dependent on God. Museum collections too, despite growing up at the same time as a positivistic and scientific worldview, were also understood as playing their part in glorifying God's creation. The collection of the British Museum in London for example was dedicated by Sir Hans Sloane for:

> the manifestation of the glory of God, the confutation of atheism and its consequences, the use and improvement of physic and other arts and sciences, and benefit of mankind'
>
> (cited in Alexander & Alexander 2008: 59)

The very institutions which are so often said to represent all that is secular had a religious worldview at their root. But despite this, and although 'doubtless not entirely to blame for the ontologisation of the distinction, and the way it has become embedded in our way of thinking' the writings of Descartes have been used over centuries as a way to 'free scientific thought from subjection to theology and strict institutional supervision by the Church' (Csordas 1994: 7). I return to these ideas as the thesis unfolds to develop the use of theological metaphor and its implications for material interpretation.

Anthropology, material culture and the 'material turn'

This section begins by looking at what is meant by 'material'. In particular it is important to explore the so-called 'material turn' (Edwards & Hart 2004: 3), and I now explore some of the key anthropological ideas which have permeated museums and have subsequently informed and had impact on this thesis. So what is meant by this 'material'? The Oxford English Dictionary states it is 'the matter of substance from which a thing is or may be made'. The term is closely linked with the word 'matter', which, in a discussion about the wooden sculptures of David Nash, Ingold notes is derived from the Latin for wood, 'materia' (2007a: 11) which is in turn linked to the word 'mater' or mother, the trunk of a tree being understood as the mother of its offshoots (see OED definition). Although dissimilar from the immaterial Platonic idea of the Forms, nevertheless, there is something comforting about this conception of matter: like a mother, perhaps matter could be said to 'give birth' to materiality.

Studies of artefacts are common to many disciplines, from archaeology to art history, and of course within museums. But over the past few decades, studies of material culture have largely focused on consumption as opposed to production (Miller 1987), and despite this, there have even been those who criticise certain scientific disciplines for not taking objects seriously enough (Joerges 1988: 220), and about which Marshall McLuhan has famously coined the phrase 'technosonambulism' (Graves-Brown 2000: 3): Joerges' 'world of actors devoid of things' (1988: 220) might just as well be referring to numerous other studies of material which famously neglect the material of which they speak (see Dudley 2010: 2; Ingold 2000: 53).

In the introduction to his volume *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, Graves-Brown helps set the scene for an area of research in material anthropology which although has gathered force over the past decades, nevertheless has arguably not made its way into many museums studies at a similar rate. He states:

> By its very nature, our material culture is something with which we are all, at first glance, familiar. Yet this very familiar world is also one which we, as both

quotidian individuals, and as scholars, are inclined to overlook. The very
familiarity, mundanity of the material world around us leads us to leave it
unquestioned. (Graves-Brown 2000: 1)

He defines the task of material culture studies as to make this familiar unfamiliar.[67]
Instead of focusing on the 'cultural' part of objects, or their 'form' (Ingold 2000: 53),
we might need to turn to focus on their 'substance', and we need to 'bring these
products of human activity back to life' (2000: 64).

While museums have interpreted material culture since their birth (Impey and
MacGregor 1985; Macdonald 2006a, 2006b; Preziosi 2007; Knell 2007), there are very
particular ways in which they do so. As we explored in the section about material
interpretation, one of the key ways objects are used is as part of an object-information
package: the label is often more important than the object (Dudley 2010: 4). The
object is used to punctuate a wider cultural or social history, a grander narrative. In
other cases, objects are used in taxonomic ways and as classificatory: they enabled the
shaping of the disciplines and the development of particular categories of knowledge
(Knell 2007: 14). Objects, of course, are also used tell their own stories: how did they
come to be within a museum in the first place? Following on from Appadurai (1986)
and Kopytoff (1986), museums often recognize that objects have social lives, and they
often choose to illustrate aspects of these lives. One only has to look at the popularity
of such series as the BBC's *History of the World in 100 Objects* to see how object
biographies, and objects as illustrative of wider stories are merged within the museum
setting (MacGregor 2011). So how might current debates within material culture
studies impact upon museum practices, to enable a return to what is referred to as
'materiality'?

Material culture studies is arguably still a field in its infancy: indeed the *Journal of
Material Culture* was only established in 1996. While those writing on the topic largely

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[67] While this might seem the opposite of the task of a museum, this concept of making the
familiar unfamiliar has resonance with the case studies to be explored, particularly the Object
Dialogue Box, which does exactly this in material form.

agree that *material* has been neglected in material culture studies (Ingold 2007: 1; Dudley 2010: 1), there is some disagreement about exactly what this material is, and what the task of a study of material culture might entail. For example, Tim Ingold, in his call for a reinstating of the actual material into discourse (and actually as material, not as discourse), makes a distinction between a focus on the 'material' and 'materiality'. He argues that due to a perceived split between theory and practice, materials have been lost behind an academic veil which speaks instead of 'materiality'. By way of example, he mentions a 'matter-of-fact' volume by Henry Hodges written in 1964, *Artefacts*, which does in fact list exactly the sorts of materials he is interested in, but he notes that no mention is ever given to this volume in an extensive body of theory on materiality. He criticises what he sees as a current trend that 'to understand materiality, it seems, we need to get as far away from materials as possible' (Ingold 2007: 2).[68] Would it not be better, he argues, to actually engage with materials in order to understand them?[69] Using a wet stone which he asks the reader to place on the desk while reading, Ingold posits that the 'properties of materials, in short, are not attributes but histories' (Ingold 2007: 15). Ironically, despite his insistence on a shift from materiality back to materials, it is noteworthy that however much he might ask us to engage with materials (a stone) while reading his text, his writings are still exactly that, writings, and not materials. Miller picks up on this too: 'his paper is actually not a stone but a text. He is trying to convey issues of materiality and material properties through semantics' (Miller 2007: 25; see also Hodder 1986: 126 who argues that 'material culture is like a text').

While I have much sympathy with Ingold's view that a turn to materials has much to offer in theory and in practice, particularly within the sphere of museum interpretations, criticisms of Ingold by Christopher Tilley and Tilley's own definitions of materiality are more apposite in this research. Where Ingold focuses on the material

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[68] In a fascinating published argument, other scholars including Knappett, Miller and Tilley (all 2007) note that contrary to what Ingold says about this book not being on any bibliographies in material culture, it does actually form a basic text on all their courses. However, Tilley refers to Hodges' text as: 'sheer tedium' and 'dry as dust empirical discipline' of archaeology because there is no consideration of the social significance of the things being studied (Tilley 2007: 18).
[69] I think the answer here is a resounding 'yes': the rise in creative practice-based PhDs might be one way of demonstrating this as a valid form of knowing.

almost as it were in a vacuum away from social life, Tilley speaks of materiality in relation to people:

> The concept of materiality is required because it tries to consider and embrace subject-object relations going beyond the brute materiality of stones and considering why certain kinds of stone and their properties become important to people (Tilley 2007: 17).

Since this research is about people's engagements with material things, it is essential to recognize the materiality of things *in relation* (see also Graves-Brown 2000: 2). Concomitant with this is an understanding that material things go beyond themselves:

> the concept of materiality is all about going beyond the stone itself and situating it in relation to other stones, landscapes, persons and their doings – in other words developing a holistic and conceptual theoretical and interpretative framework (Tilley 2007: 18).

Materiality thus goes both beyond empiricism and a charge of dualistic ways of thinking, and is about a meaningful relationship between persons and things. As Latour has stated: 'consider things, and you will have humans. Consider humans and you are by that very act interested in things' (2000: 20).

Agency and affordances

It is not the aim of this research to become entangled in complex debates over the question of object agency (and the often related charges of animism or fetishism (see Jones and Boivin 2010; Ingold 2007) or even the idea that object agency is simply used for shock value (Robb 2004: 131)), yet clearly if we are to understand the materiality of objects as having something to do with the way that objects and people interact in the world, it is important to look at and situate the research within this debate. While this remains a controversial topic even amongst scholars of material culture (Morphy

2012), socio-cultural anthropologist Alfred Gell's (1945-1997) arguments derived from an aesthetic reading of anthropology, are central.[70] Gell's positioning of material objects into the web of social relationships follows on from the work of French sociologist Marcel Mauss on the gift (Mauss 1954), and his work was intended to broaden the focus of anthropology of art out from a focus on symbol and meaning, to viewing art as part of a wider system of action, change and relationships.

Gell argues that within any social relationship, the 'other' whom the relationship is with, does not have to be a human subject: 'Social agency can be exercised relative to 'things' and social agency can be exercised by 'things' (1998: 17-18). For him, this agency is recognised only through its effects:

> We recognise agency, *ex post facto*, in the anomalous configuration of the causal milieu – but we cannot detect it in advance, that is, we cannot tell that someone is an agent before they *act as an agent*, before they disturb the causal milieu in such a way as can only be attributed by their agency (1998: 20).

Although Gell argues that things cannot have intentions, and so is somewhat coy about stating that things actually 'possess' agency, he notes that humans do have agency, and that this 'human agency is exercised in the material world' (1998: 20). He continues however, by introducing the idea of 'primary' and 'secondary' agents, as a categorical distinction, using an example of landmines in Cambodia to do so. A primary agent has the capacity to intend to do something (the soldier, in this case). A secondary agent however (the landmine) cannot 'initiate happenings through acts of will for which they are morally responsible' (1998: 21) but nevertheless they are still embodiments of the '*power of capacity to will their use*, and hence moral entities' (1998: 21). Gell also speaks of the soldier's weapons forming 'parts of him which make him what he is' (1998: 20-21): the soldier would not be able to do what he does (kill, using landmines), without the existence of those weapons.

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[70] Gell's untimely death in 1997 led to the posthumous publication of *Art and Agency*: unfortunately therefore, he was never able to respond to critics or further develop his important ideas.

While the finer details of Gell's arguments are widely disputed, nevertheless, that some sense of his ideas exist widely in the world can once more be explored in the ideas of Jim Ede. Ede's view is that objects too are living things and that their worlds and ours collide, and are conjoined. Objects speak with each other, just as they speak with us, so that at Kettle's Yard, 'by their placing, and by a pervading atmosphere, one thing will enhance another, making perhaps a coherent whole' (Ede 1996: 18). He goes on, 'in regard to the so-called material world, all is threaded by this need to adjust the 'inanimate' to the animate, to fuse them into one, for essentially all matter is animate' (1996: 55). To illustrate this, he tells a brief story:

> In 1917 I was making a seven-week voyage by ship to India, aged 22, and met a man who informed me that all is feeling, that the chair I sit in is no dead thing but alive with me. A child knows this quite naturally. Such things are I think essentials in life and not mere frivolity (1996: 55).

Another way of exploring what a child knows quite naturally is found in Sandra Dudley's paper, 'The power of things: agency and potentiality in the work of historical artefacts' (forthcoming 2016). In it, she further explores and develops some of Gell's arguments. Using an example of a watch given by Christopher Wren to his future wife, Faith, which she damages in some water, and sends back to Wren to have mended, Dudley goes on to speak of the effects of that watch on both parties. Returning a note to her, along with the mended watch, Wren writes an amusing letter in which, amongst several comments, he jests that he is jealous of the watch since it will be 'soe near your side' (Quennell and Quennell 1920, cited in Dudley forthcoming 2016). She draws a distinction between 'the epistemology of objects (how we know them)' and 'their ontology (what they are)', and notes that often, these two are confused. Arguing that some of Gell's terminology (ascribing characteristics of life to a non sentient being), is problematic, Dudley instead uses the twin Aristotelian notions of 'potentiality' and 'actuality': 'Object potentialities… are only actualised… when they do indeed bring about an effect of some kind.' Instead of using the problematic term

'agency' then, Dudley uses the term 'potentiality' as something 'inherent to the object's being' (forthcoming 2016).

Use of Dudley's term 'potentiality' also removes an inherent problem in Gell's arguments whereby he adheres to a dualistic separation between subject and object, and their seeming individualism. To return to the watch: 'Faith's and Christopher's snatched moments are not just *represented* by Faith's watch. They are *in* Faith's watch' (forthcoming 2016). Another scholar who explores these ideas is archaeologist Carl Knappett. As he argues, far from being the preserve of the individual mind and body, agency is also distributed across networks in a complex relationship which invariably include both humans and non-humans (Knappett 2002: 115). As Dudley again argues in relation to this: 'it is in the engagement between object and subject, in their very confluence… that subjects and objects come into being at all' (Dudley 2012: 8). Both people and things work in the world in relation to each other (see also Gosden 2005; Strathern 1999). To take the argument further, one useful perspective might be from the work of highly interdisciplinary feminist scholar Karen Barad whose work on what she calls 'agential realism' is drawn from, amongst other areas, quantum physics and philosophy (Barad 2003). Objects do make us do things. We are in relation with those things. We are also in relation with others, both other people and other things. In her arguments for understanding epistemology and ontology as conjoined through the world – knowledge as being – in the world, Barad posits an idea of 'onto-epistemology' for understanding these 'intra-actions' in the world (2003: 839). She deals with the problem of agency by talking about the 'performativity' of both humans and non-humans as bodies within the world: 'All bodies, not merely "human" bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity—its performativity' (2003: 823). Agency is something that is not 'possessed' by either subject or object, but it is part of a performative enactment between everything. As she states:

> Phenomena are produced through agential intra-actions of multiple apparatuses of bodily production. Agential intra-actions are specific causal material enactments that may or may not involve "hu- mans"… Phenomena are constitutive of reality. Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or

things-behind-phenomena but "things"-in-phenomena. (Barad 2003: 817)

In this thesis, it is recognised that objects, of course, inspire responses: they act in the world, and we are part of this world of performances, in a constant relationship or dance with the things surrounding us. Barad's understandings of performative relationships may have resonance with the views of Dudley whose suggestion above is that objects and subjects are part of a 'mutually constitutive process' (2012: 8).[71]

Sensory anthropology

Despite a dearth of a genuinely materially focused anthropology, Dudley notes that there is, in addition to anthropological aesthetics, one further area in which materiality has tended to feature strongly (2010: 4), and this is 'sensory anthropology' (Csordas 1994; Howes 2005; Stoller 1989). Howard Morphy also refers to this as a new paradigm in material culture, with an 'anthropology of the senses' running alongside a turn towards a more phenomenological approach and an emphasis on theories of embodiment (Morphy 2010: 278). This is also expounded by the American anthropologist Thomas Csordas, who calls for a more radical role for the body within both anthropological and cultural discourse, representing 'a step towards an anthropology that is not merely about the body, but from the body' (1994: xi). Following the phenomenological approaches of Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and closely associated with the 'material turn' and a turn back to the body (Barad 200; Butler 1993), those espousing such an embodied view of anthropology hold the view that knowledge is not detached from the body, but is grounded within it. And because knowledge is from the body, it must also be derived from our sensory and embodied experiences.[72]

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[71] The idea of 'affordances' is also useful here (Gibson 1979): these are characteristics of the world which emerge in the relationship between actor and matter, so for example both a chair and a tree trunk might 'afford' sitting as a product of the relationship between body and object. In a similar vein some of the objects which will be explored in relation to material interpretation, also afford particular actions.

[72] There are however, scholars who have criticised this move, thinking that 'an emphasis on sensation entails a loss of critical awareness and precipitates a slide into a morass of emotion and desire' (cited in Howes 2005: 6).

One of the major proponents of such a view of sensory engagements with things (particularly within museums) is anthropologist David Howes. He states: 'a focus on perceptual life is not a matter of losing our minds but of coming to our senses' (2005: 7).[73] Howes uses the language of 'ideological revolution' to explain that 'once the encompassing grip of the 'science of signs' is broken, we are brought – perhaps with a gasp of surprise or a recoil of disgust – into the realm of the body and the senses' (Howes 2005: 1). He refers to Serres' description of the language-bound body as a 'desensualised robot, moving stiffly, unable to taste or smell, preferring to dine on a printed menu than eat an actual meal' and contrasts this with a new vision where the body is 'free and could run and enjoy sensations at leisure' (Howes 2005: 2). But Howes points out that this shift will not take place outside cultural experience (and paradoxically neither will it take place outside of the 'court of language'), since 'from the empire of the signs we enter the empire of the senses – and there are as many such empires as there are cultures' (2005: 4). Sense experience is both a social and cultural phenomenon.

Another key theorist who argues for a sensory understanding of the world is ethnographer Paul Stoller. He suggests that 'considering the senses of taste, smell and hearing as much as privileged sight will not only make ethnography more vivid and more accessible, but will render our accounts of others more faithful to the realities of the field – accounts which will then be more, rather than less scientific' (Stoller 1989: 9). Taking this 'sensual turn' he argues, will open people up to new understandings so that anthropologists can be seen as 'bricoleurs' who are 'rummaging through the debris of deconstructed ideas for something new and meaningful' (1989: 139). Incidentally, it is important to note that so far, all that has been discussed are western epistemologies, but within other cultures, a differentiation of the five senses as derived from Aristotle, simply does not exist, or has no meaning (Edwards et al. 2006:

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[73] There is dynamic internal debate about 'anthropology of the senses' as compared with 'sensory anthropology', based on different readings of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and explored in Pink, Howes & Ingold (2010).

5). In his account of the people of Songhay,[74] Stoller speaks of the 'epistemological humility' required in order to immerse oneself into another culture. This taught him that 'taste, smell and hearing are often more important for the Songhay than sight, the privileged sense of the west. In Songhay one can *taste* kinship, *smell* witches, and *hear* the ancestors' (Stoller 1989: 5). He shows how it is crucial to use senses other than sight to categorise experience and asks, 'if anthropologists are to produce knowledge, how can they ignore how their own sensual biases affect the information they produce?' (1989: 7). Howes too points out that the Peruvian Cashinahua have no dichotomy between mind and body. Rather they have 'skin knowledge', 'ear knowledge', 'eye knowledge' and so on. (Howes 2005: 6). Yet another concept of sense knowledge is described by Classen who refers to Ritchie's writings on the Hausa of Nigeria who have just two general senses: visual perception, and non-visual perception (Classen 1997: 401).

Proponents of this sensory turn, Edwards, Gosden and Phillips give suggestions as to why embracing the senses should be of particular concern for material culture, not least to museologists and museum professionals: firstly, the senses concern bodily engagement with the world, and as such give structure to it. Secondly, use of the senses can be viewed as an active skill rather than something used passively. Thirdly, it is their contention that the senses are fundamental to personhood. Fourthly, the senses are political through their representation in the world. Fifthly they explore the notion that museums are also political entities of representation. And finally, they explain that a new politics of change in the contemporary museum depends on a critique of the sensory relations between objects and people, encouraging active debate (Edward et al. 2006: 23-24). In other words, museums with their collections of physical objects are vital institutions in enabling discussion around representation, identity and a realisation of our own materiality and embodiment.

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[74] The Songhay originate from the Niger River Basin, straddling West Niger, East Mali and North Benin and comprise three groups of people, the nobles (descended from Askia Mohammad Toure), former slaves (who trace their descent patrilineally to prisoners from former colonial wars) and foreigners (migrants to Songhay). (Stoller 1989: 6).

Although most academic discourse views the senses in isolation (as we can see from reading some of the discussion), nevertheless, there is a developing body of research on multisensory perception (Spence 2007: 45). Howes terms this interaction between the senses (or sensorium) 'intersensoriality' and uses the metaphor of a knot to describe how each of the senses works in multi-directions with the others (sometimes in harmony, but sometimes not) which cleverly takes us away from a linguistic or textual analogy (2005: 9). Classen echoes this: 'sensory perception, in fact, is not simply one aspect of bodily experience, but the basis for bodily experience. We experience our bodies – and the world – *through* our senses' (Classen 1997: 402). And our 'sensorium' is a holistic construct: each sense working with the others. So what are the implications of this holistic view of the senses for museums? Having briefly looked at some of these anthropological ideas around embodiment and sensory understandings of culture, I shall now try to relate these back to a (re)turn to a material and sensory focus within the museum, by looking at some museum histories.

Histories of the senses in museums

Much has been written about the rise and fall of different sensory perceptions in museums (Classen 2005 and 2007; Candlin 2010; Pye 2007). Currently, in the majority of museums, 'artefacts for the most part are only to be seen, not felt, smelt, sounded and certainly not tasted' (Classen 2007: 895). Yet this has not always been the case. Despite a focus nowadays on ocularcentricity, and an implicit understanding that sight is privileged (Dudley 2010: 9), Classen traces the histories of touch in museums, particularly looking at visits to the Ashmolean Museum, where one traveller notes 'there is a Cane which looks like a solid heavy thing but if you take it in your hands it's as light as a feather...' (Fiennes 1949 [1702]: 33, cited in Classen & Howes 2006: 201). Here, touch enables a deeper understanding of an object through appreciation of its weight and texture.

Likewise, and more than eighty years later, the German writer and traveller Sophie de la Roche (1730-1807) made similar excited comments about her experiences at the British Museum and the objects' capacity to evoke an emotional response and a

connection with the past, '…Nor could I restrain my desire to touch the ashes of an urn on which a female figure was being mourned. I felt it gently, with great feeling… I pressed the grain of dust between my fingers tenderly, just as her best friend might once have grasped her hand…' (de la Roche 1933: 107-8, cited in Classen & Howes 2006: 202). As Classen points out, here, touch has the capacity to annihilate time: 'this oft-perceived ability of touch to bridge space and time gave it a special value in the museum setting, where visitors were separated by considerable spatial and/or temporal distances from the cultures of origin of many of the objects displayed' (2005: 278).

There were numerous other reasons as to why visitors to early museums may have touched the collections. Touch was commonplace, most prominently in worship. It held something of a mystical esteem in the lives of many: from touching holy relics, to kissing shrines, to participating in the liturgy of the Eucharist. A bodily connection with such religious objects or symbols was believed to imbue the worshipper with supernatural power, an intimate bodily connection or participation in the divine.[75] Touch is also significant in the biblical account of the doubting Thomas (John 20: 24-29) where it is connected to knowledge of (as opposed to belief in) bodily reality. It is not surprising that many epistemological connections have been made between museums and sacred places of worship.[76] Yet even so, there were still those critics who thought such practices as kissing saints' statues were vulgar, such as the sixteenth century art theorist Vicenzo Borghini (Classen 2007: 902). Pinney, likewise, has argued that actually the Church was perhaps not as keen on the 'performative dimension of the artefact', or 'corpothetics' as may initially come across (Geisbuch 2007: 78).

But touch *could* enable access to deep meaning that simply was not available through sight alone. This was true not least in perceptions of works of sculpture. The German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) deemed sculpture to be the highest art form as it was perceptible to that most esteemed of senses, touch. As he stated,

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[75] See for example Duffy 1992 and Thomas 1971. This idea of the intimacy associated with touch can be contrasted with the lack of intimacy found in the dominant hierarchy of the visual (Zimmer & Jeffries 2007: 5).
[76] See Duncan 1995.

'the eye that gathers impressions is no longer the eye that sees a depiction on a surface; it becomes a hand, the ray of light becomes a finger and the imagination becomes a form of immediate touching...' (Gaiger 2002). Paintings were also touched to comprehend their texture, or as above, to enable close intimacy with subject matter, artist, or again, the divine. Touch was a form of knowledge in itself.

Despite its seeming ubiquity in the above examples, nevertheless, the practice of touch in museums was still not open to all, or at least was not considered appropriate for all. It was a highly differentiated activity, dependent on class, gender and professional status. As Candlin notes, touch was either forbidden, permitted, or celebrated, depending on who was doing the touching (2010: 2). 'Sensory impressions gathered by the (male) connoisseur and scholar were understood to be on a different plane from those of the common visitor' (Classen 2007: 908). Likewise in the contemporary museum, Pye notes that although the topic has seldom been debated, 'the way touch happens and who does it is controlled by the culture of museums so that some handling is taken for granted, some of it is hedged around with precautions, and some of it is hard-won' (Pye 2007: 14).

Alongside a growth in public access to museums in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was also a growth in class-based prejudice and snobbery about the effects of touching museum objects. For example, Anna Jameson wrote in 1840, that everyone could recall times when visitors went about 'touching the ornaments – and even the pictures!' (Classen 2007: 897). Likewise, Von Uffenbach, a German visitor to the Ashmolean in 1710 was horrified by the 'uncultured touch of the masses' (Classen 2005: 281). Ironically, Classen tells us, it was that same snobbish traveller 'who wished to scrape off a little of 'the famous stone of the patriarch Jacob' in Westminster' as well as several other recorded instances of his wanting to take little 'souvenirs' (2007: 902). Touch is thus intimately connected with notions of prestige and power: by handling something that a series of other distinguished forebears have handled and marveled over, one is intimately bound in their stories and (self) importance. To 'have a piece' is even more desirable.

Despite this, new expectations for museum behaviour began to emerge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, pre-empting modern preoccupations and dominant negative warnings not to touch exhibits. Artefacts were classified and displayed as exemplars or masterpieces, at the same time becoming physically more distanced from the viewer: 'within the pseudo-sacred space of their museum-temples, artefacts were symbolically positioned outside of time and space, and thus removed from ordinary human interactions' (Classen 2005: 282). That touch had now become taboo concomitantly changed the status of visitors. They were now less important than the objects, which they tarnished with their filthy hands. Conservation of objects and the desire to keep them pure rose to the fore as cases and railings were erected.[77] The paradoxical duties of the museum to allow access whilst also preserving collections had emerged.

This change in tack from an established understanding of touch as vital to the early museum, to a less accessible environment (yet ironically an environment that was opened up to the masses in a move to become seemingly *more* accessible) in which touch was seen as a contaminant to the purity of an object, was paralleled by a concurrent emphasis on the predominance of the visual as the most important sense. Touch no longer had the same cognitive value as that of the empirical, verifiable sense of sight, so was not considered to be desirable or important in the museum and as such the museum became a less sensuous space. Sight became *the* organ of the intellect as informed by the rise in modern empirical science. The visual implied objectivity, rationality, truth and fact, as opposed to the subjectivity of the other senses (Jay 1993). It is of no coincidence that the rise and development of museums as storehouses of disciplinary knowledge coincided with this shift.

By the nineteenth century, observation, for example through microscopes, was key to scientific enquiry and 'the use of the proximity of the senses of smell, taste and touch, had been generally relegated to the realm of the nursery and the 'savage'' (Classen 2007: 907). The visual world became the established and accepted reality. Sight and

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[77] It has also been suggested that the ban on touch was also connected to the desire of curators to protect their own expert status (Candlin 2007: 19).

hearing became the senses of the higher 'masculine' intellect, whereas taste, smell and touch had subordinate 'feminine' and emotional attribution. Subtle nuances abound however in the discussion of the hierarchy of the senses, and despite the taboo around touch, nevertheless, it was still the privilege of the expert specialist curator to be able to touch collections (Pye 2007: 18-19).

Interestingly, visuality was not only important for a powerful elite at the top of an intellectual or class-based hierarchy. Frederick McCoy, who was the first director of the National Museum of Victoria expresses this through his statement that museums are best thought of as 'affording 'eye-knowledge' to a class of persons who have neither time nor opportunity for lengthened study of books' (cited in Bennett 1998: 347). Bourdieu and Darbel similarly argue that display can 'give 'the eye' to those who do not see' (in *The Love of Art* 1969 cited in Bennett 1998: 369). So sight, although master in the sensory hierarchy, is also critical to those at all tiers of society. Despite her arguments that 'objects are encountered initially through the senses and the body' (2000a: 116), nevertheless, even Eileen Hooper-Greenhill's work celebrates the visual nature of the museum experience: 'Objects in museums are assembled to make visual statements which combine to produce visual narratives' (Hooper-Greenhill 2000a: 3). Yet despite museums celebrating the visual, often seemingly over and above any other means of knowing, there are of course areas of current museum practice where touch and sensory engagement are prioritised, arguably largely for instrumental rather than the intrinsic reasons being promulgated in this research, yet nevertheless important to note. I shall now turn to some of these.

Sensory practices in contemporary museums

The case studies explored in this research are projects that have emerged from the gallery practice of *interpretation*, as opposed to that of education (see earlier discussions of the distinction). But it is in museum education and learning practices, where work on the sensory capacities of objects, and engagements with them particularly through handling, has taken place for many years. While some are critical

of the value of handling objects (Geller 2007: 63), these bodily and material engagements form a large aspect of educational practice in many museums[78] and have done so since the prevailing Ruskinian view of the value of objects in learning at the end of the nineteenth century (see Horsfall 1883; Atwood 2011: 162). Objects are used both in formal education sessions for schools, as well as in informal learning for families, adults and diverse community groups. Many museums offer handling workshops, and many have permanent or temporary handling stations for all visitors (Golding 2010; Ting 2010; Wehner & Sear 2010; Corbishley 2011: 248). In addition to site-specific handling, there is also a large volume of research and reports on different aspects of object handling as outreach (Knowles 2008; Foreman Peck & Travers 2012; Ashby & Wood 2009).

There are several important texts dealing with object engagements in museum education, among them classic practical guides by Durbin, Morris & Wilkinson (1990), as well as the Scottish Museum Council's 'Hands On' guide (2007).[79] Other theoretical and evaluation-based literature includes Paris 2002; Pye 2007; Chatterjee 2008, as well as several contributions within Hooper-Greenhill (1999) including the oft-cited text by Hennigar Shuh (1994). Arguably one of the main centres for research into what is referred to as 'object-based learning', the work by Helen Chatterjee and others at University College London spans both museum practice, as well as use of objects more generally within higher education (see Chatterjee & Hannan 2015). Museums including the British Museum, Pitt Rivers, Horniman and Reading Museums all use handling objects as a central focus for their schools learning programmes.

This sort of educational work largely derives from a constructivist approach to learning, in which learners are not empty vessels to be filled (see Piaget 2002; Vygotsky 2002; Bruner 1977), but rather bring to bear a wealth of their own experiences on exploring artefacts in museums (for example Hein, G. 1998, 2011). In one of the most central reports to recognise the vital place of learning in museums,

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[78] But in galleries this practice is much less so.
[79] https://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/museums/about-glasgow-museums/learning/Documents/Hands%20On%20Training%20Pack.pdf (accessed 24/07/15).

Anderson states, 'the unique characteristic of museum learning is that it is based on first-hand, concrete experience of real objects, specimens, works of art and other authentic resources in a social environment in galleries or at sites' (Anderson 1999: 31). Hooper-Greenhill even points out that encounters with objects are *more* than encounters with ideas: 'bodies adopt a performative relationship to objects; they enact the construction of meaning which is at once dramatic and contingent' (Hooper-Greenhill 2000a: 113). This concretised relationship in space between learners and objects is one of the special features unique to museum learning. One writer has even stated, 'Learning is possible in museums *because* objects are three-dimensional and material' (Nuissl 2004: 23, italics mine).

In discussion of learning in museums, particularly referring to those such as Howard Gardner who posit multiple learning styles (1999), much has been written on the importance of both 'hands-on' as well as 'minds-on' learning in museums. While this is not the place for a detailed analysis, what is clear is that 'it is important for museum professionals to realise what a powerful, almost magical, experience touch can provide when handling something venerated' (Pye 2007: 16). In addition, it could be argued that this capacity of real objects is actually to go beyond the informational, didactic or educational, into new emotional and creative realms[80] which enable a deeper and more personalised meaning-making to take place: 'the experiences elicited by touch… go beyond, but do not exclude, learning and enjoyment, to include deep emotional responses stimulated by object handling' (Chatterjee 2008: 4). Indeed, 'objects can touch us as much as we can touch them' (Pye 2007: 134). In an early years project at Manchester Art Gallery using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (whereby mind and body work together to make sense of a material world through experience), to explore children's response to physical artworks, it was found that a sensory approach to objects could open up creative ways of looking at the world. 'Emphasising the role of the senses in the singular experience of things, mediated by dialogue with others, is an approach that has the potential to access unlooked-for connections and alternative ways of thinking' (MacRae 2007: 165).

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[80] I would argue that this emotional realm is not distinct from learning but an essential part of it, but this is for discussion elsewhere.

As well as in educational settings, an additional area of current research in relation to engagements with objects is the growing area in current museological research on the social agency of museums (Sandell 2012, 2007; O'Neill 2002; and Butler's current *Happy Museum* project[81]), and particularly on the role of touch as instrumental in improving health and wellbeing (Chatterjee & Noble 2013; Dodd & Jones 2014). Not least for those with visual impairments or for hospital patients, the impact that physical contact with museum objects can have on the health and emotional response of audiences is being explored, particularly through object handling. Demonstrated at UCL through the *Touching Heritage* programme led by Chatterjee in 2012, in papers by Candlin 2010; Tomlin & Narkiss 2009; Chatterjee 2008; Pye 2007; and through the *Who Cares?* programme (Renaissance NW and UCLAN), a body of research can now be drawn on to demonstrate the impact of such practice for social benefit. Objects might be engaged with in therapeutic environments, such as in reminiscence for the elderly, in hospitals and palliative care units, as well as in more general community engagement activities (especially for under-represented groups).

Fiona Candlin has undertaken work particularly on blind and partially sighted people's responses to objects. There are now numerous 'in to touch' schemes within museums and galleries employing a variety of object handling techniques and accessibility measures (from Braille labels, to tactile mapping, to touch tours and coating sculptures to minimise damage), and this clearly is an important area for research (see Sheffield Industrial Museums Trust 2015). Nevertheless, the movement within museums (particularly within learning and outreach teams) to employ touch as a strategy for engagement with blind or partially sighted people, is not without its problems, particularly where there is no strategic professional development in this area: 'if museums are going to use touch within their access projects, then visitors[82] need to be taught *how* to handle objects' (Candlin 2010: 188). Milton's view of the blind Samson Agonistes as 'a prisoner chained' seems to have pervaded much of the

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[81] http://www.happymuseumproject.org (accessed 24/07/15).
[82] I would also add 'and staff'

public and historical response to blind visitors in museums. How different this could be if the western paradigm shifted from its current ocularcentric one towards a paradigm that focused on the whole sensorium. Where 'an unsighted person attains access not only to an object but also to a recognition of our own subjectivity' (Candlin 2010: 62) through touch, how empowering it would be if the same could be recognised for all people in their range of sensory and non-hierarchical relationships with things.

Not only is this an issue in professional practice, but there are also questions to be raised around the tactical use of touch with other under-represented museum communities: for example why is touch deemed appropriate as an access strategy for non-traditional audiences? (Candlin 2010: 120) I would argue that with sufficient training for staff and audiences, such measures should be used across the board for all audiences. There would of course be a need to weigh up whether the physical integrity of an object was more or less important than the ability to demonstrate its characteristic movement, sound, action or texture (Pye 2007: 22), and a recognition that some objects would wear out, but actually, perhaps a radical tack could be embraced by contemplating 'the possibility that using up an object in this way is not the museum's loss so much as the visitor's profit' (Geisbuch 2007: 84).

While my research project aims to rehabilitate the object into approaches to imaginative museum *interpretation*, this is certainly not to say that the process will not also contribute to the development of a more socially inclusive museum or enable the development of new strategies for engaging with learning. In fact, far from it. It is hoped that through this exploration of the material object and participation in imaginative interpretation, it can be demonstrated that the museum, through its objects, has the capacity to be a truly life-changing and life-affirming experience for audiences, ultimately moving beyond that unhelpful dichotomy situating people and collections as opposed. In order to explore this further, I now provide a theoretical structure for the research, harking back to Sontag's call for an 'erotics of art', I also aim to look beyond the material:

> Visual experience cannot always be articulated verbally, and this makes it more difficult to discuss, to share, to understand. The gut response to colour, the physical reaction to mass, the engagement with the visual that is both embodied and cerebral, remains mysterious' (Hooper-Greenhill 2000a: 4)

It seems to me that no matter how much we might engage with the physical, embodied thing, this 'mysterious' element always persists alongside. And it is for this reason that I now enter the as yet unfamiliar territory within museum studies, of theology.

