CHAPTER TWO

HISTORIES AND COLLECTING:
MUSEUMS, OBJECTS AND MEMORIES

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I am really concerned with . . . giving you some insight into the relationship of a book collector to his possessions, into collecting rather than a collection. If I do this by elaborating on the various ways of acquiring books, this is something entirely arbitrary. This or any other procedure is merely a dam against the spring tide of memories which surges towards any collector as he contemplates his possessions. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books. For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?

Walter Benjamin (1993)

There is not much to Silverton these days. What was once, very briefly, a booming New South Wales mining town now boasts only a pub, recreational camel rides, a small museum, and the refuse of film crews that have used the place to simulate authentic Australia. On my first visit I went straight for the Museum, housed in what used to be a court-house and gaol. The Museum held a huge collection — pastoral, industrial and domestic artefacts; photographs, private papers, sporting and recreational memorabilia; portraits, medals
and much, much more. As I wandered through the maze of rooms, objects seemed to be spilling into the courtyards, pressing at the windows, falling off the tables. At one point I stood before a glass cabinet that contained mine relics, railways memorabilia and women's clothing. The combination of these objects in the one display case was both familiar and bizarre. Familiar, in that similarly anachronistic collections can be found in many country towns throughout Australia. It has become almost necessary for these history-minded towns to have an antiquarian museum as evidence of their historic status. But the assemblage in that glass case, and many others in the Silverton Museum, was bizarre; it did not feel like it belonged in a late twentieth-century museum. The artefacts were not ordered by chronological sequence or theme. Many were not labelled and, more often than not, the objects did not follow a theme or 'teach' the visitor anything in particular. The museum employed none of the characteristic means by which visitors have been trained to understand and interpret objects on display: the devices of category, of narrative sequence, of juxtaposing the typical and the singular, or of generating an aura of aesthetic wonder. It seemed as if the objects were meant to invoke associations, to trigger memories, to generate questions, confusion or fragmentary recognition.

Yet the objects in the Silverton Museum were very particular and in at least two senses completely coherent; all were from Silverton and all related in some way to the town's heyday. It was a memory palace that seemed to have a great deal in common with the cabinets of curiosity that provided the model for European collectors during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Silverton Museum was an anachronism. Those who could have remembered or interpreted the memory palace were dead; it was a place of silence and sadness. The historical imagination of Silverton seemed to exist only as a residue in a collection of objects now subjected to the tourist's gaze.

At about the same time that I was visiting Silverton, Francois Lyotard was curating a show entitled Les Immateriaux at the Beaubourg (the Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou) in Paris. It was a philosophical exhibition intended to interrogate postmodernity and the museum; an attempt to dramatise the extent to which the modern museum — which in Baudrillard's terms 'functions as an incinerator absorbing and devouring all cultural energy' — has given way to the postmodern museum; a place to arouse the visitors' anxiety about the dissolution of the order of
things. Equipped with a headphone, visitors entered a maze of 61 sites. One strategy in the exhibition was an attempt to displace the centrality of the contextualised object. It was a show in which there were:

video, film, slides and photographs — commercial and artistic, anonymous and signed, old and recent. There were robots, an elaborate photocopier, the first display of a holographic movie, and, of course, computers — lots of them. There were examples of rugosymmetric reproduction, electromicroscopy, spectrography, holography, Doppler effects and Fourier series; displays of astrophysics, genetics and statistics.\(^5\)

I did not see *Les Immateriaux* but I would like to think that if I had seen the spectacle I would have agreed with John Rajchman that it was an extravaganza in which the artefacts of a hyper-real America were being transformed into museum pieces by French intellectuals to produce the effect of the ‘delirious theatre of commodities and signs that is the contemporary American shopping mall’.\(^6\)

