My Home
is My Museum

Ideal Homes, ideal selves, ideal shelves?

Rachel Hurdley

"We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room. For there we sit surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience. That bowl on the mantelpiece, for instance, was bought at Mantua on a windy day. We were leaving the shop when the sinister old woman plucked at our skirts and said she would find herself starving one of these days, but, "Take it!" she cried, and thrust the blue and white china bowl into our hands as if she never wanted to be reminded of her quixotic generosity. So, guiltily, but suspecting nevertheless how badly we had been fleeced, we carried it back to the little hotel where, in the middle of the night, the innkeeper quarrelled so violently with his wife that we all leant out into the courtyard to look, and saw the vines laced about among the pillars and the stars white in the sky. The moment was stabilized, stamped like a coin indelibly among a million that slipped by imperceptibly. There, too, was the melancholy Englishman, who rose among the coffee cups and the little iron tables and revealed the secrets of his soul--as travellers do. All this--Italy, the windy morning, the vines laced about the pillars, the Englishman and the secrets of his soul--rise up in a cloud from the china bowl on the mantelpiece."

V. Woolf, 1930, Street Haunting: A London Adventure
in Selected Essays, OUP 2009 pp. 177-188

As a visitor to a house, how much can we know of its inhabitants by viewing the things we see around us? And how do those same sorts of things make us feel 'at home' in our own houses? When we step over the threshold, do we become different versions of ourselves?
And how do visitors influence our homely aesthetic?

For a visitor sipping tea on the sofa, the mantel is just about at eye level, a silent tableau that invites judgement: are they people like us?

How did those particular things make it to that focal point; what are we supposed to think? Unless the householder recounts, Woolf-like, absent times, places and people that breathe so vividly for them from these little objects, we are left to conjure our own stories. Do they build up an accretion of objects over time, the kitsch souvenir, rather nice porcelain, pine cones and invitations jostling together in a fine haze of dust? Or is it the pure symmetry of candlesticks and vases, with the carriage clock ticking fast or slow at the centre? If so, what kind of candlesticks: Georgian or Primark? Are there three more carriage clocks in the attic: Dad's retirement present, the wedding gift, the heirloom from Auntie Gladys? Are the mementoes that sit in pride of place carefully chosen for their beauty, utility, or rather for remembrance of the giver. For some, the ugliness of a gift matters less than the heart's jump of love for the giver. And sometimes, there's a good story to tell about that tarry piece of ship's rope, papier mache owl or rusty lamp. Particular sorts of stories, which remake us as adventurers, loving parents, or *really* working class because grandpa was a miner.

Some of that stuff is out there because of what we want others to think of us; some of it because of what we want to make of ourselves. Stories change according to who is telling, who is listening, and the meanings of things change over time.

A museum mantel is situated in a place that has already framed its story, whereas display spaces at home are less settled.
A relationship ends, so the photos and some of the ornaments go; it's a birthday and everything must make way for the cards; the Poole pottery collection overflows from the cabinet, or a daughter's graduation photo takes centre

stage. All too often, the neat little site above the gas fire or under the flatscreen, gets cluttered. Calendars of social ritual: Christmas, Diwali, Valentine's Day, Father's Day (for some); the tempo of lives: births, marriages, civil partnerships, deaths; family narratives; displays of cultural belonging proliferate. Then there is the card to be posted, the TV remote, the coffee cup that leaves a ring. Houses cannot be curated in quite the same way as a museum, because life gets in the way.

Museum Mantel (courtesy of Cambridge Museum)

Sometimes, too, things take over, because of the stories that cling to them. A parent dies, and the house must be cleared, but memories cannot be cast out as easily as that old armchair. The chair that has always been there, lumpy, in the way, but a travelling companion, where dogs, cats and people have slept, babies fed, children comforted, phone calls made, tea drunk, books read, tears cried, letters opened, grief and excitement shared. So much more visible than a small ornament, ever-present, unlike the memento in a drawer, yet barely thought of as a place of memory or display. The paintings seen so often, they barely trouble the eye, suddenly spring out from the wall, bringing back the feel, the smell of childhood. And things that seemed not to matter now matter so much, because they bring back what would otherwise be forgotten. They are the stuff of memory.