Theological metaphor

While to me it is entirely intuitive to use theology to frame the research,[83] this needs explanation, not just for a non-specialist audience without an academic background in theology, but also for those for whom recourse to something as potentially alien as theology might be particularly provocative.

Why might it be useful to reflect upon sensory engagements and material interpretation in art galleries through the lens of theological paradox and metaphor? In what follows, I attempt to draw some parallels between the disciplines of museum studies and theology (and religious studies) which although they have been written about in tandem previously (Wood & Latham 2014), have never been combined into one exploratory lens or interdisciplinary dialogue. My aim is to pave the way for the research into the practical implications for museums of some of these theological themes, but also to open up discussions in what I call 'theological museology'. In particular, I ask two questions. Firstly, how might metaphors derived from contemporary understandings of medieval apophatic theology (see Turner 1995a; Sells 1994; Nelstrop et al. 2009; Boesel & Keller 2010) help us (if at all) to explore the many

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[83] This is because I identify myself in part as a theologian, having studied Theology as an undergraduate at the University of Birmingham (1996-1999) and as a postgraduate at the University of Cambridge (1999-2001), both important centres for then contemporary developments in the discipline.

paradoxes inherent in the museum? And secondly, what might be the implications of this for a materially focused museum practice of interpretation? So to begin, I first explore some of the ways in which museum studies and theology have already been examined together as having similar concerns, before turning towards new readings of this perhaps uneasy pairing of subjects: one largely secular in scope, and the other, of course, not.

The last thirty years or so have seen a rise in the development of various academic institutions whose remit is concerned with the relationship between theology and the arts. One of the pioneering departments of this sort was The University of Glasgow's space for Literature, Theology and the Arts, established by David Jasper (Jasper 2011).[84] The University of St Andrew's Centre for Theology, Imagination and the Arts[85] was established in 2000 by Jeremy Begbie (see Begbie 1991) who originally came from the School of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, where studies into the relationship between theology and the arts had been undertaken for a number of years and were closely associated with what is known as 'Radical Orthodoxy' as will be explored below.[86] A taught MLitt at St Andrews includes modules on 'theological engagement with the arts', 'Christian doctrine and the arts' and 'religious experience and aesthetic theory'. Duke University also runs 'Initiatives in Theology and the Arts' also established by Jeremy Begbie in 2009[87] and Kings College London lead a programme taught amongst others by Professor of Christianity and the Arts, Ben Quash,[88] who also came from the Divinity School in Cambridge and at Kings teaches on modules including 'Art as a Theological Medium' and 'The Devotional Use of Art in Christianity', working closely with the National Gallery and Tate (see Quash 2013). In addition to these departments, there are of course numerous texts and series' of publications exploring theology and the visual arts, performance, poetry, music and

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[84]http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/research/researchcentresandnetworks/literaturetheol ogyandtheartsatglasgow/ (accessed 24/07/15).
[85] http://itia.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk (accessed 24/07/15).
[86] This is also where I studied for my MPhil in the School of Divinity, exploring whether it was possible to find links between mystical theology and the art of Mark Rothko.
[87] https://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/dita (accessed 24/07/15).
[88]http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/trs/people/staff/academic/quash/index.aspx (accessed 24/07/15).

literature (see for example Ashgate's series, including Guite 2012 and Hart 2013). As yet, however, there is a dearth of literature linking theology with museology. This thesis is in part an attempt to draw the two areas critically together in an exploratory and imaginative way.

One of the strengths, yet real complexities of the academic study of museums, or museum studies, is its interdisciplinary nature: it draws readily from anthropology and sociology, philosophy and literary criticism, (art) history and theory, archaeology and science, and so on. In many cases this makes for a highly nuanced, varied and dynamic field, ripe for empirical and theoretical research and innovative practice. Yet sometimes, perhaps its very multiplicity can contribute to a lack of confidence in its disciplinarity: exactly *what is* museum studies?[89] What is its discourse and what are its methods? How can these relate to each other?

There is another subject which might also suffer from a similar, yet wildly different identity crisis, not least in today's society, a society which often likes to refer to itself as 'secular'. That subject is theology, the study of 'God', or speaking about the nature of God. So when we ask of theology the same question as of museum studies, exactly 'what is it, and what are its discourses and methods?', all sorts of complications and controversies arise. How can we speak about God? Can such a non-empirical subject ever even be taught in an academic university environment? Many would argue not.[90] Yet many would posit on the other hand, that as 'the queen of sciences'[91], theology is (and by definition can be no other than) the root of all other disciplines. It is the pre-modern underpinning to everything. Where museum studies draws on a plethora of other subjects, theology subsumes them all. Not least is this argued clearly (yet often by recourse to superfluous semantics and complicated rhetoric) by those mainly

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[89] These questions also include *how* or even *whether* museum studies differs from museology, but this is for another discussion.

[90] Perhaps the most famous opponent of the academic study of theology is Richard Dawkins: see for example his letter to *The Independent* dated 1 October 2007: http://old.richarddawkins.net/articles/1698 (accessed 25/09/15) or in *Free Enquiry Magazine* dated 11 May 2006: http://old.richarddawkins.net/articles/88 (accessed 25/09/15).

[91] This term can be traced back to Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* (in *Selected Writings* 1998).

Cambridge-based theologians who hold themselves up under the banner of 'radical orthodoxy' (Milbank, Pickstock & Ward 1999).

In their seminal work *Radical Orthodoxy*, the not uncontroversial theologians Milbank, Ward and Pickstock describe what they see as the current theological turn, an attempt to 'reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework' (1999: 1). Thus they explain:

> For several centuries now, secularism has been defining and constructing the world. It is a world in which the theological is either discredited or turned into a harmless leisure-time activity of private commitment. And yet in its early manifestations secular modernity exhibited anxiety concerning its own lack of ultimate ground – the scepticism of Descartes, the cynicism of Hobbes, the circularities of Spinoza all testify to this. And today the logic of secularism is imploding. Speaking with a microphoned and digitally simulated voice, it proclaims – uneasily, or else increasingly unashamedly – its own lack of values and lack of meaning. In its cyberspaces and theme-parks it promotes a materialism which is soulless, aggressive, nonchalant and nihilistic.
>
> (1999: 1)

Their new approach to resituating theology is described as both 'orthodox' and 'radical': 'orthodox' because it traces its roots back to a rich Christianity (pre Protestant and Catholic divergence) which they argue was lost after the later Middle Ages, and 'radical' because this return to its roots transcends 'modern bastard dualisms' and criticises modernity in a bold way (1999: 2). Perhaps most significantly for what may be deemed as the contrived pairing (but I hope to argue the opposite) of museology and theology, the key framework for such a theological endeavour is the notion of 'participation' for:

> every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing. Although it might seem that to treat of diverse worldly phenomena such as

language, knowledge, the body, aesthetic experience, political community, friendship etc., apart from God is to safeguard their worldliness, in fact, to the contrary, it is to make even this worldliness dissolve. (1999: 3)

So, why link museum studies with theology? Having been immersed in both disciplines, the crossover between the two disciplines seems immediately apparent on numerous levels, yet is worth elucidating briefly here, looking at a broader context of some of the similarities between museums and *religion* (or characteristics of religious belief and practice) per se, before going on to speak philosophically in further depth about certain *theological* metaphors and their resonance with the museological task.

Museum space as temple

There is much wider literature in the studies of museums which links them with religious experience and worship. Firstly, there is much written in museum studies about the museum as a sanctuary, as a 'spiritual place' in secular world, as a temple to the muses, a shrine to different cultures. Such quasi-religious language is commonplace when describing the physical space or architecture of the museum (Macdonald 2005: 209). In his seminal piece from 1971, 'The Museum: a Temple or the Forum', Duncan Cameron explores aspects of this idea. Although arguing for a new conception of museums to move *beyond* the temple model, he states:

> the museum sociologically is much closer in function to the church than it is to the school. The museum provides opportunity for reaffirmation of the faith; it is a place for private and intimate experience although it is shared with many others; it is, in concept, the temple of the muses where today's personal experience of life can be viewed in the context of *'The Works of God Through All the Ages; the Arts of Man Through All the Years'*[92]
>
> (1971: 195)

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[92] This is the inscription above the door at the Royal Ontario Museum.

Museums are perhaps places par excellence in which God's creation is revealed. Clearly such crossovers might be viewed today as controversial. They need further unpacking and questioning: what does it means to describe a museum as revealing the 'works of God'?

In her useful article on the topic, closely aligned to architectural perspectives, 'Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred', theologian and scholar of Christianity and the Arts, Gretchen Buggeln paints a picture of the ways in which museums have shifted between seeing themselves as architectures of non-religious modernity, rationalism and objectivity on the one hand, or as sacred spaces on the other (2012). As has been explored previously in the contexts of both hermeneutics and anthropology, in the eighteenth century, she argues, the Enlightenment and its rise of science and human rationality seemed at odds with religion, leading to a divide between knowledge and faith, science and religion. Museums were part of this rational and objective new world order. Yet despite this:

> the language of the sacred was present in museums all the time. Promoters of these spaces and collections knew, perhaps unconsciously, that there was something to be gained by suggesting a supernatural power behind their enterprise (2012: 35).

She sees the concomitant rise of aesthetics as a discipline in this period as a quasi-religious phenomenon: 'the metaphysical power believed to be inherent in art objects rendered them not just mere artefacts but shapers of the human spirit, and this had a powerful religious and moral dimension' (2012: 36). The 'invention' of aesthetics in the eighteenth century has also been described as 'a transference of spiritual values from the sacred realm into secular time and space' (Duncan 1995: 14). In Buggeln's (albeit sparse and highly simplified chronological) overview, she argues that during the nineteenth century, museums were seen as spaces for social and moral improvement, before becoming aesthetic 'art for art's sake' spaces during the twentieth century (2012: 36), and nowadays serving as sites for 'transcendent tourism' (2012: 40).

Paul Goldberger, *New York Times* architecture critic likewise observes also that the art museum of today has become a quasi-religious cathedral-like space, since there is no shared sense of faith in a secular society:

> We have in our culture conflated the aesthetic and the sacred… it is no accident that we have made the art museum the most intense arena of architectural expression today… We have chosen to be attracted to the beautiful rather than to the divine, and therefore to have our hearts – or our eyes – satisfied instead of our souls (2010: 6).

This statement has particular resonance with what is to come: an investigation of mystical theologians' conceptions of divine beauty and some of the nuances around where such beauty may be found. Goldberger himself points towards some of this complexity, adding:

> I am not sure it is so simple, in part because the connections between art and religion, between art and the soul, are far deeper and more interdependent, not to say ambiguous, than these formulations would suggest. I would hope that our failings are not so clear-cut as merely the elevation of the aesthetic over the spiritual, leading us to make the aesthetic sacred (2010: 6).

So, we are already beginning to see several highly complex and provocative overlaps between museum spaces and religious spaces, (art) museum content and religious content, museum (aesthetic) values and religious values.

Museums, material culture and immanence

A second area for some sort of disciplinary crossover between museum studies and theology lies within the material culture of religions themselves and their presentation in museums. There is a large body of literature that deals with religious objects in museums (especially Paine 2013 and 2000; Sullivan & Edwards 2004; and the journal

Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief) and much has been written on the conservation, display and meanings of religious objects as displayed within the museum space. Despite this, Paine notes that religion itself is largely ignored in museums (Paine 2000: xiii).

In the same volume edited by Paine, Chris Arthur makes a suggestion as to why this may be the case: 'for if many, if not all, faiths have at their centre a key element which eludes expression, does this not drastically limit any attempt to exhibit religion from the outset?' (Arthur 2000: 2). This idea of unspeakability is a concept that is central to mystical theology. Arthur poses a series of complex, paradoxical questions, which would find themselves just as at home within theological discourse as they do within museology: How are museums to exhibit both the sayable and the unsayable? Will they fall into a trap of 'idolatry' by trying to do so? How can a museum enable encounter with the non-material? Where does the museum stop and religion begin? All these are highly pertinent and are questions similar to those posed in the mystical theological tradition.

Not put off by such challenges and aporia, there have been several museums set up to actually try to embrace and engage with such discussions. The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow is one such, its aim being 'to reflect the central importance of religion in human life'. Yet for all its attempts, the museum does not escape from its limitations: 'Museums show real things, and although religion has inspired the creation of many beautiful and fascinating objects, by definition it deals with non-material beliefs and values.' (Spalding 1995: 5) Perhaps simply by fault of its own definition, the museum is falling short.[93]

Rather more often than a whole museum being set up to explore such themes, exhibitions too can deal with theological and religious questions through their material exhibits, often more successfully engaging with philosophical dilemmas than the St

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[93] Although it could be argued that where Spalding sees a failure of a museum of religions to reflect the whole sum of a religion's non-materiality, it is actually through its very materiality that such transcendence may be attained, since we are embodied and the material world is all we know (see Boesel & Keller 2010).

Mungo example. The National Gallery's exhibition in 2000, *Seeing Salvation* had theological paradoxes at its heart as it sought to display through objects, manuscripts, illustrations and art, how artists had conveyed Christ as both utterly immanent in the world yet utterly transcendent and beyond the world at one and the same time. *Palace and Mosque*, an internationally touring exhibition from the V&A's Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art (exhibited in Sheffield in 2005-6) also sought to explore Islamic cultures through both the absence, and, controversially, the presence of representations of living beings within objects ranging from carpets to ceramics to metalwork. An exhibition held in Zurich in 2011-12 at the Rietberg Museum was entitled *Mysticism: Yearning for the Absolute* and even sought to demonstrate in physical ways through documents and interactives a mysterious yet shared world of unknowing and hiddenness across times and religious traditions which incorporated Sufi mysticism, Zen poetry, Jewish eremites and Hindu ascetics.

In 2001, a conference held jointly between the American Association of Museums and Harvard's Centre for the Study of World Religions led to the publication in 2004 of Sullivan and Edwards' edited volume, *Stewards of the Sacred.* While this publication contains much practical advice relating to policy and strategy for displaying culturally sensitive artefacts across religious traditions, the introduction shares some of the more esoteric relationships and philosophical overlaps between museums, religious practice and theological rhetoric. Edwards and Sullivan describe some of these: both religion and museums arrange 'sacra', or 'sacred items' (in the broadest sense of the term) – display is central; both set in motion an oscillation between heightened focus on particular objects and wandering attention to a peripheral background; both create conditions for divining meaning from puzzling circumstances (2004: x-xii). Indeed 'an irrepressible dialectic of appearance and concealment energises all museums and religions at their core' (2004: xii).[94] Again, absence and presence are absolutely central themes linking museums to theological paradox.

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[94] Macdonald shares some of these similarities and lists others in addition: she argues that sometimes boundaries between a museum and a sacred space are not clear cut – how might we define Auschwitz, or a synagogue in Krakow, now open as a museum? She also notes that both places of worship and museums share an aesthetic (2005: 209).

Museums, transcendence and wonder

So given this dialectic, we move onto a third area, closely related to these ideas of museum architecture mirroring religious space, and of displaying religious objects and ideas within them. There is a small amount of literature on the actual museum experience, the encounter with objects – and not just 'religious' ones, but any or all objects revealed (or concealed) in the museum space – as a sort of mystical encounter with the 'other', as an experience that some may describe as 'spiritual', 'numinous' or 'transcendent'. It is this experience of the 'other' that is particularly pertinent to this enquiry into what I am calling 'apophatic museology', of which more later. It is this capacity of objects to draw one out of oneself (and concomitantly within oneself) which is characteristic both of museum experiences and of the 'ecstatic' within theology.

This phenomenon, although described in different languages, is not new within museological literature. For example, Carol Duncan speaks of the museum as a space for 'ritual' in which the museum is seen as a stage within which visitors enact a performance, rather like participation within liturgy (although she does not use liturgical language to frame her argument). Using Victor Turner's theory of 'liminality', which is similar to western notions of aesthetic experience and defined as 'a mode of consciousness 'betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending'' (Duncan 1995: 11 citing Turner 1977: 36-52), Duncan refers to the exalted attention given to objects in art museums. The visitors are referred to as the actors within this process, a process which has a transformative purpose that can be likened to a 'spiritual' experience: 'it confers or renews identity or purifies or restores order in the self or to the world through sacrifice, ordeal, or enlightenment.' (1995: 13) She cites Kenneth Clark who writes of this transformative capacity thus: 'The only reason for bringing together works of art in a public place is that… they produce in us a kind of exalted happiness. For a moment there is a clearing in the jungle: we pass on refreshed, with our capacity for life increased and with some memory of the sky.' (1995: 13 citing Clark 1954: 29).

Moving away from, yet building upon, Duncan's notion of the agency of the *visitor* within this transformative process, in an edited volume based upon a European workshop led by Sharon MacDonald in 2000, Bouquet and Porto argue that there are many more forms of agency at play in an art museum: the *curator* in particular having a crucial role within the process (2005). Reflections on the role of the curator within this museum ritual are elucidated clearly within Brennan's *Curating Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum,* which is a case study and biography of museum director James Johnson Sweeney (1900-1986). Brennan argues that his whole style of curating and directing was to 'reveal the unseen through the seen' (2010: 8). His primary goal as a curator was for the cultivation of spiritual experience within the museum, thereby 'curating modernist consciousness' (2010: 7) in which a museum 'should be to stimulate the aesthetic responses of its public to a richer, spiritual life, to a fuller enjoyment of the spiritual over the material, or relationships rather than things' (2010: 7). Such reflections on the 'unseen' are particularly relevant for our discussion metaphors from mystical theology and their potential resonance with materialities in the museum.[95] Likewise, other museums, for example the Menil Collection and Rothko Chapel, have been established purely 'to inspire people to action through art and contemplation, to nurture reverence for the highest aspirations of humanity, and to provide a forum for global concerns.'[96]

As an aside, Macdonald interestingly aligns notions of curatorial authority in the museum with the concomitant rise yet demise of religious authority in society: a rise in what she refers to as 'fundamentalisms and new religious movements', yet a decline of traditional religion: 'rather than seeing them as opposed and contradictory developments, some commentators have suggested that they are both part of a response to a similar set of late-modern anxieties: both involve the pursuit of some kind of deeper meaning and ontological security in the face of perceived instabilities

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[95] Although there are of course questions about whether a curator can 'manufacture' such experiences, and indeed as we shall see, there is much debate on the role of 'experience' itself within the 'mystical journey' (see Turner 1995a and 1995b).
[96] From Mission Statement for Rothko Chapel:
http://www.rothkochapel.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3&Itemid=6
(accessed 28/01/13).

and uncertainties in the world today.' (MacDonald 2005: 211). She speaks of the interplay within museums between this curatorial authority, knowledge or science, and its counterpoint: magic and enchantment, in which the individual's own meanings and personal significances can be read or imagined.

It would be impossible to deliberate the museum experience as encounter with 'the other' without also referring to the cultural poetics work of 'new historicist' Greenblatt on resonance and wonder. Resonance he describes as 'the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand' (Greenblatt 1991: 42). Resonance hinges upon various aspects of the object, not least its precariousness, the fact that the museum object is now in a context utterly removed and different from its original purpose, and indeed often the object itself lies abandoned, broken and worn, sometimes with traces of its former life, sometimes without (Greenblatt 1991, 44).[97] Resonance implies thinking about, and questioning the very museum processes that led objects to be displayed in the first place: it speaks both of absence and of presence, of absence through presence and of presence through absence, 'for resonance, like nostalgia, is impure, a hybrid forged in the barely acknowledged gaps, the caesurae…' (1991: 48).

For Greenblatt, a sense of wonder however is what opens up resonance: he thinks it 'easier in our culture to pass from wonder to resonance than from resonance to wonder' (1991: 54). But here, there is a particularly interesting feature of a museum experience in relation to some of the theological metaphors we shall explore: where wonder is that 'power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.' (1991: 42), what museums should be engaging with is both 'wonderful resonance and resonant wonder' (1991: 54). It is just this sort of linguistic game which so delighted the mystical

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[97] The Mary Greg collection at Manchester Art Gallery is a particularly good example of this 'displacement' and will be explored further in case study research. See www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk (accessed 28/01/13).

theologians, and enabled them to begin to explore those paradoxes at the heart of their own philosophies: of trying to make sense of something for which there is no sense.

So, I have given three examples so far, of a crossover between the museum and religion. But I do not wish to confuse religion with theology - that much was by way of preamble – and I do not wish to limit my research to museums of religious art and artefacts - rather I wish to point out some philosophical overlaps between the tasks, processes and paradoxes implicit within both museums and theology: both as at once paradoxically immanent and transcendent. And it is because of this that I now turn towards theological metaphors, in particular those found within that branch of theology often associated with mystical experience, but which as I will argue, go far beyond experience, those found within the tradition of the 'via negativa', negative, or 'mystical theology'.

Metaphors from mystical theology

So, what is meant by mystical theology? And what can it possibly have to do with museum studies? While it is beyond the bounds of this thesis to interrogate the terminology of 'mystical theology' in depth, its being coined with this title is generally agreed to be profoundly modern. The mystical theologians never thought of themselves as such.[98] The authors themselves generally refer to their own writings as contemplations, deriving from the Greek '*theoria*' which was then translated into Latin as '*contemplatio*' meaning 'to view' or 'to contemplate' (Nelstrop 2009: 2). This sort of theology was done over an extensive period in its history (over half in fact) in the eleven centuries from Augustine in the fifth, to John of the Cross in the sixteenth, and it forms a continuous tradition of writing, known since the nineteenth century as 'mysticism'.[99] The core language of this type of theology is a fusion of Hebraic Biblical

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[98] See ed. Nelstrop et al. 2009: 1.

[99] My understanding of 'mystical theology' is derived through both my BA in Theology, and my MPhil, both taught (at the Universities of Birmingham and Cambridge respectively) by Professor Denys Turner, who is one of the most internationally influential philosophical

with classical Greek Platonic sources, a coming together of Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai in the Exodus, where God remains hidden in a cloud of unknowability as 'you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live' (Exodus 33:20), with Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* in which prisoners, bound in a cave since childhood are unable to distinguish between shadows of reality and reality itself (*The Republic* Book 7.7). Plato warns that just as 'the eyes may be unsighted in two ways, by a transition either from light to darkness or from darkness to light,' so too it is with the mind. If someone is perplexed, is it because he 'has come from a clearer world and is confused by the unaccustomed darkness' or is he 'dazzled by the stronger light of the clearer world'? (1987: 321) Might something similar occur in a museum?

Although various and nuanced, nevertheless, there are some features common to mystical texts which I hope to argue have symbiosis with some of the inherent paradoxes of museum processes. Within the mystical texts, common metaphors and images are used, usually linking immanence with transcendence, and including in particular: those of absence and presence, silence and language, knowing and unknowing,[100] interiority and exteriority,[101] light and darkness,[102] ascent and descent[103], and erotic/ecstatic yearning for oneness with God.[104] There is a constant dialectic between these poles (and others, for example revelation and concealment, affirmation and denial), always leading to oxymoron (for example in phrases such as 'dazzling darkness'). The dialectic pairs are not simply used as either/or: it is always both/and and also neither/nor. Both Hebraic and Greek writings have a common dialectical narrative structure:

> there is an ascent toward the brilliant light, a light so excessive as to cause
>
> pain, distress and darkness: a darkness of knowledge deeper than any which is

theologians in this area. For a very brief overview, see
http://notesfromthequad.yale.edu/denys-turner-finding-god-not-clouds-bread-and-wine
(accessed 28/01/13).
[100] Found in *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Anonymous 1978).
[101] Found particularly in Plotinus' *Enneads* and Augustine's *Confessions.*
[102] In Plato's Allegory of the Cave in *The Republic.*
[103] Deriving from the Exodus account in the Bible.
[104] Deriving from Plato's *Symposium.*

the darkness of ignorance. The price of the pure contemplation of the light is therefore darkness, even as in Exodus, death, but not the darkness of the absence of light, rather of its excess – therefore a 'luminous darkness' (Turner 1995a: 17-18).

It could be argued likewise that those paradoxes already mentioned as inherent within museums, for example access versus conservation; people and objects; experience or interpretation, and so on, could all be usefully framed within a similar sort of dialectic. It might be helpful to recognise in museums and galleries a constant similar interplay between poles: rather than understanding an institution in one way or another, it might be helpful, as in theology, to understand it through a lens of both/and. For this reason, the thesis uses a particular framework of theological metaphor to explore material interpretation which is now explored.

Apophatic and cataphatic theology

Accompanying this metaphoric imagery within mystical texts are two technical terms for describing God (or 'theology' – theo logos): 'apophasis' (or apophatic) and 'cataphasis' (or cataphatic). The apophatic takes as its starting point that we do not (and cannot) know what sort of a being God is. God is ineffable, unknowable, and unsayable. Indeed, God is not a being at all. He is not a 'thing' and so is even (a) 'nothing'. But rather than this not knowing being out of ignorance, rather it is an 'acquired ignorance', a 'docta ignorantia'. In fact, theology is understood as a process of 'unknowing', a process of deconstructing what we know.[105] Also known as the 'via negativa' (negative way), according to Turner, it follows that if God is unknowable, then there is very little that can actually be said about God. Yet apophatic speech is not a case, argues McIntosh, of there simply not being much to say. Rather it is the opposite of this (1998: 124). Or rather 'since most theistic religions actually have a great number of things to say about God, what follows from the unknowability of God

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[105] Use of the term 'deconstruction' here is deliberate: Derrida reflected a great deal on the mystical writers, and there are many similarities between his theories of *différance* and the apophatic, and these have been widely written about. See for example Caputo 1997.

is that we can have very little idea of what all these things said of God *mean*' (Turner 1995a: 20). This is to what apophatic theology assents: 'apophatic' being a neologism for 'failure of speech' which 'in face of the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark' (1995a: 20). So the phrase 'apophatic theology' is a perfect oxymoron for describing 'that speech about God which is the failure of speech' (1995: 20). It is often (mis)associated with many of the negative metaphors: the darkness, the unknowing, the transcendent, mysterious, and silent.

Yet for all these negative metaphors, nevertheless, as metaphors and as language, these are still part of the complementary 'cataphatic' tradition, the bright, talkative, verbose, noisy, immanent, fleshy element of theology. As Turner explains:

> It is the cataphatic in theology which causes its metaphor-ridden character,
> causes it to borrow vocabularies by analogy from many another discourse,
> whether of science, literature, art, sex, politics, the law, the economy, family
> life, warfare, play, teaching, physiology or whatever. It is cataphatic tendencies
> which account for the sheer *heaviness* of theological language, its character of
> being linguistically overburdened… For in its cataphatic mode, theology is, we
> might say, a kind of verbal riot, an anarchy of discourse in which anything goes.
> (1995: 20)

All language about God is cataphatic, even that language which speaks of God using negatives. Yet theology still comprises a dialectic between the cataphatic and apophatic, the saying and the unsaying, knowing and unknowing, a dialectic which ends in a silence similar to that of the 'verbose teacher, who in shame at having talked too much in the class, lapses into an embarrassed silence' (1995: 23). But both our affirmations (what God is) and also our negations (what God is not) ultimately fail. The route to the apophatic, Turner argues, is thus through the dialectics of the cataphatic. Language is ultimately all we have. But it is not enough. In other words, the apophatic and cataphatic reveal something akin to Plato's analogy of the cave, but in the domain of discourse.

Towards a theological museology?

It is my contention that if we read museums through this prism of the apophatic and cataphatic and through theological metaphor, we might get some way towards accepting their paradoxes. So in the analysis of data gleaned through my case study research, I utilise these metaphorical lenses of the apophatic and cataphatic. In the process, I explore critically the extent to which this is a helpful model to use and how far the fields of museum studies, material culture and theology might learn from each other. Objects in their very embodied materiality, in their relationships with us, are both utterly immanent, in the world, with us, yet are also utterly transcendent, beyond our experience and out of our reach. While not necessarily the most obvious link, I am suggesting that – and this thesis will explore the extent to which – museum studies and theology are closely connected and share numerous common elements, not least because they are both beset with paradox, epistemologically and ontologically. I return again to Goldberger who states of museums that:

> It is a wonderful paradox, really, because the greatest sacred spaces also represent the material world at its most material – in its most intensely physical, even sensuous, so you might think it would push us away from the spiritual, because it makes us think so completely of the world of sensory experience. And yet, of course, the opposite thing happens when we are in one of these great buildings, we move away from the material world, not closer to it. (Goldberger 2010: 7-8)

As we have explored, Greenblatt is critical of what he sees as the shift in modern museums from being 'temples of wonder into temples of resonance' (Greenblatt 1991: 53): we have lost our sense of awe and wonderment. Museums nowadays, it would seem, seek to enhance or develop opportunities for cultural understanding, contextual knowledge or resonance, at the expense of allowing for an epiphany or 'wow' moment of awe and wonder.

So in my concluding remarks, I would echo this sentiment and call for a new poetics of wonder, a paradigm shift in museum practice in which the power and mystery of the physical object is absolutely central, for 'no one can be called a poet who does not excel in the power of arousing wonder' (Minturno 1550 in Greenblatt 1991: 51). Museums should strive to become like material poems – like art – not based upon words, but rich in their embodied and sensory nature, learning much from festival-like sensory experiences. It is in these rich experiences that wonder would lead back to resonance and vice versa, in a carnival dance: 'both the poetics and the politics of representation are most completely fulfilled in the experience of wonderful resonance and resonant wonder' (Greenblatt 1991: 54). Through this re-engagement with sensory experience of objects, the museum will be 'not an end, but a beginning' (Hein 2006: 4).

Chapter Four: Encountering things

Preamble: Edmund de Waal's netsuke

In September 2013, I attended and presented at the inaugural conference of the Oxford Centre for Life Writing (OCLW) at Wolfson College, Oxford. Entitled 'The Lives of Objects', this interdisciplinary three-day conference focused on the growing trend within biographical studies of looking at biography of and through objects. Not only recognising a growing body of 'popular' works of literature and histories focused on objects (de Waal 2010; MacGregor 2011; Connor 2011; Daston 2000), the conference was inspired by academic writings on object biography, from the 'thing theory' of Brown (2001), to Gosden and Marshall's archaeological work on 'the cultural biography of objects' (1999), to Appadurai's edited volume on the social lives of objects (1986). Being there was a lively, enriching and invaluable experience. Yet for me, there was one highlight easily surpassing all others.

During his keynote speech, artist and writer Edmund de Waal spoke about his work, his collections, and the objects – 264 netsuke (hand-carved delicate toggles for Japanese kimono robes) – that had led him to write his book *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* (2010). Full of love, wisdom and beauty, de Waal spoke of his vitrine of 'beautiful, funny, moving objects', these eighteenth century netsuke, with which he had been entrusted, as all those ancestors before him, to 'hold, and then pass on'. He spoke of the extraordinary agency of these objects that had led him around the world, to France, to Austria, to Ukraine, to Japan, to trace an extraordinary family history, particularly of European Jewish identity in the early years of the twentieth century. And he spoke of these objects as portends of new memories, which have themselves become another object: a book.

The links between this collection and his own practice are no coincidence. A maker of simple porcelain pots, his own works are in neutral, muted colours, light and

occasionally dark, sometimes with golden traces. Quiet, yet often grouped together as multiples, they are often placed in vitrines with varying degrees of frosted (or not) glass. They are composed: notations of objects placed in very particular, almost rhythmic, arrangements. Sometimes, they are even displayed where they cannot be seen directly at all. They might be underfoot (as in *A Local History* (2012) on the Sidgwick Site at the University of Cambridge) or they may trace the broken, in vitrines of lids from destroyed pots (as in *Atlas* in the Alison Richards building, also at Cambridge). As de Waal states on his website in a short essay, touching things through making, through collecting and through memory is his story:

> I am the fifth generation of the family to inherit this collection, and it is my story too. I am a maker: I make pots. How things are made, how they are handled and what happens to them has been central to my life for over thirty years. So too has Japan, a place I went to when I was 17 to study pottery. How objects embody memory - or more particularly, whether objects can hold memories - is a real question for me. This book is my journey to the places in which this collection lived. It is my secret history of touch.[106]

While he tells *stories* through objects, his concern is above all with their materiality. Yet de Waal, although admitting that he has been seen by some as the 'poster boy for tactility', has observed that tactility is so much more complex than simply having something in your hand. Positioning things too, is part of their tactility and of course of their materiality if we are to consider this term as a relational one, between the thing and the person (Dudley 2010). They may be near and they may be far away from us. They may be entirely invisible to us, existing elsewhere – present yet absent. Imagining touch is also important: where we cannot hold something, we might close our eyes and reflect upon how it might feel. We might also touch things without using our hands at all (for example through sleeping on protected objects under our mattress). There is something about yearning too: for him, the object is a carrier of our

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[106] From http://www.edmunddewaal.com/writing/the-hare-with-amber-eyes/about-the-book/essay/ (accessed 26/08/15).

imagination. A thing may be placed out of reach, yet it is still present and tactile because we yearn to touch it with our imaginations (see Stewart 1993).

Now, let us return to the conference. Before I could really take in what was happening, the artist delved into his jacket. Something tiny, creamy-coloured, delicate, appeared from underneath the fabric flap of his pocket. He held it up. There were some gasps. And then the room fell silent. We couldn't quite see it clearly: it was so small. But we knew. His hand then fumbled about again in his pocket. Another. And another. Three of his ivory netsuke, with which we (the readers of his memoir) were all familiar. And then, in a move of total generosity and trust, he passed one object to a delegate. And another. And another. Encounter, feel and pass on. I could feel my heart beating in my chest, tears welling up in my eyes. So eager to hold the thing, to – using his words (which have since become my favourite expression to encapsulate this sort of handling) – 'to tumble it about in my hands' – I confess that some parts of what he said next were lost to me.

Three objects chosen to represent something of what he was talking about that morning. A tired servant, someone making something, and finally a rat with a bean. This little rat (which to me seemed cute and more mouse-like than a rat) was the first of Edmund de Waal's netsuke that tumbled in my hand, and I loved it. Smooth, intricate, I stroked it as though it were a real little animal, feeling the creases, the carved lines, the soft fur. Often while I have been doing the research for this thesis I have thought about my experience of holding this tiny creature. The power of objects. It makes me remember why I am doing this.

Figure 17: Tumbling Edmund de Waal's netsuke in my hand.

And then in April 2015, I went to see *Magnificent Obsessions: The Artist as Collector* at the Barbican Art Gallery. In her introductory essay to the exhibition, curator Lydia Yee states: 'Collections have traditionally been amassed with the objective of building and transmitting knowledge. Artists too share this aim, but towards more subjective ends' (2015: 9). They 'frequently treat collecting as an extension of their artistic work – not only as research and source of inspiration, but also as experiment or material to be used, appropriated or even transformed' (2015: 15). Artists share a different sort of knowledge that comes through an encounter with materials. I had not done my homework before going to see the show, so was not prepared for what was to come. As I walked up the stairs to the second floor of the exhibition, my eyes were immediately captured by an alcove which I instantly recognized to be displaying the work of Edmund de Waal. Deciding to save this section for last, I wandered through the other alcoves of artists' collections. Through Peter Blake's Pitt Rivers-like collections of objects and cabinets from the Walter Potter Museum, through Howard Hodgkin's colourful collections of Indian miniature paintings, to various displays of

kitsch and tat, and eventually to Edmund de Waal's section. And there, in a case were his netsuke: material 'used', 'appropriated' and 'transformed' through his own making practices. And sitting amongst these netsuke was the little rat which I had tumbled.

I was overcome as I drew it in my notebook: 'I've held that mouse! I've held it!' I wrote. I stood between his piece and the mirrored netsuke cabinet, and I saw myself reflected between the ivory and the porcelain. 'I am being eaten up by it', I wrote.

Figure 18: Rat on an edamame bean. Image by Michael Harvey 2011, courtesy Studio of Edmund de Waal.

'You can't create narrative closure of objects', de Waal had stated two years previously in his keynote presentation. Especially not now they have been ingrained into millions of people's lives not just through the book, but through their actual exits and entrances into lives through displays such as this. This object has passed in and out of my life, and I look forward to my next encounter.