These exhibitions at the Silverton Museum and the Beaubourg are not points along a continuum of museum development, nor are they antithetical. How could they be? The range of museums is so vast — from museums enacting Mousier Malraux’s notion of the *musee imaginaire* to venerable institutions such as the Smithsonian and the British Museums; from folk museums to the Swedish Samdok project that has taken seriously the notion that a collection should strive for totality and has pushed the democratic and public logic of the museum to extremes; from community-based cultural centres of indigenous peoples to the enormous number of historic places and recreated historic parks, villages and towns that resemble nothing so much as walls without museums. The simultaneity of two radically different exhibitions, one in Australia and one in France, could be pursued via a number of circuits. The most uncomplicated observation might be that, as an institution, ‘The Museum’ has proved to be remarkably adaptive and enduring. In a great many countries, including Australia, museums are booming. Another approach might be to suggest that my juxtaposition of the two museums denotes the anxiety, perhaps even the melancholia, around memory and the museum. Perhaps the museum as time/space and the museum as a collection of objects is an institution in crisis — on the one hand objects in a state of chaos, on the other, objects vaporising to ether. Perhaps the rhetoric of crisis is simply a device of curators or academics, or perhaps it suggests more serious disruptions between memory and representation.
I want to explore the question of how we might understand the
museum in relation to collecting and memory. This is one approach
to much more general issues around the rules, modes and rhythms of
social memory. The capacity of institutions like the museum have,
in general, been radically undervalued in thinking about memory.
This is partly because writers formed by modern Western cultures,
cultures obsessed with individualism, have theorised memory as
pre-eminently the possession, facility or work of individuals. The
influences of Freud’s therapeutic paradigms of memory and the
connections between interiority, memory, subjectivity and the novel
have been particularly important in this process. Yet from the work
of Frances Yates and others, we know that mnemonics has long
been governed by interlocking regimes of training in the ordering of
memory, image and language. A great deal of how we think about
memory is articulated in terms that are overwhelmingly social and
certainly historically specific: memory as a product of civic training;
memory as crucial to identity; memory as necessarily narrative;
memory as an expression of continuity in the world; memory as
indispensable for communication.

Similarly, we have no way of representing the absence of memory,
amnesia and memory disorders such as aphasia, other than through
the social effects and confusion produced by private torment. There is
not and could not be any general philosophy of the relationships
between memory and objects in human culture. Our everyday
language is replete with contradictory assumptions about memory
and objects: objects are said to hold, represent, recreate, evoke,
epitomise, illustrate and exemplify memories, the past, an era, ideas,
belief systems, social processes, historical moments and the spirit of
an age.

However, two propositions about objects and memory in modern
Western cultures may provide a starting point. First, in order for an
object to be associated with social memory it must be fetishised, that
is, it must be transformed into a representation of something other
than itself to become the subject of desires. Second, the association
between an object and social memory is an effect of a situation; that
is, an object is always a product of the institution that has reorganised
it according to certain rules. So the stuffed carcass of the racehorse
Phar Lap only works as a memory site because it is more than a dead
horse in a glass cabinet. It works because it elicits social imagination
and desires, and because it has been remade, both literally and
figuratively, as an object on display. The museum is the key public
institution in which these processes of memory work have taken place in Australia. By considering museums as institutions that are constitutive of social memory, I want to contribute to the task of mapping the shape of memory and historical imagination as both a product of and productive of the social subject.

The modern European museum and Australia

The museum and the archive, along with the school, the asylum, the prison, and new bureaucratic, juridical and representative forms, have generally been regarded as key institutions in the formation of the modern public sphere in Europe. These institutions were the spaces within which rational and free civil subjects were formed and the places where civil society articulated its universal values. More specifically, the museum, along with a number of other institutions, constituted the modern ‘public historical sphere’. Historical knowledges and displays have, of course, long performed public roles, pre-eminentely those of authorising or coercing political consensus. However, the modern public historical sphere is distinctive in that it emerged as one component of what Foucault describes as a theory of knowledge in which the science of Man was central. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill has characterised the place of the museum in this science:

The ‘museum’ of the nineteenth century functioned as a general archive in which time never stopped building, in which things of all epochs, all styles, all forms could be accumulated and preserved against the ravages of time, in perpetuity. The Museum acted and in many ways still acts (and not least, conceptually) as a microcosm of the world, as a universal sacred space where Man can rediscover and reconstitute his fragmented self.¹⁰

The public historical sphere is a distinctive moment of historical culture when, for the first time, history describes a mode of generalised representation capable of apprehending the totality of human experience in time. The modern museum is the material representation of that historical culture.

