

Remixing Museology: An approach to collecting social media in museums



Figure 1. A reimagining of a social history museum, featuring a doge meme. Created from an image credited to The Museum of Cardiff, remixed with a doge image.

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

At its core, this is a thesis about collecting social media in museums. As part of it I have drawn on theories of remix (Lessig, 2008, Navas et al., 2015) and appropriate museology (Kreps, 2008, 2015) to argue that in order for museums to be able to collect social media, they need to *remix* collections management processes to make them more *appropriate* for new and emerging object types.

Essentially...



Figure 2. Hotline Bling meme created using imgflip.com

My research was driven by my own love of getting involved and has led to what I can only describe as a mixed-methodology approach. Taking an overarchingly autoethnographic approach, I've utilised reflexive dyadic interviews, action research and self-reflection. The thesis is structured around past attempts at collecting social media at the Museum of London and Victoria and Albert Museum, my participation in the Collecting Social Photo project, and practicing what I preach at the National Science and Media Museum where I worked collaboratively to collect an 'absolute unit' of a social media object. Throughout, I have been guided by the concept of 'Remix Museology' which has emerged as a way to make ongoing pragmatic and incremental remixes to collecting practices to support the culturally and ethically appropriate acquisition of new and emerging objects.

Whilst this thesis is primarily interested in Remix Museology as a method to support collecting social media, you may have noticed that I am also using alternative forms of academic writing. I write in a way that reflects the objects I am advocating museums collect, my methodological choices and my approach to change which makes careful use of humour. As a result, this thesis also works to remix academic form; taking a hop, skip and a jump towards online cultures, harnessing the critical power of memes, emojis and humour in a way that is appropriate to both the topic and method at hand.

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1. Me and My Approach

1.1 Me...

Hey there, my name is Arran and I'm a millennial museum professional and researcher. I have wide ranging interests across museums and heritage, but particularly in collecting, collections management, humour and digital cultures. I have other interests too. My Twitter bio describes me as 'A Welsh researcher based in Manchester. Interested in museums, memes, cats & food. PhD research based @fahacs in museums, memes & social media collecting. He/him.' My Instagram bio reads: 'Wandering and photographing things I like. Doctoral Researcher.' (*Obviously, trying to be more mysterious here*). Meanwhile, my LinkedIn describes me as: 'A doctoral researcher at the University of Leeds, with over a decade's worth of experience working in and researching museums, collections and cultural heritage.' Taking a bit of inspiration from the brilliant Dolly Parton meme concept that took social media by storm early in 2020, I've made my very own PhD-style #DollyPartonChallenge meme:



Figure 3 – My very own PhD-themed #DollyPartonChallengeMeme

I have many faces to my identity that I express through a range of online social media platforms and I communicate with my friends and family through an eclectic

range of photos, screenshots, memes and emojis. I am not alone in this, and this did not happen overnight.

I grew up just outside Merthyr Tydfil in the Welsh Valleys in the early 2000s, just at the right age to be one of the first emos in town. Through Myspace, I connected with people around the world, sharing my passion for Evanescence song lyrics, long fringes and skinny jeans; engaging in teenage politics through selecting my 'Top 8' friends list, displayed on my painstakingly designed profile page. I'd love to share with you what it looked like, but I can't. Myspace lost all content uploaded before 2016 in a so-called 'server migration error' in 2019 (Hern, 2019).

I began to understand that I was gay around the age of 14. I connected with people from all over the world on MSN Messenger and in other chatrooms – spending hours every evening keeping the home phone engaged, using the dial-up Internet to talk to other people like me, people who did not seem to exist in my local area. The importance of online spaces and social digital tools in connecting LGBTQ people across the world cannot be underestimated (Mowlabocus, 2016; Phillips and Milner, 2017: 71) – especially for us millennials coming to terms with our sexuality, as digital connectivity was expanding so rapidly. I'd love to share some of the conversations that shaped me as the person I am today, helped me to understand my sexuality and gave me a safe space outside the confines of the Welsh Valleys to express myself... But I can't – none of those conversations were saved. MSN Messenger doesn't exist anymore – I can't log in and see if any of those people are still on my friends list – send them a nudge or an obscene number of emojis.

Stories like these are startlingly absent from museum narratives. Will social history museums be able to develop exhibitions on growing up in the early 2000s without being able to tell the stories of Myspace and MSN Messenger? Are we able to effectively represent queer narratives (amongst many others) without engaging with how digital tools changed the game for many LGBTQ people? Have we already lost the chance to record the way we communicated and expressed ourselves through the Internet in the early 2000s?

I went to Swansea University in 2005 after finishing my A Levels. I met a lot of people, made a lot of friends, and opened a Facebook account (what a life milestone!). I don't have the phone numbers or email addresses of most of the people I met, and I haven't printed any photos from one of the most exciting times of my life. They all exist on Facebook (although, to be honest, some are so bad I have de-tagged them!). I wonder sometimes, what would I do if Facebook decided to start charging for the number of photos on an account? It's not an unprecedented move. Flickr – an early online haven for open and shareable photography – introduced a charging model in 2018. In March 2019 they began deleting photographs from accounts with more than 1,000 images that hadn't signed up to be Pro Members (Gartenberg, 2018). Would I sign up to pay for Facebook, or would I remove all the photos I could and think of another place to put them? What about all the sweet, funny and nostalgic comments – where would they go?

I remember some of my early engagements with contemporary meme cultures – tagging friends in random pictures on Facebook; sending silly images via email; and poorly 'photoshopping' images of a friend's head onto someone else's body. These were just some of my interactions with the beginnings of what Lawrence Lessig calls Remix Culture. In Lessig's Remix Culture, society moves from a read only mode of experiencing culture, to a read/write mode fuelled by the development of digital and online technologies. In this read/write mode we read culture, digest it, edit it and share it. We remix it (Lessig, 2008). A lot of the early creative remixes have been lost – my awful amateur ones for sure, but also some exciting content from short-form video platforms like Vine, which is credited with inspiring a whole new genre of creative six second video forms (Redi et al., 2014). The platform has now closed and while some of the content has made its way to YouTube or been embedded in tweets, much of it has been lost. The concept has been built upon by platforms like TikTok, which is one of the newest big-hitters in the social media landscape.

I believe it's fair to say that how a generation of people began using online social platforms is already lost to history, out of reach for museum collections, and for thoughtful and engaging interpretation. With current platforms, we have a chance to begin developing approaches to collect from them.

In undertaking this PhD, I set out to look at how we might do that.

1.2 ...and my approach

When I started this PhD, I set out to undertake a piece of work that critically engaged with collections management standards and developed methods for collecting social media content. I was motivated by improving the ways in which museums collect, and to achieve this aim, I understood the need to critically reflect on how museums operate, their logics and how social media challenged those. My aim has always been to produce a thesis that could be read, understood and applied by people working in the sector, not just a heavily theoretical thesis with limited on-the-ground impact. I was keen to mobilise professional networks and use my own experiences, trust in my own sense of collaborative work and activate the tacit knowledge I had built up over a decade of working in and with museums.

As a result of this desire to develop accessible and practically grounded research, I used autoethnography and action research as my key methodologies. I explored how social media has been collected in the past; followed and took part in emerging research that opened up the ways in which social media could be collected in museums; and collaborated with a museum to actually collect social media content. In carrying out this work, I came to understand a number of the ways in which social media can be collected by museums – one of the original key outcomes of my research project. However, that is not necessarily what this thesis is all about. Through doing the research, it became apparent that people and museums as institutions need to reorientate themselves to collect new and emerging objects. Therefore, whilst in undertaking my research I critically engaged with collections management standards to develop methods for collecting social media – this thesis is more about how I did that – the way in which the research happened is as important as the research findings. In paying attention to the ways in which my research approach has enabled the research outcomes, I have conceptualised what I refer to as ‘Remix Museology’ as a way of enacting change in museums.

My approach to writing about how the research happened became part of the wider project and argument of this thesis. It draws from lived experiences, tacit forms of knowing, humorous forms of engagement, and awkward encounters, as I’ve

attempted to navigate action-focused research, wearing both my museum professional and academic researcher hats. Through undertaking this research and writing this thesis, the concept of Remix Museology has emerged as a form of practice that aims to make ongoing pragmatic and incremental adaptations to collecting practices in order to support the culturally and ethically appropriate acquisition of new and emerging object types – in the case of this thesis, social media objects. The development of Remix Museology emerged from my own approach to research: from reflecting on my own experiences of enacting change in museums, as well as a growing body of scholarship on appropriate and adaptive forms of museum work, and the research activities described, analysed and reflected on in this thesis. Remix Museology was developed through the work of this PhD and I see it as a method for museum practitioners seeking to create more appropriate forms of collections management for new and emerging objects.

Ensuring my research produced benefits for on-the-ground museum practitioners was really important to me. I stated at the beginning of the thesis that I am a museum professional as well as an academic researcher, and I have attempted to harness skillsets, knowledge and networks from both identities throughout the PhD. There have long been discussions about the distance between academic museum studies and the realities of the profession (Teather, 1991; Rice, 2003; Starn, 2005; Dewdney et al., 2013; Grewcock, 2014; McCarthy, 2015; 2016). One of my favourite quotes I came across early in the PhD was from Duncan Grewcock in his work on 'doing museology differently'. Grewcock noted that in 'heavily critical-theoretical studies, one could be forgiven for thinking that visiting a museum has not actually formed any part of the study' (2014: 190).

I think it would be fair to say that I came to this PhD believing that most academic research was like this – totally abstracted from the reality of the sector. I have since come to agree with Conal McCarthy that every time I've carried out an activity or procedure in my professional career, a theory or set of assumptions has been in place to give them meaning (2016: 28). In coming to understand this, I have become more comfortable with the idea that I have been theorising and testing my theories as part of this PhD. Anthony Shelton, a museum practitioner and scholar, sums up this realisation in saying: 'Only through theorising museum practices do we become

conscious of the presuppositions that we apply to our everyday work, and only through rigorous deconstruction and reflexivity of that work can we develop fresh insights and innovations necessary to ensure the future development of museums' (2013: 14). Whilst Shelton's call for deconstruction and reflexivity is a helpful place to begin conceptualising how academic research and museum practice can more readily come together, an ongoing issue remains in the communication gap between practitioners and academics. This gap in the ways in which academics and practitioners communicate makes knowledge sharing more difficult and is a challenge that needs to be addressed through collaborative dialogue, or 'intense (and perhaps endless) conversation' (Ripamonti et al., 2016: 55). Shelton is a major proponent of Critical Museology – a form of studying museums that focuses on practice, but with critical theoretical questions that seek to explore power, agency and the historical, political and economic contexts in which those practices were formalised (Teather and Carter, 2009; Shelton, 2001; 2013; Lorente, 2012; Mason et al., 2018). But Shelton also speaks of two other forms of museology: Operational and Praxiological Museology.¹ He defines Operational Museology as the body of knowledge, rules of application, procedures and organisational structures that make up the field of 'practical' museum work. In his definition he also includes the professional organisations, conference cycles and mentorship programmes that 'reproduce institutionalised narratives and discourses', which he claims has mostly escaped sustained analysis or criticism (Shelton, 2013: 8).

The criticality of critical museology has developed somewhat since the concept was first discussed in the early 1980s, with Shelton calling for the 'relentless incredulity' of institutionalised museum professionals (Shelton, 2001: 146). Early adopters like Lynn Teather and Jennifer Carter have tried to steer away from using a heavily critical approach, arguing that it can be destructive and block transformative processes, instead suggesting that focusing on supportive criticism is more productive (Teather and Carter, 2009: 28). I tend to agree with Teather and Carter's perspective and, whilst interested in adopting a thoughtful critical approach to

¹ Praxiological Museology is the practice of institutional critique undertaken by artists when assuming curatorial roles. In these roles they question, parody and problematise the institutional procedures and conventions by using their artistic practices to deconstruct it from the inside (Shelton, 2013: 8).

museology, I avoid some of Critical Museology's combative overtones, opting instead for the collaborative dialogues or intense conversations suggested by Ripamonti and colleagues. Therefore, whilst I am interested in an exploration of Operational Museology as defined by Shelton, I adopt a thoughtful critical approach, supported by ongoing collaborative dialogues, and conversations. In doing so, I admit that before embarking on the PhD, I was perhaps an institutionalised museum professional guilty of uncritically reciting collections management mantras...

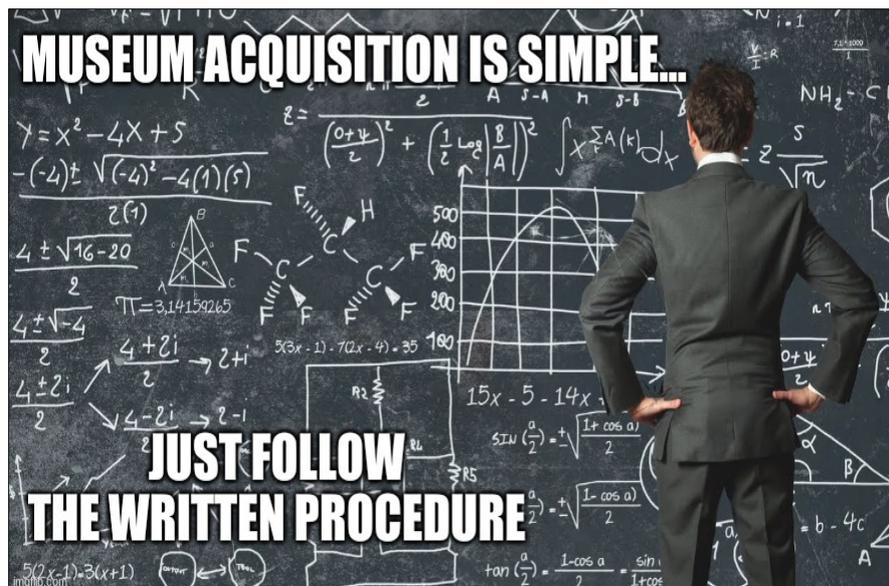


Figure 4 – 'Explaining my work' meme created using imgflip.com

My research is based in practice, but through the course of the PhD I have also developed a philosophical approach to museum practices; an approach that attempts to unsettle aspects of the institutions' traditional processes, their sometimes overly fastidious approaches to acquisition, and their general orientation towards change. My research has brought me to a point where I feel it is necessary to continuously remix museological practices in order to effectively move forward with collecting social media objects. This has led to the development of Remix Museology, which I describe in more detail in the [Remix Museology](#) chapter. Before doing that, I first dedicate some time to setting out my positionality, who I am as a researcher and practitioner, what methods I use, and how my approach to research is informed by my previous experiences in the sector, and in life more generally.

My approach to change

Having spent several years slogging away as a museum collections manager, I am particularly interested in collecting and acquisition processes. I am completely aware that anyone who knows anything about stereotypical collections managers might see my previous declaration on the need to continuously remix museological practices as inherently opposed to what a stereotypical collections manager might want. We collections managers are known for loving rules, conventions and consistency in the face of a changing world. But nonetheless, I identify as a collections manager through and through.

Working with an amazing range of people throughout my PhD has shown me a wonderful array of approaches to researching and opened my eyes to new ways of seeing the world – but I always come back to a systematic approach of sorts. I like to structure things, I like context, but I'm also pragmatic. My use of pragmatism in this thesis is informed by American pragmatism, as developed at the turn of the twentieth century. It is a philosophical tradition that broadly understands knowing the world as inseparable from context and contingency and sees value and validity in relation to relevance in real-world examples (Legg and Hookway, 2020). Early articulations of pragmatism came from William James (James, 1907 [2004]) and later John Dewey (Dewey, 1910 [2011]; Dewey, 1938 [1997]), who argued for the importance of experience and experimentation as part of the process of knowledge generation in pragmatist thinking (Bradbury, 2008: 588). A key context for my work is existing collections management standards and frameworks. My work is pragmatic insofar as it understands the value collections management standards offer to museum professionals, but it does not accept them uncritically and seeks to develop them from where they are now, with a clear acknowledgement of their contingency on the objects and the museum that collects and manages them. My stance assesses the usefulness of the standards for new and emerging object types and make changes based on what my experiences and experimentation suggest. My pragmatist approach means that I acknowledge the contingent nature of what makes collections management standards and processes useful but rejects them as foundational truths.

The research conducted throughout this PhD, informed by my pragmatic approach, has led me to accept that museum acquisition processes need to change if they are going to be able to accommodate new and emerging object types such as social media content. I struggled with my approach to change at first. I came to the PhD initially thinking that social media could be repackaged to fit within existing collections management standards – an institutionalised viewpoint when considered through the lens of Operational Museology. I quickly changed tack as I realised how pointless collecting social media would be if all the context, liveliness and exciting remix cultures it is situated within were lost as part of the collecting process. But still, the idea of revolutionary change in museums – the kind that suggests we rip up the rule book and start again – just doesn't sit properly with me. I've experienced first-hand how change in the museum sector impacts on people and how they react to it. More often than not, the prospect of wholesale or revolutionary change, driven by big or abstract ideas, results in people digging in their heels. Ross Parry highlights how museums hurtling towards the Web and its 'anomic' or disorientating qualities has often led to the assertion of more traditional approaches in the workforce (2013: 18). There is a risk of this happening if approaches to collecting social media are presented as an overhaul of traditional collecting methods. What I have found to be more effective in my professional life and my research is a pragmatic and incremental approach to change – neither iconoclastic and driven by big and abstract ideas, nor wholesale and all at once – but rather, based around small shifts or remixes in processes, undertaken as part of an ongoing conversation and while being acutely aware of the specific context of that moment. Therefore, this thesis does not suggest we revolutionise museums in order to fix museum acquisition for new and emerging object types. Instead, it calls for a series of small remixes, driven by the practical need for museums to be able to accommodate new and emerging objects. Let's take things step-by-step and incrementally adapt how we collect.

The question of change in museums has been addressed in several influential publications over the past decade or so. In a foreword to *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*, Elaine Heumann Gurian opens by stating that the museum profession is one that is 'generally resistant to change and where alterations in practice can be measured in what seems like geologic time' (2010: xi). Jennie Morgan suggests that the dominant story in museology is that of 'epochal' change but argues that these

accounts of change tend to be reductionist, and overlook the change that emerges dynamically in, around and within organisations all the time (Morgan, 2018: 158-159). Words like revolution, reinvent and redefine feature heavily in the discourse, but at times we also see an acknowledgment of the value of incrementalism. In the introduction to *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*, Knell and colleagues note that ‘museums are constantly in flux, and change is often fine scale rather than pervasive. Nevertheless, each change incrementally, and sometimes fundamentally, changes the institution’ (2007: xx).

Robert Janes’ *Museum and the Paradox of Change*, now in its third edition, is an in-depth exploration of museological change – looking at change from the perspective of a museum director. Janes describes his account of organisational change as one which is preoccupied with ‘pragmatic thought and action’ (2013: 8). Whilst Janes’ work addresses change at a relatively large scale, he highlights the importance of experimentation, ongoing development and incremental approaches to change, and argues that if museums remain committed to the organisational traditions that they were founded on, they will find themselves increasingly unable to address issues of contemporary concern and remain relevant (Janes, 2013: 108). It is within the continuous, dynamic and progressive forms of change highlighted by Knell and colleagues, Morgan, and Janes that I situate Remix Museology as an approach to change that will help enable museums to collect new and emerging object types in appropriate and sustainable ways.

Remix Museology is heavily influenced by my approach to change and is key to the core argument of this thesis: to effectively collect social media, museums need to take a pragmatic approach and adopt an adaptive mode of acquisition that changes incrementally to remain abreast of new and emerging object types, shifting cultures, and evolving ethics. Whilst Remix Museology is a newly coined concept, it is inspired by many others who have discussed the need for museums to be more adaptive before me. Drawing from other work in the creation of something new is a key aspect of remix. Christina Kreps’ *Appropriate Museology* (2008; 2015) – which calls for more flexible forms of museum practice that are socially, geographically and culturally appropriate – and the work of Lawrence Lessig (2008) – which highlights the shift from read only to a read/write way of interacting with culture – have been

particularly influential. My use of the term 'remix' to describe my approach to change draws from the emerging field of Remix Studies (Navas et al., 2015) and situates it firmly within museum studies. The thesis will unpack the inspirations for and implications of Remix Museology further in the [Remix Museology](#) chapter and address the experiences and practice that helped crystallise it in the [Breaking ground](#) and [Social digital collecting](#) chapters.

My approach to standards

Considering that I am interested in how museum collecting processes need to change in an incremental and ongoing fashion to support the acquisition of social media, this thesis will interact with collections management frameworks and standards. Collections management is often described as 'fundamental' to any collection of cultural objects (Matassa, 2011: 3), and seen as 'everything that is done to care for, document, and make accessible objects in the collection' (Simmons, 2015: 221). This thesis will engage with the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics (2017) and Collections Trust's Spectrum 5.0 (2017b) as the collections management standards that deal specifically with museum acquisition.

The standards that govern how museums currently collect are based on normative frameworks that play a large part in defining what a museum is and does. The ICOM Code of Ethics states that its mission is to 'set down the internationally accepted foundations that should underpin all other, sometimes more specialised codes' (ICOM, 2011: 1), while Spectrum 5.0 is a UK collections management standard (as well as being used around the world, translated into nine other languages) and expands on the ICOM Code to focus on the individual procedures of collections management. Spectrum 5.0 was launched in July 2017 and is made up of 21 procedures, nine of which are considered Primary Procedures and act as a minimum standard that a museum, regardless of size, should follow. These collections management frameworks govern how museums approach acquisition and are incredibly important in bringing structure to collecting and the ongoing management of things that have been taken out of their original context, numbered and placed into an obscure and artificial context (aka museums). As important as these standards

are, it cannot be ignored that in their current format, they are no longer appropriate for a huge array of things that exist in the world and are therefore no longer fit for purpose. The standards are products of the museum's foundational commitments to preserve material on behalf of future generations, and the historic focus on tangible culture that makes little to no attempt to move towards the reality of today – a reality that sees the vast majority of cultural, political and everyday outputs being created and existing solely in digital format. The standards need to adapt.

Don't get me wrong – standards like Spectrum are not completely static. I have to confess to being quite deeply involved in the review and development of Spectrum 5.0 in 2016. Working at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) at the time, we were keen to get Spectrum referencing 'digital' a lot more, but perhaps through a lack of clarity and a case of too many cooks, those calls ended up with the re-introduction of an old procedure – the 'Reproductions' procedure – which is essentially designed to help manage digitisation or copying processes (including model making, recording of musical instruments, 3D scans). It is frustrating that our calls for effective digital object management resulted in a procedure about digitisation being updated and reintroduced. This is symptomatic of the common conflation between digital and digitized objects that still seems to happen in the sector. Cary Karp tried to clarify the difference in 2014, reminding us of the 'distinction between digitization, which is the process of making a digital representation of a physical object, or a digital transcription of something recorded on a non-digital medium, and creative activity that originates in digital format' (2014: 159). Nicole Meehan claims that this problem continues today, resulting in a hierarchical relationship that perceives digital objects as below or less important than physical objects (2020: 4).

Progress is being made on a version of Spectrum that will directly address digital collecting. I was a part of initiating this version in early 2017 after a number of colleagues in the London Museum Documentation Network expressed concern about the lack of guidance in Spectrum 5.0 for digital collecting. After I moved on from the V&A, conversations continued, some of which I was included in, most of which I was left out of (not being in London anymore often leads to this kind of thing). It wasn't until the Collections Trust conference in 2020 that I learned that this work had continued. I attended workshops in May 2021 that were designed to start getting

feedback from professionals outside of London. This off-shoot of Spectrum has already taken four years to develop. These reviews of standards happen at moments in time – often when the standards start becoming embarrassingly out of date. If we conceive of a mode of working where small remixes happen as and when needed, we won't need big sweeping reviews that take so long they are already outdated before they're published. Incremental remixes could thus end up leading to wider transformative change.

The central aim of this PhD is to explore approaches to collecting social media in museums. In doing so, I have interviewed curators who have collected from social media in the past, collaborated with a project looking at collecting social media in different ways, and experimented directly with another museum to devise a methodology for collecting memes from social media. However, platforms change, and ethics evolve. Without addressing some of the fundamental issues in how museums approach digital collecting moving forward, this PhD would be out of date very quickly. Therefore, this thesis will be making the argument that in order to start collecting social media in a sustainable way, we need to address how we can continually adapt our collecting processes. It will argue that we remix acquisition processes on an ongoing basis.

My approach to researching

Throughout this thesis, using autoethnography as an overarching approach, I reflect on my own experience in the sector as well as in using action research methodologies to interact with the realities of trying to collect social media within the confines of institutional processes and existing museological standards. Considering my desire to undertake research that acknowledges my researcher and practitioner roles and allows me to conduct research that seeks to bring the two together, whilst creating useful and implementable outputs for those I'm researching with, autoethnography and action research seemed like a methodological match made in heaven.

Autoethnography is, at its core, research that understands, owns and uses the researcher's own positionality; intentionally not separating the lived experiences of personal life, academic study and professional encounters. It does not aim to identify verifiable truths, instead seeking to analyse personal experiences in order to understand cultural experiences. I was particularly drawn to autoethnography due to its acceptance of honest reflections on lived experiences. It recognises the ways in which personal, lived experience influences research and acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality and the researcher's influence on the research (Ellis et al., 2011: np). There is no single way to research autoethnographically – it has been described as a 'broad orientation towards scholarship' rather than a methodology (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005: 298), and that is why I describe my work as having an overarching autoethnographic approach.

Action research, in a similar way to autoethnography, is understood as a broad orientation to inquiry rather than a specific methodology per se. It is an orientation that has a different way of conceiving knowing and its relation to practice; an approach to research grounded in the philosophy of pragmatism and practical knowing (Reason, 2003: 106; Brydon-Miller and Coghlan, 2019: 303). It is no doubt due to this grounding in practical knowing that some of the early influences in my work, particularly that of Teather and Carter's approach to productive forms of Critical Museology, cite action research methodologies as a useful way of engaging in constructive research on issues of museum practice (Teather and Carter, 2009: 28). Action research does not believe in foundationalist truths and looks to develop knowledge intersubjectively in a context of practice that engages relevant stakeholders (Bradbury, 2008: 585). As part of that, the purpose of inquiry is not just to describe and interpret the world, or even to theorise taken-for-granted realities. Instead, inquiry in action research is supposed to 'forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action, so that inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the ecosystems of which they are part' (Reason, 2006: 188).

I've worked in a range of museums over the past decade, and it is inescapable that the experiences I've had whilst doing so play into this thesis. My time working in the sector has been particularly influential on my approach to change, my approach to

standards, and in how I went about undertaking my research. In 2011 I completed my MA in Museum Studies via the Leicester Distance Learning programme whilst working as a Collections Assistant, during the opening of a brand-new museum, the Cardiff Story Museum (now known as the Museum of Cardiff). Not long after, I moved to Blaenau Gwent County Council where I was a Documentation Officer, working with six independent volunteer-run museums, and was set the challenge of helping them implement collections management processes. After a little while, I moved to the Royal Mint Museum as their Collections Manager on a maternity contract, taking the museum through the Museum Accreditation scheme. At the end of my stint within the whole other world of numismatics, I went back to the Cardiff Story as the Collections Curator, responsible for managing and developing the fast-growing collection. This is where I had my first fumbling interaction with digital collecting (but more on that later). After spending a good few years getting to know the Welsh museum sector and sitting on the committee of the Welsh Museums Federation, I packed up and moved to the big smoke. In London I worked at the V&A as their Collections Information and Systems Manager, looking after the cataloguing standards, collections management and digital asset management systems.

I feel slightly embarrassed as I type this, but I must acknowledge the cultural capital that these roles have given me. I have been able to use my professional experience, 'insider' persona and networks to set myself up as a 'credible' researcher interested in getting to the heart of the problem for practitioners – whilst also leveraging an 'outsider' research status that comes with a different form of gravitas and room for criticality. My experience has afforded me a certain level of privilege and power that I have tried to harness in my approach, and which has proven particularly helpful in bringing together my case studies. However, this insider-outsider status has also proved complex, positioning me in an ambiguous role that I have needed to constantly pay attention to and negotiate – pretty awkwardly at times.

Caroline Humphrey has written an honest and insightful account of tottering 'on the tightrope of the insider-outsider hyphen' (2007: 16). Humphrey notes how they were torn between the views and values of academia and the union members they were working / comrades / researching with; and found themselves sacrificing some of their principles to others along the way (2007: 16-17). Humphrey argues that readily

acknowledging the insider-outsider hyphen is 'indispensable to research reflexivity when operating in complex territories', and that in doing so, the researcher is often forced to dig into their own unconscious (2007: 22-23). This digging into the researcher's own unconscious, a process that seeks to surface experiences and actively engage with what they mean, can be uncomfortable at times – but it is key to what makes autoethnography a constructive orientation towards undertaking and writing about research. In activating my insider-outsider status throughout the research, I have had to be aware of both the professional and personal aspects of my experiences. Professionally, I can reflect on how all of the roles mentioned above have required me to either implement or support and enable others to implement museum collections management standards. These roles have required a deep understanding and respect for the intent of museum standards and processes. They have also required me to develop a tolerance to tea and coffee made to varying strengths and qualities, and above all, I've needed a broad sense of humour. I am confident that this sense of humour has enabled me to work within varied professional contexts and facilitate a plethora of personalities in working towards change and implementing collections management. In acknowledging the role of humour in my research, I had to begin to address more personal aspects of my practice and how I operate in the world. Rather than ignore that, my work reflects it. My research is social, and it uses humour – it isn't afraid to highlight absurdities and it is playful. Humour has become a unifying thread in my research; there is humour in the objects I am advocating museums collect, there is humour in the tone of my writing, and humour forms a central pillar of my practice.

Humour is not frivolous. It is inextricably linked to power and can be used constructively and destructively. It is a powerful tool that is often used in bullying, manipulation, and re-enforcing normativity. But it is also used as a way of negotiating power, as a tool to help form bonds and maintain connections, and also as a vehicle to suggest change; in my case, as a way of interacting that is social, collegial and unthreatening, offering a way of unsettling tradition and enacting pragmatic and incremental changes without causing too much tension or trauma. I have reflected deeply on my use of humour in my research and carefully considered the potential for it to slip into destructive rather than constructive use. I'll address this issue in

more detail after sketching out how humour is present in my writing and forms part of my remix of academic form.

My approach to writing

Bearing in mind my approach to research, the tone of my writing reflects my insider-outsider status, the subject I am writing about, my sense of humour, and the underlying philosophical stance of Remix. I have sought to find appropriate ways of writing and communicating my research, and have done so through the incorporation of memes, emojis, moments of informality, and instances of humour. Like Remix Museology, my writing acknowledges and recognises the role of the institutional frameworks it exists within (the requirements of a doctoral thesis), but it doesn't follow rigid processes just because someone says, 'it is what has always been done' (conventional writing and thesis structures); it seeks to make small changes that can, over time, be transformational for academic writing. I acknowledge that my writing in this thesis is challenging to academic form. First, it challenges the dominant tone in academic writing, one that must always be formal in order to be taken seriously. Second, it extends the range of 'appropriate' material to be used in the development of a critical discourse, including memes and emojis.

I have been told on multiple occasions that my use of humour and memes is not appropriate because some people may not have the literacies to understand them. Whilst I acknowledge those comments – and have created a handy meme and emoji primer to be used with this thesis if necessary – I could quite easily argue the same for the heavily theoretical texts I have had to fight my way through. These thick, complex texts tend to be welcomed in academia as a display of expertise, but I do not agree that this must be the case. Additionally, my work plays with the ideas of remix – drawing from other contexts and writing practices to develop practice-driven research that speaks to museum collecting processes as well as contemporary online cultures. My goal here is to write a thesis that is engaging, critically engaged and rigorous, reflective of my subject, grounded in my own practice, honest about my own positionality, and accessible to a broad range of people. In doing so, my writing takes a hop, skip and a jump towards those online cultures, utilising

memes, emojis and laughter to remix academic form. Thus, this remix of academic form produces a thesis that is rigorous in its exploration of museological issues whilst feeling appropriate for my autoethnographic approach – acknowledging my working practices and positionality and taking inspiration from social media and meme cultures in its presentation and storytelling.

As you may have already guessed, I have a particular fondness for memes (I am a millennial who grew up around Myspace and Tumblr after all). Used effectively, memes can summarise the tone and content of the paragraphs to come, or illustrate an argument just made. Memes have been discussed from a variety of perspectives in recent scholarship, but of pertinence to this discussion is memes as a form and practice of storytelling. Media scholar Anastasia Denisova regards them as empty conduits or layouts that anyone can fill with meaning or commentary (2019: 3). But they are more than that; Denisova goes on to explain how the meme's role in contemporary society can be either 'fast-food media' – flashy and tempting with a low nutritional value – the sort shared between friends as inside jokes; or they can be 'mindbombs' – tactical and striking interventions into mainstream discourses (Denisova, 2019: 33-35). As an individual I enjoy and value them as both, but within this thesis I play with, reappropriate and remix a variety of memes as miniature mindbombs – tactical interventions to question, unsettle and suggest change.

Denisova reflects on a memes' ability to condense complex arguments and illustrate them in creative ways. She unpacks multiple layers of interpretation of a single meme using a popular *Lord of the Rings* inspired meme. Denisova highlights how the 'one does not simply...' meme has 'an emotional tinge' and a 'sarcastic undertone' that tells the reader that whatever words are written after 'one does not simply...' is actually pretty difficult to do, whilst acknowledging that it may not seem that way (2019: 11). Specifically, Denisova notes that this meme conveys a message that the task is challenging and the person using the meme is aware of it – yet they are trying to tackle the issue anyway and are open to irony and criticism (2019: 11). I love that she chose this meme to unpack – I have actually been using an iteration of it since my first presentation on my PhD for that very reason (see Figure 5)!



Figure 5 – ‘One does not simply’ meme created by me at the beginning of the PhD using imgflip.com.

Media and communication scholars are quick to tell us that social media and memes are more than just funny pictures (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016) – but even when they are *more than* – they are still funny pictures. Therefore, I wouldn’t blame you if you thought for a moment that what I’m trying to do is perhaps a gimmick. Sianne Ngai unpacks associations with the term gimmick, noting that calling something a gimmick is often a distancing judgement, a way to publicly proclaim that you are unconvinced by something despite others indicating their attraction to it. Ngai follows up by suggesting that in calling something a gimmick you are indirectly acknowledging its power to enchant – even if you do not find yourself susceptible (Ngai, 2017: 471). So, if you, as a reader have decided early on that my use of memes, emojis, GIFs and jokes is a gimmick it is also possible that in doing so you are also confirming their potential power – a power that I am keen to use.

So regardless of whether you think of it is a gimmick, or whether you are totally on board and excited for the ride, humour will be present in this thesis. In setting up the use of humour in this thesis I do not mean to suggest that it is going to be a complete lol-fest, but that the sense of humour I have developed, and used both indirectly and directly in my research will be present and reflected on.

Jenny Kidd highlights that there is potential in placing the increasingly playful media that make up the broader communications landscape in which museums take part in

conversation with some of the more traditional discourses around ethics and practice, but warns that it is not inevitable that this will be productive (2019: 193). I want to stress that I have not taken the decision to *try* and use humour without considering why, and the potential implications of doing so. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering highlight the importance of considering how humour works in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (2005). They note that most of the time we don't think about how humour works but argue that there are times when we really should do this (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005: 10). Therefore, although having a sense of humour is a tacit form of my practice, it felt necessary to explore why I am so keen to use it in my writing too.

1.3 Situating my use of humour

Humour has had a pretty poor, longstanding reputation among Western philosophers and key thinkers. This almost entirely hate/hate relationship has been navigated by John Morreall, who summarises the status that fun, laughter, humour and comedy have had with figures like Plato, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud and well... in the context of Christianity more generally (Morreall, 2020). In doing this, he describes a history of humour, tracing out significant theoretical developments in philosophical and scientific approaches to it, like superiority theory (one laughs at another out of malice and to feel superior to them), relief theory (laughter is nothing more than a release of nervous energy), and incongruity theory (laughter occurs when something ‘violates our mental patterns and expectations’) (Morreall, 2020). In developing a case for why humour should be more readily considered as a useful mode of thinking about and practising research, Morreall argues that there are several shared affinities between philosophy and comedy. These include the desire to look at new perspectives, think creatively and critically, ask lots of questions, and to challenge traditions, conformity and authority (Morreall, 2014: 128). I like to think my use of humour is most often an act of critical thinking: either mocking processes that don’t seem to work, laughing at professional stereotypes, or taking part in self-deprecating mirth – it is a way in which I seek to communicate ideas, form bonds and create affinity. However, I am very aware that humour doesn’t always do this and can potentially exclude and agitate people. I have considered this and will address the issue after I contextualise my personal use of humour.

As I explained in the first part of this section, I grew up as a queer kid with no real positive LGBTQ+ role models around me. But I did grow up with fun. I have very fond memories of my mother, sister and I crying with laughter at the dinner table. I am hugely grateful that my family was always very inclusive of my sister and I in parties and family gatherings – especially the parties at my aunt’s and uncle’s houses. We were brought up to be polite and respectful to adults, but not ushered away as children not to be involved in the grown-up’s conversation and fun. I’m pretty sure we heard and saw things beyond our years that we didn’t understand but chuckled

along, enjoying the infectious nature of laughter – loving being part of the group. I am confident that this has contributed to me being comfortable talking to a wide variety of people in all sorts of social, professional and sometimes awkward situations. However, it was an environment rife with heteronormative male dominant humour. Not aggressively homophobic as such (apart from the odd jocular slur) but fiercely heteronormative without an alternative perspective in sight. It was the same outside of the family. Growing up I was uncomfortable because I knew I didn't conform to the 'norm' and other kids at school made sure I was aware of that. I learned to laugh off the comments in school about my effeminate eyebrows which were often cited as proof that I plucked them and was therefore obviously a 'gayboy' (but they were 100% au naturel, I promise); and I most certainly felt a sense of pride when I was able to pull off what might be considered masculine jokes – fitting in almost perfectly with the way Mary Jane Kehily and Anoop Nayak describe the use of homophobic and misogynistic humour in establishing male heterosexual hierarchies in school (1997: 83).

As I reached my mid-teens, emo culture landed in the Welsh valleys through local music scenes and the growth of Myspace; just in time for me to express my sexuality and butt up against forms of masculinity deeply entrenched in society. Judith Fathallah describes the social practices and creativity associated with emo subculture, Myspace and Tumblr as having a philosophy of playfulness, including with gender and sexuality (2020: 7). This philosophy of playfulness was described by Paul Booth in his discussions on digital fandom and subcultures as a way to talk about how groups of people (mostly millennials to start with) play with media, injecting parts of themselves and their passions into it (Booth, 2017: 8). I was deeply committed to being an emo – my black skinny jeans, straightened fringe and ability to poorly photoshop weird, comical and emotive selfies with Evanescence lyrics scrawled all over them were constants in my life. This philosophy of playfulness that accompanied emo culture has particularly strong links with the beginnings of contemporary remix cultures and the use of memes as a communication tool, as I've already addressed.

These different experiences of humour, comedy and laughter throughout my life have helped to shape me into the person I am today and have influenced how I

interact with others. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai highlight how comedy is used as both weapon and shield and performed in the most ordinary of spaces (2017: 236). I feel surer than ever that in some part, at least, my sense of humour, ability to laugh at myself, and desire to get on with people stems from this sense of knowing I was different but wanting to be accepted as part of the dominant heteronormative and humorous environment I existed within.

Queer theory has gone a long way in surfacing the notion of shame that most LGBTQ+ people are handed by society for simply existing in a heteronormative environment and drawing out the ways in which queer people respond to this. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick highlights the simple fact that there is an unimaginably large number of institutions whose 'programmatically undertaken is to prevent the development of gay people' – especially compared to the very small number who treat the positive development of gay identities as a positive for society (2008: 42). The idea that as a queer person, the best I can hope for is to be accepted is a very real feeling I had growing up and continues to be a consideration in how I interact with new people I meet today. The rapid assessments I make of people before mentioning my husband, or more often my testing of the waters by using the neutral term 'partner' despite being married; the hesitation I feel before giving him a kiss hello or goodbye in public; and the total alien feeling of holding his hand are all related to the fact that being gay means 'we have, almost invariably, been shamed growing up' (Todd, 2018: 27).

Sally Munt explains how she is keen to see shame's 'sedimentation into the social, to observe the kinds of attachments forged by its effects, especially those that pass as undetectable' (2007: 23). Social effects like personality traits and ways of interacting with people are often those that go undetected or are not associated with childhood experiences of coming to terms with sexual or gender identities. Sara Ahmed's description of coming out explains how, as queer people doing so with family members, we are often made to feel that being queer will lead to unhappiness. The sentence 'I just want you to be happy' surfaced in Ahmed's work is a familiar one for many LGBTQ+ people and it equates queerness with unhappiness. Ahmed explains that 'it is always paradoxical to say something does not matter: when you have to say something does not matter it usually implies that it does' (2009: 8-9). These

actions compound feelings of shame – they tell you that your loved one believes that you are now bound to having an unhappy life due to your queerness – even if that is not the intention of the person you are coming out to.

In his work on Polari,² Paul Baker claims that queer coping mechanisms for dealing with homophobia and societal shame resulted in the use of humour, sarcasm, irony and a general bawdiness (2020: 149). The inclination towards using humour by queer people is also highlighted by Matthew Todd, who claims that as people growing up with shame, we tend to do one of four things: fight, flight, freeze or fawn (2018: 82). Todd describes the fawn reaction as ‘people-pleasing’ with trying to make people laugh a key feature of this (2018: 83). This is a point that William Cheng also picks up on – using the same metaphor as Berlant and Ngai – noting the use of humour as armour for people who endure systemic oppression like people of colour, the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities. Cheng claims that the armour is less iron than it is ironic highlighting, that it is those oppressed people who have the least reason to ‘lighten up arbitrarily’ that tend to be the ones who are most expected to have a sense of humour, take a joke or laugh things off (2017: 530).

An interesting example that brings together Berlant, Ngai, Sedgwick, Munt, Todd, and Cheng’s work on humour and queerness is the work of stand-up comedian and art historian Hannah Gadsby, and in particular, her show *Nanette*, which began to challenge the dominant queer uses of humour. In the show, Gadsby moves from enacting the ‘fawn-esque’ self-deprecating comedy queer people had been expected to produce, to performing a self-critical reflection on why she had produced that form of comedy, before shifting to challenge dominant heteronormative patriarchal society (Jenzen, 2019). Here we see the ability to shift from using humour to protect oneself to a form of critical thought in hierarchical situations. This is a way in which I am keen to better understand and utilise humour.

² Polari was a form of language used by primarily camp working class gay men to communicate discreetly when homosexuality was still illegal. Many words like naff, slap (in reference to makeup), and clobber (in reference to clothes) made their way into more general usage (Baker, 2002, 2020).

Having reflected, more deeply than expected, on the ways in which I have become the person I am today, it is clear that laughter and social interactions infused with humour have been ever present. This, alongside the wider societal pressures to conform, that I can't help but acknowledge my resultant sense of humour as deeply important to me. As I noted from Humphrey's work, when undertaking autoethnographic-focused action research that relies on the researcher to productively use their insider-outsider status, the research becomes personal and requires acknowledgment of parts of yourself that may have been mostly unconscious (2007: 23). Whilst Baker's, Todd's, and Cheng's references to humour as coping mechanisms, fawning, or a form of armour position humour in a more negative light, I am keen to draw on a philosophy of playfulness, and claim my humour as a positive and productive part of myself.

Although these kinds of reflections may seem tangential to my research, I cannot ignore how my experiences have shaped how I carry myself and why I feel strongly about surfacing the modes that I have developed in working with people. As I have drawn out above, humour can – and does – get used as a weapon as well as armour. Whilst I understand the word 'weapon' is useful in the analogy with armour, I think this term is a bit extreme in my case, so I will use 'tool' instead. As I transformed from my emo teenage self into a young university-going adult I became more aware that my sense of humour could diffuse tension and build relationships in such a way that I wasn't on the back foot. It became more consciously a tool for me.

I am very wary of two things here. Setting myself up as someone who uses humour to manipulate people in a cold and calculated way and setting myself up as some sort of comic genius – I am neither. I don't actively set out to entrap people by trying to be funny and believe it or not, I wasn't a class clown. I don't think I'd get very far trying to write jokes and I *generally* don't like being the centre of attention (although, a little bit of fuss is allowed now and again of course 🙋). Despite this, I must acknowledge that I feel more comfortable in a situation if I can make someone laugh, and that I actively try to create an environment where frivolity can happen, because throughout my own life experiences, more often than not, that has been a productive

way of engaging with everyday issues. I have become far more aware that I do this, and more conscious that in doing so, I am constantly treading a delicate line.

Negotiating a productive use of humour

It is important to recognise the power relations in discourses around humour, and the potential to shut down conversations rather than safely engage in them. Ahmed discusses the figure of the feminist killjoy, noting that to go against a social norm is often seen to be willing to cause unhappiness, even if unhappiness is not your cause. Ahmed prompts us to consider whether a feminist kills other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism. Or whether they are simply exposing bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy (Ahmed, 2010: 2). Ahmed's questions caused me to reflect on my desire to use humour in several ways. First and foremost, the need to recognise that not everyone will want to laugh at the issues this thesis tackles and guarantee that that is okay. Cheng asks us to consider what it feels like when someone tells you to lighten up: 'It's a gut punch, a low blow. Accusations of "why so serious?" feel like serious attacks, striking at a core failure of character in societies ruled by laugh tracks, witty tweets, and punny headlines' (2017: 530). Part of my newly conscious practice is to draw the boundaries of humour as a productive tool, considering carefully what is appropriate to address through humour and what isn't.

I've already noted the need to acknowledge that my insider-outsider role as an academic researcher as well as a museum practitioner places me in a strange power position. I have a certain freedom to critically engage in a humorous way with issues that the people I am working with may not feel empowered to do. My position as a critically engaged outsider could be perceived to give me a get-out-of-jail-free card that employees embedded within institutional power structures do not have. Ahmed's words also encourage me to consider whether I am glazing over fundamental issues, not willing to cause unhappiness. This is a central feature of the way Gadsby critically reflects on her use of self-deprecating queer humour and an area I have needed to constantly negotiate due to my innate preference to reduce tension. There is also an ongoing risk of being flippant when engaging through the use of humour

and I have had to be mindful that my use of humour maintains critical thinking at its core. Another ongoing negotiation for me to consider.

In working through my approach to humour, I have come to better understand why I use it, and the politics at play in me using it. I use humour as an embodied part of my methodology – as a key feature of how I operate in the world and therefore a lens through which I undertake my action research and write about it. As a result, I feel it necessary to address how I perceive my use of humour as a method to unsettle power relations whilst maintaining positive social interactions and building collegiality. David Collinson explains that there has been an increase in the recognition of the significance, complexity and ambiguity of joking dynamics in work environments. He claims that far from being austere and impersonal places, organisation theory has begun situating workplaces as characterised by multiple forms of humour and laughter (Collinson, 2002: 269). It is, however, important to acknowledge that those multiple forms of laughter and humour are not always positive. Barbara Plester's work highlights that laughter in the workplace does not always come from the pleasure of humour, but through other dynamics such as power, coercion and control (2015: 538). Using humour to enact change definitely requires a wielding of power, but I argue that it does not have to amount to coercion and control; in many cases it can be done whilst maintaining harmony, as non-threatening challenges to dominant power structures and through the establishment of collegial bonds.

Enacting change through politeness, harmony and humour

In understanding how humour is used as a management strategy – as a way of reducing or reinforcing power relationships with minimal friction – Janet Holmes utilises politeness theory to explore minimising inequalities between people with different professional statuses, to both emphasise power imbalances and to challenge hierarchies (2000: 160). Holmes acknowledges that, whilst humour can often be enacted through coercive power, it is possible to 'do power less explicitly' and in a way in which informality is valued (2000: 165). This is where politeness theory comes in. Politeness theory was worked through by Penelope Brown and

Stephen Levinson (1987) as a communication strategy aimed at creating and maintaining harmony. Holmes discusses humour as a form of politeness and categorizes it as a form of positive and negative politeness. Humour as positive politeness is used to express collegiality towards colleagues, or as a tool in protecting the speaker through self-deprecating joking. Humour as negative politeness can be used to soften direct commands or criticism (Holmes, 2000: 167). Holmes then moves beyond politeness theory to draw on contestive humour which can be used to challenge existing relations within institutional power structures. She identifies it as a critical discourse device that uses humour and demarcates it as one of the few acceptable means of 'subordinates' who wish to challenge upwards (Holmes, 2000: 177). This is one of the key ways in which I see humour as potentially productive in managing change.

I can see how I have mobilised humour through both positive and negative politeness, as well as contestively throughout my professional career – both as a manager and as a peer. I have used humour in building relationships and forming connections and have used it to put myself down as a mode of protecting myself from other people's criticisms. I have used it to joyfully encourage people who I have no formal supervisory role over, to undertake work that supports one of my goals, as well as a way to deliver constructive criticism to members of my team and suggest alternative ways of doing things to my boss. In most contexts, I have done this as a natural instinct, as a tacit practice, and uncritically. Through the reflective work I have conducted throughout the PhD, my use of humour has become more considered; with a clearer understanding of when it is appropriate as a critical tool and when it is not.

The idea of creating and maintaining harmony is of particular interest to me. Most cases of change I have experienced in the museum sector have been forced and have had the possibility of being traumatic for many people, therefore I see the use of humour and politeness in maintaining harmony whilst enacting change as having huge potential. In the latter half of my time at the V&A I was tasked with what felt like a gargantuan job of reviewing the museum's digital asset management system (DAMS). This involved undertaking a museum-wide consultation, developing a new system specification, taking that specification out to tender, and then managing its

implementation. Despite trying to ensure that the process was consultative at every point, I found myself under pressure from multiple directions to force through some changes and features. I was regularly chairing meetings of 20+ people who ranged from disgruntled to ambivalent; unbothered to overly engaged – most having experienced a similar project with the implementation of a whole new collections management system only a couple of years earlier.

I know that throughout the process I enacted change by using humour as both positive and negative politeness. Looking back, I can see how I tried to use humour as positive politeness to create some sort of collegial bond amongst the DAMS Steering Group, and negative politeness when attempting to corral the group into doing work outside the meetings and responding to meeting action points. I can also see how I attempted to laugh at systems and processes as a way to be contestive with the owners of those systems and processes – trying to unsettle both upwards and sideways. But what I do not know is whether I did it well, or just bulldozed people in meetings, not allowing genuine concerns to be fully voiced. I'd like to think I didn't bulldoze, but I did not have the same levels of self-reflexivity and awareness of the embedded power relations in the use of humour as I do now. My use of humour throughout the PhD is more attentive to the room (or the Zoom, as it became towards the end...), continuously adapting my tone and use of humour to be appropriate for the conversation and the people participating.

Forming collegial bonds and positive working environments through humour

Finally, I want to further address how humour forms social and collegial bonds, which helps create environments for effective collaboration and enacting change. Morreall discusses the usefulness of humour as a social lubricant that gives rise to feelings of trust and helps reduce conflict (2020: np). I have found humour to be incredibly powerful when used in this way, but as Pickering and Lockyer remind us, there is 'perilous terrain that lies between humour and offensiveness', and I have had to be careful about how to negotiate this terrain (2005: 3). This has been especially true in

my fieldwork throughout the PhD, as I have been a relative outsider coming into already established workplaces / professional relationships.

Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra argue that workplace humour is collaborative, jointly constructed humour and that each team seems to develop their own combination of inside jokes (2002: 1,707). Holmes draws out that this ‘inextricable context-bound’ workplace humour may give rise to great hilarity among colleagues but appear obscure and opaque to outsiders (2000: 159). This makes negotiating the line between humour and offensiveness, when challenging internal power structures as a relative outsider, all the more complex and delicate. Undertaking embedded action research is incredibly useful in negotiating this line. Just overhearing conversations whilst working in offices is useful for getting a sense of the type of humour used within the workplace. I knew I was onto a winner when, at the National Science and Media Museum, I was able to pick up on the fact that staff send memes and GIFs to each other in response to emails or in the context of responses to change or announcements. I recall one member of staff trying to get to grips with the new Microsoft Teams application that had been installed, before shouting, ‘oh god, I can send RuPaul memes!’ It was like music to my ears whilst sitting there trying to develop a justification for collecting a meme.



Figure 6. 'I can't wait to see how this turns out' GIF of RuPaul.

What I have tried to draw together here is how humour is filtered through and used appropriately in nearly every layer of my PhD. First and foremost, this is a thesis that reflects on my own experiences as a practitioner and uses them to undertake action

research. I cannot remove my own way of working from my research, and my writing throughout this thesis aims to match how I hold myself in a professional context; I see it as an extension of how I enact my practice. But there are multiple other layers where humour is hugely productive. As I've explained, I am drawing on humour as a tool to unsettle power relations whilst maintaining positive social interactions and building collegiality. Through using (what I consider to be) witty commentary on professional situations and harnessing context-bound humour to highlight limitations, I have been able to suggest changes to tradition in a non-threatening manner – in a way that makes change less scary and promotes incremental approaches over sweeping reforms.

Acknowledging the limits and movable lines of the appropriateness of humour is one of the biggest challenges of using it (beyond trying not to be that person in the office who just constantly laughs at their own jokes). I use humour where I feel I know the situation, context and wider connotations well enough to be able to make that call. The same is true when I work with people; I read a room and try to establish whether humour is appropriate in that context, and if it is not, or I judge incorrectly, I do not attempt to position people as being killjoys – humour is only used where I feel it would be productive.

Having spent some time setting out my use of humour, perhaps the most unconventional of elements in my research approach, you might be thinking – okay, just get on with it and tell me about the research. As part of doing this, the next section addresses the methodology. Having already introduced my methods in [My approach to researching](#), the next sections look to explore them in more detail, drawing on the value of my methodological choices, and the discourses on quality and success that are relevant to them.

1.4 Methodological choices

While this PhD started out as a study into the collections management implications of collecting social media content, it has evolved into an exploration of Remix Museology as a mode of enabling museums to collect social media content. This shift has been made possible by my approach to the research – it developed through the doing of the research and paying close attention to what was enabling and limiting my work. The research is autoethnographic, utilising reflexive dyadic interviews and action research methods to explore, be a part of, and implement approaches to collecting social media in museums.

The research itself was split into four case studies; as part of these I undertook a mixture of reflexive dyadic interviews, action research and reflective journaling to draw out the learning opportunities from past attempts at collecting social media (from the Museum of London and V&A), to observe and later participate in existing research projects (the Collecting Social Photo project), and to test my findings in an institution (the National Science and Media Museum). The aim of this section is to draw out more detail about my methodological choices, their implications, and how I understand their value, quality and appropriateness.

An overarching autoethnographic approach

This overarchingly autoethnographic research project has been underpinned using what I can only describe as a mixed-methodology approach. Leon Anderson and Bonnie Glass-Coffin describe autoethnographers as ‘eclectic bricoleurs in their methods’ noting how we draw on a range of materials ‘from “impressionistic” personal memories and musings to more traditionally “objective” data like fieldnotes and informant interviews’ (2016: 64) – add tweets, memes and emojis to that list and there I am, perfectly summed up as a researcher. Autoethnography is research that seeks to analyse personal experiences in order to better understand their cultural context. To me, having an overarching autoethnographic approach means that my personal perspectives, personality and emotional baggage come along for the ride. For example, I had not intended to draw on queer theory in my thesis; but as I began

to reflect on my use of humour and to conceive of Remix Museology as a mode of working in museums, I realised that my own approach to working was inseparable from my own queer experience. It became clear that understanding more about my way of being through incorporating and reflecting on queer theory was foundational.

Tony Adams and Stacy Holman Jones claim that autoethnography is in itself queer. They argue that autoethnography and queer theory both refuse orthodox methodologies, focusing instead on fluidity and responsiveness; choosing to borrow and refashion methods differently (or remix perhaps?!) and to question or undermine normative discourses (Adams and Holman Jones, 2008; 2016). Therefore, we might want to consider my use of Remix Museology as having 'queer inflected perspectives' (Nash and Browne, 2016: 4). It is an approach to enacting change to support more appropriate forms of museum acquisition within social media and remix cultures, developed through a research method that incorporates myself and my orientation to interacting with the world, which is inextricably influenced by my own queerness.

The embeddedness of myself in the research extends to the ways in which I wanted to interview and interact with the people I was researching alongside. In the first two case study chapters, I use material generated through reflexive dyadic interviews. Reflexive dyadic interviews are a mode of interviewing that focuses on the interviewee, but also acknowledges the words, thoughts and feelings of the interviewer. This type of interview does not disregard the researcher's own experience and knowledge on the subject (Ellis et al., 2011). But more than allowing me to contribute to the discussion, reflexive dyadic interviews allow for a conversation between peers, rather than the often-hierarchical approach to formal question and answer style interviews (Ellis and Berger, 2003: 854).

I undertook reflexive dyadic interviews with the Museum of London (MoL), V&A, and the Collecting Social Photo (CoSoPho) project (made up of Aalborg City Archives, the Finnish Museum of Photography, Nordiska Museet, and Stockholm County Museum). Not every interview was structured in the same way – I knew the interviewees in different ways. I had different forms of insider knowledge at the V&A than I did with the MoL. At one point when undertaking the interview with Nordiska

Museet, it almost became a workshop on how to catalogue social media photography within the museum's structures. My agency as practitioner, researcher, collaborator and/or ex-colleague was important in all the conversations that I had. Each of the interviewees was given the opportunity to reflect on the transcripts of their interviews – this was not research being done 'on' people – I was researching in dialogue with my colleagues and co-inquirers, activating my insider-outsider status to produce a recorded discussion on the topic of collecting social media in museums. In my case, very little was changed in the interview transcripts – just one flippant comment that was made, on a topic that was tangential to the core discussion on collecting social media. Ensuring participation and transparency of the interview, transcription and knowledge generation process was key to my approach.