> You take an object from your pocket and you put it down in front of you and you start. You begin to tell a story (de Waal 2011: 349).

Encountering things

This chapter focuses on the direct encounter with the physical object in an art gallery (and store) setting, and particularly (and unusually in an art gallery setting as opposed to a museum), it explores such engagements through the sense of touch. It looks at a particular set of practices associated with the Mary Greg collection at Manchester Art Gallery and starts with looking at how the object itself has been engaged with to investigate the following questions within the selected case studies:

- How and why might we use the physical object tactually in an art gallery?
- How do different museum professionals and others reflect on the value of engaging first-hand with objects?
- What are some of the strategies used for engaging directly with objects (particularly by makers)?
- What is the value of these sorts of approach and how might they be further developed?

While the interviewees in my research gave so many rich examples of how they physically engage with objects across different projects and organisations, I have chosen to focus on just two areas in this chapter. The first of these is the direct engagement with objects made through what I (and others) refer to as 'rummaging' in the Mary Greg collection stores at Manchester Art Gallery.[107] The second theme is concerned with a development of these rummages as it played out through the creation of a Mary Greg handling box for use within the gallery and beyond (which I also link to the use of the Artemis Collection at Leeds). I initially look at the act of rummaging as a means of material interpretation in itself, but also as a form of interpretive engagement which inspires making and new material outpourings – works of the hand. Secondly, I explore different staff responses to objects and the processes that were involved in creating a box of real accessioned objects for handling from Mary Greg's collection. Although there are clear similarities between rummaging in

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[107] See also Blakey & Mitchell (2013); Trustram (2013); Woodall (2015a).

stores and handling objects from an outreach box, and the trajectory for the latter was established at Manchester Art Gallery through the success of the former, there are also distinct differences. In particular, I look at the role of the maker within this process. Firstly, I explore the role of the artist in creating the shell in which to house collection artefacts, but then I investigate the role of the conservator in making the conservation-grade boxes for the accessioned objects contained within this shell. I suggest that seeing the role of conservator as a highly creative one using 'hand knowledge', akin to the artist who rummages, allows for many more playful possibilities of interpretation to emerge. Up to this point, the chapter's focus on encountering the object could also be described as a discussion about *presence*: the material object in a gallery is a thing present. Yet by way of some concluding comments, which begin to develop a theoretical model for materiality using theological metaphor, the chapter ends by exploring the relationship between this material presence, and the material object within the museum or gallery as being something *absent*.

Rummaging

The word *rummage* has an interesting etymology.[108] Both noun and verb, it is derived from the Middle French *arrumage*, and originally concerned arranging the cargo in the hold of a ship, or setting things in order, particularly in relation to that cargo. Many of its meanings have an orderly and customs-related sense. Later usage refers to a place of storage, or 'roomage'; a loud noise; miscellaneous articles; a mouse's roaming about in search of food; by the late nineteenth century in Scotland, a thorough search or investigation; and 'to poke around and stir things up in searching'. A rummage can thus both be something that is ordered, but it can also be something more chaotic, as in the case of some of the verb meanings: 'to disorder, disturb' and 'to search thoroughly but untidily in (a place) or among (an accumulation of things).' Interestingly in relation to this chapter, one use of the term also refers to 'using the hands' to search amongst things.

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[108] All definitions are from the online *Oxford English Dictionary* (accessed 26/05/14).

In common parlance, 'to rummage' implies a somewhat messy, chaotic approach, that thorough but untidy search described above. Popular culture has embraced this concept: television programmes are dedicated to rummaging,[109] high streets are awash with charity shops, and our love of 'vintage' and 'retro' has given people a new appreciation of the contents of grandparents' attics. We go to car boot sales and antiques fairs to have a good old rummage and just see what we find: serendipity is the name of the game. Part of the joy and excitement of going to a jumble sale is the not knowing what might be found, the unexpectedness of the encounter, the opportunity to get one's hands on the stuff, to 'tumble it about', to be able to smell, feel, listen to it.[110]

Museums and galleries, on the other hand, do not generally encourage this sort of unruly conduct. Indeed it is usually not possible to rummage *at all* in a gallery, even if one wanted to. Exhibits are often behind glass, and access to the displayed objects, let alone the museum stores, is, at best, strictly managed. Although there is a great deal of research on the immense value of audience engagement with, and access to, museum objects, largely, while museums may run controlled handling sessions, they do not encourage the sorts of rummaging we might encounter at a flea market. Of course, with their role and ethical duty to 'hold collections in trust on behalf of society' (Museums Association 2008: 10), as custodians of the collections, safeguarding and protecting objects from damage is of course paramount. Visitors are generally not allowed into the stores just to see what they might find amongst the cupboards and drawers.

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[109] For example the BBC's *Antiques Road Trip*, *Cash in the Attic*, *Flog It!* and *Bargain Hunt* and ITV's *Dickinson's Real Deal*, and *Secret Dealers*, which although they focus on selling objects, nevertheless value the search for those objects.

[110] In their chapter 'Sense appeal: the marketing of sensation' (2014: 125-151), Howes and Classen describe many similar ideas in relation to the development of the department store. For example, it uses open display techniques: 'instead of being hidden away behind counters and in boxes, as in traditional stores, merchandise was placed out in the open on tables and shelves – even hung from ceilings and draped over rails.'(2014: 130) Customers could also touch goods: 'successful department store displays were not only eye-catching, they were also 'hand-catching' (2014: 131).

But what happens when a type of rummaging *is* allowed? Museums, with their paradoxical twin duties to conserve while at the same time enabling access, also have an ethical duty to 'encourage people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment' (Museums Association 2008: 12). Are the majority of policies and procedures too risk averse to fully exploit this duty, too far on the conservative side of the spectrum, too worried about maintaining an object's status quo even when that object was never meant to last in perpetuity or to exist locked up in a museum collection? Should we actually be thinking about safe and playful ways to encounter objects that are different in approach from typical object handling sessions? Indeed, how might *rummaging* enhance our *imaginative engagement*s? Or is this too time-consuming, too resource-heavy, or even too *dangerous*?

The Mary Greg project at Manchester Art Gallery began, albeit on a very small scale, by experimenting with just these sorts of questions. As explained within the Introduction, artists Sharon Blakey and Hazel Jones, were invited to participate in an entirely open-ended investigation of some of these sorts of questions, working collaboratively with Manchester Art Gallery's Interpretation Development team. Between 2007 and 2010, I worked together with Liz Mitchell[111] in this two-person team.[112] Our remit was to devise creative projects to engage audiences with collections interpretation.[113] Contrasting with other interpretive posts in different organisations, whose remits are often actually to create and write all interpretive text, our role was rather to encourage others to interpret, often in a-textual ways. Because of the experimental nature of this role, we were fortunate to be able to develop new ideas often slightly 'under the radar' and with few visitor targets or external 'key performance indicators' to worry about. In short, we could take risks and play both

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[111] Liz Mitchell is currently researching a PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University about Mary Greg as collector and has a research blog to share her musings: http://untidycollector.wordpress.com/ (accessed 25/09/15).

[112] In existence just for 3 years, this team is unfortunately now defunct due to staff leaving and gallery restructuring.

[113] Other projects for which we had responsibility included managing *Visual Dialogues*: a strategic commissioning partnership programme with Tate, which enabled young people to work creatively with artists to develop innovative interpretation for, and exhibitions of, juxtapositions of historic artwork from Manchester's collections, with contemporary pieces from Tate. We also worked on the redevelopment of the Clore Interactive Gallery for families.

with ideas and with things. Exploring the Mary Greg collection was one such project. There is of course a long-established practice of inviting artists into museums and within institutional critique (see Putnam 2009; McShine 1999; Robins 2013), but inviting artists to explore the stored collections in this way, had not been undertaken previously at Manchester Art Gallery. In his significant contribution to the field, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, curator James Putnam states:

> The activities taking place behind the scenes in museums have been *as important* as the modes of display in public areas. There is the interesting contrast between revealing and concealing, as illustrated in the common process of choosing to exhibit one object while keeping others in reserve storage (Putnam 2009: 16, italics mine).

The Mary Greg project aimed to develop reflection on some of these important activities behind the scenes, both to reveal what was already there, but also to develop new ways to reimagine the collection, and the institution itself.

In his paper on the curiosity-driven museum visitor, Jay Rounds discusses the chaotic nature of most museum visitors who 'meander about the museum, sampling randomly here and there' (2004: 390). Using Falk and Dierking's work on motivations for free-choice learning (Falk & Dierking 2000), he defines the 'curiosity-driven visitor' as one who visits with the intrinsic goal of nothing more than 'piquing and satisfying curiosity' (2004: 391). Highly creative people, he argues, are those who are intensely curious, 'browsing omnivorously' in other disciplines as well as their own. They do not know what might be useful one day, so best enhance their 'potential for creativity' by 'acquiring a large and diverse store of 'useless' information.' (2004: 394). This, he points out, is similar to how an animal forages in the wild. It may know where it has found food previously, but it does not know whether the food will be there again, or indeed how much food there will be. It has to search for the food, and this has a cost, particularly in terms of expending energy and in avoiding danger. The animal therefore needs to develop a foraging strategy (2004: 397).

Figure 19: A Mary Greg rummage.

Rounds likens a museum visit to the activity of a foraging animal, outlining three strategies for curious visitors. Firstly, the 'search rule' or 'initial scanning mechanism': this is 'intended to improve the likelihood that the visitor will locate exhibit elements that have a high personal interest potential, while avoiding investments of attention in exhibits that are likely to prove boring' (2004: 401). Secondly, the 'attention rule' is about knowing 'when to stop searching (for the moment) and start attending to a specific object' (2004: 403).[114] Thirdly, a 'quitting rule' is about knowing when to stop attending and start searching again (2004: 405).

Although his 'rules' are for (non-tactile) visits to a museum exhibition, and not to museum stores, there are obvious similarities between Rounds' forages and the Mary Greg rummages. Artist Hazel Jones describes her experiences of these:

> It was basically: 'Here are all the cupboards open. I'm here watching
> you but *go forth* and have a look and see what you can find!' It was
> brilliant – it was just – because you could *open* a drawer. You could look
> for a couple of seconds and then – you know, think 'this is amazing but
> it's not the sort of thing I'm excited by' and you could be quite quick,
> whereas if the curator was sort of fetching stuff out for you, it's a very
> slow process, isn't it? And we had a very quick editing process going on.
> You know, like you're scanning cupboards at one point, the first time we
> went. I think not even fetching much out, just scanning what was in the
> cupboards to start to get to feel for what sort of things […] and then we
> could pick and choose and explore more, and the fact that we could go
> back more than once, and we did, was even better because each time
> you went back, even drawers you'd looked in quite well before, you
> found *even more* in that drawer. (Interview J, 15/06/13)

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[114] Such 'information foraging' is explored by researchers of the Web (such as Pirolli and Card 1999, cited in Rounds) who speak of 'interest scent' when people search online.

Despite the similarities, and clear signs of 'searching', 'attending' and 'quitting', I would argue however, that the term *rummaging* is more creative and therefore more appropriate than *foraging*. Less a biological imperative, and more an imaginative instinct, rummaging is inspired purely by curiosity, and here by a material response: 'picking' and 'choosing' through lifting things up, turning them over and having a first-hand unmediated encounter. No labels, no contextual information, no 'facts' to get in the way. As such, rummaging is not systematic: its scattergun approach is based on *not knowing* what might be found, on not knowing how the things might feel, on not knowing what the things are. Extolling exactly the sort of free-choice learning advocated by Rounds and Falk and Dierking, one of the project's initiators explains:

> The rummages allow you to make your own pathway through things, to have the agency of a degree of discovery. And that might be discovery of just something at the back of the cupboard, or it might be the discovery that actually this thing that you've picked up has the most fantastic tiny grain of pins in it, or something like that - it could be discovery at a whole level, series of levels of intimacy - but it is YOUR discovery, it's not something that an anonymous curator has discovered and then written up on a label and said 'Oi, look at this!' It is absolutely yours, and nobody else's. And in that moment it's a purely personal private thing. You might choose to share it and then it becomes a different kind of discovery, but in that moment it belongs to you. (Interview H, 09/06/13)

In advocating the rummage as an 'intrinsically creative and serious act, comparable to the maker's playful experimentation in the studio', Blakey and Mitchell have nevertheless described *rummaging* as 'neither a word nor activity that museums and galleries generally encourage; it conjures up loss of control and wayward behavior, undermining the museum's authoritative role as guardian of material culture.' (2013: 176). Indeed, rummaging may feel somewhat renegade (Woodall et al. 2011: 43). It allows an equality of access and interpretation not often paralleled in usual curator-visitor relationships. Yet perhaps it is *because of* this, and its tactile nature, that it is such a valuable museum experiment. I now wish to illustrate the value (and

challenges) of rummages as material interpretation by turning to three objects within Mary Greg's collection, all of which inspired creative response – material works of the hand: a headless zebra; a bundle of cotton threads; and a series of wooden boxes.

The headless zebra

Figure 20: Tray of Noah's Ark animals, including a headless zebra, in the Mary Greg collection. Image © Ben Blackall for Manchester City Galleries, licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0.

At some point during an early rummage in 2008, the project team came across a cupboard in which there were several cardboard solander-type boxes. On opening the first box, a menagerie began to appear. It seemed apparent that these boxes contained animals from at least one, and quite probably more, Noah's Ark. Bearing traces of lives lived, having been played with, many of the animals were in a state of disrepair, missing tails, hooves, ears. In one of these, a box which became subject for the photography of Ben Blackall, lay a pair of zebras. Two by two. Except one of them was headless. Blakey comments in a blog entry that she loves the headless zebra, and finding this, and reading some accompanying letters from the archive which discussed missing animals, she began working on a series to restore and remember these animals.[115]

The Noah's Ark animals were clearly fragile, and to position or 'notate' them (to use de Waal's phrase) as a form of making them present into their upright two by two nature, as in the example image below, was not viable (they simply would have collapsed): yet they could still be held, felt, smelt, observed, in and out of their storage boxes.

Figure 21: A similar nineteenth century German Noah's Ark. Image by Harry Middleton, courtesy Tennants Auctioneers, Leyburn, North Yorkshire.

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[115] http://www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk/archives/1546 (accessed 20/09/15).

Some time later, during another playful rummage, a small white packet was found, upon which was written the mysterious 'LOOSE PARTS'. Opening this little parcel up revealed a wonderful horde: tails, hooves, legs, ears – and the missing zebra's head.

Figure 22: Loose parts including the zebra's head.

Yet, already noted, one of the recognised values of this collection lay in its brokenness, and in its narrative of things missing, spaces and traces of former lives prior to the gallery; a narrative which could only be told through the materiality of the collection. Imagine the surprise of the artists then, some weeks later when revisiting the boxes only to discover that the headless zebra was no longer headless! Reunited by meticulous (and anonymous) conservators, the project team struggled to contain their disappointment on seeing a pair of gleaming, pristine zebras. Had something been lost

in the very process of bringing these two parts together to make a present 'whole'? Did the value of this zebra lie in its prior incompleteness, in its traces of life?[116]

Artist Michael Leigh has used this question within his own highly material practice: a collage maker, he devised a series of playful *Animal Hospital Arks* based upon the Mary Greg collection. Material rummaging leaves material traces: in this case, through making, restoring, reimagining what is now absent.

Figure 23: *Animal Ark* **by Michael Leigh, courtesy the artist.**

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[116] This question has also been posed in an earlier paper by Woodall (2010) and in Blakey & Mitchell (2013).

The cotton threads

Figure 24: The cotton threads. Image courtesy Hazel Jones.

These cotton threads were discovered by chance in 2008 by artist Hazel Jones, amongst the archive letters of Mary Greg. One afternoon, while sitting in the office at Manchester Art Gallery, these threads fell out of an envelope. The writing on the envelope was (initially mistakenly) read as containing 'the first yarn ever spun upon the mule'. Since the envelope was addressed to Samuel Crompton, the initial inference was that these threads were the first to have been spun on Crompton's original mule: absolutely central to the industrial revolution in the North West – of world changing importance, then. Indeed Mary Greg herself had married into an influential Manchester cotton family, the Gregs of Quarry Bank Mill, Lancashire, so there could easily have been a link.[117] The initial response of the artist was one of wonder at the rich historical associations which 'whooshes you back in time to when our world started to change'[118]– this was the *first ever thread* from the mule. Her response was also of serendipity as she herself was a collector and maker of string-related objects – and of course their material qualities: 'for me it was the fact that they looked so ordinary. So rough and stained and insignificant. Bits of string. The banal. It never is... When I found them it was better than finding gold.' For Jones, this find is the most exciting find of all and she reflects:

> How can such a small piece of thread have such a strong presence? It makes you feel as if you are touching the beginnings of the industrial revolution [...] My love of string isn't a secret. I think it all dates back to being a Brownie and having to have a piece of string in your pocket for emergencies (I never did have a suitable emergency to use it). I still collect party popper string from significant events too. (from Mary Greg blog 26/05/10)[119]

Relating to the materiality of these objects' interpretation, not only do these tiny scraps of cotton thread offer a glimpse into an extraordinary period in Manchester's

[117] See for example https://quarrybankmill.wordpress.com/about/ and http://revealinghistories.org.uk/why-was-cotton-so-important-in-north-west-england/people/the-greg-family-of-styal.html (accessed 20/09/15).
[118] Private email correspondence, 05/08/15.
[119] http://www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk/archives/1694 (accessed 20/09/15).

history,[120] but their qualities of stringiness led to the development of whole series of work about string and thread. In his paper on the Dutch historian Ellco Runia's use of ideas of presence and metonymy, Bencard asks:

> What are objects in collections if not metonymies through and through? The axe for the army. The throne for royal power. The scalpel for the surgeon. The skull dissolved by syphilis for the dangerous sexual practice. The prosthetic limb for the patient. The microwell for the scientist. The skull of the ancephalic newborn for nineteenth century pathologies. The genechip for the hope of a cure. And so on and so forth in expanding circles. (2014: 37)

Yet while in the example above, these intimate, tiny objects clearly have immense metonymic resonance, representing the entire industrial revolution, importantly their sensory and material qualities are absolutely tied up within this: had such tiny things not dropped out of an envelope, a whole body of material would not have been created.[121] Within the material is an amazing potentiality for more: 'you can feel other bits of string could also have their own story too.'[122] Jones' own box of 'string too small to use' found in a car boot sale, and her various iterations of 'string too small to use' metalwork winders, and emergency string kits have continued to emerge ever since.

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[120] Sent to Dr Samuel Crompton of Manchester in 1841, they were described by the sender, Henry Houldsworth, as 'the finest ever spun upon the mule' (not the 'first' as mistakenly read initially). Crompton's grandfather had invented the spinning mule in 1779, a machine that kick-started the Lancashire cotton boom, enabling, for the first time, the mass production of high quality cotton yarn. However, further investigation by staff from Bolton Museums suggested they were actually spun in 1841 and were sent to Crompton's grandson as evidence of the incredibly fine quality of yarn that could now be produced as a result of new developments to his grandfather's invention.

[121] See also discussion on the blog about 'curatorial anxiety' over making sure the facts and truth are given: http://www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk/archives/34 (accessed 20/09/15).

[122] Private email correspondence, 05/08/15.

The wooden boxes

Figure 25: Student photographing wooden boxes from the Mary Greg collection.

While opening up the stores for creative practitioners as a process and journey in itself is arguably an experience more important than any tangible outcome, (and I am not suggesting that material interpretation has to have a material output), nevertheless, as observed in the previous examples, because of the rummages new things were made and physical art objects created; traces inspired by these engagements. One of the students involved explains his processes:

> I was instantly drawn towards the slide lid domino style boxes. One of the reasons for this was because my own pencil case, an old domino box I had with me at the time, looked just like it could easily have belonged in the collection. I especially liked one box with a wooden puzzle in it. A piece of the puzzle had been lost and someone had replaced it with a piece of blue card. I instantly began exploring different ways of making boxes in whatever materials I could get my hands on, like pine fruit crates and mahogany pulled from a skip. One box was even ceramic. Through making many boxes I came across a way of using finger joints to make a box that could be dismantled and rebuilt in different ways, a bit like a puzzle. The final box, which deconstructs and stacks into another box, has an oak base with side pieces made from cherry, ash, mahogany and reclaimed plywood. It has a blue Perspex lid that is supposed to reference the Bygones box with the blue piece of card.[123]

This is perhaps an example of 'material interpretation' par excellence. The physical encounter through an unmediated rummage has enabled the student not only to explore materials, textures, mechanisms, but also to develop these in a continuation of the interpretive journey beyond the store. While he has *made*, he has also *figured out,* a knowledge that has come partly through the hands. As one of the original project team members notes, the art students:

> responded in ways that were interesting because they weren't museum
> professionals. So […] they actually responded at quite a material level because

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[123] From student's blog (04/11/10) http://www.marymaryquitecontrary.org.uk/archives/2177 (accessed 25/09/15).

they were makers I suppose, and they […] got sort of stuck into these objects as material things I think. Because they were looking for inspiration for their own making things. And their response was through the medium of physical making. Making, you know, manipulating material. (Interview H, 09/06/13)
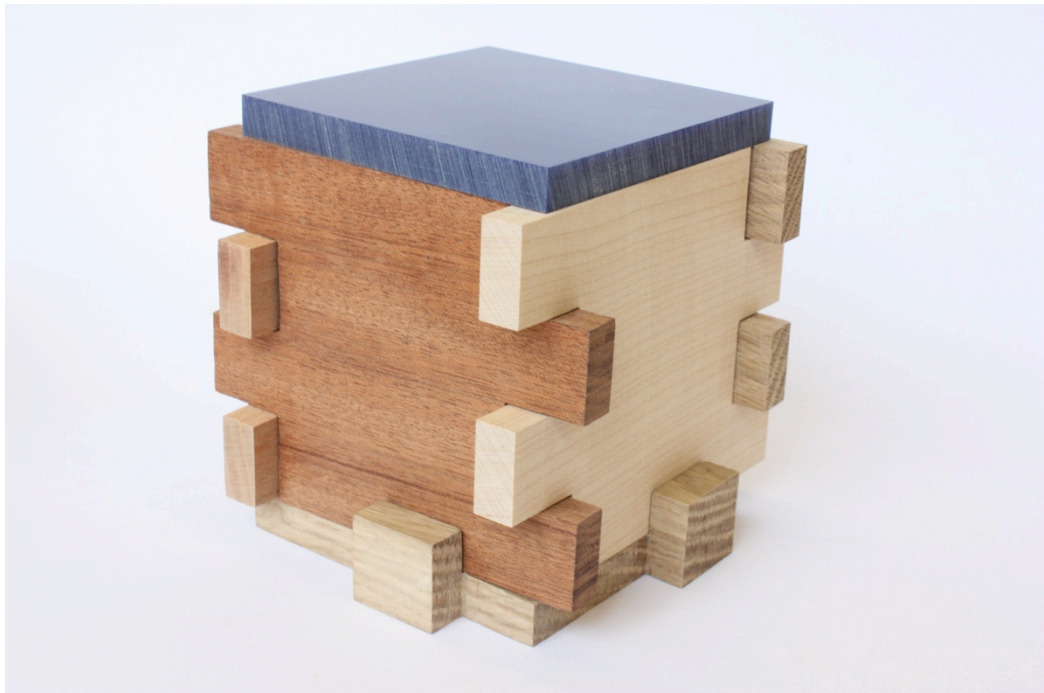
Figure 26: Boxes inspired by the Mary Greg collection made by Joseph Hartley. Images courtesy the artist.

As can be seen in the examples above, a rummage has a legacy far outreaching its time and space limited self: it is a process. In their recent paper which has much resonance with the Mary Greg project, 'Object-love at the Science Museum: cultural geographies of museum storerooms', human geographer Hilary Geoghegen and Science Museum researcher Alison Hess have explored the 'overlooked and inaccessible spaces, objects and staff of the storeroom in order to understand more fully the emotional life and spatial practices of the museum; in particular storeroom spaces…' (2014: 4). They argue that it is the storeroom that 'highlights the need to focus on the materiality of objects' (2014: 5) and gives rise to 'new sensory meanings' (2014: 7). Using a framework of 'object-love', where 'love is experienced by curators and conservators, and nurtured between people and things' and is 'recognised as a process, a doing, shaping people and place' (2014: 8), their work reveals an ethical imperative for museums to engage with their publics in such ways, and clearly has much resonance with the projects outlined in this chapter. I now explore ways in which approaches such as this might become embedded into practice.

Staffing and strategies for rummaging

While rummaging might not be appropriate in all museums and with all collections, there may be elements of this approach that could be appropriated into museum strategy: an objective of this research is to consider approaches that may enable developments in practice (as well as in theory). A focus on the materiality of objects, on engaging with *makers* in particular to provide new ways of interpreting objects through their materiality, might go some way to answering the recommendation made in the *Collections for People* report that there be collections access officers to engage the public with collections: perhaps it is time for some kind of 'rummage facilitator' role (Keene 2008: 71-72).[124] Responding to material is after all, what makers do,

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[124] Recent work at Derby Museums' Silk Mill: Re:Make as a space for makers is one such example of this type of approach: see http://remakemuseum.tumblr.com (accessed 20/09/15).

having a 'particular sensitivity to the way material bears traces'.[125] Of course many museums and galleries already have artists in residence (Wehner & Sear 2010; Dorsett 2010; and especially Robins 2013), but this call has a slightly different emphasis. Here, I argue that artists might play a particular role in actually engaging the various visiting publics (and staff) with objects in imaginative, creative and new ways.

Artist Karl Foster reflects on there being a gap within staffing: he sees a potential role in the gallery for some sort of mediatory person for the public: 'a managed presence where people are allowed to touch' and where someone is also 'trained to talk, so that they are keeping an eye on things, but generally facilitating stuff, without any educational aims […] inherently within the position, but not […] named as education' (Interview A, 03/05/13). Hazel Jones suggests that gallery staff might also be more open to working creatively with artists. She compares her earlier experiences of being an artist at other museums unfavourably: 'all I can remember of the store is like a dark room and a man showing me […] a few things and I don't feel like I really connected with it and he didn't want me to go back again, but just because he didn't have time' (Interview J, 15/06/13). Although she views rummages as a 'luxury' of privilege, of time and of staffing, nevertheless, she argues that it would be fantastic if museums were resourced to embrace this sort of work: 'I realise there's got to be somebody watching but […] it would be fantastic' (Interview J, 15/06/13).

Creating such a role might also acknowledge that a process of rummaging can be at the same time both powerfully individual, but also be central to developing a 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998) such as that arising through the Mary Greg project team. One curator explains the conflict between her role as curator/owner/custodian of objects, and that of enabler/sharer with the public. Her responses to rummaging are both profoundly personal, yet also social:

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[125] On discussing the response of one artist to a wooden spoon: 'I had not particularly noticed the wear on that spoon and the fact that the wear on that spoon must have come from somebody doing that [stirring motion], lots and lots and lots and lots of times. And that's what she saw. She saw that act, that movement, that sort of describing of a movement in the wear and tear on that spoon.' (Interview H, 09/06/13).

> I sometimes struggle with letting people touch the objects - because they are
> MY objects […] but I also really want to share them with everybody because
> they are mine and I love them […] it is much more fun, going and having a
> rummage at Queen's Park with somebody else, not just doing it on my own.
> (Interview H, 09/06/13)

While open and free rummaging is one way of engaging materially with a collection, this sense of individual discovery is clearly resource heavy and space-limited, so I now examine another strategy for enabling material interpretation outwith the limitations of the store.

Developing a Mary Greg handling collection

Much research has taken place on object handling collections and the value of touch, particularly within museum learning programmes and outreach (Walker 2013; Munday 2002; Keene 2005; Monti & Keene 2013; Pye 2007 - especially contributions by Jacques 2007; Cassim 2007; Trewinnard-Boyle & Tabassi 2007 and Lamb 2007; Chatterjee 2008 – especially contributions by Phillips 2008 and Arigho 2008). There is a longstanding precedent for such work in professional practice as well:[126] perhaps not as radical as the idea of rummaging because it lacks the total free-choice element, nevertheless it is of course one established way of enabling some degree of material interpretation.

In the research undertaken for this thesis, unsurprisingly, there was unanimous support for being able to handle collections. Various reasons are given for this, ranging from material engagement enabling different sorts of thinking and knowing: 'sometimes you're prompted to think in a different way when you have something in your hand' (Interview I, 11/06/13), and 'by holding onto something it enables a different level of thinking and ownership to take place because it's like you have the ability to have it literally in your hands' (Interview B, 03/05/13); to comments about

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[126] One of the first object handling collections was established by Liverpool Museums in 1884 with one following soon after in Sheffield in 1891 (Munday 2002: 6).

the act of object engagement being a political one which supports a socially inclusive remit, breaking down traditional hierarchies of privilege: 'the fact that you can hold something, it just breaks down - I think it just breaks down the barrier' (Interview N, 30/07/13) and an acknowledgement that museum staff also have this capacity 'bestowed upon them in their positions' as a 'permission-based' experience (Interview A, 03/05/13); to an acknowledgement of the performative nature of such an activity and the importance of the facilitator: 'I don't think everybody can do it. I really don't' (Interview N, 30/07/13). These relate closely to the benefits of touch ascribed for example by Pye, who speaks of touch as 'evoking memories'; 'opening a new world' for example for blind and partially sighted people; of 'enriching learning'; of 'conjuring sound and motion'; and for 'regaining cultural identity' (2007: 19-24). One interviewee from Leeds Art Gallery had a much broader notion of 'handling collection' than traditionally ascribed:

> *A handling collection is untenable in my world. Everything in the space, including the space, is a handling collection […] Handling can be both metaphorical and physical […] I'm very interested in handling things literally as a […] haptic, […] tactile thing, [and] at the level of imagination or I will call it the mind's eye, as opposed to a literal thing […] A touch-based, sensory gathering of knowledge is as interesting as a smell-touched mode of engagement, or hearing, or intuition as sixth sense […] The experience of the object is immersive and embodied. So I don't need to just touch it. At the moment […] you pick up a pastel or […] corrugated cardboard and you start manipulating that material, you're in a handling collection. (Interview K, 18/06/13)*

For her, the term 'handling' is much wider than meaning simply something 'touchable with one's hands': anything experienced by and with the body might be a handling collection, and her way of defining a much broader experience might be a useful one, particularly since much of this chapter is about making things, and manipulating material as interpretation: to make something from something else is to be immersed in some sort of handling collection.

Despite these positives, there was also a recognition in one interview that sometimes visitors did *not* want to engage physically with the objects: 'I've had groups who have said absolutely, categorically, 'I don't want to touch the object, just tell me about it and then leave please, if you wouldn't mind.' I've had those groups you know which were so hard' (Interview I, 11/06/13). The reasons for such a visitor response are impossible to discern. People have different preferred learning styles or 'multiple intelligences' in which bodily-kinaesthetic and spatial are just two (of at least eight), and this could be one for some visitors not wanting to physically handle objects (Gardner 1999). But despite this comment, there was an overwhelming sense that engaging with things through touching them enabled a profound experience inspired by materiality. There was also a sense that to access the 'real' was important too. But what is this real thing?

Is it the genuine museum or gallery artefact, accessioned, documented and catalogued according to strict policies and procedures? What happens if this artefact is conserved, restored, mended (as in the tale of Mary Greg's headless zebra)? What happens if it was never accessioned but is part of the fabric of a collection?[127] What happens if the object was never 'real' to begin with? If it is a fake or forgery?[128] What happens if the 'real thing' is actually a replica, or a model[129], or if it is an interpretation tool made by an artist as with the Object Dialogue Boxes? Or what if it is a 3D model, or even a virtual one? What if the object is something intangible – a person, an idea, an emotion? And how does one class 'handling collections', things representative of collections that are real, yet are not accessioned? Are these the 'real thing'?

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[127] For example (historic) packaging, archival material, envelopes of letters.

[128] As in the case of the several museums in whose collections are 'Billy and Charley' objects made by the 19th century mudlarks, William Smith and Charles Eaton, who turned to forging antiquities, usually by casting them in lead and then bathing them in acid to feign age.

[129] For example, many natural history museums contain collections of models of foramnifera (microscopic single-celled organisms, which in model form are beautifully shaped objects in their own right. See for example the collection at the Grant Museum of Zoology: http://ucl100hours.wordpress.com/the-objects/a112/ (accessed 20/09/15).

Whereas the Artemis collection at Leeds City Council is acknowledged as a 'commodity' because it is 'the means to an end' (Interview L, 18/06/13), nevertheless there is still a higher value placed on the real objects which are 'really old' or 'really worn and battered' rather than the educational models for example. Users prefer old teddies whose wornness displays their life journeys, rather than a model of a Viking longboat. The conservator also acknowledges that the replica object 'doesn't contain any deeper emotion' or 'have the same reference about it' (Interview O, 16/12/13).

At Manchester Art Gallery, it was decided to develop the Mary Greg project by developing a handling box containing some of the more robust items from the collection. Partly because the collection was in storage and unlikely to be displayed, but also resulting from a desire to develop a new series of learning activities, and because staff had been invited to speak at the *Object Dialogues Symposium,*[130] at which real objects would be key, ideas for developing some sort of Mary Greg handling box were set in motion. Working together with Karl and Kimberley Foster, the conservator and members of the learning and interpretation teams met to select objects for such a box (see Figure 25). Rather like a rummage, these selection days involved close reflection on how a narrative *between* objects might unfold. It was the aim of the box to tell not only the story of the Mary Greg objects, but also to explore the biography of Mary Greg and a wider notion of museum collecting. Practicalities were also considered under the guidance of the conservator: ensuring there would not be 'gassing off' problems, potential for cross-contamination, the spread of mould and so on.

The process of developing the Mary Greg handling collection was an iterative journey. The first version of the box was housed in a standard aluminium museum case, with plastazote trays made by the conservator, much as other museum's handling collections tend to use (see Figure 26).[131] Purely functional and utilitarian, this type of box was felt to be somewhat sterile, and not representative of the more mysterious creative outpourings provoked, for example, through open-ended rummaging in the

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[130] Held at the Sainsbury Centre at the University of East Anglia in November 2010.
[131] For example that at Reading Museums.

stores. So the Fosters were commissioned to create a 'halfway house' somewhere between a traditional museum handling box and an Object Dialogue Box.

While it is not necessary to analyse the use of this box at this stage, it is significant that to develop this box was not always a straightforward process, and the interviews undertaken with the Fosters and with the conservator provide fascinating insight, particularly into the role of conservator: not as protector, restorer, or preventer, but as creator.

Figure 27: Mary Greg handling box development activities.

Figure 28: The first iteration of the Mary Greg handling box.

Figure 29: The final Mary Greg box, created by artists Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

Conservator as maker

In her chapter 'Understanding objects: the role of touch in conservation', Pye states that although conservators handle objects all the time, 'it is easy to forget that this contact with objects and discovery of the stories they tell is *not available to others*' (2007: 121, italics mine). Where there have been well-documented examples of the processes of conserving major works being made publically accessible[132] there is less attention in general museum studies literature, on the interpretive role that the conservator might play specifically as *maker*. Indeed, the conservator might be viewed as *the* material interpreter, yet their material is very rarely shared with the public.

During the research interview discussing the development of the Mary Greg box, the conservator stated that key skills needed for the job included being 'dextrous, creative, patient' (Interview O, 16/12/13). She continues: 'I came in from the fine art background and I have always enjoyed making something, the process of making something with my hands […] I'm not good with the paperwork. I don't like that element of a job so much. I prefer to make things. My mother always said I should have been a *Blue Peter* presenter' (Interview O, 16/12/13). Her use of the phrase 'hand skills' is repeated several times: whereas a traditional conception of knowledge within an art gallery might be more akin to the telling of facts acquired by an art historian curator, it seems that for the conservator, a completely valid, and necessary form of knowledge, like for the artist, is that knowing which comes through – and because of – the hands. The conservator is at once maker, surgeon and artist:

> you have to keep those hand skills very fresh and I think that's what a lot of conservators would complain about these days […] they have to spend so much time doing paperwork that they lose those hand skills but it's very, very critical. You're holding – other than surgeons, how many people sit around with scalpels all day? – handling very valuable things. If you don't have those hand

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[132] See the *Salvaged* project at Manchester Art Gallery for example: http://www.manchestergalleries.org/salvaged/ (accessed 12/09/14).

skills, you can make a mistake, so it's critical to keep doing that and keep working (Interview O, 16/12/13).