From studies on the history of museums we know that they can be read archaeologically; that the modern museum contains traces ranging from the preservation of religious relics and the collecting of valued objects, to the cabinets of dilettanti, as well as popular culture forms such as fairs, freak shows, circuses, wax works and exhibitions.
Although we can still hear echoes of these forms in the modern museum, we also know that the modern museum is distinctive once it deploys taxonomic and historical frames to organise the objects in a collection. The modern European museum is an institution that collects and imposes on the objects it collects a systematic order framed by sequential and rational sciences of natural and human history. History provides a narrative of and an explanation for the order of things and for the necessity of unceasing progress. The modern museum is both a product of and marks a shift in how we contemplate the historical imagination. The congruence of the new public-sphere institutions with print culture is usually understood as establishing the parameters of time-space in which a new apprehension of humanity becomes possible. In this context, museums are spaces within which people are instructed and disciplined to become modern citizens in time, conscious of their destiny in the creation of work, experience, memory, liberty and character.

Of perhaps equal importance is the extent to which the modern European museum is an institution of the nation-state. In the historiography of museums, the paradigmatic moment is the French Revolution after which the museums of the new Republic were transformed into representational spaces that refused the inevitability of dynastic order and installed the nation-state as the object of collective identification. This pattern is repeated across Europe in various forms, from the northern European enunciations of the volk to the familiar, yet always strange, British anomaly of an ancient free state replete with the baubles of monarchy. As the present became more malleable, so historical space and ‘tradition’ became central concerns for the state in relation to civil society. Public interpretations of the past mattered in quite new and decisive ways, and so the museum was crucial in producing a culture of historical sensibility that was, among other things, a celebration of rational and heroic civilising; it formed historical sensibility that was quantitative, universalist and, in its use of objects, materialist.

There are significant problems in trying to map such an account onto the formation and development of museums in Australia. The problem is not one of periodisation, as large metropolitan museums (along with archives and libraries) were established throughout Australia during the nineteenth century. By 1891, at least one museum was established in the capital city of each Australian colony. These were museums of science and natural history, of technology, or art. While these museums were public, and their framework was histor-
ical in the sense that sequential progress was crucial to their organisation and display, not one of them held a significant collection of historical material. Even in 1933 a report prepared for the Carnegie Foundation named only three museums devoted exclusively to history in Australia: the Australian War Museum, Vaucluse House, and the historical collection in the Parliament Building in Canberra.¹⁴ Not only was history almost an absent category in nineteenth-century museums, but when historical material was held or displayed the state was not the locus in the very definite way in which the nation-state was central to the modern European museum. In this context, Kimberley Webber has suggested that, even today, the only Australian museum that could be considered as taking both the state and history as central to its project is the Australian War Memorial.¹⁵

This predicament might be read as evidence in support of the notion, widespread both then and now, that for colonial Australians their country was without history. As the famous complaint went, Australia lacked castles or gothic ruins, or, as Ken Inglis has put the matter, nineteenth-century Australia lacked the material from which to fashion history because of the shallowness of the historical soil.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century Australian museums did not, of course, have a nation to which they could hitch historical collections, although we should not underestimate the extent to which the sense of pride in the progress and status of each of the colonies was, to a significant extent, prototypical of nationalism. Nevertheless, the historical objects that predominated in European museums at the time were objects of classical antiquity, royalty, imperial conquest, nation formation and war.¹⁷ Australian colonists did not have direct or analogous or unambiguously Australian associations with such events. Some museums resolved this problem, temporarily, by bringing European history to Australia in the form of copies of the Magna Carta or plaster casts of famous sculptures. The Victorian collection of 1863 inspired that patrician of Melbourne culture, Sir Redmond Barry, to wax lyrical on taste and simulation:

It includes casts of the Elgin Marbles, 71 casts of Statues and Groups, 63 casts of Busts, a few Relievi. . .