Another key component in an autoethnographic approach is reflection. The practice of reflective thought was first described by one of the founders of American pragmatism, John Dewey. Dewey claimed it was 'active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends' (1910 [2011]: 6). Dewey's work has since been written about and put into practice in several contexts, but the key element of reflective thinking that has proved useful in my work and in many others' is the requirement for us to start with our own experiences. From those experiences, we should seek to emphasise our own learning through connections to knowledge produced by others; and how that helps form further inquiry (Rodgers, 2002: 848; Tran, 2019: 8).

Caroline Bath argues that reflexivity in is also particularly productive in action research as it is capable of accounting for the practitioner-as-researcher role that often occurs in action research (2009: 3). Bath addresses how combining autobiography (or autoethnography in my case) and theory is conducive to opening up the complexity of collaborative work to greater scrutiny and suggests that the use of diaries supports this (2009: 4).³ Throughout most of my research, I actively

³ Autobiography and autoethnography are related; both require self-reflection on past experiences. However, autobiography refers to a recounting and retelling from one's own perspective only, whilst autoethnography is an intentional approach that situates the researcher's own experiences within a cultural context and analyses their experience in relation to that context (Ngunjiri et al., 2010).

reflected on what had happened, was happening and could happen next, but it was only during my work with the National Science and Media Museum (NSMM) that I began documenting my thoughts. I found documenting my personal reflections directly after meetings or events to be a productive activity. It helped to surface and work through my immediate thoughts and feelings in a way that supported greater self-awareness and informed ongoing actions.

Multiple forms of action research

As I've already noted, action research is an umbrella term that captures the multiplicity of ways to undertake action-focused research that seeks to improve the rationality of real-world environments. There have been a number of large museum projects that have used action research over the past few years, including *Bradford's National Museum Project* (2017-2021)⁴ and *One by One* (2017-2020).⁵ There have also been a number of sector-led projects like *The Happy Museum Project*⁶ and Culture 24's *Let's Get Real*⁷ that cite the use of action research methodologies. The value and validity of action research is being increasingly understood by academics who want to improve the reality of practice for people working with and in museums. In my work, I have not confined myself to following one form of action research, I have adapted approaches as needed to deal with the fluidity of real-world contexts.

⁴ *Bradford's National Museum Project* was an action research project that explored how the National Science and Media Museum could become locally rooted and more open, engaged and collaborative. The project worked with over 150 people who helped to shape the research and the ideas that emerged. <https://bradfordsnationalmuseum.org/> (Accessed 21/05/2021).

⁵ *One by One* was a multi-partner international action research project that brought together cultural organisations, policy makers, academics, professional bodies, support agencies, and communities of practice, to build digitally confident museums. <https://one-by-one.uk/whats-it-about/> (Accessed 21/05/2021).

⁶ *The Happy Museum Project* is an action research project that looks to explore how the museum sector can respond to the challenge of creating a more sustainable future through placing well-being within an environmental and future-facing frame and rethinking the role that museums can play in creating more resilient people, places and planet. <https://happymuseumproject.org/what-we-do/research-development/> (Accessed 21/05/2021).

⁷ *Let's Get Real* is an annual collaborative action research programme that looks to support arts and heritage people and organisations to become more relevant, resilient and responsive to digital cultural change. <https://weareculture24.org.uk/lets-get-real/> (Accessed 21/05/2021).

However, there are particular articulations of action research practices that help describe the action research used in this PhD.

Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury highlight that the use of first-, second- and third-person research is useful in organizing the different approaches researchers have taken to action research. They describe first-person action research as an approach that inquires into and from the perspective of the researcher's own life; whilst second-person action research addresses inquiry face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern. Third-person action research aims to extend generally smaller first- and second-person action research projects to create wider impact (Reason and Bradbury, 2008: 6). One of the core beliefs of action research is that nothing is clear cut, and – as useful as Reason and Bradbury's distinctions are – true to form I found that my action research approach fell somewhere between their neat delineations. For the most part, the research falls somewhere between first- and second-person research. Judi Marshall has been a long-term advocate of what she calls 'living life as inquiry' (1999; 2016) – a way of living that is 'continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, and bringing things into question' (1999: 156). This approach is founded on the belief that research comes – at least in part – from a personal place, where the topics we choose to study in some way relate to our lives, but in most contexts, researchers are 'encouraged to say less than they believe in order to not breach prevailing "etiquette"' (Marshall, 1999: 157-158). Through the very personal way in which I have positioned my approach to work – acknowledging my subjectivity, humour, emotion and lived personal and professional experiences – I have attempted to expand the prevailing etiquette in academic form.

The act of putting myself so out there in this research has been uncomfortable at times. I do care what people think about me and have often wondered whether my approach to this research comes across as self-indulgent or narcissistic. Andrew Sparkes reflects on the idea of self-indulgence in work that centres the self, noting how his work had been used to question whether the practice of autobiographical ethnography is an act of gross self-indulgence (2002: 213). Sparkes goes on to argue that these claims are based on a misunderstanding of the research method and how it can establish connections that extend beyond the self of the author and contribute to wider understandings of how social situations and practices take place

(2002: 222). Marshall argues similarly that first-person action research does not need to be 'ego-obsessed' and can be conducted with 'due humility' to inform action in the process of researching (Marshall, 2016: xx).

Whilst first-person action research is a 'worthwhile endeavour in its own right', it is also a foundational approach to inquiring with others alongside second- and third-person action research too (Marshall, 2016: xvi). This is useful to consider because although I have been doing action research from my own perspective, and seeing what emerges, I have not been inquiring alone. Simply inquiring with others in collaboration does not necessarily mean I have been doing a mixture of first- and second-person action research – Marshall warns that just engaging collaboratively with others whilst undertaking first-person action research does not mean you are undertaking second-person action research. First-person inquiry in collaborative relationships is also valid (Marshall, 2016: 9). Whilst this could arguably describe my research with the CoSoPho, it doesn't adequately describe the nature of my research with the NSMM.

My research with the NSMM was more directly about working in partnership to explore a specific and shared issue, making it more directly second-person action research. Second-person action research or inquiry is a form of collaborative working that can range from one-to-one conversations to large group inquiries (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014: 698). My work with NSMM took the form of what might be best described as a second-person inquiry group, humble in its size but not in its ambition. Kate McArdle talks of a three-phase process for inquiry groups with larger organisations: getting in, getting on and getting out (2008). Although of course there were smaller action research cycles within the phases, this differentiation between the getting in, on and out neatly describe how the research took place with the NSMM. In my case, COVID-19 sat in the middle of getting on and getting out, with meetings cancelled and research partners furloughed. By May 2020, the only way to sum up on my action research was:

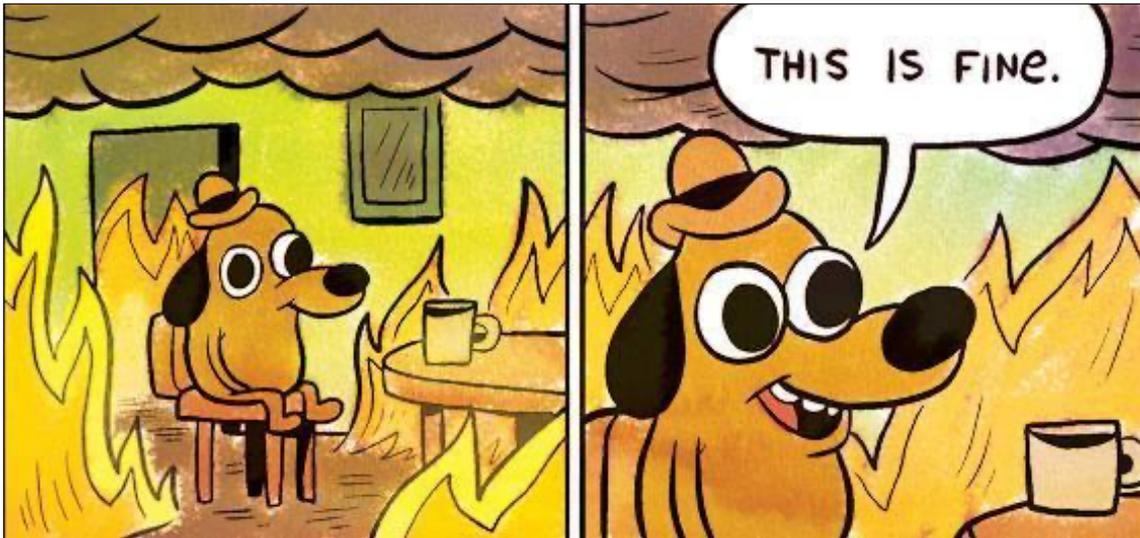


Figure 7. 'This Is Fine' meme, sourced from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/this-is-fine>

Of course, the research was rightly the last of many people's worries. By the end of September we were up and running again with the core work of the project coming to an end around December 2020.

My use of autoethnography and action research was a deliberate choice aimed at grounding my research in practice, paying attention to the operational museology of the sector, and creating useful and implementable outputs for those I was researching with. With action research comes a different orientation towards and understanding of success, quality and significance than is found in more traditional academic forms of inquiry. It is therefore useful to spend some time drawing out how I have been thinking about success and quality in my research in relation to their epistemological underpinnings.

Understanding quality in action research

Concepts of success and quality in action research have been purposefully shifted from 'idealist question in search of "Truth" to concern for engagement, dialogue, pragmatic outcomes and an emergent, reflexive sense of what is important.' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001: 343). With pragmatic outcomes noted as a feature of action research and its quality, Hilary Bradbury highlights 'actionability' as a key feature of quality that is fully consistent with pragmatism and action research. Bradbury explains how actionability distinguishes between people knowing about

something and them being able to produce an intended outcome by using their knowledge (2008: 588). The actionability of my research has been a touchpoint of quality, validity and value for me throughout the PhD process. The influences of pragmatic thinking, and my use of action research to devise and experiment with Remix Museology have meant that its foundations are built on its actionability in museums, and its usefulness to the context in which it is used. This has helped ensure that my work has thoughtfully engaged with what emerged during the research, and what I and others who I have researched with have identified as important through ongoing reflexive work.

I quite often refer to my natural inclination to get involved, and with regards to my action research this inclination is more active; it was a seeking to be involved, seeking to make my research actionable in some way. Judi Marshall and Peter Reason describe this more active orientation towards inquiring as 'taking an attitude of inquiry' (2008: 1). Marshall and Reason argue that it is easy for accounts of action research to become bland and prosaic and urge quality action research to respect the aliveness of the method – its wildness at times. They claim that, 'if you think you know what you are doing as an action researcher, have it comfortably in hand, you are really not doing it, are not on a learning edge' (Marshall and Reason, 2008: 2). Acknowledging that you do not know what you are doing at times feels to be at odds with what is expected from quality research in more traditional research methods. But in action research, capturing the liveliness of the research that pushes you and your collaborators to the edge of your learning and comfort zone is the sign that significant research and learning experiences are taking place.

Marshall and Reason go on to discuss some of the qualities of an attitude of inquiry that should be illustrated through accounts of action research. They cite 'curiosity and commitment, a willingness to articulate and explore purposes, paying attention to framing, dancing in beauty rather than fighting ugliness, participation, practices of power, systems and wholes, evidence, and humility' (Marshall and Reason, 2008: 4). The ongoing desire to develop more appropriate ways of understanding the qualities of action research, and how to measure success as part of it, has led to several 'choice points' being developed to build a framework for quality in action-focused

research (Bradbury and Reason, 2001; Bradbury et al., 2019). Bradbury and Reason initially devised five points:

- Quality as relational praxis.
- Quality as reflexive-practical outcome.
- Quality as plurality of knowing.
- Quality as engaging in significant work.
- Emergent inquiry towards enduring consequence (2001: 346-349).

More recently, these quality choice points have been revisited and extended as part of conversations about assessing the quality of articles submitted to the *Action Research* journal. These updated quality choice points seek to frame quality in action research through:

- Articulation of objectives, purpose of knowledge generation, and choices made.
- The extent to which participative values are reflected or enacted and concern for question of 'whose knowledge counts?'
- Contribution to the theory and practice of action research.
- The extent to which the action research process and methods are articulated and illustrated and demonstrate knowledge creation that acknowledges whole persons as relational beings.
- The extent to which the research provides new ideas that guide action in response to need.
- The extent to which self-location as a change agent is acknowledged, and that the knowledge creation integrates personal/reflexive, interpersonal and impersonal knowledge.
- The extent to which insights from the research are significant in content and process, showing relevance beyond their immediate context in support of the flourishing of persons, communities and the wider ecology (Bradbury et al., 2019: 16-17).

By now I am quite aware that I have supplied a range of qualities in action research from Marshall and Reason's nine qualities to Bradbury and Reason's initial choice points (2001), then the extended choice points by Bradbury and her fellow editors of the *Action Research Journal* (2019). It is clear that the conversation around quality is

active and ongoing, and as more researchers use action research in different contexts, the ways of understanding and assessing quality will become more widely referred to.

Working from the more recent articulation of choice points, in my research I have sought to be clear about the objectives and honest about the lack of clear research objectives at times. My research with CoSoPho – although grounded in action research theory through following an open, positive and social approach to emergent research relationships – did not set out with clear objectives. My articulation of why I was working with the project and the choices I made as part of it are brought to the fore during my discussion about the research in [Social digital collecting](#). Throughout the work, I aimed to highlight the values, opinions and contributions of my research collaborators – from the decision to use reflexive dyadic interviews as less hierarchical interview formats, to properly attribute their own words to them, and to reflect on the influences they had on me and my research. Whilst doing this, my writing up of the research sought to acknowledge my self-location as a change agent and reflect on what that meant, when I consciously used it in settings such as meetings on the most appropriate methods for collecting a meme at the NSMM, or when I held back, like in some of my interactions with the CoSoPho project. All these choices are articulated and reasoned through in the text.

The process and methods of my action research are given significant space for discussion in my case studies. The CoSoPho project in particular dedicates a substantial part of the chapter to the development of the action research project, contributing reflections on awkwardness, sociality and cardamon buns in relation to established action research discourses. My chapter focusing on the NSMM similarly incorporates Remix Museology as a concept into action research theory, adding remix as a step in the action research cycle. Finally, my work addresses the significance of what was achieved. My research with CoSoPho directly contributed to their overall outputs, and the process of working with them directly contributed to my development of Remix Museology. My work with the NSMM in particular has had significant impact on digital collecting at the Science Museum Group, with myself and Phillip Roberts, the Associate Curator of Photography and Photographic Technology, being invited into groups to discuss forms of social media collecting,

digital photography collecting and online-focused collecting generally. The acquisition is being presented by the NSMM as a blueprint in process for online digital collecting and the way in which pragmatic and incremental changes were made to collecting processes through good-natured, collaborative discussions with a focus on appropriateness for the context of social media, is recognised by people like Phillip as being key to its success.

This response to the Bradbury et al choice points should give an indication of how I have been working with the notions of quality that are relevant to action research. I have, more generally, attempted to incorporate my reflections on the choice points into the body of my case studies – intentionally refusing to separate reflections on the process and findings of the research, and aiming to honestly illustrate the liveliness and, at times, messiness of the process.

Each chapter has utilised slightly different methods, and I have categorised and summarised the four case studies as follows:

- 1) Breaking ground
- 2) Social digital collecting
- 3) Practicing what I preach

Breaking ground looks at how museums have attempted to collect social media in the past. Using the reflexive dyadic interviews with the MoL and the V&A, this chapter unpacks how museums have been approaching digital collecting and, more specifically, how they have broken ground with collecting social media. The chapter draws out the challenges and opportunities for learning and reflects on the innovative approaches to collecting that have already taken place. This feeds into how I have conceptualised a Remix Museology approach to collecting.

The social digital collecting category refers to the CoSoPho project. My relationship with the project blossomed throughout the three-year period of my PhD (which happily coincided with the three-year period of their project), starting with me responding to a call for participation on the very first day of my PhD. It felt like a cheeky call for participation response – I had nothing to say about my research so far – just a load of questions... but it turns out we had a lot of those same questions

in common and an action research or mixed first-person collaborative inquiry project emerged. In the chapter, I situate CoSoPho as Remix Museology in action. Although this project did not develop an approach to collecting social media per se, it re-orientated museological (and archival) collecting practices to be more attentive to the affordances of social media. I argue that CoSoPho opened up pathways to collect within the realm of social media, and also helped crystallise Remix Museology as an approach to collecting.

Finally, we come to practicing what I preach. Working alongside Phillip Roberts, the Associate Curator of Photography and Photographic Technology at the NSMM, we collected an absolute unit of an object – the Museum of English Rural Life’s famous iteration of the Absolute Unit meme. Phillip and I worked collaboratively to undertake a piece of action research, squeezing me into the institutional setting to explore potential collecting methods and navigate / show jump through the institutional dynamics of digital collecting in a museum without a digital collecting policy or digital preservation strategy. It allowed me to actually do what I’ve been banging on about for a while – getting museums talking about memes as cultural heritage. The action research saw Phillip and I work through cycles of collections board meetings and follow various inquiry strands to implement a Remix Museology approach to collecting; by that I mean working within the spirit of the museum’s acquisition process, but with a pragmatic, incremental remix-focused approach. The action research saw Phillip and I work with colleagues to stretch ideas around what a museum object is or can be, and to make small, context appropriate remixes to its acquisitions process to accommodate new object types, without needing to introduce sweeping changes to its procedures.

This thesis argues that, in order to collect social media content, museums should take a Remix Museology approach to acquisition processes and standards – an approach that aims to develop pragmatic and incremental adaptations in collecting practices to support the culturally and ethically appropriate acquisition of new and emerging object types. This assertion is backed up by my observations and discussions with the MoL and the V&A that illustrate how museums have had to bend established museum collecting processes to collect social media objects; by witnessing how a re-orientation of collecting practices towards the affordances of

social media with CoSoPho opened up acquisition process to make them more appropriate; and in experimenting with how a Remix Museology approach could be enacted through collaborating with the NSMM to collect a meme from Twitter.

I hope you agree that [Me and my approach](#) has painted you a picture, showing you who I am, what my approach to researching and writing is, and how I have considered the use of humour in my work. The next section looks to explore further what I mean by collecting social media before addressing in more detail what Remix Museology is and the practices and scholarship that helped shape it.

2. Social media - Y tho?



Figure 8. 'y tho' meme created using imgflip.com

I came to this PhD aware that the ways in which a large number of people communicate, get news, and express themselves every day happens through some sort of social media platform or online messaging service; and more importantly, I was aware that museums were not yet considering how this would impact the way they collect. Throughout the three (and a bit) years it has taken to draw this thesis together, I have witnessed a rapid increase in interest from museum professionals in collecting social media. Nearly every curator or collections manager I have shared my research with – be it in formal presentations or in an on-the-spot panicked response to the question 'so what is your PhD on?' – has agreed in some way with the need and desire to collect from social media.

I am sitting at my desk at home writing this thesis; I haven't been into the University building for over a year. People in the UK are coming to terms with a new way of working and interacting with each other. There is a global pandemic happening and

curators are attempting to mobilise their contemporary collecting programmes to document the effects of COVID-19 on people's lives.

I am a part of the UK Contemporary Collecting Subject Specialist Network and there has been a burst of energy around digital collecting in the time since social distancing measures began. I have witnessed a deeper recognition of the role of social media in people's daily lives, with this fact being reflected on by Twitter too. In August 2020, Twitter published some research it had undertaken on the changing ways in which people had utilised social media during the first six months of the pandemic, highlighting emotional tweeting, heightened creativity and closer communities of interest as just some of the changes in behaviour (MacMillan, 2020). Across the contemporary collecting groups I am involved in there has been a growing desire to know more, to understand methods, and to just generally talk more about collecting social media. Since the first lockdown began, I have chaired Zoom meetings on collecting social media, taken part in a #MuseumFromHome interview on collecting memes, recorded a Museums Showoff talk on museums and memes, and even done a little BBC news piece on why memes should be collected. I've written a number of different blog posts, and this period has seen a number of great articles appear, highlighting the importance of social media to our contemporary moment – some, like Kostas Arvanitis', specifically note the potential of memes (Arvanitis, 2020: np). (He also, in a weird collision of worlds, makes reference to a viral video of my husband playing the drums to the BBC News theme as an example 🥁). Towards the end of writing this thesis, the Museum of London (MoL) announced an exciting new acquisition of 13 viral social media posts, containing a number of memes, all tweeted during the pandemic (Museum of London, 2021), and Jack Dorsey (co-founder of Twitter) sold his first tweet as a non-fungible token (NFT) – with its buyer calling it 'a piece of human history in the form of a digital asset' (Harper, 2021b: np).⁸ This thesis is proving very timely as museums begin to react to

⁸ NFTs are units of data recorded using Blockchain technology that certify individual digital assets as unique and they are therefore being hailed as potential ways to re-formalise ownership in digital objects. Blockchain technology more generally is the technology that underpins cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin (and Dogecoin of course!) and is a decentralised digital ledger that records provenance data on a range of digital assets. It is designed so that records made in the ledger are unmodifiable, which supports trust in the technology for dealing with assets like digital currency and other valuable digital assets (Liddell, 2021a).

the fact that so much of so many peoples' lives is intertwined with online contexts and social media.

There are, of course, many facets to what makes social media worthwhile collecting in museums. The response to COVID-19 has been a contemporary wake-up call for many curators, but taking a step away from the pandemic, there are deeper roots to the significance of social media in society. Social media platforms have a history that is worth exploring; they have design features, like the hashtag, that have become dominant vernacular forms; and they have helped visual communicative tools like memes and GIFs become embedded into everyday social interactions. Through the case studies in this thesis, I consider collecting *from* social media, *with* social media, and collecting social media *as the artefact*.

In the rest of this 'y tho' section I want to begin surfacing some reasons why museums might want to collect social media. While this PhD is more about the *how tho*, if the question of why was not addressed in some way, I feel that would be an oversight. Starting with a brief historicization of social media, addressing some of the beginnings of the social web and web history that has already been lost, this section explores some of the significant influences of social media on society before looking in more detail at examples of social media objects. Those objects, I suggest, are new and emerging object types that museums need to begin to grapple with.

2.1 Historicizing social media

When I refer to social media, I am doing so using Kirsten Drotener and Kim Schrøder's definition of it as 'a wide range of quite diverse Internet-based and mobile services that facilitate users' shaping and sharing of content and participation in online communities' (2013: 2). I like this definition because it encompasses social media as both technical and social environments, whilst also acknowledging some of its key features – the principles of remix, sharing and community – that I argue makes it of relevance for museums to be collecting. Many of the wide range of diverse Internet-based and mobile services that make up social media today have their origins in older Internet-based sites and platforms, and their history warrants attention too.

More and more attention is being paid to these histories, and this can be seen in the ever-increasing volume of scholarship being produced on the subject. I suppose you can tell that academic discourses are maturing when you get a Routledge Companion or a SAGE Handbook on the subject. In 2017, *The Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories* was published, and in 2018 *The SAGE Handbook of Web History* arrived. 2017 also saw the launch of the *Internet Histories: Digital Technology, Cultures and Society* journal and 2019 played host to large international conferences like *The Web that Was: Archives, Traces, Reflections*. I am not going to go into detail on this developing body of work here – this section is designed to be a much more targeted look at social media – but I want to underscore the important historical work that is developing a strong discourse on the significance of the Internet to society.

An important milestone in the history of the social web and the development of social media is the rapid uptake of GeoCities. Web historian Ian Milligan explains how, in the 1990s, GeoCities helped facilitate people publishing their own content to previously unimaginable audiences and becoming part of virtual communities. The increase in accessibility of the web pages helped bring the web and user-generated content to tens of millions of users (Milligan, 2017: 137). The openness of GeoCities made it a hotbed of personalised online creativity and user-generated content –

arguably a starting point for the social media platforms of today. In 2009, web service Yahoo! shut down GeoCities. This act, as described by ArchiveTeam – a collective of self-proclaimed rogue archivists and programmers – successfully destroyed ‘the most massive amount of history in the shortest amount of time with absolutely no recourse... Millions of files, user accounts, all gone’ (ArchiveTeam, 2009). Milligan notes that the GeoCities of old is dead today, and that what is left is a web archive bundled together by the Internet Archive and ArchiveTeam (Milligan, 2017: 137). It is worth reflecting on that fact that the majority of the easily accessible content comes from what ArchiveTeam saved at the end – the ‘rogue archivists’ who saw the potential historical value and managed to salvage a large proportion of early Internet history.

One productive way of understanding the relevance of early web or Internet histories to museums is through the lens of Digital Folklore. Dragan Espenschied and Olia Lialina draw out a range of folkloric traditions of the Internet – including the Internet’s obsession with cats (2009). That being said, Elyse White, in their book on Internet cats, argues that it is more of a truism that the Internet is obsessed with cats – but does agree they are somewhat of a mascot for the web (White, 2020: 6).



Figure 9. Nyan Cat, one of the first Internet cats I fell in love with. Created by Chris Torres in 2001.

Either way, Espenschied and Lialina argue that Digital Folklore can be best described as ‘the customs, traditions and elements of visual, textual and audio culture that emerged from users’ engagements with personal computer applications

during the last decade of the 20th and first decade of the 21st century' (McRae, 2019: 37). Discourses on Digital Folklore have been steadily developing with memes and memetic culture – past, present, and future – being drawn into the fold more recently too (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 37; de Seta, 2019: np). Although museums tend not to use the term 'folklore' too often anymore, Owain Rhys reminds us that early museum folklore collections were the forerunners of the contemporary collections we see in many social history museums today (2011: 35). Acknowledging the historic as well as contemporary use of visual, textual, and audio content on social media platforms as Digital Folklore begins to open up possibilities for us to consider them more readily as new and emerging objects to be collected in museums.

2.2 Social media and society

Let's take a look at some statistics – we all know a bit of quantitative data helps to cement something's significance after all... The first quarter of 2020 showed that Facebook had around 2.5 billion monthly users, closely followed by WhatsApp with 2 billion, Instagram with 1 billion, Tik Tok bringing in 800 million, Snapchat 390 million, and Twitter trailing, but still impressive, at 380 million monthly users (Clement, 2020). These figures are so large I find them quite difficult to comprehend, so to put them in context, Facebook's 2.5 billion monthly users is roughly 32% of the world's 7.8 billion people. One platform is used by 32% of the world's population at least once a month. A significant figure. Whilst that statistic alone doesn't mean that museums *should* be collecting from social media platforms, it does suggest that huge numbers of people are using their social media accounts to interact on a pretty regular basis. Therefore, for museums interested in documenting, understanding, and interpreting human culture, it might prove to be a productive space to inhabit...

Social media platforms themselves have become enormous companies that trade in our personal data – data that we give over freely in signing up to their terms and conditions (mostly without ever reading them) (Meikle, 2016: ix). Some social media users have forged new careers for themselves as 'influencers', making millions as marketing tools for companies keen to sell to eager 'followers'. Khamis and colleagues note that the affordances of social media platforms have created an environment where the ease of projecting one's image, combined with the rise of self-expression and individualism online, has made the notion of self-branding and the concept of the social media influencer more popular (2017: 194). They argue that the networks and technologies that social media rely on allow for global, interactive, and commercial communication on a scale and at a speed not possible for anyone before except the most privileged elite, making 'influencer' status seem achievable for anyone who has access to the Internet (Khamis et al., 2017: 196). The professionalisation of social media content creators has also extended to memes, as more and more brands take note of the meme's use as a communicative tool (Marciszewski, 2020). As we wander through the museums of the future and encounter anvils, cobbler's tools and typewriters that help us understand the

professions of the past, what objects will we see that tell us about influencers, professional meme creators and the people who have made their money through social media platforms?

Graham Meikle explains that social media enables new kinds of connections between users, increasing communication, organisation and mobilisation of a new kind of public (2016: x). Whilst social media does provide some new opportunities for participation, there continue to be many issues. Meikle highlights how these new connections, as well as bringing many positives, also open up possibilities for endless trolling, unwanted exposure and shaming rituals (2016: x). The increased ambiguity between public and private communication through social media also leads to a number of grey areas, or as Phillips and Milner refer to them, 'unique contours of collective online spaces' (2017: 6). They argue that these spaces have led to deeply ambivalent practices, and that online behaviours that display a hint of mischief, oddity, or antagonism – practices like satirical Amazon reviews on a t-shirt or pen, or a meme using an image of someone who had not agreed to it being used in the first place – are often lumped under the category of trolling or just the 'weird Internet.' This implies that the actions are either deliberate (and sometimes playful) subterfuge that inflicts emotional distress on unexpected audiences, or harmless weirdness to be ignored or overlooked (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 7-9). These forms of ambivalent practice online framed some of the conversations I had during my action research at the National Science and Media Museum (NSMM) about the original concept of an 'absolute unit' and will be discussed in more detail in [Practicing what I preach](#). The practices described in Phillips and Milner's *The Ambivalent Internet* are most often enacted by random members of the public, but we see a wide range of more formal, or governmental, discourses played out in a similar fashion on social media too.

Terms like 'Twitter diplomacy' and 'hashtag diplomacy' have become more prevalent within the broader subject area of digital diplomacy. 'Recent' research – in the academic-publishing-timeline sense – has seen substantial projects undertaken to analyse the sentiment and approach to U.S. Twitter diplomacy by Barack Obama. The research argues that the Obama administration's approach was 'rational', as opposed to ad-hoc and in line with officially stated foreign policy (Collins et al.,

2019). The Twitter diplomacy of the Obama era was a little different to how it played out under the Trump Presidency... Former U.S. President Donald Trump took a different approach, constructing and posting threatening tweets to global leaders like Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un. Noting the increase in a social media-first approach to politics, the U.S. talk show *The Daily Show* staged a travelling satirical exhibition called *The Donald J. Trump Presidential Twitter Library* in 2016. In the published exhibition catalogue, U.S. presidential historian Jon Meacham notes how Trump's (now suspended) Twitter account offered insight into a rare thing – a sitting president's moods and musings (Meacham, 2018: xiv).

In surfacing just some of the impacts social media has had on society, it is possible to consider why some museums might be interested in collecting social media as objects of social or working lives, or of conflict and international 'diplomacy' or relations. Although tongue-in-cheek, the Presidential Twitter Library made an effective point about the tweets of Donald Trump, that, whilst a baffling load of covfefe at times,⁹ they are actually significant digital artefacts – new and emerging objects that will form part of the historic record and are worth being taken seriously by museums.

⁹ A misspelling of 'coverage' tweeted by Donald Trump late at night on 30 May 2017. Ridiculed on social media and in print, the term Covfefe now even has its own Wikipedia page. 'Covfefe' (2021). *Wikipedia*. [Accessed 06/10/2020] Available from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covfefe>

2.3 The objects of social media

Having drawn out some of the wider reasons why social media might be relevant to the collecting policies of museums, I want to spend some time discussing what the actual objects might be. As noted, in this thesis I am considering social media as a new and emerging object type. Social media and online technologies continue to develop rapidly, and as such, new object types will continue to emerge from that development. The next section looks to discuss hashtags, social digital photography, and memes as some of the types of objects this thesis engages with through the case studies.

#Hashtags

Haidy Geismar sets up the hashtag as a ‘relatively new communication artefact’ in her discussion of Instagram as an ‘instant archive’ (2017: 333). This idea is developed further by Paula Uimonen who examines the #MeToo movement in Sweden, arguing that the hashtag is an artefact across all social media platforms and suggests the term ‘hashtag visibility’ to describe how in some cases the hashtag itself becomes a visual object rather than just text (2019: 4).

‘Hashtag <insert other word>’ has become a popular way to describe an event, discussion or topic of some sort that happens within, or at least begins within social media environments. Guobin Yang describes hashtag activism in a discussion on the #BlackLivesMatter protests (before its recent re-surfacing in general consciousness after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020). Yang explains how, in adding a word to the character ‘#’ on social media platforms like Twitter, it becomes linked to all other tweets sharing the same hashtag, forming some sort of collective endeavour (2016: 14). Whilst hashtag activism is often criticised for not being ‘real’ or for its performative nature, it does often produce a sense of community and solidarity that emerges as more people contribute (Smith-Prei and Stehle, 2016: 142). The influential nature of the hashtag has not gone unnoticed. Attempts have been made to document social media hashtag activism in projects like *Documenting the Now*, which follows archival principles. Much can be taken from this project – including

tools for collecting and thoughtful commentary on the ethics of collecting social media data (Jules et al., 2018). Considerations from *Documenting the Now* will feature more in the [Breaking Ground](#) and [Practicing what I preach](#) chapters.

The hashtag has become deeply embedded in everyday life for many people, and Meikle highlights how the use of hashtags has filtered into more traditional forms of media, now appearing in the news and TV programmes (2016: vii). Its use continues to spread outside of the social media context, and we could even, for a little while at least, eat hashtags thanks to frozen foods powerhouse Birds Eye, who released *Mas#tags* in 2014 for our culinary enjoyment. Let's not forget that they were #NEW and even made with #Tasty 'real potato'!



Figure 10. Mas#tags from Birds Eye – now sadly discontinued. Credit: Birds Eye

Social media photography

Technologies like smartphones have had a large impact on social media and the two are often described as having relied on each other throughout their development – a symbiotic relationship where the rise of the smartphone enabled social media to grow into what it is now and where the widespread use of social media continues to be a reason why people have and use smartphones (Meikle, 2016: 20). One of the fundamental pieces of technology that really cemented the dominance of the

smartphone is the camera. Smartphone photography has developed to become a vernacular force and is shared through social media platforms and messaging services in a variety of ways. Van House and colleagues note that smartphone (or cameraphone, as they said in 2005) photography use tends to fall within one of four categories: 1) creating and maintaining social relationships; 2) constructing individual or group memories; 3) self-presentation; or 4) self-expression (2005: 1,855). These categories still stand today with a potential addition in the form of visual communication.

The development of photographic practices with smartphones and social media has led to what Nathan Jurgenson calls social photography. Jurgenson explains how this form of photography goes by many other names, including snapshot photography, personal photography, domestic photography, vernacular photography, networked images, and even banal photography (which is one I can definitely relate to when scrolling through my camera roll and finding 18 pictures of different size screws I sent to my other half as we tried to work out what we needed to put some shelves up...) (2019: 8). Jurgenson continues to observe that social photography is intended to focus on the photographs that are shared through digital networks, particularly social media platforms. He argues that what makes a photo a social photo is the degree to which it exists as a unit of communication (Jurgenson, 2019: 9). Elisabeth Boogh, Kajsa Hartig, Bente Jensen and Anni Wallenius argue that it has become the dominant form of vernacular photography today (Hartig et al., 2017; Boogh et al., 2020b).

Social photography, as Jurgenson and Boogh and colleagues note, is most often used as a form of visual communication; to illustrate statements or to prompt conversations. I most often post illustrative images in my tweets and prompting images on my Instagram, and a mixture of all sorts of random – sometimes useful, but most often completely useless – images on my WhatsApp groups. Boogh and colleagues note that this ‘flood of visual expression and ongoing communication’ creates new opportunities for museums and archives to consider the types of photographs that are currently in their collections (2020b: 9). The Collecting Social Photo (CoSoPho) project – which we will delve deeper into later in the thesis – refers to these types of photographs as social digital photography, building on Jurgenson’s

social photography. The addition of the word 'digital' is intended to refer to photographs taken and shared on a broader set of contemporary digital tools rather than just social media (but still, as it turned out, most often on social media) (Boogh et al., 2020b: 8).

Social media platforms that deal specifically with photography have been referred to as ephemeral as well as inherently archival. In addition to the work by Geismar (2017) on hashtags and Instagram, Lisa Ehlin discusses how the sharing aspect of photography on platforms like Snapchat is designed to be fleeting, whilst Facebook automatically attempts to remind you of photographs you've uploaded in the past (Ehlin, 2020: 37). The archival logics of platforms like Facebook and Instagram have developed over time. Xuan Zhao and Siân Lindley note how the platforms can become meaningful personal archives, claiming that social networking sites have the potential to be seen as 'virtual possessions', which become more meaningful over time and form part of an online archive (2014: 2431). I remember that one of the earliest conversations I had with Kajsa Hartig as part of the CoSoPho project was about this, how at some point soon we will begin to see the photo albums of Facebook or Instagram images being offered to the museum instead of the old shoebox of photographs found under the bed. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter all have options to download your own data, and there is no reason why this could not form part of a donation to museums in the future. Many of the photos that form part of people's Facebook profiles exist nowhere else.

Memes

I've already touched on my use of memes, but here I want to contextualise them within a wider view of why we should be considering them as new and emerging object types suitable for museum collections. It would be a pretty big understatement to simply say that memes have become widespread cultural artefacts in contemporary life. Integrated into a wide range of social practices, memes reflect society's increasingly graphical modes of communication and self-expression, ranging from humorous commentary on the day-to-day to more subversive appropriations of cultural imagery by political extremists.

Taking a well-documented example, Pepe the Frog, we can observe how a meme originating from a comic series and initially known as the *Feels Good Man* meme was re-appropriated by alt-right groups. During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Elections Pepe started to be used by supporters of Donald Trump to propagate white supremacy. This became so widespread that Hillary Clinton released a statement about the use of the meme.¹⁰ Denisova urges us to reflect on the fact that the meme became so powerful as a symbol that a U.S. presidential candidate felt the need to release a formal statement about it (2019: 27). This pattern of use and re-appropriation is not unique to Pepe. Memes have become much more than funny pictures: they have and will continue to play a large part in some of the defining events of the twenty-first century (Shifman, 2014: 6).



Figure 11. The evolution of the Pepe the Frog meme – images taken from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog>

The term meme was originally coined by Richard Dawkins and proposed as a unit of cultural transmission or imitation. Dawkins argued that ‘just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body... so memes propagate themselves... by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation’ (2006: 192). There is no real clarity on when this concept of a meme shifted towards our current understanding of Internet memes as remixed manifestations of visual culture, but media scholars Victoria Esteves and Graham Meikle claim that, in the context of remixing images and text, the term meme started being recognised more widely as part of the Occupy Wall Street events of 2011 (2015: 563).

¹⁰ The statement gives context to the meme and explains how white supremacists hijacked it (Chan, 2016). The post is no longer available on the Hillary Clinton campaign website, but can be accessed through the Internet Archive via <https://web.archive.org/web/20160914040646/https://www.hillaryclinton.com/feed/donald-trump-pepe-the-frog-and-white-supremacists-an-explainer/> [Accessed 28/09/2020].

The meme as we know it today really took off on Internet messaging boards and forums like 4Chan, before moving to aggregation websites like Cheezburger and 9gag, and then onto social media and news platforms like Reddit and Tumblr (Douglas, 2014; Eppink, 2014a). Meme generator tools started to be launched in 2009 (Douglas, 2014: 331), providing easy-to-edit template memes and opening up the remixing process. By 2011, Google Trends showed a spike in interest in memes (Shifman, 2014: 13) – correlating with the Occupy movements that Esteves and Meikle regard as one of the moments leading to the solidification of the term meme. In terms of memes themselves, there is a lineage to the ‘LOLcats’ and ‘distracted boyfriends’; there is a history to the forms of contemporary memes that have become the ubiquitous vernacular force they are today. Phillips and Milner link the contemporary meme’s existence back to Xeroxlore in the 1970s. Xeroxlore (also known as Faxlore or Photocopylore) was the act of spreading ‘mock letters, farcical office memos and parodies of songs – travelling from photocopier to photocopier, office to office as participants created, circulated and transformed these everyday expressions’ (2017: 31-32). Photography historian Anna Dahlgren explains that ever since photography emerged as a mass medium in the 1860s, images of cats and dogs with captions – much like the digital image macros that make up so many memes today – have been shared and collected (Dahlgren, 2020: 27).



Figure 12. Spot the difference if you can. A photograph of a cat with a caption that I came across whilst working at the V&A and an image of a cat with a caption that is referred to as HappyCat and credited with starting the LOLcat meme genre.

This section has drawn together a number of reasons why we should be considering social media as new and emerging object types for museum collections. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative of the significant impact social media has had and continues to have. This section has also given more context to some of the social media forms which reappear as potential objects for acquisition in the case studies that follow. As we move through the thesis, I will specifically discuss these new and emerging social media objects as they come up in the case studies. The next section looks to explore the scholarly and practice-based influences of Remix Museology.

3. Remix Museology



Figure 13. 'Woman yelling at cat' (Taylor Armstrong of the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* mixed with Smudge the cat at the dinner table) – generated using imgflip.com

As it stands, the museum is Taylor Armstrong, pointing and yelling at traditional collecting processes as we try to apply them to new and emerging objects like social media. On the other side we have the idea of Remix Museology as Smudge the cat, sitting down, enjoying a nice green salad, confused at all the yelling and wondering why we don't just remix our processes to make them more appropriate for the new and emerging objects as they come.

The concept of Remix Museology is key to the core argument of this thesis: that in order to develop approaches to collecting new and emerging objects like social media, we need to begin incrementally and pragmatically adapting acquisition processes to make them more appropriate for shifting cultures and evolving ethics. It hinges on the premise that I believe standards need to be constantly constructed, or remixed, to stay abreast of new and emerging object types. It has developed over the course of this PhD research as a response to a particular challenge – how to collect social media objects – but its philosophical approach to museum work has the

potential be used more widely. In this thesis, Remix Museology is explored as a way to adapt methods of collecting.

In this chapter, I want us to spend a little time getting to know Remix Museology – what it stands for, what it is inspired by, and how it sits within wider museological discourses. The chapter will start with me, as I walk you through two short stories of implementing change in the sector. These stories are important as they set up my own positionality – reflecting my time as an emerging museum professional finding his feet, and also as a more established practitioner facing the same barriers to change, but in different locations and contexts. They are scenarios I am sure many people who have worked in museums will recognise. Experiences like this shape how we interact in a professional environment, and it is from experiences like these that I now think, practice, research, and write.

Following these stories, I'll dedicate some time to describing Remix Museology – drawing together its influences and the principles by which it operates under the headings adaptive, liquid, imaginative, and ethical. Finally, the chapter will address how a Remix Museology model aligns with some of the recent museological practices and projects happening in the sector. By the end of it, I hope that you agree with me that Remix Museology has the potential to make museums less like Taylor Armstrong and more like Smudge the cat – a little smug, knowing that there is an effective mode of practice for dealing with the acquisition of social media objects and other new and emerging object types in the future.

Remix Museology is a new concept, inspired by many others who have discussed the need for museums to be more flexible before me. I noted earlier in the thesis that, in my development of Remix Museology, I have been influenced by a number of scholars' work – primarily Christina Kreps' *Appropriate Museology* (2008; 2009; 2015) and Lawrence Lessig's *Remix* (2008). However, I have also been influenced by Petrina Foti's *Adaptive Curation* (2019) and Vivian van Saaze, Glenn Wharton and Leah Reisman's *adaptive institutional change* (2018). Inspired originally by critical theorist Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*, Olga Van Oost's 'Liquid Museum' concept (2012), later taken up by Fiona Cameron (2013) and Juan Gonçalves (2019) has also been particularly instructive. Other key projects and

scholarship in the mix include Anisa Hawes and Catherine Flood's (2018) *Collecting and Curating Digital Posters* project that calls for imaginative approaches to curation and Janet Marstine's (2011; 2015; 2017) and Jenny Kidd's (2017; 2019) work highlighting the need for updated forms of ethical museology. As with the very nature of remix, elements of these concepts and practices have come together in the creation of something new.

Remix Museology is the product of remixed museological discourses, a remix that speaks to a specific need for continuous pragmatic and incremental change in approaches to acquisition in the light of new and emerging objects, shifting cultures, and evolving ethics.

3.1 Experiencing change

I've already introduced my approach to change in the previous chapter; this section looks to illustrate how that approach has come to be, and how my development and use of Remix Museology can be transformational for the sector, without the need for the disruptive change rhetoric that I believe is often traumatic and ineffective for people working in museums. I speak to this from my own personal experiences of working to implement collections management standards in steely and self-determined voluntary-run independent museums, and from the results of pushed-through 'revolutionary' change in managing the embedding of process of a new collections management system (CMS) at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A).

Early in my career I worked as a Documentation Officer in Blaenau Gwent – deep in the heart of the South Wales Valleys. In this role, my core objective was supporting a cluster of voluntary-run independent museums in setting up collections management processes and taking initial steps towards Museum Accreditation. Working with an array of personalities to 'professionalise' or 'musealise' their approaches to working with the material culture they had been surrounded with in their professional lives (primarily heavy industries like steel works), it became clear that simply reciting professional standards and attempting to up-end their interactions with the museum objects was proving traumatic and unproductive – it was not an appropriate way to handle the situation. It wouldn't be out of the question to suggest that some of this resistance might have been down to me being a 21-year-old, scrawny and camp guy swanning in, employed by the local county council to tell these retired heavy industry men (mostly) how they should be doing things – but I think it would be a slight mischaracterisation of the overall situation. The vast majority of people I worked with were welcoming and open to learning more about museum documentation and collections management processes; it was a strand of work in a Heritage Lottery Fund (as it was known then) collaborative project that they had signed up to. What proved to be a barrier was my attempting to chant collections management standards like Spectrum at them in the way I felt empowered to do, having previously worked in an accredited local authority-funded museum in Cardiff. I was attempting to get them to overhaul their approach to interacting with the museums they had

helped set up and the objects they were familiar with outside of a museum context, alienating them from the heritage and material culture they were invested in.

I needed to take a more pragmatic approach. I paid attention to the end goal, explained what elements of Spectrum were definitely needed and why, and worked out what elements could be navigated around with respect to the local context and social dynamics. In this situation I had to trust and use my sense of humour and reflect on the appropriateness of what I was asking people to do before progress was made. The process required time, lots of tea, just popping in for a chat, and building productive humour-infused relationships whereby small adaptations could be made. Meeting for a chat and a gossip whilst numbering the collection or paying attention to the local contexts of the museum allowed me to listen to the ways in which the now objects – then everyday tools – were used and not simply state that they could no longer be touched by the volunteers without gloves.

Fast-forward four years and I am at the V&A. A new CMS had just been implemented through a large and, at times, disruptive project. Although the technical implementation of the CMS, the advanced system features, and the ‘completion’ timescale showcased a successful project (award-winning actually 🏆), the reality is that the three years I spent at the museum were focused on constructing and managing relationships to embed a system that had been pushed through using a revolutionary / overhaul approach. This is not intended as a criticism of the individual management of this project; rather, it is a criticism of an approach to change that is endemic in the sector. The fact that so many of the developments that happen in the museum sector come about through time-bound funded projects makes it difficult not to implement change in this manner – but as I’ve already set out, it is not a mode of change I find effective. The feelings of resentment in many departments across the museum were, at times, overwhelming. It was only through building strong, social, and humorous relationships where we laughed at the system’s flaws, created funny names for common issues and workarounds, and worked with the promise of incremental system changes and updates to make the system more appropriate for their work, that we were able to heal and gradually bring those people and departments on board. Ongoing, pragmatic, and incremental approaches to change

have far more potential for effective transformation, especially if undertaken in a social and honest manner. This belief is at the core of Remix Museology.

Working from this point of departure, where my stance on the nature of change that museums undertake, and my own positionality within that, is clear and on the table, the next section of this chapter will focus on the scholarship and project work that has inspired different elements of Remix Museology. Focusing first on the work of Christina Kreps and Lawrence Lessig – the two core pillars of this approach – I want to draw out what their ideas are about and then spell out how I've developed them into Remix Museology.

3.2 Remixing museologies

Remixing

I introduced the idea of remix at the beginning of this thesis – how Lessig uses it to describe the forms of amateur creativity that have flourished through the development of a read/write culture, fuelled by digital and online technologies. But there are other ways in which remixing has been taken forward in scholarship and, as such, there is a developing field of Remix Studies. *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies* (2015) was the field's first major synthesis and aimed to offer a 'concrete point of reference based around the ongoing discussions and online resources' (Navas et al., 2015: 1). Remix studies pays attention to the histories of DIY culture, acknowledging the role of popular music in the development of remix ideas (Navas et al., 2015: 3).

The use of remix as a metaphor has been problematised as a convenient way of describing a mode of production assumed to be specific to our current moment of digital production (Borschke, 2015), but also acknowledged as an important mode of being in culture, which is always incomplete and in need of continual additions, rethinking, and renewal of meaning (Irvine, 2015). My use of remix within Remix Museology works from Lev Manovich's clarification of remix as 'a composition that consists of previously existing parts assembled, which is edited to create particular aesthetic, semantic and/or bodily effects' (2015: 128). Remix is more than just an aggregation of older ideas – Remix Museology employs remix in a way that draws ideas together, recontextualises them and applies them in a pragmatic sense to an issue that is specific to the online remix cultures described by Lessig.

Appropriate Museology meets Remix

Starting with the work of Christina Kreps, we're about to dive into the work that has inspired Remix Museology. Each concept, idea, theory, or project discussed here stands on its own, but as with the very nature of the cultures this thesis is concerned with collecting, they can also be remixed into something new.

Appropriate Museology, as described by Christina Kreps, is an approach to museum work that calls for adaptations to standardised practices and strategies for cultural heritage preservation to sit more appropriately alongside local, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. The development of Appropriate Museology comes from Kreps' work with museums in Indonesia, but she has also discussed the underpinnings of the concept in the context of North America and the Nordic countries too (2003; 2015). Kreps notes that the adaptations made through taking an Appropriate Museology approach to museum work are ideally bottom-up and combine local knowledge and resources with those of the professional museum workforce to better meet the needs and interests of a particular museum and its community (2008: 26). The emergence of Appropriate Museology is attributed to several developments over the past few decades, including decolonial critiques of the museum; the growth of cross-cultural comparative museological studies; and the increase of indigenous and ethnically specific community-based museum models (Kreps, 2015: 5). Kreps highlights that the changes in relationships between many museums and indigenous communities – particularly towards a focus on participatory approaches to how local cultural heritage is curated and represented – has been particularly productive, leading to a more mutually beneficial and culturally appropriate form of museum practice (2015: 4-5).

Describing in more detail some of the observations that led to the development of Appropriate Museology, Kreps noted how museum training programmes in Indonesia were run in a top-down fashion, most often in collaboration with museum professionals from Europe, the U.S., Australia, and Japan, to implement internationally recognised practices and standards established by organisations like ICOM (Kreps, 2008: 25). Kreps claims that this style of training did not work because it was a direct transfer of museum standards, practices and technologies developed in cultural and socioeconomic contexts dramatically different from those in which most Indonesian museums exist. These standards pay little to no attention to the ways in which Indonesian people have been managing their own cultural heritage for many years (Kreps, 2008: 25), or how they might want to continue exploring those practices in the present (Kreps, 2016: 220).

An Appropriate Museology approach to museum training would be one that recognises that the use of traditional curatorial methods does not ‘compromise the integrity or value of standard, professional museum practices’, but instead opens up the ways in which these methods can be combined with established museum practices to offer a diversity of options on how to ‘most appropriately curate those cultural resources communities choose to pass on to future generations’ (Kreps, 2008: 26). Appropriate Museology hinges on the idea that what is seen as appropriate or best practice in one context may not be true in other contexts (Kreps, 2015: 4). Kreps claims that if we look past the dominant Eurocentric and hegemonic forms of museology, we can see that there is a world full of museologies out there (2015: 5). Bearing that in mind, I thought, what harm is there if I add another museology into the mix?

I want to take the time here to acknowledge that in incorporating Appropriate Museology into my remix, I am acutely aware that I am attempting to re-use a concept that describes a move to re-balance the power relationships between Western and non-Western notions of museology and apply it to a digital environment dominated by Western thought. Kreps is keen to highlight that insights gained through comparisons in different contexts encourage us to question the ideas of ‘best practice’ that have become orthodox in the museum profession, suggesting that we may be better served by a discourse of appropriate practice rather than best practice (2015: 14). Elsewhere, Kreps has also discussed the role of non-Western approaches to curation and cultural heritage preservation in developing new museological paradigms (2009: 199). I take from Kreps’ comments that actively seeking more appropriate ways of working with cultural heritage should be encouraged in as many cases as possible.

Haidy Geismar is more explicit in arguing that non-Western, indigenous discourses are highly relevant to all discourses on cultural heritage (2008: 110). Geismar has written on a number of occasions about the combination of indigenous discourses and Western museological concepts – citing the notion of ownership as one area in particular where non-Western insights can be powerful (2008: 115; 2015: 78). The problematizing of ownership will reappear as we move through this thesis, but for now, let's just work with Geismar's words as a statement on the importance of non-

Western approaches to cultural heritage management. It is with this understanding of the importance and relevance of non-Western approaches to cultural heritage that I work with Appropriate Museology and apply it to a context outside of the 'traditional' museum context – the Internet and online environments.

Key to Kreps' concept is the local cultural context, and in my development of Remix Museology I am extending the idea of locality to online spaces – spaces like social media, Internet forums and messaging services. The urge for flexibility over 'recognised' museum standards, based on cultural appropriateness, and the widening of museological forms that feature so heavily in Kreps' Appropriate Museology, offers huge potential for productively engaging with online cultures. Alongside Kreps' and Geismar's assertions of the potential for non-Western curatorial models to develop new museological paradigms, I position Remix Museology as a mode of museum practice that goes beyond dominant Eurocentric and hegemonic forms, which focus on physical, tangible material culture.

In positioning Remix Museology as a mode of museum practice that looks beyond the tangible, we can bring in the second pillar of the remix. This is where Lawrence Lessig's Remix comes into play. I am interested in Lessig's work on two fronts: the first being the remix cultures he describes; the second, his approach to discussing the changes needed in regulatory frameworks to support those remix cultures.

First, I'll address remix cultures more generally. Lessig's *Remix* describes the shift from the Read Only culture, dominant in the twentieth century, to a Read Write culture which we see flourishing through digital technologies, particularly the Internet and the platforms designed around sharing that make use of it. In Read Write culture, we read, edit, and re-appropriate cultural content and create something new. That new outcome is the remix (Lessig, 2008: xx). Lessig asks us to think of remix as an act of layered quotation, noting that 'remixed media may quote sounds over images, or video over text, or text over sounds. The quotes thus get mixed together. The mix produces the new creative work – the "remix"' (2008: 69). Lessig's work was published in 2008, so still in the very early stages of many of the social media platforms and memes we see today, but late enough to be able to describe how content shared through platforms like YouTube showcases amateur creativity.

Today, it is quite clear that remix has become even more prevalent, and that social media content and the memes that this thesis is concerned with, in all of their varieties and formats, are excellent examples of it.

Central to Lessig's argument is that, as it currently stands, under Copyright law, all forms of remix are actually illegal. The fact that so much of the creative remixing taking place is digital is an additional complication. Technically, any interaction with a digital file can trigger Copyright. Whether you are simply opening an image file saved on your own hard drive, downloading a document from an email, or actively remixing video content, when interacting with a digital file, a form of copying always takes place. Copying from a saved location into a software application in order to run the file, copying from an email server onto your own hard drive or splicing video files together – we are constantly triggering Copyright law in our interaction with digital culture (Lessig, 2008: 98-99). Following the letter of the law, the vast majority of us are engaging in illegal activity every day. With every version of this thesis that my supervisors commented on, they have technically broken the law (and no, this example hasn't been included as a veiled threat to ensure they only say nice things). It seems absurd, doesn't it? Lessig passionately claims that the current wording of Copyright law wages war against the creative practices of young people and in effect criminalises them all (2008: 293).

In 2008 I think I would have been classed as one of those 'young people' – I would have been 20 years old, a millennial as we are known today. I would have been one of those criminalised young people that Lessig talks about. Today even more so, I interact with digital files, save images, or take screenshots from the Internet and social media to send to friends and family multiple times every day, and have even done so as part of my research activities. Maybe I should have noted all this 'illegal' activity on my research ethics form?!



Figure 14. 'Bubbles girl meme' generated using imgflip

This laughable conclusion, that myself, my supervisory team and possibly even you – the person reading this right now, depending on the format in which you're interacting with this thesis – are somehow breaking the law leads me on to my second area of interest in Lessig's work; the call for adaptations to intellectual property law in light of remix culture.

Some of Lessig's earlier work explains the concept of technological inversion, where a set of values enshrined in law are upended by technological advancements that leave us in a different cultural, political, or legal landscape. He argues that Copyright is facing technological inversion (Lessig, 2003: 766-767). The landscape that Copyright was developed in is so vastly different today. Copyright now tends to restrict rather than support creativity and use online. Writing from a UK perspective, the current Copyright act in the UK was passed in 1988 – the year I was born. I can vouch for the fact that a lot has changed since then. And with the UK having left the European Union, there is no obligation to make any changes to comply with the 2019 EU Copyright directive which attempted to update Copyright for the digital economy.

I have to ask, does this notion of rules lagging behind the shifting and evolving realities of contemporary society ring any bells for you? It does for me. The concept of technological inversion is applicable to contemporary museum acquisition standards. They are designed around tangible material, not suitable for the increasingly digital world museums find themselves in. Lessig notes how in cases of

technological inversion, the general response is to ignore it and continue trying to apply the same rules to the new landscape (I am reminded of the ‘digital isn’t different’ mantras recited around the Spectrum collections management standards).¹¹ However, there comes a point where it becomes so obvious that the situation is no longer tenable and the issues need to be addressed (Lessig, 2003: 768).

Lessig argues that in order to support remix cultures, legal and regulatory frameworks need to be updated. He notes that ‘Copyright law must be changed. *Changed* [author’s own emphasis], not abolished’ – adding: ‘I reject the calls of many (of my friends) to effectively end Copyright.’ (Lessig, 2008: 253). Lessig also resists the creation of a comprehensive plan to overhaul Copyright law, focusing instead on ‘shifts in the law’ (2008: 254). He was, in a sense, calling for the law to be remixed in order to support remixing, even if he does not use that terminology himself. Rather than work to abolish Copyright laws, Lessig was more interested in working to make their use more appropriate through a process that would allow creators to express their own expectations around the use of their content rather than a blanket legal approach. In 2002, Lessig was one of the founding directors of Creative Commons, a licensing system that allows content creators to set out how their content can be distributed and used. The beauty of Creative Commons is that it works with Copyright law to make it more applicable to the types of content that emerge from remix cultures (and many other forms of culture too), rather than against it. Creative Commons licensing places the power in the creator’s hand to decide what is appropriate – whether it be CC0, where the content is completely open to be used in any way without attribution; CC-BY-NC where content needs to be attributed to the creator and can be used only for non-commercial; or © where the content is completely Copyrighted, and all rights are reserved to the content creator. Remix Museology aims to work alongside existing collections management standards in a

¹¹ ‘Digital isn’t different’ is a well-meaning but misleading positioning of digital collections management-related work. The premise is that you still need to take into consideration the same things as you do with analogue methods. While that is true, there are additional issues to take on board when working with digital. The ‘digital isn’t different’ message amounts to sweeping those issues under the carpet. <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/digital-isnt-different/> (Accessed 20/05/2021).

similar way. It works with the spirit of the standards but aims to make small changes that allow new forms of emerging objects to be appropriately collected and managed.

