

There's the story, then there's the real story, then there's the story of how the story came to be told. Then there's what you leave out of the story. Which is part of the story too.

Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam* (Bloomsbury, 2013)

Introduction

My background is mainly in museums and built heritage, rather than archives. This short paper draws on that experience, but I also want to explore the ideas underpinning the work of the artist in all of these places – what it means, and how it adds to something we loosely call 'heritage'. Erroneously, we tend to assume that heritage is all about the past, and maybe the future – what we inherit, and what we hand on. In many ways, however, it is actually about the present, and how we see ourselves now. As the Australian archaeologist and academic, Laurajane Smith, has so memorably put it: 'there's no such thing as heritage'. Stonehenge, she continues, is 'basically a collection of rocks in a field. ... What makes [them] valuable and meaningful – what makes them 'heritage' ... are the present-day cultural processes and activities that are undertaken at and around them, and of which they become a part'.¹

It is that process of 'becoming a part' – of art, of heritage – that I would like to consider today. The artist in the archive not as an outreach or audience engagement activity, although obviously it can be both of these things and both are important, but as something integral to the process of making meaning. It should go without saying, of course, that outreach and audience engagement are also part of the process of making meaning.

Animating Museums

Museums, galleries and historic sites have a long history of commissioning work from visual artists and makers, who use their collections as a source of artistic inspiration. Such interventions aren't particularly new or remarkable. More recently, however, visual artists have been joined by musicians, dancers, theatre performers, and writers. Their work focuses

¹ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of heritage*, Routledge: 2006, p.3

on the collection, much as it has always done, but also on the audience and on the audience as participant. As one filmmaker, and guest curator at the Natural History Museum, has put it:

It's not about the art, it's about the visitors - the way visitors feel and behave in those kinds of spaces, something about power and passivity and the possibility of [the right] art to democratise, to make meaningful and equal connections between non-experts and specialist areas... *Sarah Punshon*, quoted in Murch and Porter, *Animating Museums*, 2013

Examples from a recent study for the Arts Council gives us some idea of the range of possible interventions:

- **An external voice – breaking the rules and challenging assumptions:** *British Museum: Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, curated by Grayson Perry.
- **Opening up spaces** – working with artists to move people in new ways to and through buildings and spaces that may be unexplored: *Enlivening the Darwin Centre - a pilot arts events programme at the Natural History Museum*, curated by Sarah Punshon – various artists.
- **Creating extraordinary effects** and creating a sense of event and excitement to embellish and transform a tired site or gallery: *Enchanted Palace, Historic Royal Palaces* – various artists.
- **Creating a sense of event and excitement:** the museum as venue: *Supersonix and V&A residency* - Jason Singh, sound artist.
- **Breathing new life into collections** – bringing new perspectives, changing cultures and behaviours in relation to collections; creating research opportunities for artists: *Thresholds at Cambridge University Museums*, curated by Carol Ann Duffy.
- **Artists and communities as place makers** – new languages that enable people to connect at an emotional and personal level: *Transform, Snibston Discovery Museum* – Maurice Maguire, lead artist.
- **Bringing stories to life**, artistic interludes that connect past and present; and enable audiences to make imaginative leaps: *Foundling Museum – Exchange: 1000 Good Deeds* - Clare Twomey.
- **Making/bridging cultural connections** between communities and museums: *Luton Culture, as part of Material Response, an MLA Stories of the World/Cultural Olympiad project* – various artists.

The same study has shown that work with artists can:

- stimulate visitors' curiosity and interaction, inspire wonder and encourage creativity.
- draw on, and draw out, stories, collections and connections previously unseen and unknown to visitors.
- Bring in outside thinking and inject new expertise, which can develop the skills of both museums and artists, empower and energise staff and transform organisational culture.²

So we have lots of examples of interesting practice and some evidence of the respective benefits of such practice to the artist, the organisation and the visitor. Art in all its forms is primarily seen as way of enlivening, interpreting or reinterpreting a place or collection – approaching it from a different direction, seeing familiar objects in new ways, making connections with new audiences.

Thus Grayson Perry's installation at the BM explored 'a range of themes connected with notions of craftsmanship and sacred journeys – from shamanism, magic and holy relics to motorbikes, identity and contemporary culture'. It included vases 'covered in witty captions, elaborate tapestries and the centrepiece, a richly decorated cast iron coffin-ship', which were 'displayed alongside objects from the past two million years of culture and civilisation'; and offered visitors 'a reality that [was] old and new, poetic and factual, and funny as well as grim'.³

Carole-Anne Duffy, describing the Thresholds project with Cambridge University Museums, speaks of 'a meeting of minds and disciplines and ... a catalyst for ideas', for which the Museums' 'remarkable collections', from the Fitzwilliam to the Polar Museum, the Botanic Gardens to the Whipple Museum, were essential.⁴

Archiving the artist

At the same time, the value of archiving the artist is also well, if more recently, understood.