A perusal of the list annexed will afford you an idea of the nature and quality of the objects . . . of the standards of excellence assumed by the Trustees . . .

Believing the major part of the population of this country to be fully
competent to discriminate between the sterling and real in Art, and the false or that merely showy and superficial, the Trustees have exercised... a resolute exclusion of the latter.18

It is worth noting that most Australian colonial displays in both local and international exhibitions showed a clear preference for tableaux and pictorial representation of historical events as opposed to the display of material remnants.19

The problem of the relative absence of historical objects in Australian colonial museums could be pursued by a variety of routes — here I will traverse only two. First, I examine what was collected and suggest that these collections consist, in the main, of two categories — Aboriginal property and paper records — which provide important clues to the historical imagination in the institutions of nineteenth-century Australia. Second, I turn to very different conventions of collecting that can be inferred from local historical museums and societies, organisations that were the forerunners of the Silverton Museum. Between these two sets of practices lie the traces of the historical connections between memory and objects.

History and paper

In 1884 the Australian Museum published a catalogue of the material held in its collection, entitled a ‘List of old Documents, Relics & c’. It listed only 44 separate items, at a time when the natural history collection already ran into tens of thousands of items. Of those 44 items listed, over one third were simply single issues of newspapers, and more than 80 per cent were paper-based records, including letters, hotel bills, bibles and so on. The list includes eight bona fide objects that were not paper: a few coins, a bottle of Nardoo seeds gathered at the grave of Burke and Wills, a box, telescope, cloak, bottle and purse all tenuously associated with Cook, and a necklace of indeterminate origin.20 This collection was not only paper-based, but obsessed with explorers. Similar small and eclectic collections consisting chiefly of paper records existed in other colonies. Queensland did not establish a register of items of historical interest until 1911, but items acquired in the nineteenth century included ‘archival and photographic items... [and] natural curios such as the inevitable two headed chickens beloved of early museum visitors’.21 The South Australian and Victorian State museums held similarly small collections consisting chiefly of paper records. In these museums the situation is somewhat confused because in each case, the
museum, art gallery and library were located in the same building for significant periods and because the collections were moved between these closely interconnected institutions.²²

I want to draw attention to three reasons for this association between paper and the work of memory. In 1885, the very short-lived Historical Society of Australasia put out a call for members stating:

it is expected that all important men [and they most definitely meant men] of our time, whose lives practically constitute the history of Australia, will avail themselves to the opportunity [to join].

This was a persistent theme in the historically minded literature of the nineteenth century: that history in Australia was within the reach of living memory and was made up of the lives of eminent people. Yet, with the exception of periodic flurries in statuary that was rarely genuinely monumental and is therefore best described as up-market, outdoor wax works, the obsession with the great men of Australian history was rarely associated with objects. The monuments these ‘important men’ left to the world were imaged in various ways: lines on the map in the case of explorers; buildings and roads in the case of someone such as Macquarie. What these men did leave behind and what, in one sense, many of them shared, was a world of paper. They drafted statutes, kept stock and production records, dealt in legal documents, bought and sold notes, signed proclamations. They wrote letters, reports, journals and sometimes books that celebrated achievements, reminisced or vindicated a life well lived. These were the kinds of material that constituted the meagre historical holdings of Australian museums in the nineteenth century because memorialising took the form of paper.

