

# if i could dust off your thousand treasures and water them

A collectively-voiced document by museum directors, curators, and artists from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Romania, United Kingdom and Singapore

Through a conversation facilitated by Sheralynne Dollatella-Wong Jia (Salty Xi Jie Ng) for the Museum Why symposium, September 2022

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The prestige that being part of a collection offers

Should museums collect socially engaged art?

Does collecting such a work necessarily imply a change in the museum's direction or strategy?

An artwork changes in the moment it's included in the collection, it becomes locked in time, ossified

If i could dust off your thousand treasures and water them

Presumed eternity of collections

While measures are taken to extend the life of artworks, there is still change over time, albeit very slowly – chemically, mechanically, structurally, etc.

Expectations of preservation in relation to social forms of art

Expectations of re-presentation

Many museums don't even have time to look at what was collected a hundred years ago

Feeling responsible to work with something someone years ago collected

As a commissioner of social forms of art, the museum itself rubs off on the work. A piece of the museum is forever embedded in the work.

The museum can produce and display a work without acquiring it, still there is a trace of the museum embedded in the work forever after

Performance actions, happenings, social practice, community building, time-based and live works can be collected as instructions and recreated, or as documentation of a specific set of values in a specific context. Happenings or activism are often contingent on the context in which they are realised, such as socially engaged happenings.

Instructional works are open for participation and collaboration, reflecting the time and context of the moment of reenactment. A re-enacted piece reflects the shift in time and context from when/where it was originally created, thus reflecting on time passed. Documented works become relics and archives.

Inviting contemporary artists to engage with the collection opens up the possibility, for the museum, to reflect on its own practice

Artist-museum interaction: there is a difference between the museum's (strategic) need or want for artists to engage with the museum and its collection, and the need of the artist to engage with the museum

The established role of the museum in society, with a great freedom in terms of content, gives the museum a responsibility to perform social criticism

Is the museum on the outside looking in or does the museum represent the privileged?

Is it possible to perform social criticism when poised high, (relatively) well funded and (relatively) safe?

A lot of challenges of collecting social forms of art are not obvious to the artist entering the museum

Immaterial practices represent resisting the rigid, scientific grid of art history, as it challenges the standard way to organise artworks in collections.

One of the reasons we're lifting up immaterial and social practices is because it's challenging to the rigidity of the museum

It's crass

Force that into the museum

Break into the museum

To expose

You're simplifying it

Making it a question for the museum and not a representation of what artists are interested in, in this current time

Not to put you on the spot

The strategy of acquisition is transparent

Look with a queer perspective into our collection

A very broad theme; we need to narrow it down

Focus on the untold, ignored, hidden narratives in the collections

How do you bring the other stories alive if you don't have documentation?

You will need researchers

Use the blind spots in the archives

The only archives are from white men

Using speculative fiction can tell a story that is untold

We play with what we have as archives and what we think is material knowledge

It is not our responsibility to see that all forms of art are preserved, which is different for national museums

Underrepresented stories and histories is the same word in Norwegian

Sometimes being exposed or collected isn't the best thing for particular groups of people

Resistance to being collected

It doesn't have to be our wet dream to be in a museum

You refer to your work as scores

Does it necessarily need to lead to acquisition?

There is not more information on exhibition history

It's quite the same as painting

We shouldn't treat social, relational, immaterial artworks differently. They go into the same acquisition plan, they have the same criteria of relevance.

What is different is in the re-staging or reproducibility

We will always re-enact it in a different context. Which in a sense is the same as every artwork. A painting is painted in a context.

It is a lot of work for the institution

Have you made a structure around collecting time-based work?

What does it mean to document the life of the work

The work may not end in such obvious ways

You know when you have a recipe for something and it turns out different every time  
It is really hard to describe how something should be done

Witnesses

What if works weren't 'collected' but cared for in a relationship of custodianship rather than ownership?

What relational possibilities emerge if we subvert the proprietary model of institutions, and think about a work as a nexus of relationships, rather than an object?

Could we imagine these as a repertoire rather than an archive, and reimagine who, and what, might be part of this repertoire and how it might be transmitted?

There are relationships even for objects (that are not social forms of art), existing works, that are being addressed in the agreement – how it will be kept, who will be kept in the loop, estates

If I own something, I would use it. I would make dents in it. But as custodians of an artwork, we treat it with silk gloves. We don't really own them. We own them for somebody else, for the state, the country.

Captured in an acquisition agreement

Nobody likes to think what happens when the artist is gone

To trust in the past

We're collecting ideas for the future

Shared custodianship around the future of the work

Someone reading it thirty years from now

Conditions upon which the work should die, be liberated or exited

There is a fragility

The safest space

Not everything has to end up in a museum

Thoughts shared by:

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