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Building a Collection of Contemporary Urban Material Culture

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INTRODUCTION

BUILDING A COLLECTION OF CONTEMPORARY URBAN MATERIAL CULTURE

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THE FIELD MUSEUM

The articles in this collection were originally presented at the Urban Material Culture Initiative symposium held at DePaul University from June 14 to 16, 2011, under the auspices of the Field Museum of Natural History (Field Museum) and the Department of Anthropology of DePaul University. The Field Museum has recently embarked on an ambitious new collection effort around a discernable gap in the museum's holdings: contemporary and urban material culture. The collecting of urban material culture should be considered by a broad array of natural history and anthropology museums for the simple reason that urban populations now represent the majority of people on earth. If museums are to speak to current and future cultural patterns, we will need to include documentation of urban dwellers' lifeways. The Field Museum program hopes to be an experiment from which other museums can learn, but we anticipate that other museums will shape urban collecting in their own way.

The Field Museum's anthropology collections, comprising over a million artifacts, reflect a varied approach to collecting. The core of the collection was amassed during the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, under the direction of Edward Ayer. After the fair, until the early 1930s, wealthy business owners and their families sponsored a series of expeditions and archaeological surveys to Africa, parts of Asia, the South Pacific, and North and South America that led to the significant growth of the collections (Haskin et al. 2003). Until the 1960s, collection strategy was driven by the prevailing theories of "salvage anthropology" and evolutionary anthropology. Salvage anthropology proposed that museum collections safeguard the material record of vanishing cultures of non-Western peoples—their art and their tools of

everyday life. Evolutionary anthropology proposed that the material record of the past would guide the understanding of human progress in distinct geographic regions (Fowler 2003).

By the 1960s, as anthropology began to "decolonize" itself (cf. Harrison 1997), anthropologists in museums began to shift their focus away from the evolutionary and salvage-era perspectives and undertake more systematically rigorous studies of material culture. The curatorial attention also turned toward collection of non-Western art, but the predominant focus of collection was on archaeological material—however, now guided by theories that focused on documenting cultural history or site-specific change (the "new" processual archaeology—cf. Nash and Feinman 2003; Wilcox 2003). The "ethnological" collection stagnated. Funding for large-scale collections expeditions dwindled after the Depression and World War II, and most nonarchaeological collections came from donations by private individuals or the episodic collection of art from Oceania, Africa, Asia, and Native North America by curators. The acquisition of artifacts, albeit not wedded to now discarded theories of salvage and evolutionary anthropology, nevertheless was still focused on the colonial geographies that located collection practice since the founding of the museum. Since the 1990s, the curators have largely been archaeologists with an interest in research rather than building new collections. In reality, it became difficult to collect archaeological material as countries placed restrictions on the taking of cultural patrimony and archaeological ethics became more attuned to national sensitivities. The current focus of much archaeological collection is on the acquisition of raw materials (stone, pollen, soil, et cetera) to trace origins of artifacts and gain insight on trade and production strategies as well as on human ecology. This innovative turn in collections strategy reflects the theoretical turn in archaeology and the availability of sophisticated analytical tools beyond dating technologies.

We also acknowledge that there has been a great deal of attention focused on the nature of collecting by museum practitioners and scholars. The existing literature encompasses definitions of collecting (MacDonald 2006), forms of collecting (e.g., by private individuals, museums, and other institutions; Belk 2006; Shelton 2006), and the manner of collecting

(Rhys 2011). The collecting protocols and specific program suggested in the articles in this special issue follow historical practice but also suggest new directions that take into account the complexity of capturing urban lifeways.

The anthropological–ethnological collection at the Field Museum, meanwhile, remains in a quandary. The focus on geographic area (or culture area) is increasingly problematic for understanding current patterns of social organization, social structure, and human–environment relationships. This is not to deny the continued vibrancy and dynamism of the diverse cultures represented in the collections, but it is to recognize that the collections must reflect the profound change in how these cultures are interacting with each other and with the global capitalist economy—to recognize, in Anna Tsing’s (2005) characterization, the friction(s) generated in the current moment. Although the peoples of Native North America, South America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania have continued craft production and the production of objects of everyday use outside of mass manufactured production, these objects have entered the global commodities flow. They do not seem as tied to specific localities, although the locale might still inform their aesthetic. To collect objects that have been historically collected at the Field Museum still requires a shift in perspective and approach.