The second reason for this association between history and paper was that those who thought of history in Australia as more than just a footnote to the British Empire did not imagine objects as central to history. While the nineteenth century may have been the century of history, the museum and history were linked most strongly in the eighteenth-century fascination with materiality and memory. It was in proto-historical antiquarianism and preservationism that historical material really mattered. The historical collections of modern museums were, initially, the product of inheriting material from this earlier moment. In the nineteenth century, history was marked off from the protocols of the natural sciences and conceived as scientific, as literary, and as the calculation of civilisation (hence the influence of statistics). This characterisation points to the centrality of written
or printed evidence — to records, correspondence, documents, registers and census data — as the key materials for history in Australia. Thus an archaeology of memory and paper in Australia might link the journal writing of Cook and those on the First Fleet with the paper-based collections of nineteenth-century museums, to the obsession with documentary evidence that created the huge copying project that stretches across the Historic Records of New South Wales and the Historical Records of Australia, through to the faith of historians Max Crawford and Manning Clark that Australian history could not be taught without the documents at hand.

The third reason for the predominance of paper in Australian museums is more abstract. It is possible to interpret nineteenth-century colonial museums as predominantly defined by, or existing in relation to, European and American metropolitan museums. It is also possible to read the burgeoning interest in history in the twentieth century as a product of Australian nationalism; to imply, in effect, that history, or at least history in museums, was required for the nation to exist. Both these lines of argument offer important insights, but they are perhaps too much part of our strange late twentieth-century habit of imagining national histories as our primary category of public memory. An alternative might be to consider the lack of historical material in the museums of the colonies as a product of the absence of Australian historical imagination. Australia’s colonial museums could not install the nation-state as their project because a nation did not yet exist. Instead, museums collected the relics of local bourgeois men as the material evidence of a very particular public memory. Perhaps there simply was no project of representing a generalised historical memory in nineteenth-century Australia, in which case an important silence existed at the centre of the public historical sphere.

Collecting Aborigines

Australia is the present home and refuge of creatures, often crude and quaint, that have elsewhere passed away and given place to higher forms. This applies equally to the aboriginal as to the platypus and kangaroo. Just as the platypus, laying its eggs and feebly suckling its young reveals a mammal in the making, so does the aboriginal show us, at least in broad outlines, what early man must have been like before he learned to read and write, domesticate animals, cultivate crops and use a metal tool.
The most material evidence of the past in Australia located in Australian museums consists of Aboriginal property. However, this material was not collected with history in mind. Despite the range of competing paradigms as to how Aboriginal people would be characterised by Europeans, in general Aboriginal people were regarded by Europeans as a people outside of history. Prior to the emergence of varieties of Social Darwinism after the dissemination of The Origin of Species in 1859, there was only sporadic and uneven interest in collecting Aboriginal material culture or bodily remains. Darwin and ethnology changed this situation to the extent that Aboriginal people became objects of 'scientific' curiosity; their bodies and their cultural artefacts became objects of relentless pursuit, particularly those that were unsullied by European blood or cultural influences and thus exemplified the prehistoric character of Aboriginal people.25

In 1871, towards the end of his period as the head of the Australian Museum, curator Gerard Krefft wrote a statement on collecting that expressed the place of Aboriginal people in the post-Darwin museum:

The products of a new country should be secured as early as possible and every object bearing upon the manners and habits, the arts and manufacturers of a primitive race should be gathered and deposited in some public institution before it is too late. Animals and plants are often local in their habitat and soon disappear before the steps of civilisation.