One area in particular that Lessig argues requires real change is in people's attitudes. He stresses the need to update our norms and expectations on the 'control of culture' to better reflect the twenty-first century (Lessig, 2008: 274). He later refers to this as a 'need to find ways to chill control-obsessed individuals and corporations that believe the single objective of Copyright law is to control use' (Lessig, 2012: 165-166). This need to 'chill' and the reference to 'control-obsessed' individuals and corporations chimes with me. I have reflected so much in the writing of this thesis on how to word my desire for museums (and some of the people who work in them) to relax and be more open to the possibilities of not completely owning digital objects or having full control and authority over them. The discourses over authorship and authority run deep within museum studies and have been at the forefront of those in digital museology too (see section 5 of Parry, 2010). A change in attitudes is needed to help shift perspectives on collecting digital objects.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the discussion around whether or not remix constitutes illegal activity has continued and developed since Lessig's publication. Guilda Rostama, a consultant at the World Intellectual Property Organisation, explained how the relationship between remix and Copyright law is ambiguous, noting that, 'Strictly speaking... Remixes do violate the Copyright in a pre-existing work', but also following up with, 'as long as the remixed work remains in the realm of amateur creativity (i.e., no commercial gain is derived from it), the exclusive right of the original author can be limited' (Rostama, 2015: np). Although the discourse continues to develop, Lessig's argument still stands. We should not revolutionise legal frameworks but shift them to be more appropriate for our current context, and that is what is of specific interest to me.

In mixing the key elements of Kreps' Appropriate Museology and Lessig's Remix we create a new remix; we create the scaffolding of Remix Museology. Remix Museology takes the need for appropriateness in local or current contexts from Kreps' concept and inserts it into Lessig's Remix cultures – essentially the context of the Internet, social media, and places of online interactivity, sharing and creativity.

But their convergences do not end there. Remix Museology is also attentive to the notion of change presented by Lessig and the call to shift practices to become more appropriate by Kreps; it works on the understanding that transformative change can be incremental and based on evolving or emerging contexts. Remix Museology does not call for the abolition of acquisition standards, in the same way that Lessig doesn't call for the abolition of Copyright law. Instead, it seeks to remix it (even if that is not what Lessig calls it). Creative Commons may be a relatively large remix, as opposed to my suggestion of smaller incremental remixes, but the sentiment of shifting or remixing processes in seeking wider transformation change is at its core. What Remix Museology looks to do though is not to be oriented towards a fixed goal, or make the process a one-time mission – it aims to build an incremental, continuously changing approach to reflect the continuously changing remix environment and the new and emerging objects that will come from it.

This orientation towards incremental, but transformative change – as I've already touched on in [My approach to change](#) – does have some traction within museum studies... but not *generally* with regards to acquisition standards. Despite this, there are some noteworthy approaches that promote incremental change, whilst also discussing digital object and collections management. These have been particularly influential in the remixing of museological practices that led to the development of Remix Museology. The following section takes a look at the adaptive, liquid, imaginative and ethically focused calls for change that feature in the museological remix that is Remix Museology.

Adaptive

Petrina Foti's adaptive curation is based on the experiences of Curators and Collections Managers at the Smithsonian Institution in collecting computer-based technology. Foti notes that those who 'engage with computer-based technology in their practice exhibit a series of traits that have facilitated [...] transformation and this ability to accommodate the unknown and assimilate the new' (2019: 51). Foti continues that the practitioners who exhibit those traits are not 'paralyzed by lack of precedent' and she categorises (because she's a collections manager like me! 😊)

them as 'adaptive, distributive and transmitted', noting that the adaptive category is where the seeking of flexible solutions to accessioning, interpreting, and exhibiting new types of museum object comes in (2019: 51).

The parallels between Foti's interests and my own are clear; we both focus on elements of collections management, 'computer-based technology' and working out ways in which the two can become friends rather than work against each other. However, Foti's work is based largely on the physical technology rather than the content (although not entirely – software and digital photographs are touched upon), and her work is also based on the experiences of curators and collections managers at the self-proclaimed largest museum institution in the world, a place where there are perhaps more resources to help think outside the box. The aim of Remix Museology is to work for museums of all sizes and levels of resource, not just the big museums who have the resources, time and space to think outside the box and experiment. I do acknowledge that one of my experiments with Remix Museology is with a national museum site too. Ultimately, the idea of adaptive curating as a mode to seek flexible solutions to new object types is key for both Foti and I, and it is something I definitely envisage being enabled more widely by Remix Museology.

Vivan van Saaze, Glenn Wharton and Leah Reisman's work on adaptive organisational change in light of digital art is another strong influence on Remix Museology. It sits alongside Foti's work in describing how large museum institutions – in this case, the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA) – have gradually changed their practices to accommodate digital art (Saaze et al., 2018). The authors note how so much of the literature related to digital art situates it as disruptive or revolutionary, but they argue that, in reality, if an organisation is set up to be open and experimental, then the changes required don't necessarily need to be earth-shattering (Saaze et al., 2018: 221-222). Their work helpfully articulates how, through multiple iterations of practice, the management of digital art has been transformed.

I found the description of one iteration of practice particularly amusing – partly because I remember doing it myself and partly because it just sounds absurd now. Saaze and colleagues explain how in 2004 the general practice for storing digital art

collections was to keep them on ‘CDs, DVDs, flash drives, portable hard drives, and computers in fine arts storage’ (2018: 224). We were still doing very much the same whilst I was at the Cardiff Story Museum around 2013! I remember my first digital acquisition was of a group of digital stories the museum had commissioned. We decided the best course of action was to burn the digital file onto a DVD, accession the DVD and write its number on it and then store the DVD in a fireproof cabinet in our object store... because how else would we be able to formally acknowledge its accessioned status? Surely an object can’t be accessioned without the ceremony of writing its number on it. By contrast, in 2013 MoMA was in the midst of developing an advanced digital asset management system integrated into its collections management system (Saaze et al., 2018: 231) – a further reminder how differently we can see the landscape of digital collecting in museums if we focus only on the Smithsonians and MoMAs of this world.

Another element of what makes Saaze and colleagues’ approach particularly interesting to me and to the development of Remix Museology is their conception of collections management in museums as a social product enacted through institutional practices. This fits in with my personal experiences of collections management, and how enacting and adapting them requires sociality. This focus on the social interactions that come with the implementation of institutional practices is present in a lot of organisational theory work but is also apparent in Kreps’ work too. Kreps notes how museological work can only become more appropriate if you take the time to get to know a community, group or social context (2016: 232) and understand its social dynamics. Kreps is speaking specifically about the creation of a new museum here, but it can be applied to collecting new object types and implementing changes in processes to accommodate them too.

Liquid

Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity speaks to the continuously changing nature of modernity (2000) and has inspired a number of museological thinkers to consider the liquid potentials of museums. Bauman’s work is incredibly useful when applied to museum work. The second edition of his *Liquid Modernity* describes our current position as a ‘time of “interregnum” – where the old ways of doing things no

longer work... but the new ways of tackling the challenges and new modes of life better suited to the new conditions have not yet been invented' (Bauman, 2012: 1). This speaks to the notion of technical inversion discussed by Lessig, and the ways I have been feeling about the sector, long before I even knew of Bauman. His quote sums up one of the starting places of my doctoral research.

The ways in which the ideas of liquid modernity have been applied to museological thinking have been helpful in my development of Remix Museology. Olga Van Oost's 'liquid museum concept' pays attention to the need to understand contemporary society – removing the distinctions between collections and audiences that are no longer so stringent (2012: 484). Van Oost stresses the importance of the 'digital network sphere', arguing that the liquid museum approach sees every 'person, thing or object' as equally valuable to the museum (2012: 484). I see this concept as offering a useful way of ensuring museum practices are attentive to the needs of people as well as objects. This aligns well with the ways in which I have discussed Saaze and colleagues, Kreps, and Lessig – where the social interactions between people play an important role in the ways in which museums need to adapt their practices. Van Oost's work is more direct in its assertion of the equal weighting of people and objects. This was something that was particularly clear in the ways in which the Collecting Social Photo project approached collecting too (we'll look more at that in the [Social Digital Collecting](#) chapter).

Fiona Cameron, a prominent museums scholar – and someone who seems to have somehow written something profound on nearly all of my wide-ranging professional interests – is also a proponent of the liquid museum concept. Cameron proposes it as 'an ontology [that] can be applied to any issue or circumstance' – an approach to interacting with contemporary complex issues such as climate change (which is what Cameron is addressing in her chapter) (2013: 346). Cameron discusses the challenges of implementing the liquid museum concept, highlighting the need for a shift in institutional attitudes, principles and protocols (2013: 353). These shifts in attitudes, principles and protocols speak to the same urge for shifts in Lessig's, Kreps', and my own work.

More recently, Juan Gonçalves has worked with the liquid museum concept to question how that might actually look and function in the day-to-day of museum

work. He stresses the need to think about the ‘concept of a museum that is not stagnant in its reality and that seeks to keep up with the fast pace of society’ (Gonçalves, 2019: np). In doing this, Gonçalves proposes that the ‘liquid museum’ could offer a different administrative model which allows ‘operational freedom for institutions to work more closely with society’ (2019: np). This model aligns closely with the continual remix function of Remix Museology. Gonçalves explains how he envisages the liquid museum to be transformed through ‘transformation that is guided by the constant revision of transition and transformation which society can be associated with’ (2019: np). We are definitely on the same wavelength there. Gonçalves’ approach to the liquid museum concept and Remix Museology really do complement each other. But Remix Museology is more specific – it is a mode of working with a particular problem for the sector, that of collections management for new and emerging object types.

Imaginative

When it comes to collecting new and emerging objects, or undertaking new projects without precedent, there is always going to be some element of imagination, thinking outside the box, or perhaps even making it up as you go along (or taking educated guesses as we might want to call it). Anisa Hawes and Catherine Flood acknowledge this and call for ‘imaginative approaches to collecting’ in their write up of the *Collecting and Curating Digital Posters* project which was undertaken at the V&A in collaboration with the UK Posters Network between 2015 and 2018. A key element of this imaginative approach is to ensure that theoretical questions are asked alongside practical questions. Hawes and Flood argue that this is to ensure approaches to collecting look at digital objects ‘on their own terms rather than seeking to accommodate them within systems, methods and vocabularies developed through tactile knowledge of physical objects’ (2018: np). Essentially, this is a call for more appropriate forms of collecting.

I have reflected on my own initial dislike of overly theoretical approaches to museum studies, especially as I first took the step out of the sector and into academia and research. However, through my action focused-research, I later realised that good theoretical musings underpin nearly every interaction I make in the world. Remix

Museology – a new concept or theory, a new ‘ology’ – is a product of me embracing theoretical questions about the nature and need for acquisition standards, as well as practical or pragmatic ones. Hawes and Flood develop their theory around what a digital poster in the social media environment is and use this to influence how a digital poster might be practically collected. A significant difference in our work is that their ‘practical’ approach has never been put into practice. The project took place at the V&A, and nothing was actually acquired. The project was run from the Word and Image department, where the museum’s digital art collection also exists. Whilst I was at the museum, it was very much the case that the art was digitally-generated art, collected in physical print form, rather than art that exists in a digital-only form.

The V&A has developed a very specific definition of what they consider to be digital collections – arguing that objects such as the Pussy Power Hat (Figure 15) are born-digital objects because their materiality can be traced, in this case to the knitting pattern that was shared digitally (Park and Samms, 2019). Whilst I appreciate the intellectual intervention in arguing this, I struggle to fully agree with it, knowing that the object is a pink woollen hat that was collected physically, and that there are still so many difficulties and complexities to be ironed out with collecting born-digital objects as objects that are born-digitally and remain in a digital-only format.



Figure 15. The Pussy Power Hat (CD.5-2017). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

I cannot say for certain why nothing was collected through *Collecting and Curating Digital Posters* – the project has some very in-depth actionable methodologies – but

there were no formal attempts to use them to collect whilst I was in the Collections Management Department and, as far as I can tell, there have been no attempts since. Despite this, there are many elements of the project write-up that influenced the collecting methodology that we used at the National Science and Media Museum, which we will look at more closely later, and Hawes and Flood's desire to use imagination, and to theorise alongside practical considerations is definitely embedded in Remix Museology.

Ethical

There is a growing interest in seeking to understand the ongoing ethical dimensions of collecting in museums, as well as the use of digital technologies in museums. Both of these come together in Remix Museology. Janet Marstine has argued that traditional museum ethics discourses were 'unable to meet the needs of museums and society in the twenty-first century' (2011: xxiii). The sector's foundational ethical frameworks, like the ICOM Code of Ethics (2017), or the UK Museum Association's Code of Ethics (2015) are periodically reviewed through large update processes, but, as I've highlighted with collections management standards already, only when they have become out of date and no longer fit for purpose – they follow a similar pattern to the technological inversion described by Lessig. The idea that ethical codes that set out what is good or bad practice are only updated when they out of date means that the codes are only able to meet the needs of museums and society for small chunks of time. Marstine argues that approaches to emerging ethical questions need to be 'adaptive and improvisational' (2011: 8); this echoes the language and sentiment of all the Remix Museology influences I've discussed so far. The ongoing discussions around new forms of ethics are beginning to shine a light on the digital activities of museums, and scholars like Jenny Kidd stress that approaches to ethics in the digital realms of museum work are still emerging (Kidd and Cardiff, 2017; Kidd, 2019). This is yet more recognition of the need for an incremental approach to new and emerging object types.

The idea of appropriateness at the heart of Kreps' 'Appropriate Museology' and carried into Remix Museology is closely connected with the idea of working ethically. One of my most used tools in writing this thesis (just behind the meme generator...)

is WordHippo.com – an excellent dictionary and thesaurus for academic and creative uses. It notes ‘appropriate’ as a synonym for ‘ethical’, particularly when being used in the context of a profession and standards.¹² In some of Kidd’s most recent work, she highlights the need for a new form of museology – one that recognises that museums and the people who visit them find themselves in both digital and physical spaces, encountering and interacting with different principles and formalities that they bring to the table every day (Kidd, 2019: 195). Remix Museology also aims to be attentive to the context: the social and the digital factors that govern what museum practices are appropriate or not. Both Kidd’s call for a new form of museology and Marstine’s for ‘adaptive’ approaches to ethics work in harmony with the ethos of Remix Museology. In its inherent adaptability and awareness of remix cultures, Remix Museology is attentive to developing digital ethics and is aimed, in particular, at pragmatic and ethical approaches to collecting social media as new and emerging objects from digital and online environments.

Marstine’s work has continued to build on the requirement for new forms of ethical approaches and has proposed a form of ethical stewardship that privileges the experience of objects over other notions like ownership. In ethical stewardship the sharing of heritage is valued more than ownership and therefore the notion of shared guardianship is conceived as being a defining aspect (Marstine, 2017: 46).

Marstine’s orientation towards alternative notions of ownership is supported by an earlier project, which saw consultation with sector professionals who expressed a general aspiration to ‘reject the conventions of museum possession/ownership of collections’ (Marstine et al., 2015: 81).

We encountered the rejection of direct ownership as a form of appropriate museum practice earlier through the work of Haidy Geismar. The notion of ownership – so deeply entrenched in museum acquisition practices – will be discussed in more detail throughout the case studies. But ***spoiler alert*** a key feature of this argument rests on the fact that existing notions of ethical practice around collections management activities like acquisition do not hold up in the twenty-first century and in remix

¹² ‘Ethical’, Adjective; *Having characteristics in accordance with the high standards of a profession*: professional; appropriate; fitting; in order; correct; *comme il faut* (Kat IP Pty Ltd, 2021).

cultures – cultures that work with licenses over ownership or de-emphasise ownership and authorship as a notion altogether. However, I suggest the aim should be to incrementally move away from traditional ownership models, rather than pull the rug from underneath them and upend the ways in which the sector interacts with all objects in their collections.

The work discussed so far is aimed at underpinning the principles of Remix Museology; an exploration of the scholarship, practices and projects that have come together in the creation of a new approach to museum work. The next section briefly outlines two examples of remix in action, indicating how Remix Museology might work in practice. It explores the acquisition of the Planetary app at the Cooper-Hewitt in 2013 and the development of the *Matters in Media Art* guidance.

3.3 Remix in practice

In developing the notion of Remix Museology, it was useful to reflect on where I'd seen instances of what I would now call 'remix' within the sector. Some practitioners already take an incremental approach to 'best practice' or standards. Sam Alberti, Stephen Allen, Xavier Dectot and Ruth Gill note that best practice is not set in stone, that it is dynamic, being constantly constructed through reflective practices (Alberti et al., 2017: 325). This is part of the essence of Remix Museology, that standards need to be constantly constructed, or remixed to remain abreast of new and emerging object types. This section aims to take a brief look at two cases of where I think collecting and collections management have been remixed. The first example is of an institutional approach to remixing collecting and collections management, and the second is an example of a collaborative approach to remixing collections management standards.

Remixed collecting

In 2013, the then named Cooper-Hewitt – the New York-based design museum that is part of the Smithsonian family of museum institutions – collected a music app called Planetary as a born-digital object. In a blog post about the acquisition on the museum's website, Seb Chan notes that whilst the museum had previously collected physical objects that rely on algorithmic processes, Planetary (or 2013-14-1 to give it its accessioned museum object number) was the first piece of digital code collected by the museum (Chan, 2013: np). Chan also makes the point that much of the reticence over collecting born-digital museum objects is connected with the uncertainty over how to care for them – a point I will address a further in the next chapter. What makes this acquisition an interesting case of Remix Museology is the way the museum treated the object as a living thing, developing more appropriate ways of managing it. This remix of practices allowed the object to be collected, preserved, and made accessible in a way that the existing systems, processes, and procedures designed around the more static physical collections held by the museum would not have been able to achieve.

Chan, along with Aaron Cope, discussed the detail of the acquisition at the 2014 Museums and the Web conference, explaining how, as a piece of software, the original object stopped working six months after the acquisition was complete, when a new version of the Apple operating system was released. Chan and Cope explained that, as a preservation technique for the object, they open-sourced the code that runs the app using a licence that meant people could download the code without the consent of the museum or the original donors (as part of the acquisition, the donors of the app and code had given explicit permission for this). Then, using GitHub's version control system, they were able to make the code accessible for updates to ensure the object kept working.¹³ They did this whilst also maintaining the 'original object' as acquired (Chan and Cope, 2014: np).

Foti, interviewing Chan in 2015, describes how he used the analogy of a panda in the Smithsonian Zoo to compare acquiring software as a 'living object' at the Cooper-Hewitt, and how the opening of the object to the open-source community was akin to managing a panda breeding programme (Foti, 2019: 93). Chan makes the point that a panda entering the Smithsonian Zoo does not result in the panda being frozen in carbonite in a Han Solo-esque manner, but rather transfers them to a new environment to be cared for in a different way (2013: np).

The acquisition of Planetary is a powerful example of how remixing museological practices and allowing objects to exist within contextually appropriate environments – in this case, as open-source code on GitHub – can help support sustainable acquisition and collections management practices without undermining the principles of museum collecting or the object itself. Chan admits to not having all the answers but makes a clear argument that the museum's experimentation with the acquisition and management process is important in finding them (2013). This exemplifies a pragmatic approach to beginning to develop appropriate digital collecting and collections management methods.

¹³ GitHub is an online software development platform that allows developers and users to build, maintain, further develop, and provide access to open-source software (GitHub, 2021).

Remixed collections management

As with the remix of collecting and collections management at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum we can observe a second instance of what I consider to be a Remix Museology approach, but this time aimed at collections management standards. Although I am critical of collections management for being slow off the mark when it comes to digital collecting, there are small-scale instances of collections management processes being changed to better fit 'media art'. Much has been written about digital and media art – it is an area of scholarship and professional practice that could quite easily lead onlookers to believe museums are actively collecting digital objects and culture pretty well (Dietz, 2005; Paul, 2008; 2016; Graham and Cook, 2010; Graham, 2014). However, this is a misrepresentation of the museum field more generally. Despite that, I do want to hold the *Matters in Media Art* project up as a good example of how changes can be made to collections management in an incremental and targeted fashion. *Matters in Media Art* – framed as 'developing best-practice' by Time-Based Media Conservator Patricia Falcão (2019: 285) – is a deviation of general collections management standards that aims to be updated on an ongoing basis, rather than the one-off review-publish-and-run jobs most often seen.

Matters in Media Art was launched in 2005 in collaboration between the New Art Trust, Tate, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), and MoMA. The project was originally conceived as a 'consensus' building partnership between the partners, but the project website notes that, 'It has always been the consortium's hope that if the three museums could come together to agree on emerging stewardship practices, then by sharing these practices online they would be used, improved upon and refined by larger audiences of artists and collectors' (*Matters in Media Art*, 2015).

The practices recommended by the project focus on acquisition, documentation, loaning, and preservation and include particularly useful guidance for museums and galleries that are part of the 'art world'. The appropriateness of the standard, the adaptations made, and the ongoing management of the project is what really sets it up as an example of Remix Museology. The recommended practices are released

under a Creative Commons licence and the project welcomes further recommendations and changes to the guidelines through GitHub. *Matters in Media* not only focuses on collections management, but it also treats digital media as objects, and works through an online collaborative platform to manage the recommended practices on an ongoing basis. This epitomises Remix Museology to me and is an excellent example of what can be achieved in remixing collections management standards.

This chapter has functioned to introduce Remix Museology. It is an approach to museum work that is inspired by remix cultures and advocates for pragmatic approaches to collecting new and emerging objects that incrementally adapt to become more appropriate for shifting cultures and evolving ethics. In the context of this thesis, Remix Museology functions to develop approaches to collecting social media in museums. We can already observe examples of what a Remix Museology approach can achieve through exemplary acquisitions like Planetary, and through the *Matters in Media Art* guidance. Throughout the thesis, I will be coming back to Remix Museology, discussing how my case studies have either contributed to its development, or how I've observed and been a part of remixing happening, and also how I have actively attempted to navigate a Remix Museology approach to acquiring social media objects within an institution.

Now that we have walked through the underpinnings of this thesis, it is time to look more closely at the core case studies of the thesis. In the next chapter, [Breaking Ground](#), I work through the reflexive dyadic interviews I undertook at the MoL and the V&A to surface existing digital collecting practices and begin focusing in on the specific challenges collecting social media presents to draw out how they have contributed to my application of Remix Museology.

P.S. I hope you're finishing this chapter feeling more Smudge than Taylor.

4. Breaking ground

Imagine for a moment, the Web as a history museum. Vast open collection storage facilities, filled to the brim with personal journals, corporate advertising, and lots and lots of porn. Whilst the majority of the collection is open to the public 24/7, most items are rarely accessed. The museum has the most lenient accession policy in the world and donors, not institutional staff are responsible for the conservation and preservation of their contributions. Imagine sitting down with your fellow web museum trustees and arguing that instead of harnessing the vast collection, you should actually make it larger – you should make it easier for people to share pictures of their cats and vacations; you shouldn't organise things in top-down hierarchies, you should instead allow users' behaviours and preferences to create a folksonomy – a user driven cataloguing system constantly in flux.

(Simon, 2011: 18-19)

I wanted to start this chapter with a quote from Nina Simon, as this quote, together with Kreps' *Appropriate Museology*, is what first got me thinking about more adaptive and appropriate ways of collecting from online contexts. Simon is purposefully humorous in her comparison of the Web and the museum here – ten years later it all seems pretty utopian when we consider the reality of the unseen and unaccountable algorithmic forces that influence the Web today... but regardless of this, it just so happens that nine years after she was writing, we can actually see some of her playful suggestions surface themselves in the forms of practice this thesis is working with.

These forms of practice range from decision-making processes about collected objects sitting with the donors rather than museum staff in projects like #CitizenCurator at the Museum of London (MoL) and the Collecting Social Photo (CoSoPho) project, to pictures of cats and vacations forming a large part of the types of object CoSoPho were interested in collecting. The case studies in this thesis also see challenges to the cataloguing and organising principles of museums at the MoL, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), CoSoPho and the National Science and

Media Museum (NSMM). The ins and outs of these principles will be addressed as we move through the thesis.

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate how museums have broken ground with digital collecting and started to consider what it might mean to collect social media. Working within my overarching autoethnographic approach, I use personal reflections on my previous work in the sector as well as events that have happened throughout the course of the PhD. I also use insights gained from three reflexive dyadic interviews as a way to explore wider discourses on digital collecting and previous approaches to collecting social media. The interviews used in this chapter are as follows:

- 12th August 2019, V&A. Reflexive dyadic interview between Corinna Gardner, Natalie Kane and myself.
- 18th October 2019, V&A. Reflexive dyadic interview between Brendan Cormier, Esme Hawes and myself.
- 7th February 2020, MoL. Reflexive dyadic interview between Foteini Aravani and myself.

When considering previous approaches to collecting social media, I look at several examples, including the Library of Congress' ill-fated attempt at collecting ***all of Twitter***, as well as the *Documenting the Now* project, the MoL's approaches to collecting from Twitter, and the V&A's WeChat acquisition. This chapter will argue that these acquisitions broke new ground by conceiving of social media as cultural heritage and museum objects. The case studies explored in this chapter show a number of innovative approaches to collecting and have contributed to my conceptualisation of Remix Museology. They highlight the ways in which positive orientations towards institutional change can support more productive attitudes towards digital collecting, and in turn, the acquisition of new and emerging object types.

4.1 Museums and digital collecting

I don't think it is unfair to say that digital collecting in museums has taken some time to gain momentum. That does not mean we have not seen a number of museums make a start on digital collecting – some have been doing so since the mid-2000s, when museums were collecting oral histories and images on electronic media (Parry, 2007: 67). More complex digital collecting has also been taking place in large national museums and in art galleries, often being written about under the guise of 'new media' art (Krysa, 2006; Paul, 2008; 2016; Graham and Cook, 2010; Graham, 2014). The collecting of media art has reached a certain maturity, as can be seen through the production of the *Matters in Media Art* guidance (2015), but beyond the artworld, the uptake of collecting, managing, and preserving born-digital objects has been slow.

I was at the *Museums and Digital Memory* conference at the British Museum (BM) in 2018 and it was the first time I'd heard this fact acknowledged out loud in a public forum. Later that year, the same conclusion was drawn in the Museum Association's *Collections 2030* report that sought to work out a roadmap for collections engagement, management, and development over the next decade (Brown and Briggs, 2018: 8). Glenn Cumiskey, the Digital Preservation Resource Manager at the BM at the time said in his introduction to the conference that 'museums are very immature' in preserving digital data and objects and made the point that the work of archives and libraries show that this is not a new problem, but one that has been around for the past twenty years. He finished off by saying that archives and libraries are trying to help museums and it is about time museums accepted that help in order to take their place in 'the fraternity of cultural institutions that are committed to ensuring that the digital legacy we create today is available to everyone tomorrow' (Cumiskey, 2018).

I observed earlier in the thesis, that over the past four (or so) years I have noticed a marked increase in the energy behind digital collecting in museums. COVID-19 has spurred this on too, but the energy was definitely there before the pandemic hit. The outcomes emerging from projects like the *One by One* project (Parry et al., 2018)

and the work of Nicole Meehan (2020) suggest that curators working in the sector are becoming more aware of the need to collect digitally and are getting more comfortable with using digital collecting orientated language. At the same time, we cannot ignore other influential factors that tell us museums are not yet properly collecting and looking after born-digital objects. In 2019, the Digital Preservation Coalition added 'all manner of digital materials held in museums' to their *Bit list of Digitally Endangered Species* list.¹⁴ I am yet to see – from the literature, my own previous experience and the many conversations I've had with curators across the UK during my research – that museums in general are confidentially collecting and preserving digital objects as part of their normal practice.

During my time working in collections management at the V&A, between 2015 and 2017, I saw a number of leaps forward in terms of institutions accepting the idea that museum objects can be digital; and through my reflexive dyadic interviews I have come to know earlier experimental digital collecting from the MoL and in the Nordic countries. Nevertheless, we are still not in a position to say that it is common practice. During my interview with Corinna Gardner (Senior Curator of Design and Digital) and Natalie Kane (Curator of Digital Design), we were trying to recall which museums in the UK had digital curators. Outside of visual or contemporary art museums / galleries, we could only think of two such curators: Natalie herself and Foteini Aravani at MoL (Gardner and Kane, 2019). Of course, I do not mean to suggest the lack of specialist digital curators means digital collecting doesn't happen, but it does illustrate what Cumiskey noted at the BM conference, that digital collecting and preservation in museums is still at a relatively early stage.

One of the claims this thesis makes is that collections management standards and the ways in which we describe objects are extremely influential in setting the boundaries of what does and does not get collected in museums. When collections management standards do not address digital objects they contribute to a

¹⁴ The Digital Preservation Coalition's *Bit List of Digitally Endangered Species* is a crowdsourced list of digital materials that the digital preservation community thinks are most at risk, as well as those which are relatively safe thanks to digital preservation. It uses a tiered system to indicate the level of danger the digital materials are facing: lower risk, vulnerable, endangered, critically endangered, and practically extinct (Digital Preservation Coalition, 2019).

conceptual barrier to collecting them. Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine have highlighted that the 'so called immateriality of digital objects' causes an issue for many within the sector (2007: 4), and this scepticism is closely linked to the idea that the tangible or material aspects of an object still form an important baseline for its value (Knell, 2012: 325; Mason et al., 2018).

This issue also came up in my discussions with Corinna and Natalie. Corinna was keen to note that we are often quick to blame the complexity of digital objects for our problems with collecting them but she wanted to reframe the issue. Whilst we can acknowledge that some digital objects are complex, so are many non-digital objects. Having said that, the issue faced with digital objects is that the complexity of the object pushes siloed institutional frameworks (collections management in this case) to work differently (Gardner and Kane, 2019). For many, the idea that digital objects are immaterial or too complex is confirmed by collections management standards' lack of reference to them – this, in my view, compounds the conceptual barriers to collecting digital objects.

Taking what I see as a pragmatic approach to bringing people on board to start dismantling that conceptual barrier, there have been attempts to describe digital objects in a way that is more palatable for those who are not as used to working with digital culture. Ross Parry's use of 'e-tangible' is a great example of this. He suggests using the term as a way of creating a 'reassuring nomenclature that intentionally aligns them to existing typologies of objects traditionally collected by museums' (Parry, 2007: 68). This is one way of incrementally breaking down that conceptual barrier to digital collecting. Natalie described how there is a similar approach at the V&A – she noted that 'it's easier to talk in analogue examples, so "it is like this. It is like this previous thing"' – but acknowledged that there is only so far that this can work; when the object you are describing becomes more abstract you start to notice the system breaking down more. Natalie claimed that the challenge from here is how to break away from saying 'this is like a video recording' (Gardner and Kane, 2019).

During the interview it became more apparent that Corinna and Natalie had moved the conversation about digital collecting on quite a bit since I had left the V&A –

Natalie had only just joined when I left. Corinna noted that, until recently, most of the conversations about digital collecting in the museum ‘hedged on issues, challenges and problems and the sense of impossibility’ and how ‘through determination and something of a terrier attitude towards positivity we are managing, with the absolute collaboration of colleagues to shift that perspective’ (Gardner and Kane, 2019). Whilst interpretations of what a terrier-like attitude is may be broad, the way in which Corinna was portraying it during the interview did not suggest a yappy Yorkshire terrier, but rather a determined energetic terrier. Through this persistence towards positivity, a cross-departmental ‘curating the digital’ group has been set up, a group that seems to have voluntary representation from nearly every collecting department (Gardner and Kane, 2019). This has meant that now a number of people across the institution are on board, and conversations that more productively and generatively address the complexity of digital objects have been able to start.

In expressing my excitement over how the conversations had developed at the V&A since I’d left, I fumbled over my description of the broad range of digital objects museums might collect, settling for ‘digitally existing... things’, and after laughing it off, Natalie went on to describe how in the V&A’s recent articulations of digital objects, they have tried to distinguish between born-digital, digital-physical hybrid, digitally enabled and digitally mediated (we also briefly touched on ‘phygital’ which is similar to physical hybrid, but agreed that it was awful and should be avoided at all costs) (Gardner and Kane, 2019). These distinctions begin to surface how digital objects in museums can range from straightforward single files to complex multifaceted objects where numerous digital files work together with each other and physical hardware in order to create the object. The digital materiality of the V&A’s collection has also been articulated through the *Content/Data/Object* project that was just starting as I left the museum. The project was being led by Marion Crick, Head of Collections Management at the museum, and aimed to focus on the language used to talk about and describe digital objects (Crick et al., 2019). A key finding of the project so far has been that the definition of digital objects at the museum is being blurred through interrogations of their digital materiality (Park and Samms, 2019). A key example of this is the Pussy Power hat that I referred to earlier, in which a pink knitted hat is being defined as a born-digital object. It is worth clarifying here that I do not disagree with the concept of digitally-designed objects transitioning

to physical ones – these can be readily considered as hybrid objects. It is more that, for the sake of establishing clear processes and practices around managing born-digital objects that were created in, and continue to remain in, a digital-only format, I think the blurring seen through objects like the Pussy Power hat should be avoided for now.

This opening up of complexity follows conversations that have been happening outside of museums for some time. Earlier discussions of digital objects in this vein can be found in Clifford Lynch's suggested hierarchy of digital objects that moves from data, through to documents, sensory presentations and on to interactive experiential works (Lynch, 2000). Others have started using the notion of static digital objects (jpeg images, mp3 audio, mp4 video) and dynamic digital objects (videogames, interactive artworks, websites with embedded media) to differentiate between objects that are generally complete, fixed, and suitable to be kept in read-only formats, and objects with changing content or working algorithms that are made up of multiple elements with interdependent relationships (Giaretta, 2011; Boss and Broussard, 2017; Corrado and Sandy, 2017).¹⁵ However, another strong argument that has emerged is that digital objects are always incomplete, perpetually in the making, with an 'ambivalent ontology' (Kallinikos et al., 2013: 357-358). Although an in-depth discussion on digital preservation and the intricate complexities of digital objects is not the focus of this thesis, the fact that some museums are beginning to have conversations about this is of relevance. Accepting the plurality of types of digital objects is an important milestone in beginning to shift towards implementing a Remix Museology approach to collecting – taking pragmatic and incremental steps towards accepting the need to work with digitally enabled, mediated, dynamic or perpetually 'in the making' objects is key to collecting new and emerging object types like social media.

The museum sector, as Cumiskey noted in the 2018 BM conference, is still relatively immature in its digital collecting journey compared to archives and libraries, but that doesn't mean that a number of institutions haven't started making significant

¹⁵ The term 'complex digital object' is also used to describe dynamic digital objects (Delve and Anderson, 2014).

progress. It is not insignificant that the Museum Association's *Collections 2030* research project highlighted the need for more dynamic collections management and experimentation with digital collecting (Museums Association, 2019: 26), or that the Digital Preservation Coalition has seen the number of museum members more than double over the past five years – a membership which includes the Science Museum Group, who joined during the course of my action research with them.¹⁶ The task from here will be to galvanise the energy behind recent developments and ensure processes are scalable for a range of museums who might be interested in digital collecting.

Having addressed some recent developments in digital collecting, helpfully prompted by my discussions with Corinna and Natalie at the V&A, I now want to take a look at approaches to collecting social media from a range of cultural heritage perspectives, before coming back to look at two museum-specific examples from the MoL and the V&A.

¹⁶ Although the numbers are still really small. Of the Digital Preservation Coalition's 111 members (Jan 2021) only seven are museums... (Personal Communication via Twitter with Sarah Middleton, Head of Advocacy and Community Engagement for the Digital Preservation Coalition).

4.2 The Atlantic Ocean in a basement

One of my favourite descriptions of cultural heritage institutions' attempts to collect social media in the past has come from Scott McLemee, who compared the Library of Congress' (LoC) venture with archiving Twitter as someone who finds themselves agreeing to store the Atlantic Ocean in their basement (McLemee, 2015). The library's ill-fated attempt at collecting all of Twitter is just one of a number of projects that have seen cultural heritage institutions attempt to grapple with collecting social media over the past decade. The aim of this section is to highlight some of those projects and the learning that museums can take from them in future attempts to collect.



Figure 16. 'Ocean and person' stock photo meme created using imgflip.com

The LoC and its Twitter archive is perhaps the most notable attempt made by a cultural institution at collecting social media. I've lost count of how many times someone has told me that Twitter has already been collected by the LoC when I try to explain my PhD to them. Therefore, I feel it is important that the example gets explored here, highlighting what happened, what didn't happen, and what we can learn from it. In April 2010, the LoC announced that it had signed an agreement with Twitter, who had agreed to donate all public tweets from March 2006 to April 2010

and to transfer new tweets, in line with the gift agreement, moving forward (see Figure 17).

<u>GIFT AGREEMENT</u>			
<p>1) <u>Gift</u>. Twitter, Inc. ("Donor") hereby donates to the United States of America for the benefit of the American people and inclusion in the Library of Congress ("Library") a collection consisting of public Tweets from the Twitter service from its inception to the effective date of this agreement ("Collection"). Any additional materials that the Donor gives to the Library, including materials accessed by a feed established for this purpose, will be governed by the terms of this agreement unless the Donor and the Library agree upon different terms in writing in advance of such additional gift.</p> <p>2) <u>Copyright</u>. Donor grants an irrevocable nonexclusive license to the Library for such rights as the Donor has the right to transfer or license under the Twitter Terms of Service in place at the time of the gift or before. The current, as of the effective date, and previous Terms of Service are appended.</p> <p>3) <u>Access</u>. Any portion of the Collection originally posted to the Twitter service six months prior to the then-current date may be made available to Library staff and to bona fide researchers according to the policies of the custodial division of the Library responsible for the administration and service of materials of this nature, provided that the researcher signs a notification mutually agreed upon by Donor and the Library prohibiting commercial use and redistribution of all or a substantial part of the Collection. After a period of six months from the date any portion of the materials was first posted to the Twitter service, the Library may display such materials in the Collection on its public website or in any other electronic form or successor technology, subject to reasonable access limitations such as the use of a robots.txt file. The Library will not provide a substantial portion of the Collection on its public website in a form that may be easily subject to bulk download.</p> <p>4) <u>Disposal</u>. Should the Library determine that any part of the Collection is inappropriate for retention, the Library may dispose of such material in accordance with its procedures for disposition of materials not needed for the Library's</p>	<p>Collections.</p> <p>5) <u>Warranties</u>. The Donor warrants that, to the best of the Donor's knowledge, the Donor owns the physical property in the Collection, free and clear of any liens, and the Donor has the full right, power and authority to transfer the physical property in the Collection and license rights therein to the Library as described herein.</p> <p>6) <u>Choice of Law and Jurisdiction</u>. This agreement is to be governed by, and construed in accordance with, the federal laws of the United States. Any action in regard to the agreement or arising out of its terms and conditions is to be instituted and litigated in the federal courts for the District of Columbia. Accordingly, the parties submit to the jurisdiction of the federal courts for the District of Columbia.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">In witness whereof, the authorized representatives of the parties have signed this agreement effective as of the last date of signature:</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Donor</p> <p>By:  Alexander Macgillivray General Counsel, Twitter, Inc.</p> <p><u>April 13, 2010</u> Date</p> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p style="text-align: right;">For the United States of America</p> <p>By:  James H. Billington The Librarian of Congress</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><u>April 14, 2010</u> Date</p> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Donor</p> <p>By:  Alexander Macgillivray General Counsel, Twitter, Inc.</p> <p><u>April 13, 2010</u> Date</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">For the United States of America</p> <p>By:  James H. Billington The Librarian of Congress</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><u>April 14, 2010</u> Date</p>
<p>Donor</p> <p>By:  Alexander Macgillivray General Counsel, Twitter, Inc.</p> <p><u>April 13, 2010</u> Date</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">For the United States of America</p> <p>By:  James H. Billington The Librarian of Congress</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><u>April 14, 2010</u> Date</p>		

Figure 17. The gift agreement between Twitter and the Library of Congress

The gift was hailed as a clear recognition of the historical and cultural importance of Twitter by the LoC (Zimmer, 2015: np), and one that Twitter more than likely saw as being prestigious too (Fondren and Menard McCune, 2018: 35). By January 2013, the Library claimed to have received c.170 billion tweets, totalling 133.2TB, and had established processes for receiving and preserving daily updates using an intermediary company, but not for providing access to the collection (Zimmer, 2015: np). The 2013 LoC update on the Twitter archive stated that its focus was on 'confronting and working around the technology challenges to making the archive accessible to researchers and policymakers in a comprehensive, useful way' and that it is 'clear that the technology to allow for scholarship access to large data sets is lagging behind technology for creating and distributing such data' (Library of Congress, 2013). The collection is still not accessible today, and in December 2017, the LoC announced it would no longer be collecting incremental updates of every

tweet. Instead, it would consider the Twitter collection to be made up of a snapshot of the first twelve years of Twitter, followed by selective thematic tweet collections on an ongoing basis (Library of Congress, 2017).

One immediate issue I have about the material collected is that no media or links are included, leaving many tweets only half complete. This is a pattern we also see reflected in the MoL's initial Twitter acquisition, which happened two years later. The bigger issues in this case are more closely linked with the gargantuan task of archiving the entirety of a social media platform, a task that cultural heritage organisations are not resourced for. Lynch argues that we should consider the LoC's experience as a cautionary tale for institutions considering doing the same (2017: np). Elisabeth Fondren and Megan Menard McCune argue similarly that the LoC Twitter collection signals the difficulties that cultural heritage institutions face when attempting to materialise their ambitions with treating digital content in the same way as traditional material collections (2018: 40). These issues resonate with what I have already argued in this thesis: that we cannot attempt to acquire social media content through existing collections management processes. We need to make pragmatic, incremental, and ongoing changes to cope with new and emerging types of objects. Having said that, there are additional issues with the LoC's Twitter archive that also help inform how museums should go about collecting social media – primarily related to the ethics and appropriateness of the task.

In a blog piece as part of the announcement of the acquisition, Twitter were careful in their description of what was being donated. They noted that 'it is our pleasure to donate *access* to the entire archive of *public* tweets to the Library of Congress for preservation and research' (Stone, 2010: np). I have italicised *access* and *public* as what Twitter seems to be keen on highlighting here is that ownership of the tweets is not being given to LoC and that what is being given is access to already publicly available content. This suggests that Twitter may have anticipated some concerns around individual people's tweets being donated without their explicit consent – and that is exactly what happened. Michael Zimmer notes some of the public responses revolved around the appropriateness of the Tweets being handed over for archiving, focusing mainly on the respect of the privacy expectations of Twitter users (2015: np).

The Library responded by saying that the information is already out there and that users signed up to Twitter's terms of service. Zimmer calls this 'the classic "but the information is already public" used to justify the widespread harvesting of social media content', following up by noting that whilst it is technically true, it might have ignored any 'contextual norms' that might have informed a Twitter user's expectation of how a tweet might be seen or used (2015). Zimmer makes a valid point – just because someone tweets from a public-facing account, it doesn't always mean they fully understand that their words are now fair game for anyone who wants to use them.

That being said, practices around the use and quotation of other people's social media posts have moved on quite a lot since this donation in 2010. In a discussion piece on the blog of the Centre for Digital Ethics and Policy at Loyola University Chicago, the ethics of quoting social media posts in articles without explicit permission was explored. The piece argued that, whilst it might be polite to notify someone that their tweet is being quoted, it is not an ethical stance. However, it also made the point that a judgement call should be made on a case-by-case basis (Educo, 2014). Later work from the Social Data Science Lab at Cardiff University argued that it is a case of ethics and the effects of 'online disinhibition' and users' privacy expectations should be considered (Williams et al., 2017: 1,150). It should be acknowledged here that quoting and collecting are different; Fondren and Menard McCune claim that the outcry in the LoC's case was in part down to the 'permanent and long-term nature of the Library's Twitter Archive' that people felt so challenged by the donation (2018: 41).

The *Documenting the Now* project sits between the use of social media in research and more institutional approaches to collecting and archiving social media, arguing that the ethics of collecting social media needs to be actively worked through and become rooted in the core values of practitioners moving forward (Jules, 2016). The project began, in idea form, at the 2014 Society of American Archivists annual meeting, and coincided with the murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (Galarza, 2018: 792). After initial discussions about what could be done to document the response to the killing, Bergis Jules and Ed Summers worked together to try and archive a number of

relevant Twitter hashtags and the *Documenting the Now* project was born (Jules et al., 2018). The project highlighted that the key ethical challenges included a lack of awareness or informed consent about how social media platforms use and share data; the potential misuse of social media content; the heightened risk of harm for marginalised communities on social media; and the difficulty in applying traditional ethical archival practices to social media content (Jules et al., 2018: 3).

Whilst all of these ethical challenges are relevant for museums thinking about collecting social media, the issues of particular pertinence for this thesis and the case studies within it are those of informed consent and the difficulty of applying traditional ethical practices. That does not mean that I am disregarding the heightened risk of harm for marginalised communities and the awareness of potential misuses of social media data. These are considerations that all archivists and curators should take on board when thinking about collecting social media, with more weighting given to those issues when considering collecting social media content related to protest, racism, and social justice. As will be addressed later, the responses to the Absolute Unit meme were examined for their potential to do harm when we worked to collect it and some of its responses from Twitter. Utilising the learning from projects like *Documenting the Now*, a balanced, pragmatic, and informed decision was made on how to collect the meme and its responses. As Jules and colleagues note – there is no one-size-fits-all approach to an ethical stance and practice (Jules et al., 2018: 9). An adaptive context-specific approach is required when considering ethically appropriate collecting practices for social media.

The final recommendations that come from the *Documenting the Now* White Paper on Ethics set out what archivists (and curators in our case) should be thinking about when collecting or documenting contemporary activism on social media. They recommend:

- Engaging and working with the communities you wish to document online.
- Documentation that goes beyond what can be collected without permissions from social media and the web.
- Alignment with social media platforms' terms of service 'when they are congruent with the values of the communities they are attempting to document'.

- Archivists (or curators) should, where possible, apply traditional practices such as appraisal (or selection), collection development and donor relations to social media and web materials (Jules et al., 2018: 12).

These recommendations were helpful in designing the process used to collect social media at the NSMM, and in the development of Remix Museology. Engaging and working with online communities, as well as the remix cultures that are a dominant feature of social media, is central to Remix Museology. A recognition of the requirement to pay attention to the ways in which people manage their own cultural heritage in different contexts – as argued for in Kreps' *Appropriate Museology* (2008) and spurred on by Simon's playful comparisons of the web as museum – is what inspired me to start developing Remix Museology.

Documentation that goes beyond what can be collected online without permission and alignment with social media platform terms of service has fed into the ethical and appropriate elements of Remix Museology. As Kidd notes, digitally appropriate ethical codes and considerations are still emerging within the museum sector (2019). Therefore, making a pragmatic start on ethical collecting practices by working within the terms of service set out by social media platforms (where they align with the principles of the communities you are working with), and taking extra steps to record permissions even when not 'legally' required, as we saw with Educo (2014), has been a feature of my approach to collecting during this research.

Finally, the idea of working *where possible* with traditional practices in selection, collections development and donor relations is another strong influence on how Remix Museology is intended to work. As I've noted throughout the thesis so far, Remix Museology is not designed to be revolutionary in the conventional sense of the word. It does not propose an out-with-the-old and in-with-the-new approach to dealing with acquiring new and emerging object types. The use of 'where possible' in the recommendations from *Documenting the Now* is very important here. It recognises that some practices just cannot be done in the same way when collecting social media, and that more appropriate ways of handling the collecting process might be needed. Remix Museology proposes working within the frameworks of

museums and collections management, but with pragmatic and incremental remixes where needed, transforming them in the process.

Both the learning from the LoC's Twitter Archive and the ethically engaged research and findings of *Documenting the Now* have fed into the work of this PhD. The LoC acts as a cautionary tale about biting off more than you can chew, but also specifically concerning the backlash from its blanket approach to collecting everything without contextually appropriate considerations on professional ethics. The *Documenting the Now* project has been helpful in this regard, dealing with a particularly sensitive area of social media archiving, and in doing so, providing a good base from which to think about ethical collecting practices.

The next section aims to look in more depth at how the MoL and the V&A have gone about collecting social media in two very different ways. It will focus more on the reflexive dyadic interviews and my experiences of working within the sector.

4.3 Two museums, two very different approaches

Whilst the LoC's Twitter acquisition and the *Documenting the Now* project are excellent examples of approaches to collecting social media that begin addressing a number of issues, they are not examples of museums working to collect social media, and therefore can only address the issues museums face in a broad sense. In order to address the specific challenges for museums, this section looks at the social media collecting projects of the MoL and the V&A. The MoL was one of the first – if not *the* first – museums to experiment with the acquisition of social media content, collecting tweets about the London Olympics in 2012. That was followed by a further two Twitter collections and a social media dataset and visuals collection in 2018. The V&A, on the other hand, with a different curatorial motive to the MoL, worked to collect a social media platform, finalising their WeChat acquisition in 2017.

Hashtags and Twitter accounts at the Museum of London

I met with Foteini, the Digital Curator at MoL, a few times before we managed to arrange our interview. These meetings / catchups that happened before the interview were particularly useful as they helped us to build a productive relationship before we sat down to discuss the museum's Twitter collections in more detail. We arranged an initial conversation in the museum in November 2017 when I was on my way to the first Collecting Social Photo workshop and chatted about the potential for me to do some research. We kept in touch after that, catching up at various museum events and workshops, but nothing substantial happened again until March 2019, when I was in London for the meeting of the Contemporary Collecting network. Foteini and I met before the meeting, and I wrote some reflections afterwards. The first thing I noted was that when we met, we hugged, did a double kiss, and that it all felt very darling-darling and comfortable. Reading this back felt especially lovely, considering the social distancing that came into effect as I was finishing some of my research.

This familiar, social, and friendly start to our second face-to-face meeting created an open atmosphere and Foteini was frank about her dissatisfaction with the Twitter

collections in their current form. We looked at the Twitter collections in Foteini's office and it was essentially a spreadsheet – even the object's name in the collections database was 'spreadsheet' – a very informative name for a collection of tweets, I am sure you'd agree.¹⁷ Happily, by the time of the interview in February 2020, Foteini had updated the object name to 'social media' (Aravani, 2020). We finished the March 2019 meeting with some thoughts on how we could move forward with the research and decided that a recorded discussion would be the most productive way to explore how the museum had collected social media. We met again briefly along with the CoSoPho team when they were in the UK in October 2019. It was after this meeting that Foteini and I finally got a date in the diary to do our reflexive dyadic interview. We'd established a good working relationship by this point. Our meetings often featured quite a bit of laughter and a real sense of collegial problem-solving spirit – there was always energy around the need to get to the core of how to collect social media effectively during our time together. When we finally got around to sitting down and doing our reflexive dyadic interview, Foteini explained how MoL came to collect their group of Twitter collections during a four-year period of Arts Council England funded experimentation with digital collecting. In 2012, the museum appointed a Digital Curator (Hillary Young, although Foteini was working at the museum during this time), and the experiments began. Foteini told me that the museum jumped right in with collecting social media in 2012, then went on to explore collecting soundscapes, videogames, and websites (Aravani, 2020).

This was remarkably early for museums engaging in complex digital collecting, let alone social media collecting. Foteini was very open about the completely experimental nature of the collecting at this point. She noted how they didn't collect any of the media alongside the tweets and that they didn't really realise how difficult it would be to do that at the time. The only way they have to look at any media associated with the tweets is to click on a URL in the spreadsheet and hope it isn't a broken or dead link (Aravani, 2020). The specific way MoL went about collecting from Twitter meant that they did not run into the same number of issues the LoC did regarding privacy and permissions. They were able to apply more traditional gift and

¹⁷ 'Object name' is a field name in most museum collections management databases and is often used to record what the object is in its simplest form. For example, an object name could be 'mug', 'photograph', or 'fossil' (Collections Trust, 2017).

Copyright procedures to the acquisitions as the approach and the scale of the collecting was more realistically manageable (Aravani, 2020). I'll address this in more detail a little later.

The Twitter collections at MoL are as follows:

- c.6,000 tweets collected from the purposefully set up hashtag #CitizenCurator to document the London Olympics from the perspective of Londoners.
- The whole @SaveLewishamAE Twitter account used during the Save Lewisham A&E campaign.
- A Twitter account called @LondonIsYours that allowed people to take over and tweet from the account for a week.
- A collection of Twitter datasets and data visualisations as part of a digital art commission called Pulse.¹⁸

Three of four collections resulted in relatively similar object types but employed slightly different methods and raised a number of interesting challenges. The Pulse acquisition sits differently to the other three collections – beginning as an art commission and acquired as such too. In MoL's case, the key points of interest were in implementing the museum's existing collections management processes, introducing new aspects of collections management like digital preservation, and getting the collections' significance and value recognised throughout the museum.

Experimental collecting and established collections management processes

To start, rather than highlight challenges, I want to reflect on how MoL's approach to collecting Twitter managed to avoid a lot of the privacy and permissions issues faced by the LoC's Twitter collecting. As I briefly noted, the approach taken by MoL was more manageable and did not result in them signing up to store some sort of ocean

¹⁸ The 13 tweets collected by MoL with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic are not part of this analysis – the interviews took place before the pandemic began. But I was involved in conversations with Foteini about the process for collecting them. They were collected with input from Twitter this time, and the overall process will be worth exploring further in the future.

in their basement. The #CitizenCurator collecting project was managed and contained from the onset. It was a considered, pre-planned experiment.

Foteini explained how an open call was set up and people could apply to take on the role of tweeting with the hashtag #CitizenCurator. The museum was able to select from the applicants, who would become the citizen curators and, in the process, get full permission for the tweets to be collected (Aravani, 2020). Similarly, with the museum's @SaveLewishamAE and @LondonIsYours Twitter acquisitions, Foteini told me how the Twitter accounts were collected in active discussion with the account holders and permission forms were secured by using the museum's existing deed of gift and Copyright forms (Aravani, 2020). As we were discussing these acquisitions, Foteini acknowledged that they were safe options for the museum – the route to get people's permission was relatively straightforward (Aravani, 2020). However, this will not be the case for all potential social media collections. A lot of social media content museums might want to collect will either contain tweets from significant numbers of different users or content that does not have easily traceable permissions. Jules highlights that a different approach is needed depending on whether you are collecting the tweets of a single or manageable number of users, compared to trying to collect a more organically occurring social media event or hashtag where there could be thousands of different users (2016: np). Additionally, if a museum wants to collect the media or document the context of the social media posts more visually than MoL were able to, there are added complexities to identifying permissions around the content.

In a UNESCO report on preserving digital heritage, the difficulty in identifying the laws that apply to online content was highlighted. The report argued that content like social media generally transcend territorial boundaries, making it difficult for individual institutions to identify the best ways to effectively manage the rights associated with the content (Choy et al., 2016: 5). Therefore, whilst we can argue that the MoL's approach to permissions regarding their social media collections has been effective, it is context specific. The approach of getting a Deed of Gift and Copyright agreement signed before the tweeting takes place is not applicable in many circumstances, and the one-to-one relationship developed with the individual account holders of @SaveLewishamAE and @LondonIsYours is not going to be

possible for many types of social media collections that are not focused on a single account. Museums need to be pragmatic in remixing their approaches to acquisition to be appropriate to the form and structure of the social media content in question.

I do not want that to diminish any of the excellent work that MoL's Twitter collecting did. MoL's self-proclaimed 'safe option' did a huge amount of work in breaking ground – it situated social media content as a museum object, and that is a big leap for many people. Calling something a 'safe option' is often used as a critique, but I feel strongly that it is part of a pragmatic approach to remixing acquisition processes to be more appropriate for social media, and I feel the MoL's work goes some way in supporting that claim. It is an argument I put forward when questioned on the decision to try and collect the Absolute Unit meme in collaboration with the NSMM and the Museum of English Rural Life. Although it is not the most challenging meme to acquire, the many small remixes to practice that we had to make in order to collect this meme should now be in place when (and if) the museum looks to acquire a more complex meme in the future.

In our interview, I asked Foteini how this open approach to experimental digital collecting sat alongside the museum's collections management procedures more generally. She explained how their processes have had to change, even simple things like creating new locations within the museum's collections management system for digital objects. Foteini described how this has been an incremental process – how she has taken it one step at a time – with the aim of 'changing the mentality of the organisation' (Aravani, 2020). Her reference to changing the mentality of the organisation supports my earlier claim that museum collections management standards often reinforce conceptual barriers to digital collecting, and that incremental approaches to changing those procedures can help break down such barriers. This incremental approach to change seemed to be something that had been fully realised at MoL and was an ongoing task for Foteini and others to work on.

Making a start on digital preservation processes

As I addressed at the beginning of this chapter, museums are still in the relatively early stages of getting to grips with digital preservation. This was a subject that Foteini brought up in our interview, not something I had prompted. She was keen to set out that the museum did not have a digital preservation system, strategy, or a digital conservator in place, but was trying to implement affordable and practical preservation practices with the resources they did have (Aravani, 2020). Foteini described how the processes in place are currently manual, and include server back-ups, periodic checks on the files to ensure they have not been corrupted, and having multiple copies of the files – a master copy and access copies. At the time of writing, all this work is being done by Bill Lowry, who came to the museum in a digitisation role and has slowly found himself doing more and more digital preservation work (Aravani, 2020).

This folding in of digital preservation into the wider digital collections management work of the museum demonstrates how these practices sometimes develop incrementally. Lowry himself calls digital preservation an ‘evolving process’ that will often start manually and become increasingly embedded (2020: 32). The MoL’s incremental implementation of digital preservation sits particularly well alongside the adaptive approach to implementing digital collections management processes at MoMA described by Saaze et al. and highlighted in the [Remix Museology](#) chapter; and Trevor Owens’ claim that in most cases it is best to start small, implement simple tools and gradually develop digital preservation approaches (2018: 7).

