BEHIND THE LOCKED DOOR

An archaeology of the store rooms of the Cantor Arts Center, Stanford

Don’t you often wonder about what museums keep in their store rooms, but rarely manage to display? The hidden, perhaps forgotten, treasures of “The Archive”

Last year, between March 2007 and April 2008, in a small gallery off the main stair well in our Cantor Arts Center at Stanford stood a locked steel cage full of art works … still in their protective storage boxes, half-opened to let you peek in.

a project in “animating the archive” – Archive 3.0

The artifacts were the main part of a collection I made from the store rooms of the Cantor – 52 artifacts, one for each week of the year, randomly selected from the museum’s vast database.

By the cage was a computer and an invitation to make a comment on the exhibition’s web site. To say something about what you could see in the cage, what you might imagine about the store rooms, what treasures lay down there, cared for, but unseen.

I had been asked by the Cantor to be part of their “Faculty Choice” program – to

deliver a reaction to the collections, as a member of Stanford's faculty. Others have given tours of the galleries or presented lectures on their interests in the rather marvelous holdings. I asked to be let into the basement, through the locked door into the store rooms, to see what lay within. I couldn't expect to see everything, so I developed a simple way of making a random sample of the museum's collection – random numbers taken from the radioactive decay of Caesium 137 applied to the museum's digital data base. (OK this may sound wacky – but have a look here at my thinking [Link])

I wanted to share my fascination with museum store rooms. I love the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford. I had spent many months exploring the depths of collections of Greek pottery across Europe and the Mediterranean in my 10 year study of ancient Corinthian perfume jars [Link]) So I built a web site, a wiki, that would let anyone view the artifacts dredged from the store rooms, alongside available information about them, and then add comment or reaction. I worked with a team of high school and college students who did just this and presented their own personal collection of art works, together with stories and researches.

This had worked well for an exhibition of the photography of Edward Burtynsky held in 2005. The accompanying wiki attracted over 70,000 interactions and delivered some very interesting discussions – [Link]

I planned a series of additions to the exhibition with the high school students – images and clippings in a collage on the gallery wall, and perhaps some more artifacts, everyday items, placed alongside the cage.

But the project stalled. After the first contributions from the students I let the web site rest. I have hesitated to share the reasons, but there are some very interesting dilemmas at the core of my experience.

What is to be done with collections in museums of artifacts about which we know very little?

Though the Cantor Art Center has developed a focus upon the arts over the last ten years and more, since the museum was redesigned after the '89 earthquake, its storerooms are still dominated by the original Stanford Family collections and a cascade of donations made since. Jane and Leland junior were quite eclectic and even promiscuous in their buying. Other donations are very mixed in their character

and quality. Most are not the kind of thing you would put in a conventional gallery exhibition.

My encounter with these collections in the store rooms was based upon an exploration of the database, though it was far more fascinating to simply open drawers at random to see what was within. The Cantor is a well-resourced and well-run establishment. Its storerooms are state of the art in their organization and protection offered to the artifacts.

Nevertheless, of the 52 artifacts chosen at random from the database, 5 were found to be missing. And none had any significant detailed information concerning where they came from. There were some beautiful items, and some quite strange. The old

pistol in the cigar box was rather evocative. But all the information about the artifacts was circumstantial and incidental, usually concerning the donor.

I had anticipated this. The project was designed to evoke and provoke. The involvement of the students and the accompanying web site were designed to *add* context, *of whatever kind*, to the artifacts.

Here is how I put it:

Animating the archive

Archives – the collections at the heart of our experience of history – need to be brought alive. As well as looking after the remains of the past for the future, we might make something of the past in the present.

Opening up the importance of context

A crucial issue is context . Artifacts become tautologies if we don’t know where they came from, the circumstances of their making, use, exchange and discard, who cared for them, what became of them, their life history. Tautology – because we only confirm what we already know when we assign an artifact to a class simply on the basis of what its form tells us and through reference of form and attributes to a standard catalogue or art history. This Corinthian perfume jar

is … a Corinthian perfume jar! Albeit a beautiful/ugly/different/regular one.

Connecting collection with storytelling

Collections and archives come to life when we tell stories about them. When we connect things to contexts in this way.

Revealing value

This project asks questions about the character of collection. Why do some things fascinate? What values lie behind collection?

Things are collected when they are seen to have some value. The art museum is often interested in aesthetic value, how an artifact is a testament to an artist's skills, and to the taste of the collector in acquiring such a fine example.

How interesting is this? There are many different kinds of value – ways of finding interest in an artifact because of how it speaks to you, of its qualities and experiences, how these connect with your own.

This project encourages us to explore different kinds of value through the members of a collection.

Revealing the personal

Value always also has a personal dimension. It is how ”’you”’ connect with a thing, how ”’you”’ find it of value.

This project is about exploring such personal responses.

Richer accounts – challenging the standard stories

Much collection and exhibition starts and ends with familiar stories. The history of art; the story of an artist; the variety of a type of valued artifact; the history of a region.

This project begins with a random selection from items in store, not with a story or contribution to art history, nor with some intrinsic quality, though all of these may have originally led to an item joining the museum.

The project sets us the task of finding connections and weaving stories. Its emphasis is upon the process of building a collection.

This is quite a different basis to exhibition. We expect to generate richer experiences and stories.

Redeming the past

Think of all this as a kind of rescue or salvage archaeology, an animation of the cultural archive that is a museum, a redemption of the loss inherent in the ruin that is history, making good the gaps, the missing pieces.

So what went wrong?

Nothing really. Except that the responses revealed the inherent poverty of collections like this Or, more precisely, the complexity, the contradictions at the heart of notions of cultural value. The students struggled, quite appropriately, to reconcile the expectation that they would learn from the artifacts (about the ancient past, Asian arts, archaeology) with the reality that the collection only came to life when connected with quite subjective aspects of their own experience that actually said nothing much at all about the artifacts (the students produced some fascinating micro-narratives of their lives, hopes, interests).

Paradox – the poverty of such collections in terms of historical and archaeological value is only revealed through the attention and engagement of “collectors” – those fascinated with archives and museums. This runs deep into the values contested in the market for ancient art and antiquities. Collectors love the things for their

qualities; for art historians and archaeologists and those of like mind, the things are located in much broader and richer contexts.

So the web site was showing conspicuously that the collection of a great and well-run museum such as that at Stanford is actually not all that rich as a resource for learning.

Perhaps this is not such a bad thing?

Tom Seligman, Director of the Cantor Arts Center, has pioneered the radical evolution from “museum” to “arts center”, emphasizing active and very explicit development of the university’s holdings of art, very conscious of these issues of value. This issue of the pedagogical and cultural value of collections needs airing. A university collection is a good place to start.

I do think also that people need to know about a connected scandal, little known to most. Well-organized and well-managed collections, such as that at Stanford, are the exception. I have seen vast collections of fabulous works lying rotting and undocumented in so many museum store rooms across the world.

More information – [Link]

Gallery – [Link]

On museum futures – [Link]

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