The shell of the Mary Greg box was created by artists, but it was essential that the supports for the accessioned items were conservation standard. Each object lives in its own little box, and each of these has been painstakingly created by the conservator.

Figure 30: Special boxes were created to house each object.

Figure 31: Plastazote trays made by the conservator.

It was not until the interview that it became apparent just how complicated this process was: as alluded to by Pye above, there is a lack of shared knowledge and transparency across gallery departments about what it is that individual staff spend their time doing. A lengthy but important quotation follows to give a sense of the volume of work, and the hand skills required:

> Every piece, every box was different, because the interior of the box is not symmetrical […] Because it is an old sewing box […] no surfaces are level horizontally, vertically. So every single box that's within it is shaped to that section […] The layout of the objects within the box had to take into consideration the amount of foam and packing that would be needed […] Each box is lined with […] 'corrosion intercept', which is a conservation material that is designed as a scavenger. So if the metals are giving off anything that could set off the corrosion with another metal object or other object, it should in theory scoop that up and absorb it and stop that happening. So if you see anywhere in the box this kind of copper, papery stuff, that's 'corrosion intercept', and that was an expensive material. We have to buy it in a ginormous roll for the tiny amount that we use so it does get a very expensive project […] There's also […] some charcoal felt which does a very similar job. Also […] to stick plastazote is a very, very slow process because certain glues will react with other objects, so things like […] you can get an acid-free double-sided sticky tape, so there are areas in the box where that was the only material we could use […] but obviously that is sticky - if it came into contact with an object it would be a disaster, so what you tend to do with plastazote to stick it—the conservation safe way of doing it, thinking is […] and this is why it takes a very long time—you cover each side of the plastazote that you want to bond with an acid-free PVA glue. You let it dry. You then put another layer on and let it go to tack. You stick the two together and you compress it and you let it dry thoroughly under compression for up to a day or overnight, so this is why every piece in there takes a long time […] So if there's any changes or alterations, it's not a simple process necessarily to just change it and then obviously each box is stuck on […] So if I looked a bit wide-eyed through some

of the conversations of planning, it's because in my mind I'm […] thinking about—actually how this box is going to work and the layers. So my conversations in the planning, this is what I'm thinking. It's not the aesthetics of the box. It's not how it's—what purpose it's going to serve. It's the how it's going to be made, how it's going to be protected and it was complex but it was very fun and I enjoyed those challenges. I enjoyed making that happen. Don't ask me to do another one for a little while but it was good. (Interview O, 16/12/13)

Without explicitly being told this information, there is no transparency, no way that other members of gallery staff, let alone members of the public, would realise how complex a process this is: clearly there is an opportunity for additional layers of material interpretation based on these processes. 'Conservation should be a means for facilitating (and even increasing) the use of objects. It should not be used as an excuse to limit access to them.' This statement was made in Sweden in the 1960s and caused much consternation (Pye 2010: 140), as the idea that it was 'better to show them, tour them, and risk them' was not a popular one. Yet not only should conservation allow for access to objects, but so too processes of conservation could likewise be made accessible in this revaluing of the material nature of knowing.

Using and *using up* objects

Indeed, we might go one step further to reflect on the role of conservator as enabler of access: using objects, but even *using up* objects might be seen as something positive, even as restoring life to things. Interviewees spoke of museum objects as being dead things, using a variety of metaphors to do so.[133] Yet what if through a

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[133] For one it is about respiration: 'Do you know what I mean about this kind of idea of breath? Of the things behind the glass? Haaaahh [breathes on glass]. It's like they've been taken out of them. It's like [intake of breath]. It's suspended.' (Interview B, 03/05/13) For another objects behind glass need nourishing: 'Well I would say another metaphor, metonym - they are dehydrated. They don't have fluidity in the world anymore.' (Interview A, 03/05/13). He also uses metaphors about movement in space: an object in a museum pays a price 'that it can't ever be used. And so it is arrested or held in a liminal state' (Interview A, 03/05/13).

process of making things present and accessible, we let them die a more natural death? There are conservators using this line of argument, so the notion of 'sacrificing' objects is less controversial than it might at first appear: 'If a few objects disappeared, or were damaged, there would still be objects enough left to satisfy everybody in the future' (Hjorth 1994: 106 cited in Pye 2010: 141). And, going even further, this should actually be an ethical imperative since 'using collections, even if we risk losing some items is not irresponsible, but it should be judiciously encouraged as it makes objects accessible' (Pye 2010: 145). Objects were not meant to exist forever: one interviewee takes this thought further, even suggesting that being sacrificed from a collection is actually regaining something of its original life:

> It is a difficult one because you don't want the objects to get damaged but [...] if they're just lying in a drawer gathering dust, they're not doing anybody any good. So you obviously need [...] sacrificial objects [...] Things that you've got multiples of, surely you can sacrifice one? [...] I mean, most of the objects are pretty sturdy, aren't they? I mean they've been battered around. They've been lying in the ground. They've been used. Actually, what's a few more scratches? Actually, a few more scratches is probably improving them and [...] it's actually probably going to be improved by being handled. It's going to give it life again, isn't it? See, you're not sacrificing it, you're giving it life. You're sacrificing it from the collection. Am I getting too poetic here? [...] Objects tell stories by the marks on them as well. So handling them is going to leave more stories, isn't it? (Interview J, 15/06/13)

Through material engagements and interpretation, projects such as that of rummaging and of handling as described in this chapter might enable those objects to have social lives, biographies, agency: in fact to be united with their materiality.

Concluding remarks: presence and absence

Theorising material encounters with objects: beyond the object

This chapter has focused on material engagements with things, and knowing or interpreting things particularly through handling and making them. In many ways, what has been discussed is about objects being made *present* to the senses through this sort of sensory – particularly touch-based – engagement. Many objects in museums and galleries are of course present: they are there; there is usually information about them; they are in some sense accessible. The examples in this chapter are explicitly examples that *play with* ideas of the extreme presence of objects made manifest through the hands. Yet I wish to step further, and to suggest that this presence is actually a paradoxical one. Rather like the Mary Greg project itself which is stuck in a perpetual conflict and paradox that 'the collections get locked away and never get seen' but at the same time 'it is the very fact that they are locked away and never get seen that makes the discovery of them so exciting' (Interview H, 09/06/13), so too are all material objects in museums similarly conflicted. Ironically though, their discovery is diminishing those objects too: once discovered, they are no longer hidden, secret and mysterious any more. So 'in doing the Mary Greg project, we were losing something. We were crushing or destroying something whilst creating something' (Interview H, 09/06/13).

I would like to conclude this chapter by introducing, as an exploratory idea, the twin notion of *absence* in relation to material encounters. It is nothing new to develop theoretical framings which play with the twin notions of absence and presence (for example binary oppositions are central in theories from the structuralist de Saussure to Derrida's deconstruction of them, and of course in a much longer classical tradition from Plato to Descartes and beyond). The traditions of Christian theology too deal with these: often using the terms immanence and transcendence to describe presence and absence (especially when speaking of God, and the relationship between God and the world); arguably the incarnation might be viewed as the coming together of presence and absence par excellence. In Christian theology, God, in becoming man

through Jesus Christ, is at once both utterly immanent and present, yet also transcendent and absent from a limited human understanding of the world. Might there be ways in which a similar use of presence and absence could be useful as a museological metaphor as well as a theological one?

The relationship of absence and presence in museums has been written about widely and across several disciplines. The two concepts are used as tropes occurring in wide-ranging museological discussions from those about difficult histories (see Kidd et al. 2014 on examples relating to museums and war, memory and the Holocaust; and Parker 2013 on museological storytelling in Berlin); to discussions about 'hidden histories of acquisition' (such as Rees Leahy's tracing of why there are only three Holbeins in the National Gallery (2007); to research around social inclusion (see ed. Sandell et al. 2010 on the absence of particular voices within museum displays); to fashion museums (see Hjemdahl 2014 on displaying dress with an absent body); to the absence of any real violence in a museum of firearms (see eds. Ott et al. 2011), to name but a few instances. But if, as we have seen in this chapter, a material encounter with a thing is a highly present activity, how might it also be understood as absent, or as involving absence? And why might this be a useful way of reflecting upon an object encounter, even when it is a very present and embodied one?

There are of course 'concrete' ways in which a museum or gallery experience might present us with an absence. Not all objects are displayed: they might be inaccessible in the stores, or they might be inaccessible even when on display either physically (for example in a case where their three dimensional or tactile nature cannot be appreciated), or intellectually (if there is no provenance/contextual information relating to the object, as with so many items in the Mary Greg collection. Likewise the theme of the object itself might explore absence: for example it might be related to death, to ghosts, to memories. Interestingly, both staff and visitors to the Mary Greg collection often spoke of the value they placed on glove-wearing: this might be seen as a metaphor for the idea of *absence as presence*. While there is much debate about the

necessity of glove wearing[134] and interviewees spoke both of its positive performative and ritualistic nature, as well as its detrimental effect when actually encountering objects, one key response was that the gloves acted as a physical reminder of the material encounter after having left the gallery: 'the children often want to keep the gloves as a memory of the objects that they've held' (Interview N, 30/07/13). The gloves become a symbol of what is now absent. And it is not just the objects in the collection that become absent after a visit, but it is also the experience itself.

But as well as this symbolic absence, it could be argued that handling an object is itself handling an absence. The object in our hands is no longer the object living its purposeful life. The zebra is no longer the toy to be played with two by two. The slide box pencil case is no longer used for housing pencils. The cotton threads are not those used on the spinning mule. We hold them and we hold a ghost, or to borrow a phrase from Derrida, we are confronted with a spectre, an 'hauntology'. The things in museums are both present and absent – like metonyms. And the museum itself absents and presents things.

Several writers are even developing a 'material culture of absence', exploring how the notion of absence is a highly material one. Morgan Meyer for example speaks of the material culture of absence as 'something performed, textured and materialised through relations and processes, and via objects' (2012: 103). Using the arguments of Kevin Hetherington, Meyer argues that absence has 'as much effect as material presence' (see Hetherington 2004), and likewise, anthropologist/ archaeologist Severin Fowles speaks of the affect of absence: 'Absences push back and resist. They prompt us into action. And like present things, absences also have their distinctive affordances and material consequences' (2010: 28). For these theorists, absences have a trace, even a 'geography'. Law even speaks of a 'manifest absence' as the correlate of an incomplete presence (2004: 84), and sociologist of death Kate Woodthorpe speaks of the example of toys left in cemeteries as a sort of present absence (see

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[134] Baker & Silverman argue for example that 'blanket policies' recommending glove-wearing need to be re-examined not least since 'wearing gloves actually increases the potential for physically damaging fragile material through mishandling' (2005: 5).

Meyer & Woodthorpe 2008). Museums themselves are built on the practice of making the absent present: as heterotopic 'places outside of all places' (Foucault 1986: 24) they have a capacity to transcend space and time.

Yet these spatial and temporal absences are not exactly akin to the sort of transcendent absence, which I suggest might coexist with the immanent presence experienced through encountering an object in a museum or gallery. A transcendent absence, is not something in space or in time. Rather it is something beyond this, and, to use the language of apophatic theology, it is beyond any sort of knowing. Objects are both present and absent at one and the same time. If we hark back to Edmund de Waal's work, in this we find an idea of yearning, an imagining what could be, and of an object pointing beyond itself to something other. Within every object is both an actuality as well as a potentiality. It conjures up what is, but also what might be. A response might be entirely visceral, emotional, inexplicable. Why did I cry when de Waal's rat on an edamame bean was tumbling in my hand?

There are several theorists who have noted (in various different guises) this absent presence, or this capacity of the present object to point beyond itself to something absent and transcending all. For example in Barthes' notions of studium and punctum (Barthes 2000: 26-27, 42-45), whereas the studium is what we might refer to as a contextual presence, the punctum of a photograph is that elusive aspect which 'pricks me' (2000: 27). It is something inexpressible, something transcending what is, something absent. Where Mary Greg's headless zebra is both present in that I can handle it, so too does it represent an absence in making me imagine what it once was. But it goes further than this: this zebra, present in my hand, makes me yearn for numerous other absent things. Indeed it even makes me reflect on my own existence as something finite, capable of breaking, eventually to die.

Somewhat similar are Greenblatt's oft-used twin concepts of 'resonance' and 'wonder'. Using quasi theological – or at any rate poetic language – filled with paradox and oxymoron (rather like that of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in speaking of 'intimate immensity' of space (Bachelard 1994)), Greenblatt speaks of the need for

delivering exhibitions filled with 'wonderful resonance and resonant wonder' (Greenblatt 1991: 54). Where we might link 'resonance' with the presence of a thing, 'wonder' might be that more elusive and absent quality. Rummaging about playfully in the Mary Greg collection is filled with both of these qualities.

Playing with absence

One of the most significant volumes published on play is Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (first published in German in 1944). For him play is 'an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely respected, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow' (1970: 10). Play is not foolish, for 'it lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly' (1970: 24). Huizinga is not alone in noting similarities between play and holiness or ritual (1970: 38) (see also McConachie 2011). To some extent, the suggestion that material interpretation is as much about absence as it is about presence, is a form of authorial play. Just as rummaging is play, so too is this thesis playing both with language as with the very thing itself. Playing with things, with ideas of things, as well as with materials, is at the heart of many of the discussions about objects and interpreting them in material ways undertaken during this research.

The suggestions for material encounter presented (and absented) in this chapter are playful. By playing with things we get so much more than those things. Although the notion of playing with things is 'out of kilter with traditional museum activity' (Trustram 2013: 193), nevertheless, to challenge the reasons for this is one of the reasons for undertaking such a study in the first place. Why should playful devices and approaches to interpreting physical objects be seen as lying in opposition to what it is that a museum does in providing 'knowledge'? Throughout this chapter, it has been argued that material encounters provoke a different sort of opportunity for interpretation, one that comes through the senses, through the hands, through

making – indeed through play. 'Consciousness of play being 'only a pretend' does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture… Play turns to seriousness and seriousness turns to play' (Huizinga 1970: 27). Engaging with things through rummaging, through handling, through making as a strategy for material interpretation, and by reflecting on such encounters as both present and absent is exactly this: serious play.

Chapter Five: Talking things

Preamble: Objects in children's literature

> 'Oh you may not think I'm pretty,
>
> But don't judge on what you see,
>
> I'll eat myself if you can find
>
> A smarter hat than me
>
> …
>
> So put me on! Don't be afraid!
>
> And don't get in a flap!
>
> You're in safe hands (though I have none)
>
> For I'm a Thinking Cap!'
>
> (from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling 1997: 88))

At the start of each academic year, pupils at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, are placed into four different school houses, dependent on their personal qualities and characteristics. This process is undertaken by the 'patched and frayed and extremely dirty' Sorting Hat (1997: 87). The pupil's name is called out and he or she sits on a special stool and puts on the Sorting Hat. The hat speaks into the ear of its wearer, in Harry Potter's case noting that it is difficult to choose: 'Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind, either… So where shall I put you?' (1997: 90). The Sorting Hat then calls aloud to the rest of the school the chosen house: 'GRYFFINDOR!' (1997: 91).

An object speaks. An object decides. An object has a voice.

In children's literature, this ability of an object to speak is not new, and neither does it seem surprising: in the tale of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, for example, the mirror speaks to the wicked queen each day, telling her she is the 'fairest of them all'; and in Frances Browne's 1856 *Granny's Wonderful Chair* it is always the chair who tells the stories after the request: 'Chair of my grandmother, tell me a story'. Films such as

Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Toy Story* contain numerous talking objects, and children quite readily speak with, and listen to, their own things. Just as in *Chapter Three* we saw that a child knows innately that objects are alive (Ede 1996: 55), so it appears that a child knows automatically that an object can talk. Yet contrast this with the following poem, *Things*, by Lisel Mueller:

> What happened is, we grew lonely
>
> living among the things,
>
> so we gave the clock a face,
>
> the chair a back,
>
> the table four stout legs
>
> which will never suffer fatigue.
>
> We fitted our shoes with tongues
>
> as smooth as our own
>
> and hung tongues inside bells
>
> so we could listen
>
> to their emotional language,
>
> and because we loved graceful profiles
>
> the pitcher received a lip,
>
> the bottle a long, slender neck.
>
> Even what was beyond us
>
> was recast in our image;
>
> we gave the country a heart,
>
> the storm an eye,
>
> the cave a mouth
>
> so we could pass into safety.[135]

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[135] http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/238242 (accessed 12/06/15).

As we mature, things no longer speak in a literal way. This poem by the German-born American poet Lisel Mueller (b.1924) describes a different way of understanding objects and their capacity to talk. In it, we can listen to the 'emotional language' of the shoe or the bell. But do these objects really speak? In Mueller's poem, in contrast with the Hogwarts Sorting Hat, the ability of an object to speak is not an inherent property of the object. Rather its capacity to speak is *given by us*, here, because of our loneliness in the world. It is we who have assigned these personified attributes to inanimate things, to keep ourselves company (see Gell 1998: 20). Yet such objects, as is argued in this chapter, do have the property, or the *potential* to be 'voiced' (see Dudley 2016), and in this way, they speak.

Talking things

This chapter focuses on the 'voice' of the object and its capacity to 'speak'. Of course it does not argue that museum objects actually have the ability to speak out loud: that would be absurd.[136] Rather this chapter looks at the twofold capacities, or 'potential', of objects both to be given voice (by us), but also to inspire voice (in us) (see Dudley's use of Aristotle (2016)). We hear what an object says to us, and it inspires us to say something else. As with the other chapters, this discussion takes place within a theological framework reflecting on the museum as a cataphatic place for sound and noise but also, in contrast, as an apophatic place of silence: sometimes an engagement with an object renders us speechless. Talking things and object conversations inspired by the material encounter with a gallery object are thus positioned at the heart of this wider context of noise, dialogue and silence in museums.

The chapter opens out from the tight microcosmic focus on engagements with objects through the sense of touch in the previous chapter, to recognising the intersensoriality of the museum experience, especially as made manifest through the relationship between handling objects and speech (as a form of sound) (Howes 2006). First it briefly looks at the museum as a place for sound (which includes human talk and

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[136] Unless of course it is part of the object's physical nature to be able to speak, for example if it is a speaking automaton and so on.

dialogue, but begins with metaphorical sound and noise within gallery spaces). It then turns to look at the prevailing view of many institutions that objects do not have the capacity to speak at all, and that as a result, it is the duty of a museum to speak for the object, which it does not least through the voice of accompanying label text (Ravelli 2006; Serrell 1996).[137] Yet the chapter goes on to argue that in our material engagements with them, objects do 'speak' in different ways. I discuss the contested notion of objects 'speaking for themselves' and ways in which they are given voice, before focusing on the idea that things make us talk: things have the capacity to give us voice, just as we give voice to them.

This latter discussion draws on a case study from a session observed with a group using the Mary Greg handling box, and aims to answer the following questions:

- How do physical objects in museums 'talk'?
- What do they make us talk about?
- Does the material matter within these conversations?
- What strategies might be used to make the material matter within conversations?

Using data from the interviews conducted, three (overlapping) categories for the sorts of conversations or 'talkings' elicited by objects emerge: these include *physical* things, *contextual* things and *emotional* things. Having looked at some of these so-called talkings, the chapter then explores further the nature of the social act of talking within a museum, focusing on two aspects of the dialogic experience of objects as shared by participants during the research interviews. Firstly, it explores the notion of talking inspired by engagements with objects (or talking with objects) as *empowering* (and thereby situates the arguments within literatures around learning, social inclusion and wellbeing). Secondly, the chapter looks at the idea that such talking is part of a *performative* material relationship between person and thing, and this might be

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[137] There are of course huge differences between written text and spoken language, both practically and philosophically, but a discussion on the subtleties of philosophy of language falls outside the remit of this thesis (see Blackburn 1995; Miller 2007: 177).

compared with understandings of liturgy and ritual. Harking back to ideas about the transparency of interpretation (Meszaros 2006; Meszaros et al. 2011), the chapter suggests that strategies can be employed within the institution, particularly through the actions of the facilitator, to enable a deliberate focus on the materiality of objects to inspire particular sorts of conversation. Yet by way of some concluding comments, which extend the theoretical model for materiality using apophatic theological metaphor, the chapter ends by exploring the object within the museum or gallery as *silent*.

Museums as noisy

In an article published almost twenty years ago, John Cox quotes from a piece in *The Times* in which the archdeacon of Westminster Abbey describes the place as 'rather like Euston Station, or one great cocktail party. The noise is deafening. At certain times it has become dangerous.' (*The Times* 22 March 1997, cited in Cox 1997: 79). Cox goes on to suggest that museums are similar, and his article is about a then new type of sound system (the Mark X Interpreter™) designed to get around the problem of the 'Tower of Babel effect' whereby there is a constant need for tour guides to 'scream to be heard above the cacophony' of other parties (see also Fry 2002 for a discussion on the acoustics within an interactive museum). Similar to some of the ways in which museums were described as places of 'presence' in the previous chapter, it is possible to list several ways in which their galleries, and the objects within them, are 'noisy', even deafeningly so at times, both in literal and metaphorical ways.

Of course, spaces in museums may well be filled with sounds. These sounds might come from the objects themselves (as in the case of the Don Valley Steam Engine at Kelham Island Museum in Sheffield); they might form the artwork itself (as in the case of artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's work[138]); they might come from the acoustics and design of the space (within the echoey corridors of the sculpture galleries at the V&A); they might come from the activities taking place within that

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[138] For example their audio-visual iPod *Alter Bahnhof Walk* shown at *Documenta 13* or their Forty Part Motet, *Spem in Alium*: http://www.cardiffmiller.com (accessed 24/09/15).

space (as in Falmouth Art Gallery's baby painting workshops), or there might be sounds from infinite other sources. A noisy museum might be viewed by some as a positive place of enjoyment, activity and inspiration.[139]

Some gallery spaces might also be described as metaphorically noisy, speaking to us in a plethora of ways through their spatial arrangements, architecture or design (Psarra 2005). The Pitt Rivers Museum for example, with its cacophony of cases and objects, might be one such: we might be overwhelmed simply by the volume of cases, cabinets, narrow walkways and abundant objects.

Figure 32: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.

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[139] Although many comments on TripAdvisor for example, reveal a less tolerant public than might be imagined: 'this museum is spoilt by the constant noise of children', one commentator states of the National Maritime Museum. http://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g186338-d187600-r265602794-National_Maritime_Museum-London_England.html. See also Dea Birkett, whose story of her ejection from the Royal Academy after her child shouted, led to the foundation of the Kids in Museums manifesto: http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/feb/05/museums-family-children (accessed 27/08/15).

Within the galleries, object displays might too be noisy, speaking to us in many different ways at the same time: crammed to the rafters, the displays may be dizzying (although not strictly a museum, Spalding Gentlemen's Club is like this). Sometimes displays may even be 'shouty' due to the amount of textual interpretation which drowns out the object itself (for example in the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition explored in Ravelli 2006: 126; or that surrounding the rather dull-looking Magna Carta, for example), or simply due to the fact that one object has a particularly interesting story and copious amounts of research (for example the British Museum's Rosetta Stone). An object might also be loud because of its fame – as a result of which it may find itself surrounded by chattering visitors armed with selfie sticks and cameras (the Mona Lisa at the Louvre). Museums it seems might be deafeningly loud, in numerous ways, both positive and negative. And one further way of course, is through the conversations elicited by objects and interpretive practices, to which the chapter now turns.

Objects speaking for themselves?

The question of whether an object can speak for itself is contested, and of course many museum careers rely on objects *not* being able to speak for themselves.[140] Curators devote their time to being the voice of and for the object; interpreters make those voices accessible to the public; education staff enable learning from those 'voices' to take place. Guidelines are produced about how to produce text so that the objects can be given a voice (Trench 2009) and labels are written to ensure that the gallery is socially inclusive (O'Neill 2002). In all these cases, objects are arguably being made to speak, which they do 'through a human act of authorship with all its editing, contextual manipulation and censorship' (Knell 2007: 7). Objects are given voice by a variety of others.

In her volume on communication in museums, *Museum Texts*, Louise Ravelli's main argument is that objects 'do not speak for themselves' (2006: 95) (see also discussions in Hooper-Greenhill 2006: 236; Noy 2015: 40; Paine 2013: 19; Knell 2007: 1-28).

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[140] See http://themuseumminute.com/2013/11/07/can-objects-speak-for-themselves/ for an interesting debate on Twitter about this subject (accessed 24/09/15).

Anyone who thinks that objects do speak is 'simply hearing their own pre-existing frameworks speaking back to them (2006: 118). Although her book's focus is on museum text (rather than speech), and she explores both text *in* museums and the notion that museums *are* texts (2006: 1), she argues that because objects do not speak for themselves, museum text is 'an intrinsic part of a museum's communication tool-kit, sometimes being placed on a par with exhibition material' (2006: 1). With a slightly different emphasis, Margareta Ekarv argues that words and text supplement the object:

> Is there really any need for words in a museum? Aren't pictures, exhibits, labels and sets enough? […] Far from it […] We can use words to give a new, deeper, dimension to our visual experience. Words make us think. (Ekarv 1999: 201)

Ekarv's discussion about textual interpretation is not quite so black and white as that of Ravelli. Rather than thinking that objects simply do not speak for themselves, Ekarv argues that words add to the object encounter, a view upheld by Hooper-Greenhill, who states: 'objects are always contextualised by words' and 'museums are in fact as much concerned with words as they are with objects' (1994: 115).[141]

Museums and galleries, as well as being public places full of potentially noisy objects and chattering people, are (usually) also places full of text. In many cases, this is because institutions do not subscribe to the idea that objects speak for themselves: 'the museum object is reliant on labels' (Knell 2007: 26). Yet without necessarily subscribing *consciously* to the notion of objects having agency (see Gell 1998; Tilley 2007; Ingold 2007), nevertheless, many museums, (sometimes even in spite of their use of text), do endorse the idea that objects can somehow speak for themselves. Piles of worn shoes and hair, often still plaited, are displayed in cases at Auschwitz. This needs no words. The objects scream out at us. They speak to us even without language. Although Knell acknowledges that objects have a capacity to affect our

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[141] There is much overlap here with previous discussions of Derrida's 'double logic of the supplement' (1994: 144).

emotions, nevertheless he questions whether it is the object itself that is responsible for this (2007: 26). But despite the insistence that we need to speak for objects, because they are mute, nevertheless, many museums still describe their objects as having the capacity to 'talk'.

Talking things

Although the name given to a programme may seem inconsequential on first glance, it could be argued that a title actually underlies an institutional understanding of what it is that objects do (indeed that they do something at all). At the British Museum, a whole partnership programme entitled *Talking Objects* has been developed based on the premise that objects talk (Poulter 2010; Hogsden & Poulter 2012).[142] Likewise, *Collective Conversations* at Manchester Museum is a community programme for diverse groups inspired by objects in the stored collections and was established in 2007 as part of the *Revealing Histories*[143] work to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade: objects from nutmeg to a Benin Oba bell 'spoke' to participants and inspired new conversations (see also Lynch & Alberti 2010).[144]

This approach is not new: *Objects Talk* was a community-led exhibition held at the Pitt Rivers Museums in 2002-3. In their article about this exhibition, McLellan and Douglas note that it is a positive of that museum that objects there are often left to speak for themselves (2004: 57). However, *Objects Talk* deliberately used community interpretations to 'explore the many ways that objects 'speak' to people and how people 'respond' to them' (2004: 58). Often the 'speech' of the objects was about their materiality, texture or weight, and where this was the case, handling objects were placed alongside in the displays created, thereby (and in a similar vein to the

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[142] Funded through the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, six museums are involved in this programme which explores visitor involvement in the interpretive process through an object-based approach (see Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd 2013) http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/community_collaborations/partnerships/talking_objects.aspx (accessed 14/09/14).
[143] http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/home.html (accessed 28/08/15).
[144] Much of this work takes its inspiration from the idea of the museum as 'contact zone' as propounded by James Clifford (1997).

projects described in this thesis) creating a 'visual and tactile interpretation, not as a replacement for curatorial expertise, but as an equivalent to it' (2004: 60). The exhibition could also be used as a form of evaluation in itself to explore community responses to different objects within the collection.

In some of these projects, it could be argued that the object is employed instrumentally to enable something beyond itself. For example the object in UCL's *The thing is…* project is deliberately staged to stimulate debate, to challenge and to deal with conflict, using Robert Janes' model of museum as 'dialogue centre' (Janes 2009: 83). It focuses on 'unplanned and incidental' visitor conversations arising from one object. Indeed project manager Celine West has stated: 'the conversation *is* the experience' (2013: 109). She categorises broad themes of discussions emerging from engaging with objects: narrative/storytelling, questioning, and processing (statements that illustrated visitors' thought processes about things). The object, although 'central', is ironically superseded by conversations of others, and perhaps becomes a mere spectator in the process.

Each of these programmes has a slightly different objective: all are object-centric, and interestingly all have been devised by learning and outreach teams with aims broadly around access and inclusion, rather than from curatorial perspectives.[145] Despite the titles of programmes such as these, things do not of course physically talk. The question of whether to 'let the objects speak for themselves' or not is a phrase often bandied about. But do those who use this sort of language really think that an object will speak? That it will utter something? This might sound absurd, and is perhaps illustrated best through the example of an observed session.

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[145] This is interesting in relation to Meszaros' calls against 'whatever interpretation' and her concurrent plea for transparency about why we come to form the opinions and interpretations of objects that we do: if it is part of a formal programme, then we are more likely to hear objects talk in particular ways than we might do if the interpretation were unmediated.

Mary Greg's cabinet of curiosities: a description

What follows is an illustrated description of the first part of an object-centric session led by a freelance drama practitioner for Manchester Art Gallery's community development outreach programme. Although somewhat lengthy, it is important to give the reader a sense of the session, some of its objects and its conversations, as they unfold.

> *We are in an upstairs room of the large Methodist Hall in central Manchester for the weekly meeting of a women's group who call themselves 'Growing Old Disgracefully'. The ten women, who seem to know each other well, are all chatting and laughing amongst themselves, sitting around a large table. Coordinator Freddi introduces Matt, who is facilitating today's session. What do the women already know about today's session? Various replies hastily and enthusiastically come forth: 'It's about Mary Greg'; 'Her roving museum'; 'It's about her cabinet of curiosities'.*

> *A mysterious, large, dark, almost triangular-shaped, bespoke waterproof bag with long handles, containing something that is obviously awkward and heavy is placed on the table at the front of the room, alongside a tray of disposable gloves. 'What do you think is inside?' asks Matt. 'An elephant'. 'A bird cage'. 'A hamster'. 'A magnifier'. The women, already highly engaged and even amused by each other's playful suggestions, add to the suspense by creating a noisy drum roll effect with their hands beating on the table as Matt unzips the bag.*

> *There is an air of intrigue and sharp intakes of breath as the cover is lowered to reveal the contents. 'Wow'. 'Oh, it's beautiful'. A strange house-like structure emerges. It is wooden, carved in places, with chimney, three windows, doors, a sort-of-but-not-quite dolls' house. It has a lock at the top, which joins together the two halves of the roof. It looks like it will open out and stretch beyond this somehow. Someone else cries in semi-recognition: 'Oh, it's a sewing box'. But it isn't really a sewing box any more.*

Figure 33: The Mary Greg handling workshop is set up.

A photograph of Mary Greg is propped up against the box, and Matt gives a brief introduction to her as it is passed around. She is described as a 'collector of the everyday', but also as a 'curiosity hunter', and someone passionate about collecting, the idea of collecting, and the meanings of objects. Matt describes her obsessive letter-writing habits: she wrote at least twice a week to the curator at the gallery. The group laughs. He talks about her biography, her connection through marriage to the Greg family, cotton mill owners from Quarry Bank.

Matt unlocks the house-box. It opens in an orderly way. There are rules as to how to open it. First the top part divides in two. Each half is carefully extended to reveal layers. We can't yet see what is inside. Matt carefully pulls something out. It's a dark grey card tray that looks like it has been made to measure. Inserted into it is a very large old key with an ornate metalwork head, the sort

*of thing that might have unlocked a large oak door or chest. What will this
open? 'A treasure chest'; 'a secret door'; 'something with all your love letters
in'. Matt talks about the key as a symbol: of unlocking, secrecy, coming of age,
security, something valuable. The group begin to comment: 'how old is it?'; 'it
reminds me of a wardrobe key I had as a child'; 'I've seen things like that'; 'was
it all from the UK?'.*

*Another key is brought out of its tray. 'Ooh, wow!' This key is less intricate,
angular, more solid, still over-sized and perhaps double-ended. Matt asks what
people think this key might unlock: 'a stable door'; 'an outside door'; 'a shed'.
Participants note that the key is very industrial; it is quite the opposite from the
previous one; it is very heavy; it is functional. Is one for an inner, and one for an
outer door? Since it came from a cotton mill family, is one of them to lock the
bobbins in place? One participant suggests that they could have a research
group to look it all up. Another says: 'yes, I'd love to do that'. Still nothing has
been passed around to handle.*

*We are now told that we need to wear gloves to avoid the oils from our hands
damaging the objects. The desire to start picking things up and handling the
objects is now palpable. Freddi is keen to assist: 'shall I give the gloves out?'
The group obediently don the smelly and tight nitrile gloves.*

*The objects inside the dolls' house have been carefully curated. They are always
kept in the same place. They live in beautiful little carved plastazote trays. A
length of fabric tape behind each object helps remove it from its casing. This is
not a free-for-all rummage, but a carefully choreographed exploration of these
objects. Matt explains that there is very little information about any of the
objects, some information is inaccurate in any case, and that 'that's the joy of
it'. Each object will raise more questions than answers.*

*Gradually Matt lifts the individual trays, or 'floors', out of the house. A little
cylindrical pixie house pops out. What is it? Is it made of wood? Do the parts*

separate? Is it for needles and bobbins? Is it an inkwell? He takes the chimney off to reveal a glass bottle. Ink and sand to dry the ink, and all you would need to make a quill pen in this miniature writing set. 'A trifle from Brighton' is printed on the side of this little miniature house. There's another cry of delight: 'that's lovely'.

Figure 34: The Mary Greg house is opened.

Objects are now passed around the group who comment eagerly. This is like a wax seal. Does it stand up? This is an apprentice's show-piece. A spinning top whizzes from the table onto the floor. The atmosphere is one of dialogue, happy engagement, and the room is abuzz with a group of amateur detectives.

Figure 35: Sorting objects from the Mary Greg handling collection.

Things make us talk: what do they make us talk about?

Based on this account of this Mary Greg *Cabinet of Curiosities* outreach session, the following analysis explores what it is that the objects made people talk about. There are several pieces of research which explore the capacities of objects to inspire conversation or story-telling within museum learning environments (Rung 2014: 15-16; Leinhardt, Crowley & Knutson 2002; Leinhardt & Knutson 2004; Golding & Modest 2013), but fewer on spontaneous conversation that comes from outside a learning agenda (Monti & Keene 2013: 14[146]). There is even object-based research cited within museum studies texts in which the data is based on people's personal collections at home and not in a museum at all (Csikszentmihalyi & Halton 1994). All of these provide different categories and ways of framing the 'talkings' elicited through objects (see also Wood & Latham's 'object knowledge framework' (2014)). However, for the purposes of this research, categories of conversations inspired by the Mary Greg objects are divided into three: physical things; contextual things; and emotional things.