As museums become more confident in their approaches to digital collecting, and more museums begin to collect new and emerging object types like social media, taking a Remix Museology approach, by incrementally introducing digital preservation practices will help to develop more appropriate collections management processes that consider digital preservation from the outset rather than as an afterthought. Making a pragmatic start on digital preservation through the manual approaches described by Foteini is a productive first step in embedding robust digital acquisition processes.

Recognising the significance of a social media object

Right at the beginning of our conversation Foteini explained how, for her, collecting social media surfaces questions about authority in the museum, shifting the ‘creator’ and ‘expert’ roles towards the visitors in the galleries. She noted that ‘by collecting social media we’re like transforming our visitors, our audiences, from spectators... to the actual creators of the object... it’s their opinions that we accession’ (Aravani, 2020). Foteini was keen to note that she meant this in a positive way – she noted that the museum didn’t particularly want to tell the ‘official history’ of the London Olympics – it wanted the lived experience of Londoners. The tweets collected as part of #CitizenCurator offered that outcome, transforming the view of people who might normally be exploring the galleries into the objects used to tell the story of the Olympics.

Foteini’s reference to the transformation from visitor to creator has been a feature of the discourses on museums, heritage, and social media for some time. Elisa Giaccardi’s work on social media and heritage argues that the increased significance given to non-curatorial voices forces heritage professionals to consider their own loss of voice and the prospect of a redistribution of curatorial activities (2012: 5). This is particularly important to consider in conjunction with the conceptual barrier to digital collecting I have discussed. That, along with Giaccardi’s claim, could make the idea of collecting social media problematic for a number of museum professionals. Angelina Russo acknowledges the impact that social media may have on the sense of authority for many museum workers but argues that the museum must try to understand how a wide variety of its traditional roles can sit alongside social media, rather than worry about their potential loss of authority (2012: 145). Foteini exemplifies this uneasiness when she describes how some people within MoL have found it quite hard to come to terms with the concept of a tweet as an object sitting in the gallery alongside the shirt of King Charles I. She notes how many still see it as a ‘novelty’ or a ‘quirky thing’ (Aravani, 2020). This indifference or refusal to take social media as a museum object seriously is definitely a challenge to those of us proposing tweets, memes, and Instagram photos as relevant to museum collecting policies and as significant social, political, or visual objects.

Foteini is clear in her mission to confront this refusal to engage. When I asked her what her wishes or goals were with regard to the museum digital collections in the next few years, she honed in on wanting to get the tweets about the Olympics displayed in the gallery in the new museum (which is currently projected to open in 2022) (Aravani, 2020). The display of social media is not specifically addressed in this thesis, but the way in which Foteini described how its display impacts its significance within the collection made me pause for thought. She went on to describe how she wants the collection to have more presence and a position within the physical space of the museum rather than ‘oh why don’t you write a blog about it?’ or ‘oh yea, put it on the website’. She went on to enthuse, ‘I want it to be in here... next to the Lord Mayor’s coach and have the same weight’ (Aravani, 2020). Before my discussions with Foteini, I’d always considered collecting an object to be more significant than displaying it. That is not to say I didn’t recognise the important role of display or condoned the idea of collecting without the consideration of use, but for me, the idea of displaying social media objects in galleries and not collecting them constituted a flirtation with object status. Simply put, committing to collect an object implies an intention to invest significant resources in its long-term preservation and accessibility; it indicates a stronger recognition of an object’s significance. Throughout my PhD, I have talked through a number of examples at conferences and workshops that feature social media being exhibited, but not collected, two of which I want to touch on here. The first example to address is Amalia Ulman’s *Excellences & Perfections* Instagram performance piece from 2014. This was displayed at both Tate Modern and Whitechapel Gallery in London, before being displayed online at the New Museum in New York (Figure 18).

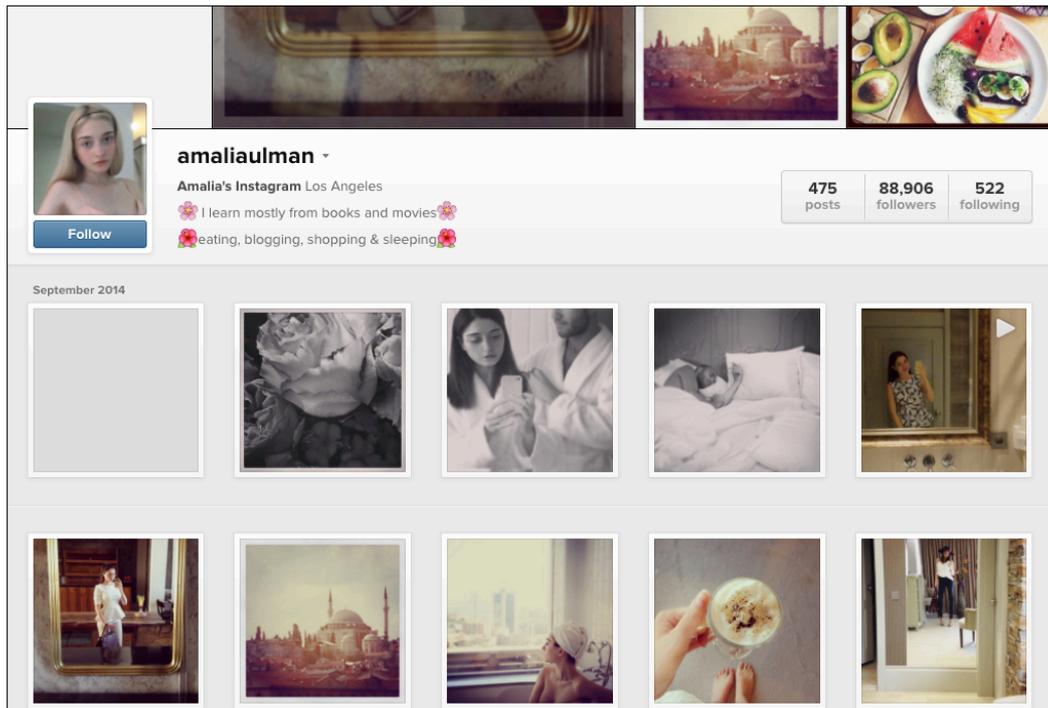


Figure 18. Screenshot of the Webrecorder capture of Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* on her Instagram account in 2014.

The artwork was displayed as physical prints on the gallery walls in both Tate and Whitechapel (rather than digitally or within the context of Instagram), and as a Webrecorder capture at the New Museum. The use of Webrecorder allowed the work to be experienced in the version of the Instagram interface from 2014.¹⁹

The second example regards the exhibition of memes and GIFs at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York. In 2014 the museum held an exhibition about reaction GIFs²⁰ and in 2018 they had a celebration of two decades of Internet memes co-curated with KnowYourMeme.com (Figures 19 and 20). The 2014 exhibition used Reddit to ask regular reaction GIF users to interpret their commonly understood meaning (Eppink, 2014c: np), but did not attempt to acquire any into the collection. In an interview, Eppink noted that whilst the display of the GIFs sat comfortably under their framework for exhibiting, they did not sit as neatly under their collecting policy which focuses on objects of production, promotion and exhibiting

¹⁹ Webrecorder is a tool for web archiving and will be explored in more detail in my discussion of the meme acquisition at the NSMM.

²⁰ Reaction GIFs are looped moving images that playfully express common ideas and emotions. The GIFs are often used to respond to comments or news stories and are mostly used in lieu of text (Eppink, 2014a: 303).

moving images (2014b). Similarly, their 2018 exhibition highlighted some of the recognisable memes from the past twenty years, interacting with significant media and technology developments along the same timeline (Winkie, 2018), but did not collect any such memes.



Figures 19 & 20. Left: *The Reaction GIF* exhibition CC BY 3.0 (Jason Eppink). Right: *Two Decades of Memes* exhibition, Credit: Marisa Gertz.

Foteini's strong feeling that displaying social media in the gallery makes it more readily recognisable as an object helped to shift my perspective on the significance of display alongside acquisition. The shift in thinking, helped along by Foteini, played an important role in practicing what I preach with the NSMM, and recognising the value of making room for discussions on display and access as part of the Absolute Unit meme acquisition proposal.

MoL's approach to collecting Twitter broke new ground for the museum, and started conversations, albeit on a relatively small-scale, in the sector about social media content as museum objects. The ways in which Foteini described how the museum has been slowly shifting its attitude towards digital collecting and making small changes or remixes to its collections management processes illustrates the potential of pragmatic and incremental approaches to change in dealing with new and emerging object types. However, the museum's collecting of their three core Twitter objects using existing Deeds of Gift and Copyright forms centralises the need to consider appropriateness – the ways in which the museum approached the acquisition through collecting individual accounts or self-created hashtags meant that it was appropriate to collecting using existing procedure. If the museum had decided to collect in other ways, these processes may not have been appropriate.

Whilst MoL focused its social media collecting on the content created by individual users, the V&A's curatorial interest meant that their WeChat acquisition was undertaken in direct conversation with the platform owners. This resulted in a different type of social media acquisition, one worth exploring in more detail.

Collecting a platform at the Victoria and Albert Museum

The WeChat acquisition was an ongoing saga for the last year or so of my time at the V&A – it was something I was very aware of, but never quite fully involved in, despite my obvious interest and tendency to get involved. The complexity of it meant it was the Head of Collections Management who got to have all the juicy conversations with the Design Architecture and Digital Department (DAD), and the many subsequent people who would come to be involved. From what I know now, the acquisition eventually landed with my colleague Pam Young, who was the Collections Documentation and Procedures Manager, and worked through with the acquiring curators and assistant curators – chiefly Brendan Cormier, Esme Hawes, and Alice Power. My responsibility at the V&A was with the Collections Management System (CMS), the Digital Asset Management System, and the collections information standards. The system was much more than a cataloguing system – we had in-depth workflow systems built into it to enact a wide variety of collections management procedures, including acquisition. If I'd stayed at the museum longer, then I am sure I would have had the opportunity to work alongside Alice Power to manage the workflow, record creation and subsequent cataloguing of the WeChat acquisition.

Undertaking the two reflexive dyadic interviews at the V&A, the first with Corinna and Natalie, and then with Brendan and Esme, was quite a nostalgic experience. Sitting with Brendan and Esme looking through the CMS felt very familiar, yet I also felt a million miles away from the person I was and the perspectives I had when working at the museum. This is no doubt down to the development in my critical thinking as part of the PhD process – a development that allowed me to shift what Shelton (2013) would call my institutionalised perspectives on collections management that informed how I worked within an operational museology environment. My positionality within this research gives me excellent insights into how acquisitions such as WeChat can

be truly innovative, yet also held back by outdated and inappropriate procedures and processes. For example, the WeChat acquisition did break new ground for museums, acquiring an object that illustrates the design and experience of using online social media and messaging platforms. Despite that, how the V&A presents this social media platform on its Explore the Collections website is in no way representative of what has been collected: with no image, and only very basic descriptive information that gives no context about what WeChat is or details that explain why it is something worth being collected by the museum. As with MoL, its object name is stunningly descriptive: 'digital file'.

This poorly catalogued object record is what is publicly available for anyone looking at the V&A's collections. The *Explore the Collections* site is directly connected to the museum's CMS and the way in which it is catalogued there is how it is displayed online. *Explore the Collections* sets itself up as a way to interact with the V&A's globally renowned collections, stating: 'From ancient Chinese ceramics to Alexander McQueen evening dresses, take an incredible journey through 5000 years of human creativity with our online collections' (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2021: np). There have been many wonderfully written blogs and articles that explain the acquisition and WeChat's significance beautifully, but the lack of appropriate language to describe digital objects within established museum cataloguing terminology standards has led to an inability to present what WeChat is as an object on the museum's online public facing collections search.

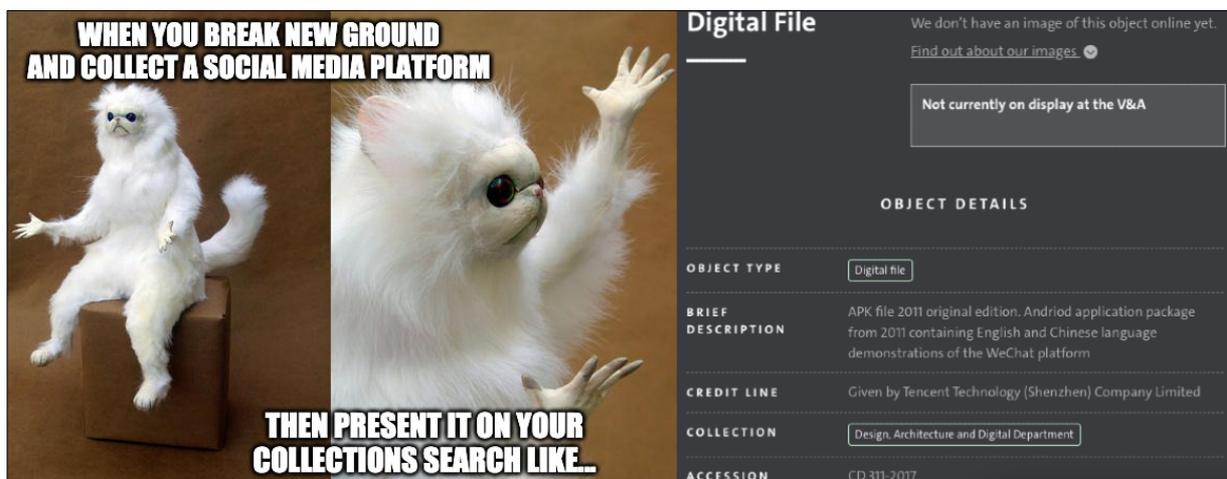


Figure 21, Persian cat guardian meme remixed with a screenshot of part of the WeChat object record of the V&A's *Explore the Collections* site. Made using imgflip.com and the Pixlr X online photo editor.

The interview with Brendan and Esme was particularly useful in drawing out the details of how the WeChat acquisition came to be, the conversations with Tencent – the company that owns WeChat – and the ways in which the object was eventually collected and assembled. It highlighted two things in particular: how investment in relationships with the platform owners themselves can be productive (although not achievable for all museums), and how a complex social media object sometimes needs to be made up of multiple elements. The WeChat acquisition shows that openness to remixing the concept of how a digital object is assembled, along with a pragmatic approach to acquiring it, allowed the V&A to break new ground and acquire an object that illustrates the design and experience of using a social media platform in 2017, even though the museum's procedures didn't all work to represent it fully.

Collecting social media through social partnerships and relationships

The V&A's WeChat acquisition is an example of a museum attempting to collect a social media platform and its design features. What was achieved through the acquisition was only possible because of the relationship developed between the museum and Tencent over a three-year period – a relationship that heavily relied on the V&A's international reputation and its presence in Shenzhen, where Tencent is based. Whilst partnering with the large companies that own social media platforms may not be an option for museums of all sizes, it is worth exploring in more detail what this relationship enabled, including the development of the demo version of the app. This demo constituted a major part of the collected object and led to collaborative discussions around legal questions, particularly concerning the difference between Chinese and British law.

To provide some context, as part of the V&A's 'international' and 'world leading' aspirations, the museum developed a relationship with Shenzhen Design Society and was commissioned to support the development of a cultural hub which would house the V&A's first international gallery. It was through this project that the WeChat acquisition was enabled. In my conversation with Corinna and Natalie, Corinna explained how she first went to Shenzhen in 2013 and quickly realised that she could not do anything out there without WeChat. When back at the V&A the idea

of trying to collect the platform was floated but at that time it felt like a total impossibility. She noted that only through the later embedding of the V&A's presence, the relationship with design companies in Shenzhen, and Brendan's commitment to featuring it in the V&A gallery in Shenzhen (which he was lead curator for), did it then become a possibility (Gardner and Kane, 2019). Brendan added to this that in 2015 when discussions about the acquisition really began, the DAD department was newly formed and still had a 'pioneering spirit' that pushed the boundaries (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). It was this coming together of a new collecting department wanting to break new ground, along with new international relationships, that laid the groundwork for the acquisition to take place.

The relationship with Tencent began when Brendan invited them to be a part of an exhibition called *Unidentified Acts of Design* and through their interactions the idea of acquiring WeChat was broached. I use the word 'acquire' here, but Brendan highlighted how he had to shift his use of language to use 'collect', as 'acquire' and 'acquisition' has some very different connotations in the tech world (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). After it had been cleared up that the V&A was not attempting to buy out Tencent and take over the ownership and management of WeChat as a social media and messaging platform, the conversation turned more towards framing the collecting process as an act of preservation (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). Brendan highlighted how framing it in this way, and as something that was unprecedented, meant that the tech team at Tencent took the project on as some sort of challenge: to work out how something so vernacular and everyday could be packaged up and collected so that people could understand what it was 100 years later.

It could be argued that at this point, decisions around what form the object would take sat more with Tencent than the museum – it was up to the tech teams to set the boundaries (with plenty of input from the V&A too, of course). Eventually it was agreed that the best course of action would be to create a demo of WeChat that could be 'acquired' by the museum – I'll address what that meant in more detail later. What is important to surface at this point is that the discussions were collaborative and required the V&A to acknowledge it did not have the expertise to set the boundaries of the object and to give over an element of control as to what the object would be.

The collaborative nature of the 'acquisition' did not end there. Small adaptations to the museum's approach to collecting and acquisition were needed throughout the process. Although the V&A has a long tradition of collecting objects from China, the documentation around the WeChat 'acquisition' proved particularly challenging. Not only because of the language of acquisition, but also because of the incompatibility of British and Chinese law (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). Again, curators at the V&A are in a particularly privileged position and have the assistance of a General Counsel working for the museum on legal issues. Parts of the museum 'acquisition' documentation had to be re-written according to Hong Kong law, which has some of its basic principles rooted in the British legal system. Esme highlighted that it was the donation element in particular – where the transfer of title happens – that was rewritten to be explicit that the V&A has usage rights to the demo version of the app created for them, not to WeChat as an app or platform (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). Whilst the museum has some ownership rights to the copy of the file they have, Brendan and Esme explained how the rights to the WeChat object needed to be conceptualised differently to the way the V&A usually seeks rights to objects it acquires. Brendan reflected on how the museum usually tries to retain rights to objects it acquires so it can generate income from them (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). This approach to trying to attain all rights to an object is pervasive in the sector. Matassa's guide to collections management states that the full assignment of Copyright is 'the best outcome for any museum' because it means the 'Copyright holder has agreed to transfer all rights' (Matassa, 2011: 16). Brendan noted that this is often where there is push back from donors and claimed that he argued against it with Tencent, stating that the main point was to get WeChat represented in the collection. Printing it on postcards, posters and tote bags was not appropriate in this context (Cormier and Hawes, 2019).

Through the ongoing relationship between the museum and Tencent, these discussions were made possible in a productive way – many of the informal negotiations about the acquisition of WeChat took place on WeChat in a group chat between Brendan and the Tencent team (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). Brendan was able to find and scroll through his chat history there and then during our conversation; it was littered with laughing emojis and indicated that a real social,

collegial and fun-infused relationship underpinned the discussions about how to collect the social media platform. The development of strong social relationships as part of the 'acquisition' allowed for collaborative discussions that made small changes to the way the V&A usually acquires objects, including how it conceives of objects and how it formally acquires them.

CD.295-2017 to CD.311-2017: WeChat as an object

The WeChat acquisition is made up of the accession numbers CD.295-2017 to CD.211-2017 with CD.303 to 309-2017, having additional part numbers which equate to over 150 individual GIFs.²¹ Therefore the acquisition is an assemblage of 172 items: 1 APK file,²² 1 video file, 1 NCOL, 161 GIFs, and 8 physical sketches (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). In that list there is a 'non-collection' object known as an NCOL – in this case it is a mobile phone that displays WeChat. It is not formally considered an object in the collection and can be replaced as and when needed. The acquisition is complex, and that aspect very much came through as we tied ourselves in knots when discussing the makeup of the WeChat acquisition (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). At the simplest level, the acquisition is: the APK file, which is a demo version of the WeChat application itself; a set of GIFs that are instantly recognisable to users of WeChat; the original sketches of the 'bubble pup' character that features in the GIFs; and a screen recording of the WeChat application in use. Owens explains how, when thinking about digital objects, we need to acknowledge that one person's digital collection is another's digital object and is another's dataset. He argues that there is a fuzziness around the boundaries of digital objects which

²¹ Object numbering is a dark art and the V&A's approach, although much simplified from what it used to be, is still quite complex. One of the GIFs in the WeChat acquisition has the accession number CD.304:12-2017 – the number means the following:

- CD is the unique code for objects acquired into the DAD collection (standing for Contemporary Design).
- 304 means it is the three hundred and fourth object accessioned into the DAD collection that year.
- The number 12 is an additional complication – it is known as a part number and means that it is just one of a number of individual items that make up a single object (usually used for removable parts – such as a teapot body and its lid).
- 2017 is the year it was accessioned.

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1482728/gif-wechat/>

²² An APK file is the file type used by Android operating systems to package up individual files used to install and run apps.

makes distinguishable parts less clear than with physical items (Owens, 2018: 8). This fuzziness is exacerbated with hybrid objects that have both physical and digital elements, like WeChat and the Pussy Power hat touched on earlier.

Amongst that fuzziness, an argument could be put forward that the APK file is, in a sense, *the object* that best represents WeChat – the actual application file itself. However, it is totally opaque; without being opened on a device it does not tell you anything about what WeChat is and how it is used. Brendan explained that initially the museum was seeking to collect the 2017 version WeChat application, but Tencent explained that the file would need a connection to a server in China in order to work. Applying the preservation framework Brendan had explained the acquisition through, Tencent understood that allowing the museum to simply collect the APK file would mean that, in 100 years when the server does not exist, the object would be nothing but an obsolete APK file (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). Therefore, they suggested that the V&A might want to collect a demo version of the app similar to the one they had made for Apple who needed it to approve WeChat for the Apple App Store. The demo versions have all the functionality of the regular app but are designed to work offline and cannot connect to servers. The V&A agreed to the demo and Tencent made a version specifically for them and populated it with data created amongst themselves in the office (Cormier and Hawes, 2019).

Here we see the creation of an object specifically for the V&A that has the same functionality as the live WeChat app. Brendan explained how many other options that would allow the capture of more of the ‘social life of the object’ were discussed – including asking people to donate their own profiles – but the decision was made that this would be too complicated (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). Whilst from a social history perspective one could argue that a demo version of the app populated with fake profiles and messages is useless – I cannot imagine the MoL would be interested in that – it is important to note that the V&A is collecting with a different curatorial motive. They are collecting WeChat as an object of digital design. The demo version of WeChat was accompanied by a screen recording of the demo in use, and this is what was displayed in the gallery at the museum.

This video of the app in use is a curated experience of the object that highlights the design features that are behind the museum's curatorial motive in collecting the object. Whilst the 'curated' elements of physical objects on display are rarely treated as more than interpretation, the V&A accessioned the video of the app in use (CD.310-2017). In our conversation, I suggested that what they had accessioned into the collection was actually a performance of the demo of WeChat, and Brendan and Esme followed up by saying that the demo itself has never actually been interacted with (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). It is possible that this ongoing fuzziness of the boundaries of the object has contributed to the poor ways it is described in the CMS, and therefore also on the Explore the Collections website.

Understanding the displayable or accessible element of WeChat as an object which is in fact a performance of the object speaks to Johanna Drucker's concept of performative materiality in digital media. Drucker's theory sees the material features of digital objects made perceptible through use as an event (2013: 8). As we've already discussed, being able to understand the material aspects of an object is important in helping to break down conceptual barriers to digital collecting. Performative materiality is particularly helpful here and proved helpful in thinking about collecting the meme at the NSMM too. By folding in a curated performance of the WeChat demo into the assemblage of objects that makes up the WeChat acquisition, the museum is definitely straying into the fuzziness of the distinguishable digital object. Brendan himself admitted that they 'tried to hedge our bets a bit' and collect the object in a number of different ways (Cormier and Hawes, 2019). This experimentation with how a complex social media platform can be conceived within museum object structures is an excellent example of an imaginative approach to collecting, as proposed by Hawes and Flood (2018).

4.4 Breaking ground and informing the remix

The aim of this chapter has been to show how a number of collecting projects have broken ground for museums collecting social media, and how this first wave of social media acquisition in cultural heritage organisations (being inclusive of LoC and the *Documenting the Now* project) laid the way for subsequent ones, including the meme acquisition at the NSMM. The case studies explored have shown a number of innovative approaches to collecting and have contributed to my understanding of Remix Museology. Particularly in the case of the MoL and V&A – where acknowledgement of the need to start somewhere and gradually bring colleagues along with you – shone through in the interviews. Another key aspect of this chapter has been the attention it paid to the form of the social media objects collected by the MoL and the V&A. This exploration highlighted the limitations of trying to collect the social media experience through single file acquisitions, whilst simultaneously showing the fuzziness and complication that can come from treating the objects as an assemblage of items.

The ways in which the reflexive dyadic interviews were undertaken allowed a dialogue to take place, rather than a question-and-answer session, and it is through this dialogue that the social aspects of change were able to be surfaced. I took a lot from these discussions and they definitely contributed to how I moved forward with developing Remix Museology and enacting it at the NSMM. Sociality also came through in how the acquisitions took place at MoL and the V&A. The lack of social interaction and collaborative discussions was a huge failure on the LoC's part and is something the *Documenting the Now* project picked up on as being central to ethical social media collecting practices. The centrality of the social element in collecting social media content is something that comes through more prominently in the next chapter on the CoSoPho project and which influenced the collecting project at the NSMM too.

Having shown how digital collecting in museums is developing and drawing out the multiple ways in which previous attempts to collect social media in museums have influenced me, Remix Museology and my approach to collecting social media, the

next chapter of the thesis addresses my research with the CoSoPho project. It illustrates how Remix Museology crystalised through my collaborative action research with the project, further situates the importance of sociality, and highlights the successes and limitations of the project.

5. Social digital collecting



Figure 22. A failed selfie on Suomenlinna. (Left to right) Bente Jensen, Elisabeth Boogh, Kajsa Hartig, Anni Wallenius, Sofia Lahti, and myself. Taken 24/05/2019.

Through good timing, shared interests, and emerging friendships, an action research case study developed from a response to a call for papers on the first day of my PhD. This chapter traces how through my collaborations with the Collecting Social Photo (CoSoPho) project, I observed, interacted with, and contributed to a remix in museological (and archival) practices. This remix saw three museums and an archive draw on the affordances of social media platforms to develop more appropriate ways of collecting born digital photography, or, as CoSoPho would refer to it, social digital photography. Being a part of how the project did this helped me to crystallise what Remix Museology is, as well as to witness a number of exciting and experimental social media orientated digital collecting projects.

CoSoPho was a three-year funded Nordic research project undertaken by two museums in Sweden, one in Finland, and an archive in Denmark, working in partnership with Stockholm University. The project helpfully ran along the same

timespan as my PhD – with their first call for participation in a workshop coinciding almost perfectly with the start of my research. The institutions were Aalborg City Archives, the Finnish Museum of Photography, Nordiska Museet, and Stockholm County Museum. This project was born out of existing relationships between each of the partners and the individual work each of them were doing to try and address the core question of the project – how to collect contemporary social media photography – photos like the one at the start of this chapter of us trying to take a group selfie on Suomenlinna, Helsinki by balancing my phone on a rock and trying (but obviously failing) to take a timed photo.

The CoSoPho project was guided by three core research questions:

1. How can collection policies and practices be adapted to create relevant and accessible collections of social digital photography?
2. How can digital archives, collection databases and interfaces be relevantly adapted – considering the character of the social digital photograph and the digital context – to serve different stakeholders and end users?
3. Can museums and archives change their role when collecting and disseminating, to increase user influence in the whole lifecycle of the vernacular photographic cultural heritage? (Boogh et al., 2020b: 12-13).

From the perspective of my PhD research, this project shifted from one of potential interest into a case study to be explored through observation, then recorded discussions, and finally into an embedded collaborative piece of action research. I moved from being a participant to an observer, then onto a contributor, before a brief stint as (an unofficial) facilitator and, later, to a close collaborator, as I am referred to in their project anthology acknowledgments. This relationship that developed with all four of the main partners enabled a deeper understanding of the project – its merits and its flaws. Shared train journeys, dinners, cocktails, and laughter have all contributed to my interactions with the project. That, along with my natural inclination to ‘get involved’, led to a collaboration that resulted in me eventually being named as a co-author on the project recommendations. But more importantly than that, I would now consider Anni, Bente, Elisabeth and Kajsa friends. Nevertheless, as nice as our relationship has become, I still retain a critical view on many aspects of the project.

Chiefly the extent to which the project has successfully developed an approach to collecting social media.

I do not believe that CoSoPho has developed a water-tight process to collect social media and I think they would agree with me on that too. What they have done though, is take pragmatic steps to re-orientate museological (and archival) collecting practices to be attentive to the affordances of social media. CoSoPho has developed methods and tools to allow people to upload digital photos – more often than not, shared on social media – onto a digital platform that the institutions host. The platform, called the Collecting Social Photo web app,²³ prompts uploaders to answer questions about the photos and their social media usage. There is also a request to upload screenshots of the images on social media (if they were posted there). Photos on the platform can then be acquired by the museums (and archive).

As a result of their activities, I see CoSoPho as having remixed a number of museological and archival practices: bringing together outreach and collecting as part of the same cyclical process; creating new, flexible and continually adapting digital tools to collect from online environments and shifting some of the underlying power relations in museum collecting by allowing users to decide what photos they upload and to describe them in their own words (rather than through formal museum cataloguing). Particularly interesting to me is that some of the partners have also openly accepted that these collected images are not formally owned as would be the case with the traditional material collections of museums – that they are considered to be jointly owned and made available through Creative Commons licensing.

I see CoSoPho as a case of Remix Museology in action. None of the partners see the changes as revolutionary, but rather a first step in shifting traditional collecting practices to be better suited for online and social media-focused collecting. Much like the example of the *Matters in Media Art* collections management guidance, the CoSoPho recommendations present a remixed approach to collecting, using human-centred flexible approaches to set up collecting initiatives and undertake

²³ The Collecting Social Photo web app is available from <https://www.collectingsocialphoto.org/en/home> (Accessed 20/05/2021).

contemporary digital photography collecting. It is an approach to collecting and collections management that understands the context in which the collecting is taking place and has adapted to be more appropriate for it.

This chapter is based on my experiences with the CoSoPho team, my positionality as the project developed into action research, and the findings of my reflexive dyadic interviews. It sits in line with my overarching autoethnographic approach – a key feature of which is its refusal to intentionally separate the observer and the observed; the researcher and the researched (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2016: 58). Initially my approach to the project was going to be more traditionally objective, conducting semi-structured interviews with the project team. However, as it developed, incrementally, into an action research project, I shifted my orientation towards the research and began to work more autoethnographically. I tried to become more aware of moments where conversations led to changes – both in my own position on a topic or in the project.

I conducted four reflexive dyadic interviews, and these form part of my ‘bricolage of collected stuff’ that make up the research materials (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2016: 58). In all cases, the main project team member from the institution was accompanied by a colleague, meaning eight people have contributed their insights to the CoSoPho interviews. The interviews took place as follows during a week-long Nordic country-hopping, interview-conducting, project team-attending, cardamom bun-eating research trip:

- 19th May, Aalborg City Archives. Reflexive dyadic interview between Bente Jensen, Flemming Nielsen and myself.
- 21st May, Stockholm County Museum. Reflexive dyadic interview between Elisabeth Boogh, Ann-Sofie Nygren and myself.
- 22nd May, Nordiska Museet. Reflexive dyadic interview between Kajsa Hartig, Ulrika Hoffman and myself.
- 27th May, Finnish Museum of Photography. Reflexive dyadic interview Anni Wallenius, Sofia Lahti and myself.

Although I did not ask the CoSoPho crew to invite additional interviewees, the outcome of the interviews undertaken in this way was particularly useful. The inclusion of an additional person from each institution provided an extra level of insight into how people who were not in the core project team saw it from within the institution. These insights are incredibly important in getting a feel for how remixing museological approaches, and the changes in thinking that come with it, were landing.

This chapter is structured in three distinct sections that broadly address methodology, critique, and analysis. The first of these three pays attention to how the action research project came to be. It traces my shifting relationship with the project, surfacing key touchpoints that help form the action research cycles we went through. The chapter then seeks to address whether or not CoSoPho collected social media or digital photography through discussing the issue of context with the objects collected by the project team. Finally, the chapter illustrates how the project has helped crystallise Remix Museology by focusing on how CoSoPho is a case of Remix Museology in action. Here, I reflect further on the details of how the project operated and the conversations I had at an institutional level through the reflexive dyadic interviews.

5.1 Four distinct(ish) Finnish cardamom bun-esque action research cycles

Throughout the timeframe of the CoSoPho project, I met with, chatted online, and presented together with the team more times than I can count, but there were some milestone moments that played a more substantial role in shifting my relationship from participant, to observer, to contributor, and finally to a collaborator. I have come to understand how each of these shifts represented a new action research cycle for me. Jean McNiff and Jeff Whitehead highlight the action-reflection cycle as a defining feature of action research (2011: 42). The cycle of action, reflection, evaluation, and action became more clearly defined as my work with CoSoPho developed. This refinement of the cycles is discussed by Pamela Lomax, who notes that action research cycles are not just points of intervention but that they must change; positions must be re-evaluated; and new cycles must be informed by the learning of the previous cycle (Lomax, 1995: 50). I refer to the moments where new cycles begin as touchpoints. These touchpoints mark milestones, new directions, shifts and feelings – some big, some small – that are all relevant in describing and analysing the outcomes of the CoSoPho project.

My communication with the project was initially quite formal, conducted through emails only. As we developed our increasingly collaborative relationship the communication became more distributed – I had parallel conversations on Facebook Messenger, my email account, Instagram, and Twitter – between myself and Kajsa or Bente, or group conversations between the five of us. The journey from cheeky response to a call for participation to key project collaborator was not linear, nor did it follow perfectly cyclical instances of action-reflection. I know this may sound odd, but I like to think of my action research with CoSoPho in terms of cardamom buns. They became a bit of an obsession of mine after I initially had one at a CoSoPho meeting in Stockholm, and I've had one on every trip since. It even became a running joke amongst us. Honestly, if you think you like cinnamon buns, try a cardamom bun. It'll change everything. Anyway, cardamom buns and action research; stick with me on this.

I've thought a lot about cardamom buns. They are a simple concept – just a sweet dough, proved, covered in sugar and cardamom, shaped, proved again and baked. There is kneading involved, so you know you need to put in some effort, but the overall concept is straightforward. Similarly, action research is a simple concept, but requires a lot of work – it is doing things, reflecting (proving), changing or developing (adding sugar and cardamom), doing again (shaping), reflecting (the second prove) and doing (baking). In my experience of Nordic cardamom buns, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to making and shaping them. The two I want to focus on are the Swedish cyclical-clearly-defined-action-research-cycle-bun and the Finnish knotted-complex-research-cycle-bun (see Figures 23 and 24). There are Danish ones too, but it is the Swedish and Finnish ones that are well known. For me, one of these buns represents the theory of action research cycles and the other reflects the reality.



Figure 23 Swedish cardamom bun; Figure 24 Finnish cardamom bun

Whether or not what I was doing with CoSoPho was action research was always an anxiety of mine – it was messy, it didn't have easily definable cycles like McNiff and Whitehead were telling me it should. However, their neat Swedish cardamom bun-style theory is not the reality. My action research was a Finnish cardamom bun. It wasn't smooth, it got knotty and crisscrossed. There have been exchanges lost in translation, times where I have put more into the project than I needed to and others when I've stepped away, needing to focus attention in other places. The Swedish cardamom bun may look like it is sprinkled with more sugary-cardamom goodness, but I promise the more complex Finnish bun had more depth of flavour – the knots and twists meant the cardamom was infused in the dough, not just sprinkled on top.

The same happened with this research. I wasn't just there to be sprinkles on top of a neat action research cycle. I was complexly woven in and out of the project at different times, infusing with the core of it. I've been able to do that because I am not a core project member, I am technically an outsider. At the same time, there have been multiple moments where I very much felt like a project insider. As with other elements of research in this thesis, I have flittered between insider and outsider, used humour, developed relationships, used professional knowledge, used non-professional knowledge, and brought myself fully to the research.

In writing this chapter, I have been trying to recall all the conversations we've had. A complication with this case study emerging as action research halfway through the project is that not all of it has been documented as much as my research with the NSMM. In attempting to retrace our meetings and conversations, I have enjoyed the fact that the images on my phone have been some of the most useful prompts. I have photos from at least 11 different face-to-face interactions over the three years and I use them throughout to illustrate significant moments and milestones. Others I have located on Anni's, Bente's, Elisabeth's or Kajsa's social media. My use of these photos casually taken on our phones in my thesis is something I am sure the CoSoPho crew would enjoy too; it really does help to carry some of the core arguments of their project – that vernacular smartphone photography (social digital photography) is hugely important for both individual and shared cultural memory.

First contact

Hi Rob,

Do you think it is a bit too early for me to put something forward for a workshop in Helsinki?

<http://collectingsocialphoto.nordiskamuseet.se/workshop-call-for-participation/>

It seems heritage institutions there are trying to grapple with photography created and disseminated through social platforms. I was particularly interested in their point about merging collecting and dissemination, especially after our conversations on Thursday.

I'm not sure they'd accept anything I put forward, as I haven't really done any fieldwork yet... but I'd be interested in using it as a place to start talking about my early thoughts with people who are working along the same lines.

What are your thoughts?

*Arran*²⁴

On what was technically day one of my PhD, I emailed my PhD supervisor a simple question as I attempted to find my feet as a full-time researcher. Rob's reply – which was essentially, 'you may as well try' – spurred me on to apply to the Collecting Social Photo project's call for participation in a workshop which would involve me speaking for around 15 minutes on my area of current research. I didn't really have an area of research on day one, just some thoughts I'd been mulling over since being accepted for the PhD a few months earlier and some anecdotes from my time in the sector. I applied anyway.

On 17th October I received an email from Kajsa Hartig, the Project Manager, inviting me to participate. I remember thinking, 'this is exciting, international workshops within the first few months of my PhD.' But then came the terror... What am I going to offer to this workshop, how are these experts going to react to my attempts to drag together a coherent 15-minute presentation just 55 days into my PhD? I had to just shake it off and run with it. I could use it as a deadline to bring together the ideas I'd been mulling over and present myself as a credible researcher for this developing field and tackle my imposter syndrome head on.

²⁴ Email correspondence between myself and Robert Knifton, 01/10/2017.

The initial inquiry phase

After a delayed flight, I arrived into Helsinki late, missing the introduction to the project, but in time to hear the other invited participants talk about their fascinating research. The breadth of projects being spoken about was surprising – social media campaigns and research in London, France and Germany; Insta-walks and competitions in the U.S.; coding start-ups in Sweden; and app-based interpretation projects in Finland – my talk on Spectrum and social media felt comparatively dull. However, halfway through my presentation, I heard a whoop in the audience when I indicated that I was about to start talking about collections management standards. I knew then that there would be at least one person there who appreciated what I had to say. Luckily enough it was one of the project team, Elisabeth Boogh. I still smile when I think about this – it was important for me – it was confirmation that my research ideas had some potential standing with the project.

Throughout the course of the workshop, Kajsa explained more to me about how the project was conceiving of social digital photography. She noted that they were complex-digital objects, assemblages of image and text within a constantly changing network. This conceptualisation of social digital photography instantly piqued my interest. Until this time, I'd been imagining photography in social media to be one of the simpler elements to collect – that it could somehow be more easily removed from the social media network than a tweet itself. CoSoPho's conceptualisation of social digital photography more closely matched how I had imagined memes, but not everyday photography. On reflection, I now see this as one of the first big influences the project had on me and my research.

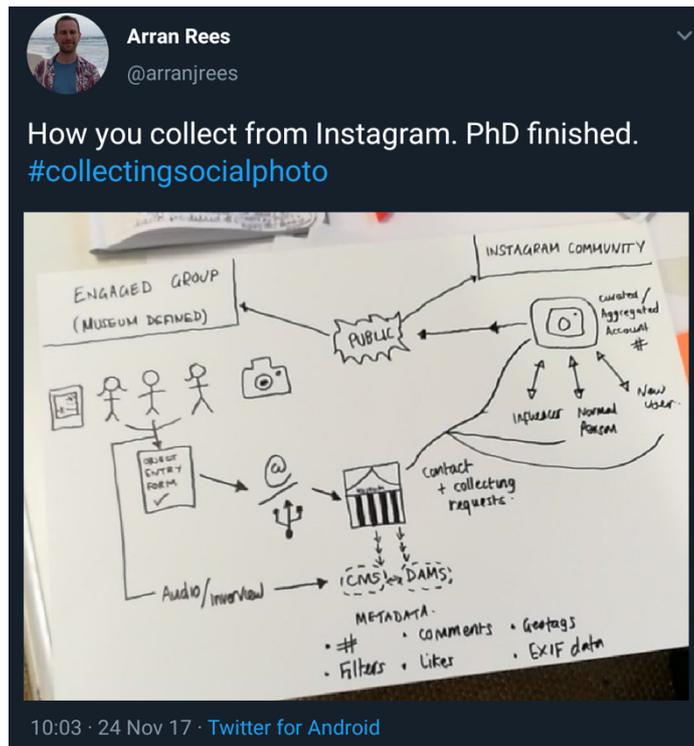


Figure 25. A Tweet I sent during the first CoSoPho workshop.

It is worth going on a little tangent here to think about the social digital photography I took over the two days of the Helsinki workshop. Above is a screenshot of a tweet from 24 November 2017. When I tweeted, it was in the spirit of workshop participation, with some sarcasm injected. At this point, I had no idea that Collecting Social Photo was going to become such a large part of my research and this photo wasn't intended to be a formal 'fieldwork' action shot. This image no longer exists on my phone, and in order to find it, I had to search through my own Twitter feed. My Twitter account has acted as an archive for me to access and reflect on my research and the work of the CoSoPho project. The act of me tweeting has led to me being able to use this image as a digital object, in the same way as both I, and the Collecting Social Photo project, envisage social digital photography being used by the researchers of the future.

By the end of my time in Helsinki, I was already thinking about how I could get more involved with the project. Their way of thinking about social digital photography, and the energising nature of the workshop, left me wanting to follow more closely how the project progressed. CoSoPho was a research project in itself, so I had initial reservations about treating it as a case study. My other case studies were based on specific acquisition in museums that I could analyse; CoSoPho was very much alive

and only at the early stages of their research. I decided that observing the project and its development would be a good way to move forward.

I emailed Kajsa, expressing how I was interested in working more with the project, and she replied in the same way, inviting me to another workshop in Stockholm. This was my first touchpoint – an expression of interest that marked the start of an initial action research cycle; one where I shifted from a workshop participant to observer of the project. Although at the time I was not entirely sure what my end goal was, by expressing an interest in working more together, CoSoPho and I were opening up communication spaces. This is a step during the initial inquiry phase of action research that Patricia Gayá Wicks and Peter Reason highlight as being the point on which the success or failure of action research often depends (2009: 244). Through our shared interest in visual social media objects, the first Helsinki meeting had shown that mine and CoSoPho's research had the potential to inform each other. The email exchange between Kajsa and I marks the beginning of a research relationship; the beginnings of what would become a mutual inquiry – a form of inquiring which Wicks and Reason note often evolves from engagements and conversations (2009: 247-248). The Stockholm workshop that following March would work to solidify that relationship and expand the scope of our mutual inquiries.

Observer (AR cycle one)

The second Collecting Social Photo visit was over three snowy days in Stockholm in March 2018. On 6th March, I was invited to the project reference group meeting as an observer, and over 7th and 8th March I was a participant in a two-day workshop. The reference group meeting was helpful in providing more context about the case studies being undertaken by the project. I found it difficult to not contribute to discussions, but I was very aware of my status as an outsider. This was a reference group meeting, and I was not part of the reference group. There was a certain awkwardness to my presence at this meeting. CoSoPho were opening up a closed group meeting to me, but my status in that group was unclear. This awkwardness resulted in my choosing to be a silent observer. In trying to understand what was awkward about the situation, I came across Adam Kotsko's work on awkwardness.

Kotsko argues that at its core, awkwardness is a breakdown in our normal experience of social interactions whilst remaining ‘irreducibly social’ (2010: 15). Throughout this thesis I have noted my natural inclination to get involved. My professional experience to date has relied on me doing that, and my involvement with CoSoPho is down to that too. I don’t see the initial awkwardness of this situation as being CoSoPho’s fault, but rather, because I was still trying to assess how these interactions might become part of my research, my normal experience of actively participating in conversations in work environments was not yet connecting with my still relatively new ‘researcher’ status. Awkwardness, as I was going to learn through experience, is a feature of the initial inquiry phase – the finding of your feet within a research project. My action research cycle was already coming across its first Finnish cardamom-bun-style-knot – and I hadn’t even tried a cardamom bun by this point.

At the meeting, each of the core CoSoPho crew introduced the case studies they had been working on. All were of interest, but the Finnish Museum of Photography’s project shone through to me at this point. They had just undertaken a pilot project collecting photographs from IRC-Galleria, a Finnish visual social media platform from the early 2000s that reminded me of Myspace (see Figure 26).



Figure 26. Images from the IRC-Galleria case study. I had many like this myself, now sadly lost to a ‘migration error’. Photos from top left to bottom right: Jasmina Kauta 2010, Santeri Pälkkö 2010, Jonna Leskinen 2008. The Finnish Museum of Photography.

I was drawn to this case study in particular as it felt the closest to collecting people's experiences of using social media. Hearing about it made me more confident that CoSoPho could be a productive case study. At dinner that evening, I spoke briefly with Anni about whether or not she would mind being interviewed as part of my research.

At the time, I was attempting to set up an interview situation similar to what I had planned with the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the Museum of London (MoL). However, on reflection, this work was more about testing for resonance with the core team. I had been in direct contact with Kajsa and worked with her in the group in Helsinki. Elisabeth had given me a whoop over my mention of Spectrum and collections management. However, until this point, although I had interacted with them and got on well, I hadn't really been able to spend much time developing a relationship around shared professional interests with Anni or Bente. Danny Burns identifies resonance as a key part of developing productive action research relationships. Burns clarifies that resonance means that people see and feel connections between things; they know that it relates to their own experiences; and they are energised and motivated by that *thing* that is sparking the resonance (2007: 53). Through my interactions in the workshops and around the reference group meeting, I was coming to understand what resonated with each of the core project team members and the project as a whole. This continued throughout the whole of the Stockholm visit.

As the workshop was coming to an end, I had to leave early to get my flight. Feeling energised by all points of resonance I'd been identifying with the team, I once again emailed Kajsa a thank you with a further suggestion of closer collaboration. Again, I did not have a specific research question in my head for working with the project, but I knew it was exciting me and I knew our interests were shared. Looking back now, I see this as another touchpoint. The beginning of a new cycle of action, informed by what I'd learnt about the project and the project team. An important starting point for the next cycle of action was improvisation. I've already admitted throughout this chapter that I wasn't entirely sure what I was working towards with CoSoPho, but I knew I wanted to do it. I went with the flow; or as Burns notes 'one thing leads to another, and people join in with the action that is emerging' (2007: 53). This is

exactly what I did, just taking every opportunity to join in with the action. Burns argues that improvisation and acting on opportunities as they emerge is an important strategy for action research (2007: 41), and this touchpoint demonstrates that it worked in mine and CoSoPho's case. The experiences of the Helsinki and Stockholm workshops contributed to the requirements of a web-based collecting tool to assist in collecting social digital photography that had been planned as part of the project. My rather forward email and continued interaction with the project resulted in an invitation from Kajsa to Stockholm in October 2018. Here the project team discussed the functional requirements of the collecting tool with Micha Walter Studios, the tech company taken on to design it. My first piece of direct action within the new action research cycle formed at the end of the previous Stockholm visit – a cycle that saw me move from observer to contributor and to trying my first cardamom bun.

Contributor (AR cycle two)

My third Collecting Social Photo event was in October 2018. As noted, this interaction with the project felt more directed than my previous ones. The meeting was not a workshop designed around consultation, as the other two had been. It marked the beginning of me being specifically invited to contribute to events that were generally restricted to core project partners, their colleagues, and the reference group. The awkwardness I noted from the previous workshop was still there, but less apparent. My involvement felt more purposeful. This trip was where my observations of the project turned more directly into contributions to the project. I was actively involved in helping to shape the collecting tool that would become one of the key outputs of the project. My previous work at the V&A meant I felt professionally qualified to ask difficult questions about system front end and back-end capabilities, but also intellectually positioned to also discuss the impact on the resulting 'object' by collecting in this way.

In the beginning of this thesis, I briefly reflected, using Judi Marshall's work, on whether I was undertaking first- and second-person action research with CoSoPho, or whether it was first-person action research in a collaborative relationship. During this facilitated workshop, I was a first-person action researcher collaborating with the

project. I was inquiring into the CoSoPho project from a personal perspective, becoming part of the extended team, reflecting on myself, my lived experiences, and my own research throughout. In previous meetings, I had been saying less than I normally would, holding back my opinions in an attempt to not breach prevailing research 'etiquette' (Marshall, 1999: 157-158). This often added to the awkwardness I was feeling. But here I was more vocal – I brought myself as a first-person action researcher. I was also simultaneously working *with* CoSoPho to inquire on areas of mutual concern and collaborating with them to collectively work out how to create an effective tool to support the collecting of social digital photography for museums (and archives).

Still not 100% certain at the time that what I was doing was action research or not, I asked the rest of the CoSoPho crew whether they were interested in being interviewed as part of my PhD. The more I heard about the project case studies and the more I was involved in the project development, the more relevant the project seemed to become to my understanding of how museums could collect social media effectively. With Anni already on board from the previous meeting, Bente, Elisabeth and Kajsa also agreed to be interviewed. We decided that we should wait until spring to give me time to organise funding and travel. In the months that followed, we continued conversations. I met with Kajsa and Elisabeth in London and I presented at a conference in Graz where Bente and Anni were also presenting. These meetings, although not milestone touchpoints in the project, were important for our developing relationship and my action research – some extra sprinkles of cardamom and sugar to the action research, adding more flavour and depth.



Figure 27. Snapshots from meetings in February 2019. (Left to right) Instagram image on display at the Photographers Gallery, London; Instagram-themed graffiti in Graz; Anni and Bente on a walk in Graz.

Contributor / facilitator (AR cycle three)

In May 2019 I went on a Nordic country-hopping research trip to undertake my reflexive dyadic interviews. The trip was planned to align with a CoSoPho project meeting as well. We were talking often, and I was finding myself becoming more deeply involved in the project. There were times when it felt like the Finnish cardamom bun analogy was becoming more of a platted loaf – more intertwined and complex than a bun could account for – but I think the twists and turns of the Finnish cardamom bun just about copes with the intricacies.

By the time we were recording the reflexive dyadic interviews, I'd been working with the CoSoPho crew for a year and a half, and we'd developed a really good working relationship. The interviews are smattered with laughter and insider references – references to things that have happened, or things that we know about each other and the project. They reflect the nature of the relationship we have in our everyday interactions. But the interviews also had an exploratory angle that focused on each individual institution. I noted in the introduction to this chapter that in all the interviews there was a third person – someone who sat more on the periphery of the project – representing the museum (or archive) more than the CoSoPho project. These interviews provided an institutional context for me, allowing me to understand further how the layers of work undertaken at a project level filtered into the specific realities of each institution.

The first two and a half days in Helsinki (four days into my trip) were project meetings. The agenda included planning the project anthology, the collecting app, the conference, and future funding bids that we could submit together. These meetings were fuelled by great coffee and large quantities of Finnish cardamom buns. My newfound love for them was no secret and had been joked about a number of times, and Sofia Lahti very kindly brought some in each morning. This may seem like a small act, but it provoked quite a strong feeling in me. Sofia going out of her way to get the cardamom buns each morning felt like an act of inclusion, it supported a growing sense of camaraderie that I was included in. The initial awkwardness that tinged some of our interactions had gone, a real collegial bond was beginning to emerge, and I happily consumed large quantities of the buns as part of that!

On the half day of working, we started addressing the project recommendations and conclusions – a very exciting moment in any project. It was at this point it became clear to me that I was stepping into different territory. I found myself acting as a facilitator in this meeting – drawing out key points that Anni, Bente, Elisabeth and Kajsa felt needed to be reflected in the conclusions and morphing the wording to be more action-focused, or to sound more recommendationy (probably not a word, but I'm going with it). We had Post-it notes everywhere and some fantastic discussions.



Figure 28. Snapshots of us working on the recommendations at Oodi – Anni and I obviously finding something hilarious.

I could see elements of museological (and archival) thinking remixing in front of me. We discussed agile project management for collecting initiatives, the need for fluidity and human-centred design processes, and much more (I'll address these in more detail later in the chapter). We kept coming back to making it simple, implementable, and adaptable. The whole process was enjoyable: we laughed, we took photos, we ate cake, and of course, did some serious thinking. For me, something shifted that day. More of me, my research and my past professional experiences went into the project than I was expecting.

That morning was another touchstone in my action research – it marked a new phase in my work with the team – I felt more a part of the CoSoPho crew than ever. I'd moved from contributing to the project to collaborating with them. My interactions were unlike my previous ones, for example, at the workshop in Stockholm (October 2018), where I was adding a lot of my own views into the mix. Here I was more

conscious about adding my opinions, and more aware of my role as facilitator. Jade French highlights the important role a facilitator takes in helping to complete group tasks, noting its central role in applying structure to the complex and unruly task of collaboration (French, 2020: 17). I was not asked to facilitate the conversation but slid into the role as it felt natural and appropriate for the moment and task. Jenny Mackewn proposes facilitation as action research in the moment. She notes that in this role, the facilitator's purpose is to continuously question the self and the group on what is needed (Mackewn, 2008: 618). As the only non-core team member there, it felt right that my role was to bring together and help clarify the ideas rather than input my own. I had not undertaken any of the case studies, I had not needed to work the collecting experiments into my institution. The issues faced and recommendations on how to tackle them needed to come from Anni, Bente, Elisabeth and Kajsa.

French explains that 'facilitators know the process is not about them. Facilitators know how to actively listen; they smile and make eye contact, use verbal affirmations, they question and summarise what people say for clarification, they observe body language and take notice' (2020: 17). That said, as first-person action research collaborating with CoSoPho, this moment of facilitation was also about me and my research. Mackewn reflects on what she calls the polarities and paradox in facilitation, noting that facilitators in action research needs to embrace the paradoxes and shift their approaches and interventions as appropriate to the context (2008: 616). This is exactly what I was attempting to do in my brief stint as facilitator: to do justice to the role of facilitator as set out by French, but also acknowledge my own experience of the moment, my position and ability to negotiate what was happening through gentle encouragement, collegial humour, and summarising. My role as facilitator in the CoSoPho group dynamic was temporary. Kajsa as the project manager is most often the person in that role, but as Kajsa needed to be at the centre of the recommendations, I stepped into it, taking on facilitation as action research in the moment. My role in wrangling the structure and wording of the recommendations continued, as I sat at my desk in Leeds, communicating through Google Docs comments. Of course, the rest of the team wrote the vast majority of the content, but I feel my inclusion as a co-author of the recommendations comes as an acknowledgment of my role in facilitating and structuring in this cycle of action.

Communication continued, but it was not until October 2019 that we all met again. This time the CoSoPho crew came to Leeds. We were all in Leeds for a symposium I had organised on digital collecting practices in museums, libraries and archives. We didn't make any project decision here, and I can't claim that the Leeds visit left a lasting impact on the project, but it was nice that we were able to joke about how we'd now managed to meet in all of our locales – we had completed the set. It felt great to have CoSoPho on home turf, and I wish I'd had more time to show them around a bit more (but we did get to have a curry and a pint which felt like a relatively authentic way to celebrate in Leeds). I remember thinking to myself that night, how I had become a transient member of the team. When we were together, I was included in everything, treated as a member of the core team. Then when we went our separate ways, the project continued without my input, but I was always kept up to date. I am still not sure what 'status' that gave me in the project, or if it even needs to be qualified, but the CoSoPho crew being in Leeds closed a circle for me. Their visit to me, rather than me visiting them, marked another inclusive touchpoint in the project.

Collaborator (AR cycle four)

Later in October 2019, Bente sent me a Facebook message asking if I wanted to speak at a conference in Odense, presenting the same paper I had done at the Leeds symposium. Never one to say no to such an offer, I agreed. Fast-forward to January 2020 and I find myself in Copenhagen. Efficient as always, the CoSoPho team decided to arrange a meeting around my talk in Odense with a full-day meeting in Copenhagen the day before and a morning meeting in Odense the day after the conference. With Brexit day pending (31st January 2020, if anyone needed a reminder), I brought essentials like crumpets for Bente and Scottish shortbread for Elisabeth as we joked about how it might be their last chance to get such British delicacies before the impending doom. It was only fair considering I was on a bit of a mission to get my first Danish cardamom bun to complete the set.

The project anthology was in the final stages and the conference preparations were well underway. It was in this meeting that Kajsa suggested I be included as a co-

author on the project recommendations; I wasn't expecting that, and I felt a real level of recognition and appreciation from the rest of the group. It felt like some sort of tangible proof of my action research – that I had made a real contribution to their project through our collaboration. The conference talk went well, and it was significant that I was the person representing CoSoPho, with the rest of the team sat in the audience. The project team didn't speak as a foursome – they always split up who was talking at conferences and would take it in turns. Although I was talking about my own research I'd done with the project, it felt like it was my turn to be presenting on behalf of the project. That evening we went out for some food and had a few cocktails – we discussed how the project was fitting into my thesis. As a group we reflected on how I'd shifted from an external participant, how we'd become friends during the process and how we'd influenced each other's work. There was one thing in particular that Elisabeth said that evening that really struck a chord. She said that although we have become friends, she wants me to maintain criticality. This felt important for me; we acknowledged that our relationship had grown as it does with colleagues you work closely with – it was not a project done at arm's length. But, despite this, the CoSoPho crew still wanted my critical reflections. I was always going to write in that way, but it felt good knowing that they wanted and expected that too.



