'Things': a case study in getting from accession to online display in 60 minutes

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This paper looks at the online presence of the exhibition ‘Things’ by artist Keith Wilson that took place at Wellcome Collection in October 2010. It examines the process by which objects were temporarily acquired from members of the public for an exhibition, and the way in which those images were digitised and managed to form the online element of the exhibition, using the photo sharing website Flickr. It looks at the role of student volunteers and their reaction to the use of technology, as well as the reactions of the public to the use of images online to represent their donated objects, and some alternatives to the conventional ‘object’ photography that museums employ. It draws the conclusion that images, and digital images in particular, form an increasingly important part of the museum paradigm at all levels.

Objects, photography, museology, public engagement.

1. ‘THINGS’ AT WELLCOME COLLECTION

‘Things’ was an art project and installation by the artist Keith Wilson which ran at Wellcome Collection between 12-22 October 2010. In an exploration of the museum paradigm, members of the public were asked to lend or donate objects ‘no bigger than your head’ which had significance to them. Collectively these formed a temporary exhibition, which would assemble, and then disassemble itself over the course of two weeks.

The choice of Wellcome Collection as a venue was particularly apposite. Wellcome Collection’s core permanent exhibition, ‘Medicine Man’ is built around the personal collection of Henry Wellcome, the pharmacist and ethnographic collector whose legacy founded the Wellcome Trust. Wellcome’s own collecting habit approached a monomania; only a fragment of his collection saw display in his short-lived Historical Medical Museum (Larson, 2009) and the bulk of it was dispersed and disposed of following his death. The promotional aesthetic of ‘Things’ had a corresponding feel of quasi-Victorian bricolage (Fig.17).

For the project itself, Wellcome Collection’s lower gallery was divided into two spaces by a wall of 365 metal display cubes wrapped in transparent plastic that were filled with objects as the installation progressed. Members of the public completed a form describing their ‘thing’ and brought both ‘thing’ and form to an acquisition desk behind which was the ‘professional’ space of the museum operation. If an object was acceptable, Wilson or one of the volunteers on duty would handle the object with cotton gloves (members of the public were not required to take any protective measures when handling their own objects), issue a duplicate of the form as a receipt against collection, and assign the object a date from the year 2011. Each display cube was also assigned a date (in blocks corresponding to months) creating a unique corresponding space for each ‘thing’ (Figs. 1-8).

Each ‘thing’ was then photographed in a small photographic area alongside the serial number of its corresponding form, and a ruler to indicate scale. The object was then placed in its nominated display cube, while the photographic file was placed on a server. At a third location inside the ‘professional’ museum space, two volunteers at computer terminals retrieved the photographs from the server and scanned the corresponding form. Both image files were then uploaded to the photo-sharing website Flickr, and tagged so that they could be retrieved according to the date assigned them and distinguished from each other as bureaucratic and photographic representations of the object.

The objects inside the display cubes could be viewed from the ‘public’ museum which also contained twelve display tables into which objects assigned dates falling on a Sunday were arranged, by month. Among the ‘Sunday things’ were objects

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Figure 1: The view of the cubes from inside the ‘professional’ museum space.

Figure 2: The ‘professional’ museum space including the areas where photography and uploading take place.

Figure 3: Volunteers work on uploading photographs and scanned forms to Flickr.

Figure 4: Cases containing the ‘Sunday’ objects.

Figure 5: Donors hand over their ‘things’ to artist Keith Wilson.

Figure 6: A visitor inspects an object in one of the exhibition cubes.

Figure 7: The outside of the exhibition, showing monitors on which photographs of ‘things’ were displayed.

Figure 8: Artist Keith Wilson wearing white gloves.
loaned by celebrities including Jo Brand, Jon Snow and Janet Street-Porter (Fig. 20).

The Wellcome Collection website devoted considerable space to the ‘Things’ project. As well as basic visitor information, the photograph and scanned form for each ‘thing’ was displayed on the website. The navigational structure was derived from the gallery’s arrangement of display cubes, divided into months, and adopted the same graphic presentation of the months (rotated ninety degrees counterclockwise from the traditional calendrical orientation). The images of objects and forms were retrieved from Flickr in real time with a limited amount of caching, meaning that in some cases a public donation could be visible on the website within an hour of being accessioned (Fig. 18).

Volunteers staffing the accession desk and uploading terminals were also encouraged to blog, and given access to the Wellcome Collection blog to publish posts describing both the experience of working on the project and some of the stories attached to the objects. During the weekend on which the project was open for donations, the artist Heather Barnett conducted brief interviews with donors and took photographs of their objects in a very different style from the professional object photography, focusing on detail and mood.

Members of the public unable to physically attend ‘Things’ were offered the opportunity to put a photograph of a significant object into a moderated Flickr pool. The entire web presence was archived as a record of the project and objects.

The public response was enough to fill the display cases with objects for every day of the year 2011. People brought ‘things’ of sentimental value, ‘things’ with personal significance, and ‘things’ that they never wanted to see again. For some, a loaned artwork was their way of being included in an art exhibition. For others, a donation was a way of finally dealing with an object that represented a difficult aspect of personal history, such as a failed relationship.