The Field Museum is a natural history museum, with a significant anthropology collection acquired under colonial and near-colonial conditions in the 19th and 20th centuries. Precisely because we seek to “move on” from this colonial legacy, we need to collect differently than we did in the past. In addition, we feel a responsibility to reflect local life (e.g., Chicago) in the collections. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the museum was dedicated to documenting natural and cultural change but had ignored the change occurring immediately outside its building in the city of Chicago. The material culture of the First Gilded Age, the Prohibition Era, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Post-War Boom years were largely housed at the Chicago History Museum—where, until the 1990s, the focus was on collecting the history of Chicago’s elites. Anthropological curation of urban social life was thus conspicuously absent. Wali committed her resources to filling this gap. She aimed to establish a collection

program of contemporary materials with the potential to index change in Chicago’s urban life for visitors 100 years in the future. But where would we begin such a collection effort? Metropolitan communities are notoriously large, diverse, and contestable. What parts of it would communicate change most effectively to the great, great grandchildren of the current residents?

With this collection program in mind, we assembled eight experts in material culture and museum studies from the within the discipline of anthropology. Archaeologists, ethnographers, and linguists came together for two days to discuss how we might understand significance in the contemporary materials around us. We were joined by members of the museum and academic communities in Chicago, in particular, colleagues from the Chicago Historical Museum.

Neither one of us nor any of the other invited participants were aware of any other collection program that had projected its intended audience so far into the future. However, we acknowledge that every collection program attempts to speak to succeeding generations of scholars and visitors. For that reason, we want to share the ideas of the participants with our colleagues in other museums and museum studies programs. The seven articles included here represent what we consider to be conscientious efforts to think outside the box on collection programs. They are arranged in the order in which they were presented because the original papers were written as direct responses to the presentations that precede them.

Our conversation opens with an article by Elizabeth Brumfiel and John Millhauser on their efforts to mount an exhibit in the Field Museum on the urban Aztec world. Their article hones in on the urban problem in collecting. They argue that the way one defines the urban field will shape the artifacts collected. They begin by discussing how the aesthetic criteria that had shaped the Aztec collections they were working with limited their ability to depict daily life. They also address whether a utilitarian criterion for collecting would have been more effective but conclude that this approach also contained several weaknesses. The authors continue by examining other criteria, such as social structure, other kinds of social divisions (homelessness, undocumented, invisible), local versus global, creative class, and cur-

rent historiographical tastes. Their efforts to curate a Tenochtitlan exhibition demonstrate the challenges of theorizing a collection program for a self-consciously “Chicago” exhibition. The article is rich with reflections on the diversity of contemporary urban materiality.

The next article, which is by Alison Clarke, frames the conversation around issues of material agency, a relevant theme throughout the rest of the articles. Clarke is particularly well suited to discuss this topic. A curator and researcher at the Museum for Applied Art in Vienna, Austria, and well known in Anglophone material culture studies for her monograph on Tupperware, she was also part of the circle of material culture scholars assembled by Daniel Miller at University College London. Miller and his group have contributed many targeted studies on material agency. For those unfamiliar with the term, it refers to the ways in which material objects in use appear to shape the behavior of people. In her article, Clarke reviews the agentive turn in contemporary culture theory, focusing on the potential interrelatedness of subjects and objects. Doing so, she makes two important distinctions: the first, following Bruno Latour (1996), between things and objects; and the second, following Tim Dant (2005), between the conscious and the unconscious embodiment of meanings in objects. From this article, we learn that there are already several collections trending toward the one we are planning. For example, there are different kinds of “consensual museums” on the model of eBay in which people exhibit their own goods. Another has to do with the self-conscious efforts that city agencies mount to “brand” themselves for various marketing efforts. Both of these reflect a form of urban materiality never seen in museums.

Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga’s article responds to Clarke’s article. Lawrence-Zúñiga is an ethnographer who teaches at the architecture school and leads the Regenerative Studies graduate program at California Polytechnic University in Pomona. Having completed an extended study of house restorers in “Bungalow Heaven,” she works on issues in the material agency of that most common of urban artifacts, the detached house. She also has the strongest future orientation of all the panelists because of her work in regenerative studies. In her article, she argues that there are larger webs of social relationships, both in

time and space, that have a bearing on the appearance that objects are shaping behavior. She follows Alfred Gell (1998) in pointing out that material agency may be secondary to the homeowner’s appropriation of the object for use, as if the object’s social meanings attach to the homeowner but are then directed toward other ends. She also offers an extended discussion of a prevailing material style in contemporary cities, namely convenience products and the unconscious consumption of resources that they make possible, such as energy. Will contemporary devices that imitate human decision-making capacities represent a manufacturing trend that will continue over the next 100 years, giving these devices connoisseur value that is separate from their aesthetics? The implications of this last point for the collection program correlate with what she terms the problem of the “future past”: How will future generations regard the materiality of our present as their past when objects are designed to operate “autonomously” as ostensible extensions of ourselves?

Robert Rotenberg, an urban ethnographer who teaches at DePaul University in Chicago, offers a semiotic analysis of material agency. In his article, he argues that the unit of analysis for such agency is not the single object but the collection or assemblage. Working from ideas first developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), he points out that much of what we consider as the power of an object to shape behavior derives from its origin in a collection. Indeed, collections themselves are among the most powerful objects among urban dwellers, whether in their homes, offices, or city’s agencies, including museums. Their meanings are often not fully formed unless seen as a whole, a feature that nominates them as emergent cultural phenomena. In an extended example, he shows that Grant McCracken’s (1988) well-known Diderot Effects are largely the product of the agency of assemblages. The implications for the collection program are that the most important objects, that is, those that define who Chicagoans are and how they relate to each other, may not be singularities but rather collections. Collecting collections would seem to be a new wrinkle for any museum.

Paul Mullins, an urban historical archaeologist at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, offers a take on the material agency of mundane objects, which he calls prosaic materiality. In his arti-

cle, he argues for a curatorial focus on the apparently prosaic dimensions of urban materiality, concentrating on the things contemporary people reduce to banality and consign to the boundaries of consciousness. These objects, he argues, embody many important values that guide behavior. The very banality of the object allows it to reference and reinforce these values without calling attention to itself. As such, they tell us more about the sensibility of the people who own them than the people themselves may articulate. He illustrates this point with Victorian porcelain bric-a-brac, objects and experience far enough removed from the present to simulate how our objects might be seen by the museum visitor 100 years from now.

Ivan Karp responded to Mullins's article. Karp is well known in museum anthropology for his exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution, his writings on museum practice, and his frequent consultations on collections. His commentary on Mullins focuses on the challenges involved in documenting the complex meanings associated with collecting everyday objects and exhibiting them in museums. In his article, he reminds us that theorizing about material agency is not a new preoccupation; symbolic anthropologists of the previous generation addressed many of the same issues of how objects can be said to shape behavior. In a wide-ranging discussion of how museums influence the meaning of the objects they exhibit, he identified five genres of exhibiting, all of which carry strong narrative force. The implications for the collection program are that knowing how the objects might eventually be exhibited can shape the collection program itself.

Finally, Alaka Wali, Curator for North American Ethnology at the Field Museum of Natural History, puts forward the collection program that emerged from our discussion. During the meeting, Wali actually spoke after Rotenberg in an address that reflected her own questions about how to proceed with the project. Here, her article is placed last as the product of the symposium. She starts from two points: first, museum-based anthropologists are largely concerned with understanding the interrelationships between people and their environments as cultural change and how these interrelationships shape human diversity. Second, working from John Comaroff's (2010) set of "epistemes" that distinguish anthropologists' work

from the other social sciences, cultural studies, and even qualitative journalism, she calls for a collecting program that is participatory (all stakeholders involved), linked (to existing collections at the Field Museum but also to the city as ethnic, racial, and class interactions and as vernacular culture), and open to assemblage (the collection of appropriate sets of objects that reveal emergent patterns). Additional criteria include modernized documentation, such as photographic documentation, about the objects that can provoke research questions even among those who are not physically present to view the collection.

Two of the articles are from colleagues who have died since the symposium. Liz Brumfiel and Ivan Karp were well-known members of our community whose books and exhibitions enlightened us all. We were very excited by their interest in participating in our conversation and stimulated by the ideas they brought to the question. Corinne Kratz, Ivan's wife, who was present throughout the conference, edited his presentation for publication. These articles may be among Karp and Brumfiel's last publications, but their insights live on.

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