Figure 29. Snapshots from the last visit to Denmark – Elisabeth, Anni and Kajsa in Copenhagen and the Odense conference where I spoke on behalf of CoSoPho.

Action research on reflection

We parted ways in Copenhagen on 31st January. It feels like a small victory to have been working with my EU colleagues in Copenhagen on Brexit day. We were expecting to properly celebrate the end of the project at the conference in Stockholm in March. Of course, that did not happen. An online conference eventually took place in October 2020, and it was perhaps more appropriate, considering the way I have framed needing to work within the context and lived environment you are researching. Since our last meeting we have continued as before. We exchanged messages, we've had a Zoom catch up, submitted a joint funding application, and continue to talk about future collaborations. The project anthology and the collecting tool have been launched too. Even as the thesis is being written, my collaboration with the project hasn't ended. But I am treating the Copenhagen / Odense trip as the end point for analysis.

I'd love to claim that I knew what I wanted to achieve, what my research questions were, and what I was doing the whole time, but that would be untrue. CoSoPho became action research through my natural inclination to get involved, through working with my own awkwardness and humour, through going with the flow and being open to incremental changes to my plans. In reflecting on this journey, I have been able to recognise four distinct(ish) Finnish cardamon bun-esque action research cycles that have influenced me, my research, and CoSoPho. The description of the action research I was involved in is important – it gives a sense of deep collaboration this case study comes out of. I have learned so much about the project, the individual institutions, and approaches to collecting social digital photography. But I've also come to better understand my own approach to collaborative working, the potential of remix approaches to work, the ins and outs of Google Docs, and how the intricacies of a cardamon bun reflects so beautifully the complexity of action research.

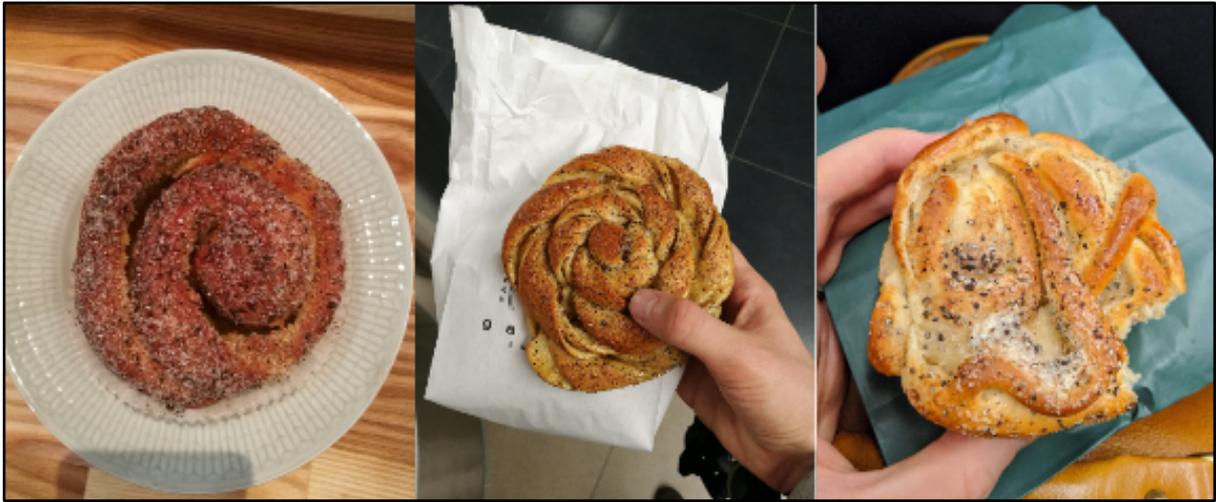


Figure 30. A triptych of cardamom buns. Swedish, Finnish and Danish Cardamom buns (left to right). The *second-best* thing about working with CoSoPho.

Having set up the context of the research, the methodological approach and my positionality within the project, the next section of this chapter begins to address the Collecting Social Photo project's approach to collecting social media, before situating it as a case of Remix Museology in action. To do this I utilise the findings of the reflexive dyadic interviews, my own understanding developed through interactions with the project, and the case study write-ups in the project anthology.

5.2 Collecting social media... or social digital photography?

The CoSoPho project was first and foremost a project about collecting photography and did not, in my view, fully capture the context of social media in the objects that were collected. This is not intended as a statement or claim about failings in the project – its focus on photography was clear from the onset. However, I feel it is important to highlight that the project did not result in a robust method for collecting social media.

Each of the core members of the team have been involved in photography collections for a number of years, whether curators of photography (Anni and Elisabeth), archivists working with large photography collections (Bente), or digital project managers with a professional background in photography collections (Kajsa). What inspired the project was an awareness of developing photography practices in relation to digital technologies – particularly smartphones and social media – alongside the lack of these photographs or practices being documented by heritage institutions. In the words of CoSoPho, ‘the starting point for the CoSoPho project has been to investigate the future of photography collections... museums and archives are facing a decline in spontaneous donations of analogue photographs. Soon it will no longer be possible to acquire a shoebox of photographic prints, negatives or photo albums, found in the attic or handed down by older generations’ (Boogh et al., 2020b: 9).

In [Social Media... Y tho?](#) I introduced how the project was using the term social digital photography, building on Jurgenson’s social photography (2019) to include the word ‘digital’ and linking it to other digital technologies, rather than exclusively to social media (Boogh et al., 2020b: 11). In the CoSoPho project anthology, the point is made that even outside of social media, digital photos exist in vast numbers, are often treated as disposable, and are at high risk of vanishing through technological failures and digital-related incidents such as lost passwords (Boogh et al., 2020b: 9). The specific challenges of collecting social digital photography from social media were pinpointed as Intellectual Property Regulations (IPR) and General Data

Protection Regulation (GDPR) issues, as well as the poor exporting options of social media posts (Boogh et al., 2020b: 9).

The project undertook 11 collecting-orientated case studies, focusing on a range of different social digital photographic content, using different methods that interacted with social media platforms in one way or another. The introduction to the project anthology explicitly notes that the 'project team was compelled to take into account... that collecting straight from social media is not currently possible due to GDPR and the affordances of social media services' (Boogh et al., 2020b: 10). I remember the moment quite early on in the project when Kajsa highlighted this after talking to a lawyer. It was not something I fully agreed with, but it was also not something I pushed with the team. This might have been down to some of the early awkwardness or the grey area I was wrestling with before fully embracing my Finnish-cardamom-bun-esque entanglement within the project.

Even as I became more comfortable and confident with my role and the action research, I did not push back in this area. Although action research actively encourages such interventions, I was keen to work with CoSoPho within the bounds of their project rather than push against them. Having said that, the project team were very aware that my PhD was looking to challenge those stated barriers. Although this barrier influenced the degree to which CoSoPho was able to collect the social media element of the social digital photographs, working within the confines of the advice from the lawyer provided an excellent opportunity to observe and contribute to the project remixing their practices in response to those confines. It became an important point for me that, throughout my collaboration with the project, I was always aware that CoSoPho was not collecting social media per se, but photography heavily influenced by and sourced from social media.

This difference may seem subtle, but it has significant implications for the collecting process. In focusing on the social digital photo, there is an extractable element that becomes the collected thing. The social media context can become secondary when focusing on the photo as the object. In most of the photos collected through the project, social media was treated as a space to identify photos and to interact and collaborate with photographers. Whilst this is exciting and represents a remix in

museological practices in itself – a remix that situates the act of collecting as a public-facing act undertaken in dialogue – the status of the photo was always given higher priority than the social media context. In many of the case studies the authenticity of the photos as an object of social media was lost through a focus on the photo as the object.

CoSoPho was not unaware of this, and the project experimented with a range of ways to collect the context: from taking screenshots or screen recordings of the photos in the social media interfaces, to undertaking surveys, interviews, and digital ethnographic observations (Boogh et al., 2020a: 250-251). In all four of the reflexive dyadic interviews undertaken we broached the subject of context – or lack thereof. In discussion with Kajsa and Ulrika at Nordiska Museet it became clear that there had been a few technical difficulties with their collecting tool *Minnen* and that in nearly all of the cases no additional context, apart from the request for a description / story during the upload process, was sought from the photos collected (Hartig and Hoffman, 2019).²⁵ The other partners worked to address the lack of context for the social digital photos in a number of different ways. Bente and Flemming at Aalborg City Archives explained how screenshots of the photos, in the context of the Instagram interface, were recorded and attached to the archival catalogue record (Jensen and Nielsen, 2019), and Elisabeth and Ann-Sofie similarly relied on screenshots with the addition of interviews conducted through Facebook Messenger for one of the case studies. Elisabeth was particularly reflective on the project's ability to record the social media context of the social digital photos, noting that 'I don't think it is fulfilling at all', and 'it's not very satisfying. At all' (Boogh and Nygren, 2019).

A wider variety of methods were employed by the Finnish Museum of Photography, and Anni and Sofia explained how initially they recorded contextual information through a series of questions, but in later case studies they had asked the people contributing photos to make video logs and do screen recordings (Wallenius and Lahti, 2019). Anni and Sofia also recorded the selection process of the photos in one

²⁵ A technical glitch with the *Minnen* interface meant a number of stories and photos did not get formally submitted and are left in a grey area. At the time of the interview, the museum was actively working on fixing this and following up where necessary.

of their case studies, a process that was undertaken in conversation with the contributors (Wallenius and Lahti, 2019). However, Anni and Sofia admitted that the amount of work involved in recording or processing all this information isn't feasible in a museum of their size (roughly 20 members of staff, 13 of them permanent) (Wallenius and Lahti, 2019). It also feels important to note that due to GDPR concerns, none of these screenshots or contextualisations are publicly available – they are for internal use only.

The varying levels of contextual information associated with objects is not a new phenomenon for museums. The process of museum collecting has always involved the de-contextualisation of objects and re-contextualisation within artificial categories and gallery displays (Baudrillard, 1968; Pomian, 1990; Baxandall, 1991). Finding objects that have lost their context along the way is also relatively normal where 'cupboards of doom', as we used to call them at the V&A – finding unidentified objects with no paperwork or provenance in the office of a retired curator – are part of the realities of working with objects in museums. That is why we have procedures like the 'Inventory' procedure in Spectrum designed to 'make sure you have the basic information to be accountable for the objects in your care' and to help deal with 'backlogs' and things found under the desk (Collections Trust, 2017c).

The frustration that comes with the lack of context associated with museum objects is often used (along with many other great reasons) to argue for the potential of contemporary collecting – the ability to record excellent contextual information from the here and now (Rhys and Baveystock, 2014; Alberti et al., 2018; Kavanagh, 2019). Whilst CoSoPho made a number of attempts to do this, a method that could do so effectively was not fully identified and worked into the recommendations of the project. The Nordic countries have a strong tradition of contemporary collecting – particularly Sweden, which is known for the development of Samdok, the contemporary documentation network in the 1970s. A number of scholars have written and reflected on the role Samdok had in developing narratives around relevance and the recording of contemporary objects, materials, and cultures (Axelsson, 2014; Steen, 2004; Nielsen, 2015). Neilson, in particular, argues that Samdok was the first museological attempt at shifting from meaning-making about the past to creating collections of contemporary relevance for the future (2015: 370).

Although Samdok is no longer active, when the network was being run centrally, it was done so from Nordiska Museet (which was also the lead institution for CoSoPho). The legacy of Samdok is still felt within the institution, and Kajsa cited it as influential in how the museum collects, highlighting the focus on stories and documenting contemporary culture (Hartig and Hoffman, 2019). This makes the difficulty in effectively recording the social media context of the social digital photos collected through CoSoPho even more pertinent in this case.

There are also inconsistencies in the quest for the authenticity of social digital photography to be captured in the project's stance on collecting the 'best possible quality of images' whilst also noting that the 'content of the image overrides technical qualities' (Boogh et al., 2020a: 250). The recommendations suggest that the best outcome is for the image to be uploaded onto the Collecting Social Photo app directly from a phone or camera along with a screenshot. This 'best outcome' is illustrative of the project's focus on the photograph rather than the social media context of social digital photography. Anni and Sofia mentioned the use of the tool 'Dinsta'²⁶ during the interviews as a method of downloading images directly from Instagram, but the successful use of such tools in the case studies has not translated to the project recommendations. Anni and Sofia used it as part of the image selection process with the photographers, and in my view, collected a more authentic social media object than if they had collected the photo via email, directly from a hard drive, or uploaded from a phone onto the Collecting Social Photo web app. This points to a tension in the project that did not get fully worked through. One of the key outcomes of CoSoPho is the creation of a participatory collecting process that brings together outreach and engagement-style practices with the collecting process, which is traditionally separated. Whilst I appreciate the benefits and agree with the reorientation of some of the power relations between museum (and archive) and photographer that this process allows, there are implications for the context and authenticity of the social media element of social digital photography which do not seem to have been addressed.

²⁶ Dinsta was an online tool that allowed the user to download images directly from Instagram. Instagram as a platform does not support right click and save or download functions from within its interface in the same way Twitter or Facebook does. However, since our interview the service that was available on <https://www.dinsta.com/about.html> is no longer up and running.

Although I am critical about the extent to which CoSoPho has managed to collect the social media-ness of social digital photos, the CoSoPho crew are reflexive practitioners who are aware of the limitations of some of their methods too. At the project conference in October 2020, Kajsa argued that there are still no set methods for collecting from social media and that everything that has been done needs to be understood as experimentation. Kajsa urged the conference to understand the need for constant development of museological and archival practices. This was a further reinforcement in my mind that CoSoPho represents a case of Remix Museology in action.

The next section aims to surface what I mean when I say CoSoPho is a case of Remix Museology in action by drawing further on the findings of the reflexive dyadic interviews, project recommendations and reflections on my points of realisation throughout the project. Focusing on three distinct features of Remix Museology, I want to highlight how CoSoPho: 1) pragmatically remixed the way in which collecting takes place; 2) developed a mode of ongoing incremental change in how individual institutions work with that remixed form of collecting; and 3) drew on culturally and ethically appropriate ways of working within social media environments to challenge traditional power relations in collecting and notions of ownership in acquisition.

5.3 CoSoPho as Remix Museology in action

Before we begin situating CoSoPho as a case of Remix Museology in action, it is worth re-visiting the description of Remix Museology set out earlier in the thesis. Drawing primarily on the theories of remix and appropriate museology, Remix Museology conceives of a pragmatic, incremental, and ongoing approach to change that looks to develop culturally and ethically appropriate processes for acquiring new and emerging object types. For the purposes of situating CoSoPho as Remix Museology this section will focus on parts of that definition to discuss elements of the project that illustrate them in action. This section is not designed to produce critical reflections on CoSoPho, but rather to flesh out Remix Museology using examples from practice. In order to do this, I have gone into full collections manager mode and categorised Remix Museology into three elements:

- 1) Pragmatic remixing
- 2) Ongoing incremental change
- 3) Cultural and ethical appropriateness

These categories are at times a little fuzzy, with features of the project being examples of two or all three of them, but I felt that the categorisations produced a useful structure to address the project as Remix Museology. As well as using the three categories above, CoSoPho's status as Remix Museology in action will be addressed at both a project and institutional level. The influences of the project on the individual institutions are highlighted through the reflexive dyadic interviews and illustrate how the recommendations are based on the experiences of each of the project partners.

Pragmatic Remixing and CoSoPho

Pragmatic remixing refers to the context-dependent use of remix activities to draw on other forms of practice in supporting an end goal. Here, I am referencing remix as defined by Manovich (2015), as compositions that consist of previously existing parts, edited and brought together in the creation of something else. Throughout the CoSoPho project, the pulling together of non-traditional museum (and archival)

practices or ideas and editing them together to generate new ways of enacting practice within the context of non-ideal constraints like GDPR and the traditional material-focused conditions of museum (and archival) collecting was an ongoing iterative process. I argue that these remixed practices are pragmatic approaches to move towards the goal of collecting social digital photography.

The CoSoPho project enacted pragmatic remixing by drawing on the expertise of people outside the cultural heritage field to inform observation, outreach and collecting methods as part of creating achievable ways forward for collecting social digital photos. Within each of the institutions, the project partners worked within the barriers presented to them – whether they were institutional resistance, digital tools, or collections management processes. Throughout the course of the project, it was possible to identify a number of instances where pragmatic remixing took place at both project and institutional levels.

At a project level

From the very first CoSoPho event I attended, the remixing of museum (and archival) practices has happened as a central component of the project. As I noted earlier in my re-telling of the research journey, the ideation workshop (as CoSoPho called it) in Helsinki 2017 was a melting pot of ideas and expertise. As well as a range of cultural heritage professionals, the workshop included insights from visual culture academics, computer scientists, and digital service designers. Organised into four groups of five, we were given the task of designing museum and archive-specific engagement programmes that featured contemporary topics and social digital photography.

Although my group was actually quite museum-focused compared to the others, we were diverse in our roles and experience. The group consisted of Kajsa, me and Sofia Lahti (Curator at the Finnish Museum of Photography), plus Russell Dornan (Digital Content Editor at the V&A Dundee) and Jennifer Poleon (Digital Communications Manager at the Columbus Museum of Art in the U.S.). We brought together expertise in digital engagement, curation, and collections management. Sat in the seminar room of the Finnish Museum of Photography, fuelled by coffee, fruit

and sweets we hashed together ideas, presented them, re-worked them, and presented them again. These rapid iterations – although mostly not implementable in the end – set the groundwork for the remixing of museological and archival practices in the CoSoPho project from the onset.



Figure 31. My group (myself, Russell and Sofia pictured) presenting the outcomes of our rapidly developed outreach and collecting programme at the Helsinki workshop (credit: Bente Jensen)



Figures 32 & 33. The ideation process – plenty of diagrams, Post-it notes, pointing (and remixing!) (Image on the right, credit: Bente Jensen).

A similar process was also followed in the March 2018 ideation workshop in Stockholm. This time I was in a group with a curator, an anthropologist, and a software designer. In a similar fashion we built on the previous workshop but in direct response to data sets and images collected through a project case study that

focused on the 2017 Stockholm terror attack. Our remixing was more pragmatic this time; we had the knowledge of museological and archival constraints as well and a real-life, recent, and sensitive topic to ground us, but drew on social media design features as appropriate to mediate how a social digital photography collecting and engagement tool might work.

We attempted to conceive of an app that would connect to a user's social media account that could automatically share images posted (in a similar way to how you can set up an automatic tweet every time you post a picture on Instagram) and plot where those photos were taken on a map of Stockholm using geotagging data (see Figure 34).

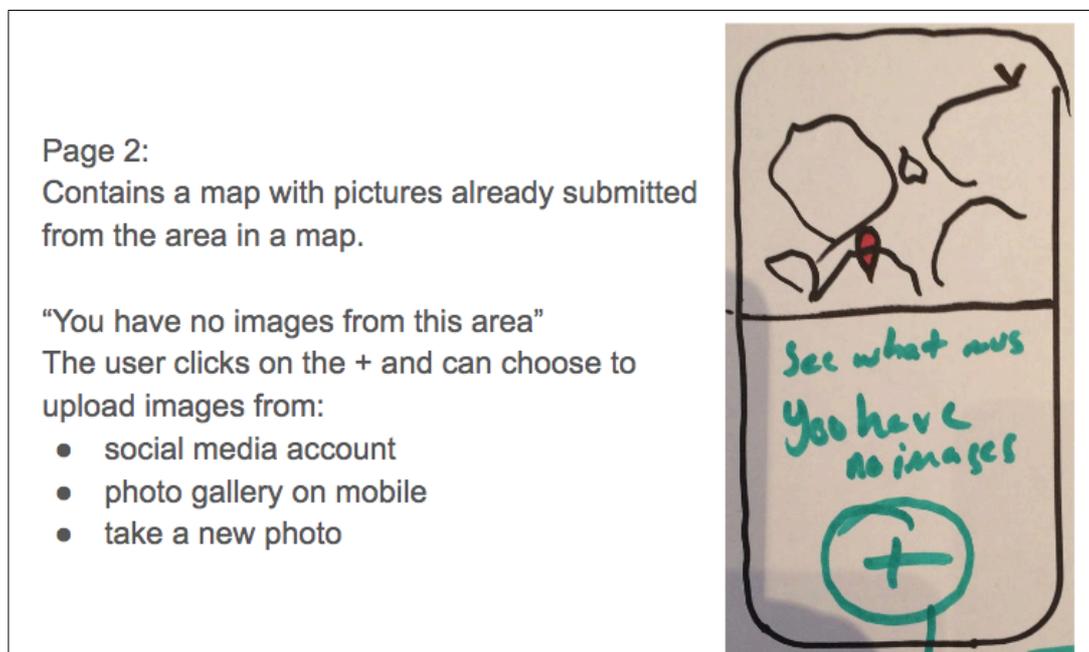


Figure 34. Screenshot from the presentation we designed to present to the wider group at the Stockholm workshop (including my excellent and definitely geographically accurate map of Stockholm)

These workshops, although taking place early on in the project, were highly influential in the outputs of the project and the ways in which the CoSoPho crew continued to experiment with collecting social digital photography. These pragmatic, context-centred approaches to developing new methods of collecting and sharing social digital photography are one of the significant features of the project that, in my mind, make it a case of Remix Museology in action.

Skipping ahead to May 2019, I also want to reflect more on the process of compiling the project recommendations. I noted in my description of the research relationship between CoSoPho and myself that it was at this point it dawned on me that the project was remixing museological (and archival) processes. We arrived at the shiny new central library in Helsinki – known simply as Oodi – on a Saturday morning to try and make a start on defining what the recommendations of the project were going to be. We found a table, went in pairs to get a coffee, and made ourselves comfortable. Everyone got their laptops out (apart from me, who still, for reasons unbeknownst even to me, likes to work using a little A5 notebook). As we began to consider where we should start, it is difficult to articulate what we did for that first ten minutes – everyone was able to recite the interesting things their case studies had taught them, but there was no connective tissue between them. There was no... wait for it... structuring or categorisation happening.

It occurred to me that whilst I was contributing – helping to condense and re-phrase ideas – the group's thoughts, methods and descriptions of practice were being thrown into the middle of the table and simply being assembled rather than remixed. It was at this point that I found myself slipping into the role of facilitator – the role Kajsa normally holds. This wasn't because Kajsa wasn't doing the role properly, but because at this point in time Kajsa needed to be a participant, rather than a facilitator. Seeing this opportunity to contribute to the moment in a more effective way, I suggested we begin categorising the practices that could be characterised as distinct areas for change, under which individual recommendations could be listed. For me, it was this change in dynamic that shifted the meeting from being about creating lists of outcomes to articulating a remix of museological (and archival) practice.



Figure 35. Categorising and organising outcomes and recommendation ideas at Oodi in Helsinki 2019.

By the end of our morning at the library we had come to agree on the key areas of the recommendations, centring the need for what we were calling at that point a user-centric approach to collecting. In the final version of the recommendations, this eventually evolved to become a re-orientation towards the affordances of social media alongside a human-centred approach to working, utilising technologies and tools that were in constant development and adaptations and alignments of policies and procedures to work with the social digital photos' context. These principles of the CoSoPho recommendations represent a pragmatic remix of museological (and archival) practices in a number of ways – including the folding in of social media, digital design and ethical-human centred collaborating working practices into collecting methodologies in a way that works with museum (and archival) structures, policies and procedures but is not held back by them. These principles are articulated in more detail throughout the recommendations, and the application of remixed ideas can be seen in the introduction of concepts like user journey mapping, a method normally used by web design and tech teams in planning and developing websites and user's experiences of them. CoSoPho recommend using the principles of this method in designing collecting initiatives aimed to engage people and encourage them to donate their social digital photography to the museum (or archive) through the Collecting Social Photo web app (Boogh et al., 2020a: 258).

At an institutional level

Each of the project partners worked within their own institutional contexts to enact the case studies that led to the development of the recommendations of the project. The four institutions are diverse in size, set-up, and scope, and all started from a different place with regards to their experiences of collecting digital objects. The reflexive dyadic interviews proved useful in surfacing these in a way that my general action research with and the formalised outcomes of the project did not address. The Finnish Museum of Photography and Aalborg City Archives presented particularly illustrative examples of pragmatic remixing: the Finnish Museum of Photography in their reflections on how they started the collecting process without any digital collecting tools, and Aalborg City Archives on handling the fluidity of social digital photography through flattening archival hierarchies to start the collecting process before working to re-build them afterwards.

Sitting in the offices of the Finnish Museum of Photography with Anni and Sofia during our interview session, we had been discussing the museum's grounding in digital collecting before getting involved in CoSoPho. Anni and Sofia explained that they had done some collecting, but that it had been fragmentary, reacting when an artist offered their digital photographs to them and attempting to adapt their processes as and when it happened. It wasn't an active collecting area for the museum, and they didn't have the tools and processes in place for it to be so (Wallenius and Lahti, 2019). We continued our discussion for a little while longer before we shifted to talk more about the CoSoPho case studies they had undertaken. Anni started by reflecting on *The Prehistory of Visual Social Media* experiment that looked at the IRC-Galleria platform that I compared with Myspace earlier in the chapter. Anni admitted that then 'we had no clue of how to do this, how to collect', but noted that the support from members of the public at an event they held at the museum to launch the idea helped build their confidence in the relevance of trying to collect social digital photography. I questioned what they actually managed to collect from that case study, to which Anni explained, 'we didn't have

any infrastructure, unlike our Swedish partners who already had platforms.²⁷ Anni and Sofia both told an increasingly excited me about how they realised their contact management database had the functionality to create sign-up sheets for events and courses and upload files. They re-appropriated this functionality to design an online form that people could upload images to and collected around 40 images from people's old IRC Galleria platform in this way (Wallenius and Lahti, 2019).

What became apparent in this moment was that the Finnish Museum of Photography was not held back by their lack of a digital collecting tools and that they took a pragmatic approach, circumventing the museum's practices and procedures designed around collecting physical photographic material, by remixing their contact management database into a digital collecting tool. This approach echoes the words of Petrina Foti, who claims that Smithsonian curators displayed adaptive practices when, instead of being paralyzed by a lack of precedent in collecting computer technologies, they were able to 'meet the challenge of the unknown creatively' (2019: 51). The Finnish Museum of Photography's hack of their contact management database is an excellent example of pragmatic remixing.

Pragmatic remix activities were also highlighted in my interview with Bente and Flemming at Aalborg City Archives. That CoSoPho was a project involving three museums and one archive already combines two forms of practice that have a surprisingly different view of their role and approach to collecting/archiving. Throughout the project, Bente was always keen to remind us of the archival perspective, and that the influence archival approaches had on the project cannot be underestimated (hence my use of 'and archival' throughout this chapter). But museological theories and approaches also had a significant influence on the way Aalborg City Archive conceived of its practice (both before and during the project). Aalborg City Archives offered a remixed perspective on collecting to CoSoPho and also allowed itself to be pragmatically remixed whilst supporting experimentation with collecting social digital photography.

²⁷ Anni meant that Nordika Museet and Stockholm County Museum had online collecting platforms that allowed people to upload digital content to a website for the museums to work with.

After exchanging a packet of Warburton's crumpets for some real Danish danishes, Bente, Flemming and I sat down to begin what was my first reflexive dyadic interview. I started all the interviews by asking everyone to introduce themselves, say a little about the archive/museum and give some context for their collecting, especially with respect to their digital collections. Within the first few minutes Flemming mentioned that they had 'a million or so' digital photographs, which is just mind-boggling to the museum collections manager in me, but is just so illustrative of the gap between where archives generally are with their digital collecting compared to museums (Jensen and Nielsen, 2019). Bente noted how their grounding in digital collecting, which had been thrust upon them with the digitisation of local government around the year 2000, was a good point of departure for them in the CoSoPho project. But they also highlighted how their digital archives were becoming more 'fluid' and that providing access to them in a structured way was increasingly difficult (Jensen and Nielsen, 2019). This fluidity of archives, with particular reference to social digital photography, came up again when we were discussing the hierarchical cataloguing structure of archives – Bente and Flemming explained how recording the context of social media photography collections is difficult as it isn't the structured data the archives are used to (Jensen and Nielsen, 2019).

Displaying clear pragmatic thinking, Bente and Flemming explained how the way in which they've started working with the photos is more like a museum object – completely removed from its context and looked at as an individual thing. Bente was quick to note that 'it is just really horrible in archive terms' but also noted that they were now beginning to experiment with how to structure the photos collected using more archival practices (Jensen and Nielsen, 2019). This led to us discussing how their archival database systems were also being used in ways they were not designed for, to account for how they have been trying to capture the context through screenshots saved in PDF formats (Jensen and Nielsen, 2019). The situation the Finnish Museum of Photography and Aalborg City Archives found themselves in was not ideal – having to hack systems to make them work for you often leads to additional jobs and can sometimes cause unintended consequences with regards to computerised systems, or general inconsistencies with regards to cataloguing and arranging systems. However, as Anni and Sofia, Bente and Flemming talked me through the actions they had taken, it was clear that they were a

starting point; they were early pragmatic decisions about how to start collecting social digital photography and to remix their practices, processes and systems along the way. This way of working is needed more throughout the museum sector as we begin to face the ongoing challenges that new and emerging objects will present. Hawes and Flood remark on this in their write-up of the *Collecting and Curating Digital Posters (2018)* project, and it has been a feature of discussions at conferences I've been a part of (Alberti et al., 2020) and in direct conversations I've had throughout this PhD. We cannot wait for a perfect system to begin collecting social media: we have to make a start somewhere.

Pragmatic remixes have been a feature of the CoSoPho project from the outset. The CoSoPho crew have been drawing in expertise from outside museums or archives, as well as from each other to remix approaches in a pragmatic fashion. The pragmatic remixing that has been foundational to the project enabled the partners to make a start at collecting social digital photography – and a good start too.

Ongoing incremental change and CoSoPho

Ongoing incremental change refers to the manner of change a Remix Museology approach proposes. Robert Janes notes that 'most innovation occurs from hundreds of small changes and ideas, which add up to enormous differences' and argues that 'this kind of thinking must be encouraged' (2007: 142). I would add to Janes' comments that this form of incremental change needs to be an ongoing process if it is going to continue to develop innovative practices and appropriately deal with the new and emerging.

The CoSoPho project exemplified ongoing and incremental change in several ways. In the project's description of how to create and implement collecting initiatives and the design and management process for the Collecting Social Photo web app, the project adopts a philosophy of incremental and ongoing change. These principles are further infused at institutional levels, where strategic directions, professional relationships and documentation procedures also illustrate how incremental change processes have been adopted as part of an ongoing process.

At a project level

The CoSoPho recommendations and outcomes propose a model of ongoing, incremental, and collaborative change as a way of creating appropriate, meaningful, and sustainable collecting initiatives that facilitate the acquisition of social digital photography. I've seen first-hand how the project embraced the concept of ongoing incremental change through its adoption of agile principles in designing collecting initiatives, and through its adoption of GitHub as a tool for the ongoing development of the Collecting Social Photo web app.

The design and implementation of collecting initiatives is a key feature of the Collecting Social Photo method for collecting social digital photography. Part of the project's vision for bringing together outreach and collecting activities in museums (and archives), the collecting initiative is designed to create time-bound thematic collecting streams that can accompany other activities such as Instawalks,²⁸ or be stand-alone streams that are part of wider conversations the museum (or archive) is engaged in.

The CoSoPho crew were keen to ensure that collecting initiatives are designed in a way that is responsive and adaptive. The recommendations discuss the need for initiatives to be iterative; to be monitored and to be able to respond and adjust in reaction to engagement, feedback, and users' behaviours (Boogh et al., 2020a: 259). This need for ongoing incremental change moves beyond the specific collecting initiatives that will be designed by individual institutions; it is also a fundamental part of how the Collecting Social Photo web app – the tool that is supposed to facilitate the collecting initiatives – is hosted, managed, and further developed. Since before the first web app meeting I attended in October 2018, the plan was to design a digital collecting tool that was open source and – to use the language of agile project management – a minimal viable product (MVP).²⁹ This MVP was to be hosted on GitHub and incrementally developed by a community of practitioners on an ongoing

²⁸ Instawalks are physical meet ups where groups of people go on walks and take photos to share and post on Instagram together.

²⁹ The minimal viable product in agile project management is a version of a product that has just enough features to make it usable, with the intent of designing and implementing new features in short periods of focused development time (Techopedia, 2020).

basis. The project describes this as designing a tool with a ‘long-term and sustainable perspective’ to be produced with ‘constant development and possible scaling in mind’ (Hartig, 2020: 206).

From the outset of the two days in Stockholm in October 2018, Micha Walter studio, the company appointed to design the web app, attempted to build in a typical U.S. tech team approach to working with the project. We had multiple icebreaker sessions, we were moving a lot, laughing, improvising, and I even got to show off some of my Swedish pop knowledge, dropping in references to Swedish band Alcazar and the Melodifestivalen (the music competition that decides the Swedish entry to the Eurovision song contest). The fast-paced iterative way of working wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea – especially as it meant we spent a lot of time not talking specifically about the project – but it did evoke the idea of the sprint that is part of the agile project management. The amount of time we spent on fleshing out the requirements of the web app was split into intense bursts, incremental leaps forward. Then we’d spend some time doodling or playing a game. I can’t say this way of running workshops became part of how CoSoPho worked moving forward, but it did embody the idea of ongoing and incremental developments – a general philosophy that CoSoPho definitely took forward, even if not in this specific brand of U.S.-tech-team-style-agile-working.



Figure 36 – Two different ways of working throughout the October 2018 workshop in Stockholm (photo on the right – Kajsa Hartig)

Through both the recommendation of iterative and responsive collecting initiatives, and the workshoping, development and ongoing management of the Collecting

Social Photo web app, the project has worked with and embodied an approach to ongoing incremental change.

At an institutional level

As with pragmatic remixing, the individual partners also showed how ongoing incremental change was being built into how they were approaching collecting social digital photography throughout the project. Stockholm County Museum and the Finnish Museum of Photography presented particularly illustrative examples of how they were taking an ongoing incremental approach to change: the former through their step-by-step approach to becoming a digital-first museum; and the latter through their incremental development of documentation structures to support social digital photography.

Stockholm County Museum's participation in the CoSoPho project coincided with a change in the museum's overall direction of travel – the museum decided in 2018 to become a digital-first museum. In this context it means that, whilst the museum does still hold some physical collections, there is no physical exhibition space or museum building as such. Elisabeth noted that this means the web pages and social media presence of the museum is going to be incredibly important (Boogh and Nygren, 2019). When I asked whether or not the success of *Samtidsbild* – the museum's online collecting tool developed in 2014 – was part of that decision, Elisabeth said whilst it was not formally, it did help that the museum had already started working with born-digital collections. Or as Ann-Sofie added with a broad smile, at least some people had anyway... indicating that work is still needed before the museum becomes truly digital-first (Boogh and Nygren, 2019). Other factors that demonstrate the museum's incremental approach to becoming a digital-first museum include their change in focus from digitising and filling gaps in their analogue photography collections to collecting born-digital photography. During our conversation, Elisabeth highlighted that, since 2011 and some organisational restructuring, the museum has stopped individual digitisation projects and has instead focused on developing their digital collecting methods (Boogh and Nygren, 2019). Elisabeth's ability to take part in CoSoPho and the further, ongoing incremental experimentations with approaches

to digital collecting are inextricably linked to their orientation towards ongoing incremental change at the museum.

Towards the end of our chat, it became apparent that the rest of the museum was slowly developing a more distributed responsibility towards the digital collecting taking place on *Samtidsbild* (and soon to be Collecting Social Photo web app). Elisabeth explained how, during the climate emergency school strikes led by Greta Thunberg in 2018, the museum's Communications Officer got in contact with Elisabeth and asked if it would be okay if they put out a call for photos on *Samtidsbild*. At which point in the interview, both Elisabeth and Ann-Sofie joyfully exclaimed 'Yes!!' in unison and all three of us enjoyed a few seconds of mini celebration at this relatively simple acknowledgement of their digital collecting method from outside a collections department made up of just Elisabeth and Ann-Sofie (Boogh and Nygren, 2019). 🙌🎉🙌 The ongoing and incremental change in internal recognition and responsibility for engagement with digital collecting, as part of a wider re-orientation towards being a digital-first museum, is an excellent example of a strong Remix Museology approach to working.

The wider institutional recognition and support for CoSoPho and digital collecting activities was less of an issue for the Finnish Museum of Photography, which was lucky enough to have had buy-in from director level down from the start (Wallenius and Lahti, 2019). Instead, ongoing incremental change presented itself in how they were developing their documentation structures to support the acquisition of social digital photography. Anni explained that they were keen to get the photographs recorded in their collections management system as soon as possible after the case studies were undertaken, but they 'encountered several issues' related to the structuring and information requirements of catalogue records. Anni noted how they had been solving issues as they'd been going along, rewriting cataloguing instruction at the same time as cataloguing the social digital photos (Wallenius and Lahti, 2019).

We sat together – me 100% in my element – scrolling through the database as Anni and Sofia highlighted difficult fields, discussing how some of them had been reappropriated. Even simple things like the 'artist name' fields being used to put

someone's Instagram username in, or utilising the 'inscription' field to record the caption of an Instagram post present themselves as incremental adaptations to their processes that enable them to continue developing and refining their collecting process (Wallenius and Lahti, 2019). Anni explained that they were planning on creating a system whereby the collections team would meet once a month to discuss the new fields that are needed as they continue to interact with new types of photography, and then once agreed, ask their internal IT support to develop them in their database (which is a FileMaker database and therefore relatively straightforward to add and remove fields with) (Wallenius and Lahti, 2019). This was particularly interesting to me because it is very similar to the CMS User Group I managed when I was at the V&A, and I know how productive it was in creating a sense of ongoing incremental development that people could feel a part of. By Anni and Sofia working to implement this, it shows how the incremental change driven by the cataloguing of the social digital photos was being adopted as an ongoing practice for the museum.

These examples of how ongoing incremental change is a strong feature at the institutional level as well as at the project level further cements CoSoPho as a case of Remix Museology in action. In demonstrating multiple examples of pragmatic remixing and adopting an ongoing approach to incremental change, at both a project and institutional level, the practice-based examples of the CoSoPho project gives substance to the principles of Remix Museology, illustrating how they can potentially work in museological (and archival) settings.

Cultural and ethical appropriateness and CoSoPho

Cultural and ethical appropriateness refers to the ways in which Remix Museology requires us to pay attention to the contexts that we are working within and to ensure we are working in a way that is appropriate for them. In the context of CoSoPho, the project team acknowledged the affordances of social media, in particular the use of photography in social media, and adapted their practices to be more culturally and ethically appropriate for those contexts.

The CoSoPho crew built an exploration of the affordances of social digital photography into their project and remixed their approach to be more culturally and ethically appropriate for them in a number of ways. As a project, CoSoPho re-orientated the usual power relationship in museums (and archives, to an extent) that sees the institution as the authority that decides what is collected. In doing this, the project paid more attention to the reciprocal and participatory nature of posting social digital photography on social media. At an institutional level, the re-orientation towards more culturally and ethically appropriate practices took the form of more context appropriate approaches to ownership. Both Stockholm County Museum and Aalborg City Archives discussed the inability to formally own social media photography in the same way that museums and archives have traditionally done for physical collections.

At a project level

The name of the CoSoPho end-of-project publication is *Connect to Collect: Approaches to Collecting Social Digital Photography in Museums and Archives*, and it really sums up the sociality of collecting that the project argues is needed when collecting social digital photography. It was actually during my reflexive dyadic interview with Elisabeth and Ann-Sofie that I first heard the proposed name for the project publication, and it really struck a chord with me. I think it has the potential to become more of a slogan or mantra for the project – ‘connect to collect’ is what I want us to be chanting for years to come when talking about collecting from social media (as well as chanting Remix Museology too of course 😊). At the core of ‘connect to collect’ is an underlying shift in how CoSoPho suggests museums and archives approach collecting. They argue that the decision-making power should shift to the photographer rather than the curator (or archivist, to an extent). This is a model of collecting that Stockholm County Museum had been following since the introduction of *Samtidsbild* in 2011 (Boogh, 2013). The CoSoPho project recommendations state that collecting must take place with consent and that the best way to facilitate this is for the photographers to be the ones that upload them to the institution’s instance of the Collecting Social Photo web app (Boogh et al., 2020a: 249-250).

In discussions about the functionality of the web app there was some disagreement over the amount of power the institution should have to formally veto what is acquired from the uploaded photos – Bente was particularly clear that the archive could not just accept anything uploaded – but there was general agreement that the choice of what should be uploaded to the app should sit with the photographer, and that the institutions should not moderate content before it gets uploaded (but can remove it by ‘unpublishing’ it if the content is deemed to be inappropriate). Additionally, the project proposed that the photographer should also have some control over how the photograph is described in the museum (and archival) collections management system (Hartig, 2020). The final web app allows individual institutions to select what gets acquired, but also allows them to accept everything, as is the case with Stockholm County Museum and Nordiska Museet.

Elisa Serafinelli draws out some of the affordances of social media platforms that have come to be understood as their defining features. In particular, Serafinelli notes how social media platforms are ‘contemporary widespread and ubiquitous manifestations’ of our tendency towards ‘social aggregation’ (2018: 79). The ways in which we interact with each other, when socially aggregated on social media platforms, is more heavily governed by ‘the reciprocal exchange of content’ than in our day-to-day interactions offline (Serafinelli, 2018: 79). This culture of reciprocal exchange, alongside increased participation, is often cited as one of the key principles that supports claims of democratisation or empowerment through social media (Kidd, 2011; Meikle, 2016). The extent to which social media truly does democratise culture or empower people is very much contested, not least through discussions about corporate ownership of the platforms (Baym, 2015) and the digital divide (Mihelj et al., 2019). Yet, whilst the extent to which it does democratise culture might be debatable, the use of social media platforms to level the playing field – whether communicating as individuals, institutions, or even as political and territorial entities in the same networked environment – undeniably challenges traditional institutional power relations.

The relationship between museums and social media has developed over time to better reflect the affordances of social media. This shift has been framed as a move from didactic communication to a more dialogic form and has been heralded as a

tool that can help facilitate people participating in the construction of heritage (Fairclough, 2012; Holdgaard and Klastrup, 2014; Gronemann et al., 2015; Budge, 2017). Regardless, the ways in which museums have taken on board the affordances of social media to invite people to participate has not really led to any changes to the ways in which museums collect and the decisions around what is collected. This skirting around the relinquishing of power and control over what gets collected has started to be addressed by CoSoPho as a way of more appropriately collecting from the social media environment. Although the project does not go as far as directly stating that anything uploaded to the web app should definitely be collected, and still emphasises the importance of selection in museum and archival collecting practices, there is a distinct recognition of the ethical and cultural dimensions of social media platforms in the way the project recommends opening up the collecting process.

At an institutional level

The ways in which Stockholm County Museum and Aalborg City Archives (and to some extent Nordiska Museet and the Finnish Museum of Photography too) saw their claim to ownership over the photos collected also points to a cultural and ethical recognition of appropriateness. Stockholm County Museum and Aalborg City Archive both explained that they did not own the photos, which sits as a challenge to the acquisition processes set out in foundational museological codes of practice and collections management standards. Instead, they take a more culturally and ethically appropriate approach, understanding that it would not be possible to try and assert direct ownership over social digital photography already posted on social media and subsequently shared, retweeted, and possibly even remixed into other forms of memetic media.

After lunch at Stockholm County Museum, and happily grazing on biscuits and coffee from the museum's fancy coffee machine, Ann-Sofie, Elisabeth and I started looking through the collections management database together. I asked what I knew might be a bit of a knotty question – what is the legal status of the photographs uploaded to *Samtidsbild*? I followed up more explicitly by asking, 'Do they go into the museum's ownership or what kind of agreement is signed compared to if you donated a

physical object museum?’ Elisabeth answered instantly, ‘it’s a shared ownership’ – the museum does not claim individual ownership over the photos and the uploader gives usage rights to the museum under Creative Commons licensing (Boogh and Nygren, 2019). I found this all really refreshing and our conversation went on from there. We chatted further about whether there was any nervousness about the lack of control over the photographs. Elisabeth explained how it wasn’t something that had been expressed or discussed in the museum and that whilst full ownership would be easier, the museum had undertaken many collection projects where there is ‘combined ownership between the photographer and the museum’, citing examples of where analogue photography has entered the museum, been digitized and later returned (Boogh and Nygren, 2019).

Taking a deeper look into the Terms of Use for *Samtidsbild*, they illustrate how the collecting tool is actually working on a similar licence model to social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. The terms of use stipulate that by uploading, a user grants ‘a non-exclusive right of use to Stockholm County Museum to, with the restrictions stated below, produce copies and in other ways make messages available to the public.’ They also state that ‘Stockholm County Museum also has the right to place the publication on another’s website, on social media or a search portal on the Internet’, noting that ‘Nothing in these sections restricts the User’s right to use its content on its own’ (Stockholm County Museum, 2021: np). What is particularly interesting here is that the museum has developed an agreement around the collecting of social digital photography that uses the same model of the social media platforms people are used to sharing photos on but does not assert ownership, or even shared ownership. However, the Terms of Use do indicate that uploads become part of the collection, stating that ‘By submitting messages and personal data to *Samtidsbild*, they become part of Stockholm County Museum’s cultural-historical archive and will be preserved and managed for future generations and for historical and scientific research purposes.’ (Stockholm County Museum, 2021: np). Therefore, although Elisabeth stated that there is a shared ownership, the Terms of Use do not directly address this, but do signal that they are considered part of the museum’s collection. The legal status of the photos is ambiguous.

This approach to collecting social digital photography is a remix that at a surface level seems to be a culturally and ethically appropriate remix of museological processes. Whilst there is clearly an unquestioning openness to the idea of the Stockholm County Museum collections not being exclusively owned, and a belief that the collected photos are governed by some form of shared ownership, the reality of the remix has not quite made that clear. The shift towards using Terms of Use to govern the collecting process is a potentially culturally and ethically appropriate remix of museum collecting practices, but in order for there to be a shared ownership, that needs to be clearly stated. What seems to be in place at the moment is a licence for the museum to use and store the images for the future, and a nod towards that meaning the photos are in the museum's collection. Despite the lack of clarity, this approach to collecting still unsettles some of the foundational notions of acquisition in museums codified through the ICOM Code of Ethics. The code insists that: 'No object or specimen should be acquired by purchase, gift, loan, bequest, or exchange unless the acquiring museum is satisfied that a valid title is held. Evidence of lawful ownership in a country is not necessarily valid title' (ICOM, 2017: 9). Valid title is clarified further in the glossary as an 'indisputable right to ownership of property, supported by full provenance from the time since discovery or production' (ICOM, 2017: 49). The Acquisition and Accessioning procedure in Spectrum 5.0 follows closely that as a minimum requirement 'you have written evidence that the undisputed owners of acquired objects have transferred title to your museum' (Collections Trust, 2017a). As early as 2013, Kalliopi Fouseki and Kalliopi Vacharopoulous argued that ICOM's Code was out of touch with the implications of the digital age, citing the focus on ownership as problematic (2013: 8). That argument still stands today. What makes this focus on ownership problematic for the social digital photography in the project was the idea of an 'indisputable right to ownership of property' and how that translates from discreet and fixed tangible objects to social digital photos collected within the context of social media.

As with Elisabeth and Ann-Sofie, this topic came up in discussion with Bente and Flemming at Aalborg City Archives. After chatting for a little while about how the archive had needed to translate their acquisition documentation into English now that they were collecting photos posted on Instagram, I asked whether their documentation stated that the archive owns the photo. Flemming, as quickly as

Elisabeth did, said ‘not owns, but that we have the right to use.’ Bente swiftly followed up with ‘you can never own it’ (Jensen and Nielsen, 2019). Stockholm County Museum and Aalborg City Archives are not alone in their steps towards unsettling traditional notions of ownership in museum and archival collecting practices (shout out to Post-Custodial Archival Theory).³⁰ As highlighted in my discussion on the ethical elements of Remix Museology in the [Remix Museology](#) chapter, Janet Marstine has explored a twenty-first century approach to ethical museum work and one strand of the research was focused on alternative ownership models for collections. Through them, a number of concerns over the museum’s focus on ownership of property in isolation from their communities emerged, and the project concluded that there is a general aspiration to ‘reject the conventions of museum possession/ownership of collections’ (Marstine et al., 2015: 81). Instead, Marstine suggests moving towards a more ethical form of stewardship that doesn’t focus on exclusive ownership (2017: 46).

Geismar suggests that guardianship is a more appropriate term to describe how museums should consider their relationship with collections. Geismar explains how this would mean a more consultative relationship, whereby the museum does not consider objects as property, a belief that suggests the museum is entitled to do what it wants with them and further commodifies them (2008: 115). Although the CoSoPho project didn’t see a rejection of ownership, it did begin paying attention to the cultural and ethical appropriateness of collecting and owning social digital photography. Whilst Aalborg City Archives acknowledged that it could never really own a social digital photo, Stockholm County Museum suggested that the model could be more along the lines of shared ownership. Although Stockholm County Museum’s attempt at creating this model has not been completely successful, it does present an alternative to ownership as described in foundational approaches to museum collections management like ICOM’s Code of Ethics and Spectrum. Both Aalborg City Archives and Stockholm County Museum continue to collect social digital photos without owning them – they collect them with a licence to use,

³⁰ Described by Terry Cook in 1994, Post-Custodial theory reject the ideas that archives can only exist in one place and only have one creator. It calls for more dynamic management of archives and closer relationships with creators where possible. (Millar, 2017).

acknowledging the cultural and ethical specificities of photography posted and shared through social media.

5.4 The social digital collecting of CoSoPho

The aim of this chapter has been to illustrate my work with the CoSoPho project, to draw out how my learning from the action research influenced Remix Museology, and to describe some specific examples of what Remix Museology can look like in practice. The way in which the action research developed alongside the course of the PhD meant that the project – its sociality and its desire to reorientate museum (and archival) practices towards the affordances of social media – infused with my approach to researching in a deep and complex, Finnish cardamom bun-esque way. It was because of the nature of the action research that I was able to work so closely with the CoSoPho crew and witness the remixing of practices happening in front of me. It was through seeing and being a part of that process that I have been able to crystallise and describe Remix Museology, ready for me to experiment with putting it into practice myself at the National Science and Media Museum (NSMM).

CoSoPho's attention to the affordances of social media has been particularly influential in my approach – looking to find appropriate ways of collecting from social media that acknowledge a reconfigured relationship to owning social digital photos and to describing them, their use, and their meaning. Although I have been critical of the authenticity of some of the social digital photos the project has collected, CoSoPho did, from the onset, state that the photo was of primary importance to them (rather than the social media context). This is important to note, as it further cements the findings from the MoL and the V&A that the curatorial or archival motives behind the collecting have a more significant impact on how digital objects are collected than they do for physical objects.

The next chapter, [Practicing what I preach](#), explores what happened when the insights from my research with MoL, the V&A and CoSoPho came together to inform how I could work collaboratively to take a Remix Museology approach to collecting a meme from Twitter at the NSMM.

6. Practicing what I preach

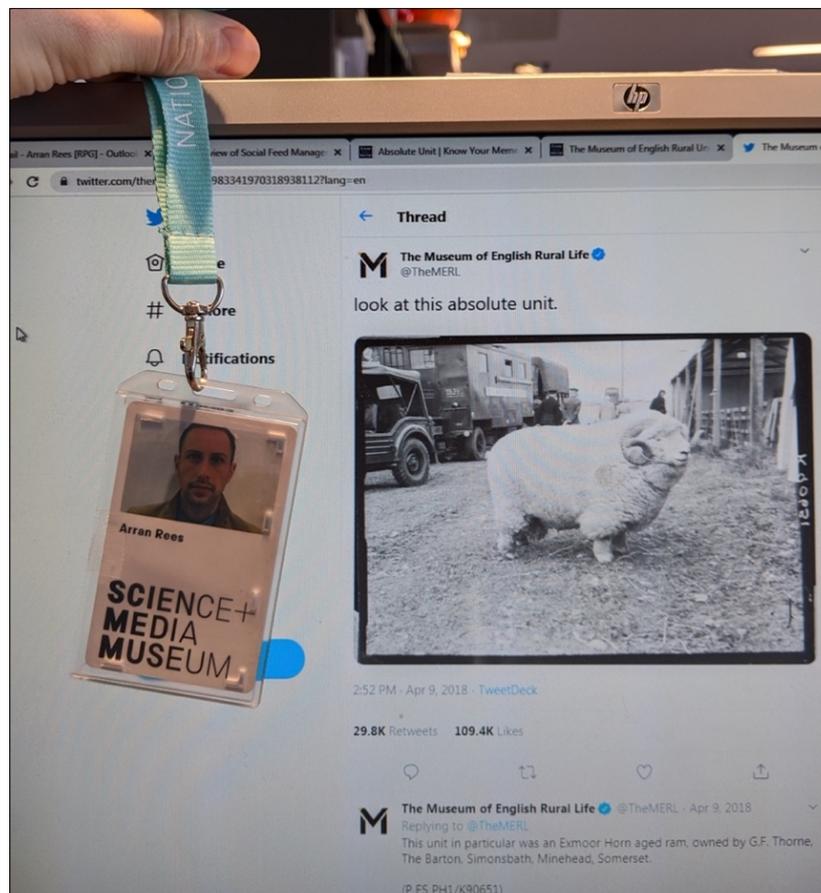


Figure 37. Me, my badge, and a meme. Snapshot sent to my family WhatsApp group just after I started working in the NSMM office.

Over the three-and-a-bit years of the PhD, I've worked collaboratively with the National Science and Media Museum to practice what I've been preaching and to collect a social media object. Through an action research project led by me and Phillip Roberts, Associate Curator of Photography and Photographic Technology at the museum, we worked to remix the museum's acquisition process in order to collect an 'absolute unit' of a meme. In undertaking this action-focused research, the project helped solidify what a Remix Museology approach to collecting might look like in action. Phillip and I followed multiple inquiry strands with colleagues in the museum, across the Science Museum Group, and externally to help navigate existing collecting processes and implement pragmatic edits with the aim of making them more culturally and ethically appropriate for a meme. The remix of the

collecting process led to the Museum of English Rural Life's 'Absolute Unit' meme being approved for acquisition in December 2020.

The National Science and Media Museum (NSMM), based in Bradford, is one of five museums that make up the Science Museum Group. The museum holds 'world-famous collections in photography, film and television' and aims to explore the science and culture of image and sound technologies as well as their impact on our lives (Science and Media Museum, 2021). Although the museum does have some gallery space dedicated to 'Life Online', NSMM's collection is overwhelmingly analogue. This is despite decades of digital innovation in the fields of photography, film and television and a clear remit for collecting and preserving it.

As with many other museums (discussed in more detail in the [Breaking ground](#) chapter), the Science Museum Group did not have much in the way of formalised digital collecting or preservation practices when I began my research with them. It was clear to me that this lack of formalised process or policy on digital collecting was contributing to the conceptual barrier to collecting digital objects I have already explained. Developing social and humorous relationships with colleagues at the museum enabled a more open approach to exploring subjects like this. This collegial working environment allowed us to be more honest about the limits of what was and was not known or understood about digital collecting and, in my view, supported a more open approach to remixing the acquisition process at the museum. This chapter, as with the others, utilises research materials made up of a variety of things, including field notes, post-event reflections, Microsoft Teams chats, images, and more official documents to trace how Phillip and I worked through a Remix Museology approach to collecting a new and emerging object type within a process-driven museum. Unlike other chapters, the personal reflections utilised in this chapter come from written reflective documentation I produced throughout my action research. They are unfiltered, highlighting moments of frustration and confusion as well as introspection and clarity. Looking back over the reflections as I write, they still evoke some of the visceral feelings I had at the time – feelings that were long forgotten by the time I came to the end of the action research.

The chapter is structured into three sections that chart how, through cycles of inquiry, reflection and action, Phillip and I remixed the acquisition process and collected a meme from Twitter. The first section pays attention to the establishment of the project and how I came to better understand how the museum worked. The second focuses on how Phillip and I conceptualised the meme as a museum object, the conversations we had with the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) and the collecting method we presented to the NSMM's Collections Board.³¹ Finally, the third section addresses Remix Museology. It looks at the ways in which Remix Museology was implemented, what we did manage to remix, and the types of working that enabled it. Throughout the chapter, I seek to show and explain how the action research took place, the conscious choices that were made, the details of what was remixed and also illustrate how the sociality and use of humour played a productive role in supporting those remixes.

³¹ Collections Board is the formal meeting that approves or rejects acquisition proposals by the curators and archivists in the museum. It is a minuted meeting, chaired by the museum's Head Curator, and has representation from across the museum's collection specialists, conservation, and registration. The board meets once a month and continues to monitor progress of acquisitions after their approval, and until they are formally accessioned into the collection.

6.1 Establishing the project: accepting offers; understanding the museum

As with my work alongside the Collecting Social Photo (CoSoPho) project, my collaboration with NSMM came about through my natural orientation towards accepting offers and getting involved. Yet, it differs from CoSoPho in two ways: firstly, my work with NSMM was imagined as an action research project from the outset; and secondly, for reasons beyond my understanding, cardamom buns are not widely available in Bradford. Between October 2017 and March 2021, I worked with various people at the museum, establishing the groundwork for a collecting project, building relationships with colleagues, and coming to understand the institution. Although there were moments where I was left uncertain or uncomfortable with my position, the resulting relationships were collegial, humorous and flexible – adapting well to the shift in working patterns, reassessment of priorities and the furloughing that COVID-19 threw our way as momentum was building with the project's acquisition proposal.

Even though my key relationship in the action research was with Phillip Roberts, we collaborated with wider inquiry groups both inside and outside the museum to implement a Remix Museology approach to collecting the Museum of English Rural Life's 'Absolute Unit' meme. As with the CoSoPho chapter, the development of the research relationship, how the action research played out, and how working in this way enabled me to practice what I've been preaching warrants attention. The 'setting up' of my research with NSMM felt unsettling, frustrating, and confusing at times, and it would be a disservice to the methodology of this PhD for the chapter not to acknowledge this. Jo Frankham and Andy Howes argue that in the inception of an action research project there will be instances of 'disturbance' that might feel disruptive or painful. Rather than suggest that these disturbances are an inevitable result of collaboration, Frankham and Howes argue that it is in working with these disturbances that a collaborative relationship is formed (2006: 618). The work that goes into setting up a project like this is just as significant as the resulting project – negotiating how to take part in action-focused research within an institution you are not formally a part of is illuminating for anyone interested in exploring change.