It was sentiments such as these that justified the 'scientific' collection of bodies, grave robbing, dissection of corpses and the display of Aboriginal bodies as trophies, the most famous of these being Truganini and William Lanney.26 Museums were crucial in giving material form to the articulation of 'race' as a component of differentially valued humanity, so that only a year later the Australian Museum featured a display of:

a number of skeletons of the Bimana, or human family, comprising five principal races: — The Caucasians or Iranians, the Mongolian or Turanian, the American, the Malayan (to which the Aboriginal Australians belong) and the Ethiopian or Negro.27

Australian displays at international exhibitions also began to feature Aboriginal artefacts and occasionally Aboriginal people.28 Private collectors began to acquire Aboriginal skeletal remains and museums began to use the services of both private and government collectors
to expand their holdings. Somewhat later, in 1911, the Queensland Museum enlisted the services of the local police in these terms:

Since the Aboriginal Tribes are fast dying out, every effort should be made to acquire those symbols of the life of the original Australian inhabitants, whose rites, ceremonies, customs, and traditions are becoming obsolete and being entirely lost to us.

The Director [of the museum], therefore, appeals to you in the confidence that you will take every opportunity of securing specimens of all kinds, and forward them to the Museum.²⁹

Thus the processes of possessing Aboriginal people as objects, and later as image and text, were part of the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples that is now beginning to be acknowledged in the historical sensibilities of non-Aboriginal Australians. Possessing Aboriginal people had a complex relationship to white memory. It included remembering Aboriginal people as a disappearing 'race' and remembering colonial confrontations, but it was never remembering for Aboriginal people.

I mention this variety of collecting for the purposes of replying to Paul Fox's question in relation to the museums: '[D]o Australians inhabit a postcolonial world or a landscape of colonial memories?'³⁰

The bodily and cultural property of Aboriginal people that exists in state and private institutions cannot be regarded as collections of historical objects — they must be understood as the results of particular and historically specific visions of 'the science of Man'. They are historical products and the residue of white imagination, but they are not history. This is not to say that Aboriginal property in museums provides only a mirror for the colonising gaze. On the contrary, these collections can be subverted to become important resources in the dynamic processes of remembering. This is basic to the involvement of many Aboriginal people in contemporary museums, heritage centres, and keeping places. Aboriginal people have recognised that some of these materials, these remnants of Western historical imagination, can provide opportunities for remaking connections, meaning and memory between objects, culture and history. In this work, Aboriginal people are reclaiming memories which were stolen and they are enacting a sentiment that Benjamin celebrated when he claimed: 'To renew the world — that is the collector's deepest desire'. But these practices also hold out a challenge to non-Aboriginal people: if this Aboriginal property is to be part of non-Aboriginal remembering in all its complexity and pain,
then the museums that hold the material must be more than the
treasure houses of civilisation or photo-opportunities on a tourist
route.

Back to collecting

In considering the museum as an institution of memory, I have
suggested that the insignificant historical collections in Australian
museums of the nineteenth century can be seen as constituting an
absence at the centre of the public historical sphere. In the ‘objects’
that were collected — paper and Aboriginal property — these
museums were institutions that preserved bureaucratic and ‘race’
memories. I want to shift the focus of the chapter here to consider
some very different museums, not so much in terms of what they are,
namely institutions, but in terms of what they do, that is collect
and display objects.

Museums like those at Silverton are not new. Objects have
floode into local museums in the last thirty years. Some of these
were ‘discovered’ in barns and some were found in the proverbial
local tip. However, most of these objects were not recently discov-
ered or unearthed by institutions in the business of collection, but
were recollected. That is to say, often these objects were first
collected in the nineteenth century. Many of them did not survive
by accident but had been collected long before for altogether differ-
ent purposes. These instances in the prehistory of contemporary and
largely local museums raise quite different questions about objects as
bearers of memory than those suggested by the collecting practices
of State museums.

