

Manker's list

Museum collections in the era of deaccessioning and disposal

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Abstract: *During the last decades debates and concerns over deaccessioning and disposal have affected museums worldwide. At the root of the debate lies the ever more pressing problem with overstocked collection; the consequence of decades and even centuries of allegedly far too liberal and eclectic collecting and acquisition practices. This paper presents some alternative views and argues in favor of such liberal collecting. Taking as its starting point a list of desired museum objects compiled by Swedish curator Ernst Manker, it emphasizes the immense value and unruly power of large and heterogeneous museum collections. By constantly being added to, these assemblages have developed into new and unforeseen becomings that may radically affect and disrupt existing knowledge. The paper also addresses museums as caretakers, offering spaces where things, including those once soiled and broken, can be treated with care and dignity.*

Keywords: Deaccessioning, museum collections, Ernst Manker, things, archaeology museums, care.

Since the journal of *Nordic Museology* was first issued 25 years ago, debates and concerns over deaccessioning have increasingly affected the museum world (e.g. Knell 1994; Weil 1997; Vecco & Piazzai 2014; Sund 2016). At the root of the debate lies the ever more pressing problem with overstocked collections, too much stuff heaping up in cramped museum spaces; in short, with what is increasingly seen as an immense accumulation crisis. A crisis caused, many would argue, by decades and even centuries of far too liberal, shortsighted, and eclectic collection and acquisition practices. Notwithstanding such accusations, faced with

the prospects of perpetual swelling collections and equally dwindling budgets, deaccessioning and disposal have surfaced as very actual and viable options for troubled museums. A difficult and for many disheartening choice, of course, since they involve practices that represent a radical break with – in fact, exactly the opposite of – the *raison d'être* and ethos of the very museum project.

In order to help and ease the choice, various museum organizations and policy makers have produced guidelines for how to move on in a way that is legally and ethically eligible. These include measures such that a

disposable object may be one that does not fit into the museum's profile or agenda, is better suited for another collection, is acquired in a way that is ethically or legally dubious (and thus should be repatriated), has deteriorated beyond conservation, is hazardous, or is a duplicate of other and more appropriate items in the collection.¹ The interventions, however, are increasingly rationalized also on grounds of more explicit social, cultural, and philosophical arguments. For example, the process of selecting things for degradation may be bolstered as integral to a sustainable heritage management, where such active pruning is claimed future-oriented and absolutely necessary in order to maintain pasts relevant to present and future societies (Harrison 2013; Vecco & Piazzai 2014:3).

These arguments can be seen as emerging out of late twentieth century critical heritage discourses, where similar concerns were addressed through notions such as heritage boom, heritage industry, and musealization (e.g. Hewison 1987; Walsh 1992; Lowenthal 1998; Harvey 2001). What differs, as especially seen in some branches of current critical heritage studies, is the insistency on the past as a pruned and cultivated resource for the future. Left to its own uncontrolled sprouting this resource runs the risk of turning into a wild weed garden, "a heterogeneous piling up of disparate and conflicting pasts" (Harrison 2013:579). Thus, in order to avoid such perpetual and unruly accumulations we must manage the legacy of the past far more actively and select things to forget. According to Rodney Harrison this should include

active decision to delist or cease to conserve particular forms of heritage once their significance to contemporary and future societies can no longer be demonstrated. Deaccessioning and disposal must

become a key area of attention in critical heritage studies (Harrison 2013:579).

In these discourses, it is hard to spot much enthusiasm for the fantastic fact that so many things actually are gathered in our museums; enthusiasm for what an immense power these bulging collections may amount to, and for what unique critical corrective and reservoir for alternative knowledge they constitute (Byrne *et al.* 2011). And though there are concerns, especially among those on the museum floor, for the fate of things in all this, such concerns are less frequently expressed among the more theoretically oriented critical heritage and critical museum scholars. Within their fields of discourse, it is often hard to see that things – and indeed the past – have any value beyond the use-value that stems from their enrolment in contemporary socio-political programs and practices. Things as heritage and museum objects are basically what Heidegger (1993) referred to as *things-for-us* and thus to be managed in ways that suit our interests and needs. Not surprisingly, thus, what you hardly find much about in these discourses is the role museums has had, and still has, as caretakers, offering spaces where things, including those once soiled and broken, can be treated with care and dignity.