Though the medical aspect of Wellcome’s collecting was not emphasised in the publicity for ‘Things’, many donors brought objects of medical significance. Some were contemporary such as an egg donor’s injection accelerator gun (Fig. 11) and an oral/enteral syringe essential to the well being of the donor’s child (Fig. 12); others were antique such as a ‘Roger’s Vitalator’ used for relief of chronic pain in the 1950s. Almost all had an intimate connection with the life of the donor, or of a member of the donor’s family. One donor brought an ultrasound image of her own unborn child taken hours earlier at the hospital next door to the collection, which she hadn’t yet shown to the child’s father (Fig. 9).

2. USING FLICKR AS AN IMAGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Flickr photo-sharing website is widely used by museums (Romeo, 2010). Most commonly it is either used for the dissemination of photographic images that an institution holds and wishes to make public for comment and interpretation (often by contributing them to the ‘Flickr commons’), or for gathering images contributed by the public on a particular theme. It is less commonly used as a substitute for an institution’s own web content management system (CMS) or image cataloguing system.

For ‘Things’ we used Flickr to manage the photographic images and form scans for several reasons. Firstly, as a ready-made and available image hosting system it required little financial or technical investment other than paying a small annual ‘pro’ fee for the number of images we wished to host. Secondly, it offered an efficient, fast way of hosting the images. Thirdly, with a large and fluctuating staff of volunteers working on ‘Things’, Flickr seemed considerably easier for these volunteers to learn to use than our own CMS. Lastly, by not having to give volunteers access to our own systems, we diminished some of the security risks of an experimental project of this kind.

We retrieved the images from Flickr via the Flickr Application Programming Interface (API). This interface to images on Flickr is more commonly used for small applications with which users can browse or upload their own images, but can also be used to retrieve selected images and display them on a website.

As a photography site, however, Flickr privileges the photographic image above all else. It displays photographs at a variety of resolutions, but sophisticated cataloguing of images is not possible, only ‘tagging’ them, with free-form tags which other users of Flickr may or may not also use. There is a social layer, which allows commenting and discussion on individual photos, as well as thematic and aesthetic groups to which a user can add their photographs, but this exists for the most part within the Flickr website itself (Fig. 21).

Thus, while Flickr was more than an adequate storehouse and manager for images of the objects, they could only be displayed in the manner that we need to display them for ‘Things’ by bringing them into our own website. There they also had the additional framework of Wellcome Collection’s
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Figure 9: 'My baby daughter Letty Jacob', 24 January 2011.

Figure 10: 'The National Sperm Clamp', 12 February 2011.

Figure 11: 'Egg Donor's Injection Accelerator Gun', 27 February 2011.

Figure 12: 'Oral/enteral syringe essential to the lives of many people', 21 March 2011.

Figure 13: 'A cardiac pacemaker', 3 April 2011.

Figure 14: 'Wall Radio, object in a derelict house and Lithuanian passport', 15 April 2011.

Figure 15: 'Plaster of Paris Cast of Owner's Face', 16 May 2011.

Figure 16: 'A grey tin box 'hooks' containing hooks', 4 December 2011.
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Figure 17: Promotional graphic for 'Things'.

Figure 18: 'Things' arranged in a calendar on the Wellcome Collection website.

Figure 19: 'Other Things': a Flickr pool.

Figure 20: Janet Street-Porter discusses her 'thing' on YouTube.

Figure 21: A 'thing' on Flickr.

Figure 21: The Wellcome Collection blog displaying a post about 'Things'.

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institutional web design to give a coherence to their arrangement which reflected their organisation in the gallery itself.

3. VOLUNTEERS AND TECHNOLOGY

In the period during which public donations were being accessioned in the gallery, the ‘museum’ space was staffed largely by volunteers from the Royal College of Arts Masters degree programme. Where a museum generally has a permanent staff whose knowledge and experience of both the collection and its systems can be called on when interacting with the public, Wilson’s volunteer team had little familiarity with the institution, the collection did not exist before the project began, and our ad hoc accession and imaging processes existed only for the duration of the project. The volunteers thus comprised an extra layer of close collaborators between Wellcome Collection and the donors and visitors to ‘Things’.

In contrast to the seamless presentation to the public of the museum process from accession to online publication, the tasks involving the use of computers, whether for image uploading or blogging, were presented to and perceived by the volunteers as ‘technical’ tasks; there was a corresponding initial level of anxiety about these tasks, and some volunteers verbally identified themselves as the kind of people uncomfortable with computer and online interfaces. It was a challenge to our own stereotypes of a technologically hyper-literate student generation to encounter these responses.

In practice, with a small amount of training and oversight, volunteers in fact excelled at uploading, scanning and tagging images (with an accuracy rate of over 90%), but the image-based tasks remained routine. The volunteers who took on the task of blogging, however, did so with some gusto, and produced writing that was both immediate and task of blogging, however, did so with some gusto, remained routine. The volunteers who took on the rate of over 90%), but the image-based tasks scanning and tagging images (with an accuracy oversight, volunteers in fact excelled at uploading,.