These are categories largely based on professional experience, derived from museum learning principles, and particularly the work of John Hennigar Shuh (1994).[147] Despite being written for first publication over thirty years ago (in 1982), in his highly regarded and still often-used work, he famously explores fifty ways of looking a Macdonalds Big Mac box. These begin with the sensory and physical qualities of the object: 'Smell it. Taste it. Feel it all over. Does it make a noise? What are its measurements?' and so on. He then asks questions about its context: 'What does the circled R signify? If someone… fifty… years ago had set about to design a box for a hamburger, how might they have done it differently? Did people eat hamburgers then?'. Finally he asks for more emotional or imaginative response to the box: 'What do you think is the single most significant thing about a Big Mac box? Why? And now, imagine that you are a Big Mac box and write the story of your life' (1994: 90-91).

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[146] Here, the authors divide experiences with objects into categories including: cathartic, aesthetic, poetic, introspective, flow, sensory, memorial and therapeutic.

[147] They also closely correlate with an interpretive framework devised by the author for a health and wellbeing in museums project for the Research Centre in Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester, in which objects were explored by pupils in a hospital school as though they had a body, mind and spirit (see Woodall 2015; Dodd & Jones 2014).

Of course there are many other ways to explore and categorise objects. For example Susan Pearce explores them through the threefold lens of functional artefact, historical evidence and symbolic structure (1992), and Crispin Paine's categories include a category of beauty or meaning, scientific specimen and evidence for a story being told (2013: 14). But for the following purposes, I have used the groupings with which I engage in my own practice. The first, 'physical things' focuses on the material and physical qualities of the object; the second, 'contextual things' refers to that object's story; and the third, 'emotional things' relates to the imaginative responses to objects.[148]

Physical things

This is used as a category of response to objects that includes discussions and comment on the material of the object and its sensory properties. It includes examination of the materials and components from which something is made (by any of the senses, but often the tactile, thus encompassing an object's feel, texture, weight and so on, but also its smell, sounds and visual appearance). It might also involve a kinaesthetic response to an object, for example through moving its parts, or using it as a prop in some way, or by positioning it in relation to other people and objects. As such, it is talk based on the visceral and embodied nature of a thing.

Contextual things

This refers to discussions that arise about the histories of an object. It might include 'facts' about the object derived from prior knowledge and research, or thinking aloud about an object's stories, biography and so on. This category is associated with those responses that are based on 'what I already know' rather than a visceral response to the material.

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[148] This structure is similar to the structure of the whole thesis, which moves outwards from a material encounter, to its effects in the world.

Emotional things

This mode of talking about objects relates to a primal, immediate, unfettered or instinctual response to something. It also refers to comments bound up with memories, with questions of identity, but also with concepts difficult to vocalise (for example if a person just says 'wow!').

These three categories do overlap of course, but in this instance, it is helpful for the purposes of analysis to define them. Each of these ways of talking about things might also include 'imaginative things', by which is meant guessing things, making things up, and suggesting things which may be based on the object's perceived physical, contextual and emotional existence. In what follows, I shall draw out examples of these three categories from the outreach session previously described.

Physical things: analysis

Initial reactions to the mysterious case respond to the physicality of the bag: its shape and size are used to infer what might be within. For example, the suggestion of 'a magnifier' refers to the similar shape of a cased overhead projector-type object, and a 'birdcage' or 'hamster', (presumably in a hamster cage) are also suggested due to the physical casing (see Figure 31). Once the bag is opened and its contents revealed, other conclusions are drawn: it becomes a 'sewing box' because that it what it appears to be: recognisable as a traditional hinged wooden sewing box, although with a few additional features.[149]

Once the box is opened up to reveal its contents, and participants can explore using magnifying glasses, several comments also refer to the physicality of the objects. A key is 'very heavy' and 'functional'. A spoon is explored closely to discern what it is made from (see Figure 34).

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[149] Made by artists Karl and Kimberley Foster, this type of sewing box is also used in their Object Dialogue Box at Harewood House, Leeds in a box themed around the anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade.

When undertaking a final activity where participants are asked which objects they would display, discard, cherish or store, again some responses are made according to the physicality of the object. When deciding what participants think is important, objects are chosen often for their material aesthetic: 'it's the thing I like to look at', or on a large old key with an intricate metalwork decoration: 'I like the maze part: it is labyrinthine'.

Yet what is particularly significant here, is not necessarily that the materials of these objects are discussed. Rather, it is that they are *used* in their very physicality. This opportunity to handle and encounter objects is importantly a playful one, not based on any expectations of prior knowledge or experience. Participants can ask questions of the material objects ('does it stand up?') through actually testing out what the things do. Mother of pearl counters are used to actually count, a tiny rake is used as a prop to imagine raking the ground, and miniature vessels are laid out and arranged in different orders: by colour, shape and size. A spinning top is spun slightly wildly, ending up on the floor. Using objects in this way enables a relationship with their physicality utterly unlike that of observing something in a staid glass case, at once enchanting, playful but of course also risky to the safety and long-term preservation of the objects. There is no wonder that participants talk about and use these things: simply because they can.

Figure 36: Material engagements with different objects.
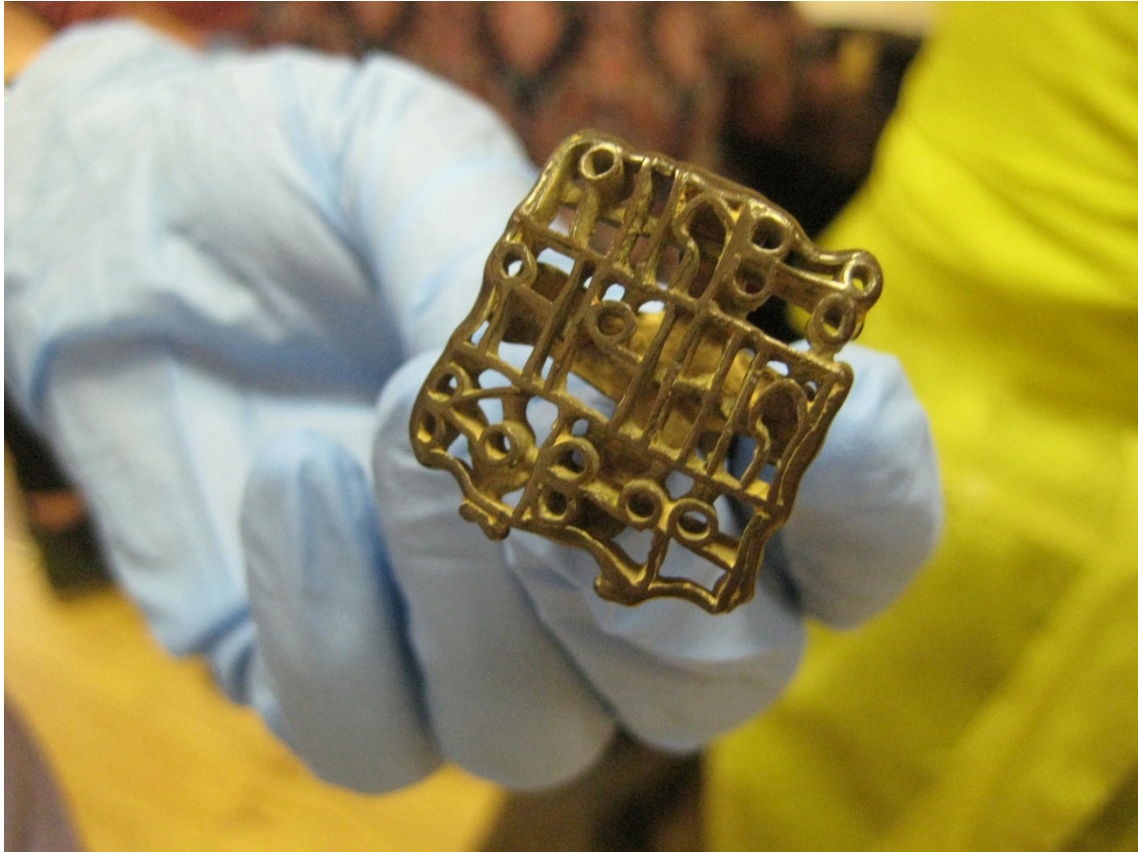
Figure 37: Intricate metalwork detail.

Contextual things: analysis

Many remarks about objects made during this session could be categorised as contextual: people make connections, tell stories, and place objects according to their perceived (or imagined) historical contexts. This is usually based on that prior knowledge and understanding often referred to within educational theory and constructivist pedagogy; we are not John Locke's children with 'tabula rasa' or empty vessels waiting to be filled (Locke 1996 [1690]), but rather participate within a world in which all our unique and individual experiences are constantly at play (see constructivist learning theories including Vygotsky 2002; Bruner 1977; Piaget 2002; Dewey 1964). When asked what a large key might open, imaginative responses are based on exactly these already formed ideas: 'a treasure chest', 'a secret door', 'something with all your love letters in'. Another key is less ornate than the first: bringing class contexts into the conversation, this might open 'a stable door', 'an outside door' or 'a shed'. Participants note that this one seems 'industrial', that it is

different from the previous key. Their inferences lead to asking questions of it about its life and purpose, suggesting it might be something to do with cotton mills, since they have been told about the Greg family connection with Quarry Bank Mill near Manchester.

Guessing what things might be, and what their back-stories are, proves fascinating for the participants in this session. One object becomes an 'apprentice's show-piece', while another unidentifiable thing might be a 'wax seal'. During the selection game, objects that many group members would like to protect are those which have that potential historical connection. They select a particular object to cherish 'because it has a human element' and because there is 'a history to it'. Several responses paint a picture of the need to know what a thing is, to learn some 'facts' about it. For example, several women ask about the specific dates of things: 'how old is it?' is a popular question. Others would like to know where the object came from: 'was it all from the UK?' Typically questions that one may expect to be answered if seeing objects within a museum, where there are factual interpretive text panels, this group – who might be described as having a great deal of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984) – were perhaps slightly disappointed that in many cases, this provenancial information remained unknown. In such contextual discussions, an appraisal of the object goes beyond its material.

Emotional things: analysis

In this category are placed those remarks based on personal memories and identity: 'I've seen things like that'; 'it reminds me of a wardrobe key I had as a child' and a selected object is chosen because 'my granddad was a printer who did copperplate writing', or because 'I have a collection of roosters'. Deeply rooted in the personal response, these comments reveal the deep, almost unspeakable emotional valence of such objects.

Yet, this third category of object conversation is often the initial vocative exclamation made on seeing, holding, using the object for the first time. As such this is not a dialogue. It may not be something that can be given description: 'wow', 'ooh', and deep intakes of breath are common, alongside visceral reaction: 'that's lovely'. Words often seem to fail when trying to unpick such reactions, and this will be explored further in the final section of this chapter.

Does the material matter?

This thesis is arguing for materially-based interpretive strategies within art galleries. But is this the primary concern of visitors when simply left to their own devices? Although people's reflections might often *begin* with the shape and material of what is on the table in front of them, it is apparent that soon this response to the physical material becomes a contextual one in which audiences try to make sense of the object through story or other emotional connections, rather than simply engaging with its physicality. It seems that the material both does and does not matter.

In some cases, the material might be arbitrary. Perhaps *because* the session has been established as one in which any sort of conversation is encouraged, or indeed, because conversation is in fact the 'product', the materiality of objects per se is not given centre-stage in these workshops: participants can talk about whatever they want to talk about, and *it just so happens* that sometimes this is materially focused. During the research interview following this session, its facilitator referred to the need for an outcome of the session:

> I think maybe there has to be a product – maybe it's a conversational product [...] It's a thinking product. It's a cognitive one but [...] I think there's got to be something at the end. I think it needs to build somewhere otherwise it will just dissipate to nothing [...] I don't know if that's the teacher in me rather than the community practitioner. Do you know what I mean? I don't know if sometimes I'm a bit too teacher-ish [...] (Interview I, 11/06/13)

The implication here is that the session leader, community practitioner or teacher is responsible for enabling a 'product' to emerge, which of course could focus directly on the material and sensory properties of the objects if that were a direct aim of the session. Reflecting on these sessions, one officer notes that:

> The house – the inkwell is really popular […] People talk about all sorts of things […] I guess it all comes down to that tradition, change, how things have changed. Communication always comes up. Emails always come up, how people communicate now. So I think it's […] a great way into conversation. Actually holding the objects makes such a difference. (Interview C, 20/05/13)

But here, holding the objects is a means to an end: it is a means to a conversation, or as the officer refers to it 'a structured conversation' (Interview C, 20/05/13). A physical encounter does not necessarily lead to a purely physical response. Yet importantly, these conversations would not have happened in the first place were it not for the objects of engagement.

Other respondents situate material engagements with, and the ensuing conversations about, objects in a more contextual framework: either the objects enable stories about the *things*, or they enable stories about the *people* handling the things. For one person: 'Mary Greg's objects for me aren't the same without her. They wouldn't […] work without Mary. She is key' (Interview N, 30/07/13). Rather than the material, it is the biographical context that matters to this interviewee. This was observed during the session in which many participants wanted to know solid historical information about the objects being passed around. As its facilitator reflected after the session: 'the atmosphere felt academic today: it was more about knowing facts about things than it was about creating interpretation probably, on this occasion' (Interview I, 11/06/13). This may be due to the cultural capital of those in the group (Bourdieu 1984), and their affinity with museum visiting and protocols of learning via caption on the wall. Yet despite this, such conversations would not have arisen without the presence of the material.

Other community groups' responses, particularly from 'harder to reach' audiences, are arguably more reflective of a personal (rather than a historical) content. For example, within the Mary Greg box, the coracle is often selected as an object to cherish (see Figures 36 and 37). Particularly by those originally from countries other than the UK, it is used to make personal connections: 'there was an Indian woman […] and she talked about life in India and boats, and making boats, so […] that one brought in lots of discussion' (Interview C, 20/05/13). She goes on: 'some people could really tell stor[ies] […] so for example the cockerel, people would talk about living on a farm, what it would be like to live on a farm, urban and rural life, lots of things came up […] A lot of that group talked about how they ended up in Manchester' (Interview C, 20/05/13).

Figure 38: The coracle.

Figure 39: Image of traditional coracle use kept with the box.

Another woman had 'worked in a shoe factory and she spoke about how you would often make samples of shoes, very small samples of shoes, and then […] people would come in and order their shoe in their size, and she loved the little shoe. And there was [sic] a lot of women in that group who had worked in kind of textile industry of some sort, so people loved the glove' (Interview C, 20/05/13). But also, some people were happy to 'just kind of make up more stories about the animals', so 'it really varied from person to person' (Interview C, 20/05/13).

Figure 40: Miniature leather glove.

Of course, as already observed during the session, objects also elicit emotional responses and reminiscence (Chatterjee 2008; Chatterjee and Noble 2013; Smiraglia 2015):

> There was one particular object that I remember […] one old man who sat in the corner of the session and didn't say anything for about an hour, then I sat next to him to talk to him about the object in front of him and he said […] 'I used to fly a Spitfire' […] It was absolutely amazing and this came from nowhere. He'd […] not spoken about it for a long time and me and him talked for about ten minutes about his experience of that, which came from […] the glove that reminded him of flying gloves' (Interview I, 11/06/13).

The facilitator comments here that such a comment had 'come from nowhere'. But this is not strictly true: the comment has come from the engagement with an object.

So, it can be argued that the material *does* matter: even if it is not directly talked about, the very fact that a material engagement is eliciting particular conversations and memories is significant. Yet I would also argue that the facilitator can directly influence whether a respondent focuses particularly on the material properties of things. For example, unlike the case studies explored in this research, Kirsten Wehner and Martha Sear's project, *Australian Journeys*, deliberately got people to interact with objects in bodily, multi-sensory and emotional (as well as cognitive) ways.[150] As Dudley has pointed out: 'museums and visitors alike grow so focused on the story *overlying* the physical thing, they may inadvertently close off other, perhaps equally significant potentials *in* things' (2012: 10). The facilitator (or institution itself where an experience is not facilitated), is in a position of power, and can ensure a focus on this potential *in* things, rather than on their stories.

What is clear is that all interactions between person and material thing are nuanced, complex and difficult to categorise, and people's reflections on experience are of

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[150] Compared with the cases explored in this thesis, which do not *deliberately* set out to explore materiality and sensory aspects of objects, but which often do result in this.

course subjective. To illustrate something of this paradox – that the material both matters and does not matter – when probed further on whether the material of a thing even matters in such object encounters, one respondent said: 'no […] I think that the discovery is what makes the thing that you discover' (Interview H, 09/06/13). When questioned further, she goes on:

> from a phenomenological point of view, everything is mediated through the subjective experience […] there is nothing but the encounter […] And if I think that, then I do think that it's the discovery rather than the object (LM, p.14).

This element of *discovery* was found to be particularly significant within the particular examples studied in this research. To discover a material object is both empowering, but it also becomes part of a ritual or performance, the focus of which can be shifted according to the aims for the session.

Talking objects as empowering

In her influential practical guide to making museums more accessible for a wide range of communities, 'museum visionary' Nina Simon[151] begins her chapter 'Social Objects' with the following:

> Imagine looking at an object not for its artistic or historical significance but for its ability to spark conversation. Every museum has artifacts that lend themselves naturally to social experiences. It might be an old stove that triggers visitors to share memories of their grandmother's kitchen, or an interactive building station that encourages people to play cooperatively […] These artifacts and experiences are all social objects. (Simon 2010: C4)

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[151] This title was ascribed by authors of the Smithsonian Magazine in August 2010: http://www.smithsonianmag.com/40th-anniversary/nina-simon-museum-visionary-642778/ (accessed 10/08/15).

Social objects, she continues, are 'the content around which conversation happens'. Not all objects are social however, but those that are have common attributes, that they are personal, active, provocative and relational. While I would argue against Simon here, to say that in fact *every* object has the capacity and potential to be a social object, the findings of this research are indeed closely aligned with Simon's description and her understandings of their value within the 'participatory museum'. On several occasions, interviewees speak of their practices of using objects as 'empowering'. Material objects, as we have seen above, are used as a strategy to overcome or discuss particular political, social, democratic, wellbeing or equality issues, as well as being levellers within themselves, for everyone can be brought into a conversation about and with an object.

The very notion of engagement with an object is often described as being about ownership: makers of the Object Dialogue Boxes refer to holding and talking about an object being about someone 'having ownership over their learning, and that idea of saying you have a voice and we like your voice' (Interview B, 03/05/13). In Sheffield, sessions for speakers of English as a foreign language always start with objects as the initial basis for conversations, either museum objects or participants' own things (Interview D, 25/05/13), and likewise, in Leeds, a feely-bag is used to 'get the children comfortable about talking about objects' with the expectation that 'it's not always about the right and wrong answer; it's about the thinking that you've done to justify what you think' (Interview L, 18/06/13). This aligns neatly with Meszaros' views about transparent interpretation within her 'critical pedagogy' framework (Meszaros 2006; Meszaros et al. 2011: 45): so long as one reflects on the process of interpretation, and on 'how did I come to that opinion?', the engagement is not only empowering but has the capacity to become transformative.

This idea that *things give people voice* cropped up time and again and is expressed in the views of one formal learning manager. She describes her own role thus:

> I would say whether I am using objects or just taking a walk around the gallery, what I am trying to help people do is to develop their own voice, develop

confidence in their own opinion, so that they realise that when they see different things on display, that they don't have to take that kind of curatorial or historical point of view all the time, that their opinion is valid. And that all that other information will come once you allow that conversation to take place. (Interview N, 30/07/13)

And this space for a voice, she argues, often comes from *holding* an object (Interview N, 30/07/13). Other officers note confidence in groups derived from handling objects. At Leeds' Artemis Collection, an officer recollects a teacher discussing a class, half of which is 'boisterous' and the half is 'mute'. The teacher is amazed at the capacity of one object to affect the class dynamic, stating:

"Did you notice when so-and-so was talking about the Qur'an stand? She's really quiet. She doesn't normally speak." And […] then she'd said something and […] one of the loud ones, had said something about the artefact and he'd prefaced it by the girl's name […] And that's a really interesting dynamic because he actually took notice of what she had to say." So not only was she empowered and very confident, other children were then starting to see their peers in a different light. (Interview L, 18/06/13)

Objects empower in what could be described as a therapeutic way: 'Children who never spoke up in classrooms, whose voices were never heard, were more forthcoming during some of the sessions with the Mary Greg material' (Interview H, 09/06/13). Time and again this is reiterated in the research interviews.[152] Interview respondents claim that: 'the actual using of the objects was absolutely key' (Interview I, 11/06/13). Like findings from research around the use of objects as therapeutic within health and wellbeing settings (Chatterjee & Noble 2013)[153], there was strong feeling that the Mary Greg collection had positive effects, for example at the Christie, Manchester's specialist cancer hospital, where:

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[152] As in my professional experience (see James, O'Riain & Boyd 2006).
[153] See also UCL's AHRC-funded *Museums on Prescription* research (2014-2017)
https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/research/museumsonprescription (accessed 24/09/15).

the Mary Greg objects did actually provide respite from their situation and a space for a different kind of conversation. And there was no making necessary. Making wasn't a part of it […] the making was the making of conversation (Interview H, 09/06/13; see also *Who Cares?* evaluation report ed. Trustram 2011).

As well as conversations inspired by objects being therapeutic and empowering, a further category for discussion here is what we might call their performative role.

Talking objects as performative

Throughout this chapter, the importance of the role of facilitator (whether this is one individual, or several on a co-led project, or even whether it is the institution itself) has been alluded to: the facilitator can establish aims for a session, and these might be focused on materiality and the relationships between people and objects. As someone whose role is both to frame yet also to open up objects for wider discussion, the facilitator plays a pivotal role:

> If the objects aren't framed and contextualised in the right way […] I'm trying to think of the right word. They're only important if I tell them they're important and that's what I do. I make sure they're clear. Not why they're important but that they *are* important (Interview I, 11/06/13).

The facilitator plays a powerful role in opening up discussion, and can change the emphasis of a session. Sometimes the character of Mary Greg will be introduced first before the objects are explored, whereas another time, the objects might come first: 'And actually, the responses we get probably won't be the same' (MW, p.20). Introducing objects imaginatively and with variation also allows for changes in delivery, developing the creative practice of facilitator. The object can open up this dialogue between the workshop leader and participants in infinite ways (MW, p.7).

Object interactions are often reflected upon as being a performance in themselves. An Egyptian Mummies session in Sheffield is delivered as an embalming with lights dimmed, Egyptian funeral music playing, and the children entering in a funeral procession in silence before they embalm 'Fred' the textile body and remove his organs to place in canopic jars (Interview G, 07/06/13). And in another amusing episode recounted about a project in Leeds, taxidermy animals from the Artemis collection became people's pets for a week. The project *Get Stuffed!* enabled families to choose an animal to take home and live with for a week, during which time it was photographed 'living' in the home. Rather than being a liturgical performance as with the Mummy case, responses to this are more like a comedy or pantomime:

> The fox […] was in a family's house in Calverley […] and […] well, the fox is big. It's in a big case because all the animals are in Perspex cases. Well, the Dad had wheeled the fox to school with a wheelbarrow… And Calverley is a bit like […] it's a village […] so people were talking about this fox in a wheelbarrow […] One of them, the pangolin, had a Twitter account, which I think it's still live. So it was tweeting things throughout its week. The chameleon went camping. The puffer fish […] was quite often taken on the trampoline by the children and the foster Mum was like, "get that puffer fish off the trampoline!" (Interview L, 18/06/13).

Objects here seem to have developed lives of their own, and often become part of a bigger 'ritual' within and beyond the museum space (see Duncan 1995).

Theologian Denys Turner borrows terminology from British philosopher of language, J. L. Austin (1911-1960) who coined the term 'performative utterances' (arguing against the prevailing positivism that claimed that all sentences have truth values), in his theory of speech acts. We use language to actually *do* things. For example, by saying 'I promise to do something', I am actually doing something: making a promise. Turner argues however, that sometimes even when we performatively utter, the opposite might happen: it might be a 'performative contradiction'. He gives various examples

of this: Enoch Powell's speeches warning about racial conflict actually led to racial conflict; a student arguing in a seminar to ensure maximum participation is actually inhibiting that participation (Turner 2004: 68). Turner also notes a complement to the 'performative utterance', namely Wittgenstein's 'uttering performances': that is to say, an *action* bears meaning. Actions themselves speak: 'utterances not only utter what the words spoken say, but also, being actions, can speak *qua performances*' (Turner 2004: 69). For Turner, ritual and liturgy mark an interaction between these 'performative utterances and uttering performances' (see also Turner 2010: 289-290).

While the claim here is not that object conversations and interactions are 'liturgical', nevertheless, it might be a helpful metaphor to explore what is going on within the dynamic of a performative relationship between object and person. Just as the object is part of a performance during these object conversations, so is the person interacting with that object, whose interactions might be seen as part of a ritual. This is illustrated particularly dynamically in the relationship between a person and an object from a resource such as the Object Dialogue Box:

> Once you are in an art gallery, or any other public performative place, you are a performance – you're performing. You are very aware of yourself as public, and you are very aware of the gaze of the front of house staff, and looking knowledgeable in front of artworks, or looking relaxed in front of artworks at least. Looking like you know which room to go into. All of those sorts of things, which […] if you're used to going to museums and galleries and other public spaces, you don't even notice. But once you've got a weird thing in your hand, that doesn't make sense, it's a companion. I remember talking about that actually at the time, that […] the thing that I loved about the Object Dialogue Box when we got sent off into the galleries with a thing, was that it was like going round the galleries with a friend (Interview H, 09/06/13).

Developing this line even further, the objects themselves could also be said to be acting and performing in relationship *with each other*, quite apart from with any people involved. This is no more true than in the case of the Object Dialogue Boxes,

whose objects exist purely to enable relationships and dialogue with other objects in an exhibition. Participants can often be seen to wear objects, carry them as though they are little pets, or 'use' them in some kind of imaginary interaction. One interviewee reflects on this as a 'third person thing' whereby the object being held is 'a witness'. A lengthy but apposite quotation follows to illustrate the performative utterances and uttering performances inspired by the Object Dialogue Box:

> I can go to the art gallery and I can sit in front of one of my favourite paintings… and I can sit at that painting and I can ruminate on that painting, and contemplate that painting, and love that painting and just gaze at that painting, and probably unformed thoughts are in my head, and they might not be in words. They might be in words, but they might not be in words.

Figure 41: *Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his Wife* by John Souch (1635), held by Manchester City Galleries, 1927.150. Image courtesy Manchester City Galleries.

If I have a third party with me, a thing in my hand […] how does that change the dynamic of what is going on between me and that painting? Because now there are three entities in communication with each other, and there's also an additional sensory thing in touch and smell, taste I suppose if you want to lick it […]

Figure 42: A bandaged spoon from the Object Dialogue Box as a companion for the John Souch painting at Manchester Art Gallery (see footnote 154). Image courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

But there is a different thing going on, because then you've got sort of at an imaginary level, you've got conversations that you are participating in, and conversations that you are not participating in, but you might be listening to – so the object in your hand may be having a conversation with the painting on the wall, in an imaginary sense, that you might be a conduit for, but you are not actually having. You are listening to these two things talking to each other, and you at the same time might be talking to the thing in your hand, and you might be talking to the painting on the wall, or the painting on the wall might be talking to you – but the dynamic, the dynamic of two is replaced by the dynamic of three. Which is like going to an art gallery with a friend. So it does do something different. It's like a really compliant friend. Except that it isn't compliant actually at all, because the object in your hand refuses to settle (Interview H, 09/06/13). [154]

Although the dynamics and interplay between objects and persons using Object Dialogue Boxes are explored in much more depth in the following chapter, that its use can be described a performance with an unsettling character leads on to the closing section of this chapter. It is this unsettlement which may often lead to something other than talking, dialogue, conversation and performance. And that, as alluded to above ('They might be in words, but *they might not be in words'*) is silence.

Silent things

In her paper on the somewhat negative views about the museum within the poetry of Thomas Hardy, the French scholar of English Literature, Isabelle Gadoin, notes one of

[154] This interviewee speaks further of the performative relationship between painting and object:

> The bandaged spoon [is] brilliant companion for the Aston, the spoon being about nourishment and comfort and protection (spooning) and love, about holding and giving and feeding. But the poor thing is bandaged, along with its morsel of food. It's damaged, wrapped up, inaccessible. And the child is dead, and the mother is dead and there is little comfort to be found. But then the bandage is about healing too, about a different kind of protection, so maybe one day the bandage will come off and what lies within will be whole and well again (personal correspondence 31/08/15).

the central paradoxes of this thesis: namely, that museum objects are those stripped from their original context. She analyses one poem in particular, 'Haunting Fingers – A Phantasy in a Museum of Musical Instruments'. Perfectly illustrating the nuances of a discussion around silence and sound in museums (and also object agency), it is worth quoting two verses including one spoken from the objects' points of view:

> And they felt past handlers clutch them,
> Though none was in the room,
> Old players' dead fingers touch them,
> Shrunk in the tomb.

> "'Cello, good mate,
> You speak my mind as yours:
> Doomed to this voiceless, crippled, corpselike state,
> Who, dear to famed Amphion, trapped here, long endures?"

(Hardy 2002: 559 [1922])

The musical instruments 'denounce their imprisonment' in what soon becomes for them a tomb. Paradoxically, she notes, 'the museum seems to bring awareness of what has disappeared just as much as it proclaims the permanence of a few artistic relics. While preserving the outward appearance and shape of things, the museum divests them of all life and light' (2014: 18).

Sometimes objects in museums are silent, like this, because they are stripped of their original contexts and uses. Sometimes they are silent for other reasons: people might not want to interact with them for a variety of reasons. The objects may be associated with difficult histories of conflict and terror (Kidd et al. 2014; Ben-Ze'ev et al. 2010; Winter 2012); they may be indigenous objects from source communities about which silence is a 'social fact' (anthropologist Elizabeth Bonshek describes her fieldwork in Wanigela, Papua New Guinea and the significance of silences around particular objects associated with the past (2008: 87), as well as the rituals of *silencing* objects for

example through destroying those associated with sorcery (2008: 97)); they may be silent simply because of their aesthetic – they are 'not exceptionally large or small, colourful, artistically noticeable, obviously ancient or precious looking' (Monti & Keene 2013: 1). They might be silent simply when there is no information or provenance information in existence at the museum.

Silencing things

Just as the objects themselves might both talk and be silent in many ways, so too might *they silence us*. Whether through a lack of knowledge, through fear, through ambivalence and boredom, or through a lack of words to describe some sort of profound relationship, reaction or emotion, often we are stumped, puzzled, or simply awed into silence in the presence of an object in a gallery. It might be a beautiful thing, a complex thing, a violent thing, a challenging thing, a surprising thing. Sometimes this silence may be due to the 'silent' nature of the objects themselves: indeed sometimes it is the object itself that it either silent or loud, sometimes both at once. For example, the Mary Greg collection is of humble, broken, worn 'things of the least' (Yates 2009): they are silent (and loud), and they often provoke a silence in audiences:

> It is both silent and loud […] it's the things that don't proclaim their presence, that are worn out, that are anonymous in their production, in their ownership, in their point of origin, but at the same time, they are things that have people's names on them, and that are held within however many hundred letters there are with Mary Greg's voice running through the whole thing. So I think that they are actually, they are very, very talkative objects at the same time as being very very quiet objects (Interview H, 09/06/13).

Another officer makes the point that it is important not to overthink things: the simplicity of the objects often does much of the talking (Interview N, 30/07/13): why do we need to say much at all about a toy rabbit? So as well as recording some of the conversations arising from handling objects, it is also important to acknowledge that

sometimes these conversations do not take place: instead, visitors are silent (and silenced). They have no need to speak, or they are not able to speak.

As explored within the literature review, there is a body of literature on these silences in relation to the 'sacred' nature of a museum space and the gallery experience (Duncan 1995; Paine 2013; Latham & Wood 2009; Wood & Latham 2011). Kiersten Latham in particular writes about the numinous *object* and the numinous *experience* with museum objects (Latham 2009) citing from earlier public history literature:

> The 'numinosity' of an artefact or place, the intangible and invisible quality of its significance, consists in its presumed association with something, either in the past or in the imagination or both, that carries emotional weight with the viewer. (Maines & Glynn 1993: 10)

Much has also been written on silence in relation to the works of particular artists. Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko (1903-1970) is one such: 'silence is so accurate', he states, when attempting to speak about his work.[155] At the recent retrospective of his work at The Hague's Gemeentemuseum, an opening statement included: 'Rothko wanted to offer the viewer an almost religious experience. This gallery is designed to allow you to experience the art in that way' (see Figure 41). While there is debate as to whether the objects themselves are 'numinous' (particularly in the case of objects with powerful historic resonance - see Maines & Glynn 1993), or whether it is our experience of them that is so, what is clear is that there is often something about an experience of the materiality of a thing that can render us speechless.

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[155] The author's MPhil dissertation explored Mark Rothko's work and its relationship with apophatic theology (Woodall 2000).
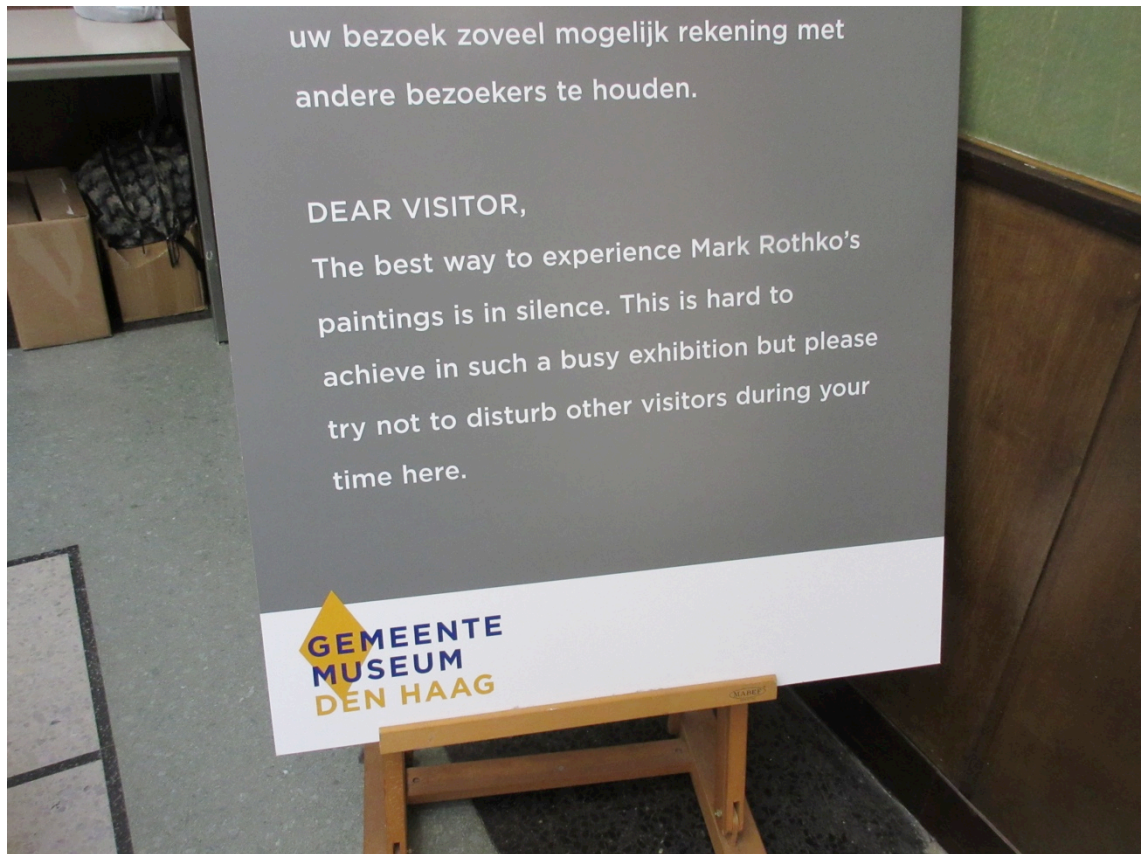
Figure 43: Sign at the Gemeentemuseum's Rothko exhibition.