This paper is an appraisal and tribute to the museum in its traditional modern form, a tribute to the great and heterogeneous collections that they house, and to the dedicated collectors that brought – and still bring – this amazing material to them. And though it also addresses how the museum in its current and somewhat more restrictive mode may have lost some of its previous tenets and affordances, it also argues that others are retained and perhaps strengthened. It is a short paper but its ripening has been long. In 1999,

I visited the archive of Swedish archaeologist Gustav Hallström at the University Library in Umeå. Here I came across a letter, or memo, that this fascinating scholar had received nearly six decades ago; a letter which content at first seemed ridiculously dated and which also, admittedly, was what originally draw my attention to it. More specifically, the letter contained a list of required museum objects and in the years to come this strange list kept haunting me and gradually made me rethink a number of my previous critical certainties about museums (e.g Olsen 1988, 1993). Thus, what could be a more appropriate place to start?

MANKER'S LIST

In late winter 1942, a letter arrived at archaeologist Gustav Hallström's office at the Swedish National Heritage Board in Stockholm. The letter was dated March 3 and was written by Ernst Manker, at the time head of the Sámi department at the Nordic Museum. The reason for the letter was an imminent journey Hallström was making to the northern parts of Finland and Norway. Officially the journey was an ethnographic expedition, but it has later been revealed that the collection of military information about the German occupant forces in northernmost Norway, may have been equally important (Baudou 1997:256 ff.). This was probably not an issue for Manker, so I won't pursue this any further. His letter, however, contains a detailed list of Sámi specimens that he asked Hallström to acquire during his northern journey, among them;

[...] a boy and girls' costume (preferably 8–10 years of age), a *pulk*² (half-covered), eventually also an open *ahkia*; a riding stick, a pack saddle from

Kautokeino (from Karasjok we have), a bone loop for lasso (eventually also the lasso) from Karasjok, a harness, a finger protector of the spoon-like type; otherwise what seem interesting and good.³

Manker's list was not motivated by any research problem. The items were not required in order to throw light on ethnic self-representation, Sámi gender construction, material consumption, or for that matter, the being of things. The list was motivated by items that were in demand in the Sámi collection, things that would make it more complete or representative. It was motivated by what Manker regarded as the needs of the collection and the museum; not by his own or others' research agendas. Thanks to Manker, Hallström, and many others, a rich collection of Sámi objects are today safely cared for at the Nordic Museum. Which leads me to one of my main arguments; that such a broad, perhaps even antiquarian, practice of collecting, one which does not allow itself to be governed by prevailing research trends, or by equally topical claims to social relevance, perhaps was not that bad after all. In fact, maybe we should acknowledge it as quite fortunate that it was Manker the museum curator who wrote the list, and not Manker the researcher?

To support this argument, I shall bring yet another case to the table. In 2010, I attended a PhD seminar in Oslo, *Re-visioning the museal object*, organized by Saphinaz-Amal Naguib and Liv Emma Thorsen. At this seminar, Vibeke Maria Viestad presented parts of her PhD project on the material culture of dress and personal ornamentations of the San of colonial Southern Africa (Viestad, in press). She argued that there was a remarkable ignorance of these aspects of material culture in the representations of the San and that also anthropological research in many ways had reproduced and even reinforced the popular



Fig. 1. Ernst Manker during a break from fieldwork at Abelvattnet, Lappland, 1951. Photo: Sture af Ekenstam/Nordiska Museet.

and stereotypical image of a naked – or almost naked – hunter-gatherer people. She drew attention to the fact that museum collections, and in particular the two which she studied – the Fourie collection at Museum Africa in Johannesburg and the Dorothea Bleek

collection at the Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town – contained a vast amount of San dresses, ornaments and material culture more generally and photographs thereof (Viestad 2015). Thus, due to what is actually collected – and indeed, as Viestad also emphasized,

not always in compliance with our celebrated ethical codes and standards – these collections contain a material that affords very different and far richer depictions than the canonized image of naked hunter-gatherers almost without any thingly inclinations.

This I find as yet another example of how fortunate it is that prevailing topical concerns and research agendas have not constantly defined (and redefined) the practice of collecting. But even more important, an example of what immense critical corrective museum collections may amount to; with what force, mass, and weight they can object to and argue, if they are allowed to affect, influence, and interrupt our endeavours for knowledge (cf. Thomas 2010).