Getting a foot in the door

During my time as Collections Curator at the Museum of Cardiff, I got involved with the Social History Curators Group and made a number of connections with social history curators across the country. One of those connections was with Michael Terwey who, at the time of starting my PhD, was Head of Collections and Exhibitions at NSMM. This relationship, alongside his collaborations with one of my supervisors, Helen Graham, allowed me to get a foot in the door; opening up space to discuss working together and the potential for some collecting experiments.

My first meeting at the museum was in November 2017 with Michael Terwey and Geoff Belknap who was, at the time, Curator of Photography and Photographic Technology. There was a desire to work together, but the nature of working for a museum like NSMM means people are constantly on a project treadmill, one meeting onto the next, one exhibition onto the next, one acquisition and onto the next. The idea of starting a project was always something we'd do in the future, after *this* project was finished, or *that* funding was finalised. This repetition continued for the best part of a year. During that time, Michael left the museum and Geoff was promoted to Head Curator after a restructuring of Michael's role. A lot had changed, but I hadn't really got any further with the project. Luckily for me, Helen saw a potential opportunity within the *Bradford's National Museum Project* that would enable me to make an intervention, form connections, and develop relationships with a wider group of people in the museum; it allowed me to begin identifying the ways in which action could take place and be sustained.

The idea of WhatsApp³² as a way to keep in touch with family across the world was raised in initial conversations that were being had about an exhibition at the museum. Helen suggested that I might be a good person to be involved and before I knew it, I was developing an idea for using WhatsApp in an interactive exhibition on the theme of family photographs for an exhibition called *Above the Noise: 15 Stories from Bradford (AtN)*.³³ Despite my natural propensity for getting involved, I initially

³² WhatsApp is a communicative tool owned by Facebook that allows users to send voice, text and image-based messages as well as have profile pictures and update statuses.

³³ *AtN* was an exhibition was created in close collaboration with people from Bradford who got to tell their own stories, in their own voice and addressed how they felt Bradford had been misrepresented.

struggled to see how it would be useful for my project. However, having spent some time reading Danny Burns' work during this period, his notion of 'developing an orientation towards accepting offers' (2007: 42) helped encourage me to accept Helen's offer. With the gift of hindsight, I see that in accepting the invitation into the project, I was creating a new opportunity space for myself within the museum – one that proved pretty effective in finding a point of resonance for my research.

The result of my participation in *AtN* was an interactive that used WhatsApp to prompt visitors to think about whether they engage with photographs differently when riffling through physical photos in family albums or scrolling through images shared through WhatsApp. The interactive was set up using two instances of WhatsApp – one on a phone that I was responsible for, and the other on a tablet mounted in the gallery. The number of the phone was made public, and people could send their images to it. I would forward them on to the tablet that had WhatsApp installed on it and that would display the photos in the WhatsApp interface. Visitors could then scroll through and see all the photos that had been shared, and also browse some physical photos in a photo album displayed next to the tablet. By using the two numbers, contributor's phone numbers were not displayed in the gallery and there was also someone that ensured no inappropriate images ended up on display.

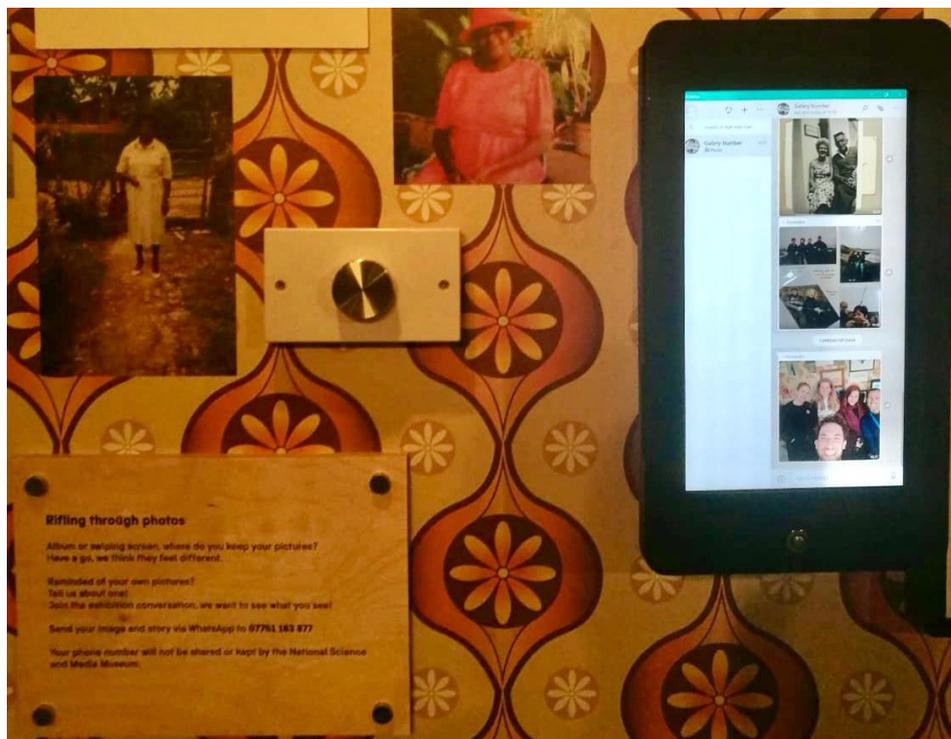


Figure 38. The WhatsApp interactive in the 'Family Photographs' story section of *AtN*.

Although the stated aim of the interactive was to prompt visitors to reflect on the activity of browsing photographs, for me, the objective of working with WhatsApp as an interactive was to encourage people at the museum to think about how social media could be used as an exhibition tool that could incrementally be adapted to be a collecting tool.

NSMM is a museum that specialises in media and media technology but has no collections that focus on social media or online culture. The museum does have a small display of online media in their Life Online exhibition space (see Figure 39), but there are plans for this to be removed in the near future. The small exhibition space traces the birth of the Internet and even displays video content that plays a number of different memes on a loop. In displaying this content there is an acknowledgement that online and networked media is within the museum's remit. However, that has not translated into any of such content being collected.



Figure 39. A GIF of an Instagram video I made of the small display on memes in the Life Online exhibition space, National Science and Media Museum.

I wanted to establish whether curators and exhibition managers at the museum were able to make connections between their current work and what could be done with a tool like WhatsApp. I was keen to see if social media could be more readily incorporated into the core activities of the museum, with the longer-term goal of working up an appetite for social media content to be collected.

In working on the WhatsApp interactive, I was taking an opportunity presented to me, and using it to test for resonance in the use of social media as a way of photography entering the museum. As Burns argues, once resonance has been identified, it can continue to develop as it envelops more people and grows 'like the proverbial snowball' (2014: 13). The plan was for this WhatsApp interactive to be the start of a social media-collecting resonance snowball. In reality, the resonance did not exactly snowball, and after *AtN* closed in June 2019, there was a lull in communication. When I got back in contact in August, Phillip Roberts had just been recruited as the new Associate Curator of Photography. We met, together with Geoff Belknap, to begin conversations about setting up the action research collecting project again. In this meeting, Geoff enthusiastically explained the work I had done on the WhatsApp interactive to Phillip – it felt like he was trying to set me up as having a strong existing relationship with the museum. In my reflections from that meeting, I wrote: 'It struck me that the WhatsApp project *had* done exactly what I wanted... perhaps it showed the museum that I was serious about my research as well as piquing their interest in the use of social media / messaging services within everyday museum practices.' Geoff had been mostly absent from my work with the WhatsApp interactive, but his eagerness in describing the work suggested that it had been a point of resonance for him, and that he wanted it to spark energy with Phillip too. Geoff left Phillip and I to continue our conversation and within five minutes of us chatting we were on the topic of memes, laughing and joking about setting up a national meme collection at the museum.

Our area of mutual inquiry

Before this meeting, the discussions with NSMM had been relatively fluffy – we’d agreed to look into collecting some sort of photography from some sort of social media platform. Phillip had read a small article I had written on collecting memes and the idea intrigued him too.³⁴ He was interested in memes himself and we discussed how large historic photography collections in museums – *The Daily Herald* newspaper archive in NSMM’s case – were fertile with raw ‘memeable’ images. We decided pretty quickly that we wanted to use this project to try and collect a meme. Phillip and I had identified our broad area of mutual inquiry. We drew up an initial project proposal that set out the scope and approach we would take. It was deliberately vague about the object we were looking to collect, but it did allow us to agree on the principles of the action research, principles that we would revisit and check-in with each other about throughout the project. The document outlined how the project would contribute to my PhD as well as the research culture of the museum. It set an achievable goal of producing an acquisition proposal but did not suggest the project would be a failure if the proposal was not accepted by the museum – the project was about the process. It also set out the different teams and people we wanted to have a stake in the project, highlighting the registration, documentation and conservation departments. Finally, the document made it clear that we’d be working through cycles of experimentation, reflection and reworking to test out different methods and tools to support the work of the project.

The core experimentation process took place between January and March 2020, and by early March we had established a draft collecting methodology that we started to present to different stakeholders in the collecting process – expanding our inquiry group from just Phillip and myself and incorporating viewpoints and perspectives from the wider SMG and the MERL. From this point onwards the research took a more embodied remix-centric collaborative approach to developing the acquisition

³⁴ The magazine article was based on a presentation I gave at the MCNx Conference in London, February 2018. As part of the conference, we had to write a small blog piece and based on that, Museum ID magazine asked if I could write a fuller version to be published on their website and in print (Rees, 2018). Available via <https://museum-id.com/meme-social-media-becomes-part-museum-collection/> (Accessed 20/05/2021).

proposal. I discussed the idea of Remix Museology with Phillip on a number of occasions, but I do not seek to claim that ‘testing Remix Museology’ as a newly theorised model of change for museum acquisition processes was a shared area of mutual inquiry. What was clear and agreed upon though were the principles of Remix Museology: pragmatic and incremental approaches to shifting or remixing processes in order to make them more appropriate for what we were attempting to collect. Whilst I didn’t sit down and devise a plan on how to enact a named ‘Remix Museology’ approach, I did introduce and use the language and principles of it from the beginning.

During the early phases of the action research, I was still coming to understand the concept of Remix Museology myself; it emerged and crystallised throughout the course of my research and only became a fully formed concept towards September 2020 when the project picked back up after Phillip was furloughed during the summer. By this time Remix Museology and action research had begun to work in unison, as I realised action research was the way in which I could enact Remix Museology, and remixing became a step in our action research cycles. This really began to take shape when Phillip and I started formally presenting our acquisition proposals to the museum’s Collections Board.

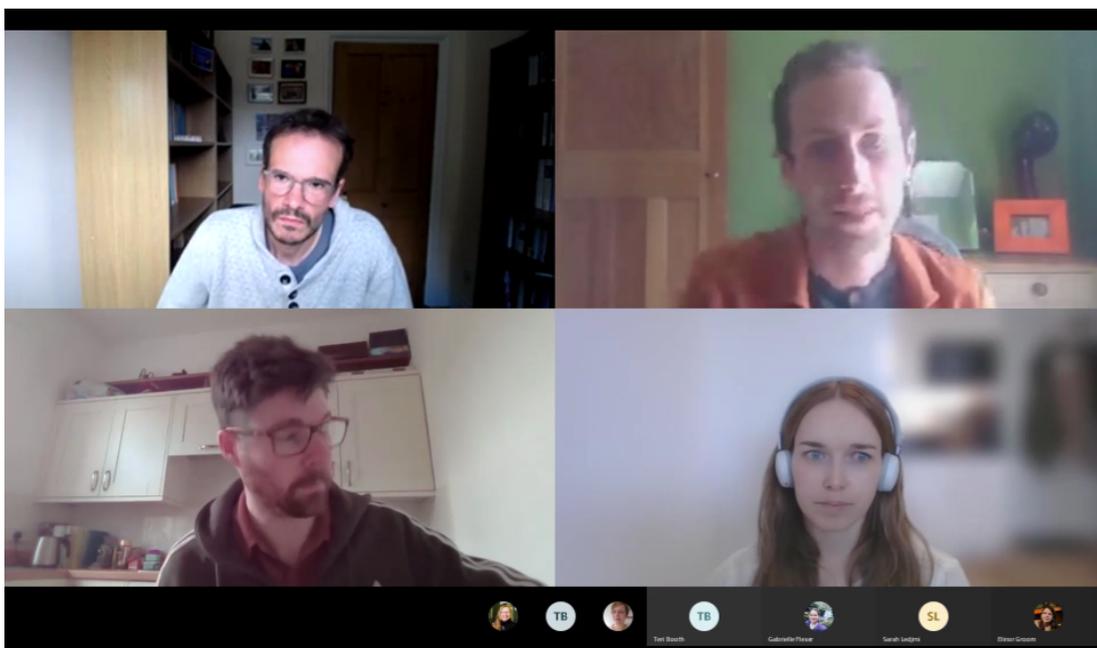


Figure 40. Collections Board 14 May 2020 – the MS Teams edition. This was the first formal presentation of the Absolute Unit to the Board. Top left to right: Geoff Belknap, Arran Rees. Bottom left to right: Phillip Roberts, Nadine Loach (and no, I haven’t got a filter on. My connection was truly that bad).

We presented our proposal four times in total; following suggested inquiry strands, remixing our plans, compiling the proposal, presenting, reflecting and inquiring again. Despite a furlough-induced hiatus for a couple of months over the summer, the proposal continued to be incrementally developed as Phillip and I invited multiple viewpoints and encouraged pragmatic and culturally and ethically appropriate decisions to be made.

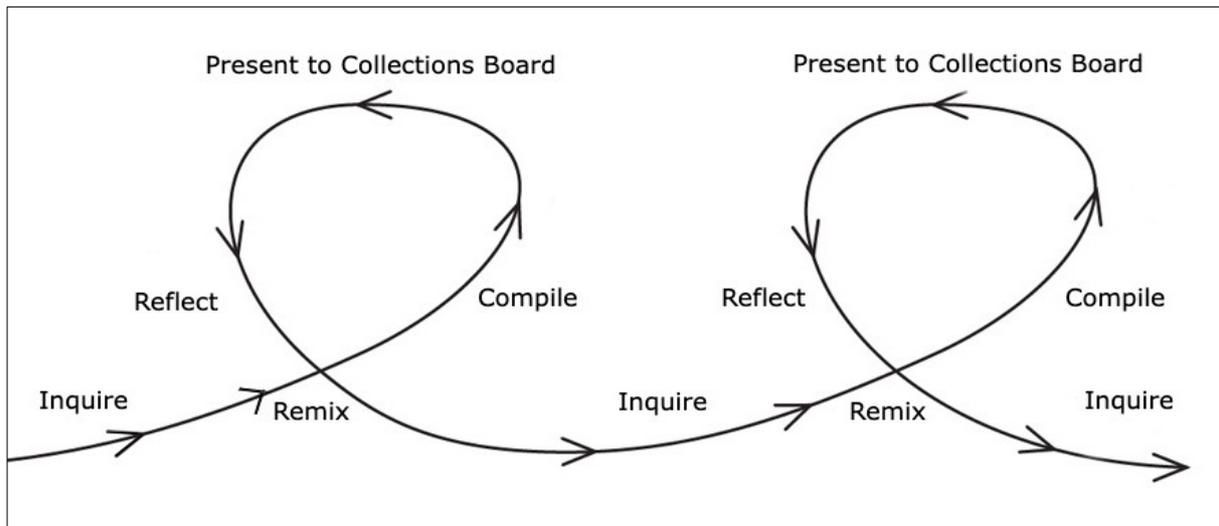


Figure 41. The Remix Museology Action Research cycle. The drawing has been remixed by me, but originally comes from an AR cycle drawing created by The Bayswater Institute.

The result of this Remix Museology Action Research Cycle was that the research contributed to a remix in the ways of understanding the object being collected in the museum, but also the way in which an object is taken through the acquisition process. We worked with the structures of the Collections Board, but developed a more consultative, incremental and remix-centric approach to how new and emerging object types can be acquired through it.

Phillip and I presented at five Collections Board meetings:

- 11 February 2020. An informal introduction to the collecting project.
- 14 May 2020. The first formal presentation of the proposal for consultation.
- 13 October 2020. A post-furlough update and chance for further consultation.
- 10 November 2020. An update and a final chance for consultation.
- 8 December 2020. Formal presentation of the acquisition proposal for approval.

Having illustrated the process by which the project came to be established, this chapter now turns to focus on the detail of the acquisition: the experimentation, inquiries and remixes that led to us collecting the MERL's Absolute Unit meme.

6.2 Understanding our Absolute Unit of a potential acquisition

Phillip just put the question out there – what if we tried to collect the MERL’s Absolute Unit meme? I’ve just had a look and it has an entry in KnowYourMeme.com. The idea being that the ram in the MERL meme had a life as a physical photograph before it was digitized and tweeted and then transformed into a meme. This is particularly exciting – it allows us to experiment with an approach to collecting to represent the meme process and working with a museum that allows us a bit of wiggle room. There are two potential pitfalls – Geoff may not be up for memes being the subject of the collecting experiment and MERL might not be too keen to share in the unit glory.

(Reflections after a meeting with Phillip in the museum cafe on 30/09/2019).

The idea of collecting the Absolute Unit came from Phillip. His suggestion came as a surprise to me, as we were discussing the potential ways of collecting memes. I was instantly on board. We talked through the different ways in which a meme might be captured in a way that didn’t remove its liveliness and ignore the specific features that actually makes it a meme. We considered:

- In depth collecting that includes the ‘memefication’ process.
- Mass collecting that captured multiple examples of a specific meme.
- Public collecting that asked people to contribute memes (CoSoPho style, as I put it).
- Platforms and group collecting through Facebook groups, Reddit or KnowYourMeme.com.

The way in which we were going to attempt to collect a meme hinged on our understanding of what the essence of the meme was. It is (relatively) easy to find a funny picture and just add some random text to it and claim it is a meme, but there is more to it than that. Memes have an overarching concept (even if it is nonsensical) and there is always a process in their creation. Limor Shifman argues that, at their core, memes should be understood through three key attributes; as pieces of ‘cultural

information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon', as reproductions made through 'various means of repacking or imitation', and as items amplified in digital environments through 'competition and selection' (2014: 18-22). The fact that memes are created through social and technical processes means that an individual tweet or image 'isn't in and of itself a meme' although it may be 'memetic in its connection to other tweets' [or images], and it may 'memetically spread along with others in kind' (Milner, 2016: 3).

Applying Shifman's and Milner's work, Phillip and I knew that simply collecting a screenshot or the jpeg of the MERL tweet was not going to be enough. The MERL's Absolute Unit was a single tweet and therefore, in and of itself, not a meme. The absolute unit concept existed before the MERL tweeted it, and it has been reapplied since. The MERL's version is just one significant remix that helped cement the absolute unit as a meme concept. Understanding the MERL's tweet as a remix of the absolute unit concept applied to a farm animal that inspired further memetic responses shifted how we needed to conceptualise the 'thing' that got captured through the acquisition.

This section explores the key aspects of how the acquisition was conceived, drawing out the ways in which Phillip and I collaborated with colleagues to specify what was being collected and how. Specifically, this section addresses what the Absolute Unit meme concept is, how a meme sits within NSMM's collecting remit, what was *actually* collected, and the tools we used to do so.

The Absolute Unit meme

It is worth spending a moment to contextualise the Absolute Unit: how it originated, what its meaning is, and the considerations Phillip and I made as a result of it. The concept was first tweeted by @mrreptoid in 2017 where it was applied to an image of British hotelier David Morgan-Hewitt, who was pictured with Queen Elizabeth II (see Figure 42).



Figure 42. The original absolute unit tweet. Image sourced from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/absolute-unit>

There is no doubt that the application of ‘absolute unit’ in its original context is speaking to the height and weight of Morgan-Hewitt. I think it is fair to assume that being referred to as an ‘absolute unit’ is not something he would have particularly liked, yet the tone of the tweet is not hostile, it is almost celebratory. This is an example of Phillips and Milner’s ambivalent Internet, introduced in [Social media... y tho?](#). Phillips and Milner explain how behaviours like this on the Internet are often described as either trolling, which is used to ‘imply deliberate, playful subterfuge, and the infliction of emotional distress on unwitting or unwilling audiences’; or as the ‘weird Internet’ (2017: 7-9). However, they argue that these two categories do not effectively account for the content online that is ‘simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed’ (2017: 10). Rather, Phillips and

Milner suggest that content such as the absolute unit meme are ambivalent – they are not trolling or just weird; they inhabit a ‘full spectrum of purposes – all depending on who is participating, who is observing, and what set of assumptions each person brings to a given interaction’ (2017: 10).

Therefore, whilst Phillip and I discussed the ways in which the application of ‘absolute unit’ could be offensive, we valued its ambivalence as an example of Internet culture and digital folklore (as described in the earlier [Historicizing social media](#) section in the thesis). We agreed that although the original context of the Absolute Unit was vitally important and should be documented, it did not need to be the focus of the acquisition. We were interested in the specific creation and dissemination of the MERL instance of the meme.



Figure 43. The MERL’s instance of the Absolute Unit meme, tweeted 9 April 2018.

The MERL instance of the Absolute Unit was tweeted on 9 April 2018, by the then Programme Manager and Digital Lead at the museum, Adam Koszary. The tweet was hugely successful, gaining around 63,000 likes within the first 24 hours. Koszary explains how he tried to encourage more interaction with it through talking to people, encouraging puns, playing deadpan, being sassy, and generally getting creative

(Koszary, 2018: np). The tone adopted by the museum on Twitter in response to the replies to the tweet marked a departure from how the museum had communicated before and tweets in response to the meme began to fall more in line with the way people tend to communicate on Twitter. Central to Koszary's argument, and also very much in line with my own philosophy, is that communicating using memes in a friendly and humorous way 'doesn't destroy the museum' and that it is 'simply one of the ways we reach our end goal: involving everyone in our heritage' (Koszary, 2018: np). A more 'traditional' museum tweet followed the initial Absolute Unit tweet, explaining that the sheep was an Exmoor Horn aged ram, the identity of his owner, and also the accession number of the photograph. It was the story of how the MERL's Absolute Unit went from being a physical photograph of an Exmoor Ram in the museum's collection to becoming a significant remix of the Absolute Unit meme that acted as the hook for Phillip and me. It allowed us to make the case for why *this* meme in particular fitted within the museum's collecting policy and was therefore worth collecting over the many other thousands-if-not-millions that exist and could be collected.

A meme in the NSMM collection

Since 2012 the NSMM has been actively reviewing their collections, in parallel with other SMG sites. One of the outcomes of this was the transfer of the Royal Photographic Society collection to the V&A – a controversial decision for many people (Wombell, 2016). After undertaking the collections transfer, the NSMM refocused its collecting priorities and developed a new strategy that focused on collecting the *process* and *practice* of photography. In focusing on these two elements of photography, the museum would be less bound by the photograph as a discrete end-product object and allow an approach that incorporated the social and technical elements of photography to be addressed together. As part of this focus on process and practice, the NSMM identified three priority areas currently underserved by other UK museums: the science of photography; photography and printing technologies; and, last but certainly not least, digital photography.³⁵ In a briefing

³⁵ 'Photographic Collections Review' briefing paper. Delivered to the NSMM Senior Management Team Meeting on 29 November 2017. Pg.2

paper devised for the NSMM's Senior Management Team, the focus on digital photography is described as 'one of the most important technological revolutions in photography in the last thirty years, but critically under represented within our collections.'³⁶ The briefing paper specifically highlights that the museum does not yet have a good grasp of what constitutes a digital photographic collection, questioning how to capture the social and dynamic exchange of digital photography.³⁷ This briefing paper was written in November 2017 – just as I was getting a foot in the door.

In early iterations of our proposals, Phillip and I were trying to address these questions, developing our articulation of how a meme would constitute an object under the digital photography strand of the museum's collecting priorities, and paying attention to the social and dynamic exchange of digital photography through social media. Shortly after our Absolute Unit acquisition was approved (December 2020), SMG approved its new Collections Development Policy (January 2021). I was very pleasantly surprised to see that it directly addressed digital collecting for the first time. In it, SMG claims to have collected digital technologies for a number of years, citing some of the world's first electronic computers and their programmes. In this policy, SMG addresses born-digital objects specifically referencing social media platforms and the need to capture the broad interconnected context of digital objects' dissemination and use (Science Museum Group, 2021: 8-9). I won't be so bold as to claim that the work Phillip and I were undertaking directly contributed to this need as such an outcome has not been confirmed with me. However, a number of the people who would have fed into a policy like this spoke to Phillip and me during the research, and others would definitely have heard about it through other means. Since this project ended, I, along with Phillip have been asked to speak to others across SMG about social media collecting, and Phillip in particular has been drawn into other conversations about using some of the processes we experimented with in other acquisitions across the group.

³⁶ 'Photographic Collections Review' briefing paper. 29 November 2017. Pg.6

³⁷ Ibid.

A meme as museum object

From relatively early on in my research, whenever I have discussed the idea of museums collecting memes, I have been asked the question: ‘but how can a meme be collected effectively?’ Even during my interview with Corinna and Natalie at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), Corinna questioned how I would actually do it and jokingly urged me to come to her with a method and list of memes that they should acquire and they’d do it (Gardner and Kane, 2019).

Much like the fuzziness in definitions of digital objects described by Trevor Owens (2018), Geismar explains how the definition of digital objects often slips between the files themselves and the technologies that deliver them and that the language of museum collections often struggles to describe them (Geismar, 2018: xvii). Phillip and I acknowledged from the outset that, as was the case with WeChat at the V&A, there had to be multiple elements to the object – some that we would refer to by their file type and others by their technologies – but all were required to make up the more conceptual object of a meme. As discussed, the tweet in and of itself would not adequately reflect the meme, and neither would a single jpeg; attempting to treat a meme as a singular object would do nothing to tell us about what the nature of a meme is. However, Twitter and the jpeg image are significant features of the MERL’s Absolute Unit that we were trying to capture.

In digital preservation, the concept of Significant Properties is often used to identify which elements of a digital object need to be preserved in order for it to be meaningful. Significant Properties was fully described by Andrew Wilson as ‘the characteristics of digital objects that must be preserved over time in order to ensure the continued accessibility, usability, and meaning of the objects’ (2007: 8). There have been arguments claiming that declaring some properties as more significant than others amounts to ignoring large parts of digital culture (Galloway, 2017: 8), but there is general agreement in the field that using the concept of Significant Properties is a useful framing to help define individual digital objects (Corrado and Sandy, 2017; Falcão, 2019). In attempting to draw out what we saw as the MERL’s Absolute Unit’s significant properties we thought about the meme itself, and also considered previous

attempts at collecting social media – and what about them we thought was missing.

Phillip and I agreed that the Significant Properties of the meme were as follows:

- It was an image-based meme.
- It was shared on Twitter.
- It was a remix of an existing meme concept than inspired multiple other remixes.
- It was an example of social and dynamic exchange in digital images.

Therefore, the fact that the meme was image based, on Twitter, part of a larger memetic concept, and representative of social and dynamic exchanges in digital images were all qualities needed to be perceptible in the eventual object that the museum would acquire.

One characteristic we were particularly keen on trying to capture and preserve in the digital object was how people encountered the meme: its context within the Twitter interface. Throughout my research, the lack of visual context in social media collections had been a recurring issue. The Library of Congress (LoC) and Museum of London (MoL) collections are not accessible (at all in the LoC's case) in a way that allows you to see how a tweet would have been encountered. Throughout the CoSoPho project, photos were collected either completely abstracted from their social media context, or the interface was shown in a static screenshot. Whilst this allows us to see some of the design features of the social media platforms, it does not effectively capture the interactivity of them. There is an element of the significant characteristic of a social media object missing.

I referenced Johanna Drucker's performative materiality (2013) when discussing the V&A's WeChat acquisition earlier in this thesis, and the concept is particularly instructive here too. Drucker explains how performative materiality touches on multiple layers of digital media: from the processing of code as a performative act to the engagement of users as a 'generative experience of viewing' (2013: 13). The performative materiality of the MERL's Absolute Unit had two distinct features for us: the performativity of scrolling Twitter, encountering the meme and seeing the replies and responses; and the performativity of a meme being remixed – the multiple iterations, jokes and reappropriations that make up the very essence of memetic media. Phillip and I wanted to collect a digital object that illustrated these material

qualities. This generative experience of viewing a meme on Twitter is something Phillip and I were keen to capture in the object. Simply seeing a visual of the Twitter interface with the meme in it could not capture that generative experience. Drucker explains further that performative materiality is based on the premise that ‘an object is produced as an effect of a dynamic relation between provocation of the object’s characteristics and an interpretative process’ (2013: 16). In our case, we saw the ability to be able to interact with the meme and the responses to it within Twitter’s interface – to provoke the object’s characteristics – as a key way to comprehend the object.

In the first written proposal for the object that Phillip and I shared with colleagues (March 2020), we conceived of the potential acquisition as being ‘a suite of items that make up a single acquisition’ – we were proposing that the object was made up of three core elements: a dataset of the tweet and the replies to give core information and metadata to the object’ a selection of image files that illustrate the ‘memetic responses’ to the MERL’s Absolute Unit; and a web archive file that would show the meme in its context in the Twitter interface and allow interaction with the timeline and responses to it. We used our understanding of the meme’s significant characteristics and materiality to help define the three core elements of the acquisition that we then went on to refine through internal and external conversations. Those conversations questioned whether or not the acquisition was actually an archive, how the concept of a meme-as-an-event played into our thinking about the acquisition and the influence of intangible heritage discourses.

An absolute object or absolute archive?

The question of whether or not the Absolute Unit meme was an absolute object or absolute archive was raised internally from our early inquiry phases with Clare Mayo, the museum’s Archive and Library Manager, and became one of our inquiry strands that continued throughout the project. The discussions around whether or not the acquisition would be made as an object or archive featured in three meetings and was finalized in a meeting specifically on the topic in November 2020.

Throughout my PhD research, I've reflected on whether or not social media collections are better suited to archival hierarchical cataloguing structures than museological ones. Although trained in Museum Studies and specialising in museum collections management, my roles at the Royal Mint Museum and especially the V&A included some responsibility for archival collections management. There have always been distinct organizing principles and theoretical underpinnings between museums, libraries, and archives, as well as more blurred lines between the most appropriate form of institution to care for heritage materials. Those blurred lines of responsibility are becoming more apparent in the digital age, especially when we consider the responsibility for the acquisition, care of and interpretation of digital heritage materials that have no traditional preservation institution (Lynch, 2002: np; Choy et al., 2016: 6-7).

As I addressed in the [Breaking ground](#) chapter too, libraires and archives have developed more robust processes for handling digital heritage materials and the museum sector trails behind them in managing digital collections as an embedded part of museum practice. Social media collecting specifically has been attempted more by archives, and the absence of museological examples in the Digital Preservation Coalition's 2016 *Technology Watch Report* on preserving social media speaks volumes (Thomson, 2016). In the report, Sara Day Thomson suggests that archival and data management standards may provide some useful grounding for future best practice in collecting, but due to the volume and speed at which social media content is proliferating, existing standards alone will not cope (2016: 9). Museums are not even mentioned.

With regards to the type of archives that are held at the NSMM, they are what Laura Millar describes as 'Museum archives', which acquires archival material related to the museum's wider mandate (2017: 85). SMG also has what might be defined as a corporate or 'Institutional archive' which documents the institutional history and plays an active role in institutional records management (Millar, 2017: 80). However, there is no formal shared responsibility between the SMG and the NSMM archives – they are managed separately. The NSMM archives sit as their own collection that contains material that is relevant to the NSMM's collecting remit. Claire reports to Geoff, the Head Curator, but uses a different cataloguing system and information

structure to the museum collections. However, archival acquisitions are proposed through the same Collections Board and managed by the same Registration and Conservation teams as the museum collection. Claire indicated from the first time we spoke about the project that she was interested in the acquisition from an archival perspective, noting that the museum intended to apply for Archival Accreditation over the next year or so; she wanted to see how this acquisition could help contribute to policies and processes needed as part of that. Claire's interest was initially from the perspective of digital collecting processes more generally but, through ongoing conversations, this interest grew to include the potential of situating the acquisition as an archival acquisition rather than a museum object acquisition.

On 16 March, Phillip and I met with an internal inquiry-group-of-people-we-thought-should-be-involved made up of Phillip, myself, Claire, Toni Booth (Associate Curator of Film), and Nadine Loach (the Registrar working across SMG sites in the North). During this meeting we discussed the makeup of the acquisition and the different ways in which the collections management structures at the museum might be used to help organize the multiple elements of the acquisition. The meme as a three-element object – made up of a data set, group of images and web archive – had been presented to the group and the idea of the web archive being the core object representing the meme and the data set and image files being supporting material was floated. Nadine suggested that if we wanted to pursue a structure like that, SMG's collections management structures could support it through the use of auxiliary objects.

An auxiliary object within SMG is roughly defined as material significant enough to be displayed but not enough to be collected, similar to the NCOL status object I discussed as part of the V&A's WeChat acquisition. I've been critical of the way in which social media content, GIFs and memes have been treated as displayable content, but not worthy of collecting – the Museum of the Moving Image in New York has consistently done this and NSMM has done it in the Life Online gallery too. Phillip and Nadine both expressed worry that if this model was used, there would not be a full commitment to preserving all the materials. Therefore, we decided that prioritizing a core object and categorizing others as supporting or auxiliary material was not what we were trying to achieve. The conversation moved into more archival

territory after we dismissed the idea of using auxiliary objects. Claire brought archival structuring into the fold and mentioned the potential of using accruals to support future captures of the object if we felt it necessary. As the MERL's Absolute Unit had already had a secondary surge after Elon Musk tweeted it in 2019,³⁸ it prompted us to consider how we might address collecting resurgences of memes, and the usefulness of established archival principles in recording those.

Archival theory stipulates that content, structure and context are the three elements that enable archives to have value. Laura Millar explains how a single photo of a sunset is only information, but a photo of a sunset within a titled and annotated photo album becomes evidence. That evidence becomes valuable as an archive when it sits contextualized within a structure containing other pieces of evidence. The content is the photographs, the structure relates to the characteristics that define how the content was created and maintained – so in this case the album. And finally, the context is the functional, organizational and / or personal circumstances surrounding the creation of the evidence – the who, where, when and maybe even why of something's creation (Millar, 2017: 10-13). With knowledge of these underlying archival principles and the notion of accruals – which are later additions and updates to existing archival collections (Millar, 2017: 205) – the potential of acquiring the meme into the archive collections grew.

As well as the principles and concepts noted above, archival description standards also held potential with regards to our acquisition. The *General International Standard Archival Description*, 1999 (more usually known as ISAD(G)) presents a hierarchical structure for describing archival collections that aims to help identify and explain the content and context of archival material (1999: 7). Using ISAD(G) the MERL's Absolute Unit could have been thought of as a conceptual top-level record (also known as Fonds or group records), with three sub-level records (series or file level) indicating the three core elements of the meme – the data set, web archive,

³⁸ In April 2019 Elon Musk, owner of electric car company Tesla, used the Absolute Unit meme concept in a tweet and ended up in an online exchange with the Museum of English Rural Life. The Twitter conversation ended up with Musk changing his profile picture to the Exmoor Ram and MERL changing theirs to a picture of Musk. Adam Koszary was subsequently hired by Tesla to look after their social media before Koszary came back to work at the Royal Academy (Dhruvi, 2019).

and memetic responses. These three sub-levels could then be described at lower levels (often called item level) to highlight individually identifiable files. For example, the meme responses could be further described individually. Although we did not talk in detail about this, it is worth illustrating what an archival description of the meme could have looked like (see Figure 44).

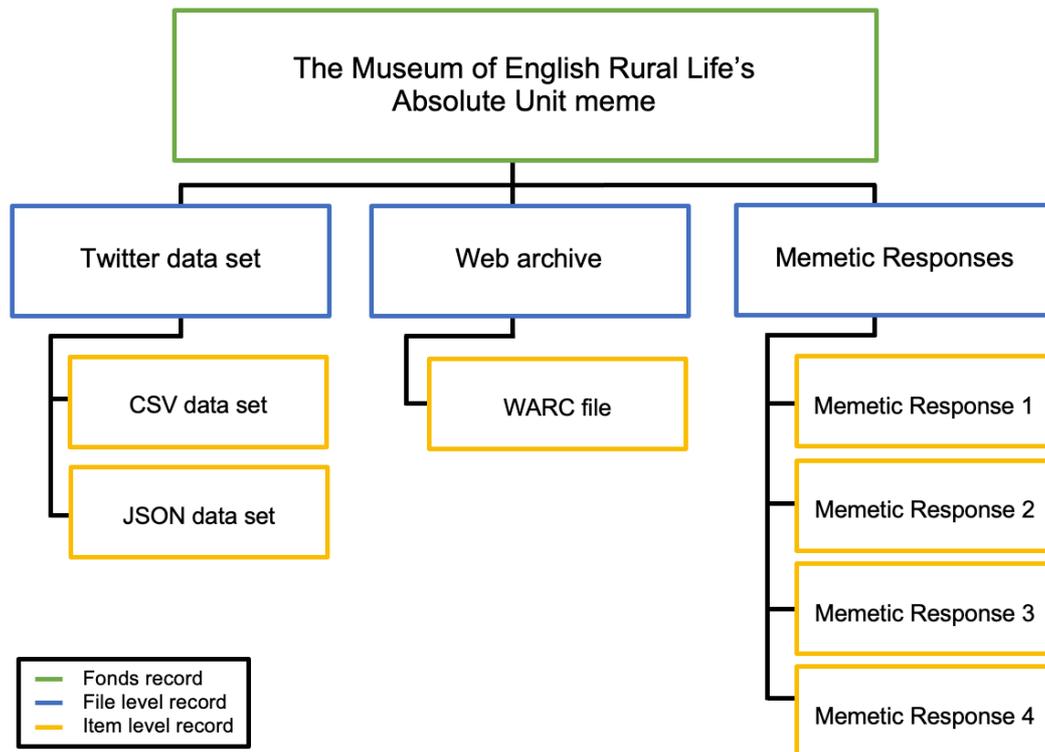


Figure 44. A diagram showing how archival structures *could* have been used to describe the meme as an archival collection.

During the meeting, nobody willingly gave a strong opinion on whether the meme should be acquired as part of the archive collections or photography collections – at some point we even (half) jokingly discussed proposing a new social media section of the collection (with me hired as the responsible curator of course!). We decided to wait until we had jumped through the hurdles of acquiring social media content before pushing for its own discrete collection section to be set up. We also left the idea of the archive or photography collection open; we chose to continue talking about the acquisition as an object but remained open to it as an archive, as we followed further inquiry strands that might influence our final decision.

As the project continued to follow multiple inquiry strands and move through cycles of remixing with the Collections Board, we kept the question of whether it was an object or archive that we were acquiring open. However, as the formal acquisition proposal was reaching its final round of incremental updates we had to decide either way. In the October Collections Board meeting, Claire and Phillip joked about fighting it out in the carpark, but they both also saw the potential of each option. By this point I was keen for it to be an object, as not all museums have an archive structure to be able to fall back on, but I chose not to push it in this meeting as the entire point of this project was to collect a meme at the NSMM – not to design a blueprint for other museums to follow.

Geoff suggested that we did not want to hedge ourselves into a box over it; that we should be able to experiment with the meme as an object, and that we could also retrospectively re-catalogue as an archive (or vice versa) if needed. He asked that Claire, Nadine, Phillip and I meet separately to make a final decision ready to present it at the November Collections Board. That same week Phillip, Claire, Nadine and I met to agree on the archive or object question. Geoff's openness to it being either an archive or object, and also potentially switching later, meant that this question was still undecided for us. We all stated our positions. I was more open about my preference for it being an object this time – I knew that the archival structures offered potential, but I had to be honest about the fact that my research was interested in remixing museological processes. Adding archival qualities to the museum collecting process is definitely within the scope of remixing museum acquisition processes but acquiring the meme as an archive felt like it would be moving around the museum acquisition issue rather than working through it.

Claire understandably argued that what we were proposing to collect was inherently archival and was firmly on team archive, whilst Nadine was team object but acknowledged the potential of established accrual processes for archival material. Phillip sat on the fence with a leaning towards object, but also agreed that he could see how the archival structuring could benefit the meme. What was particularly interesting to me in this moment was Phillip's suggestion that giving the meme the status of an object would give it more importance across SMG than if it was acquired as an archive. This is due to an ongoing status issue where SMG implicitly considers

its archive collections to be more functional and tends to recognize its objects as having some sort of elevated status. There was a similar status challenge between objects and archives at the V&A. Archives, although incredibly important, were often treated as secondary within the institution. I remember having to really push for archives to be made available online when I worked at the V&A, and even when 'Search the Archives' was finally launched in 2016, it was separate to the general 'Search the Collections' portal – as if archives were not included in the collections. The two have only just been combined, close to five years later. Even within the curatorial departments at the V&A, there was an unequal weighting given to museum objects over archival items. The Theatre and Performance department often removed individual 'object worthy' items from archival collections to give them museum accession numbers and catalogue them as objects. There was a special status ascribed to the object that an item amongst many within an archive was just not given.

In attempting to actually dig down into what the difference between being acquired as an object or archive would be for the meme, Nadine explained that it came down to how it was catalogued and made accessible online. Objects are catalogued following Spectrum-compliant processes using the Mimsy CMS. Archives are catalogued in an ISAD(G) compliant process using a system called Adlib as the CMS. Both object and archival items are accessible through the same collections search portal (<https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/>) but archival collections are also browsable through their hierarchical structure. There was nothing fundamental in the acquisition process that would alter by choosing an archive acquisition over an object one. Therefore, bearing in mind that Phillip felt the significance of the meme would be understood differently as an object and that we could decide to catalogue it as an archival collection later if we felt it necessary, we agreed it would be pragmatic to try and collect it as an object and allow ourselves to change our minds if needed.

Input from the MERL

Phillip and I understood that before we presented our proposals in any formal setting within the NSMM, we needed to understand whether the MERL was on board with us

collecting the meme, and if so, to get their input on how we were conceiving of it as an object. On 6 April 2020 we met with Guy Baxter, the museum's Associate Director and Head of Archives, and Ollie Douglas, the Curator of MERL Collections, who has written about the photograph of the Exmoor Ram. Alongside a productive conversation about what their Absolute Unit meme might look like as an object, they expressed their approval of us moving forward with the acquisition proposal.

Before our meeting, I shared our working document that outlined why we wanted to collect the meme and the way in which we were conceiving of it as an object made up of three elements. Guy replied with some interesting points for discussion:

That looks really good. I am sure that we will be able to overcome any technical challenges around our Twitter account, although our own IT are not going to be prioritising this right now... [the email was sent at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic]

In haste, here are a few things that I am interested in exploring:

- 1. Intellectual property*
- 2. Preservation metadata (including IP - [PREMIS](#) for instance is very heavy on rights data)*
- 3. The idea of this as an "event" and whether that gives us a different metadata challenge / opportunity. Attached is some work that I did describing performing arts events - very complex but potentially relevant - read the intro file and you'll get the idea at least!*
- 4. Capture or cross-referencing of contextual information a) URIs b) bibliographic references (including press articles) c) archival documents or museum objects (in this case, obviously, the original photo). Also how we relate each of these references to the "event" - i.e., before (original photo); during (memetic response); or after (press article)*
- 5. Relationship to ideas of intangible cultural heritage (see for instance our project <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/merl-collections/research-projects/museum-intangible/>)*

Plenty to think about! ³⁹

³⁹ Email correspondence between myself, Phillip, Guy and Ollie, 02/04/2020.

This was the first time we'd shared our thoughts on the acquisition outside of SMG. Guy's response brought the idea of event-based objects and intangible cultural heritage into the fold. I formulated some responses under Guy's questions and forwarded the email on to Phillip to ensure we were on the same page before the meeting. This small email exchange opened up a number of interesting points that we carried through to the conversation with the MERL.

A meme as an event

With regard to Guy's point on the meme as an event, I was prompted to go back to the *Collecting and Curating Digital Posters* project by Hawes and Flood and reflect on how they conceived of a meme as an event. In my email to Philip, I wrote:

The idea of the meme as event is really interesting. I've been teetering on the edge of performance archiving for a long time... Have you come across the Collecting and Curating Digital Posters project? It conceives of posters online and on social media as graphic events – essentially, they were looking at 'official' posters that get remixed online and turned into memes. They do not go into cataloguing structures etc. though. I think the way we have conceived the acquisition does not conflict with the idea of the absolute unit as an event.⁴⁰

Hawes and Flood's work conceives of memes as 'graphic events', arguing that in 'recognising the interactive way in which a graphic meme is created, manipulated and experienced, it becomes clear that the work exists less as a clearly defined 'thing' and more as a constellation of images and relationships' (2018: np). This was something Phillip and I were already taking into account with our suite of items – we knew we wanted to capture the MERL's Absolute Unit as well as remixed versions of it within the one conceptual object. Rather than treating them as separate objects, we were treating them as some sort of bounded event.

⁴⁰ Email correspondence between myself and Phillip, 06/04/2020

Hawes and Flood highlight that in trying to capture an event as a constellation of images and relationships, the creation of the object becomes a proactive act where the person responsible for capturing the object draws the boundaries of the digital object itself (2018: np). This became an important point for us as we began to move beyond trying to identify significant properties of the object and into identifying significant content that needed to be included in the suite of items we would propose. We came to better understand that we would be the ones drawing the boundaries of the meme as a bounded event, constructing the conceptual object.

In Phillip's response to my musings based on Guy's prompt, he indicated that he was not too keen on following a cataloguing structure designed around archiving theatre performances like Guy had suggested, preferring to think more about social history as a way of framing the cataloguing (which is my background too, so I was glad to hear that). The information shared by Guy was on the National Performance Data Project,⁴¹ which I heard quite a lot about whilst I was responsible for the cataloguing structures at the V&A. The aim of the cataloguing model was to allow for complex layered information to be recorded on performance events – a theatre production will have multiple instances, in multiple locations, on multiple dates with multiple cast members and production staff.

I knew the cataloguing model would be complex, and Guy admitted thinking the same, but Phillip's indication that he was not interested in pursuing that route helped to clear up how we approached it with Guy in the meeting. The NSMM's refocus on process and practice meant that we could acknowledge the meme as a bounded event, but focus our curatorial attention on the social and technological aspects of the meme as bounded event, rather than introducing the theatre-related performance cataloguing structure suggested by Guy. This

⁴¹ The project has been through a number of phases, but its most recent iteration was undertaken as part of the AHRC-funded 'Staging Beckett: the impact of productions of Samuel Beckett's drama on theatre practice and cultures in the United Kingdom and Ireland' led by the University of Reading with the University of Chester and the V&A as partners (UKRI, 2014).

was a pragmatic decision as well as a curatorial one – trying to implement an entirely new data model alongside a new and emerging object type might have been a bit too much for the NSMM to take on at once.

During the actual meeting we did spend some time talking about a meme as an event. Phillip and I were able to articulate that we didn't want to focus too much on the idea of event-as-performance because it was outside of the museum's curatorial remit, and Guy understood. However, we did talk about the acquisition being more than a traditional object – how it needed to be collected in a way that illustrated it was not an individually perceptible object. In my reflections, I note the sentence 'curated acquisition of a concept' being used. Guy suggested that this was a potentially useful way of framing the object to help elevate the intangible features of a meme. This concept provided the link to talk a little more about capturing the intangible elements of a meme that Guy had included in his points of interest.

A meme as intangible cultural heritage

The link that Guy had sent with his prompt on a meme's relationships to intangible cultural heritage related to the MERL's *Museum of the Intangible* project that started in 2016. The toolkit for the project emphasised the importance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in interpreting cultural practices, knowledge, relationships, and other non-physical aspects of life that traditional museum collecting methods cannot achieve without freezing ICH at a particular point in time (Bertram et al., 2018: 3). The toolkit also emphasises the notion of guardianship and acknowledges that, in some cases, museums have to document ICH through tangible objects, but urges readers to take note that documenting in this way does not automatically safeguard ICH practices, knowledge and relationships (Bertram et al., 2018: 12).

In the preparation for the MERL meeting, my response to Guy's point on ICH seemed to resonate with Phillip more than the point on event and performance. I wrote:

I really love the distinction between preservation and safeguarding here. We've been thinking in a similar way about the idea of acquisition. We're not looking to collect in the way that assigns title and deals with property – we have discussed this from a stewardship or shared guardianship perspective. We're not looking to remove it from its context – it needs to stay alive on the MERL Twitter account. However, we are thinking of the assemblage or event that is acquired as a snapshot of the meme in its natural living environment as illustration of memes as a photographic practice.⁴²

In my response I was attempting to highlight that we were not trying to attain ownership over a meme concept, in a similar way to how in documenting ICH practice, an institution does not take ownership of it. The aim is to document it without stalling it. My response prompted the following reply from Phillip:

This is all really useful, and I agree with everything. I think that the idea of stewardship is a key point to be made as it helps to clarify what we are collecting (i.e. a record or representation of a living digital exchange in context) and helps me to make the case for why.

I've been pondering this a bit lately, as (being honest with myself) a lot of my motivation for this is just to be doing it because I like memes and we all want to collect what we like. I've been trying to ask myself hard questions about museums and digital culture and if we are the right kind of institution and what the sector's wider motivations might be. Is it because we see ourselves as universal cultural repositories (in a very old model of museumship)? Why should memes live with us anyway?

Well, if we don't capture them then they will disappear. And we aren't hoarding them anyway, we are guarding them as traces of lived experience. This is where the intangible heritage part gets interesting.⁴³

Our exchange helped reveal that the proposed object's relationship with ICH was one of documenting memetic culture, but also prompted thoughts about the reasons for this. We knew we were seeking to document the MERL's Absolute Unit as a non-

⁴² Email correspondence between myself and Phillip, 06/04/2020.

⁴³ Email correspondence between myself and Phillip, 06/04/2020.

tangible practice in digital culture through recording it as a bounded event and as a representation of wider memetic practice, but why?

The documentation of ICH practices using museological methods has been criticised for its potential to remove them from their context and freeze them as static, but also acknowledged as a potential way of revitalising them (Nas, 2002; Van zanten, 2004; Smith and Akagawa, 2009; Bonn et al., 2016). Ahmed Skounti argues that in capturing ICH practices, you have to fix them. However, that fixture has to be understood as a copy of the practice; it is documentation of the ICH practice at a particular time (Skounti, 2009: 77). The acknowledgment that in order to document a practice it has to be understood as a copy of it was something that Phillip and I embraced. In the conversations we'd been having internally at the NSMM, I had been using the 'curated representation' analogy that had come through in my discussions on WeChat with Brendan and Esme at the V&A. We were aware that we were not actually collecting a meme in a traditional, tangible way but documenting the concept of a meme in action and creating an object. What we started doing more consciously from this point onwards was actively discussing that and being transparent about the fact that we'd be capturing a snapshot of a meme in time. What we did not want though, was that curated representation of a meme to be static, even if it was a fixed snapshot in time.

Another interesting point that the ICH dimension made Phillip and I reflect on was the question of why the NSMM should be collecting a meme. Janet Blake highlights the significance of the role given to the local cultural communities in the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, explaining that this is due to the specific character of ICH practices which means they can only continue to exist through ongoing enactment (Blake, 2009: 45). Quite often, ICH practices regarded as needing 'safeguarding' are connected to marginalised communities where the ICH practices in question are under some sort of threat, and the logic behind documenting those practices from an externalised perspective often hinges on the traditional stewardship and preservationist notions deeply engrained in museological professional practices.

I think it is fair to say that the practice of making and sharing memes within online remix cultures is not yet at risk of being lost – the practice is flourishing. Well-established aggregation sites like KnowYourMeme.com already do an excellent job of documenting memes, with teams of people employed to observe swathes of the Internet, keep track of emerging memetic trends, and record them (Tiffany, 2018). Additionally, those aggregation sites, and the memes within them, are captured by large institutional web archives like those held by the likes of the Library of Congress and the British Library (García López and Martínez Cardama, 2020). Therefore, if situating the Absolute Unit acquisition in the context of safeguarding ICH, we might question why it is important for the NSMM to collect and preserve it, when the ‘local cultural communities’ are keeping the intangible practice of meme creation and sharing alive and large institutions are capturing broad swathes of memes (albeit indirectly). Phillip’s questioning of the reason why the NSMM is the place to collect a meme allowed us to take a step back and re-confirm with ourselves the curatorial reasoning behind the acquisition. I responded that:

I totally agree with you – it is the same with my PhD – my main reason for doing it is because of my own lived experience and the way I see social media and memes as a central part of my life, but not being recorded anywhere.

There definitely is a tendency for people to revert to thinking about the universal museum approach, but I, like you, think of the social history element. How can memes – a unit of creative digital communicative culture that has permeated into so many people's lives not be recorded as an important form of social history?

And as for NSMM – it is more than the social history – it is the way that people have taken to using photographic technology – it is a story of photo editing techniques, networked images and participatory cultures.⁴⁴

The value that museums bring to their collections, over large web archives held by institutions like the British Library, for example, is in their interpretation and re-contextualisation within broader subjects. I was invited to talk at a webinar hosted

⁴⁴ Email correspondence between myself and Phillip, 06/04/2020.

by the Digital Preservation Coalition in February 2020, and in it we discussed the role of museums in collecting social media and digital culture compared with libraries and archives.⁴⁵ We focused on the interpretation and connective narratives that museums could bring and addressed how web archives in libraries and archives were more readily used for research rather than treated as interpretive material in their own right. It was with this point of view that I approached the meme acquisition at the NSMM.

During the meeting with Guy and Ollie, we spoke more about acquiring a concept, and the intangibility of that. The Absolute Unit is in and of itself, a meme concept, and we touched on how a meme concept does not belong to anyone (Denisova, 2019: 29); the MERL did not create it and does not own it. We agreed that, practically, acquiring a concept has to come down to a representation of the concept. The question is how to adequately capture a memetic concept. In 2010, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) claimed to have acquired the @ symbol, calling it a ‘momentous elating acquisition’ that relies on the ‘assumption that physical possession of an object as a requirement for an acquisition is no longer necessary’ (Antonelli, 2010: np). Paola Antonelli, Senior Curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA, explains that ‘@’ is a mutable object, open to interpretation (with regards to aspects like the font that can be used) but which remains the same in essence no matter what. The museum has not taken ownership – @ is in the public realm. Instead, Antonelli describes it as an acquisition of ‘the design act in itself’ that can be featured in different typefaces which will be noted each time as if to indicate the materials that a physical object is made of (2010: np). There are definitely links between the conceptual meme object being understood as a bounded event and the way MoMA conceived of @ as an object. Both are changing objects that can only be captured at a moment in time, but MoMA claims to have acquired the design act itself and express that they will use @ in different typefaces – allowing it to continue to be changeable. Liberal arts scholar Soojin Lee has been critical of this claim, suggesting that, in stating the

⁴⁵ Web Archiving & Preservation Webinar Episode Three: Integrating Web Archives into Existing Collections. Available from: <https://www.dpconline.org/events/wap-webinars-winter-2020-three> (Accessed 20/05/2021).

acquisition is of the design act, it is actually 'not an object' (2018: np). Despite that, Lee does go on to say that MoMA's progressive thinking and activities around acquisition make it a museum at the forefront of questioning the materiality of collections and collecting intangible culture (2018: np).

In our discussions, Phillip and I veered more towards the idea of capturing an instance of a meme concept, rather than an act of design. We wanted to draw boundaries around it as an event, and for it to have identifiable elements that were usable for research and exhibition. The aim of the web archive element of the acquisition was to enable people to experience the meme in situ, drawing out some of the more intangible elements of encountering a meme on Twitter. The MERL were supportive of this approach, and we discussed the possibility of expanding the scope of the object in the future if the MERL's Absolute Unit re-emerged, as it did when Elon Musk interacted with it. Guy and Ollie were interested in the idea of allowing Twitter and Twitter users to decide on the direction of the Absolute Unit, and for the museum to follow that in a potential future capture after the initial acquisition.

Although we did not jump headfirst into the idea of collecting a concept in a non-object orientated way, I am comfortable that this was a pragmatic decision we were making. Taking incremental steps towards acquiring concepts like a meme felt necessary. That is not meant as a criticism of the NSMM as compared to MoMA – MoMA's more conceptual design acquisitions have been controversial (Lee, 2018). The aim was not to shake things up in a disruptive way, but to be supportively critical and remix processes through allowing the social-media-collecting resonance snowball to grow, as well as a collegial and positive orientation toward ongoing, incremental remix-centric change in acquisition processes.

How tho? Developing the meme collecting methodology

I started regularly working in the museum's main office from 21 January 2020. By this time Phillip and I had already been having conversations about what the significant characteristics of the meme were, and what we wanted to try and capture through the acquisition. We agreed to go off on our own to experiment with different ways of

capturing social media over a two-week period and come back to share our findings. The idea was to understand and respect how we work individually, make space for how we both generate knowledge and come back together to discuss and decide on how we should move forward.

The work that had gone into this PhD meant that we already had a good idea of the ways in which we might be able to capture social media content, but also an awareness of the potential difficulties. I'll be the first to admit that I am not the most technically proficient person, but through my research and previous professional roles I learnt enough to be able to understand, in principle, what was possible, as well as the right questions to ask in order to get useful advice from people more technically advanced than me. Particularly at the V&A, I learnt to translate collections management requirements into actionable IT tasks, and also the limitations of IT and computerised systems back into collections management lingo. This proved particularly useful as we ran into trouble trying to enact some of the technical elements of the collecting method – specifically creating the Twitter data set.

For a number of years, there has been an awareness that technical issues have made the archiving of social media a non-trivial task for people involved in web archiving. There is acknowledgment that web crawling technology used to archive websites is inadequate for dealing with dynamic content on social media and that capturing social media requires more involved processes (Hockx-Yu, 2014; Bingham and Bryne, 2021). It was clear to both Phillip and I from the onset of our experiments that to capture the three distinct elements of the acquisition we'd need to use a selection of different digital tools. In experimenting, I relied on the insights from projects like *Documenting the Now*, *Collecting and Curating Digital Posters* and *CoSoPho*, and from the generous knowledge-sharing of Digital Humanities colleagues.