Beginning in private homes and then spreading to small local
museums was a tradition of nineteenth-century collecting that can
be followed through occasional newspaper references, catalogues for
auctions and bazaars, and biographies and local histories. Consider
just one cluster of this kind of collecting. Between around 1860 and
1880, Old Identities Associations, Pioneers Societies and Old Resi-
dents Groups were formed in a number of towns around Victoria,
the best known being those in Beechworth, Castlemaine and Ballarat.31
Although they were primarily focussed on reminiscences, these
groups put a lot of energy into collecting objects. The founding
document of the Castlemaine Association couched its aims in these
terms: ‘[to r]ecord and present facts relative to the early history of the
Castlemaine district and to collect and preserve relevant documents
and relics’. A catalogue of a Grand Auction bazaar at the Mechanics’ Institute in Ballarat invoked a similar religious tone in listing, ‘Relics of the Eureka Stockade’ and ‘Revolver, loaded at the Eureka Stockade, with the loading still in’. Objects associated with Eureka continued to appear throughout the nineteenth century and indeed provided an important base for the twentieth-century museums of Ballarat.

It is difficult to obtain comprehensive inventories of such collections because they were not subject to the rules of documentation that are so elaborate in most State collecting institutions. Some of these museums established natural history collections, others collected Aboriginal skeletal remains and artefacts, and some displayed objects brought by settlers from their countries of origin. However, most of these proto-museums collected objects that were of local and particular significance. The types of objects varied enormously — a whip belonging to a pioneer, the shovel of a miner who was said to have used the implement in finding a famous nugget, a pistol that an old identity claimed his mother used to fight off bushrangers, a horse shoe of a great local galloper, a plough or an axe used by old residents. It is difficult to generalise about these collections, but three broad categories of objects might usefully be specified. There was a strong emphasis on ‘firsts’ — the cradle of the first-born in the district or the object belonging to settlers who did things first. There also seem to have been many objects that were important because they held or pointed to memories of local places and/or local events: the Eureka relics cited above, a boat used during a huge flood, and objects associated with the dominant industries of the locality. And there were many objects related to that very old form of remembering, genealogy: objects that were important because of their place in the metaphors and tropes of family sagas.

New technologies and old memories

In ‘Unpacking My Library’, Benjamin emphasises two aspects of collecting — the chaos of memories that live with a collection, and the importance of the orders of collection. He cites another collector as asserting that, ‘The only exact knowledge there is, is the knowledge of the date of publication and the format of books’. However, there is more for Benjamin: there is the potential for a book to possess almost the aura of a work of art because ‘Dates, place names, formats, previous owners, bindings, and the like: all these details
must tell him [the collector] something — not as dry, isolated facts, but as a harmonious whole’. The orders of collecting and the mnemonic role of a collection are obviously of crucial importance to anyone interested in history, but so are questions about the form of the collection. Like the importance of local collections to historical memory, recent technological developments in museums may also lead to huge changes in the ways objects and memory work together.

Contemporary museums are very much engaged in the world of digitised collecting. Most music that is collected today comes on compact discs, and soon oral historians will be using digital tape. Photographs are now regularly collected, not only as objects, but to be stored by digital means on video disc. Read Only Memory (ROM) discs are increasingly the first port of call in ‘viewing’ a collection using Video Display Units (VDU). National censuses are shredded after the information is recorded on a computer data base. In a museum, instead of taxidermists stuffing animal hides amidst the odour of formaldehyde, you are more likely to find a computer programmer cataloguing collections and perhaps, soon, producing holograms or designing a virtual reality display around a museum’s holdings. Whatever you might think of Benjamin’s obsession with the aura of the object, he is right in pointing out that, for collectors, there is something irreducible about the material form of their collections, and that this has been self-evident for all forms of European-derived private and institutionalised collecting. Such an orientation is fundamentally changed by digital information systems, so that museums might no longer be thought of as institutions that collect but as collecting machines.

The crucial difference between analogue and digital information storage is that, in the sense of encoding information, only digital systems store information, not as a copy or reproduction, but as a distinct production, the reproducibility of which is endless and perfect in that it suffers no generational loss. This means that the same procedure for reading information can also be used to produce something entirely different, which is precisely the use that sampling has contributed to contemporary music. Some museums are putting these capacities to use in interactive VDU units, now so popular in museums such as the new Scienworks Museum in Melbourne and the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. The software programs that operate these units are certainly ‘beyond the tyranny of displaying the object’ but they offer visitors, predominantly computer-literate children, a guided tour through an image-world already created for
them. They are not interactive, but Pavlovian, in that a small variety of stimuli call forth an equally constrained number of possible responses within a given program.

