

ACCUMULATE:

Lyndall Phelps, Katy Gillam-Hull and
Abi Spendlove

In 2001 Thames and Hudson published a large format, amply illustrated coffee table book called *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* by James Putnam, ancient Egypt curator with a contemporary art brief for the British Museum. Putnam's aim was an encyclopaedic survey of artists who work with museum collections. By his own admission he fails in this ambition. Of course he does. To be encyclopaedic is necessarily a vain ambition. It is an impossible task, inherently. Since postmodernism, we have become suspicious of any vainglorious attempt at the over-arching, universal and complete. Not only is it theoretically impossible since we have realised latterly that any collection is partial, but it is suspect because of that partiality. Collections always demonstrate the limitations and bias of the collector. But any collector of any *thing* soon discovers the impossibility of a complete collection. Those collectors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, those who collected at the height of collection frenzy, imagined it was both desirable and possible to collect everything, or at least everything in a small subset of everything. They soon discovered this is a foolhardy, perhaps a grandiose, mission. Some privately acknowledged their failure. Nevertheless, many collectors attempted the impossible, including Raphael Salaman, whose collection forms one part of St Albans Museums.

Much recent scholarship into the formation of collections uncovers the fallacies at the heart of all collections: none are complete, none are encyclopaedic, none are neutral. The mid-1980s saw the 'new museology' in which a more reflexive museum practice helped foster the understanding that no collection is comprehensive, and indeed that all collections also betray the beliefs and biases of the collector. There will always be exclusions, limits to the resources of the collector and parameters placed on the collection. James Putnam's collection of artists' work in museums misses out much of the work that artists have done because even a large book has limited space. He avoids, I assume, what he believed to be inferior specimens. I also assume some of the oversights are due to ignorance and opinions formed, perhaps unconsciously, based on assumptions and his own predispositions. As a collector, he is not alone in this. Collectors reject what they believe to be inferior or duplicate. They also form opinions about the parameters of collections, including and excluding on this basis.

Putnam, the collector with encyclopaedic ambitions for his collection of artists, compares to Raphael Salaman's collection of 3000 hand tools. Both unselfconsciously aimed at collecting everything in a small subset of everything and however comprehensive their collections, they fall short of *everything*. The Salaman Tool Collection amply illustrates the finitude inherent in the collecting project. He may have wished to collect everything and his *Dictionary of Woodworking Tools* (1975) and *Dictionary of Leather-working tools c1700-1950* and *Tools of Allied Trades* (1986) exemplify this ambition, but it is not everything. It only contains the hand tools of crafts-men and in particular the tools of the industry crafts that were becoming redundant and superseded. Just as with the great ethnographic collections of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nostalgia motivated collections of the nearly extinct. It was a time when collectors were men of learning, leisure and means, and the motivation for collecting was both a feeling for preservation and also of loss. Salaman was a Cambridge-educated man of his time. He shared the generational hubris of devising a project to define the gamut of typologies, and then sought to fill every box with a specimen. The ultimate aim for knowledge and preservation, those generations believed, lay in pinning down everything and assuming both that this was possible and that they knew what everything was. The parameters of their quest were never scrutinised. How to define a tool was a question that never surfaced for Salaman. Just as with most nineteenth and twentieth century ethnographic collections, Salaman's betrays an emphasis on masculine trades and tools. A collection with ambitions to the universal becomes partial very quickly.

I worked for nine years, between 2009 and 2017, as an artist with the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, conducting research and making art. I have seen at first hand the wide variety of work that curators, conservators and collections managers do with their collections, the knowledge they have of their collections and the history of collecting. In their decision to treasure and preserve collections, while displaying only part, museums continue the partiality of the work of the collectors. They do this knowingly and sometimes attempt to allude to the rest, to signpost the partiality of the current display and more rarely also the partiality of the collection. Some museum decision-making is pragmatic in a way that is similar to the collectors' decisions on whose collections museums are based. Other decisions are ideas-based.