Further gallery text used Rothko's voice offering his own understandings of the relationship between his objects and the numinous: 'the people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had, when I painted them' (cited in *Mark Rothko* 20/09/14 – 01/03/15[156]). Here, a museum is deliberately staging an exhibition to encourage silence, awe, tears, and raw emotion in a way that is often glossed over, or in a way that is the opposite of what a facilitator might be encouraging within the case studies explored here. Likewise, the work of light artist James Turrell (b.1943), inspired by his Quaker roots and by Plato's allegory of the cave, is both silent and encourages silence. Arguably this staging of silence might be more familiar in an art gallery than in a museum, which is significant in relation to this thesis, whose studies are within galleries, but with objects perhaps more relatable to museum than to art collections.

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[156] http://www.gemeentemuseum.nl/en/exhibitions/mark-rothko (accessed 24/09/15).

Silence was (not without irony) one of the most difficult aspects of objects for interviewees in this research to discuss. When asked to speak about the capacities of objects to 'stop one in one's tracks' and make one aware of a failure of words, the question often led to long pauses and not knowing what to say. One education officer from Leeds makes the following complex comments:

> Something happens […] people […] lose the sense of themselves […] I really don't know. I don't know […] it's not just visual art or art in its other forms but all sorts of stuff can do this, but what's different is […] human beings can engage with stuff, become submerged in it, have a dialogue with it, it strikes me. Is that a meditation? We go to Buddhist theorising. Is it a Derridean thing where meaning is constantly slipping away? Is it a Foucauldian thing in the sense that it's […] this sort of archaeology of knowledge and there is this sort of – I don't know. I've no idea. Is it Jungian collective unconscious? Is it performing ritual? Is it all of these things? I don't know but something happens. I've seen people cry. Why? Why do they spend ages with stuff? Is it John Berger's the moment in time is frozen in a busy, busy, world and you just – rest. Is it a moment of rest? I could spend a lifetime trying […] all I do is bounce from one bit to the other but at the moment […] for me it is about a whole body thing, not just an ideas thing and it takes you over. You take it over. It becomes part of you […] Maybe the easiest way to describe this is in my other life, I'm a climber and […] climbing can bring everything together that is all that you are and all that […] you could become […] but in that moment […] everything is caught and I think sometimes art or music or poetry can do that for human beings. I don't know what that is. It scares me. (Interview K, 18/06/13)

Despite her loquacity here, the over-riding sense is one of not knowing what it is that happens when we are moved to silence and awe by a thing. We might indeed liken her comments to that of the relationship between the cataphatic and apophatic within theology: 'language… bursts at the seams under the pressure of the excessive forces it is being made to contain; the language *as body* bursts open under the weight of its

overload of significance' (Turner 2010: 294). Here, it is so difficult to use language to describe something beyond language, that there is indeed a bursting at the seams, an attempt to say so much, but to end in not knowing. Perhaps it is this very dance between the speakable and the unspeakable that is exactly what it is that material engagements with objects enable: 'I think there is something about the being able to name and not name at the same time that makes that 'wow' or makes that explosion happen' says one of the makers of the Object Dialogue Box (Interview B, 03/05/13). There can be no words to explain, for words are limiting, fallible, ultimately doomed.

Concluding remarks: speech, silence and apophatic objects

So, in this chapter, the idea that facilitated material engagements with objects enable dialogue, conversation, and talk has been discussed, as has the idea that objects themselves might be full of sound. Objects are both voiced, and they inspire voice in us. As *talking things*, objects are empowering, and participate in performative relationships with people. Yet also, there is a corresponding negation: objects might also be silent and might inspire silence in people. Indeed do these very discussions about the capacities of objects to enable talk and silence not say more about that relationship between the object and *language*, than they do about the material object itself? Do they say more about the failure of language, than they do about the materiality of objects and our relationships with things?

This thesis is arguing for 'material interpretation' using theological metaphor to do so, and the inherent paradox – even oxymoron – within this phrase (as within the 'language of unsaying' of mystical theology (Sells 1994)) is deliberate. Generally, we interpret through language, and not through material, even if it is material that we are interpreting. If 'language is all we have' but it ultimately fails, then perhaps there is a place for material interpretation – and museums as the place par excellence for this to take place – as a going beyond language. What remains is for museums as institutions to recognise this, and to create strategies for interpretation in a place beyond words. The apophatic is not just about negative language: it is about the failure of language,

both positive and negative (see Turner 2010: 293). If an apophatic museology is to be embraced, then this paradox needs to be taken seriously and acknowledged within interpretive strategy. If there really are 'no ideas but in things', then it is time for a recalibration of our relationship with those things in museums, rather than with language about those things:

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

(Wittgenstein *Tractatus* 7)

Chapter Six: Knowing things

Preamble: Thomas Gradgrind's facts

'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!' (Dickens 2003: 9)

Thus begins Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* with a caricature of the didactic headmaster Thomas Gradgrind. In a later chapter, readers come to understand more of Gradgrind's distaste for what he refers to as 'fancy':

No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are! No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gradgrind having at five years old dissected the Great Bear… No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in a field with that famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the dog who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the malt… it had never heard of those celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as a graminivorous ruminating quadruped with several stomachs (2003: 16).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of the senses of the word 'fact' relates to truth. A fact is 'that which is known (or firmly believed) to be real or true; what has actually happened or is the case; truth attested by direct observation or authentic testimony; reality' and lies opposed to 'an inference, a conjecture, or a fiction'. A fancy, on the other hand, particularly in its early use, is often synonymous with imagination, and is defined as 'the faculty of forming mental representations of things

not present to the senses; chiefly applied to the so-called creative or productive imagination, which frames images of objects, events, or conditions that have not occurred in actual experience.'[157]

Fact and fancy, truth and imagination are of course widely contested terms conceived variously according to different epistemological frameworks. They all however have something to do with whatever is understood by 'knowledge'. In her important book, now written over two decades ago, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill describes knowledge as being 'the commodity that museums offer' (1992: 2). Using Foucauldian theory, she categorises knowledge in museums in three 'epistemes': Renaissance, Classical and Modern. Disagreeing with the founding editor of the *International Journal for Museum Management and Curatorship*, Peter Cannon-Brookes, who has written that the *fundamental* role of the museum is as a storehouse of knowledge and of objects (1984: 116), rather Hooper-Greenhill paints a picture of the museum which has no such fundamental role (1992: 191), and where 'the act of knowing is shaped through a mix of experience, activity, and pleasure, in an environment where both the 'learning' subject and the 'teaching' subject have equal powers' (1992: 215). Meanings are no longer fixed. Things are open to endless epistemological possibilities.

Herein lies another museum paradox. People visit museums for a reason: they 'don't just fall out of the sky and land inside' (Falk et al. 2013: 32). Yet what that reason is, is varied: it is not just for seeking knowledge or even making meaning, as many museums would have it (Hein 1998; Roberts 1989; Spock 2006; see also Moser 2010 on museums making knowledge). Indeed there are numerous bodies of research that try to categorise and disentangle why it is that people come to museums and galleries. From the social, recreational, learning, hobby-related, or reverential reasons of Falk et al. (2013: 44), to Morris Hargreaves McIntyre's social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual categories (2007), most visitors' motivations are complex and mixed. Learning about things, coming away with facts, receiving knowledge and being loaded with

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[157] Definitions from Oxford English Dictionary Online Version (accessed 12/09/15).

information is just one reason of many. In reality, most people visit primarily for social reasons as well as intellectual ones.[158] But knowledge is still widely perceived as the main offering of museums. Even in its title, *Culture, Knowledge and Understanding: Great Museums and Libraries for Everyone*, Arts Council England could be said to subscribe subliminally to this notion (2011).

Knowing things

Arguing that knowledge within the museum and gallery is about much more than the hierarchical model presented through Gradgrind's facts, this chapter looks at the role of different types of knowledge within the art gallery. It develops the ideas of American feminist philosopher and museum theorist Hilde Hein whose argument that museums are primarily about ideas (2011: 182), nevertheless resituates the object into the experiential museum (2011: 186). In particular, the chapter focuses on the sorts of imaginative knowledge that can come through material interpretations of (and with) objects. The chapter also unpicks some ontological ideas about the 'agency' of objects (Gell 1998; Dudley forthcoming 2016, especially by exploring the notion of the 'potential' in things (see also Bedford 2014: 14-15)). It takes a session using objects from Museums Sheffield's Object Dialogue Box as a starting point to develop ideas about material interpretation of objects, and once more uses twin metaphors derived from theology to unpick these themes: the gallery is a space for knowing, but it is also a space for 'unknowing', a term which will be explored in due course.

Anthropologist James Boon speaks of museums as 'a locus of dislocated fragments' (1991: 256). Containing mere symbols and remnants (the objects) of lives once lived, museums, he says, make him sad. The focus for this chapter is also on a series of objects that might be called 'dislocated fragments', yet here they are understood in an entirely different way. These are objects not from a museum's collection, and they are

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[158] Although see Morris Hargreaves McIntyre for a fascinating comparison between motivations for visiting museums and art galleries. At the museum, 48% visit for social reasons, 38% for intellectual reasons, 11% for emotional reasons and just 3% for spiritual reasons. Compare this with the art gallery where 30% visit for social reasons, 40% for intellectual reasons, 14% for emotional and 15% for spiritual reasons (2007: 28).

no longer recognisable objects with lives once lived, but they are artist-made things from the interpretive Object Dialogue Box. These objects have been deliberately created *as* fragments: one may say that they are context-free objects, or, at any rate, that they are objects that have not succumbed to museal displacement (Hein 2000: 69). Objects found within the Object Dialogue Box are created to be used and handled in the museum or gallery, unlike those musealised objects described by Hein, who states:

> Museums are full of things languishing in a state of moribund exaltation, unredeemed until and unless a hand or eye from the real world touches them with the enchantment of new meaning (Hein 2000: 60).

In the example that follows, hands and eyes from the real world do touch these things 'with the enchantment of new meaning' whenever they are in use: this is their purpose.

What's in the box?

The chapter now describes through image and words, a workshop session that took place within the Ruskin Collection of the Guild of St George at Museums Sheffield and was facilitated by the author. This eclectic gallery includes paintings, works on paper, architectural casts, minerals and other natural objects, amassed by John Ruskin (1819-1900) to inspire the working people, especially those from the city's metalworking industry, by the beauty in natural and architectural things. Based on a session with a small group of MA Public Humanities students from the University of Sheffield, the case study illustrates some of the conversations and observations made, which are also key themes typical of other sessions observed during the data collection for this thesis (as well as during ten years of running and observing workshops using different Object Dialogue Boxes with diverse audiences).

Figure 44: The session begins with the Object Dialogue Box closed on the floor of Museums Sheffield's Ruskin Gallery.

The session begins with the Object Dialogue Box closed and on the floor amongst the students. The facilitator asks a series of open-ended questions.

'What do you think this is?'
'What do you think might be inside?'
'How do you think it might open?'

After a brief silence, suggestions begin to emerge.

'It's like something within a tabernacle, like the Ark. It's like Moses going into the mist.'
'It looks like one of those logic puzzles.'
'I can just imagine with the holes in the top, some kind of light emitting from it.'
'It's full of artist's gear - casting and painting materials.'

The box remains closed for some twenty minutes while these conversations continue.
Clunk clunk clunk. It slowly unravels. The group steps closer.

Figure 45: What are these things?

'What are these things?'

After initial befuddlement, some laughter, and cries of 'I don't know!' the participants begin to give their thoughts.

Figure 46: A very uncomfortable work shoe? Image courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

'Well, the most obvious thing is it looks like some kind of very uncomfortable work shoe. But obviously no one would be able to put their feet in… Is it something to do with weaving? You know, when you use a spinning wheel? You lace it to the end of your shoe?'

'Maybe it's a shoe converted into something else. It's possibly a nineteenth century shoe.' 'It's about child labour, obviously.'

Figure 47: A powder horn for a rifle? Image courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

'Well, that looks like a plughole but I can't see how you would put it into plumbing.'

'It reminds me of a powder horn for a rifle.'

Students are then encouraged to select an object from the box to take around the gallery with them. The object is an aid to exploring the collections. Used as a navigational tool or 'compass', the object will to guide the participant to object/s on display with which they can make a connection.

'I'm intrigued by this one.'

'You do form a bond.'

'People might think we're nicking stuff.'

Questions are asked of the objects.

'What is it?'

'Who might have owned it and why?'

'Where will it lead me?'

'What discoveries will I make?'

Some objects inspire nonsensical conversations, dialogues in which the students bounce ideas from one another:

'This horn is a specimen of foreign savagery from a tropical country. But I can't make links with the plughole… It's not an ashtray, is it?'

'It's an ashtray for the bird in the tree? Or you could flat pack the skull of that bird into the plug?'

'I'm convinced this is something to do with shooting. It blocks out one of your eyes…'

And then the group begins to make connections between the thing in their hand and things on display.

Using the object as a viewfinder to demonstrate, one student notes: 'this painting was done at two different times of day. You can move the slider to block out the other side.' (See Figures 46 and 47).

Figure 48: Using the object to navigate around the gallery.

Figure 49: *North-West Door, Cathedral of Notre Dame, Senlic* by Frank Randal (1881). Image courtesy Collection of the Guild of St. George, Museums Sheffield.

'I've got this Robert Filiou quotation: 'Art is what makes life more interesting than art'. For many artists that may be true. But I don't agree, so I've changed it around to say: 'Life is what makes art more interesting than art.' And then I learnt about Ruskin: you can't just learn the techniques, you have to have clear perceptions about what moves you. Life experience is how you create the art. I was drawn to this stained glass window: it's beautiful, but what makes it amazing is when light shines through it, so that's another sign of 'life making it art'.'

'I usually don't appreciate the aesthetic of minerals, but this (see Figure 48) *made me want to know what it was.'*

Figure 50: Object used to make links with Ruskin's mineral cabinet. Image courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

'It was hard to link this to a specific object. I was thinking about Ruskin travelling across Europe. This thing was made to hold papers in. He makes a sketch as he's walking around. It's a useful thing.' Someone else joins in with the dialogue: 'you could put your pencil and paintbrush in. It's like a ready-made art kit all in one.'

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Figure 51: Minerals in the Ruskin Gallery, Museums Sheffield.

Analysis of session

One aim of the Object Dialogue Box is to encourage interactions and dialogue with artworks without necessarily needing to know any facts at all. In what follows, several themes are drawn out from this session (which also overlap with some of the conclusions from the previous chapter): these are briefly introduced before a wider discussion on perceptions and value of the sorts of knowing that come from (materially) interpreting using Object Dialogue Boxes, and ways in which different staff and creative practitioners perceive them, not least through contrasting the roles of curator and interpreter.

Firstly, the nature of the session is performative. It is delivered in a largely theatrical style: there is a long build-up before the box is opened, and initial discussions are directly focused on opening up a space for imagination and wonder. Indeed, interesting to ask, might be whether the intrigue of the box comes directly from the box itself and the strange objects within it, or whether it comes from the performative ritual of its gradual unveiling, or whether, as in the case of other person-object encounters described in this thesis, it is a complex mixture of all these interactions (Dudley 2010; Ting 2010).

Ideas about the imagined contents are shared readily by members of the group after a significant initial silence and befuddlement. Sometimes their suggestions are based on contexts, on language previously used by the facilitator or fellow participants. In this case, the suggestion that the box bears similarity to Moses' Ark might be connected with the facilitator having introduced her background as a theologian at the start of the session (or it might not). That we have no idea what Moses' Ark looked like does not come into the equation. Other comments are based on the spatial context: that the session is in an art gallery ('it's full of artist's gear'). Stories shared are both based on what is already known, as well as what is guessed, made up, created, imagined. Yet when told, the stories are often presented as fact or truth. Students use words such as 'obviously' to describe what it is they are encountering, when such things are by no

means obvious. A shoe-like object is 'obviously' something to wear, and something connected with child labour, for example. There is a blurring of what is, and what might be. Things are not 'known' in a common sense: they can be whatever the participants want them to be. There are no right and wrong answers (in contrast with Meszaros 2007).

Through the act of an individual selecting an object to accompany his or her journey around the gallery, a relationship soon develops between student and object chosen. As noted above, a bond is formed, which for some provokes anxiety. To carry something around a gallery space where touch is not usually encouraged, might feel as though the participant has taken something that does not belong to them. Yet in the session above, this initial anxiety is soon overcome: students soon begin to engage with their objects in an embodied way. They might wear it, or act out its function, or even carry it about in a particular way as though it is a pet. It is empowering not only to 'own' the physicality of the thing, albeit for a brief moment, but also to 'own' one's personal interpretation of it (see Falk et al. 2011 on free-choice learning).

One's strange object from within the box encourages different sorts of knowing. For one student, her boat-like object led her to Ruskin's mineral cabinet, something she admits she would not usually have found interesting (see Figures 48 and 49). Frustrated by a lack of textual interpretation, she wants to know more once she has arrived at this display. Another student actually wears his viewfinder, and remarkably through using it, finds a watercolour painted at two different times of day (see Figures 46 and 47). The gallery text explains this as follows:

North-West Door, Cathedral of Notre Dame, Senlis
Frank Randal (1852-1917)
watercolour and pencil on paper, 1881

The lines of this arch don't quite meet in the middle, giving the doorway a lopsided appearance. Randal seems however to have painted each side at different times of day, suggesting he was trying to document the arch more

fully by showing the depth carving through shadow on one side, and the colourful stonework on the other.

(Louise Pullen, Ruskin Curator, Museums Sheffield)

The student is able to slide the viewfinder to represent the different light qualities in morning and evening. It is likely that without having the object in his hands, he would not only not have been drawn to observe the collections in such detail, but also that he would not have wanted to learn more about the watercolours which so intrigued him through the viewfinder's lens.

A series of words carved onto individual pieces of wood lead another student to find something beautiful in a stained glass window. A material engagement has inspired not just a detailed material interpretation of displayed objects but it has also elicited a curiosity and a wanting to know more.

As well as traditional forms of knowledge coming from these engagements, so too, some provoke more nonsensical conversations and interpretations. The horn-like object becomes an ashtray for a (painting of) a bird in a tree. Or in another session for primary school children led by an artist-facilitator, the same object is:

> *A blowing thing. A plughole. A buffalo. A rhino. Something for smoking. A bird's beak. A horrible flying creature in a painting. A dinosaur tooth. A velociraptor. The nail of a dinosaur. An elf shoe. Pinocchio's nose holder. An arrow holder for a knight. A sword case.*

One element that emerged strongly from the session with university students was a concern with the ethical responsibility of a museum or gallery in relation to presentations of 'knowledge' and 'fact'. One student commented: 'You aren't exactly lying to people, but you aren't telling them what it is. You are manipulating them.' Is manipulation in fact what galleries do all the time? Is this what interpretation is? Is the Object Dialogue Box simply making this manifest? Indeed might we not use the box to reflect on the very processes of knowing and interpreting in an art gallery? Indeed

what are the ethical implications of this sort of interpretive work? [159&160] These are questions that will be returned to below.

Having pulled out some strands from within this session, the chapter now turns to focus more widely on the artistic practices behind the Object Dialogue Boxes and their relationship with processes of knowing and what will be called *unknowing* within the gallery setting.

Object Dialogue Boxes and the practices of hedsor[161]

> A lady wishing to keep people from crossing her lawn put up a notice BEWARE OF THE DOG. It had no effect. She then put one up BEWARE FIERCE DOG – still no effect – but when she put up BEWARE AGAPANTHUS no one dared come near. (Jim Ede, cited in Kettle's Yard 1995)

hedsor often begin their creative workshops by reading this quotation. The artists start by asking those in the group who are unfamiliar with the word 'agapanthus' to imagine, describe, or even draw, what they think of when they hear the word. Usually met with nervous laughter, total confusion, or in some cases by an annoying know-it-all who spoils the game, the group will soon settle down to draw or call out ideas. These are the sorts of images that emerge:

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[159] Comments from the students about ethical implications of interpretation arguably can be explained through the way in which the session had been set up as not only a teaching session for MA students looking at public engagement with objects in art galleries, but had also been introduced as contributing to the author's own research into using objects within interpretation.

[160] While it is not the remit of this thesis to explore the ethics of museum interpretation in a deep sense, nevertheless, it is interesting to note that interpretation is not directly mentioned in the American Association for Museums' 2000 Code of Ethics (see McClusky 2011; Marstine 2011).

[161] Note that as of September 2015, Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster have redefined themselves as 'sorhed' as discussed in *Chapter One*.

Figure 52: Images of an agapanthus.
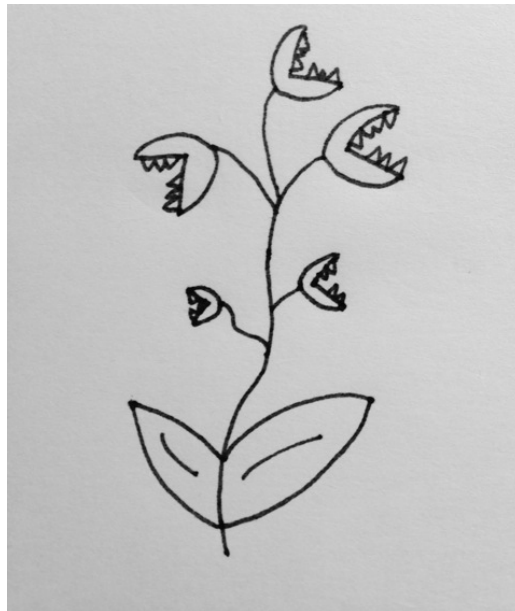
The sound of the word might conjure up a panther-like creature, usually with sharp teeth, and people's subconscious plant associations often have something Triffid-esque about them. Jim Ede's point, and that taken up throughout the practice of these artists, is about fear of the unknown, the unfamiliar, and of what we do not understand. Instinctive human nature is to avoid the perceived danger of something that confounds us. Yet where people were afraid to cross the grass in case of sudden attack by a passing agapanthus, through this imaginative exercise, participants are encouraged to embrace that fear through a sort of knowing through drawing.[162] By using this exercise at the start of an interpretive workshop in a gallery, participants are

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[162] This activity clearly will not work for those who know that an agapanthus is a type of lily.

immediately plunged headlong into several of the issues and problems of art interpretation, particularly relating to the aforementioned paradoxical 'double logic of the supplement' of Derrida (see *Chapter Three* and Derrida 1994). If something is easily knowable, it risks being ignored through familiarity: we might 'walk on by'. Yet, by the same account, if something is unknown or harder to know or understand, it risks being ignored through fear of this unfamiliarity: we might run past, or even hide. Object Dialogue Boxes comprise useful tools for enabling audiences to deal with this double logic (or paradox).

One way that they do this is through opening up this space for a material, sensory and emotional response to objects, rather than a fact-based one: an ontological rather than an epistemological reflection. There are of course other strategies for material interpretation within art galleries that are arguably more commonplace than use of an artist-made box for helping visitors to engage with paintings and artworks on display within a more traditional framework of knowledge about a thing. Artefacts similar to those in a still life painting might be available for visitors to set up, draw, or engage with creatively as props in the gallery space,[163] or there might be period clothing for visitors to dress up as though they are characters in particular paintings.[164] These sorts of interactions encourage an experiential knowing (Storkerson 2009; Sutherland & Acord 2007) yet it is still a knowing based on fact. As Hein has stated: 'experiential resonance is not the same as factual confirmation, but it might be a form of affirmation' (2011: 184). Object Dialogue Boxes deliberately encourage (even manipulate) their users into some sort of experiential resonance which may or may not affirm facts, but which definitely affirms objecthood and thingness.

By using unfamiliar objects, audiences immediately need to plunge headlong into the realm of imagination in order to make sense of, or 'know', what it is they are looking at (or, as will be demonstrated later, not what it *is*, but what it *could be*). There is no

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[163] See for example the still life table at York Art Gallery.

[164] This is a widespread practice at many galleries (National Portrait Gallery, Walker Art Gallery, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery) and other historic sites, especially National Trsut properties (see http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1355814809931/), not to mention the role of costumed interpretation (Malcolm-Davies 2002).

need for intellectualising: the immediate, visceral and emotional response is what is important. Yet since the objects are unknown, ironically, people are often reticent and fearful, perhaps preferring to intellectualise. They need someone, a facilitator, to explain that this fear is not a problem, that it is even to be encouraged. In some ways, this mimics the fear that many potential gallery-goers have in even stepping over the threshold of a museum or gallery (see Parry et al. 2014). This will be explored in due course as the ideas of managing visitor expectations in relation to knowledge and fear in an art museum are further unpicked. For now, it is useful to raise one point strongly made by the Fosters in regard to their bizarre objects, but that might be explored as having potential and resonance for general gallery practice: 'if the category of learning that we were engaged in was more readily identified as play, playing with our imaginations, then the process might stimulate less fear' (Foster 2008: 123).

Institutional responses to Object Dialogue Boxes

How do those who regularly facilitate sessions using this resource speak of it? Without exception, responses focus on the 'out of the ordinary' character of the box. Some respondents also speak about the inherent paradox, the double logic within the boxes, that as well as being out of the ordinary, there is also an ordinariness about their contents, which is what enables connections to be made:

> I think it's mad [laughter] It's mad… When you first see it, it's […] really quite mystical […] 'What's it going to do? What's inside it? How do you open it?' […] And I think when you use it with a group, even before you open it, just building up that drama about what's inside this box […] it's like a magic box. (Interview G, 07/06/13)

> 'Things that aren't quite right' would be the best way of putting it […] they're objects but they're not objects as you'd know them. So they're everyday objects that are a little bit extraordinary […] there really aren't any right or

wrong answers. They're just questions and it makes you think. (Interview D, 25/05/13)

It's like falling down the rabbit hole actually because everything is impossible and possible at the same time. (Interview H, 09/06/13)

These mad, mystical, magical, extraordinary, weird, impossible observations are the inspiration for this chapter. This last analogy from Lewis Carroll is particularly pertinent. Perhaps those creating strategies for interpretation in art museums might learn from Alice's adventures.[165] In order to unpick this, it will be helpful to think about the traditional role of gallery curator as a bearer of knowledge, contrasted with the interpretive approach of the Object Dialogue Box.

Curatorial knowledge and interpretation

They're incredibly simple and incredibly complicated… But there's no trickery in it […] I think what's interesting is when people go to exhibitions or see collections […] that they don't necessarily have [knowledge about] already […] they feel sometimes that they can't make that initial step into understanding it, because they don't have that knowledge. And I suppose what we were really interested in always is saying 'yes but you *have* knowledge, you might not have that *specific* knowledge, but you still have the ability to read things, you have the ability to say if it's relevant to you, or if it's interesting, and how do you have that? You're allowed to engage with it even if you don't know it. (Interview B, 03/05/13)

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[165] Interestingly, in Tate Liverpool's 2011-2012 *Alice in Wonderland* exhibition exploring the impact of the books on the visual arts, despite the potential for 'going down the rabbit hole' with its interpretive design, the exhibition was staged in a very traditionally curated and scholarly manner: www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/alice-wonderland (accessed 25/11/14). A more interactive exploration of some of the themes might be found at Philadelphia's *Please Touch Museum:* http://www.pleasetouchmuseum.org/play/exhibits/wonderland/ (accessed 25/11/14).

The above is how one of its creators speaks of the Object Dialogue Box as an enabler of engagement with a different sort of knowing from what might be typical of a museum. For her, the sorts of knowledge gleaned from the Object Dialogue Box are very different from the facts or contextual understandings that might traditionally be expected when visiting a museum or gallery, or even when working in one. Indeed whether 'knowledge' is even a useful term to refer to responses to the box and its objects is an important question and one to which we shall return. Yet it must be worth considering, not least since it is a topic that all those interviewed spoke about:

> I think people expect to get facts; knowledge and facts. You'll come here, you'll be given facts and you'll leave with more facts in your head and information that you didn't have before and I think it still surprises people when practitioners in museums actually work in a different way. (Interview I, 11/06/13)

For the *creative* creative practitioner (repetition deliberate) a 'different' approach of open-ended, question-led, sensory and (co-)constructed meaning is commonplace and actually not at all 'different' (see Hooper-Greenhill 2000b; Falk & Dierking 2000; Black 2012; Norris & Tilsdale 2013 for examples of literature on creative learning in museums). Visitors have long been understood not as 'tabula rasa' to be filled with information: rather engagement needs to bounce from the personal connections made with things (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson 1990). In a similar vein, another learning officer speaks of her constructed approach to objects, particularly emphasising the communal nature of the experience: 'It's not about didactic, 'these are the facts, you absorb them'. It's about a *shared process* and I think the objects work well because they stimulate that.' (Interview L, 18/08/13)

Some practitioners go even further, even *disliking* a knowledge-based approach to museum display and interpretation, for example:

> I don't like museums that give me loads of facts and writing and are quite stark. I like Pitt Rivers [...] there's something nice about the chaos and the non-

labelling and you can go and find out more if you want to, but I don't like museums that sort of set it out for you like, 'this is it, this is the history, [pop noise sucking in air]' you know […] I don't think creative people want that. (Interview J, 15/06/13)

Here, the interviewee has observed (or set up) a dichotomy, even a hierarchy, between 'creative' people and 'logical' people.[166] Yet visitors (and staff) still expect the rigour of facts, so perhaps this split dividing fact from creative response is neither a helpful nor a valid one. What is clear however, is that management of expectations is important:

When presented with an object, [e]specially in a museum… the first response [is] to think, 'what's that? what is it?' and if you are in a museum, you expect an answer, because you expect somebody to know what is it [sic]. And because if you don't know what it is, then what the hell is it doing here?! (Interview H, 09/06/13)

But what happens when nobody knows what a thing is, when to be unknown is its very point? How can this be managed?

Expectations: the role of curator and interpreter

Using arguments derived from those of the late Stephen Weil, museum scholar at the Smithsonian Institution, Straughn and Gardner state that museums have 'shifted from inward, collection-oriented institutions that disseminate knowledge to outward, audience-oriented sites that offer educational resources, and, increasingly, experience, which engage the public in their own knowledge-making (2011: 45). The rise of strategies for audience involvement in interpretation is as a direct consequence of this shift. These arguments are widespread and not new amongst museum professionals. Use of material interpretation, and resources that engage the public

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[166] While this is not the place for a discussion about the validity or spectrum of different learning styles, her comments may reflect an acceptance of these (see Gardner 1999).

with art are arguably as a result of this more democratic relationship between visitor and museum: 'Interpretation is in part an act of negotiation – between the value and knowledge upheld by museums and those which are brought in by visitors' (Roberts 2000: 99).

Yet despite these frequently occurring views about the democratisation of curatorial and interpretive practice, it is interesting to reflect on how these relate to views expressed by various interviewees, and to delve deeper into what they might mean in current theoretical understandings of interpretation. In his 2012 publication, *Interpreting Art in Museums and Galleries*, Chris Whitehead paints a similar picture of art interpretation, and how its functions are shifting in contemporary gallery practice, presenting his work as a call to arms for further studies of this nature (2012: xx). Like much of the thinking within this thesis, he is wary of a disparity and indeed any separation at all, between theory and practice, and he also notes that this area is a largely under-researched one, just as the concept of an 'interpretation' discipline within the museum institution is also 'not yet fully widespread' and is contested both within and between institutions as a function of individual teams rather than a whole organisational embedment (2012: xii). While he defines interpretation in a broad sense as 'not just the label on the wall, but everything which precedes, surrounds and follows its production and consumption' (2012: xi) and may even 'extend into the experience of the viewer, not just for the time it takes to read the label, but as a long event for the rest of her life, even if the memory of it appears to fade or lie dormant' (2012: xii), nevertheless, many of the examples he gives still follow a highly traditional understanding of interpretation particularly as mediated through language, albeit written as text or spoken through an audio-guide (including that (co)constructed by a variety of audiences (2012: xv).[167]

When asked to describe her role, one respondent suggests that a curator is:

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[167] Although it is not within the scope of this thesis, one area ripe for investigation would be to discern whether there are correlations in this widespread professional view, and the views of the general public, as to what interpretation might be.

responsible for really unlocking [the collection], for members of the public, in terms of the collection itself and the information that relates to it […] We're acting as an intermediary between the collection and the public […] So we're […] the keepers of that information in a way (Interview P, 03/04/14).

This initial language is somewhat custodial: the curator, and only the curator, as 'keeper', has the key to 'unlock' something that can be inferred otherwise to be imprisoned. Interestingly too, what a curator unlocks is 'information' and not the material objects themselves, which, it might be implied, are happiest when kept on a different side of a barrier from the public. Keen however to distance herself from the curators who 'do the book on the wall' approach (Interview P, 03/04/14), she notes, rather than (or ignoring) the traditional etymology of 'curare' and its links with 'care' and the tasks of being a 'curate', that the word 'curator' actually sounds like 'creator', adding:

> I think a curatorial imagination is a visual imagination because […] you are bringing things together that you have not seen together before […] so you have to […] think of what they will look like […] in terms of the story that they're telling […] it's not an imagination I think that has a verbal language. It's a visual language. (Interview P, 03/04/14)

Interesting is her language to describe the imagination as primarily 'visual' rather than reflecting any of the other senses (see Jay 1993): a curator deals with looking. The perspective of someone from a learning background reveals a different understanding of the role of curator:

> The sort of personality traits you need to have to be a curator are quite different to [sic] what you need to have to be an educator […] I'm not that good with attention to detail and really, as a curator, it's that attention to detail and meticulousness that makes them good at what they do, whereas I'm about people. (Interview L, 18/06/13)

Interestingly, rather than associate a curator with knowledge or information, here, a curator is primarily associated with order, perhaps with *organising* or cataloguing and classifying that information, rather than as a source of that knowledge. And while the debate around objects versus people also mentioned, is an old and not necessarily very productive one (Appleton 2001), this comment suggests that it is a divide that still exists not only in the popular imagination, but in that of museum professionals themselves.

That without exception, Object Dialogue Boxes have never been commissioned by someone defining him or herself as a curator, instead being commissioned by those working within learning and interpretation roles, is a highly significant, yet often overlooked point, which in turn adds to the nuanced discussions about the roles and responsibilities of a curator, particularly with regard to 'unlocking information'. In an age of participation (Bishop 2004; Simon 2010), inclusion (Sandell 2002, 2007, 2012; O'Neill 2002) and the democracy of the new museology (Ross 2004), this traditional curatorial authority is being challenged, making way for a multiplicity of voices, a poly-vocal strategy of interpretation. And perhaps at the heart of these strategies lies a desire to return to the object itself (Wehner and Sear 2010).

Indeed at Manchester Art Gallery, the very commissioning of the Object Dialogue Box, was arguably a political move, a provocation about traditional conceptions of curatorship. Coming from Renaissance in the Regions funding held by the now defunct Interpretation Development team, the box (and other similar initiatives) was a deliberate provocation of the status quo: what do you do with knowledge, and history and that kind of expertise within the realm of the Object Dialogue Box when 'curators are no longer the experts they once were' (Interview H, 09/06/13), asks the team's manager? For her, the box redressed a 'hierarchical imbalance that put curatorial knowledge […] at the top of the tree' (Interview H, 09/06/13) and arguably was a defining tool for the approach of the Interpretation Development team.

The Fosters are certainly aware of the political motivations for commissioning one of their creations: they explain that when they make objects for material interpretation:

it runs in parallel to a fact-finding, research-led, historical or contemporary knowledge base. It's not trying to say that that isn't relevant. It's not trying to push that to one side and say that actually it needs to be just this free-flowing navigation of something. But I think that it needs to be that both of those have a place. (Interview B, 03/05/13)

In their inquiry-based object-centric practice, the commissioning organisation is a learner just as the groups who come in to use the objects are, and also just as the Fosters themselves are. As Kimberley Foster states: 'proper inquiry is about *everybody* learning and shifting and changing, rather than saying actually 'here we are, we have knowledge, we'll impart it to you, you get it, and then you're better off.' You know, it's actually saying, 'well, we *don't* know.'' (Interview B, 03/05/13)

Sensing and making sense

The chapter now turns to explore further the relationship between this type of knowing and the objects that are inspiring the knowing. Here, a story may be a useful illustration.