But what of times, places and people that have no materialization in things and stories? And those who have nothing to show of

themselves because they have nothing? Or perhaps have nothing that is recognizable to the mass who know they belong? So much of the past has been forgotten because nothing remains, particularly of the poor who had nothing to pass on, or of everyday life that left no mark. A museum mantel can show the fine mirror and candlesticks, but rarely the clay pipe or letter. While people on the street may look like a mass, some greet that 'republican army', while others crave the solitude and comfort of a warm room, rather than another night in a hostel. The opportunity to have that space to tell a little of ourselves to visitors who might venture no further than the sofa, to share memories with family and friends who crowd into the kitchen, and to remake ourselves through the things that crowd about us, is so precious. And we can treasure the dust too. As Carolyn Steedman, writing on archives, commented, 'Indeed, Dust is the opposite thing to Waste…It is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone' (2001: 164). Museum of memories, living room for now, workshop for the future: our homes are so many places.

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Artists' Homes & the Influence on Making

Lotte Juul Petersen

How could the home be a locus of artistic production and how could the domestic space play a role in direct relation to the work of art? There is something profoundly different or special when stepping into a space, which is also an artist's domestic environment. And perhaps therefore you can understand why some artists embrace the potential of the privacy of the home in their work. Quoting Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, he writes "If I were asked to name a chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming of the house, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (p.6). With these words in mind, Bachelard gives the house and the habitual a magical possibility for merging the act of working with the act of dwelling.

A fascinating example is the one of the Dada artist Kurt Schwitter's life project Merzbau, first initiated in his residential home in Hannover, Schwitters built his own constructions into his residences incorporating rooms he lived in into the structure. The ceilings and walls were covered with three dimensional shapes and countless nooks and grottos were filed with a variety of objects. These nooks and grottos were sometimes obliterated by future additions, leaving them existing only in the memories of the earlier versions of the work. Schwitters considered the Merzbau as an uncompleted work that by its very nature, continued to grow and change constantly.

Another artist's house from the same period, which is now a trust and therefore opens to the public, is the decorative house of the artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, Charleston House. In 1916 the artists moved to Sussex with their unconventional household. Over the following half century Charleston became the country meeting place for the group of artists, writers and intellectuals known as Bloomsbury. Inspired by Italian fresco painting and the Post-Impressionists, the artists decorated the walls, doors and furniture at Charleston. The walled garden was redesigned in a style reminiscent of southern

Europe, with mosaics, box hedges, gravel pathways and ponds, but with a touch of Bloomsbury humour in the placing of the statuary.

An artist such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres also often said he was a kitchen-table artist or his studio was situated under his bed. His works came from being affected by a domestic environment and many of the works have that direct legacy of his own environment, for instance depicting his unmade bed reproduced on billboard scale, or snapshots of an interior full of cats (Kirsty Bell, *The Artist's House, from workplace to art work*, p.6). In the digital age we now live in, it seems many artists work with and within a home environment and translate that into the public realm, often creating a meeting point of reality and fiction. Laure Provoust's film *Monolog* (2009), is filmed in her home, and the artist seeks to turn the domestic setting into a place of amusing details: pointing out a mouse that runs across the room in front of the screen, or remarking on the fabric of the seats.

The writer George Perec highlights the habitual and the everyday with the 'infra-ordinary' in the book *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*. Instead of the headline news of daily papers that recounted the sensational, extraordinary and the fantastic, he was fascinated with minute situations, gestures, moments and habits that we overlooked or missed from our everyday and habitual environments. The missed and overlooked seem to be just in front of us.

Lotte Juul Petersen has since 2008 been the Artists & Programmes Curator at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge. Recently she co-curated with artist Giles Round, the group exhibition 'The Influence of Furniture on Love' in Wysing's 17th Century Farmhouse.

Privilege, Precariousness & Responsibility

A REFLECTION ON MY HOME IS MY MUSEUM

Caroline Wright

"The house is a discursive arena in which inside and outside spaces hold specific social and cultural associations that can be subverted through artistic representation."

Perry G, Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art, 2013.

