



"What do you want?"

by Marie Allitt

for Thinking Through Things

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**wellcome
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What do you want?

a text by Marie Allitt

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Following the Archival Imaginarium presentations from Kat Rawling, Bentley Crudington, Jacky Waldock, and Olivia Turner, we shared our thoughts, and raised further points regarding access to and engagement with archives and their contents. Here is a summary and response to some of the points raised.

What do we want from archives? What do we want with the objects, pieces of art, papers, and ephemera?

What if we refocus these questions: What does the object want? What does it want to tell us?

If indeed we can successfully seek serendipity, perhaps those objects can tell us what they have to say. But, it's difficult to achieve serendipity when searching an online catalogue. Instead, we must draw on our knowledge of key terms, significant names, employ the flexibility of synonyms, to search and trawl, and hopefully find.

Barriers to searching

The Wellcome catalogue and their entire collection has at times been obscure. There are barriers, challenges, and at times potential confusion in the way we must use the catalogue to search for objects: the search will, helpfully and unhelpfully, show the objects in the collection which are housed and loaned to the Science Museum. After some wrangling with labels and specificity, we then realise we cannot go and see that object (unless it happens to be on display in an exhibition, and then it is behind glass). We need to remember this fact when we are researching and trying to find sources that go beyond documents, private papers, and published work. We can see an image (photographed in a specific way)

of the object, but it's hard to tell if that object even still exists. In this instance, this raises all sorts of queries in terms of how we regard a photograph as an object: it certainly is, but surely it is only an object if we can get our hands on it? Just because we can find it on the catalogue, it does not mean we can go and see it ...

The limitation of actually seeing the object itself is frustrating, but what if we think of the different opportunities to approach it? There are two ways that we can encounter and engage with the object: in its physical form, and in its digital form and afterlives.

If we embrace the priority of the digital, how do we then experience the space of the archive? How do we encounter it? How do we chance upon?

Journey and discovery

When we research we use a lot of spatial metaphors: we talk about navigating the archive, or going down rabbit holes. Navigating the online space can be a maze: there probably is a logical progression, but that is not always apparent to the researcher. So much about the act of catalogue and archival searching feels like trial and error. In some ways this compromises the journey itself: when a search works out, we're so relieved or excited by the next opportunity it brings, and

of delving into that source, that we forget or overlook how we actually got there. Without breadcrumbs, it can be difficult to trace the way back.

The catalogue has been organised around logic, the logic of the archivist, but that is not entirely clear to the researcher. Especially when relying on someone else's description of the object or visual materials, there's room for a clash, and difficulties in seeing how that description has been created.

Keywords become another example of this. Keywords suggest keywords: the rabbit hole goes on and on. There's creativity and logic to the generation of keywords, but these will take you in a certain direction. This approach can work great for some, but it does lend itself to certain disciplines more than others. For example, the descriptions don't engage with the sound of the piece: what noise does it make? Does it have a particular timbre? Or colour? There are barriers to engaging with those pieces from a visual or sonic perspective. When you're working outside of language and outside of history, how can you search?

The Landscape of the Archive

The archive is a maze – it is maintained, cultivated by multiple caretakers. If we don't want to get lost in the maze, and instead realise the motivation for the twists and turns, we need to gain insight into the structures and rationale. Why is this tree here?

I extrapolate on this analogy to painful lengths, to help us recognise the need to understand how decisions on the catalogue and the collections are made. There are multiple stakeholders, each with distinct skills and priorities, but how these develop is not clear.

How are decisions made, concerning the display of the image? Given that in its digital form we can only view the object in one specific way, from one single image, how is that decision made? What if I want to look at the back of the picture? What if I want to look underneath?

What is the role, and influence, of the archival photographer? How do they come to these styling decisions?

With the static image, we are struck by the question: is this an object or a monument? Is



Credit: Combined knife and fork, Europe, 1914-1918. Science Museum, London.

it trapped in time, kept to remember, a reminder, memento mori of a time that has passed? The image is not neutral. A photograph is never neutral. Someone chooses that view.

The question of monument also raises the ideas of cultural heritage and preservation. Is there a certain sweet spot in the decay and damage of the object that makes it especially important to preserve?

This generates further questions regarding conservation. When do you decide to clean or not to clean it? Will it perish? Do you allow it to decay? Does it have a best before date? Is it mortal?

How did this object come to be?

The object discussed, the combined knife and fork, which was randomly selected through oblique strategies, raises questions of cleanliness and preservation: Was the combined knife and fork cleaned? What parts of it have tarnished? How much conservation interference has there been?

We can infer or assume a lot about the object, but we are left with a lot of questions. Questions that generate further questions. Questions that are frustrating...questions that are exciting...

This is frustrating...

- Has this been modified?
- Has it been improvised? Was this one of a kind?
- Are you supposed to swap out the blade? How?
- Who used it?
- Who made it?
- Is the blade silver-plated?
- How would it have been used?
- ...How can I find out more about it?

This is exciting...

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'What does this object want?'

It's still frustrating when I can't get my hands on the objects myself. But I'm trying to think bleeding-cup half full, and this approach gives opportunities. Maybe I can embrace the digital, and subordinate the real.

There's certainly opportunity, as suggested in the Archival Imaginarium, to pause and slowly consider one object. Imagine the questions and conversations if we slowed down; if people from a range of disciplines considered one object, and listened to what it had to say.

Whether I can see the object in real life or not, I want to adopt M. Poirot's perspective on 'things':

"do not be too sure that these dead things...are always dumb.

To me they speak sometimes - chairs tables - they have their message!"

(Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*)

Maybe those messages can get through to us.

Maybe?