Collecting a Twitter data set

Collecting the Twitter data set proved to be the most complex part of the collecting method. I knew that we could access the type of data in the format we were looking

for through the Twitter API,⁴⁶ but I was not entirely sure how to go about doing so. After some frantic googling, I found myself setting up Twitter Developer and GitHub accounts, and with a folder of bookmarked free tweet-capturing tools and beginners' guides to Python programming.

There are a number of ways to download Twitter data, including some free tools that allow you to record close to real-time tweeting using searches and keywords like Google TAGS,⁴⁷ and others like Vicinitas⁴⁸ that use the Twitter API to act as a more user-friendly interface to access older tweets. I experimented with Vicinitas to see if I could access the MERL's Absolute Unit tweet with their tool, but as the museum is so active on Twitter it couldn't go back far enough due to the limit that the Twitter API placed on the number of tweets it can search back through. Additionally, these tools are designed towards accessing bulk volumes of data from a single account or hashtag, and we were looking to access a single Tweet and the responses to it. Therefore, I realised that I needed to set myself up as a Twitter Developer and try to access the MERL's tweets myself. Justin Littman explains how in order to access the Twitter API you need to sign up to Twitter's Developer Agreement, which is pretty ambiguous, particularly for researchers and archival institutions (2019: np). Littman highlights the potentially conflicting, but still ambiguous, statement that might be of relevance for archivists (or museums in our case). The version of the policy Littman was discussing stated that, 'if you provide Twitter content to third parties, including downloadable datasets of Twitter Content or an API that returns Twitter content, you will only distribute or allow downloads of Tweet IDs, Direct Message IDs, and/or User

⁴⁶ API, or Application Programming Interface, is a tool that acts as a window between the back-end of a site like Twitter or Instagram and shows pieces of data in a structured format that have been deemed appropriate by the company or person who holds the data to be seen. For example, the Twitter API has been created by Twitter and allows programmers to ask to see information related to Tweets, accounts, or a hashtag, and to download such information with associated metadata.

⁴⁷ TAGS uses Google Sheets to record the results of search terms that you can define. It runs over a set time frame, drawing together the metadata from public tweets that meet your search criteria. The data is automatically recorded into a Google Sheet. The tool was set up by Martin Hawksey as a 'hobby project'. Available via <https://tags.hawksey.info/> (Accessed 20/05/2021).

⁴⁸ Vicinitas describes itself as an in-depth analytics tool that can track real-time tweets or access historic tweets. It uses the Twitter API to be able to access a user's last 3,200 tweets (the limit set by the Twitter API) and save them in an Excel spreadsheet. Access to older Tweets can be purchased. Available via <https://www.vicinitas.io/> (Accessed 20/05/2021).

ID's' (2019: np). This could have had potential implications for displaying tweets as objects or providing access to the dataset if it was part of the museum's collection.

By the time I came to sign the Developer Agreement, that sentence no longer appeared. An updated Agreement came about in March 2020 which specifies the ways in which you cannot use the content, rather than using the blanket message of before. According to the March 2020 Agreement, content cannot be used to conduct surveillance, conduct or produce research for unlawful or discriminatory purposes, monitor sensitive events (like a protest, rally or community meetings); or target or profile people according to their sensitive information, such as health, sexual orientation, or racial or ethnic origin (Twitter, 2020). There is no longer ambiguous wording around displaying content – instead, there are guidelines on how to display correctly (Twitter, 2021). Although we can see this change as positive, it is illustrative of how the terms and conditions that social media platforms use can change, and this make it difficult, or almost impossible as Laura Wrubel argues (quoted in Littman, 2019), to build an official policy around collecting, preserving and displaying social media content. The constantly adapting, incrementally changing way in which social media platforms evolve the digital environment they inhabit demands the same approach from museums – building solid non-moving policies just won't work. With the NSMM having no policy, I documented everything I was doing and brought the process into our collaborative conversations time and time again.

I quickly realised I neither had the immediate skillset needed nor access to the functions of a computer that would allow me to learn how to ask the Twitter API to do what I wanted. I tried learning to write the programming commands but the institutional controls over the PC at the museum and the university meant I had no access to the command line function and I – thinking it was a wise idea at the time – owned a Chromebook that didn't have command line functionality . I tried extending the inquiry, contacting Alan and Andy, who I had worked with on the WhatsApp interactive. They didn't have the skills to work with APIs either. Later, in a meeting with John Stack, the Digital Director of SMG, we found that he did not necessarily have the skills in his team to help either. Instead, John put me in touch

with Marty Steer, Technical Lead for Digital Humanities at the School of Advanced Study, University of London.

It became apparent after talking with Marty that directly accessing the Twitter API would not be particularly helpful. It would take a lot of work to access a tweet that old, or to automatically focus in on a single tweet and its replies. Therefore, Marty suggested that Twarc, one of the tools produced by the *Documenting the Now* project, would be more appropriate for the task at hand. Twarc is a command line tool designed to use the Twitter API to download twitter data in JSON format. It is open source and available on GitHub. I had looked into Twarc but thought its focus on producing data in JSON format would not be particularly helpful – JSON is not a data format many people are familiar with, and I was aiming to go for incremental changes and felt it might be quite a jump to follow a very technical process and in the end get a completely alien data format. Therefore, Marty and I discussed using Twarc to produce the JSON format as it has a nested structure that shows how the Twitter data sits together. We decided that we could then convert it into a CSV file to allow it to be more accessible to a wider range of people in the museum.

The *One by One* project explored the development of digital literacy in museums and observed that digital skills have mainly been deployed in four broad areas: digitizing collections; web presence and social media activities; technology in exhibitions; and operational and communication activities (Parry et al., 2018: 32). The project argues that, rather than focusing on specific specialist skills, qualifications and expertise, the sector should focus on a distributed approach where competence and confidence are key rather than qualifications and expertise (Parry et al., 2018: 33). Working to download the data set as part of the object is particularly interesting with respect to the findings of the *One by One* project.

Marty walked me through the process of downloading the data set, and whilst I do not claim to be qualified or an expert in any way, I am relatively competent and with guidance felt (sort of) confident in the process. I was aware of a gap in knowledge and confidence within the NSMM and that influenced the format of the data I wanted to make available and also how I wrote up the collecting methodology (Appendix 3). Both Phillip and I were keen that this process was not a one-off and could be

replicated without me or him being present. We wanted to ensure the collecting method could be used in one way or another across SMG. Therefore, it was key that the knowledge I brought in from Marty could be distilled in a way that Phillip could follow and distributed confidently across the NSMM and SMG more broadly.

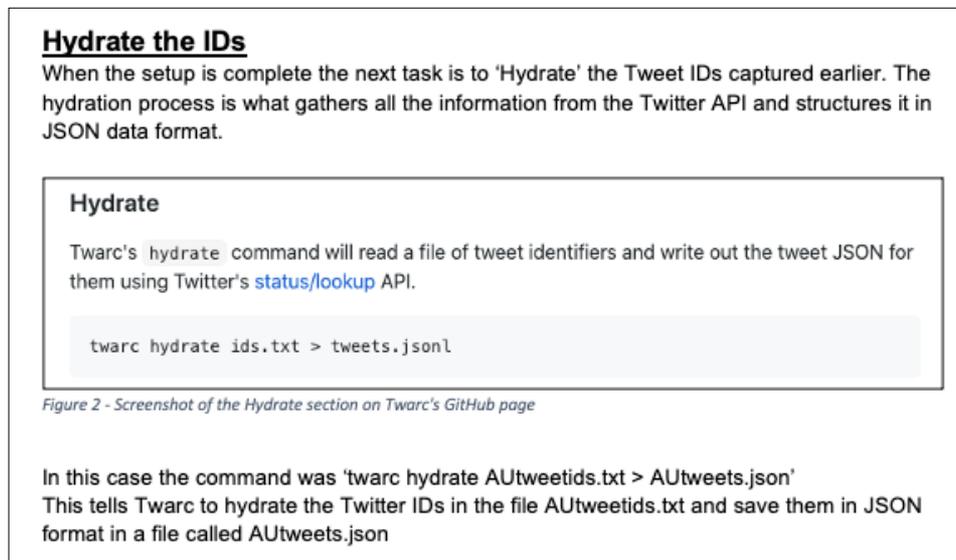


Figure 45. A screenshot of the collecting methodology I wrote up for NSMM. The full methodology can be found in Appendix 3.

The collecting method meant that the JSON and CSV formatted data sets were both put forward as part of the acquisition: the JSON as the structured data that could be used to help re-create the Twitter thread one day; and the CSV as more easily searchable by a broader range of people.

Creating an interactive web archive

Drawing together an interactive web archive was a vitally important part of this acquisition. As noted in the introduction to this section, traditional web archives do not provide the interactivity that Phillip and I felt was a significant characteristic of the meme on Twitter and needed to be preserved in the resulting object. Within the web archiving field, there is a need to balance quality and scalability – web archiving professionals are well aware that many interactive elements of websites are lost when using web crawlers to archive, but they also know that there is no resource available to undertake time-consuming and high-quality archiving on the scale required to capture the websites within their collecting remits. Approaches to

archiving dynamic elements of the web on a large scale remain elusive (Klein et al., 2019: 164).

Webrecorder is a tool that sits on the resource-heavy and high-quality end of the web archiving spectrum. It is an interactive web archiving tool, created by Rhizome, a non-profit arts organisation focused on digital and new media art, with a particular focus on online or Internet art. The tool allows the capturing of dynamic web content that was introduced to me through the work of Hawes and Flood in their *Collecting and Curating Digital Posters* project. Hawes and Flood proposed the use of Webrecorder as a way of capturing the dynamic and interaction-driven nature of social media (2018: np). I'd been slowly gathering more information and doing small-scale experiments with the tool since first reading the project publication in the first year of my PhD, trying to get a feel for whether it would be right for my eventual project with the NSMM.

The Webrecorder software

Both Phillip and I experimented with using Webrecorder within the first two weeks of me being at the museum. It quickly became apparent that, as well as acquiring the WARC file that is created as a result of the capturing process, the museum would need to download and store the Webrecorder application and player to be able to access the file.⁴⁹ Whilst in theory this is not a problem – Webrecorder is open source, available on GitHub and compatible with Windows, Mac and Linux operating systems – it prompted a conversation about what needed to be stored and preserved alongside the 'object' itself in order to make it accessible.

Edward Corrado explains how, quite often, data without the software to interpret it is useless, and therefore software preservation is a logical extension of digital collecting and preservation practices (2019: 178). There are a number of approaches that can be taken to preserve software, and Corrado describes the four main ones

⁴⁹ The WARC (Web ARChive) format specifies a method for combining multiple digital resources into an aggregate archival file together with related information. It is a standardised and preservation quality file format and the National Archives and Library of Congress preferred file format for web archives.

as: technology preservation; emulation; virtualisation; and translation. Technology preservation involves preserving the hardware and software that digital objects use; emulation is essentially making one computerised system imitate another (usually older) one and can operate without original hardware; virtualisation is a less resource intensive version of emulation, but requires access to the hardware; and finally, translation is where the entire code of a software application is re-written in a new programming language (Corrado, 2019: 180-182).

Knowing that SMG was only at the very beginning of their digital preservation work, we were aware of the potentially overwhelming complexities that preserving software as well as a suite of digital objects might present. Phillip and I made the decision to include the need to download and store a copy of the Webrecorder software in the proposal, but not to argue for its preservation in the same way as we would the object. The WARC file that the Webrecorder capture produced is a standardised file format and the Webrecorder software itself is open source and well-documented. Conversations with John Stack and Adrian Hines (Digitisation Manager for SMG) helped confirm that it was a pragmatic decision for the time being. John told us how the software being available on Linux means that it is well-supported for preservation in the future. Linux is an open-source operating system, and due to its open-source nature, has openly accessible historic versions. John explained how, if the museum found itself in a position where it could not run the Webrecorder player on its version of Windows anymore, they would be able to install older versions of Linux that would allow Webrecorder to be opened and used. It was important for us to remember that we were not looking to implement a perfect system – this was the start of incremental remixes towards embedded digital preservation practices.

The Webrecorder capture

Knowing we had a plan for storing the Webrecorder software, we felt comfortable moving forward with the web archive element of the acquisition being a WARC file created from a Webrecorder capture session. The capture session works by selecting the URL you want to start the recording at and then manually navigating through the website / social media account by clicking on hyperlinks and recording the paths and possible interactions. The resulting capture allows users of the WARC

to interact with any of the links recorded during the capture session in any order they want. It created a bounded interactive experience, rather than a video or a static flat depiction.

One of the challenges raised by capturing the MERL's Absolute Unit meme, or any other online object, in this way was the curatorial decision about what constitutes the boundaries of the object (Hockx-Yu, 2014; Hawes and Flood, 2018). Phillip and I discussed whether the Webrecorder session should begin at the MERL's website, at the landing page of their Twitter account, or at the meme post itself. How far do we record the MERL alongside the meme? Do we also try to capture the KnowKourMeme.com entry about the Absolute Unit meme concept? What about the interactions with Elon Musk and the 'second life' of the meme? These discussions took us back to the Significant Properties we had agreed on. We knew the object we were trying to capture was the MERL's Absolute Unit, and as part of that we wanted to capture that it was an image-based meme, on Twitter, as part of an ongoing remix, and an example of social and dynamic exchanges with digital images. We decided to start the capture at the meme post itself (URL: <https://twitter.com/themerl/status/983341970318938112?lang=en>) and record the direct interactions with it. Capturing the interactions with Elon Musk had been brought up during our initial conversations about the meme's status as object or archive but we decided to focus on capturing the initial meme to start with and explore potentially adding a second capture in the future. Information on the Musk interactions and on the KnowYourMeme.com entry was to be documented as supplementary information for the object's reference folder.

As well as the conscious decisions we made about the boundaries of the object we were creating, we took into consideration the potential influence of algorithms. Hockx-Yu explains how, in attempting to archive social media content, hidden algorithms will influence what is featured, so that institutions need to be as transparent about this as possible (2014: 2). The influence of algorithms online is inescapable. If you clicked on the link to the MERL Absolute Unit tweet above whilst logged into Twitter, because of the tailored algorithms that Twitter uses, the order of the replies would be different to what I see, and you might have access to some tweets that I can't see because of a user's privacy settings. The algorithms are

opaque, and it would not have been possible for us to document their impact. Clifford Lynch highlights how there has been little to no consideration of how traditional stewardship organisations like museums, archives and libraries can account for and document what he calls the 'age of algorithms' (2017: np). Lynch suggests that in most cases, effective documentation would be fundamentally impossible due to the opacity of proprietary codes and the fact that they are constantly changing (2017). Therefore, we made the decision to document the meme without logging into Twitter. Whilst this would no doubt still be influenced by algorithms in some way, we felt it reduced the impact of Twitter-based algorithms and also acted as an additional privacy layer that meant any replies not accessible to the public because of privacy settings would not be accidentally captured. If logged into mine, Phillip's, or the Museum's account, users who generally do not allow their tweets to be seen by people who do not follow them may have been inadvertently visible to the capture session.

The Webrecorder capture was done by clicking and expanding on every response to the meme that was available, opening any associated media and recording replies to replies. While doing this I read each response, keeping in mind the ethical considerations prompted by the *Documenting the Now* project (noted in the [Breaking Ground](#) chapter and to be discussed a little further in the Remixing in action section next) and made a conscious effort to not record any user profiles as part of the capture. The whole recording process took around four hours.

The Webrecorder capture that got presented to Collections Board when the acquisition was approved was captured in November 2020 as a proof of concept. The WARC file that the museum acquired was captured in June 2021. As with the data capture, I documented the method and created an annotated guide to using Webrecorder for the museum.

Capturing memetic responses

The final element of the acquisition was the memetic responses. Being able to identify specific memetic responses to the MERL's Absolute Unit was key to the MERL's Twitter post being a significant remix of the Absolute Unit meme concept. If

no further remixes had been made of the Exmoor-Ram-as-Unit then it would be difficult to argue that it extended the meme concept and contributed to the memetic landscape in any consequential way.

The Webrecorder capture included a number of memetic responses, showing them in the context of replying to the MERL's tweet. It illustrated memetic images as social and dynamic exchange as per the NSMM's collecting priorities and identified Significant Properties of the MERL's Absolute Unit. Even so, Phillip and I were keen that as part of the acquisition, the museum would be able to use the MERL's Absolute Unit and some responses to it as images, as well as capturing the social and dynamic exchange elements of memes. Therefore, we decided to select four memetic responses that showed the MERL's Absolute Unit being remixed in different ways and pursue acquiring them in dialogue with the users who created them as part of overall acquisition.

The memetic responses identified were as follows:



Figure 46. The memetic responses proposed for acquisition as part of the MERL's Absolute Unit meme.

Top Left: A meme featuring a photograph of a large horse, posted by @JoeDuiilio – furthering the concept of a photograph of large farmyard animal as an Absolute Unit.

Top Right: A meme featuring a painting of a large sheep, posted by @Clattertrap – slightly shifting the concept by applying it to a painting of a large farmyard animal and using different humorous wording.

Bottom Left: A meme featuring the Exmoor Ram alongside a scrawny sheep, posted by @JShahryar – taking the sheep and inserting it into a different memetic concept: ‘if you don’t love me at my... you don’t deserve me at my....’

Bottom Right: A meme featuring the Exmoor Ram and Ralph Wiggum from *The Simpsons*, posted by @TheGrandOMalley – photoshopping the sheep and pasting it onto a different memetic image.

In deciding on the memetic responses to acquire alongside the MERL’s Absolute Unit meme we were looking for a variety of different responses – ones that showed the different directions a memetic response can take. Not all were significant in terms of likes and retweets, but the multitude of remixes, no matter how successful they were, contribute to the significance of the MERL’s meme.

We considered the acquisition of the memetic responses as images alongside the MERL’s Absolute Unit as a more direct collecting activity than the capture via Webrecorder, and therefore we wanted to be in direct contact with the users in order to collect them. We were actively considering the case-by-case approach to ethical collecting as argued for by Jules and colleagues (2018). The act of remixing and creating a new instance of a meme involves creative, artistic, and humorous input that constitutes a new derivative under existing Copyright laws (Bonetto, 2018; Marciszewski, 2020). Whilst I wouldn’t blame you for questioning the level of creativity that has gone into some of the memetic responses above (as with some of mine used throughout the thesis!), Marciszewski argues that the threshold of creativity needed for Copyright protection is ‘extremely low’ and therefore the vast majority of memetic images are protectable (Marciszewski, 2020: 11). The direct relationship between the Twitter users responding to the MERL’s meme with remixed versions of it gave Phillip and I a degree of confidence that the memetic responses were created by the users themselves and not taken from other parts of the Internet and posted under their names. Such an assumption is not always possible to make. Jason Eppink argues that memes and GIFs actually de-emphasise authorship, claiming that a successful one is ‘shared, eclipsing its creator to become an essential part of a cultural conversation’ (Eppink, 2014a: 301). There is scope for meme collecting to complicate the idea of ownership, obfuscating clear provenance lines

and undermining processes like transfer of title. The way in which we approached acquiring the individual memetic responses for the MERL's Absolute Unit acquisition meant that this didn't necessarily happen in our case, although I did try to push the museum on its notion of ownership and Copyright attainment. I'll address this issue more as I discuss remixing the notion of ownership in the next section.

The process for collecting the memetic responses outlined above was to contact the user directly through Twitter, ask permission, capture the meme through right-clicking and saving the media file, and also taking a screenshot of the Twitter post. This process was then followed by the acquisition paperwork that asked for ownership of the copy of the file we had saved and permission to use the image for non-commercial purposes. I am aware that I have been critical of static screenshots as a method for digital collecting throughout this thesis, but we felt that because the meme was also captured in the Webrecorder session, where its interactivity and dynamic and social nature is illustrated, the screenshots in this case were cases of an additional media file in which the image's context was shown. Saving the media file directly did not always illustrate the meme, as the posts from @JoeDuilio, @Clattertrap and @JShahryar had the wording of the memetic response in the tweet, rather than directly pasted onto the image.

In drawing these memetic responses from different users into the acquisition we complicated the acquisition process somewhat. Phillip, myself, and Nadine felt strongly that the Absolute Unit was one conceptual acquisition, but in terms of collections management there were separate instances of acquisition going on that contributed to one object. The way in which we perceived the object challenged the established structure of acquisition records on the CMS and required some creative ways of connecting the formal documentation of the acquisition. Usually, each acquisition record would need its own entry record, but we wanted this to come under one entry. Additionally, this acquisition mixed the acquisition methods of 'gift' (jpeg copies of the memetic images donated by the users) and 'made in museum' (the Webrecorder and Twarc capture sessions undertaken by me), further complicating the documentation processes. Nadine and Nicole Simoes de Silva (Head of Registration), conceived of a record structure that would allow the

acquisition to be considered as one record but with multiple elements coming from multiple owners.

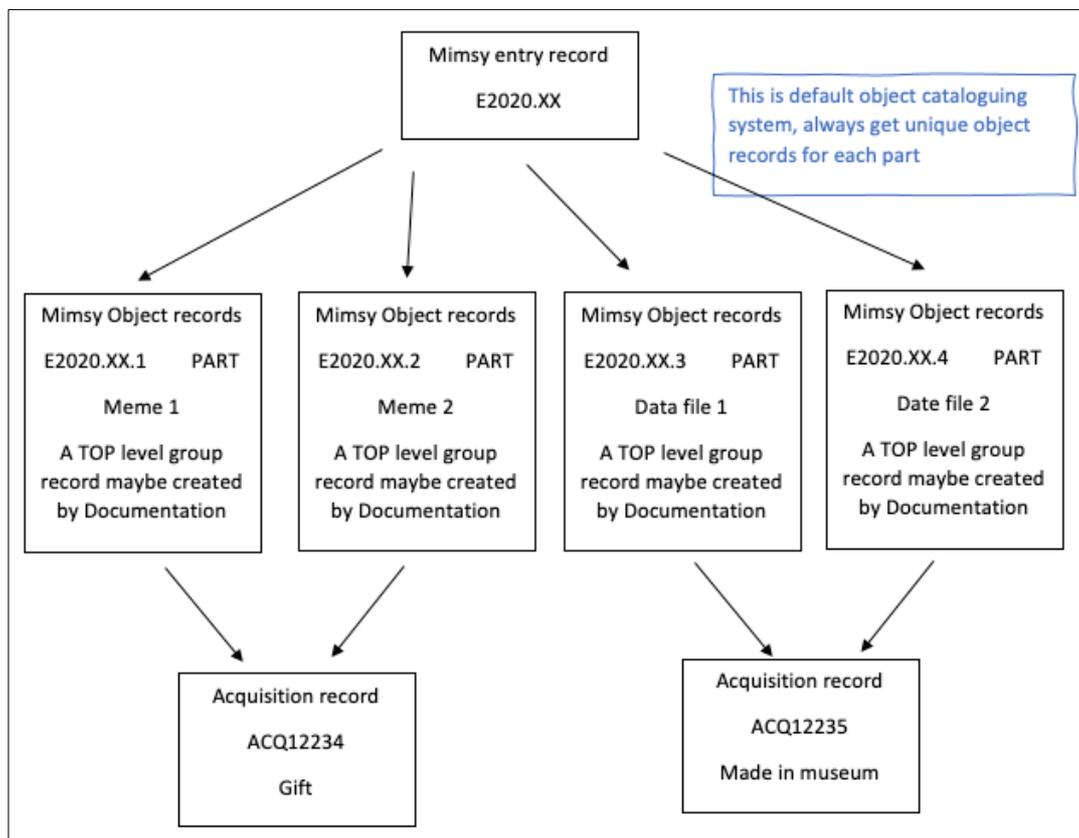


Figure 47. How the meme would be structured with separate acquisition records that form part of the same conceptual object. Put together by Nadine Loach and Nicole Simoes de Silva.

Overall, the way in which we understood our acquisition of the MERL’s Absolute Unit as an acquisition of an instance of a memetic concept, or bounded event, took us on a number of productive inquiry stands that forced Phillip and I to reflect on the essence of a museum object and push the boundaries of what the museum and its collections management structures recognised as an object. The way in which we wanted to collect the multi-part object pushed the digital skillset of the museum (and us!) and also highlighted the curatorial influence over the eventual object. Acquiring a concept is not straightforward, and we do not claim to have created a perfect model for it. Despite that, we did design a positive, productive, collaborative process for addressing the challenges of new and emerging object types – one that allowed us to remix orientations to a number of museological processes and viewpoints.

The next section aims to look at the way in which a Remix Museology approach to collecting the Absolute Unit resulted in pragmatic and incremental changes that supported more culturally and ethically appropriate ways of collecting, and how this process is still ongoing.

6.3 Remixing in action

The action research project with the NSMM ultimately had two overarching aims: first and foremost, for both Phillip and I, was to understand the ways in which the NSMM might collect a meme from a social media platform. The second aim, perhaps more first-person led by myself – but definitely in collaboration with Phillip – was to practice what I've been preaching and explore how the acquisition of a meme, as a new and emerging object type, could be done using a Remix Museology approach. With regards to the first aim – as has been illustrated – Phillip and I managed to collect the MERL's Absolute Unit meme, drawing on the knowledge and perspectives of people throughout SMG and the MERL. What remains to be explored is the extent to which we were able to take a Remix Museology approach in doing that, what that looked like, and what was achieved.

Enacting Remix Museology

Throughout this thesis, I have spoken about the importance of a positive orientation towards change, the role of sociality and collegiality, and the potential for humour as a productive way of challenging established processes without causing too much tension. I have also acknowledged the need for the use of humour to be carefully negotiated, not wanting to dismiss serious conversations or insinuate that those who do not wish to engage in humour are in some way killjoys. The value of humour-infused, collegial, and social relationships has been embedded throughout the descriptions and analysis of my research – be it in the nature of my reflexive dyadic interviews, the development of friendships alongside research relationships, or through outright laughter and fun. I strongly believe that the access I have had to professional insights, the openness to working in deep and collaborative ways with me, and the work I have been able to engage with throughout this PhD has been enabled by this approach.

With regards to my work with the NSMM, getting my foot in the door, being present in the office (pre-COVID-19) and forming collegial bonds were hugely important steps in the research. In the beginning of the thesis, I shared a memory of being in

the office at the NSMM whilst others in the office jested across the room at each other over their ability to send GIFs and memes using (the then new) Microsoft Teams. Being embedded in the working environment, getting a feel for the workplace humour, and taking part in it influenced the way in which I interacted in humorous ways through the inquiry strands and Collections Board meetings that made up a large part of the work of this case study.

There is perhaps an element of luck that Phillip is also very social and engages through humour in the way he operates in his role. From our first meeting we laughed about memes and museum processes, and we always took time to check in with each other before ‘talking shop’. In presenting our proposals to different stakeholders we found ourselves working well as a double-act – even if at times in the beginning we were ‘winging it’. We used a sense of light-heartedness and humour when trying to establish how the museum might respond to our thinking about the meme.

One moment in particular comes to mind as I think about the humour-infused, energizing ways that Phillip and I spoke about the acquisition, even within formal decision-making meetings like Collections Board. In our first formal presentation to Collections Board in May 2020, Phillip opened by saying: ‘Hello everyone. This is a meme. This is an important part of what photography has been doing the last couple of years – and it will not have escaped you that the medium has gone entirely digital and our collection remains almost entirely analogue’ – he went on to say that collecting it could prove challenging, but that our project was exploring how ‘these digital artefacts can sit within our museum processes, whether they require new processes, whether we can kind of make them work in the existing system... this is a bit of an experiment but I am very, very serious about this.’ He continued by flinging his arms wide open and exclaiming: ‘so here is your acquisition proposal.’⁵⁰

My description doesn’t do his tone and gestures justice, but seeing everyone smile, smirk or outright laugh set up the resulting conversation really nicely. Looking at this

⁵⁰ Phillip’s words quoted from the recording of the Collections Board meeting, Microsoft Teams, 14/05/2020.

introduction from a critical perspective, it might be possible to claim that Phillip was indirectly harnessing collegial work-based humour, and also using contestive humour as defined by Holmes (2000; Holmes and Marra, 2002). Phillip joyfully introduced the proposed acquisition, whilst highlighting that the museum had failed to keep up with the pace of digital photography, acknowledged that it could be challenging, and ended with an open arms gesture – inviting people to respond, but in a similar tone to how he had presented. I tried to keep the tone going, suggesting that what is particularly exciting about this potential acquisition was that we could actually collect it during a pandemic when all other acquisitions the museum was working on were on hold. It also got a good few laughs, I'm glad to report.

As we moved to the feedback part, it was interesting to see how the tone set by Phillip's introduction carried through. Annie Jamieson, Curator of Sound Technologies, wholeheartedly agreed with the proposal, re-iterating how important it was to go ahead with the acquisition and joking that the group still doesn't have digital preservation expertise despite saying for the past five years that it is about to happen, and how this acquisition could be used as a great test case for others in the museum to adapt. The meeting continued with an up-beat tone, with Lewis Pollard, Associate Curator of Television, sharing a meme as a show of support for the acquisition (Figure 48), and others interacting in generous and productive ways.

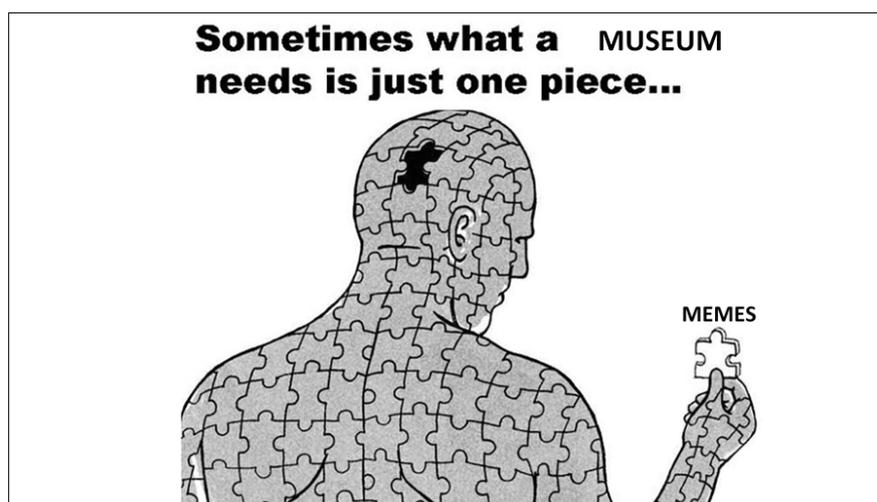


Figure 48. A meme shared by Lewis Pollard, Associate Curator of Television, during the December Collections Board meeting where the Absolute Unit meme acquisition was approved.

Therefore, I want to claim here that thoughtful and considered use of humour has been a key aspect of my action research, and also my ability to implement a Remix Museology approach to collecting a meme within a museum. The use of humour to encourage pragmatic and incremental changes to established collections management processes contributed to collaborative collegial attitudes that in turn supported a positive orientation towards the changes.

The aim now is to look at how the use of a Remix Museology approach contributed to remixes in the notion of ownership by pulling in questions of consent alongside more traditional 'title' and Copyright considerations, and perceptions around quality and authenticity, through challenging the need to acquire the highest resolution version of an image as possible.

Remixing ownership

The extent to which we managed to remix more formal notions of ownership at the NSMM may be contestable. Nevertheless, the process of questioning the need to own objects by placing online remix cultures at the centre of the discussion and asking people to consider the appropriateness of trying to apply the notion of Transfer of Title in that context was productive. We did make some incremental inroads, blurring the boundaries between donated objects and objects 'made in museum', and opting for licensing over Copyright attainment, but the museum also defaulted to Transfer of Title forms for some aspects of the acquisition.

Alongside the more traditional notions of ownership in museum acquisition practices, the role of consent also featured as we considered our approaches to recording the MERL's Absolute Unit in situ on Twitter. The key remix that came out of this work was the inclusion of the idea of consent as a more explicit consideration in collecting. We opted for what we felt was a balanced and considered approach to capturing social media content, where the deeper collecting processes that involved directly capturing media from a user's account included conversations, informed consent, and traditional museum paperwork. For the more surface level tweet replies to the MERL's tweet, we captured the responses as part of an exchange in a public forum.

Capturing Twitter content – on consent and ownership

The ethics of capturing social media content posted by a wide range of people in response to a tweet is complex, grey, and something to be considered on a case-by-case basis. There is no single rule or ethical stance that has been established – it needs to be addressed in relation to the specific context of the acquisition.

We first encountered the ethical considerations required when collecting social media in the [Breaking ground](#) chapter, where I discussed the LoC and the *Documenting the Now* project. The LoC was initially criticized for its up front ‘it is all in the public domain’ approach in 2010, and many conversations since have wrestled with the idea of public expectations on the use of their social media posts. This has produced arguments that suggest quoting posts made on publicly open Twitter accounts is not necessarily an ethical question (Educo, 2014) and also that it *is* an ethical question because users do not necessarily associate their social media posts with being in the public domain (Williams et al., 2017). The *Documenting the Now* project explored this specifically from an archival perspective, concluding that there is not a one-size-fits all approach, and urging people to consider the potential of collected posts to do harm to those who posted them, or others implicated with the post (Jules et al., 2018). In working to implement a Remix Museology approach with the meme acquisition, it was important to consider pragmatic and incremental changes that were culturally and ethically appropriate to the social media context.

The Webrecorder capture documented almost 250 replies from Twitter users to the MERL’s tweet and, in early discussions as part of our internal inquiry strands, we considered the implications of using Webrecorder to capture these tweets. I’ve already touched on how, before undertaking the capture, I read each tweet and considered the content and its potential to do harm to the user or others. This was done in the spirit of the ethical recommendations set out by the *Documenting the Now* project (Jules et al., 2018). Alongside this we considered general approaches to data privacy too.

In a meeting with Jack Kirby, Head of Collections Services for SMG, Jack asked us about the data privacy implications of recording a Twitter timeline. We responded

that we would only be capturing the direct responses to the MERL's tweet, not recording any information about the user apart from their username, which is displayed when they tweet, and a small thumbnail profile picture, which is also displayed – we would not be clicking through to people's profiles and recording their biographies or location. Jack explained that he was comfortable with this as long as the information was in the public domain. Phillip and I made a conscious effort to not record any more than surface level information that is shown to anyone looking at the MERL's Twitter account on their own accord. Bergis Jules acknowledges that it is not always practically realistic to seek formal documentation from every single user in a data set (2016: np), and due to our conscious effort to not record more than surface level information in the Webrecorder session, we took the view that the capture was documentation of an exchange in a public forum. We were not capturing large swathes of public tweets uncritically, as had happened in the LoC Twitter donation – our Webrecorder capture was considered and thought through. If we had decided to capture the profile information then we would have been moving into more personal information and would have wanted to make direct contact.

In the approved acquisition proposal (Appendix 2), we highlighted our considerations as follows:

All Twitter users have the option to hide their content using various security and privacy features like locking their account. Whilst we consider that users' decision to not utilise these features constitutes agreement that their tweets be freely viewed by all, we also acknowledge that they may not have thought their tweets might be captured. Each of the replies captured visually in the WARC file have been read and a judgement had been made that the risk for potential harm, offense and personal data breach is low. During the creation of the WARC file, the Twitter page that explains why some Tweets are not visible has also been captured to provide more context.

Our creation of a new digital artefact to record interactions occurring on twitter are new recordings of exchanges taking place in a public forum. The capture does not record individual accounts beyond their reply, twitter handle and thumbnail image.

With regards to the acquisition of the memetic responses, Phillip and I had discussions about whether or not, in making contact with the users, the seeking of consent was sought as a point to start the collecting process, or as a notification that their content was being collected alongside a request for a licence to be able to use it. I felt strongly that the single-user-specific nature of the memetic responses meant that this part of the acquisition should be approached following more traditional and established museological processes. Although we had identified and decided the memetic responses we wanted to collect, we agreed that before we began the process of bringing copies of those media files into the museum, we should seek permission. This resulted in considerations around consent being brought into the collecting process in a way it had not really featured before. We differentiated between the surface level documentation of exchanges in a public forum on the MERL's Absolute Unit meme, and a direct and deeper attempt to collect associated media. We actively considered consent and made judgement calls using some of the ethical recommendations set out by the *Documenting the Now* project.

The questions around Copyright

As this thesis has touched on in a number of ways, Copyright is an important aspect of museum collecting and an ongoing challenge for contemporary digital culture. Although the application and negotiation of Copyright in online environments can be ambiguous, it remains an important consideration when collecting from them. The question for us was whether or not there was a way to work with it that was more culturally and ethically appropriate for the context.

The application of Copyright to born-digital materials is an ongoing complex issue. As noted, Lessig's work on remix culture highlights how all forms of remix are technically illegal – but his discussion on Copyright goes further than that. Lessig highlights how, in theory, any interaction with a digital file triggers Copyright; even when simply opening a digital file, it is copied from one place to another and changed in some way (2008: 88-89). UNESCO first acknowledged the need to protect digital material through its *Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage* (UNESCO, 2003). Despite that, there remains very little legislative support for preserving born-digital content under Copyright. In European law there are

exceptions to Copyright with regards to making copies for preservation purposes, but these exceptions tend to be in relation to analogue content that is being digitized. The European Union's 2019 *Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market* made a number of changes to Copyright with respect to digital culture, but Michal Koščík and Matěj Myška argue that born-digital content and its relationship to cultural heritage institutions remains largely ignored (2019: 13).

The topic of Copyright came up during our first internal inquiry group meeting with Claire Mayoh, Nadine Loach, and Toni Booth (Associate Curator of Film), and there was a level of uncertainty expressed about risk attached to collecting memes that are using Copyrighted material. Much earlier in the thesis I noted that Rostama, a consultant at the World Intellectual Property Organisation, explained that 'Strictly speaking... Remixes do violate the Copyright in a pre-existing work', but that 'as long as the remixed work remains in the realm of amateur creativity (i.e. no commercial gain is derived from it), the exclusive right of the original author can be limited' (Rostama, 2015: np). Phillip highlighted the memetic response that pasted the Absolute Unit sheep onto a screenshot of Ralph Wiggum on a bus, taken from *The Simpsons* (Figure 49) and asked whether there was a potential risk of the creators of *The Simpsons* homing in on the museum for collecting that memetic response. We discussed the nature of the meme and agreed that despite its obvious brilliance, the cut and paste job on the poor sheep meant it definitely fell into the realm of amateur creativity and that, in reality, the museum would not think about trying to use any memes created for commercial purposes.



Figure 49 – Absolute Unit remixed with *The Simpsons* and posted as a memetic response to the MERL's Tweet by @TheGrandOMalley

I shared information about the European Commission's stance on memes, and how in the lead up to the vote on the 2019 *Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market*, article 13 of the directive was touted by many online commentaries as a 'meme ban'. The claim was that the EU's attempt to place the onus of blocking the upload of Copyrighted materials onto online platforms would lead to memes being blocked. The European Commission directly addressed the issue through an online article stating that they were definitely not banning memes, and that they were protected as they are classified as caricature, parody, or pastiche (European Commission, 2018).

We acknowledged that these memes would continue to live outside of the institution and that what we were collecting was a copy of the meme that already exists on Twitter. Therefore, we agreed that seeking full attainment of the Copyright would not be appropriate as the museum would have no control over the material that was freely available and would continue to be remixed online. We also agreed that just seeking a license to use the meme images for display and research purposes and not commercial use was more appropriate to the specific rules around the remixing of already Copyrighted materials online. Whilst these decisions did not require a remix of policies, procedures, or paperwork, it did shift perspectives that automatically seek to attain full Copyright, acknowledging that this approach to online memetic material was not appropriate. These small shifts all contribute to removing the conceptual barrier to collecting these types of objects.

Transfer of Title

The potential of notions of shared ownership that could be seen through the partners of the CoSoPho project were not picked up by the NSMM. Despite concerns raised over the use of Transfer of Title forms, the decision from Registration was that Transfer of Title forms were still needed to acquire copies of the images that were coming from the MERL and the individual users who produced the memetic responses. As I've already indicated though, we did use a hybrid model that saw the data set and the WARC file as 'made in museum' in discussion with the MERL. Despite that, the more traditional notions of ownership were asserted, where the

museum felt the need to be able to say that they were the owners of the individual digital files that made up the acquisition.

Throughout the project, Nadine had been a key part of Phillip and I's extended inquiry group – always supportive, positive, and open to editing approaches where possible. Our first chance to see how the acquisition was sitting within the context of the NSMM paperwork was just after we'd formally made the decision to move forward with the acquisition as an object rather than archive. Nadine sent the acquisition form to Phillip and me for feedback and, as I read through them, I noted that all the elements of the object were listed together in one form and that it also used SMG's usual wording on ownership that specifies that the 'donor' is the:

Legal owner of the Objects, and is properly entitled to give and transfer title so that the Museum will become the absolute legal and beneficial owner of the Objects free from any encumbrances, charges, options, taxes or licences and will enjoy quiet possession of the Objects⁵¹

I commented that, 'we are not actually asking them for absolute legal ownership. We are asking for permissions to be able to create a digital object from their data and have permission to use their tweet' and asked if there was scope to adapt the wording, but the wiggle room seemed to be limited. I re-drafted the forms and separated the items directly related to the MERL and the memetic responses which were created by different people. The idea was to collect a jpeg from the MERL plus four memetic responses to the MERL's tweet, and I explained how each memetic response would need to be a separate conversation as they are individual works in their own right. We also agreed that the WARC file created using Webrecorder and the dataset created using Twarc would be defined as made in museum. Nadine was on board with the re-structuring of the acquisition forms but stood firm on the idea that we needed to take legal ownership of a copy of the MERL's jpeg of the ram plus the licence to use it; explaining that, 'If we want to collect the MERL jpeg as part of the object then this would mean taking legal ownership of the jpeg.'⁵²

⁵¹ Wording from the Science Museum Group Acquisition form (2020). Pg.3.

⁵² Email correspondence between myself, Nadine, Phillip, Claire and Terri. 19/11/2020.

Although I am slightly disappointed that we did not create the space for a more in-depth conversation about the need for Transfer of Title, I don't want to present it as a criticism of the NSMM or as a failing of Remix Museology. By the time these conversations were possible, we were working to a tight timeframe and there were multiple competing priorities in the wider landscape for both Phillip and Nadine – including a phased return from furlough. I am also keen not to dismiss this as something that could have been easily addressed in more 'normal' times. The requirement to undertake Transfer of Title is a deeply embedded part of the acquisition process. The limited scope for wiggle room is understandable. Although I highlighted the attempts to adopt alternative ownership models by Stockholm County Museum and Aalborg City Archives alongside the scholarship of Marstine (2015; 2017) and Geismar (2008; 2015) on ethical stewardship and guardianship in the [Social Digital Collecting](#) chapter, the focus on ownership, title and Transfer of Title is systemic in museums, encoded into local, national, and international museological frameworks. The acquisition policies of individual museums need to be written in accordance with the national Spectrum Collections Management Standards if the museum is to be eligible for Accreditation status. Spectrum takes its lead from the international ICOM Code of Ethics and both emphasise the Transfer of Title as a minimum requirement of the acquisition process (Collections Trust, 2017a; ICOM, 2017). The Accreditation requirements note that a museum's collections management policies and procedures must be compliant with the Primary Spectrum Procedures (which includes Acquisition and Accessioning) (Arts Council England, 2019: 52) and, without being an accredited museum in the UK, you are automatically ineligible for a whole raft of funding opportunities.

Being able to steer the museum away from using Transfer of Title was definitely something I was interested in pursuing, but to unpick it in a single project that uses methods that seek to make incremental changes was perhaps optimistic. Instead, we created a multi-layered approach to the acquisition that really considered what was necessary to ask for title over – i.e. a copy of an image file – rather than taking a blanket approach to asking the MERL for title to the meme. This didn't remix the notion of ownership in museum collecting but it did begin conversations that could be built upon with more time and directed inquiry.

Remixing ‘quality’ and ‘authenticity’

As we neared the December Collections Board, we were working to finalise our proposal that would be presented for formal approval. Phillip, Nadine, and I met with Nicole Simoes de Silva, Head of Registration, to confirm that our proposal was acceptable from an SMG perspective. As part of this discussion Nicole and I challenged each other to think about quality and authenticity with regards to the jpegs in the acquisition. In the end we agreed a pragmatic approach, and the meeting resulted in a remix of more traditional notions of quality and authenticity.

I argued that in a social media context, quality and authenticity do not necessarily go hand-in-hand and that, in the case of the meme, we had to prioritise the authenticity of the social media object over the quality of the jpeg. Questions of authenticity have been a focus of digital museum discourses for a long time and early work brought together in Parry’s *Museums in a Digital Age* (2010) show that constructive work on the authenticity of digital material was being produced from the late 1990s, with Jennifer Trant arguing that the authenticity of museum objects presented in digital spaces does not hinge on having access to ‘the real thing’ but rather having it presented in an appropriate way for the Internet (1998). Lynch’s work took that further, exploring the notion of authenticity of digital objects. Lynch argued that in the physical world we extend the notion of authenticity to more than just objects – citing ‘authentic’ performances and experiences and suggesting that it is authenticity in this vein that works for digital objects (2000: 318). More recent work from Sarah Kenderdine and Andrew Yip draws out how digital objects (including copies) can have authenticity through immersive exchanges that connect visitors to the histories and traditions of the object (2018: 286). It is within the ideas of authenticity discussed by Lynch and Kenderdine and Yip that I situate my claims about the authenticity of a social media object.

I’ve already addressed how the issue of collecting an authentic social media-based image was also apparent in the CoSoPho project. In the meeting, I highlighted how that project gave a higher status to the quality of the photograph over its authenticity as a photo uploaded and posted on a social media platform. Our focus in the NSMM collecting project was different. We were collecting a Twitter-based meme and the

fact that it was Twitter-based was an important aspect of its significance. In the discussion with Nicole on the collecting method for the jpeg element of the acquisitions, she suggested we get the highest possible quality version of the image sent to us for acquisition. I raised my concern that, in doing so, we would be artificially creating a better resolution image of the sheep than the one the meme utilized. The fact that we were collecting it from Twitter was important – the meme does not exist without Twitter, so therefore to try and collect a higher quality version of the image than was available on Twitter felt wholly inauthentic to me. It would not be reflective of people’s experience of the meme and its histories and traditions within Twitter.

Nicole saw my point but suggested that the last thing the museum wanted to do was collect an image that was poor quality and therefore unusable in exhibitions. The jpeg collected directly from Twitter is 263kb, which is a small image file – usually an image file of 500kb plus would be needed for printing. Although, c.250kb is suitable for showing an image on a screen – arguably the most authentic way of displaying a meme. Despite this, I saw Nicole’s point as she had seen mine and I suggested that we flip the usual relationship of ‘object’ and ‘derivative’ or digitized version, where the derivative is a lower-quality version than the ‘original’ object, on its head. I proposed that we collect and accession the Twitter version and ask for a high-resolution image for display purposes. We agreed that in terms of preserving the most authentic version of the Twitter meme, this was a pragmatic decision that allowed us to also use the image of the hefty ram in a variety of ways as needed in the future. This remix was one that took into account the appropriateness of applying old standards to objects from online environments.

Remix at the NSMM

In practicing what I preach, I believe that Phillip and I managed to make pragmatic and incremental changes to the collecting process at the NSMM, in order to support a more culturally and ethically appropriate acquisition of the MERL’s Absolute Unit meme than we would have done by following the pre-existing conventions, standards and processes. Through identifying resonance in the inclusion of social media in

collections-related work, developing social and collegial relationships, and taking a positive, pragmatic and remix-centric approach to change, I was able to work with the museum to design a process for collecting a meme from a social media platform. As part of that process, Phillip and I worked with colleagues across the NSMM, SMG and the MERL to reconceptualise what a museum object in the NSMM collection could be, beginning to challenge some of the ownership notions that museums apply to their collections and to reconfigure the relationship between quality and authenticity for images from social media.

In our conceptualisation of the MERL's Absolute Unit as an object in the museum's collection we addressed capturing multiple elements of a meme as a bounded event and conceived of them as a single conceptual object. We acknowledged that there was not one single 'collectable' element of a meme that authentically expressed what a meme is; and we worked to push the edges of what an object is to capture the best representation of a meme available to us. The acquisition was greeted with great interest across the museum and was hailed as one of the key acquisitions of 2020 at the NSMM's end of year all staff celebration. For an acquisition that, on paper, challenged the way the museum has generally acquired in the past, there was little to no tension caused in collecting it. This, I want to suggest, was down to the underlying Remix Museology approach undertaken through a collaborative action research project – an approach that sought to incrementally shift perspectives and implement pragmatic changes to established processes in supportive, open, and socially considered ways.

7. Museology Remixed?



Figure 50. 'Expanding brain' or 'Galaxy brain' meme created using imgflip.com.

We've come to the point where it is necessary to draw this thesis together and reflect on remixing museology as an approach to collecting social media in museums. This research project set out to engage with collections management standards in order to develop methods for collecting social media content in museums, and in doing so, developed Remix Museology as an ongoing, pragmatic, and incremental approach to change in collections management. With a professional background in curation and collections management, I came to the PhD with some preconceived ideas about how social media could fit into existing collections management structures. However, through embracing the reflexivity of autoethnography, and settling into the emergent nature of action research, I grew to reorientate my relationship to collections management. Rather than work to devise standardised methods to collect social media as it exists in this current moment, my research developed an orientation towards ongoing, pragmatic, and incremental change in collections management, as a way to enable more appropriate approaches to collecting new and emerging object

types – in my case, social media. This orientation, that I have labelled Remix Museology, is the key contribution of this thesis.

Remix Museology is not the only contribution this thesis makes. It offers arguments for the value of social media collecting; brings a number of innovative social media collecting projects into dialogue with one another; offers new models for thinking about what it means to collect a social media object; and focuses attention on some of the more operational elements of museum practice affected by those new models. It also questions some foundational notions in museum collections management, notably ownership, authority, and authenticity. As well as speaking directly to the field of museology, this thesis is also a result of overarchingly autoethnographic and action research-based case studies. It pays attention to those methodological traditions, whilst reflecting on the value of humour, being honest about feelings of awkwardness and confusion, and highlighting the importance of sociality in productive research and working relationships. Finally, this thesis contributes to scholarship in the emerging area of remix studies, drawing in the field of museology, to situate the products of online remix cultures as museum artefacts. I utilise the concept of remix alongside pragmatism, incrementalism, and action research to think about the nature of change in professional environments.

7.1 Utilising Remix

Throughout this thesis, the concept of remix has been a central feature. My first introduction to remix cultures came from Lawrence Lessig, who described contemporary online cultures as remix cultures where people are encouraged to read, edit, and share the culture they interact with (2008). The way in which I employed remix was further influenced by Martin Irvine's articulation of remix cultures as spaces where there is a need to continually rethink and renew our mode of being (2015); and also by Lev Manovich's explanation of a remix as a composition that consists of previously existing parts, edited and brought together in the creation of something else (2015). Working with these definitions of remix, I incorporated Christina Kreps' *Appropriate Museology* (2008, 2015) – which is a call to develop more flexible, culturally appropriate forms of museum work – into my thinking and began to shape *Remix Museology*. Through exploring the potentials of *Remix Museology*, my research sought to remix museum collections management processes, embed remix-centric approaches to change in museums, and also remix the way in which I communicate my research. My use of remix sits alongside my underlying approach to change, which reflects personal experiences in the sector and is grounded in pragmatism. Remix and pragmatism came together in this research through an action research methodology which recognises the need to be responsive to matters that emerge in highly contingent environments.

In articulating *Remix Museology*, an action research approach, and my experiences experimenting with collecting social media in museums, I have also sought more appropriate forms of writing and communicating my research. By incorporating memes, emojis, moments of informality and instances of humour into this thesis, I have remixed some of the more traditional elements of academic writing.

Acknowledging that memes, as a form of digital folklore, are as opaque to some as they are illuminating to others, I have developed a critical meme and emoji primer to accompany this thesis, as I push the boundaries of normative academic form. My propensity to use humour is deeply embedded in my personal orientation to work, but more than that, it presented itself as a unifying thread in the research; humour is present in the objects I argued museums should collect, in the way in which I

conducted my action research, and in the tone of my writing. As such, the form and the content of this thesis work together, and my writing and use of memes form part of the argument of the PhD – that sometimes, the dominant and established forms of practice are not appropriate for the matter at hand.

Through my remix of academic form, I aim to illustrate that alternative, social and humorous forms of communicating can be just as careful, considered, and rigorous as more formal, highly structured, and traditionally academic forms. My use of memes as miniature mindbombs has added additional layers to my analysis, criticisms, and calls for action. For example, the ‘woman yelling at cat’ (Figure 13) meme was utilised to illustrate the almost forceful way traditional collections management processes get pushed onto digital objects in museums, versus the seemingly obvious – when properly considered – approach of using more contextually appropriate methods for digital objects. This argument could have been made using written text, but the image of Taylor Armstrong yelling at a bemused looking cat emphasises the ridiculousness of the situation in a way that words, on their own, might have failed to capture. Similarly, my use of the stock photo that pictures a person standing on a beach with a large wave coming towards them (Figure 16) to illustrate the Library of Congress’ Twitter collection is a visual reference to the brilliant quote from McLemee (2015) on how the acquisition was like agreeing to store the Atlantic Ocean in a basement, whilst also referencing the unpreparedness of the institution for what it was trying to collect. The meme encapsulated multiple perspectives and comments on the collecting project but could have easily stood on its own as a criticism. The overall tone and mode of communicating in this thesis mirrors my way of interacting in person, and the approaches to working that I have found to be effective in museums.

7.2 Social media as museum objects

From the outset of this thesis, I was clear that my aim was not to formulate a robust argument as to why social media should be collected, but rather to focus on the enabling factors. Yet, highlighting the value of social media as museum objects or artefacts of digital culture came through in [Social media – Y tho?](#), and also through the case studies where I explored the detail of the objects collected by the Museum of London (MoL), the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the Collecting Social Photo project (CoSoPho), and the National Science and Media Museum (NSMM).

In situating social media as digital folklore, an increasingly important site for international diplomacy and as a space where entire professions have developed, I made the case that social media is integral to contemporary digital culture and should be considered important for a range of different museums. But still, identifying what a social media object actually is proved more difficult to pinpoint and articulate. The reality of what a social media object is, or could be, was initially explored in [Breaking ground](#), where I highlighted the social media collecting at the MoL and V&A. At the MoL, the actual object of their Twitter acquisition was a collection of spreadsheets populated with data. At the V&A, the acquisition of WeChat was more complex, made up of an assemblage of an APK file, several GIFs, screen recordings, and drawings on paper. The resulting object collected by the MoL would not have been acceptable as an object for the V&A, and the object collected by the V&A would not have been acceptable for the MoL – the remit of the museums and their curatorial angles influenced the shape of the collected object more than it would have with a physical object. These findings led me to consider the importance of individual museum context for collecting social media; how they needed to be thinking pragmatically about how they collected a social media object rather than following a standardised process. The need for this approach was cemented in my mind as I was critical of the lack of context and authenticity in the social digital photography collected in the CoSoPho project (though I acknowledged that, for the CoSoPho crew, the photo was of primary importance rather than it being a piece of social media content).

The heightened role of curatorial motive over the eventual object influenced the way in which Phillip and I approached collecting the Museum of English Rural Life's (MERL) Absolute Unit meme at the NSMM. We incorporated the concept of Significant Properties as a framework for deciding what elements of the meme needed to be perceptible in the resulting objects. Utilising the Significant Properties that we had agreed on, we created an object that acknowledged the object as a bounded event as well as a snapshot in time. This conceptual museum object challenged the way in which the NSMM normally collects; pushing the role of the curator into one that actively draws the boundaries of an object; and also pushing the collections management structures to address the fact that a single conceptual object was both being acquired and created at the same time.

The meme collected by the NSMM pays attention to the context in which the hefty sheep was shared and the memetic responses that helped ensure its status as a significant iteration of the Absolute Unit meme concept, creating a usable, interactive object. It was collected in discussion with the MERL, after a number of conversations taking into account ethical considerations and informed by projects like *Documenting the Now*. The meme is the first acquisition I am aware of that took the time to address what a meme actually is, how it is encountered and how the experience of seeing or interacting with it in a museum context can be as authentic as possible. Collecting in this way was enabled by my action research, which allowed me to work with Phillip using a Remix Museology approach.

7.3 Developing Remix Museology

Remix Museology is a new form of working with collections management in museums. It combines action research, autoethnography, and pragmatic thinking to devise an approach to collections management that seeks to incrementally transform the way museums acquire and manage collections. In doing this, Remix Museology signals a move away from some of the more foundationalist notions inscribed in sector standards that focus on discrete, ownable, authoritative and unchanging objects, towards more contingent, context specific modes of collections management, which are appropriate for evolving cultural and ethical landscapes, and new and emerging object types.

For me, the process of undertaking the action research has been just as significant as the resultant research findings. The process – from day one, where I responded to the CoSoPho call for participation, to the very end, as Phillip and I celebrated the approval of the Absolute Unit meme acquisition proposal – has all been a part of establishing, fleshing out, defining, and experimenting with the concept of Remix Museology to support collecting new and emerging object types. Remix Museology started as a personal orientation towards working socially and humorously to embed incremental change and developed as I researched more and encountered other approaches like Kreps' *Appropriate Museology* (2008; 2015). The museum-focused discourses I had been working with infused with my reading of Lessig (2008) and my own first-hand experiences as a millennial growing up with emerging remix cultures. As my action research developed and I conducted the reflexive dyadic interviews, I began to see how my burgeoning Remix Museology concept already had real life examples that I could point to in the *Matters in Media Art* guidance (2015) and the Planetary acquisition at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (Chan and Cope, 2014).

In the [Breaking ground](#) chapter, through placing the innovative social media collecting of the Library of Congress and *Documenting the Now* in dialogue with the key findings of my interviews with the MoL and V&A, it became clear that past attempts to collect social media in museums had resulted in a stretching of

collections management structures and people's perceptions of foundational museum work. My discussions with the MoL and V&A unveiled how small remixes had been made to established collections management processes in order to fit the objects into the structures of the museum. The way the acquisitions were managed highlighted incrementalism, experimentation, and sociality as key features of collecting social media.