What unites the three artists of the *Accumulate* exhibition at St Albans Museum + Gallery, Lyndall Phelps, Katy Gillam-Hull and Abi Spendlove, is their shared fascination with failed projects of collecting, preserving, conserving, and understanding what motivates both collectors and museum professionals who work with these historical collections. Each artist has a slightly different relationship to the questions that museums and collections evoke, and I share their interest. Katy Gillam-Hull's engagement with the Salaman Tool Collection scratches at the veneer of the collector; his ordering, selecting and display. What strikes her is his meticulous cataloguing and labelling, his record-keeping. Her focus on the handles of chisels, one small subset of all the tools in the collection, echoes Salaman and the process of rendering a tool a museum object through a process of objectifying, aestheticising and decontextualising. Gillam-Hull skilfully solders metal rods in the shape of the handles, framing the silhouettes, and creating useless *objets d'art* from the most useful of hand tools. This

intervention, like Salaman's before her, uses aesthetics to bring to viewers' attention these particular tools, implying the hands that held them and also the question of redundancy.

Any collection raises the question of what counts?

At first this question seems barbaric in its stupidity. A tool is a tool and this would have seemed obvious to Salaman. An artist who works with museums is an artist who works with museums: a question equally obvious for Putnam. On closer inspection, though, the assumptions of the collector emerge. As with any collector, Putnam's collection betrays the collector. While being a capacious volume of interesting artists working with museums and collections, it omits too many varieties. Similar to Salaman, there is a heavy emphasis in Putnam on the masculine. Putnam indeed fails to value or to collect with his tome, the work of indigenous artists all over the postcolonial world who intervene into the logic of museums and colonial possession.

In addition to the inclusions and exclusions of the collector and the original collection, there are also the losses over time, or taphonomy as an archaeologist might call it, the processes of time both to decay and to preserve, with often predictable results. The process of taphonomy in Salaman's Tool Collection lies in its erosion once it was distributed to other museums. Part of the collection was sent to the Science Museum in London. Taphonomy is the study of decay, and it is the study of preservation. The process of preserving is ensured, for the moment, in artist Gillam-Hull's reimagining and reinvigorating a small section of it. Like Salaman, Gillam-Hull's artwork, *Rescued, Retained, Revered*, serves the museological goal of preservation by re-valuing past material culture. Perhaps it also serves education, informing a public about these dying skills and trades, just as Salaman had wished. But it also reiterates the impulse European culture has had since modernity to collect and display that which we don't fully understand simply for the aesthetic thrill of it all. Since the sixteenth century and the new technology of display, namely the *wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosities, we artists and also collectors have shared an interest in the curious and inexplicable, making sense – and nonsense – of our worlds through this medium. Collectors and curators share with artists a desire to order and describe the world according to our own values, interests and aesthetics.

Abi Spendlove's investigation into the medieval glass in St Albans Museums' collections has become part of the process of taphonomy. What began as the thrill of investigation into the back storage of the Museum, opening archival boxes that haven't been opened since they were first assembled and placed on shelves, became very quickly a self-conscious process of atrophy and decay. Looking through the contents of archival boxes, peering carefully and with reverence at the ancient glass shards once part of St Albans Abbey, Spendlove herself was adding to their destruction. Loss, absence, decay, preservation, knowledge, what gets passed on, what is hidden, are questions integral to Spendlove's work, and to the work of the Museum. There is the desire in Spendlove to keep everything intact, and the mandate of the museum to do so, and more. Yet it is futile or paradoxical. Exposure to light and hands creates knowledge of the objects, and knowledge of almost forgotten boxes, but it also destroys their very contents. Every museum has boxes that haven't been opened since they were deposited and every curator has the obligation to balance the need to share collections with a public and the need to preserve for future publics.