My Home is My Museum grew from a germ of an idea after a visit to Ipswich Museum several years ago. Beautiful, rare and unusual objects stared out from behind glass cabinet walls, each imbued with value and significance and part of a carefully considered story. Some of these objects had been donated, others collected particularly to illustrate specific areas of knowledge. Several had once held a role in ordinary domestic life. Returning home, I noticed afresh objects around my home, on the mantelpiece, in the kitchen, on shelves and tables. They too had a role, one of memory and as emotional triggers, of functionality and uselessness, my own history arranged around the rooms. There were other stories too, of rarity, value, fact and figure; masked considerations since for me, personal association always holds the upper hand. These ideas developed and grew and led to a collection of objects donated by the public and a performance piece that took place inside two Cambridge houses

There is a tradition of artists working in homes, and in museums, and with objects. I considered the idea of approaching the house as a museum, exploring the contents as one would in a gallery, curious as to how and if we actually curate the objects in our homes. I wondered if a collection of donated objects from the public would open up the richness I felt sure was hidden behind front doors. I thought frequently of domestic collections up and down the land remaining private and only shared with the privileged few that are invited over the threshold. The point of entry is transitional, intense; it heralds a change in circumstances and this was a key moment at the beginning of the performances.

"The rules were set instantly with careful, deliberate instructions of how to step over the threshold, an act that launched the audience into becoming part of the performance, but more than that illustrated that we were stepping into another world. We were entering an individual's home where due reverence had to be given but we were also entering a space where each of us had to let go and put ourselves into the hands of Caroline Wright, our Museum Guide for the evening."

Elly Wright, Audience Member

The rules did not simply apply to the museum guide/audience relationship. A set of parameters shared and agreed between the householders and myself was necessary to establish a context that everyone felt comfortable with. Where were the boundaries when talking about other people's treasures to a set of strangers? How far could fact and fiction be intertwined, if at all? How much personal information could be divulged?

"It was a little disconcerting knowing that a bunch of complete strangers were in my home looking at my things without me being there - usually you are with your visitors and can see where they glance and what they are noticing. I wonder what picture they formed of me from my objects and furnishings?"

Kirsten Lavers, householder

"Was it voyeuristic to use someone else's home as a performance space - was it too intrusive? But I needn't have been concerned about these things, as I was made to feel very welcome, and the performance was very respectful to the 'museum owners' and their treasures. What I wasn't prepared for was how moved and affected I would be by the piece."

Audience member

The choice of focus in each performance was dictated to a great extent by the householders' stories, practical considerations such as visibility for the audience and selecting objects that connected to form a layered narrative. This determined the pace of the piece and brought variety to the performance; some objects were invested with many layers of meaning, others had no real significance but had somehow found their way into a display.

"I asked the museum owner about this enamelled metal advertising board but she was not that interested in it, having picked it up in a market because the colours compliment the painting above. I actually quite like it – on the TV there is a horrible sports injury and yet the family are all smiling, the mother and son have even run in from outside to see what going on."

Extract from performance script

Museums are full of protocols and systems, and the museum guide is part of this construct, enhancing the power of the institution and

underpinning the knowledge structure. Our houses have a set of established systems, we adopt and observe unspoken behaviour patterns, live by mutually agreed rules. To an outsider, houses and their objects give us a sense of those who live there, we imagine the person to whom the glass penguin paperweight belongs, we picture the wearer of the Panama hat. Houses and their contents generate a character all of their own.

> *"It was through the chosen objects that we were then taken on a journey of museological considerations: the provenance, the measurements, the precise positioning and curation, the monetary value, the emotional value, the broader historical/social/ geographical context. With each object we were bombarded with an avalanche of fabulous information. The Western Rockhopper Penguin, Vesuvius erupted in AD79, the Eastern Rockhopper Penguin, the chemical make-up of a match, the Northern Rockhopper Penguin, residual ink left on an etching plate, there is not a Southern Rockhopper Penguin."*
>
> Elly Wright, audience member

> *"(On the way home) We talked about how the first house seemed to be presented in a more analytical and factual way and the second house was more personal and emotional. Was it to settle us in to the performance with something safe first?"*
>
> Diane and Stuart Archer, audience members

In writing the script and then sharing this with the householders in advance of the performances to ensure they were comfortable with the contents, I endeavoured to meld facts and information gleaned from them with additional research and a touch of humour. Decisions were made about how to incorporate potentially sensitive material. Some sections of the script were based closely on the householders' own words, particularly when there was an emotional aspect to the content. It is a truth that many of the things we keep and hold and treasure

are memorials to people, places or experiences. By acting as guardians of objects, we can deliberately travel back in our minds to relive an emotion, we can commemorate something or someone of significance; we can celebrate a part of our lives. We are placed on a timeline. Positioned in a history of our own making, we surround ourselves with our chosen, private world.