CRITIQUE AND CRISIS

As we all know, it has become far more difficult to be a museum in the way Manker envisaged it. At least from the late 1960s museums increasingly came under attack for their lack of actuality and social relevance. They were accused, amongst other, for being elitist, nationalist and colonialist institutions, forums for alienating dissemination, disciplinary technologies, and/or ideological cabinets of indoctrination. Like dinosaurs unable to adapt to new social and cultural environments, museums appeared more and more as anachronistic institutions in a multi-cultural and rapidly changing present; a present which allegedly demanded very different knowledges and different ways of having them served. As famously concluded by Duncan Ferguson Cameron in 1971, “Our museums are in desperate need of psychotherapy. There is abundant evidence of an identity crisis in some of the major institutions, while other are in an advanced state of schizophrenia” (1971:11).



Fig. 2. Pack saddle from Lemmenjoki, Inari, collected by Gustaf Hallström on an ethnographic expedition to northern Finland in 1941. Photo: Nordiska Museet.

And no one can accuse them of avoiding treatment. In order to accommodate the critique, and in their chase for a new identity, many museums proved impressively inventive and open-minded. There was almost a rivalry over becoming – and this is only a mild exaggeration – theatre, film, novel, forum of debate; indeed, seemingly anything – apart from, of course, being museums. And collecting, the very core activity of the pre-critical museums, lost much of its status and inevitability, especially with respect to ethnographic, ethnological, and cultural-historical collecting. The age-old association

of collecting with collecting *things*, which at the time were not exactly held high in esteem, also called for other options. For example, as articulated by Smithsonian based historian Wilcomb Washburn: if the primary purpose of the museum is knowledge and information, “need one save objects at all?” (1968:10). Convinced about the answer, he later advised museum to “collect information, not objects” (1984). Throughout the late twentieth century, collecting things was increasingly associated with a dated and fetishized activity among scholars within the humanities and social sciences. This devaluation, of course, also affected museum attitudes and strategies. Collecting more things, thus, was not necessarily a foremost priority anymore, and anyway just amounted to an even greater demand for museum technicians and conservators, the poor knights of things. Intangible heritage, on the other hand, became proportionally more celebrated and attractive; perhaps, one may speculate, also due to its virtue of being less massive, bulky, and dirty.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS, COLLECTORS, AND COLLECTIONS

The depicted situation is, of course, somewhat caricatured. Indeed, notwithstanding the changes brought about by the museum crisis, museums big and small continued to collect things. What still holds true, however, was an immense downgrading of the status of the practice of collecting things, both inside and outside the institutions, and, more important, that this practice seriously changed by being subjected to various measures of narrowing. Apart from increasingly more imperative legal and ethical constraints, these measures were above all related to the mentioned appeals to make museums more “topical” and relevant.



Fig. 3. Great collections: From the anthropological collections at Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. Photo: Chip Clarke/The Smithsonian Institution.

The increased demands of responding to prevailing research agendas and socio-political issues, inevitably made collecting far more selective, specialised, and “problem-oriented” than earlier. In other words, what once were seen as the needs of the collections (and the museums), and even their status as archives or reservoirs of knowledge, became less a matter of concern compared to the “needs of the public”.

Here, however, I want to pay more attention to a branch of museums that differs interestingly in this respect, and that is the archaeological museums. Not so much in terms of display, where the same trends as elsewhere have been more than conspicuous, but in terms of collections and collecting. Despite all methodological and theoretical turns, archaeologists have maintained a kind of classical collector attitude - and ethics. Almost everything from an excavation is documented, carefully collected, treated, and stored, creating enormous and incredibly varied collections. This is not just because archaeology is an object-oriented discipline, dependent on things as its source material. Indeed, helped by heritage legislation and the not always eligible thesis of excavation as destruction (or unrepeatable experiment) (Lucas 2001), field archaeologists continue to document and collect. Not just what we are in need of, that which suits our immediate research problems and theories, but almost quite literally *everything*. In contrast to the practices of collecting in other social sciences and humanities, to the degree that they still exist, the archaeological collecting has actually become far more extensive and voluminous than earlier. This has not happened without resistance, critique, or attempt to do otherwise; nevertheless, archaeologists continue to faithfully collect artefacts and eco-facts. And there is something noble and beautifully unselfish attached to all this; the archaeologist is, when you come to think of it, the collector par excellence.

The result of this collecting does not make everyone equally happy. Over-stocked storage spaces, sky rocketing conservation expenses, stricter security regulations, and dwindling budgets. And it is not difficult to see the many practical and logistic challenges of continuous collecting, and in the wake of this also more

fundamental questions are triggered. Are we to collect everything and when is enough really enough? As addressed in the introduction, it is of course not accidental that suggestions of disposal and decommissioning are featuring increasingly more prominently on the agenda in international museum and heritage discourses. While one can and should have sympathy with the practical and economic problems that overstocked museum collections give rise to, the more principal and theoretical arguments circulating in these discourses do not necessarily call for the same.