In one small corner of one regional museum, Spendlove re-enacts and embodies this tension. The ancient glass she has worked with, delaminated, decaying and now opaque, has been given new homes in shallow beds cut from polyethylene foam, keeping each shard apart, set three atop in archival boxes, where once they moved freely like particles of sand in an hourglass. Boxes and boxes in the Museums' care remain uninvestigated. The glass in the many boxes is dated 1400-1920. At least some of the glass hails from before the dissolution of St Albans Abbey, as it was found in the 1978-82 Abbey orchard excavation. Some is much more recent. In the end, confronted with an almost endless array of boxes and their splintered contents, Spendlove settled on a random selection of the most stable samples. Those have been repackaged because of the artist's use, her interest in looking through the archive. Others remain free of damage-preventing swaddling. Yet all this fails to prevent further damage. Still the shards crumble. Spendlove is conscious of the dust, bits falling on the floor as she inspects and handles the oxidising, laminating bits of glass, now both opaque and iridescent as the product of time. She brings this exquisite awareness to her drawings, sculptural Perspex and a display of the Museums' glass. The ironic awareness that display causes damage but also preservation is there in the name of the artwork, *Fragments*, and in the framed white on white work of fragment silhouettes cut from archival mount board.

Collectors are part of the process of taphonomy. They select to preserve, and what we know about the past has a life in the present through their collections. What they fail to select, for reasons of pragmatism or oversight, is lost before time has begun to slip by. Lyndall Phelps deliberately steps into the gaps formed in the process of collecting for St Albans Museums. The nineteenth century gentlemen collectors that Phelps celebrates and wryly addresses in *A Curious Conversation*, had collections that were aired and honoured in an 1880s 'conversazione', a pop-up temporary exhibition, that later became foundational for the St Albans Museums. As with any collection, much was omitted by these earliest gentlemen collectors. With *Abundance* (2015), Phelps filled the old Museum of St Albans with a set of collections that could have been, the detritus of other local industries neglected by other collectors. With eight weeks before the Museum's closure, and the building's own process of taphonomy through redevelopment into housing, preserving some bits and destroying others, Phelps filled the voids created in the relocation of the Museum's collection with an alternative collection. By the last day before the old Museum of St Albans shut

permanently in 2015, she had taken over the whole museum, a quotidian process that filled the eight weeks demarcated for closure.

What Putnam shares with his predecessors is a network and institutional position that enables his personal collection to become institutionalised as a large and beautiful book available in universities, libraries, and presumably elsewhere. A lack of resources, networks of privilege and authority, means that Phelps' contribution to a history of artists working ambitiously and creatively with museums goes uncollected. Meanwhile Banksy's take-over of the Bristol Museum is reiterated, constantly cited as the ultimate in artists working with the museum. (There is a heavy emphasis on the masculine.) The process of taphonomy continues.

But the *Accumulate* exhibition at least offers the visitor a small and partial glimpse of the ambitious intervention *Abundance* that once was whole. In this, it is like the sherds dug up by archaeologists that speak of a once magnificent whole, which we must try to imagine because it no longer exists. *Accumulate* offers us the chance to view once again the almost fetish-like whip-brushes of the H. Rose & Sons brushmakers intervention along with contemporary examples made by another local company in all their unexpected variety. Phelps' hand-manufactured engagements with industry are colour-coded, creating a closed system of reference to other exhibits, including the stocking boards that allude to the now-defunct Ballito stocking company's offerings; also to the Ryder Seed company's gladioli range named after British birds. Ryder is the Ryder of the Ryder Cup, a name with salience beyond the world of golf, and golf balls vie for attention with *Nigella Love-in-a-Mist* in a well-ordered display grid that evokes the display of specimens common to natural history. The naming or taxonomy of things suddenly seems random and quixotic, and also somehow not far from the process of both science and museum display.