Each person approaches him with an object that they have set out from all others in a process which, in some ways, is very akin to the process of making art. But there is a clear sense that as Keith receives the object, he makes it part of his own art, at least temporarily. This happens both through a short discussion with the members of the public about what the object means and where it is from, during which Keith is happy to give his own personal interpretation/reaction to the object. And also through the allocation of a date: sometimes Keith does this randomly, other times by association with the object. ‘What day of the week is this?’ he wonders of a large glittery plastic box shaped like an apple. It’s a Thursday object, it turns out.

4. HEATHER BARNETT’S PHOTOGRAPHS AND INTERVIEWS

During the weekend on which ‘Things’ was open and accepting objects from the public, the artist Heather Barnett spoke to donors, asked them about their objects and, together with Hannah Elgie and Sarah Howe took photographs of the objects themselves. She reproduced the answers to these questions and the corresponding photographs in a series of four blog posts entitled “The thing is…” (Barnett, 2010). The objects referred to in the blog posts were linked with their assigned dates to the images and forms on the website. In some cases the stories offered to Barnett by the donors corresponded closely with the explanations of the objects given on the forms; in some cases they differed widely, calling into question the veracity of either story.

The most striking difference, however, was between the photographs that Barnett took of the objects and the photographs taken in the ‘museum’ space of the gallery. Where the former were professionally lit, showed the whole object to scale and clearly identified it (Figs. 22-25), Barnett’s photographs, using a very shallow depth of field, concentrated on the surface detail of the objects (Figs. 26-29). Her photographs simultaneously reveal detail missing from the ‘museum’ photographs and obscure their apparently objective totality. Though in their public presentation on the Wellcome Collection blog they appear secondary to the images of the objects as arranged in the calendar, they were actually taken before the donors relinquished them to the museum process, and before the ‘museum’ pictures were taken. Barnett’s images from part of the overall ‘Things’ project, but they offer a powerful visual suggestion of the transition between the personal meaning and stories attached to objects, and the rendition of those stories in a museum context.

5. PUBLIC RESPONSES TO IMAGES

The private view of ‘Things’ was held on 19 October, after the majority of objects had been donated. Donors were invited to the view in return for the loan or donation of their ‘thing’. Two monitor screens were mounted at the private view displaying a slideshow of the ‘museum’ images of the objects, taken directly from Flickr. During the event, while many attendees investigated the display of objects themselves, a sizeable number stood watching the slideshow on the monitors; even in close proximity to the ‘real’ objects.
Figures 22-25: The object photography of donated objects taken in the ‘professional’ museum space of "Things".

Figures 26-29: Photographs of the same objects taken by Heather Barnett, Hannah Elgie and Sarah Howe.
themselves, the images of the objects still held a significant attraction and fascination.

Also interesting was the response of some donors, who having been told that images of their ‘Things’ would appear online, then expressed disappointment when, after some technical problems we were experiencing, they were delayed. One donor emailed us to say:

_I had been planning to attend the opening with my four year old daughter, who deposited a purple and green play dough dinosaur she had made, but I don't want to bring her if the objects aren't going to be there, as I think she would get rather upset._

This donor seems to have taken the representation of the objects online as indicative of their physical presence in the gallery: having not found them online, she was sceptical that they would be present as part of the exhibition at all.

6. CONCLUSIONS

‘Things’ explored the museum paradigm visually on a number of distinct levels. The arrangement of the gallery itself separated the ‘public’ and ‘professional’ museum spaces, paradoxically by making the ‘museum’ space visible to the public. By putting its exploration of museological practice on show, ‘Things’ demonstrated the elements of museum process in the artwork rather than hiding or mystifying them.

At the same time, that very arrangement made clear the centrality of imaging to contemporary museum practice. The process of creating digital representations of the objects took up the bulk of the visible ‘professional’ museum space. Having been accessioned, the donated objects went directly to be photographed before being displayed, and in some cases those photographs were available online before the objects could be seen in the gallery. ‘Things’ seemed to make clear that in its version of the museum paradigm, digitisation was integral to the process of incorporating objects into a collection, rather than an optional supplement.

However, not all methods of photography are equal. Heather Barnett’s photos show how even the same technology of seeing (the digital SLR camera) can produce startlingly different images with different intent on the part of the photographer and different context on the part of the thing being photographed. The pretence of museum photography to objective representation is undermined; at the same time the capacity of the museum to generate a multiplicity of different kinds of images of objects is demonstrated.

‘Things’ was a genuinely experimental project. In generating the shape for a collection and inviting the public to fill it, Keith Wilson not only laid open its final form to the public and their objects, but also allowed staff at Wellcome Collection to help define the process, both as an alternative to, and informed by, everyday museum practice. In doing this, we encountered not only the practical issues of inventing a museum process from scratch but also the primacy of the digital image and technology in our processes. In the museum re-imagined by Keith Wilson, what you see is what you get.

7. REFERENCES