For what seems far too underemphasized, is the immense power of the museum collections (cf. Thomas 2010; Byrne *et al.* 2011; Wingfield 2017). A formidable and in many ways unruly power. By constantly being added to, these assemblages have developed, and continue to develop, into new and unforeseen becomings. No one could ever envisage their constantly growing heterogeneity, complexity, and size; and precisely by not being planned and pruned but allowed to sprout and gather have they become so valuable and powerful. To some, this may just seem an endless adding up of sameness and boredom; however, as all those who attend to them can testify, they are vital and vibrating assemblages. Similar to our everyday things that Kathleen Stewart writes so evocatively about, they “don’t just add up but take on a life of their own as problems of thought” (Stewart 2008:72).

I must admit that I adore the image of bulging storage rooms, museums packed with masses of materials of all kind; I find the notions of mass and weight attractive and appropriate, for these are precisely their qualities. They are quite literally heavy institutions filled with all those things excavated, found, rescued, and which therefor can appear, show themselves, as our archaeological material. Things which

indeed are disciplined and ordered, but which still retain enough integrity to not be embarrassed by their own thinghood. Things that don't tell, and this is important, but *show* a past more materially diverse, mixed, and durable, than any of the prevailing academic narratives about it. A past, thus, which should be perfectly fit for the museum.

Yet, our engagement with these fantastic, swelling collections has become somewhat ambivalent. And increasingly so. On the one hand, we are collectors who in more or less heroic ways contribute to the museums' unique affluence of things; on the other hand, there is incontestably an ongoing detachment from the very collections we constantly contribute to. Not from the individual, selected finds, of course, which are exemplary displayed and made available for us when we are granted permission to see them; but from the masses of things and the everyday dealing with them. A detachment from the diversity and in some way, thus, from the very being of the collections. Consider, for example, how we basically have lost the previous possibility of physically frequent the storage spaces and thus the opportunity to get to know also all those shelf-mates that "my" selected things are co-habiting with. And thereby also lost the possibility of becoming dazzled by precisely that very axe or brooch we were not there to see; that unique experience of discovery that still may be had in small local museums; or in the library, when searching along the shelves for the book to borrow, are halted by books we didn't know existed. The moments of encounter when objects, as Nicholas Thomas so beautifully phrases it, are "happened upon" creating wonder and disruption, and thereby, perhaps, also destabilize and alter what we already for certain know (Thomas 2010:7).

When such accidental intimacies are no

longer afforded by the archaeological museums much of this may, of course, be said to be practically imposed, and thus providing yet another example of unintended and unfortunate consequences of new policies, bureaucracies, and security measures. Moreover, contrary to the good old days, most archaeologists today work at totally different places than museums. And yet, when this detachment has been allowed to happen and develop without any big protests, may it also be due to a certain feeling of relief?

Learning by hand, from direct encounters with things, clearly has enjoyed little support in later intellectual tropes – and even deemed worthless and reactionary through the mantra that all knowledge is theory-dependent. Also in archaeology, the discipline of things, such reasoning and theorizing and, indeed, fast publishing, have become increasingly more decisive for success and survival. Thus, perhaps at some point it felt liberating to be released from the constraints and demanding suggestions of this unruly and quarrelsome mass? That it became easier to theorize, be social relevant and critical, to write history, and also to manage and bureaucratize, without these things' incessant urge for more archaeology?

A BETTER WORLD?

These considerations notwithstanding, one still gets the daunting feeling that the immense power embedded in the collections' diversity and mass are not released, not activated, due to the increasingly stricter regimes of control governing the collections. That the exposure of material brought about by excavation and collecting perhaps just lead to yet another concealment, a new oblivion. This is indeed a very real and serious problem and where it is

hard to see any immediate or simple solution, though there certainly are those who will claim that digitalization will solve also this issue. And to some extent they may be right; but only to a limited extent and, I am afraid, at the cost of the collections' very allure and material integrity.