If the full potential of digitised technology is to be used, it must involve the ability to interact genuinely with information so as to allow manipulation and transformation; to allow people to change, the immateriality of digitised information. Sampling techniques and the manipulation of digitised photographic images are only the beginning. Superficially these are simply new instances of the old practices — simulation to produce fakes, photo-montage and so on. Taken to, soon-to-be-realised, extremes in manipulable three-dimensional forms such as holograms and Virtual Reality units, digitised information could be available that will enable anyone to manipulate images and text to produce situations which, in turn, would be endlessly manipulable. The fluidity with which digitised information can be reconstituted makes a fundamental breach between the authenticity of the original and the effects that can be generated by the use of simulated originals. As the aura of sacredness surrounding an original disappears, museums might become institutions not simply of collecting that which is worthy of preservation, but places where the use, reading, reconstitution and manipulation of the 'objects' of memory might be virtually real.

These new technologies might be a means of actively claiming memories and owning the immaterial remains of the past, not in the passive spectacle of the museum, but in the will to remember, repeat and rework, which is surely the way to live between the excesses of amnesia and the suffering of melancholia. Like the collection at Silverton, they might be recreational practices of memory. As forms of remembering, local collections were not made from alienated objects, they did not stand in for progress, the nation, civilisation, or the death of God. On the contrary, these collections were about the dynamism of remembering in the making of histories, they were elaborated versions of the ad hoc collecting that goes on in many families, and importantly they were a collective form of remembering. I do not mean to valorise these collecting practices, but simply suggest that these odd collections and their strange ways of communicating relationships between object and history provide very different models of historical understanding, ways of thinking about the past and ways people remember their lives in relation to material objects. We all live as historians by inscribing and depositing the artefacts of our own historical cultures. That remembering, that
making of histories, need not be that which we aim to capture, to preserve, to make present or to supersede; it can be part of the performances of remembering, of enacting histories. Digital systems of information storage and production might shift the focus of collecting and remembering in contemporary culture away from preservation and towards renewal, towards what Nietzsche called the possibility of history for life.

Notes

1 Aspects of this chapter are developed at greater length in my PhD thesis, 'The Training of Memory: Moments of Historical Imagination in Australia', University of Melbourne, 1993. Some of the ideas in this chapter were mooted in 'Unpacking My Digital Sampler: Collecting, Histories and Technologies', a work-in-progress seminar, Humanities Research Centre, 27 August 1991 and in a seminar presentation to 'Museums without Object', a session in the series, 'Heritage, Memory, History' run by the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne, July 1992. My thanks to the organisers of these seminars and to the participants. My reflection here benefited from Kate Darian-Smith's and Paula Hamilton's critical reading.


6 John Rajchman, 'Postmodern Museum', p.117.


17 This list ignores the Scandinavian tradition of folk culture in museums; see Peter Burke, 'Popular Culture in Norway and Sweden', *History Workshop*, No. 3, 1977, pp.143-7.


22 Carl Bridge, 'South Australia's Early Public Libraries', *South Australiana*, vol. 21, No.1, March, 1982, pp.80-6; H. M. Hale, 'The First Hundred Years of the Museum', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, XII.


26 Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1981.


28 See Marc Rothenberg and Peter Hoffenberg, ‘Australia at the 1876 Exhibition’.


30 Paul Fox, ‘Memory, the Museum and the Postcolonial World’, p.317.


32 Catalogue of Grand Auction Bazaar (Mechanics Institute), 19 August 1863, items 129 and 1510 in Envelope 5 of the Roberts Collection, State Library of Victoria.

33 A number of ‘Eureka relics’ were brought before the ‘Australian Historical Record Society, Ballarat’, Minutes.

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