One of the objects in the Object Dialogue Box at Museums Sheffield, was an extraordinary white ceramic plate of the sort from which one might eat a school dinner, and attached to which were two smaller white ceramic pieces, one slightly larger than the other. Both were smooth and almost mushroom shaped, attached to the centre of the plate using string. There was something slightly clinical, perhaps even sinister about this thing. Glassy and cold to the touch, it had been made heavier than a normal plate by the addition of the 'mushrooms'. When held upside down, the 'mushrooms' dangled, clinking together fairly quietly. Yet when turned back over, so

that it was the 'right' way up, the sound of the 'mushrooms' on the plate was a loud clattering.[168] Two accounts of using this object might be useful.

Figure 53: 'Mushrooms' on a plate.

During the data collecting interview, the learning officer recalls a story created after imaginative handling and exploration of this object led to it being used, as intended, to create a connection between it and an object within the collection. In this case, the activity took place in Sheffield's Graves Art Gallery in 2013. She describes how a group of students made up a story:

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[168] In 2012, about four replacement objects were created for the box due to wear and tear, since it was first made in 2006 and some objects had broken. In evaluation, this particular object was often deemed problematic due to its somewhat phallic nature, and it was particularly challenging that this was the first object visible on the grand unravelling of the box. It was thus decided to remove this piece, and replace it with a new object.
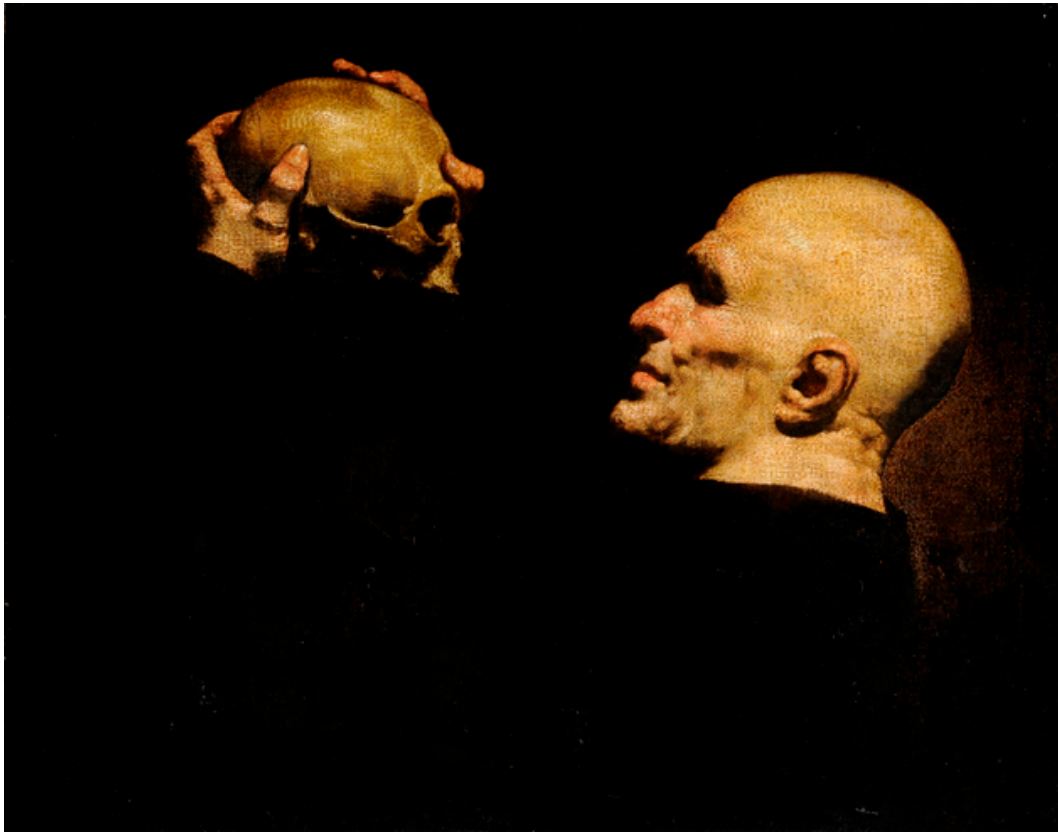
Figure 54: Man with a Skull in the manner of Jusepe de Ribera (1590 - 1652). Image courtesy Museums Sheffield.

The man portrayed is a well-loved king, and the plate belonged to him. The king had a servant whom he loved deeply. But the servant became gravely ill and eventually died. The king, having loved the servant, fell into a deep depression, and could not bear to be parted from the servant he had loved. So in order to ensure that he would stay close to his servant, even after death, he decided to cook the body of his servant and then eat him so that he would literally become part of the king. This he did, and all that remained from this gruesome dish were two bones, which the king kept with the plate, and his servant's skull, portrayed in the painting as his very own *memento mori*.

It is of course possible to analyse this story and engagement with this particular object in numerous ways. Yet what is clear, is that the very physicality of the bizarre plate, the fact that it could be handled, and that it was both something deeply familiar, yet also deeply unfamiliar, or uncomfortable even, led to a 'making sense' of a painting in a completely unique way. The painting came alive and was made known and knowable

through this engagement. Perhaps the students did read some label text and curatorial information during the session, and perhaps they did not. This does not matter. They have engaged with, and 'known' more about a painting *because of* this weird thing temporarily held in their hand.

While numerous such accounts could be given, one more example has been particularly significant in shaping future developments of the boxes. In 2006, the Object Dialogue Box in Sheffield (then known as Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust) was used in a Renaissance Yorkshire funded evaluation programme, which sought to test out the efficacy of the then newly created 'generic learning outcomes' (GLOs) (see Hooper-Greenhill 2002; Moussouri 2002) in finding out about learning within an exhibition. *Palace & Mosque* was an exhibition on international tour from the V&A during a massive programme of redevelopment and the closure of a gallery there. The programme and new gallery was funded by the Jameel Foundation to display objects of Islamic art (particularly pertinent in the political climate post 9/11). At that time, one agenda of the evaluation was to reflect on *whether* pupils could remember their visit to an exhibition, and *what* they could remember seeing in that exhibition, since some staff had been sceptical about the Object Dialogue Box as a vehicle for learning anything whatsoever, let alone for promoting a different sort of learning about Islamic cultures.

Interviewing pupils in school a few weeks after their visit to the *Palace & Mosque* exhibition, one primary school pupil from Year 2, who had chosen the plate object above to link with something in the exhibition explains where it led her: 'I remember a plate with a person with a baby standing on a man. I liked it because she had a smile on her top and I like being happy' (James et al. 2006). She remembered in great detail the Islamic artefact in the exhibition with which she had created a link, and had even drawn several pictures from memory since the visit (see Figure 53). Pupils often responded more positively than teachers had expected of them: 'This is the most I have ever seen [name] concentrate; she really loved this object and drew it in such

detail' (James et al. 2006: 14[169]). Here, knowing about an object is so much more than having read a label or seen something in a glass case.

Figure 55: Dish with the Archangel Michael, fritware, painted in colours, Turkey (probably Kutahya), date 1718. Image Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

What is even more remarkable, is that this sort of making sense through sensing or handling a real thing, is something that has a long-term and deep impact, not just for those who create the story, but also with others participating in the same session.

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[169] Note this evaluation took place in 2006, with very specific research questions relating to the GLOs, rather than being framed in the context of this research or the concepts of 'knowing and unknowing' explored in this chapter.

Reflecting on the *Man with a Skull* painting above, one member of staff admits: 'since then, I've looked at that object and instead of seeing it as something quite rude on a plate, I've looked at it as [...] that servant's bone.' (Interview G, 07/06/13)

Making and making up: the artistic imagination as knowledge

In his 2008 paper on responses to an exhibition entitled *The Butterfly Effect* at the Australian Museum, curator L. Michael Goldberg reflects on the process of inviting artists to intervene in collections, suggesting that the 'suspension of disbelief' might become a 'speculative and useful tool' to characterise a new model of the relationship between 'the visual arts, curators and a revitalised museology' (Goldberg 2008: 9). Seeing anew, often prompted by material response to objects, is indeed something that can have a profound effect in this revitalisation of museology as a way of both knowing and 'unknowing'. As one parent commented following a child's session using an Object Dialogue Box: 'the project has also made her look at everyday objects in a new way... she can now see a face in her baked potato' (reflection in Foster 2008: 133). While there is a long-established artistic genre of institutional critique (Alberro & Stimson 2009; Fraser 2005; Cutler 2013; Welchman 2006), the sorts of making and making up which come into play when engaging with knowledge through the Object Dialogue Box are somewhat different and are not necessarily commonplace in curatorial practices. As has already been shown, the Object Dialogue Box prompts making, and it prompts *making up*.

This approach is echoed within the establishment of the Interactive Arts degree at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Perhaps it is not coincidental that one of its current Senior Lecturers, Hazel Jones, has played an important role in several of the projects explored throughout this thesis. Originally named 'Creative Futures' the degree course was set up in 1993 by 'dissatisfied art graduates' and lecturers Dave Smith, Tony Eve and Nick Fleming, as a multi-disciplinary degree course that, somewhat akin to the establishment of the Bauhaus in the 1930s, encouraged students to test ideas. Where Bauhaus began from craft, Interactive Arts began from

concepts (Manchester School of Art 2012: 61). Openly stating that the course was subversive (for example students assessed each other's degrees) and had been hard to get accredited by the university (since for them, 'Creative Futures' had no disciplinary meaning), its creators speak of the course as 'challenging the experts', being 'untidy', and 'catalytic', something that has never quite fitted with the mainstream university (2012: 62). In particular this course was to enable things to be seen 'in a new light' and to embrace the idea of change: 'we didn't always know where it was going to blossom. And that was the joy of every year...' (2012: 65). A sense of movement and dynamism is central since:

> Education in this country is very much based on a Victorian model, each course being defined by their own relatively static body of material. As there is no natural mechanism for redefinition of the course content, people who were teaching were able and happy to keep things the same from year to year. To put such a static course model into an increasingly dynamic world is asking for trouble. (Smith in Manchester School of Art 2012: 64)

Yet 'asking for trouble' is exactly the philosophy of Interactive Arts. Dave Smith notes: 'the more expert you are at something, the more difficult it is to step outside and see it in a different focus... the difficulty of learning is that you can't get out of your past experiences very easily. The more difficult this is, the harder to learn anew' (2012: 62). One of the course's most well known graduates is artist Ryan Gander, who states:

> It wasn't 'interactive' or 'art' at all'. Instead it was about 'quick thinking, being inventive and intuitive, and thinking around problems: being creative. Imagining the future, thinking about things that don't exist yet, what will they be, we decide what they are. It was a brilliant, brilliant course.[170]

Now Senior Lecturer on this course, Hazel Jones' own approach to making and making up mirrors and develops these ideas. She describes her own work as taking a banal

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[170] Ryan Gander, 3 July 2014, in *Corridor 8* online interview: http://www.corridor8.co.uk/online/interview-ryan-gander/ (accessed 26/09/15).

object as a starting point, and then using it to devise new inventions, from currant steamers to fluff collectors to bun pokers. Likewise with her teaching:

> it's about finding ways to look at the world in a different way and some of them can be exercises that you can practice, a bit like practicing your chuckle muscles, […] you practice your creative muscles by just sort of twisting things, how you look at something. You know, you see it from a different angle, you see it in a different scale, you see it force fit with something else so for instance, if you tried and designed a car, you don't just look at cars, you look at fish or a camel or something else and you might get ideas from looking at something else, not the obvious. So if you looked at a camel and you try and design a car, you might come up with some fantastic ideas about storage for the roof or storage in a hump or big eyelashes on the windscreen to stop sand getting on the windscreen… (Interview J, 15/06/13)

Use of playful humour is not to be disregarded here. We might even call this approach one of 'serious play', something akin to the works of nonsense writers like Edward Lear.[171] For Jones, knowing is making, making is playful, and making is imaginative, always starting with engagement with an object: 'Imagination is to let your creative thinking, chuckle muscle, go off in a direction - it doesn't matter which' (Interview J, 15/06/13). The suggestion is that there is a close relationship between making a thing and making up a thing, and that these are not, or should not be at any rate, anathema to the way in which a museum or gallery displays its objects of knowledge, or knowledge of objects. Where Smith speaks of the need to challenge the 'experts', the same can be a useful interpretive practice within the art gallery.

There are several additional examples of current practice in which 'making up' as an alternative to expertise is a strategy straddling creative art practice and potential museological processes. One such is the brainchild of artist and lecturer James

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[171] Indeed his 'runcible spoon' from *The Owl and the Pussycat* might easily be something found and imagined within the Mary Greg collection. See http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171941 (accessed 17/09/15).

Mansfield, aka Dr Lattin, curator of the *Museum of Imaginative Knowledge* which was founded in 2013 and concerned with 'objects and information not considered 'museum-worthy' by the current cultural norms'. [172] Mansfield describes his approach:

> In setting up the Museum of Imaginative Knowledge, I wanted to suggest to people that there are many different ways of viewing the world. Far too often, we settle for a set of facts or so-called expert opinion without ever thinking a bit further… Why do we find things interesting?, is perhaps the Museum's greatest question. Why I ask, should royal wedding dresses be of national importance, while royal boxer shorts are considered unworthy or ridiculous? (Mansfield 2014: 1)

Humour is serious. It makes us think, question, wonder. As such, it can be argued that these sorts of playful makings up can play a profound role within museum practices which also value and encourage thinking, questioning and wondering.[173]

So what is the connection between the Interactive Arts course, the practice of Hazel Jones and these imaginative museums, and our engagements with objects in art galleries, and why are they included within this chapter? While there are several overlaps, here, attention will be drawn to just two: firstly, what will be called a grammar of interpretation, and secondly, the relationship between fear, risk and the unknown when dealing with these objects of fact and fiction.

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[172] http://imaginativeknowledge.org (accessed 18/09/15).

[173] Other examples include the Mmuseumm in New York (http://mmuseumm.com/) whose digitally curated objects are those banal everyday things that: 'The more you look, the more networks of analogy, of uncanny connection, emerge... Everywhere one looks one sees a metaphor. It's a playground for those who love to interpret.' (from http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/11/10/cabinet-of-wonder/ Likewise, the Museum of Contemporary Rubbish, another online museum (http://museumofcontemporaryrubbish.blogspot.co.uk/) founded in 2010 by Alice Bradshaw from Blackpool, plays with museological ideas and catalogues rubbish as Exhibit #001, always starting with the object (all accessed 22/11/14).

The grammar of interpretation

Traditionally, most museum interpretation asserts of a thing that: 'It is x'. During the research undertaken for this thesis, interviewees often pointed out some of the perceived differences between museums and art galleries in this regard. A museum is organised into topics. Objects are divided into these topics. They have labels. Labels give facts. We learn (often from those facts primarily, rather than from the objects themselves) about the objects (see Ravelli 2006). As one respondent pointed out: 'the frame to the object in a museum is about knowledge and understanding' (Interview K, 18/06/13). This 'calcification' of an object as the interviewee describes it is inherently problematic in what should be a changing and shifting institution. If interpretation is contextual, then it follows that it must also be dynamic, open to new readings, rather than captured within a label. Art galleries, although less prone to this calcification because they offer 'more freedom just to look' (Interview H, 09/06/13) nevertheless are still places for cataloguing and classifying knowledge: like museums, they too have collections management systems, ways of objects saying 'I am x'. While saying 'I am x' does not necessarily preclude something from also being y, it makes it less easy for visitors to think of a possibility of it being anything other than x.

The objects engaged with throughout this research however, are doing something different. They are often not x. They might be x and y, or any other combination, or none at all. Often there is no information about which to describe them. In the case of the Mary Greg collection at Manchester Art Gallery, many of the items have no provenance and so are not known: as one interviewee notes:

> I think what's unique about the Mary Greg collection is that unknowability of it. The fact that it's - it is a bit bonkers actually - because it isn't handicrafts, it isn't *just* handicrafts, it isn't just bygone times, it isn't just dolls and dolls' houses. It is so inclusive but it's not random. (Interview H, 09/06/13)

Not only is the classification unknowable, but so too are some of the individual objects, particularly those that have inspired the making of Hazel Jones. Her favourite objects

are the things which defy naming, such as a little roll of paper which is stuck in a tube (see Figure 54), because she still wants to know what it says, 'but part of me doesn't want to know what it says on it because I think I'll probably find out and go, 'oh' [is that all?]' (Interview J, 15/06/13) The magic of the object lies in its mystery, in its unknowability, in its potentiality.[174]

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[174] Sandra Dudley eloquently discusses the notion of potentiality in relation to Gell's concept of 'agency' in her forthcoming 2016 publication. Dudley understands potentiality and actuality in Aristotelian terms: her sense of the word is slightly different from what is meant here. For Dudley, object potentialities are 'only actualized […] when they do indeed bring about an effect of some kind' (2016). Here, an object potentiality both refers to this ontological capacity to bring about an effect, but also its capacity to be reimagined as something different.

Figure 56: Roll of paper in a tube. Image © Ben Blackall for Manchester City Galleries, licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0.

In the case of the Object Dialogue Box the very point of those objects is that they cannot be known: they are in their very essence unknowable. How would these objects even be described and accessioned? Interestingly, there is not one example of an Object Dialogue Box having been accessioned into a museum's collection. They exist for making up, for make believe, for suspending disbelief, for imagining.

A variety of what might be called 'grammars of interpretation' have been suggested within and beyond museum literatures (Bedford 2014; Wagner 1999) which may help deal with some of these potential problems. In her influential work from the 1970s on drama in education, West Yorkshire-born teacher Dorothy Heathcote puts forward the idea of learning through drama. Drama in education 'enables participants, either during the drama itself or after the drama in a discussion, to look at reality through fantasy, to see below the surface of actions to their meaning.' (Wagner 1999: 1). Heathcote uses a technique described as putting on the 'mantle of the expert' when working with students: 'it is their ideas, not hers, that will make the drama work' and 'she asks questions she knows they and they alone can answer' (1999: 96). This technique is readily used within creative learning in art galleries to extract ideas from participants. When asked to talk about the role of imagination in interpreting objects within galleries, one interviewee in this research project reflects:

> I call it 'the magic if' […] I talk about we know that we're in the hall, but if we were on a pirate ship, we're totally on a pirate ship […] because everyone's capable of imagination. Children particularly, they'll naturally imagine and make-believe as long as it feels like it's not going to be ridiculed. […] I always look at what I call 'contracting in', so I contract them into the imagined world, if you like. So I will always contract them in by […] signalling when I'm going to be a character and when I'm not. I'm making it very clear that I'm not that person and we all know I'm not that person but that's fine because that's part of our story. (Interview I, 11/06/13)

Another of his techniques is to 'wonder' and 'contract in' to a suspended disbelief. For him, imagination is 'probably the ability to suspend your belief of what actually is, and

imagine what could be' (Interview I, 11/06/13so when using the Object Dialogue Box, he first asks pupils what the strangest thing is that it could be, because this, he says sets parameters that 'nothing is too strange' (Interview I, 11/06/13).

Using this as a frame encourages imagination. Instead of asking questions such as 'what might this object be used for?', he frames it 'I wonder what this might be used for'. A subtle distinction perhaps, but whereas the first might cause respondents to think that there is a correct answer, the second leaves the interpretation open to a whole realm of possibility. As he states: 'essentially making yourself look like you don't know is the key because it's empowering to help someone that doesn't know something' (Interview I, 11/06/13).

Speaking of objects as an embodiment of the 'actual' and the 'potential' is a helpful perspective, and one that as discussed above, is not something that museums do readily (cf. Dudley 2016). Similarly, one might speak of this as the 'conditional' or 'subjunctive' nature of objects. There might in fact be two stages of this conditional depending on the sort of object with which one is engaging. Firstly, where an object can be known but is not – such as something from the Mary Greg collection with no provenance (like Hazel Jones' lost list object described above), we might wonder what it could be. 'I could be x, y, or z', we might say, when we do not 'know' what it 'really' is.

Yet with a tool like the Object Dialogue Box, this conditional is taken further into a second stage, since we neither know what the thing from the box *is*, nor do we know what it *could be*: so instead we create an imaginary meaning: 'If I were x (which I might not be, but I just might be), then I could be y (but do not necessarily have to be so)'. This is not as complex as it may at first seem. By engaging with a bizarre object, one is free to make things up.

Figure 57: Object from Manchester Art Gallery's Object Dialogue Box. Image courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

Figure 58: Objects from Museums Sheffield's Object Dialogue Box. Images courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

As explored earlier in the chapter, when one student tells the group his imagined truths about the viewfinder object in Sheffield's Ruskin Gallery, he passes the velvet viewfinder to another member of the group, who immediately buys into the narrative, suspends his disbelief, and agrees that it is indeed a viewfinder for helping Ruskin to see architectural detail in new light. Through doing this, the students engage deeply with the Ruskin watercolour, looking at details of the shading on the page, and also reading the label. They step into Ruskin's fictitious, yet real shoes. So by imagining and making up, some truths are apparent. Fiction here leads to fact.

Yet while many museum and gallery learning programmes actively promote using the imagination as a way to respond to collections and exhibitions in similar ways, nevertheless, few reveal such an imagined approach within their *curatorial* practice. Why is it that museums do not make things up more often? Or at least that they are not transparent about their not knowing?

Fear and the unknown

It is not new to speak of fear in relation to art gallery experiences and as a reason for not visiting museums and galleries (Hood 1983; Black 2005, 2012; Hooper-Greenhill 1999). A threshold fear, a fear of not knowing enough, a fear of not understanding the art, a fear because it is not a place for me, a fear because it is not accessible to me, a fear of engaging with controversial and divisive issues and so on, these concerns have shaped much of the literature on, and strategies for, inclusion in museums and galleries over the past thirty years. Closely aligned with such fear, is the way in which an organisation deals with and manages (or avoids) risk.

Many of these strategies are about removing fears and being risk averse, rather than dealing with them head on (with the exception of dealing with controversial topics). Making entrances welcoming, providing multiple layers of interpretation, and running public programmes for wide-ranging audiences are activities that are now commonplace. Yet, might it be possible to embrace a sense of fear and risk to actually

enable a deeper and still inclusive engagement with museums and their objects? How can we come to know or understand something when we don't know it (or, how do we know what we don't know?), and how might it even be useful to embrace *that* we don't know it? Often used as a trope by artists Karl and Kimberley Foster, it is this fear of the unknown that characterises much of their creative practice. Engaging with the objects of the Object Dialogue Box works because people are scared of that aforementioned 'agapanthus' factor, the unknown.

> When you do start opening it and there are all these really strange objects that are like amalgamations of different things that you kind of recognise, but you don't, and it's just a bit weird and […] with the groups that I've worked with […] sometimes they're a little bit nervous to start off with because they don't know what their object is and they want an answer. But I think once you get through to them that you don't need a specific answer, it can be whatever you want it to be, and especially if you get them working in pairs or small groups, so they're kind of feeding off each other as well, I think then it really works because they do kind of catch onto that magic. (Interview G, 07/06/13)

This educator describes the not knowing as 'magic'. Others describe this magic in terms of 'trauma' and risk (Froggett & Trustram 2014; Foster & Foster 2012). Having been trained in psychoanalytic methods, Karl Foster reflects eloquently upon not knowing as a vital and necessary process within gallery learning:

> I think that there's some kind of developmental turn that happens […] when you've been through not knowing, and when you've been through a creative journey, and you're aware that sometimes it feels awful and that you have to tolerate that and you have to work through it and you come out the other end, you've experienced it and it is about experiential learning, and that you can see the benefit, because something changes and it's like your perception of the world alters slightly, and you can see the relevance, the benefit, on a bigger, wider, social level. But until you've been through that yourself, I think it might be that people can't see it. And if you can't see it, you can't legislate for it

within education programmes necessarily. Or talk about it on its own terms, because there's some kind of membrane or divide between having not experienced it and then having experience through it. (Interview A, 03/05/13)

Not knowing is arguably just as important for an institution to acknowledge as knowing, and upon this note the chapter turns once more to apophatic theology by way of some concluding remarks.

Concluding remarks: towards the unknown

In the latter fourteenth century, amidst the restlessness of the Hundred Years War, Black Death, and Peasants' Revolt, an anonymous English author, probably hailing from somewhere in the East Midlands wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* during a period of mystical revival (1981: 10). While this is a theological discourse, or even meditation, a way to describe attainment of union with God, nevertheless, some of its content may be of use in reflecting on these ideas of imagination, fear and the unknown while engaging with bizarre objects within an art gallery. *The Cloud* author's (neo)Platonic use of the terms 'knowing' and 'unknowing' is a further example of a theological metaphor that might help unpick something of what happens during material interpretation.

Although deeply critical of the imagination, as something that gets in the way between oneself and God (1981: 73-74), nevertheless, it could be argued that the metaphor of a 'cloud of unknowing' is a helpful one to describe many of the phenomena outlined within this chapter, and it might be a useful way to conceptualise some of the museological processes made visible through engaging with Object Dialogue Boxes. The author speaks of those 'counterfeit contemplators' who try to know too much, or think they know (a critique which could be railed of many museum professionals and visitors perhaps in their assumption that we can know things that we cannot know, or those who want to name the things in the box that defy naming). In the following extract, the description could perhaps be used of different museum behaviours:

'Whoever cares to look at them as they sit at such a time, will see them staring (if their eyes are open) as though they were mad… Some squint as though they were silly sheep that have been banged on the head, and were soon going to die. Some hang their heads on one side as if they had got a worm in their ear. Some squeak when they should speak… Mouth agape, they give the impression that they would hear with their mouths, and not with their ears!' (1981: 123-124)

Unknowing is an essential but almost entirely neglected aspect of everyday museum practice. It is a concept central to the contributions of this thesis. Museums, with their reliance on 'knowledge about things' are doomed to failure because we will never know everything. Returning to Jim Ede at Kettle's Yard:

I often wish that it were possible to look at pictures in something of the spirit with which we would go on a voyage of discovery. On such a journey the explorer would feel that his time had been wasted were he to find nothing strange, nothing new – and yet in art we are annoyed the moment it differs from our pre-conceived ideas of what a thing should look like instead of seeing in this difference the possibility of new or renewed vision. (Kettle's Yard 1995)

Interpretive strategies which engage the senses with objects, which use objects to interpret other objects, which deal in the realms of potentiality, risk, fear, imagination, making up and making, are all about 'unknowing':

Do not think that because I call it a 'darkness' or a 'cloud' it is the sort of cloud you see in the sky, or the kind of darkness you know at home when the light is out. That kind of darkness or cloud you can picture in your mind's eye in the height of summer, just as in the depth of a winter's night you can picture a clear and shining light. I do not mean this at all. By 'darkness' I mean 'a lack of knowing' – just as anything that you do not know or may have forgotten may be said to be 'dark' to you, for you cannot see it with your inward eye. For this

reason it is called 'a cloud', not of the sky, of course, but 'of unknowing', a
cloud of unknowing between you and your God. (1981: 66)

Thus, in this chapter, an argument has been made which seeks to redefine the
possibilities for material interpretation of objects with objects as a way of both
knowing and unknowing about things. By engaging in sensory and material ways, new
potential is opened up in things, and in the way in which galleries interpret, and
encourage others to interpret, those things. Being mindful of knowing, but also of the
value of unknowing, institutions might open up new strategies for interpreting their
collections.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In the final pages of his novel of doomed love, *The Museum of Innocence*, Orhan Pamuk's main protagonist Kemal states 'I remembered again why some museums had the power to make me shudder: they induced the feeling that I had become suspended in one age while the rest of humanity lived in another' (2010: 688). His museum of everyday objects is based on the histories, contexts and memories associated with his complicated relationship over nine years with a woman called Füsun, the subject of his affections. That a museum – or that an object within a museum – can have this incomprehensible capacity to 'make one shudder' (or to cry, or to be awe-struck), has been referred to throughout this thesis (Greenblatt 1991). Particularly by using 'negative' apophatic metaphors including those of absence, silence and unknowing, the thesis has used theological language as yet uncommon within museological discourse to describe something akin to Greenblatt's notion of 'wonder'. But as has also been revealed, these apophatic metaphors go hand in hand with their cataphatic counterparts: museums are also places of presence, speech and knowing. In other words, they are places filled with an abundance of experience, an exuberant use of language, of objects and of contextual information. Pamuk later develops a manifesto for museums in which he paints them as such, as places of experience:

> Museums are (1) not to be strolled around in but to be experienced, (2) made up of collections expressive of the soul of that 'experience', (3) not in fact museums but merely galleries when emptied of their collections. (2010: 721)

There have been several attempts at writing manifestos for museums,[175] many of which likewise focus on audience experience. Perhaps the most well known is that

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[175] These include *The UK National Museums Directors' Conference Manifesto* which was written in March 2004: http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/manifesto_for_museums.pdf, *The Happy Museum* principles which date from 2011: http://www.happymuseumproject.org/principles/, and a manifesto put together by early

from the Kids in Museums Campaign[176] which is compiled from visitor comments and aims to make the museum a welcoming space for families of all ages. Although it does not explicitly use the terminology of interpretation, one of the points from this twenty-statement manifesto is that museums should: 'Say 'Please touch!' as often as you can. Everyone finds real objects awesome. Direct kids to things that can be handled, teach respect and explain why others can't.' Indirectly then, this manifesto advocates the sort of material interpretation, often based on touch, for which this thesis argues.

As well as museum manifestos put together by those working in the sector, these also include those written by artists, such as that from the *Museum of Everyday Life*[177] which:

> shouts out against the white walls of the traditional art and artifact institution:
>> No More Vitrines! Nothing Under Glass! […]
> We promise a Museum in which all things may be touched! […]
> We promise exhibits free of the tyranny of facts […]
>> (from The Museum of Everyday Life Philosophy Department)

There is a desire within manifestos such as this one for the visitors' experience of objects to involve being able to touch them directly.[178] As set out within the introduction, the aim of this thesis was to explore ways in which certain art galleries (rather than museums) have developed strategies and activities by which people can do exactly that: engage physically with material objects, especially in sensory ways through touch, to inspire creative and imaginative interpretation of collections, including that which is, as above, 'free from the tyranny of facts'. In short, it has set

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career museum professionals for *Museums Show Off,* under the leadership of Rachel Souhami in 2013: https://museumsshowoff.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/manifesto-for-the-future-of-museums1.pdf (all accessed 10/09/15).
[176] http://kidsinmuseums.org.uk/manifesto-2/ (accessed 10/09/15).
[177] http://museumofeverydaylife.org (accessed 10/09/15).
[178] Other artists in museums' manifestos include the *Elastic Manifesto* (Mortati et al. 2012) http://artmuseumteaching.com/2012/06/04/experimenting-in-museums-taking-risks-with-how-we-work/ (accessed 26/09/15).

out some of the practices of what is referred to and developed as 'material interpretation'.

Findings

Significantly, the word 'conclusion' has several meanings: it can be 'the end, close, finish, termination', and 'the last part or section of a speech or writing, in which the main points are summed up'. But it can also be understood as something more complex: 'a judgement or statement arrived at by any reasoning process; an inference, deduction, induction'.[179] Although this section attempts to be all of these to an extent, it is however somewhat misleading to call it an end-point: in many ways, the thesis is really only the beginning of what is potentially a much lengthier journey. And it is a journey that encompasses theory, research and practice, and the complex interweaving of these. Indeed, to return to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of the earliest definitions of 'conclusion' is as a 'problem, riddle or enigma', and perhaps leaving the research with some as yet undiscovered mysteries and unexplored pathways is as it should (and can only ever) be.

In order to open up this conclusion to future possibilities and implications, what follows is a summary of the findings of this research. Yet rather than reiterating chronologically what has been demonstrated through the literature and in each of the analytical chapters, here I draw together strands, linking the key findings of this research across the thesis as a whole with wider aspects of gallery research and practice. These areas include ways in which the research impacts upon the social responsibility and ethical role of the gallery as a space of inclusion; the possibilities opened up by letting go of modern conceptions of 'knowledge' for art gallery interpretation; and the potential implications of the research for policy development and transparency in institutional structures. To go back to the research questions posed at the outset, this thesis has used case study examples derived predominantly from the researcher's professional experience to explore sensory engagements with

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[179] From Oxford English Dictionary online (accessed 26/09/15).

objects through touch and the ways in which these are important in art gallery interpretation. From rummaging in the stores (in *Encountering things*), to using handling boxes (in *Talking things)* to exploring artist-made resources (in *Knowing things*), the thesis has investigated various creative, imaginative and playful practices taking place within art gallery settings, arguing for the value of a physical object encounter in enabling interpretation of collections in which factual knowledge about the object is not necessarily the main, or even most desired, outcome. It has examined projects that prioritise handling and touching those objects in Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield (Chatterjee 2008; Classen 2005; Pye 2007) and has given those practitioners who work to develop object-based practices a voice and space for reflexive praxis. It has explored some of the sorts of creative, imaginative and often artistic interpretations that arise from these encounters, suggesting an epistemology that prioritises – or at least recognises – different kinds of knowledge, including artistic practice (making) and use of imagination (making up), (Robins 2013; and see Marstine 2013 for an emphasis on socially engaged practice) as equally valid. And finally, to ensure the work is of practical use for museums and galleries, it has made suggestions as to ways in which approaches such as these might be embedded and developed within institutional strategies.

The research has demonstrated the value of handling objects in creating a socially inclusive museum, one in which democratic and participatory practice is celebrated, the voices of audiences are given credence and differing opinions actively encouraged. From valuing artistic knowledge through making and making up; to reconceptualising the role of conservator as maker; to using objects as a means of giving voice and empowering visitors to reflect on and talk about their own physical, contextual and emotional being in the world, the findings of the research clearly demonstrate that material engagement has much potential to enable all sorts of different people to engage with and share aspects of their own identities in the gallery setting. Handling objects allows for so much more than just handling objects.

The research has also demonstrated the value and ethical imperative for institutions to be transparent about their own processes: through opening up hidden stores for

rummaging; to revealing the plight of the broken or unloved objects behind the scenes; to rethinking the roles of conservator and artist as interpreters, questions have been asked which challenge ideas of what it is that a gallery does and should do. As both a space for contextual knowledge, but also one for creative making up and imaginative play and even using up, the gallery becomes a performance space, a place for re-enacting and shifting perceptions, a place to let go.

And there are clear practical and policy-based findings from this research: already being used by some organisations in developing handling boxes, collections access and audience engagement policies, [180] this research adds to growing research and data on user-generated responses to collections (for example through the embedding of these narratives within collections management database systems). It even has human resources implications around the need for a role to facilitate access to stored collections. [181]

Importantly, the thesis has developed the concept of material interpretation to describe these sorts of practices, building on current museological work which seeks to resituate the object at the heart of museum theory and practice (particularly Dudley 2010, 2012). To further interrogate what is meant by interpretation, the thesis has drawn upon the ideas of Cheryl Meszaros, who, in defiance of 'whatever' interpretation, asks that visitors reflect on how they come to make particular interpretations, which in this case, is largely through touch-based engagements with those objects (see also McKenzie 2006). I will interpret something differently if I touch it, from how I might if I am unable to touch it. Using cataphatic and apophatic theological metaphor as a lens through which to explore these ideas has also enabled the beginnings of a new framework for understanding the object-person encounter (Turner 1995a; Nelstrop et al. 2009).

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[180] This is an area of current development in the author's place of work at the Royal Armouries in Leeds, where such collections access practice has not been commonplace previously.
[181] See for example the post of 'tour-guide' which runs activities similar to the Mary Greg rummages at Leeds' Discovery Centre.