> *"The subject of this sketch is the museum owner's brother. It was drawn by the museum owner's mother and is dated late 1980's, depicting the subject before his early death at the age of only 38. The sketch is a fine example of the delicacy of the drawn line, the way that the emotion shines out far more than it could in any photograph; these are bloodlines encased in pencil. He was a young man, supposedly with his life stretching out before him. Look at his face….his mother would ask him to sit for her, to remain still for her to measure, and study and look and plot his form on the two dimensional paper. Her gaze that of a mother and an artist, seeking to represent all she knew. She rendered him forever in this room, on this paper. I wonder did she know that her request for him to keep motionless would become permanent? I wonder did he know that his mother's drawing would outlive him?"*
>
> Extract from performance script

The performances were for small audiences, a maximum of eight at a time. Thus the relationship between audience and performer was intimate, objects could be passed around with time for everyone to see them, close inspection was possible. Laughter was shared easily - one audience group were particularly full of mirth. Emotion in close quarter is palpable. The shared experience developed a

fragile relationship between everyone, bonded together in the room. As a performer, the closeness of the audience, the responsibility to them and to the householders, all made for a precariousness, a intimacy of experience, simultaneously full of fear and enjoyment.

> *"50 minutes – so emotionally charged I haven't talked to anyone about it. I almost don't want to share my experience, in case I lose it……. I loved the amusing moments – tea towels preserving our spirituality! And I was amazed at how I was drawn in. I loved the intimacy of our small and silent group – the specialness created. I wonder what emotions were stirred in the breasts of the other museum visitors that day?"*
>
> Lindsey Wright, audience member

> *"Was it the way the objects connected to the passing of time and the stories of whole lives and their links to previous and subsequent generations that was so moving? Was it the sadness and the sense of loss in the final story told. Was it the references to mother and child that got to me in particular? For my part I found it profound, moving, generous and somehow complete.*

> *"As I travelled home I was overwhelmed by a strong feeling that my home is not just a museum, but it is a fortress. It is where I keep my most precious things, my loved ones. For my nearest family it is their home, where I keep them warm and safe. For all the others I love, it houses mementoes, photographs, gifts (the wanted and less appreciated!) of those people (both still living and dead) who are important to me. And hopefully it houses some things that will make it to the next generation, one way or another."*
>
> Audience member

The value we place in objects we choose to cherish and display is powerful and enriching. This is equally borne out by the objects

donated to the online My Home is My Museum Collection. Wonderful and fascinating things such as a charm bracelet, a Greek Acropolis rally plate, an art deco vase, a snake's shed skin and dogs' ashes have been donated and the stories that accompany them illustrate the narrative richness that we surround ourselves with. Making the My Home is My Museum performances was a privilege and through the householders trust and generosity to the work, any fears were diminished. Immersing ourselves in someone else's home, possessions and stories is a rare event. We had experienced this together, householder, audience and performer, sealing the occasion with the gift of an inscribed match saying, "Your Home is Your Museum".

> *"We left with a better insight into two peoples lives and felt richer for the experience. We went away reflecting on the same items within our own home and their meaning and value to us. A thought process triggered by this performance and a recognition that we surround ourselves with things that have a strong personal value but maybe inconsequential monetary value. The matches currently remain unused, and maybe we will look with a fresh perspective as we visit people's homes in future.*
>
> Tim Smith, audience member

Caroline Wright is an artist based at Wysing Arts Centre near Cambridge. Her site responsive socially engaged practice encompasses visual and performance work in media as diverse as glass and gold as well as the human body, and drawing. She combines her research led studio practice with teaching and is a member of Live Art Collective East (LACE). www.carolinewright.com

My Home is My Museum

What do you keep on your mantelpiece? My Home is my Museum celebrates the domestic, private museums we all cherish, examining the objects we hold dear and how such emotional significance came to be.

My Home is My Museum combines performances, a publication, online collection, discussion and exhibition, all based around the stories and memories we create and curate in our homes.

Social Scientist Rachel Hurdley, curator Lotte Juul Petersen and artist Caroline Wright discuss and share the stories, histories and objects from the people of Cambridge, surrounded by the fascinating collections that document social history in the Museum of Cambridge.

My Home is Museum is a key strand of 'Curating Cambridge: our city, our stories, our stuff', exploring collecting and curating from the personal and everyday perspective. The University of Cambridge Museums are pleased to support this project using public funding from Arts Council England.

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