Nevertheless, when considering this issue, it is all too easy lapsing once again into arguments about calculative motifs of control and surveillance; to see the restrictions as yet another proof of how museums reveals their true anti-democratic face. Perhaps if we for a moment refrain from our ingrained academic inclination for suspicious hermeneutics, we might get a glimpse of some other features, some other possible ways of understanding, even if they might appear as something of a malapropos. In other words, and without at all ignoring the very real problem that restricted access causes, may it be that the museum in its current, somewhat rigid mode, actually better fulfil a role that we tend to downplay or ignore? A role in many ways integral to the very museum project itself, which goes beyond *Bildung* and utility, and which require that we think new – or perhaps old – about things, ethics and care.

In the works of Walter Benjamin, the collector and the rag picker are returning figures, in their roles as alternatives and correctives to the modern thing consumption. Benjamin describes the mission of the collector as a salvage work, admittedly a Sisyphean task, which involved rescuing things from usefulness. The collector's task is to divest things of their commodity or utility character by carefully taking possession of them; he dreams about a better world "...one in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the everyday world, but in which things are freed

from the drudgery of being useful" (Benjamin 2002:39). And it is also from this perspective that we should consider the potential role of museums as institutions of care.

In museum and heritage policy documents, attempts to justify museum collections, and heritage more generally, are consistently grounded in human concerns. It is repeatedly argued that museum collections are not kept for the benefit of the institutions, or for the things themselves, but mainly and overall for the benefit of society, for current and future public. Things of the past are valuable, and something to be preserved, primarily because they in one way or the other can be used to serve human interests. What matters is their use-value as identity anchors, sources of knowledge, tourist attractions, objects for contemplation and enjoyment, or, for that sake, as venture capital for academic speculation. Things are basically things-for-us, reduced to what Heidegger termed *Bestand*, that is, where their primary significance is reduced to their value as resource (Heidegger 1993; Introna 2009).

This is also grounding arguments for deaccessioning and disposal, not only the populist ones, that the collections are underused with many objects never being displayed, but also those flagging social significance and contemporary and future relevance as decisive. In these discourses, there seems to be little concern with the past, with knowledge of the past, or with the things themselves. What seems to matter is mostly how we can prune and control what remains of the past in order to make it an appropriate social and economic resource not only in the present, but also in and for the future (Harrison 2015:35). One may wonder what would have become of the San and Sámi collections if such strategies had guided their collecting?



Fig. 4. Rescued and well cared for: Conserved Late Iron Age artefacts rescued from sites exposed to looting at Gotland, Sweden. Photo: Gabriella Kalmar, Studio Västsvensk Konservering.

And it is as counterbalance to this utilitarian obsession that I think the museum, the curators, and collectors, may suggest a way forward with their Benjaminian rescue work. And this is also the other face of archaeology, a face that always has been turned towards things but which for long has been veiled and stigmatized by the humanist imperative that archaeologists should be “concerned with people rather than things” (Leach 1973:768). The work being done with things at the museum

by technicians, curators, and other museum staff, show a sincere devotion to things. The efforts involved in cleaning, describing, drawing, photographing, preserving, and storing finds reflect a thoughtfulness for what things are in their own naked thingliness; it expresses a sincere care for them and their well-being. Perhaps not only that but also that. Texture, shape, weight, size, colour, fractions and scars, are meticulously observed and recorded without necessarily being seen just

as a means for something else and more noble; such as chasing social and cultural meaning or extracting data for yet another publication. And this thoughtful care creates a unique nearness to, and knowledge of, things.

With equal force, it should be acknowledged how the museum itself cares for things, is basically an institution of care. In its ideal and traditional role, it attends to things and one may perhaps even say, safeguards their rights to just be things. And if one, and perhaps in vain, disregards all potential sources of neglect, such as lack of money, space and personnel, it may be here, in the museum, that things have found their better world, as Benjamin envisaged. A resting home where they finally can breathe, released from the drudgery of being useful.

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NOTES

1. See e.g. Too Much Stuff (2003); https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/too_much_stuff.pdf Object Disposal, Acquisition and Disposal of Collections (2005), <https://www.si.edu/content/opanda/docs/Rpts2005/05.04.ConcernAtTheCore.Disposal.pdf> Seilfaldet, H. 2015, *Retningslinjer for avhending: prioritering, avhending og destruksjon av kulturhistoriske museumsgjenstandar*. Oslo: Kulturrådet.
2. Pulk/pulkka is a reindeer-pulled covered sledge without skids, the front is boat-formed and the back straight. Ahkia/akkja is a similar but larger pulk, normally uncovered, used for transport of goods.
3. Letter dated March 3, 1942, kept in the Gustav Hallström's archive at the University Library in Umeå, Sweden.

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