Remix Museology really began to crystallise as I considered and reflected on my experiences with the CoSoPho project in [Social digital collecting](#). Although CoSoPho did not necessarily establish water-tight methods for collecting social media, the project was a case of Remix Museology in action. Through witnessing and being part of a number of the remixes, I came to be able to better articulate what Remix Museology was. The inclusion of multiple perspectives and knowledges from outside the traditional museum and archive fields; the elevation of sociality through drawing together collecting and outreach; and the re-formulating of some of the power relations in collecting were particularly influential aspects of the project and powerful examples of remixing museological approaches.

By the time I was finishing my work with CoSoPho and reflecting on the project as an example of Remix Museology, I was already pretty deep into my action research with the NSMM and practising what I preach. Through this case study, action research and Remix Museology came to work in a symbiotic form, and my approach to pragmatism and use of action research proved to be significant in allowing Remix Museology to be explored and experimented with at the NSMM. This experimentation led to reconceptualising what an object in the Science Museum Group's collection could be, the incorporation of consent into discussions about acquisition, and a remix of relationship between quality and authenticity for images that saw the NSMM reassess the need to attain 'the best quality' image possible when collecting from social media.

Did adopting a Remix Museology approach completely upend the NSMM's relationship with collecting? No – but it wasn't supposed to. Did it enable incremental shifts in perspectives and practices, influenced by the realities of online cultures that meant the museum collected a meme in a meaningful way? Yes, I argue that it did.

I'm under no illusion that the collecting process is perfect; I am sure that time will present new and more appropriate ways of collecting. But I believe that in adopting Remix Museology, museums will be able to take a remix-centric, incremental approach to collecting that will lead to ongoing, context appropriate transformations in collections management. The acquisition has already been a point of resonance for a range of staff across the Science Museum Group, and Phillip continues to be pulled into meetings with people wanting to collect difficult online-based objects using similar models to ours.

7.4 The future of Remix Museology

It is worth reiterating here that Remix Museology is a philosophical approach to change developed for museum collections management. It is based on principles of pragmatism, incrementalism, and cultural and ethical appropriateness for the context it is being used in. I explored collecting social media using a Remix Museology approach and, through that, I suggested pragmatic and incremental changes appropriate to social media – including changes to ownership models, authority, and authenticity. These issues, whilst linked to cultural and ethical appropriateness, are not core to the fabric of Remix Museology. From the very beginning, this thesis has argued that the ground on which the PhD is situated is moving. During the three and a half years I've been undertaking the research, the museum sector has seen interest in collecting social media skyrocket. Whilst this increased interest has created opportunities for me to experiment with Remix Museology, challenge established ways of collecting, think about alternative forms of ownership, and consider more relaxed approaches to control and authority over objects in museum collections, there is still the risk of new and emerging technologies being used to reinforce established methods.

Even as I write this conclusion, the concept of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) is making waves in the digital art world. NFTs are units of data recorded using Blockchain technology that certify individual digital assets as unique, and they are therefore being hailed for their potential to re-formalise ownership of digital objects. Attempts to utilise NFTs in this way are not necessarily acknowledging that the legal standing of NFTs as proof of ownership is not clear (Rivers Ryan, 2021). Despite this, digital works, including a number of social media and meme-related ones, are being sold for large amounts of money through NFTs. On 19 February 2021, an NFT for a digitally remastered version of the Nyan cat meme sold for \$600,000 (Griffith, 2021). Just under three weeks later an NFT was sold for a digital artwork by Beeple with Christie's auction house for \$69,000,000 (Kastrenakes, 2021). Then a few days later, on 22 March 2021, Jack Dorsey, the founder of Twitter, sold his first tweet as an NFT for \$2,900,000 (Harper, 2021a). Moves to try and use NFTs to assert more traditional notions of ownership in digital assets could prove to be a stumbling block for pushes to try and open up alternative forms of ownership, as has been explored

in this thesis. Although I do not know of any museums trying to use NFTs as a way of collecting born-digital works yet, there is work from scholars like Frances Liddell (2021b) that explores the use of NFTs in museum work in other ways, and I am sure attention will turn to acquisition soon. I would hope that the appropriateness of using NFTs would be seriously considered by museums. Blockchain is, at the moment, a resource intensive and environmentally damaging technology, and foundationalist notions of museums needing to own and have authority over digital objects should be understood as less essential to future museological practices than issues like addressing the climate emergency.

Although ownership has been one of the lines of enquiry through which I have explored the use of Remix Museology in this thesis, working towards alternative ownership models and Remix Museology are not dependent on each other. Therefore, whilst the use of NFTs could be problematic for my desire to adopt more open approaches to ownership, they are not a challenge to Remix Museology as an overarching orientation towards change in museum collections management. Remix Museology, as a contingent model of change, is designed to operate alongside the emergence of new technologies, and the growing interest in NFTs offers further opportunities to explore how Remix Museology could be used to navigate appropriate contextual and ethical considerations for these technologies.

NFTs aside, whether or not individual museums are interested in collecting Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or TikTok is up to them and the staff that design their collecting policies. If a decision is made that the content posted on social media platforms or shared through messaging services like WeChat and WhatsApp is relevant, then museum collecting processes need to be flexible enough to adapt, as the platforms do. By all means, museums could choose to use the same collecting process Phillip and I used to collect the MERL's Absolute Unit at the NSMM. I would argue that we need to be realistic and acknowledge that, while much work was put into developing that process, new technology will soon emerge, and the process will be superseded. Rather than working to create and establish standardised, replicable collecting processes, however, I would argue that the best bet will be to practice Remix Museology as a method of collections management: adopt a way of working that allows processes to be incrementally and pragmatically adapted to ensure they

become, and then remain, appropriate for new and emerging objects, shifting cultures, and evolving ethics.



Figure 51. Barack Obama mic drop sourced from Wikimedia Commons.

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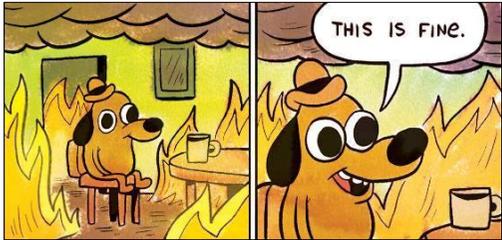
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Appendix 1 - The critical meme and emoji primer

This thesis contains a number of memes and emojis that are used both critically and from a personal perspective. I acknowledge that memes and emojis are at times used in ways that only make sense to certain people – they are both inclusionary and exclusionary tools. This primer has been designed to underscore the meanings and the ways in which I used them in the thesis. I have chosen to use a critical meme and emoji primer that sits in the appendix as I did not want to have to explain the context of each instance of use within the body of the thesis – explaining a joke often kills the joke. However, I do not want the memes and emojis in this thesis to be barriers to engagement with the critical work they are doing. The memes and emojis are listed in chronological order as they appear in the thesis.

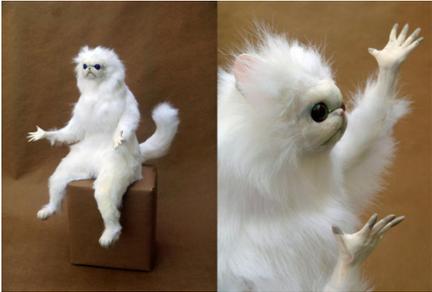
	<p>Drake’s Hotline Bling meme is made up of two stills from the music video to his song, Hotline Bling. In the top image Drake is showing his hand and turning away from something and in the bottom image he is pointing happily. The meme encourages people to put text or images that refers to something bad vs something good in the appropriate boxes.</p> <p>I used this meme in my abstract as part of my argument that following existing acquisition practices for collecting social media was a bad idea, and that remixing them to make them more appropriate was a good idea.</p>	<p>iii</p>
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	<p>The Dolly Parton Challenge (or #DollyPartonChallenge) meme was started by Dolly herself in January 2020 when she posted four different images of herself with the names of different social media platforms below them. The meme plays on the fact that we present different versions of ourselves on different social media platforms depending on what they were initially designed for.</p> <p>I made my own special PhD version that used FAHACS instead of Tinder or Grindr, dating related social media applications.</p>	<p>Pg. 1</p>
	<p>‘Explaining my work’ meme is a generic meme template taken from imgflip.com. Many memes use stock photography and simply apply text over the top and bottom of the image to embed specific meanings.</p> <p>I used this to make a joke about how long and at times complex written acquisition procedures can be in museums.</p>	<p>Pg. 7</p>
	<p>The ‘one does not simply’ meme comes from the <i>Lord of the Rings</i> movies where the character Boromir, played by Sean Bean, says ‘one does not simply walk into Mordor’. I used Anastasia Denisova’s excellent deconstruction of the meme in the body of the text, but I have used many iterations of this meme throughout my PhD and the one that made it into the thesis was my very first.</p> <p>I used it to make light of the fact that collecting social media might sound relatively simple and I am aware of that... but it is in fact pretty complex.</p>	<p>Pg. 19</p>

	<p>Person Tipping Hand emoji. The person tipping hand emoji is usually used to illustrate sassiness and sarcasm.</p> <p>I used it in reference to me saying that I don't like being the centre of attention, but don't mind a little bit of fuss sometimes, whilst expressing a playful queerness with my sassy emoji.</p>	<p>Pg. 25</p>
	<p>This RuPaul gif is what is known as a 'reaction gif'. This reaction gif sees RuPaul Charles in full drag on the reality TV show, <i>RuPaul's Drag Race</i> saying, 'I can't wait to see how this turns out' as contestants on the show compete.</p> <p>Reaction gifs are a form of memetic media that are often used in lieu of words as reactions to a comment or event.</p> <p>I used it as a way of illustrating the types of GIFs and memes that colleagues at the National Science and Media were happy to be able to send to each other over MS Teams as I recounted a moment in the office during my action research.</p>	<p>Pg. 30</p>
	<p>The 'this is fine' meme depicts a dog sitting in a room on fire and is usually used as a reaction to convey a sense of self-denial or acceptance in the face of a hopeless situation. The image is from an issue of the webcomic <i>Gunshow</i>, illustrated by KC Green and published in January 2013.</p> <p>I used it to reflect my state of mind about my research with NSMM as Phillip was furloughed and work on the Absolute Unit acquisition was put on hold.</p>	<p>Pg. 38</p>

	<p>The 'y tho' meme is a remix of the painting Pope Leo X (After Raphael) by Fernando Botero (1964). The meme is from a genre of memes called 'Classical art memes' and uses the phrase 'y tho' (why though?) alongside the painting's aesthetics to create a comical reaction meme – especially when used to react to a scenario that is hard to grasp.</p> <p>I added the text 'museums collecting social media' as a joke referencing those who might think that collecting social media is a pointless endeavour. I am particularly taken with the idea of using something accepted as 'art' to create a meme that playfully interacts with museum collection, which is traditionally associated with art rather than social media and memes.</p>	<p>Pg. 45</p>
	<p>Shocked face with exploding head emoji.</p> <p>This emoji is a depiction of the expression 'mind blown' or 'mindblowing'. It is often used to represent shock, awe, amazement, and disbelief.</p> <p>I used it in reference to the shock of my husband being quoted in the work of an academic who was writing about my subject area... He obviously doesn't understand boundaries.</p>	<p>Pg. 46</p>
	<p>The 'woman yelling at cat meme' is a merger of two separate memes that have been remixed together in to create a new one. In this meme Taylor Armstrong, from the reality TV show <i>The Real Housewives of Beverley Hills</i>, can be seen pointing and shouting at a confused and or smug looking cat sat at a dinner table. The cat's name is Smudge. The meme is normally used to depict forceful, dominant, or aggressive behaviour vs seemingly logical or unassuming ideas that are somewhat bemused at the yelling.</p> <p>I used it to depict dominant collections management standards vs Remix Museology.</p>	<p>Pg. 61</p>

	<p>Nail polish emoji This emoji of nail polish being applied is usually used to depict nonchalance, indifference or a playful smugness.</p> <p>I used it in reference to the V&A's Collections Management System being an award-winning CMS – expressing a playful smugness about it (despite me having many issues with the system) and additionally, as an indulgent expression of my queerness.</p>	<p>Pg. 65</p>
	<p>The 'bubbles girl' meme is a well-used meme where the origins and person depicted is still pretty much unknown. The meme is often used to depict running away from trouble or disaster or being chased.</p> <p>I used it in conjunction with Lessig's Remix Culture to refer to me constantly breaking Copyright law in my daily interactions with digital culture.</p>	<p>Pg. 72</p>
	<p>Winking face emoji This winking emoji is generally used to suggest a joke, hidden meaning, general playfulness or flirting.</p> <p>I used it in a jovial and collegial way when discussing Petrina Foti's work to suggest that collections managers are obsessed with categorising things and also when referencing the 'connect to collect' slogan of the CoSoPho project anthology.</p>	<p>Pgs. 75 & 167</p>

	<p>This 'ocean and person' meme is a generic meme template taken from imgflip.com.</p> <p>I used it as a visual joke to accompany the quote about the Library of Congress agreeing to store the Atlantic Ocean in its basement when it signed its agreement with Twitter. It both represents the Atlantic Ocean (though the water looks far too inviting to be the Atlantic) and also points to the general unpreparedness of the Library for the Twitter archive.</p>	<p>Pg. 96</p>
	<p>The 'Persian Cat Room Guardian' meme is a well-used meme showing a stuffed cat toy that looks quite odd in two different positions. It is usually used to illustrate frustration, disbelief, or an indecisuous situation.</p> <p>I used it edited on top of an image of the WeChat entry on the V&A's Explore the Collections search portal to express disbelief at the lack of cataloguing, images and general description that would help someone understand that the museum has tried to capture a social media platform as an object.</p>	<p>Pg. 114</p>
	<p>Raising hands and party popper emojis.</p> <p>The raising hands emoji is generally used to depict celebration, a joyous event. The party popper emoji is similarly used in celebration, as congratulations.</p> <p>I used this combination of emojis as an extension of the celebration Elisabeth Boogh, Ann-Sofie Nygren and I had during our reflexive dyadic interview over the fact their communications officer had come to incrementally understand the nature of the way the museum was trying to collect.</p>	<p>Pg. 165</p>

	<p>Person Facepalming emoji. The facepalm emoji depicts a person with the palm of their hand against their face and is generally used to represent feelings of frustration, embarrassment, or ineptitude.</p> <p>I used it alongside my comment about buying a Chromebook for work (based on only needing to do light word processing pre-pandemic) and finding out I couldn't use any technical functions like command line tools to help with Twitter collecting experiments.</p>	<p>Pg. 213</p>
	<p>The 'Expanding brain' or 'Galaxy brain' meme is a multi-panel meme often used to illustrate the development or evolution of ideas – most often with sarcasm included, but not exclusively.</p> <p>I used it to open my concluding chapter and depict how my thoughts around Remix Museology had developed. It is slightly tongue-in-cheek, but also illustrates my core argument of the thesis.</p>	<p>Pg. 240</p>
	<p>The Obama mic drop is taken from Barack Obama's final White House correspondents' dinner in 2016. At the end of his speech he said, 'Obama out' and dropped his microphone. The 'mic drop' signals the end of a definitive or grand statement.</p> <p>I used it to end the thesis in what felt like an appropriate way considering the form and content of my writing throughout.</p>	<p>Pg. 251</p>

Appendix 2 – The *Approved* Absolute Unit Acquisition Proposal

**SCIENCE
MUSEUM
GROUP**

COLLECTIONS BOARD

Title of Paper:	Acquisition proposal for the Absolute Unit twitter meme
E or Temp Number:	E2021.0095
Author:	Phillip Roberts & Arran Rees
Method: (bold and underline)	<u>Gift</u> Purchase Bequest Loan to Gift Found in Museum <u>Made in Museum</u> Unsolicited Donation

We are proposing acquisition of a meme created and uploaded to Twitter by the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) on 9th April 2018, comprised of a black and white photograph of a large sheep and the text ‘Look at this Absolute Unit.’

Our collecting methodology uses three different methods, undertaken in close succession to create a suite of items that make up a single acquisition. The proposed items include:

- E2021.0095.1 A **WARC file of the @TheMERL ‘Absolute Unit’ tweet**, capturing visually the replies, number of likes and retweets and memetic responses. File size is less than 40MB.
- E2021.0095.2 A digital **image file of the Exmoor ram photograph** from the tweet. To be captured from Twitter for the authenticity of a tweeted image. File size is less than 300KB.
- E2021.0095.3 A **dataset of the Absolute Unit Tweet** and replies, including metadata (how many likes and retweets etc). This will be in both csv and .json format. The csv file is for readability and the .json format retains the data structure as it is on Twitter. The file sizes of both the csv and json combined is no more than 2MB.

In addition, significant memetic responses to the initial tweet will be collected as image files. These responses appeared in the thread below the MERL’s tweet and so will be captured as part of the CSV and WARC files. These have been selected to capture only responses that add significant value to the acquisition, given the potentially endless series of responses and offshoot threads. Each response transforms the meme format in some way, applying the sheep to another meme template or applying the absolute unit concept to other images. These will be captured as image files to make them usable in exhibition or online contexts.

Proposed responses:

- E2021.0095.4 A meme featuring a painting of a large sheep, posted by @_Clattertrap, alongside a screen grab of the tweet.
- E2021.0095.5 A meme featuring a photograph of a large horse, posted by @JoeDuilio alongside a screen grab of the tweet.
- E2021.0095.6 A meme featuring the Exmoor ram and Ralph Wiggum, posted by @TheGrandOMalley alongside a screen grab of the tweet.
- E2021.0095.7 A meme featuring the Exmoor ram alongside a scrawny sheep, posted by @JShahryar alongside a screen grab of the tweet.

These digital artefacts (WARC file, digital image files, and dataset) will make up the collected meme. This is a cluster of artefacts that we have created to represent a social media event (a tweet and its interactions occurring in time). It is to be considered a discrete object made up of multiple parts.

Tools: The dataset will be created using a social media archiving tool called Twarc. This tool was devised as part of the [Documenting the Now project](#). A select number of individual memes posted in response to the MERL's Tweet will be saved directly from Twitter as media files and collected in dialogue with the users who posted them. The WARC file would be captured using an open-source web archiving tool called [Webrecorder](#). A version of Webrecorder will need to be downloaded and preserved alongside the meme, to ensure that any WARC files remain usable.

Summary/Key Points:

Proposed is a set of digital images and social media data to represent the Absolute Unit twitter meme created by the Museum of English Rural Life, composed of a historic photograph of an Exmoor ram with overlaid text. Our acquisition will comprise the meme image, a dataset of the meme in its context on the MERL's twitter page, and a web recorder file (WARC) of the twitter thread and its replies.

Proposed Collection: NSMM Photographs
Dimensions: Less than 50Mb total
Valuation: £0.07 (nominal value of 0.01 given to each part)

Reason for acquisition:

Summary

The Absolute Unit meme tells a story about the different affordances of photographs and photographic technology. The original analogue photograph sits in the collection of the MERL. Following digitisation, it became a digital photograph visible to the museum social media team. It was posted on social media, giving the digital photograph new context and meaning through the application of the 'Absolute Unit' meme concept. The image of the sheep has since been re-appropriated and applied to other contexts. This is an interesting story about how different technologies have led to a photographic image being recontextualised through the practice of being

memed. It reflects the transformation of photographic images in the digital realm, as exiting images are recontextualised, plagiarised, and remade by popular online image practices.

NSMM has an internationally important photography and photographic technology collection, but no examples of digital or social media-based photographic images. Memes are examples of networked images, transformed through interaction and creativity, and shared by groups of people online. They are a hugely popular form of image culture facilitated through advances in digital technology. The proposed acquisition of the Absolute Unit meme fills a gap in the collection. It allows us to better represent digital photographic culture and helps to connect analogue, digital, and networked photographic media.

This will become a keystone acquisition in SMG's future thinking around digital collecting and online culture. The Absolute Unit meme is a significant artifact in the recent history of photography, quickly spreading across social media platforms and transforming online engagement practices between museums and their audiences. It triggered a wave of creative responses and introduced new types of visual discourse around the concept of an 'absolute unit'. Further, the collecting practices implemented to acquire the meme will create an approach through which SMG can consider acquiring future social media artefacts, digital photography, and other digital acquisitions. Institutional commitment to its preservation as a digital object within the public collections will create precedent for digital collecting initiatives across the group and allow us to develop a working approach to collection and preservation of digital artifacts.

This acquisition fits our collecting policy to acquire key examples of photographic and imaging technology. Digital photography is a collecting priority for our next phase of collections development and is poorly represented in our collections at present. We hold no accessioned examples of digital photographic images, nor any collections relating to social media or memetic culture.

Memes and photography

Digital photography is now the dominant form of photographic practice and memes are a key mode for using and disseminating digital photographic (and graphic) content. Memes come in many different formats, but image-based memes are the most widespread; they are user-created, shared and remixed images. Memes established a new approach to photographic distribution that exists apart from normal photographic practice. They require none of the normal technical competencies to produce and can be circulated through easily accessible digital distribution platforms. Contemporary memes speak to the political photocollages of the 1930s, but with a massive increase in scale and accessibility. They provide powerful social commentaries on political and cultural life, exploring often complex ideas in humorous ways. Memes are self-referential and speak to patterns and approaches across meme culture. This cross communication between memes is a powerful and unique facet of meme culture, as single images speak to a wider universe of circulating images.

What even is a meme?

Internet memes are primarily visual and textual objects created, shared, edited and reshared through a variety of online platforms, networks and communities. According to meme scholar Ryan Milner, memes rely on participation by reappropriation; created collectively and transformed by large numbers of cultural participants. They are increasingly recognised as some of the most fundamental aspects of contemporary digital culture.

Why this meme?

There are several reasons to make the Absolute Unit meme our first digital photographic acquisition. It presents an integral digital photographic story through its journey from photographic negative to global internet meme. The Absolute Unit meme tells the story of a photograph – running through negative, print, digital reproduction, social media circulation, and numerous remixed variants. It shows the spread of contemporary digital images as it shifts rapidly between different forms and purposes. Indeed, this was the case even in the analogue era, when photographs quickly became print media or billboard advertisements. But museum collections do not respect the boundary-crossing life of photographs. Most pretend that photographs are irreducible artworks, even when we know they are not. For our museum, concerned with the technological and cultural life of photography, individual works must speak to many further uses and forms across media culture. This means that we must find ways to represent digital image culture and the ways that it has seized and changed photography.

The original tweet was significant in terms of its reach. It has been retweeted over 30,000 times, liked more than 100,000 times and received almost 800 direct replies. The image of the sheep inspired a wide range of memetic responses, including a notable one from Tesla CEO Elon Musk. The meme has been documented by established and well-respected meme documentation website knowyourmeme.com as a noteworthy instance of the Absolute Unit meme concept. It remains one of the most significant and famous examples of meme culture in the UK.

The memetic response from Elon Musk came around one year after the initial tweet and highlights another important feature of memes on social media platforms. The meme had a resurgence through Musk's interaction with it and marks a secondary strand of the meme's life. This resurgence makes the Absolute Unit meme an even more interesting test case as we can explore how to document and record iterations of a meme after the initial capture that forms the acquisition.

Challenges

The challenge for future curators and archivists of digital culture will be in preserving dynamic and ephemeral image content. Memes exist in a changing ecosystem of images and ideas. Their meaning and function is always changing in relation to the wider meme discourse. Any collecting programme will be capturing memes and digital content at a particular moment in time.

This meme is not a stable photographic work. We are not proposing that the museum collect this meme as an object in a literal sense, but as a curated digital artefact. We are building a curated dataset to represent a meme existing within the digital world. **Our data will document and preserve the meme as it was at a particular time** and as it related to its wider social media discourse.

Despite the challenges, there remains a strong need to collect. Digital photographic content is a ubiquitous part of everyday life but there are few places within the museum and archival sector set up to preserve it. These images are ephemeral. They exist on social media platforms and websites, but their continued existence is not guaranteed. We have already lost much of the early web's photographic, graphic, video, and audio content through [loss of platforms and data](#). Preservation of such significant and vulnerable content cannot be left to corporate interests. They require a museum of science and media to guarantee their survival. As such, we propose this meme as both a significant acquisition in its own right and as a means of formalising an approach to digital collecting and preservation.

Collecting Process

[A step-by-step guide detailing the process of creation and acquisition is provided as an appendix].

Social media has a dual function as both a lived digital sphere with interactions in real time, and as an archival record of previous interactions. As such, this meme could be considered both an archival record of an online event and an object created as part of an online event.

We propose that the meme should be considered a **digital object within the NSMM Photographs collection**. The object will be created through a data capture process resulting in a WARC file, a jpeg image file, and a CSV and JSON format dataset. The creator of the meme (the MERL) will be contacted for permission to acquire the meme and it will be recorded as a gift, to reflect that they are freely offering us ownership of a copy of their digital content.

Based on conversations so far, the MERL has indicated that they will agree to NSMM being granted all necessary permissions as part of a licence to use the object under a standard non-commercial copyright agreement (similar to other image collections where copyright is held by an external party).

[Note: Alternately, the Absolute Unit meme could be considered a discrete archival collection. In acquiring the meme as an archive we would have the option of using established archival processes like accruals to capture and acquire further resurgences of the meme and describe the relationship between them. This may become a preferable option in the future, should further meme collecting initiatives take place. In the first instance, we propose treating the meme as an object and entering it into MIMSY, but we should look to review this in line with future acquisitions across SMG].

Permissions and ownership

As this will be a museum-created object **we are not legally required to seek permission to hold this meme, but we are ethically bound to make reasonable efforts to secure appropriate levels of permissions**. All data will be newly created by us from freely-available content on the Twitter platform and at WARC file will be created without logging into Twitter, reducing the influence of individually tailored algorithms and any potential risk of seeing content from locked account. All Twitter users have the option to hide their content using various security and privacy features like locking their account. Whilst we consider that users' decision to not utilise these features constitutes agreement that their tweets be freely viewed by all, we also acknowledge that they may not have thought their tweets might be captured. Each of the replies captured visually in the WARC file have been read and a judgement had been made that the risk for potential harm, offense and personal data breach is low. During the creation of the WARC file, the Twitter page that explains why some Tweets are not visible has also been captured to provide more context.

Our creation of a new digital artefacts to record interactions occurring on twitter are new recordings of exchanges taking place in a public forum. The capture does not record individual accounts beyond their reply, twitter handle and thumbnail image. This is low risk data collecting and should not breach GDPR rules because it does not capture any sensitive information about individuals.

While it may be possible to hold the meme without agreement from its creator, we have no legal ownership over its copyright. [Twitter's terms of service](#) allows users to retain copyright of created content, under the agreement that Twitter receives a non-exclusive, royalty-free license to exploit any content on its platform. This does not infringe on users' rights to exploit their own content or to offer

it to others under license. Without permission, the museum has limited rights to exhibit content through fair use exemptions, but we may not reproduce or commercially exploit it.

Although permission is not being sought from every user who replied to the initial Tweet, we will seek to secure permission to collect and use the identified memes responses. We feel that collecting the specific meme responses requires a more direct level of informed consent to be in line with the museum's high ethical collecting standards. Our approach will be to seek consent from the content creators to capture the data. **The creators will be asked to allow ownership of a copy of the image file to the museum, but not the IP rights.** We will seek only non-commercial rights to use the memes, treating them as Creative Commons works as far as possible. Retaining free access to the works for further reuse and reappropriation is in keeping with the underlying principles of meme culture.

We will record the acquisition as a gift from the creators.

Storage and Access

We propose that usable copies of the digital files are made. Those copies will become what is accessed when interacting with the object, with the originals stored as a safeguarded preservation master. Master and access copies are one of the basics of digital preservation that the museum will be able to implement even without full digital preservation infrastructure in place.

Original and backup preservation copies of the datasets and images will be stored in a restricted location on the SMG servers. Backups will be securely stored using an external cloud computing service, in line with other secure storage approaches used by ICT. Checksums will be used to check the authenticity of the digital files.

Access copies will be broken into two categories: online access through the SMG collections search, and on-site access at the museum.

Online access will be led by the catalogue record in Mimsy. MIMSY will document the meme, breaking down the acquisition into its constituent parts within the description field and providing a representative image. This will be accessible through collections online. Further representative images of the meme will be stored on Media Library, where it can be accessed for marketing, online content, reproductions, etc. There are no plans to make the CSV or WARC files publicly available online.

On-site access (including remote working using the VPN) will treat the different parts of the meme separately. The csv and WARC files will be stored as archival access copies on the NSMM shared drive.

The WARC file will need additional software (Webrecorder player) in order to access it. This is free and open-source software that will be downloaded at the point of acquisition. The software runs on windows, mac, and linux operating systems without the need for Internet access. Access will be provided through Insight, as with the physical collections. A laptop or desktop with software to access the WARC file will need to be provided (longer term this could be facilitated online or remotely, but we have no plans to arrange this at present).

Display

Capturing both an image and WARC file allows flexibility for display in both online and gallery spaces. The image file can be reproduced as a physical still image for display, hosted on collections online, or in a digital exhibition to represent the graphic properties of the meme. The WARC file allows us to display the meme in its online context, showing the Twitter interface and allow users to scroll down

the twitter thread, as in its original environment. This could be hosted online or displayed on gallery on a tablet or touchscreen.

As SMG's collection of digital objects grows it will be necessary to invest in a stock of appropriate touchscreen devices to display interactive digital artworks.

Contextual information

The aim of our approach is to record the meme and its effects, as a social media event taking place as an interaction between different users. This is why we will acquire an image, WARC file, dataset, and memetic responses to represent the meme in its totality. Further contextual information outlining the wider story of the meme and its impact will be assembled and stored in a tech file. This will be stored in printed form, with the other hardcopy tech files in the NSMM documentation store, and in digital format alongside the object, and clearly demarcated as contextual information.

Proposed tech file contents:

- [knowyourmeme](#) entry on the absolute unit meme
- Articles by Arran Rees on meme collecting
- Press articles on the absolute unit meme
- Press articles on Elon Musk's intervention
- Blogs by the MERL on its social media strategies
- Blogs by the MERL about the absolute unit meme's history
- Blog by NSMM about our meme collecting experiment
- Archival reference number and information for the original image in the MERL collection
- Copy of the acquisition proposal and collecting methodology

Source (including address): Meme created by The Museum of English Rural Life; data captured from <https://twitter.com/TheMERL/status/983341970318938112>

Owner (including address):

Absolute Unit meme: The Museum of English Rural Life, Reading, UK

Responses: @_Clattertrap /@JoeDuilio /@TheGrandOMalley / @JShahryar

Due Diligence: (e.g. history of the object, donor has right to donate/sell, no illegal import/export)

This absolute unit meme was tweeted by the Museum of English Rural Life official twitter account (@TheMERL) on 9th April 2018, then managed by the museum's Social Media Manager Adam Koszary. The tweet used a digitised photograph drawn from the museum's collections and a memetic template taken from an earlier meme cycle—appending the photograph with the text: 'look at this absolute unit.'

The photograph first appeared in Farmer and Stockbreeder Magazine and was collected by the museum as part of a wider collection of photographs from the publication. The original was taken as a film negative and printed. This print is what is held in the museum collections. The print was later digitised and held with the museum's digital image collections.

The memetic template used in the tweet was first devised on 13th December 2017 by a Twitter account called Sad Lad Socialist (@mrreptoid), who presented a photograph of British hotelier David Morgan-Hewitt and Queen Elizabeth appended with the text: 'in awe at the size of this lad. absolute unit.' Morgan-Hewitt is a very large man. Other social media users then began to adopt similar templates,

appending large or rotund people, animals, or objects with variations on the phrase ‘absolute unit’. The cycle spread widely over the next few years.

Copyright of the sheep image is jointly held by the Museum of English Rural Life and Farmer and Stockbreeder (now Farmers Weekly). The MERL have an historic agreement to use the images for both commercial and non-commercial purposes. Copyright of the meme is held by The Museum of English Rural Life.

We consider the meme to be a new creative work and therefore having new Copyright. The Twitter Terms and Conditions grants ownership of content posted on its platform to the user who posted it (assuming they had legal right to the content in the first place), whilst also claiming a non-exclusive licence to use. This means it has the right to use the content itself, but it does not stop others using it too. Sad Lad Socialist holds no rights over the absolute unit template, as subsequent iterations of memes are protected as a Copyright exception under Parody. The European commission has recently issued a [communication](#) clarifying the right to create and circulate memes as a form of creative expression.

NSMM has captured the tweet as a data set directly from Twitter using three different methods. The files created will be owned by the museum. This data will be a dataset (held in both csv and json file formats), a selection of image files, and a WARC file. Copyright ownership of the content will remain with The Museum of English Rural Life.

The dataset was captured through the Twarc application – an open-source tool developed as part of the [Documenting the Now](#) social media archiving project. The tool will deliver the data in JSON format and that will be converted to csv, which is a more access-friendly format. It is not possible to access Tweets as far back as 2017 directly through the current version of the Twitter API.

Each individual user retains copyright ownership of new image-based memetic responses and creative works. Permission for each individual work we acquire as part of a set of memetic responses will be sought as part of the accession process.

The WARC file captures replies and responses from other Twitter users. Their replies are shown within the visual context of Twitter and only publicly available Tweets are captured. The surface level capturing of public comments with their usernames shown gives sufficient acknowledgement and the museum’s capturing of the information would fall under fair use. This is in line with the quotation exception under Copyright law.

Further content and information on the tweet and its impact (e.g. from Know Your Meme, the MERL blog) will be copied as contextual information. This will form part of the technical file and is not considered part of the acquisition. The technical file will be both digital and printed physical format. Copyright is retained by the authors. NSMM takes no ownership of this material.

Potential hazards: None

Collections Services considerations:

This acquisition is proposed with the understanding that the SMG Conversation team do not have digital preservation specialists that can advise on conservation requirements. A digital preservation manager is currently being appointed by SMG. Responsibility for the preservation and ongoing accessibility of the meme will sit with them, rather than the Conservation department.

SMG does not currently have a dedicated digital preservation system (although this is considered an institutional priority). There are processes that can be put in place while a Digital Asset Management System and digital preservation strategy are being developed. This will ensure safety and stability of the meme and provide a good level of care for the digital objects over the immediate term.

Server space will be required to store the data. This will be located on a secure drive on a shared SMG server with a regular backup regime. Additional preservation and access copies will be made and stored in different locations and checksums will be created to ensure the files remain unchanged. The checksums will be used to ensure the integrity of the file and also to check for any signs of damage. A checksum can be created on most PCs and is a long set of numbers and/or characters that allows the computer to check whether the file has changed in any way since the checksum was created. More information can be found [here](#).

The MERL meme will be catalogued on MIMSY, with each file described as individual parts. The memetic responses will be recorded with separate acquisition numbers and grouped together with the MERL meme.

Impact Assessment

	Complexity	Additional resources?	Notes	Initial
Conservation	N/A	N/A	Conservation accepts no responsibility for the preservation of this object	GF
Registration	High		Storage and copyright comments clarified. Support adding to Mimsy. Confirmed method of acquisition and management.	NL
Digitisation	High	Digital Preservation Manager (starts summer 2021)	There are both cataloguing and digital preservation aspects that still require development to manage Digital objects well. This acquisition presents a practical example to work through some of the challenges to help develop sustainable approaches. There are adequate interim solutions available to allow acquisition now.	AH
Archive	High/Med/Low			
ICT	High/Med/Low			

Cost of Acquisition: No acquisition costs, but there will be initial storage costs prior to the implementation of an SMG Digital Asset Management System

Recommendations: Acquire

Appendix 3 – The NSMM Meme Collecting Method

Collecting methodology – The Absolute Unit meme

Document author: Arran Rees

The acquisition was undertaken through a three-stage process in order to capture and document the Twitter meme and some of its memetic responses. The process created a dataset, a web archive file and a set of image files designed to represent the meme which is in itself quite an abstract thing.

This document outlines the processes used in order to capture the dataset and WARC file. The images were captured using the simple right click and save as function directly from Twitter.

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Software / Applications / Digital tools:

Twarc



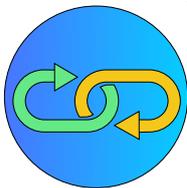
Twarc is a command line tool used to download Twitter data. It was designed as part of the [Documenting the Now project](#) which sought to capture Twitter content for archival and research purposes. The software is open source and available on [GitHub](#).

Twarc download the data from Twitter in a JSON format (which is structured hierarchical data). In order to get this in a more readily readable format it can be converted into csv and opened within spreadsheet applications.

In order to use Twarc to access the Twitter API you need a [Twitter Developer account](#) which can be applied for and linked to your own account. This was a relatively easy process that I was able to do without being an overly technical person. You then need to create what is known as an 'app' which will give you a number of passwords that will allow you to link your Twarc installation with your Twitter Developer account.

During the Absolute Unit meme acquisition Twarc was installed and used on a Mac, but it can be used on Windows too.

Webrecorder



[Webrecorder](#) is a desktop application used capture interactive websites and 'replay' them as authentically as possible. It was created as part of a research project by [Rhizome](#), who also run a hosted version of it called [Conifer](#). The decision was made to use the desktop version as there is no reliance on a third party in doing that. The software is open source and available on [GitHub](#).

Webrecorder created a web archive file called a WARC. The WARC can be opened using the Webrecorder Player which is also available on [GitHub](#) and can be used offline once installed.

The creation of the WARC file for the Absolute Unit meme acquisition was done using a Mac, but Webrecorder can be used on Windows too.

Method:

Dataset

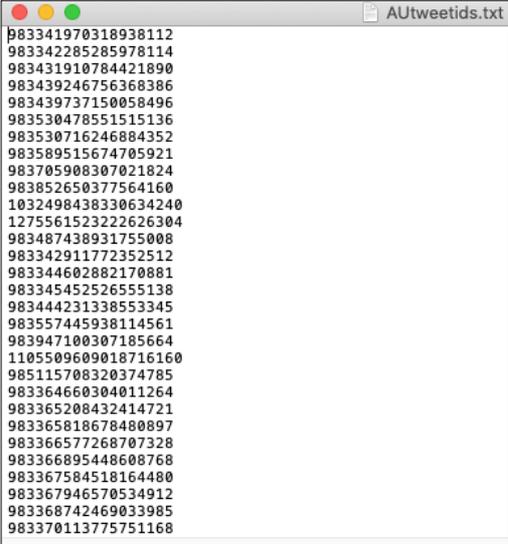
The creation of the dataset for this acquisition was quite time consuming as the Tweet in question is not easily accessible through the usual Twitter API calls due to its age. Therefore, in order to access the Tweet and the subsequent replies the Tweet ID of each of the responses needed to be individually recorded.

Identifying the tweets to be captured

The URL of a Tweet looks as follows:

<https://twitter.com/themer/status/983341970318938112> - the Tweet ID is the long string of numbers at the end. The Tweet ID for the Absolute Unit meme tweet is 983341970318938112.

In order to capture the data from Twitter using Twarc the Tweet ID of every response we wanted to document needed to be captured. This was done manually, and the IDs were copied into a basic text file (using Notepad or something similar and saved as a .txt file), with each ID on a new line (see Fig 1).



```
983341970318938112
983342285285978114
983431910784421890
983439246756368386
983439737150058496
983530478551515136
983530716246884352
983589515674705921
983705908307021824
983852650377564160
1032498438330634240
1275561523222626304
983487438931755008
983342911772352512
983344602882170881
983345452526555138
983444231338553345
983557445938114561
983947100307185664
1105509609018716160
985115708320374785
983364660304011264
983365208432414721
983365818678480897
983366577268707328
983366895448608768
983367584518164480
983367946570534912
983368742469033985
983370113775751168
```

Figure 1 - Tweet IDs of the Absolute Unit tweet and replies

Set up Twarc

To set up Twarc for the first time you will need to follow the instructions on GitHub. You will need to use the Command Line window (called Terminal on Mac) and connect to your developer account. All the steps of the configuration are on the GitHub page.

Hydrate the IDs

When the setup is complete the next task is to 'Hydrate' the Tweet IDs captured earlier. The hydration process is what gathers all the information from the Twitter API and structures it in JSON data format.



Figure 2 - Screenshot of the Hydrate section on Twarc's GitHub page

In this case the command was 'twarc hydrate AUtweetids.txt > AUtweets.json'. This tells Twarc to hydrate the Twitter IDs in the file AUtweetids.txt and save them in JSON format in a file called AUtweets.json

You now have the Twitter data in the file that has been created for you called 'AUtweets.json'. There are JSON viewer tools online that allow you to see the data in a structured way. I copied and pasted the JSON data from the file into the viewer <https://jsonlint.com/>. It turns the screenshot on the left to the one on the right. I then converted the json file to a csv file and opened it in a spreadsheet to get more easily readable data. To convert the file, I used <https://json-csv.com/>

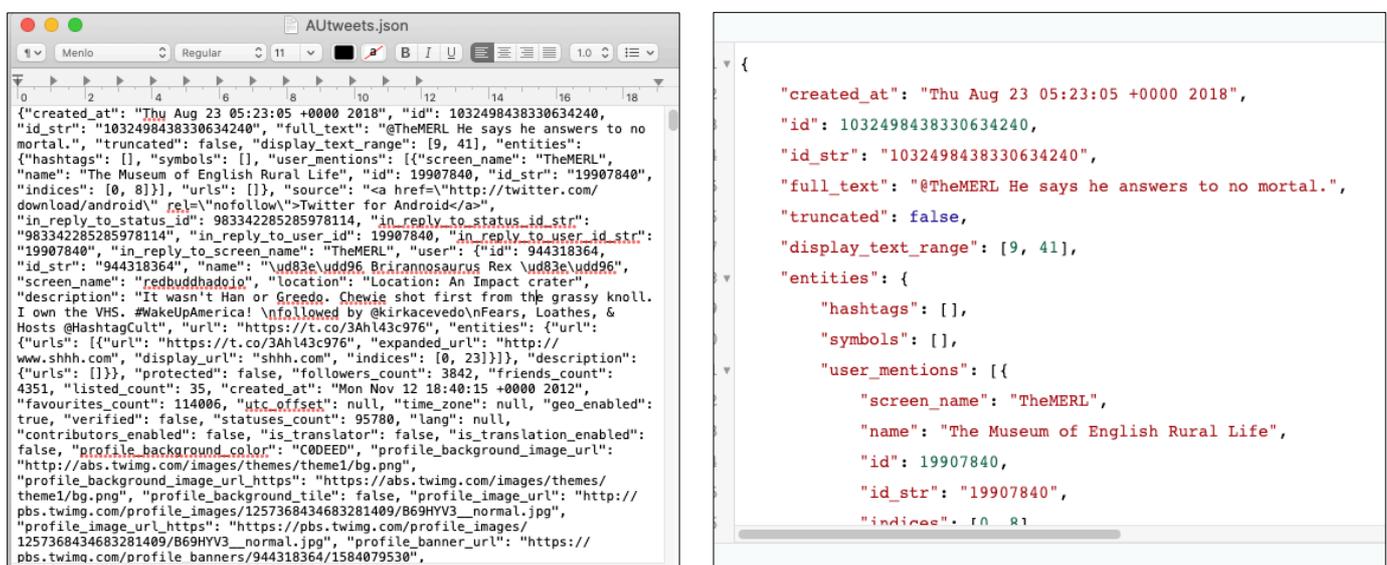


Figure 3 - The raw json data and then the formatted json data in the online json data viewer

WARC file

The creation of the Web archive in the WARC file format used the Webrecorder application and required it, as well as the Webrecorder player to be downloaded from GitHub. They can both be downloaded as packages, so they get installed in a more user-friendly way than Twarc.

The process for recording individual tweets using the Webrecorder tool can also be very time consuming and requires a relatively good and stable Internet connection.

Installing Webrecorder

Webrecorder can be downloaded and installed from the GitHub page. Select the package you want to download depending on your operating system and follow the onscreen instructions for installation.

Webrecorder Desktop App

The Webrecorder Desktop App is a complete packaging of [Webrecorder](#) hosted service as an Electron application, with an integrated Chromium browser.

It includes the same functionality available on [Webrecorder.io](#) running as a local app, including the new [Autopilot](#) feature.

All data captured is stored in a local directory on your machine, in `Webrecorder-Data` in your Documents directory.

Webrecorder Desktop can be downloaded below or from [Releases](#)

OS X	Windows (64-bit)	Windows (32-bit)	Linux
.dmg	.exe (64-bit)	.exe (32-bit)	.ApplImage

Note: Running on Linux requires installation of Redis, available as a package on most distros. OS X and Windows versions come with a bundled version of Redis.

Figure 4 - The download options for Webrecorder on GitHub

Starting a Webrecorder session

When you open Webrecorder you will need to create an account and from there you will be able to start capturing web pages. The homepage will look like figure 5 below and I have annotated

The URL of the webpage you want to start the capture from. This is the direct URL to the MERL's Absolute

You can preview what the start of the capture will look like to just jump right in by clicking Start Capture.

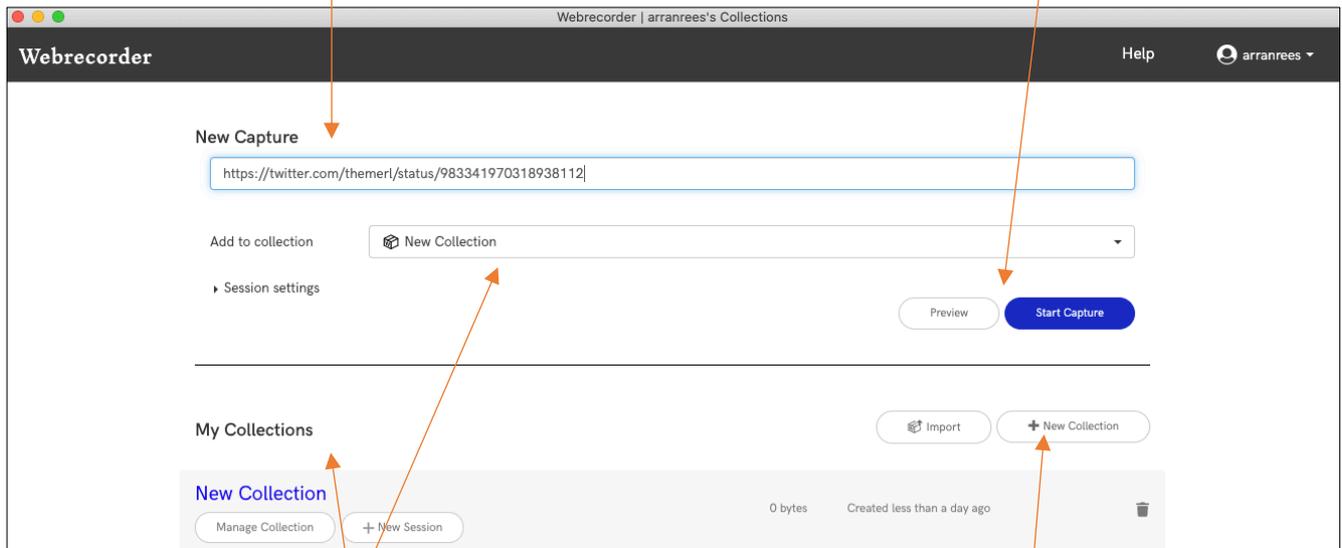


Figure 5 - Home screen of the Webrecorder desktop application.

The 'New Collection' that has been created will be shown at the bottom of the screen and should also be selected as the 'collection' you want to add to before you start the

You need to create a 'collection' that you will be capturing the webpages, media and links of.

Recording Twitter

Once you land on the Tweet after starting the capture you need to begin systematically clicking on all the links you want to record.

As you click on tweets and expand them you will see the size of the Web Archive increasing in the top left-hand corner where it tells you how much has been captured.

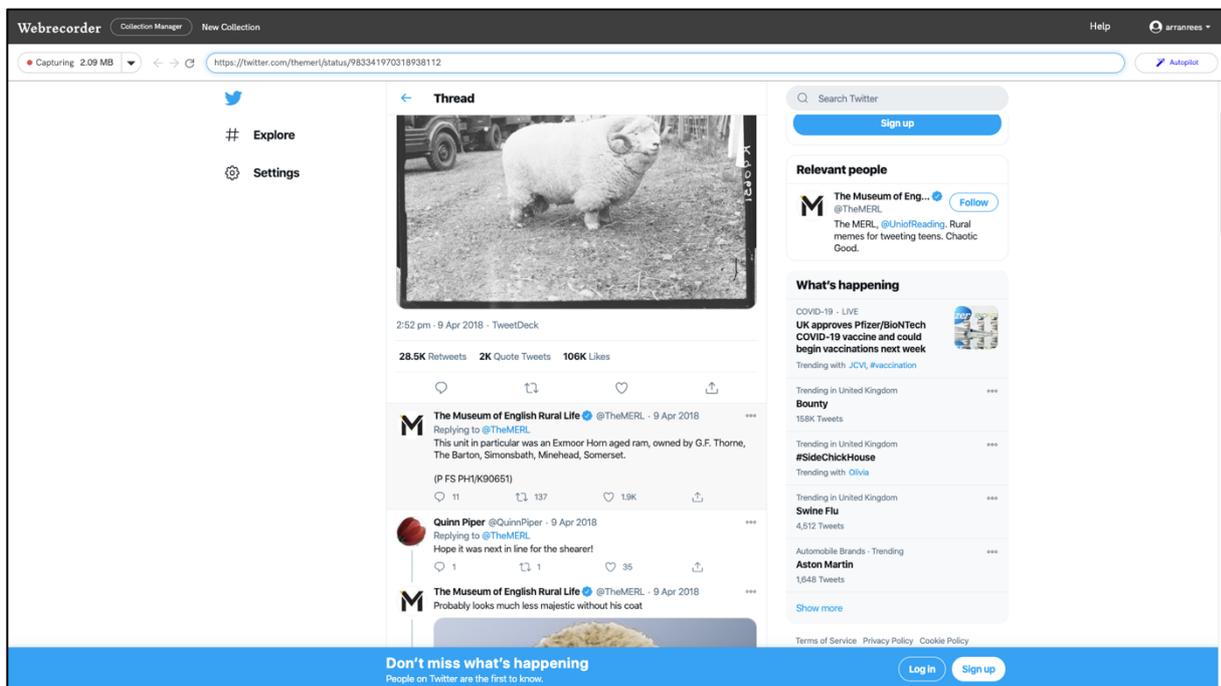


Figure 6 - The capturing process

There is an option to autopilot the recording (seen on the top right of the figure 6) of the Twitter timeline but I found this to be glitchy. It would be worth trying again as it could save a lot of time.

Webrecorder works by capturing the links – backwards and forward between dynamic webpages. When recording Twitter it is important to enact and capture any clickable link or interaction you want to feature in the WARC file. This includes expanding images, clicking on notices and moving between different tweets in a thread.

It is difficult to fully explain so I would recommend spending some time doing a test capture so you become familiar with the ways in which you need to navigate the timeline to capture the interactivity you want captured.

To finish the recording, you click on the 'capturing' button on the top left and select 'Stop'.

Testing the capture

Once you stop the capturing process you are taken to a screen as shown in figure 7. Here you can click on the links to test how well the capturing process has worked.

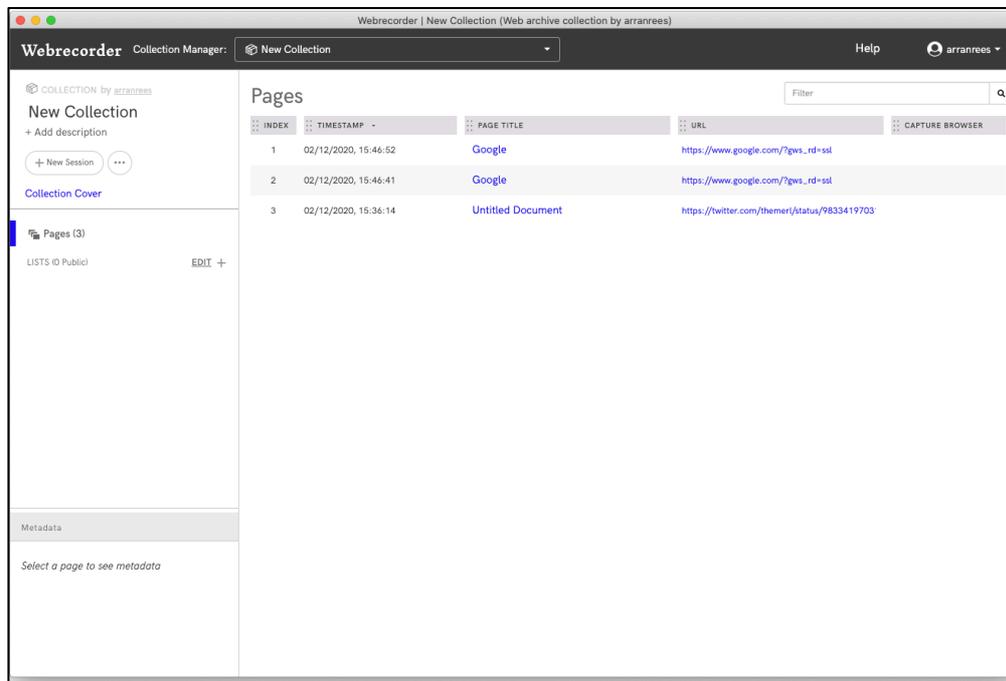


Figure 7 - Screenshot of the recorded links made during the capturing process

If when testing the capture you find that a link was not captured properly or you want to capture another feature on the page you have option of 'patching' the page.

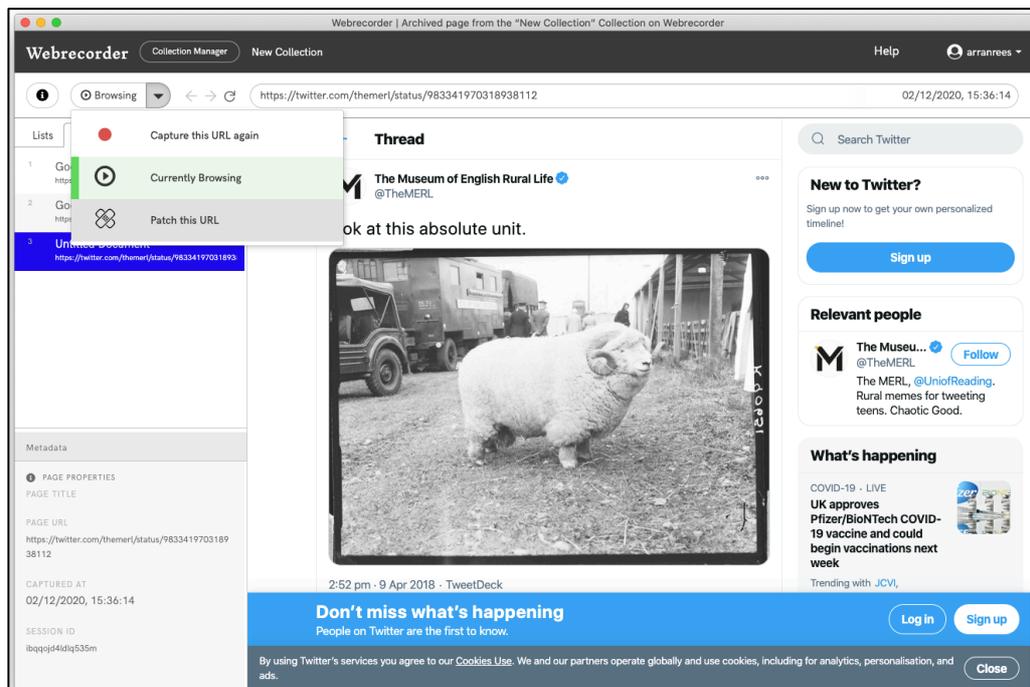


Figure 8 - The option of patching the URL if a link was not recorded properly.

Once happy you are able to export the Web archive as a WARC file.

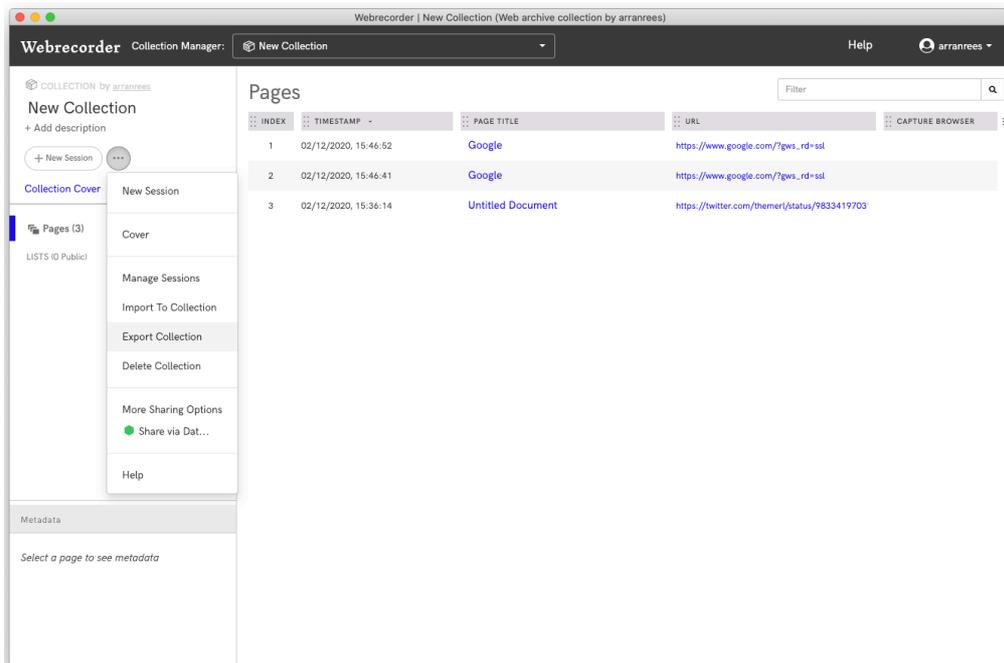


Figure 9 - The Export Collection option that creates the WARC file.

The WARC file can then be opened using the Webrecorder player application and used without an Internet connection.