² Gaby Porter & Anne Murch, *Animating Museums – Working with Artists – Engaging Audiences* (unpub paper, Arts Council England / British Museum, 2013)

³ Grayson Perry, The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman:
http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/grayson_perry/introduction.aspx

⁴ <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/poet-laureate-launches-major-poetry-and-museums-project>

In 2011, for example, a major conference co-ordinated by the Getty Institute considered how 'artists have become increasingly interested in archives both as inspiration and as an artistic medium. Accumulating and sorting—the same impulses that drive the creation of an archive—feed the process of making assemblages and collages. Conceptual and performance art continue to blur the line between art and documentation. And more recently, many artists draw on the archive to revisit and re-enact earlier works ... archives not only trace the creative process but also become part of that process and even of the work itself'.⁵

Closer to home, Tate Britain co-ordinated its own conference in 2007 on 'The Archival Impulse: artists and archives' and on 'Archiving the artist' in 2009. A series of published essays and an online archive of related 'Tate Papers' emerged from these conferences and from the discussions which went on around them; I have drawn heavily on these in researching this paper.⁶

So there is already a body of material available to us about the value of art and artists the archive, drawn from the experience of museums and historic houses, and an emerging body of work about the impact of such interventions on archival – as well as artistic – practice. The archivists at the London School of Economics, for example, were surprised to find themselves, as well as their holdings, the subject of artistic investigation: 'When Ruth Maclennan based herself in the Archives Office we expected her to browse through the archives and create new works inspired by them. We were slightly taken aback to find that she found us, the archivists more interesting, and the major piece of work coming out of the residency was a series of video interviews with members of the archive team ...', a process which in turn made them re-examine their own practice.⁷

⁵ http://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/events/artists_archives/

⁶ In addition to the Tate Papers referred to below, see also, for example: Judy Vaknin et al, *All this stuff: archiving the artist* Libri Publishing, 2013

⁷ Sue Donnelly, 'Art in the archives: An Artist's Residency in the Archives of the London School of Economics', *Tate Papers* Issue 9, 2008: <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/art-archives-artists-residency-archives-london-school-economics>

Making art, making heritage

Even so, the focus of much of this work remains on the artist as interpreter – exploring, commenting on, subverting – an existing collection. Recent research at the University of York, for example, deals almost exclusively with art as a way of interpreting the past. The researchers noted that ‘art enabled audiences to ‘look again’: noticing, seeing again, experiencing heritage in a new way. [It enabled them] to re-engage with their local heritage; ... the art interventions made visible these heritage spaces that had become taken for granted by local communities’.⁸ But this is not simply about interpreting past events or historic spaces. Art made in the museum or in the archive – of whatever form – becomes another layer of cultural heritage – adding to what we already have, and changing the ways in which we might understand what already exists. There is neat correlation here between Grayson Perry’s ‘reality’: old and new, poetic and factual, funny and grim, and Hal Foster’s well known observation that archives are ‘found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private’.⁹

There is something important going on here, and it is particularly important in the archive, or in the museum used as archive. From Jacques Derrida, we already know that archives are places of power and authority – are artists challenging this, or reinforcing it? We know too, of the ambiguous and fragmentary nature of their contents. That they record, as Sue Breakell has pointed out, only what is written and processed, and far less what is said or thought.¹⁰ That the most important story, after all, may be that which is written between the lines or in the margins.

⁸ Nuala Morse and Helen Weinstein, ‘Contemporary Art or Heritage: Devices for Public Engagement with the Past and the Present’, *Navigating the Past*, University of York, June 2011: <http://www.york.ac.uk/ipup/events/seminars/ntp-art-heritage-report.html>

⁹ Hal Foster, ‘An archival impulse’ *October* 110, Fall 2004, p. 5

¹⁰ Sue Breakell, Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive *Tate Papers* Issue 9 2008:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/perspectives-negotiating-archive>

But if the archive is a place of power and authority, then it might also be a place of empowerment, precisely because of those meanings in the margins. One of the first and most frequently cited examples of an artist reinterpreting a collection, of turning one group of objects into something quite different and wholly unexpected, was Fred Wilson's 'Mining the Museum'.

In 1992, at the invitation of Maryland Historical Society, Wilson juxtaposed items from its collection to reveal the history of Native and Black Americans in Baltimore. Some of these juxtapositions were deeply shocking: a KluKluxKlan hood placed in a baby carriage; shackles amongst silverware. But the objects themselves were, until that point, seen as largely unremarkable or essentially mute: domestic items, pieces of furniture, place settings. They had been there all the time, properly documented and catalogued in the Society's archive. So it was less that these histories had been hidden, but that they existed in the *relationships* between each object – in the spaces around them – the silences between them. They were invisible, not because they had been hidden – although that had undoubtedly happened too, but because no one believed that they were there.

So this brings us back to those processes and activities which we use to turn some physical objects and some cultural practices into 'heritage'. We list buildings and designate collections; we encourage the learning of disappearing languages and record the craftsmanship of declining industries. We attribute meaning and value to some things and not to others, and make decisions about resources, and access, as a result.

We do this in the archive too, through the processes of deciding what to retain, through priorities for cataloguing or research, through the very special things we choose to place on display or write a blog about. What the artist might do, however, is to challenge our assumptions about what is or isn't special, or reveal the connections between documents currently separated by miles of shelving and the benign protection of archival quality storage. Working in these spaces, uncovering the stories in the margins, is a powerful contribution to make to our understanding – perhaps of the past – but more of who we are and what we think now, and why this matters. In adding value – looking differently – we change the nature of the collection itself, however fleetingly, just as Wilson did when he put together those objects in different ways and made the visitor confront the stories contained

not simply within them, but in the relationships between them. The ACE study referred to earlier talks about the artist drawing out connections *unknown to visitors*. Equally important are the connections unknown to the curator or to the archivist, but which become part of what makes the stuff of heritage valuable and meaningful in the first place. And this is important for all of us.

Alison Hems
School of Humanities and Cultural Industries
Bath Spa University
30th September 2013