Contributions[182]

The American feminist philosopher and aesthetician, Hilde Hein, who has written extensively on museums, notably states: 'Museums owe their existence to, as well as being both a source and instrument of, open-ended seeking' (2006: 8). This thesis too owes its existence to a similar sort of seeking, in which engagements with objects in art galleries have become the source of an open-ended journey. The thesis demonstrably makes several key contributions to bodies of knowledge in museum studies and beyond. Not least does it capture interpretive practices within particular UK institutions, adding to bodies of archival research and recording critical reflection on that practice during the early years of the twenty first century (see also work including Foster & Foster 2012; Foster et al. 2014 on Object Dialogue Boxes; Phillips 2005 on artist-made boxes Leeds Art Gallery; Woodall et al. 2011; Blakey & Mitchell 2013; and Trustram 2013 on Manchester Art Gallery's Mary Greg project).

The thesis also contributes to making the gallery a more socially inclusive space, since its focus is on enabling access to objects (O'Neill 2002; Sandell & Nightingale 2012; Silverman 2010) and encouraging critical and reflexive personal interpretations of these objects. In direct contrast with the sentiments of Wendy Earle, a writer for the controversial *Spiked Online*, who refers to 'the democratisation of the curatorial process' as damaging to institutions, this research upholds the value of institutions letting go of their authoritarian claims to knowledge, and encouraging personal and emotional responses to objects and collections.

Earle suggests 'a loss of professional nerve', underlying which is:

> a profound arrogance towards the public, a belief that without layers of
> intermediaries – learning officers, storytellers and the like – trying to equate

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[182] To follow Plato's theory of anamnesis (developed particularly in his *Phaedo*) and later Neoplatonic thought (for example in Plotinus' *Enneads*), there can be no such thing as new knowledge, for what constitutes knowledge (as opposed to *doxa* or belief) is already a pure innate idea in the mind, and is simply being recalled. Thus it is somewhat paradoxical to assume that the thesis is developing 'new' forms of knowledge, hence this section is simply titled 'Contributions'.

unique collections with everyday paraphernalia, the public will be unable to grasp what museums have to offer (Earle 2014).

This research however argues the opposite: it is arrogant *not* to offer access to different sorts of interpretation. Demonstrating ways that galleries offer opportunities for that equalising force of touch, this thesis adds to work that upholds the social responsibility of the museum (see Museums Association 2015).

Significantly then, the thesis has developed the museological idea – both theoretical and practical – of 'material interpretation', building on a small but growing body of museum materiality literature (Dudley 2010, 2012; Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006; Chatterjee 2008; Wood & Latham 2014) as well as on interpretation literature (Fritsch 2011; Whitehead 2012; Meszaros 2006, 2008a and 2008b). It develops thinking around the change of focus that Sandra Dudley argues is needed in museums, whereby instead of a contemporary emphasis in museum studies on museum space, the focus shifts to museum object (2010: 2). She asks:

> What might a different, material, even emotional, approach to museum objects contribute to the potential of socially inclusive museums to enable rich, physical and emotional, personal experiences for all their visitors? What would it be like for visitors more often than not to be able not only to read a text panel that explains an historical story associated with an object, but also to experience an embodied engagement with that object and thus form their own ideas and/or a tangible, physical connection with those who made it and used it in the past? (2010: 4)

This thesis goes some way to answering these questions. Where the call above is for a 'physical connection with those who made it', the objects explored in this research are not necessarily explored from this sort of historical perspective, rather the focus is on another suggestion made by Dudley above: for visitors to use objects 'to form their own ideas'. Here, objects are used primarily to enable sensory experiences, which allow for imaginative response and creative interpretation within a different

epistemological framework, not dependent upon factual information. Following Dudley, 'rather than being part of an object-information package they exist within an object-subject interaction' (2010: 5), a deliberately material interpretation is also an ontological strategy: it enables a new object-based framework, reflecting on the relationship between person and object, both as embodied. Although the phrase 'material interpretation' is the author's, its activities are not necessarily new, often occurring under other labels (as handling collections, or touch-based interactives, or artists' interventions). Yet bringing together all these sorts of work under a banner of material interpretation allows for new connections to be made and new practices to emerge. It is an area ripe for enhancing museum and gallery practice and for developing new approaches to interpretive strategy.

A further contribution made by the thesis is the development of a new type of metaphorical language: 'theological museology'. While the cataphatic metaphors of presence, talk and knowing, and the apophatic metaphors of absence, silence and unknowing have been used here to explore specific activities, these have potential to be used more widely across different aspects of museum practice. Museums are places riddled with paradox: not least that they are places for sharing objects with people, whilst also having a duty to conserve those objects. These twin duties are often contradictory: in claiming to care for objects, hands-on access to them is often denied. This compromises their existence as physical things, a paradox which lies at the heart of much museum practice. In addition, those objects in museums have been removed from their original contexts, no longer what they once were. Theology too, is built upon paradox and mystery. It is an impossible possibility: its very name, derived from 'logos' meaning 'to speak', and 'theos' meaning 'about God' is somewhat oxymoronic. To speak about God when all words about God ultimately fail, is of course why doing critical theology is within the realms of 'imagination and speculation' (Jones 1995: 2). We cannot know what it is about which we speak, for to do so, would to mean that we were no longer speaking about God (Turner 1995a). This oxymoron is arguably found too within every object in the museum: we can never know everything there is to know. And it must be remembered that even apophatic language fails: it 'is not a particular metaphoric repertoire to which one refers but the failure of language

as such, the failure of all metaphor, whether negative or affirmative' (Turner 2010: 293). So perhaps it is apposite to return to Jim Ede's quotation from the introduction, acknowledging this inherent mystery: 'Each object is a miracle' (1996: 35).

Limitations

Despite its written nature and the irony that language ultimately fails, not least when speaking of the materiality of physical objects, the thesis is of course a written, language-based thing. It has been important that it bear something of a material quality: material does more than words do – or at any rate – it does something different. In the absence of being able to present the research as an exhibition, an object, or as a series of object engagements, an attempt has been made to give it something of the flavour of both a serendipitous rummage in the stores, and also of an open-ended and questioning session using an object from the Object Dialogue Box or one borrowed from the Artemis Collection, not least through its use of visual imagery (Pink 2006). For this reason, not only is the work academically interdisciplinary, drawing on diverse sources from anthropology to theology, but it has also drawn widely from artistic works including from literature, poetry, or *makings in words*. And of course images of artworks and of objects that are not necessarily the case studies themselves have been used throughout the thesis as well. These various makings illustrate something of the argument of this thesis: in other words, the thesis is a physical representation in language and images, of what it is trying to say about the importance of interpreting things materially within museums and galleries.

As with any research, there are of course limitations to this study, strands left as yet undone or still entangled (Law 2004), methodological, practical and theoretical. For instance, that it is based on case study data gives rise to several problems: it is not possible to make grand generalisations from a series of diverse projects that have taken place in just three different galleries within close geographical proximity to each other in the north of England (Gomm et al. 2006; Donmoyer 2006), and neither is it possible to even make generalised comments upon those institutions based on the

case studies. The data is tied to its contexts. Yet, as argued within the methodology section, this narrow scope is also a strength, allowing as it does for detailed reflection on the particular cases.

In terms of the methods used to generate the research data, one concern has been with the sheer volume of words generated through research interviews. With over 171,000 words of transcribed interview, not only did the data become somewhat unwieldy to manage and physically sift through and sort, let alone to analyse, but it also led to making the decision not to include interviews from two intended case study venues (The Betty Smithers Design Collection in Stoke on Trent, and Turner Contemporary in Margate) in the final research. There was simply too much to say about what may have been potentially too diverse a range of projects. Of course this data can be (and has been) used elsewhere in future research and publication, but in hindsight, it might have been better to undertake more observations of object-based sessions and of the actual encounters people have and the engagements they make with the objects, and to do fewer interviews in the case study venues, not least since much of what was said by different interviewees had a great deal of overlap (although this too is a strength).[183]

That the research is largely based on a gap noticed and reflected upon by the researcher while she was working on these projects as a museum practitioner could also be construed as a limitation of the thesis (but see Xanthoudaki et al. 2003; and literature on practitioner as researcher especially within art and education, such as Sullivan 2005; Biggs 2006). Although critically framed, the thesis may be regarded as biased towards particular projects with which the author was not only familiar, but which she played an instrumental role in establishing: the researcher is not neutral and the research is concentrated on this experience. Use of the Artemis Collection

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[183] In contrast, current research with which the author is involved on a UKIERI/British Academy funded partnership programme *Things Encountered, Things Unbound* between the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester and the National Museum Institute in Delhi, led by Sandra Dudley and Manvi Seth, does exactly this, focussing on observations of the moment of object encounter, rather than on data gleaned through interview.
(See https://thingsunbound.wordpress.com accessed 10/09/15).

case study at Leeds does something to balance this, but possibilities for future study would considerably further this complex researcher as practitioner as researcher relationship (see Pringle 2006).

Related to this, the use of theological metaphor is as a direct consequence of the researcher's academic background. While use of cataphatic and apophatic metaphor makes an unprecedented contribution to interdisciplinary museological discussion, the research is not presented as though it is theology per se: rather it borrows from theological discourse. As with many interdisciplinary undertakings then, one possible limitation is that the study falls into that perceived 'Jack-of-all-trades and master of none' category (Gardner 2011; Lau & Pasquin 2008) in that it is not from one discipline or another. Arguably however, this 'spotting a very important connection between two previously unconnected disciplines or areas of enquiry' (Lyall et al. 2011: 9) can be construed as a strength, its having brought yet another discipline into the already interdisciplinary field of museum studies (Macdonald 2006c).

One final thread left hanging is that the research took place within art gallery settings, and is specifically based on explorations of use of physical objects within the gallery rather than in the museum. Yet the objects engaged with might equally have been found within a museum: they are a-typical of art gallery collections. Although during interviews, many respondents spoke of a perceived difference both in experiences of and in professional practice, between a museum and an art gallery, the significance of this research having taken place within an art gallery as opposed to a museum, has not been explored deeply. Such work on objects, touch and materiality within art galleries is rare and has by no means taken place as frequently as similar research within museum settings, but some sort of comparative work on the two might provide useful insights.

Materiality beyond touch

Yet, while the thesis has set out 'material interpretation' in relation to the experience of touching objects, I would like to suggest a more nuanced idea, that the concept of

material interpretation be extended beyond the micro level of this thesis. Here, it has centred on touching objects, but it can also be about much more than this. Indeed the whole gallery experience might be creatively and usefully explored through this concept. In his book subtitled: 'the classic look at how we experience intimate places', Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) speaks of what he calls 'intimate immensity'. Starting a chapter of *The Poetics of Space* with the following quotation from Rilke, Bachelard's pseudo magical book looks at the intimate domestic interior as a metaphor for the immensity of the imagination:

> Le monde est grand, mais en nous
> il est profond comme la mer.
>
> (cited in Bachelard (1994) [1964]: 183)

Just as an intimate direct encounter with an object can lead to deep imaginative affects (and effects), including experiences of absence, silence and unknowing, so too other types of encounters in an art gallery might also share something of this. An example follows, describing how the concept of material interpretation can be opened up beyond touch.

In 2014, York Museums Trust staged an exhibition at their deconsecrated church York St Mary's, a site for contemporary art, entitled *Finding the Value* (Barnes 2014). In this show, five artists were invited to create new work responding to – and actually using – a collection of objects including books, paintings, ethnographic and decorative art that had been bequeathed to York Museums Trust. Peter Emil Madsen and his sister Karen Madsen, a pair ironically entirely unknown to the Trust during their lifetimes, both left their estates to it in 2011 in an act of tremendous generosity amounting to a sum of about £2 million. The bequest also consisted of Peter Madsen's wide-ranging collections of objects. Some of these were immediately accessioned (where they resonated with the museum's acquisitions policies); some were sold at auction; and the remaining objects were given for use by the commissioned artists in whatever

ways they saw fit (including through reconfiguring, reimagining, wrapping, and even by allowing silk worms to build cocoons over them).[184]

Figure 59: Detail from *Legacy* by Susie MacMurray in *Finding the Value*, York St Mary's, 2014.

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[184] The five artists commissioned were Andrew Bracey http://www.andrewbracey.co.uk; Alison Erica Forde http://www.alisonerikaforde.com; Yvette Hawkins http://yvettehawkins.co.uk; Susie MacMurray http://www.susie-macmurray.co.uk; and Simon Venus (all accessed 29/02/16).

These new works inspired by the Madsen Bequest developed the already strong tradition in York of dynamic, risk-taking and imaginative working, both with artists and with objects. Under the visionary leadership of Janet Barnes CBE (Chief Executive from 2002 to 2015), York Museums Trust has arguably been at the forefront in the UK of engaging with creative practitioners and developing the use of accessioned objects within artistic interventions. In 2009 for example, *Five Sisters*, a site-specific installation by painter Matthew Collings and mosaicist Emma Biggs[185] used real items actually from the accessioned stored archaeological collections, to create a huge mosaic of pottery, which spanned the nave of York St Mary's.

Figure 60: *Five Sisters* by Matthew Collings and Emma Biggs, York St Mary's, 2009.

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[185] http://emmabiggsandmatthewcollings.net (accessed 29/02/16).

But as well as enabling the development of this rich artistic tradition through temporary exhibitions, the Madsens' legacy also provided the initial seed funds needed to launch a massive campaign to raise £8 million for a large-scale capital project to develop and expand York Art Gallery.

In her volume on the pedagogic role of artists' interventions in museum, Claire Robins suggests that:

> When artists have been commissioned to intervene in collections in order to disrupt visitors' expectations… the host museum often intends to signal a shift in the way its collection and itself, as an institution, are understood.
> (2013: 213; see also Putnam 2009)

In these closing remarks, I argue that York Museums Trust has successfully worked with contemporary artists, in the way Robins suggests, to restage its collections for visitors, but the way in which this has been achieved could also be described as a form of material interpretation. Following Sandra Dudley's call for museums to refocus on the encounter with the very objects at their heart, rather than for them to exist simply as places to find out factual information about things, developments at York Art Gallery have actively explored 'the magic of things themselves' (2012: 12; see also Dudley 2010). Those involved in developing this complex capital project have managed to:

> … return to the material reality of the material, to shift attention back to objects as objects, focusing again on aspects of those things' apparently trivial and obvious material qualities and the possibilities of directly, physically, emotionally engaging with them… (Dudley 2012: 11)

Boldly quoting from Joseph Beuys, 'Every human being is an artist', the current display *Project Gallery* for community interpretive response firmly demonstrates that learning, creativity and engagement lie at the heart of what York Art Gallery is about. Indeed the building used to be home to the York School of Art between 1890 and

1978, and this might explain much of what feels like a palpable creative spirit living in the very material of the whole place. Each gallery space has opportunities for interaction: these are joyously low-key, always object-centric, and their activities are entirely creative and open-ended. A desk for arranging and drawing one's own still lives (an upgraded version of my former perennial favourite interactive here) buzzes with children drawing; each gallery has its own sketchbook and sketching materials for any visitor to use; even the computer-based interactive enables the user to be incorporated as the sitter in a portrait, with the capacity to share the resulting 'selfie' on social media; a series of five films in the masterpiece exhibition give deep layers of added interpretation including through artist interviews and explorations of conservation processes. A Monet-inspired floor-based felt mat for small children and babies, with textured cliffs and boats, and a hands-on corrugated card seascape inspired by Paul Nash's *Winter Sea* are found in the modern art gallery. This is a place whose interpretation strategies emphasise anew the value of looking, and of thinking (for all types of visitor), through creating and making: in other words, through material.

Mark Hearld's curated display, *The Lumber Room: Unimagined Treasures* spans a large gallery filled to the rafters with objects, display cases, furniture, and new artwork, and is inspired by a short story of Saki, read to the artist when aged 15 at school. In the tale, a young boy, Nicholas, makes an illicit foray into the locked lumber room of his strict aunt, 'a storehouse of unimagined treasures' (1998: 122), where he is surrounded by wonderful things. From a tapestry depicting a hunting scene, to a china duck teapot, to a box of brass figures, all these magical things delight and entrance the young boy in his forbidden exploration. Mark Hearld's exhibition at York Art Gallery does likewise.

Granted full access to the stores of the art gallery, the Yorkshire Museum and York Castle Museum, the artist has selected and curated objects from across the diverse collections – animal ceramics from the Ismay collection sit alongside teapots, toys, figurines, jugs, taxidermy, buttons, Delft plates, military jackets and Victorian capes and the artist's own new series of ceramic *York Horses*. By having access to the stored

collections, Hearld has managed to recreate something of the mystery and intrigue of a stored collection for visitors, and follows the pattern now exemplified by York Museums Trust of inviting people to actively *use* collections. While there are folders of interpretation giving information about each object, the displays are not hindered by text: one can simply enjoy and focus on the objects, imagining and making up what they might be, should one choose to do so, or admiring serendipitous connections between things, with the occasional hand-written instruction.

Figure 61: Cabinets in the *Lumber Room: Unimagined Treasures* by Mark Hearld, York Art Gallery, 2015.

This gallery has yet another highlight: it houses the Anthony Shaw Collection, given to York on long-term loan. With specific instruction by the collector to display the collection in a domestic setting, its resemblance to Kettle's Yard in Cambridge is of no coincidence. Pebbles on tables; bookshelves full of well-thumbed volumes of art, poetry, and literature; natural found objects alongside contemporary ceramics; collages beside kitsch Christmas decorations; ethnographic objects hanging on Art Deco furniture; the display is inventive, simple and complex. Just as Jim Ede, the

founder of Kettle's Yard refers to his house as 'in no way... an art gallery or museum' (Ede 1996: 17), so too does this display of objects again develop the strong theme emerging throughout the whole redisplay: that this is a place about beautiful objects, which does not swamp the visitor with information if the visitor does not wish to be swamped, but rather lets the objects be and speak for themselves.

Figure 62: The Anthony Shaw Collection, York Art Gallery, 2015.

Object-rich and filled with 'wonderful things for the eyes to feast on' (Saki 1998: 122), the displays certainly follow Dudley's call for a return to the material at the heart of museums (2010). They demonstrate the value of dynamic and bold partnerships with contemporary artists, with collectors, and with communities, all of which enhance the way in which the institution is perceived. The team at York Art Gallery have wonderfully revealed the objects at their heart, clearly demonstrating that not only is 'each object... a miracle' (Ede 1996: 35), but also that Joseph Beuys was right in his assertion that we are all artists. This is an example of material interpretation which moves beyond the focus on touch of this thesis, thereby demonstrating a wider resonance and impact of the notion of material interpretation.

Within the inhabited gallery space, the lived experience of intimate architecture, also dwell our immense poetic imaginings. As Bachelard states: 'all images are destined to be enlarged' (1994: 210). His dialectic of intimate immensity finds parallels in the intimate micro-engagements with objects described in this thesis. Yet so to can this dialectic be transposed into one of 'immense intimacy': thus, as at York Art Gallery, we might find material interpretation beyond the realm of the object and touch.

Moving forwards: future potential for research and practice

> Marchpane enjoyed being in the museum. She was in a glass case, between a lace collar and a china model of a King Charles spaniel. She was dusted very carefully twice a week and a number of people came to look at her. Sometimes young men and girls came to the museum to make drawings, and Marchpane was always quite sure, no matter what they drew, that they were making drawings of her. Every day she increased a little more in conceit, and the glass case made her safe from ever being played with. (Godden 1983: 135-136)

The above quotation is from a favourite childhood book, *Tottie: The Story of a Dolls' House*. In contrast to the carefree hodgepodge family of dolls living in the Victorian dolls' house consisting of Tottie (a wooden farthing doll), Birdie (made from celluloid),

Mr Plantagenet (slightly damaged china), Apple (made of plush), and Darner (the woollen dog), Marchpane is a doll made from expensive kid leather dressed in a grand wedding dress. She is brought in to the happy and playful home, and immediately disrupts and unsettles the balance with her condescending airs and graces. It always seemed fitting that she ends up locked away in a glass case. Her punishment for being too haughty is to be sent to the museum.

In some respects, the arguments in this thesis are made in support of those humble dolls, the ones that call out to be played with and handled, even if they find themselves in a museum or gallery collection, and against those more conceited things. If a museum manifesto were to be written based on some of the thinking within this thesis, it would include statements to encourage the use and handling of objects – be they things from the collection, or artist-made devices, or simply *any* material thing capable of being sensed – to enable visitors to interpret materially as the start point for their creative journey into things:

> An initial response to a text or work of art is a creative starting point for making an interpretation, not an interpretation in itself. This can only come about through a process of dialogue, enriched with play and making, stretched by a big question (McKenzie 2006: 60).

There is clearly a place in museums and galleries for objects to enable interpretation complementary to more traditional information labels. Yet there is much more that remains to be done to enable these engagements to happen more readily.

There is still room for further research and practice around the themes explored in this thesis: indeed there is little point in the researcher having undertaken this work unless it can be further developed as the journey unfurls. There is significant opportunity to develop ideas of material interpretation – both through touch, and beyond touch – and to embed these within professional practice, building materiality into gallery programming. There is an opportunity to reflect further upon use of theological metaphor more broadly within museological discourse and practice, and also to bring

it into the arena of research in theology and the arts. There will no doubt be opportunities to test out ideas around rummaging within different sorts of collections, to ask similar questions but of more challenging objects (for example those associated with war, or illness, or death and so on). There are possibilities to undertake comparative work within a museum setting, or even in a non-museum environment such as a junk shop. There are exhibitionary possibilities too: to explore how the ideas within these pages are and could be implemented into entire spaces. This has been just the start.

Afterword

Figure 63: A red wheelbarrow. Image courtesy Karl Foster and Kimberley Foster.

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens

(William Carlos Williams in Schmidt 2009: 46)

Appendices

Appendix 1: Online questionnaire (2013)
Appendix 2: Sample interview questions
Appendix 3: Summary of interviews carried out
Appendix 4: Summary of observations and workshops
Appendix 5: Sample information sheets
Appendix 6: Sample consent forms

Appendix 1: Online questionnaire

What do objects do? Material approaches to (art) museum interpretation

Researcher: Alex Woodall acw18@le.ac.uk

Who am I?

I am a PhD Researcher at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. I am now in the second year of my PhD research. Prior to my PhD, I worked in learning and interpretation teams in several art museums. I am a qualified teacher. Further information about me can be found on my webpage in the School of Museum Studies: http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/research/phd-student-research/AlexandraWoodall

What is my research about?

I am aiming to investigate the use of different types of material object (accessioned collection objects, artist-made resources, or other types of teaching/handling collection) as a source for inspiring individuals to respond imaginatively in art museums. I am interested in whether different types of object elicit different responses.

Why am I interested in exploring this question?

Museums are about objects. Yet there is a paradox lying at the heart of museum practice concerning museum objects. They are at once both present and knowable (for example in display and research) but at the same time also absent and unknowable (such as in a lack of sensory contact and in their capacity to generate a sense of awe). It is the aim of this research to centralise the physical object back into museum practice.

How will I undertake my research?

My research will largely comprise of in-depth interviews with museum professionals, artists and teachers engaged in work with objects in (art) museums. These interviews will take approximately one hour and will be recorded. In addition, I will be observing sessions and speaking to participants.

Why am I doing an initial online survey?

Although I have already identified several case studies for my research, I do not want to miss any opportunities to explore additional institutions doing work in this area, hence starting with a broad online survey. It may be that due to responses collated, I will contact you again to ask for further information, and perhaps to arrange an interview or observation. I am also interested in finding out from organisations not engaged in such work as to why they do not do so, and what the barriers to using objects in (art) museums may be.

Informed consent

You must be over 18 to participate in this survey. Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the project at any point. If you are uncertain or uncomfortable about any aspect of your participation, please feel free to discuss this with me in the first instance.

Protecting your confidentiality

Any information you supply will be treated confidentially. Anonymity will be granted unless you are happy to be identified.

If you have any questions about the ethical conduct of the interview, please contact Dr Giasemi Vavoula (Research Ethics Officer) School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, 19 University Road, Leicester. LE1 7RF.

Thank you very much.

Section 1: Background information

1) Name of institution

2) Your role

Section 2: Accessioned objects

3) Do you use, handle, or explore accessioned museum objects within your work?
(If 'yes', please go onto Question 5. If 'no', please go onto Question 4, followed by Question 15 onwards.)

> Yes
> No

4) Why do you not use accessioned museum objects in your work?
(Once completed please move onto Section 3: Question 15)

5) What sorts of accessioned objects do you use?
(please tick all that apply and give further details of specific items or reasons if appropriate)

> Fine Art (paintings, prints and drawings etc.)
> Decorative Art (ceramics, glass, furniture etc.)
> Social History
> Textiles
> Archaeology
> Geology
> Natural History
> Scientific collections

Musical instruments
Anything that we have plenty of in the stores
Items of high financial value
Items of low financial value
Items that have no conservation needs
Items from current displays
Items commissioned to be used by visitors
Items relevant to particular projects
Items chosen for use by artists, teachers or practitioners
Other
Other/further information

6) Which teams have access to accessioned objects in their work at your institution?
(please tick all that apply)

Curatorial
Exhibitions
Education (formal – schools)
Outreach (informal – families, communities)
Marketing
Design
Front of House
Volunteers
Other (please describe)

7) How do you use these accessioned museum objects?
(please tick all that apply)

Curator-led tours (with no audience handling)
Curator-led tours (with audience handling)
In education sessions (without handling)
In education sessions (with handling)
Handling sessions for all audiences
Handling sessions for particular audiences (please describe)
Off-site for outreach
Artist-led sessions (please describe)
In sessions about museum practices (such as conservation)
Other/Further Information (e.g. students can use them in design projects; they can be borrowed by schools etc.)

8) Who is able to handle the items?

9) What do they handle them for?

10) Where do they handle the objects?

11) Do you explain 'rules' for handling objects to your audiences?

Yes

No

12) If yes, how do you do this?

13) Are the objects handled with gloves?
Yes

No

14) Why?

Section 3: Other non-accessioned objects

15) Do you use, handle or explore other sorts of objects (non-accessioned) in your work? (If 'yes', please go onto Question 17. If 'no', please go onto Question 16, followed by Question 26 onwards.)

Yes

No

16) Why do you not use non-accessioned museum objects in your work?
(Once completed please move onto Section 4: Question 26 onwards)

17) What sorts of non-accessioned objects do you use? (please tick all that apply and give further details where appropriate)

Replicas (historic)
Replicas (modern copies)
Handling collection that is part of museum collection but not accessioned into main collection (e.g. Schools Handling Collection)
Handling collection e.g. purchased from antique shops/eBay etc. by learning team for specific workshops etc.
Collection specifically created e.g. for visually impaired visitors
Artist-made resources
Digital reproductions
Own objects from home
Other/further information

18) How do you use these non-accessioned museum objects?
(please tick all that apply)

Curator-led tours (with no audience handling)
Curator-led tours (with audience handling)
In education sessions (without handling)
In education sessions (with handling)
Handling sessions for all audiences
Handling sessions for particular audiences (please describe)

Off-site for outreach
Artist-led sessions (please describe)
In sessions about museum practices (such as conservation)
Other/Further Information (e.g. students can use them in design
projects; they can be borrowed by schools etc.)

19) Who is able to handle the items?

20) What do they handle them for?

21) Where do they handle the objects?

22) Do you explain 'rules' for handling objects to your audiences?
Yes
No

23) How do you do this?

24) Are the objects handled with gloves?
Yes
No

25) Why?

Section 4: General questions

26) Do you think there is a difference between handling a museum-accessioned object and handling another type of object in a museum? Please explain your answer.

27) What are your hopes and aspirations for this type of object handling work?

28) What are your main causes for concern about this type of work with objects?

29) Do you have any further questions or comments?

30) Please add your email if you are happy to be considered as a possible case study for in-depth research including interview and observation.

Appendix 2: Sample interview questions

Material approaches to art museum interpretation

Research aim
To investigate the use of the material object as a source for inspiring individuals to respond imaginatively in art museums

General Context

1. Tell me about your work…

2. Much of your work is about engaging with collections of objects in galleries museums. Can you describe some of the things you've done to explore this, both on your own and with your students?

3. Why do you think it's important to engage with museum objects first-hand?

4. What do you think objects do?

5. Do you think there's a difference between handling an accessioned object, and using something non-accessioned, or made by an artist? What is this?

6. Do you think ways of working with objects in museums have evolved?

7. How have other staff and colleagues responded to this sort of sensory engagement work with objects?

8. How do you think objects might help unleash the imagination?

Mary Greg Collection

9. Tell me about this collection and what is unique about it.

10. Explain how the collection has been opened up to different audiences to engage with.

11. Why was it important for you to engage directly with these objects?

12. What do you think about wearing gloves to handle objects?

13. What do you think is unique about being able to handle this collection?

General questions about museum and gallery engagement/practices

14. What are your thoughts about being able to handle or use accessioned objects in museums and galleries?

15. Do you think there is a need for engaging with museum objects and artworks using our senses? How might museums and galleries facilitate this?

16. How might handling objects be used to facilitate change in the organisation (for example to enable more object engagement)? Have you got any examples?

17. What are your hopes for the sorts of work you do within museums and galleries?

18. What do you think are the reasons that not more places do this sort of work with objects?

Metaphor and paradox

19. Objects have the capacity to lead us beyond the everyday, to use our imagination and transport us elsewhere. How do you describe this sort of 'wow' experience?

20. Things exist in themselves yet point to something beyond – do you think museums should engage with this idea… How might using objects help?

Appendix 3: Summary of interviews carried out

CODE	DATE	INTERVIEWEE	ORGANISATION
A	03/05/13	Artist	MAG/MS/TC
B	03/05/13	Senior Lecture Fine Art/Art	MAG/MS/TC
C	20/05/13	Communities Manager	MAG
D	25/05/13	Learning Manager	MS
E	04/06/13	Keeper	BSC
F	04/06/13	Senior Lecturer: Contextual Studies	BSC
G	07/06/13	Learning Deliverer	MS
H	09/06/13	Former Interpretation Development Manager	MAG
I	11/06/13	Freelance Artist Educator	MAG
J	15/06/13	Senior Lecturer Interactive Arts	MMU
K	18/06/13	Learning & Access Officer	LAG
L	18/06/13	Artemis Manager	AC
M	10/07/13	Schools Officer	TC
N	30/07/13	Schools & Colleges Manager	MAG
O	16/12/13	Collections Care Officer (Conservator)	MAG
P	03/04/14	Principal Manager: Collections Access (Senior Curator)	MAG
Q	01/05/15	Assistant Curator	LAG

Abbreviations
AC   Artemis Collection
BSC   Betty Smithers Collection
LAG   Leeds Art Gallery
MAG   Manchester Art Gallery
MMU   Manchester Metropolitan University
MS   Museums Sheffield
TC   Turner Contemporary

Appendix 4: Summary of observations and workshops

ORGANISATION	PROJECT	GROUP	DATE
MAG	Mary Greg Box	Growing Old Disgracefully	11/06/13
TC	Object Dialogue Box	Meadowfield School A	10/07/13
TC	Object Dialogue Box	Meadowfield School B	10/07/13
MS	Object Dialogue Box	Mansell Primary	11/11/13
MS	Object Dialogue Box	MA Students	17/11/14
MAG	Mary Greg Rummages	Various	2010 - 2013

Appendix 5: Sample information sheet for gallery professionals

Who am I?
I am currently a PhD Researcher at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. I am now in the second year of my PhD research. Prior to my PhD, I worked in learning and interpretation teams in several art museums. I am a qualified teacher. Further information about me can be found on my webpage in the School of Museum Studies: http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/research/phd-student-research/AlexandraWoodall

What is my research about?
I am aiming to investigate the use of the material object (accessioned collection, artist-made resource, or other type of teaching/handling collection) as a source for inspiring individuals to respond imaginatively in art museums.

Why am I interested in exploring this question?
Museums are about objects. Yet there is a paradox lying at the heart of museum practice concerning museum objects. They are at once both present and knowable (for example in display and research) but at the same time also absent and unknowable (such as in a lack of sensory contact and in their capacity to generate a sense of awe). It is the aim of this research to centralize the physical object back into museum practice.

How were you selected to be involved in this research?
You were chosen as a participant in my research due to your experience in working with objects in (art) museums, either as a museum professional or as an artist, or as a teacher who has experience of bringing groups to the museum.

What is your role in this research project?
My research involves several interviews with museum staff, artists and teachers, of whom you are one. Your initial semi-structured interview will take approximately one hour, and will be arranged at a time and location convenient for you. The interviews will be audio recorded and notes will also be taken during the interview. If appropriate, the interview may be followed up by observation of an object-based session. Notes will be written during the session (subject to consent forms being completed).

Informed consent
Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the project at any point. If you are uncertain or uncomfortable about any aspect of your participation, please feel free to discuss this with me in the first instance.

Protecting your confidentiality
Any information you supply will be treated confidentially. Paper-based notes will be securely stored. Although I do not plan to name you directly, you may be identifiable

If you have any questions about the ethical conduct of the interview, please contact Dr Giasemi Vavoula (Research Ethics Officer) School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, 19 University Road, Leicester. LE1 7RF. Thank you very much.

Appendix 5: Sample information sheet for community groups

Who am I?
I am currently a PhD Researcher at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. I am now in the second year of my PhD research. Prior to my PhD, I worked in learning and interpretation teams in several art museums. I am a qualified teacher. Further information about me can be found on my webpage in the School of Museum Studies: http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/research/phd-student-research/AlexandraWoodall

What is my research about?
I am aiming to investigate what happens when visitors to museums are actually allowed to use, handle or explore real objects from a museum or gallery.

Why am I interested in exploring this question?
Museums are about objects, but often when we visit museums, the objects are in glass cases, and we cannot see them very well or touch them. I am interested in finding out what happens when we are allowed to use real objects.

How were you selected to be involved in this research?
You are involved in my research because your group is being visited by the gallery today and will be doing a session involving objects. I am interested in seeing your responses today.

What is your role in this research project?
I will be observing today's session, making notes, recording what is said, and taking some photographs (just of your hands holding the objects, not direct ones of you). I might ask you some questions during the session. There are no right or wrong answers though and you do not have to be involved if you don't want to.

Informed consent
If you are uncertain about what I am doing today, please ask me about it. The information I collect will be used to help me write my PhD thesis which mainly includes interviews with museum staff, artists and teachers. My report may be published online.

Protecting your confidentiality

Your words will be recorded unless you do not agree to this. Your words might be used in the report, but your real name and details will be kept private.

If you have any questions about the ethical conduct of the interview, please contact Dr Giasemi Vavoula (Research Ethics Officer) School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, 19 University Road, Leicester. LE1 7RF.

Thank you very much.

Appendix 6: Sample consent form for gallery professionals

Material gathered as part of this study will be treated as confidential and will be securely stored.

	Yes	No
I have read and I understand the information sheet		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and they were answered to my satisfaction		
I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time		
I agree to the interview being recorded and my words being used for research purposes		
I agree that my actual words can be used in any subsequent publications or use, including online publication		
I understand that my actual name will not be attributed to any words I have said		
I understand that I will be sent a transcript of the interview		
I would like my name to be acknowledged in the report		

Name (PRINT) _____

Signed_____

Date _____

Please contact me if you have any more questions or you wish to withdraw from the research.

Alex Woodall, PhD Researcher
Email: acw18@le.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Sample consent form for community groups

Material gathered as part of this study will be treated as confidential and will be securely stored.

	Yes	No
I have read and I understand the information sheet		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and the researcher has answered them		
I understand that I do not have to take part if I don't want to		
I agree to the session being recorded through notes, and if appropriate using an audio recorder		
I agree to my words being used by the researcher for writing her research and these may be made available to the public and online		
I understand that my actual name will not be used with my words and my details will be kept private		
I am happy to be photographed using the objects today		

Name (PRINT) _____

Signed _____

Date _____

Please contact me if you have any more questions or you wish to withdraw from the research.

Alex Woodall, PhD Researcher
Email: acw18@le.ac.uk

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