

## Reflections on the Curatorial Mind

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I lack sufficient knowledge of the science, history, culture, and literature of this period, as well as of the relevant parts of cognitive science, to engage knowledgeably with the heart of Sean's remarkable work. Reflecting on its central organizing device and thematic concern—the project's literal and conceptual organization as a museum-minded exhibition of museum mindedness—does offer me a point of entry, however. I fear though that I have proven to be one of those rushed museum visitors trying to squeeze in a stop at the big city museum while en route to the airport (roller bag in tow). Passionately interested and markedly impressed, but also nervous and feeling pressed for time, here are a few reflections on my hurried visit. They address smaller *vitrines* and displays around the edges rather than the main exhibition hall with the core of the story. In the end, such sites of engagement are, of course, a specialty of my own field of Folklore Studies.

I was struck by the degree to which this is a book and digital exhibition (among the most sophisticated that I have encountered) of our moment. This is not in itself a complete surprise, of course (all our writings would similarly qualify in degrees), but it does warrant closer acknowledgement. Those who work in museums have a love/not-love relationship with the museum-ification of everything that western societies (and others as well) are in the midst of right now. This is easiest to see in the proliferation of settings in which the word “curator” is made to apply. TED talks are curated as are meals, fashion shows, and car insurance options. What Barbara Kishenblatt-Gimblett speaks of as the curation of the life world is manifest in the extreme when we speak of curating one's own personal brand through, for instance, one's social media engagements.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to more-than-just-museums curating, there are many very cool things happening on this front in *The Mind is a Collection*—both the book and the digital exhibition. Like I am, Sean is a part of the zeitgeist. He has interests and passions that are socio-culturally and historically conditioned and he knows the mood of the present so as to anticipate the interests of his readers; but at the same time, his book is fundamentally about the curation of the life world and is a valuable reminder that there is much more to this than a present-day sensibility. I loved learning about the degree to which the curatorial style was a past-day sensibility for learned London, if not for the mass of the city's residents. Something special happens when a well conceived, well executed project is perfectly calibrated between the ethos of its present and the ethos of the other time or place or context with which it is concerned. Such dynamics could be investigated in any scholarly project, but here they just ring clear as a bell for me.

Another instance of this calibration of then and now ethoses concerns what here at Indiana University we call—its in our strategic plan, for instance—“a culture of making.” Even when Sean is discussing unfamiliar matters, I sense that nearly any practicing museum curator would swoon in response to his manifest love of objects, particularly in their status as manifestations of craft. This is a book and digital exhibition for material culture specialists, even if it deals with materials and concerns not uniformly familiar to

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Kishenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berke-

the most established material culture disciplines. But outside the scholarly realm, ours is a moment of craft in countless guises, from molecular baskets concocted in materials-engineering laboratories to yarn bombing on the streets of Bloomington. I have a friend who crafts artisanal reproductions of the earliest telescopes—the kinds of objects that would seemingly belong in the cabinets of Sean’s subjects. As my own students are documenting ethnographically in a wide range of domains and as the programs of the Mathers Museum reveal, a significant portion of our fellows in the present are in love with the hand-made thing and, sometimes, with making things by hand. Such enthusiasms surely persist in a core of actors in each period and place, but they also go in and out of wider fashion. Ours is a maker-minded moment and this is an engaging book and digital exhibition written about the maker-minded living in another maker minded-moment by a maker-minded author. My pleasure again arises in part from the parallels found here. I also look forward to learning more about Sean’s in-progress work *The Crafts of Enlightenment*.