Here I intervene into my account of Phelps' artwork, *Abundance*, with a mention of *Flutter*, which serves as an intervention into the new St Albans Museum + Gallery. We first experience *Flutter* just above our eye line, congregating in the corners as butterflies do, when trapped inside, huddled for safety, or for sex. These are highly colourful square sequins mounted as early lepidopterists did, sewing the butterfly wings open to enjoy their colourful display. To help the casual viewer read the artfully arranged sets of sequins, there is a wall at the top of the Grand Staircase with gilded names on highly coloured mirrored surfaces of butterflies that once were in the collection of St Albans Museums. The Alexander Hopkins British Butterfly Collection was, in 2000, transported to the Maidstone Museum & Bents Art Gallery and Phelps imagines their return, albeit abstracted, ghost-like. One wall pins down a potential meaning for the Museum + Gallery of these transient visitors with an arrangement of display boards the same shape and size as that which houses the original collection of pinned butterflies. The experience of *Flutter* is completed by pinned coloured beads that create pixelated duplicates of the original collection, including its absences.

The question of absence is a theme that haunts Phelps and her engagement with the collections. Absence is inherently part of any collection, just as negative space is used to draw a form, how an object or subject is made present in any drawing from life. What isn't collected defines what is. Absence was there from the beginning, as the collector chooses, selects and overlooks. Absence continues through the processes of taphonomy, and then is consolidated by a later conscious process of disposal. This is the story of Phelps' artwork, *A Curious Conversation*. The 1880s 'conversazione', pop-up exhibition, had a complete list of exhibits printed by the *Herts Advertiser*. It was this that Phelps attempted to recreate and found, instead of completeness, the product of taphonomy, absence.

One thing, of all of the many things in the original exhibition, can be verified to exist in the current collection: a leather pouch with flint for producing sparks, donated by Miss Cherry. There is also a range of things still within the custody of St Albans Museums that may or may not be from the original 'conversazione'. An educated guess that the Buckingham watercolours in the collection are the same as those donated by a Mr A Bond seems fitting, the type of thing any museum curator would endorse. But where Phelps takes this reconstruction project to its artistic limits is where she re-creates that which has completely disappeared. Just as the butterfly collection and some of Salaman's tools are now cared for by other museums, it seems that whole categories of things no longer exist. Botany and ethnography are categories no longer benefiting from the custodianship of St Albans Museum where once they were welcomed.

What does this particular form of taphonomy say of the Museum today? Why are these categories eroded while others are preserved, we might ask. Phelps answers with stand-ins for these parts of the original collection, including 'Fijian' body adornments, to use the museum vernacular, and anachronistic 'Zulu' ladies earplugs of 1940s and 50s design taking the place of the pre-1880 originals of the 'conversazione'. Lost material culture is recreated, including fabric from old Indian saris collected from a small British bag manufacturer that uses the discarded material, as well as from contemporary British and Australian fabric designers. Also re-presented are herbarium specimens and 'two baskets of silk cocoons' stitched, as well as collections of religious artefacts.

What *Accumulate* does is gently interrogate the process of collections and display, the underbelly of all museum activity anywhere. Their project is with the historical collections and the contemporary incarnation of historical processes of

accumulation. Phelps, Gillam-Hull and Spendlove respond aesthetically to this history, bringing awareness to both this local example and, obliquely, to a much bigger question at a time when collecting and display have taken on global urgency. There are magnificent new museums all over the world being newly built by innovative architects, and filled with assumptions and the material culture that embodies these assumptions. There are inclusions and exclusions that echo and reverberate, making possible and impossible what happens elsewhere within culture. Global archives of scientific matter are also being funded and praised, despite operating against the known fallacies of universal, encyclopaedic collecting. There are various seed banks and zoological ark projects that are attempting to archive everything living in the face of climate change and probable extinction. Any museum professional knows that they can only archive that which is known, and valued. The archived DNA of animals of the Frozen Ark Project focuses solely on the pure animal DNA, with quite a lot of emphasis on the fluffy and charismatic, denying the coexistence, multitudes and importance of symbiotic microbes that enable life. Microbes are not being archived. Still the ark scientists persist in imagining they are archiving everything, that they are archiving life.

Once something is lost, when it is overlooked, it remains lost forever. The process of erosion can only be halted, not reversed. The exhibition *Accumulate* highlights the inherent tension in, and perhaps the folly of, all archives and museums.

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