Creating a Teaching Cabinet

The Cabinet of Obsolete Technologies

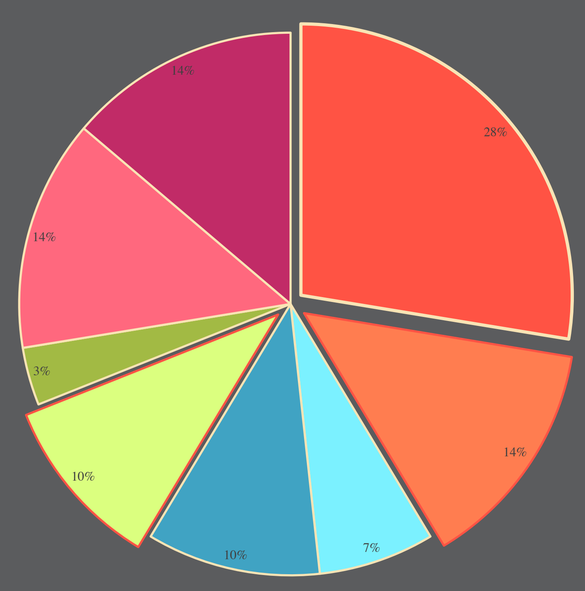
Phoebe Thomas
Supervised by Dr. Hanna Hölling, Department of History of Art
and Andrea Lathrop Ligueros, PhD Candidate

Department of History of Art
Faculty: Social and Historical Sciences

Overview

My Laidlaw project was to assist the creation of *The Cabinet of Obsolete Technologies*: a teaching collection that will be used for research and studying purposes at the History of Art Department. Over the six weeks, I researched and wrote descriptions for *Cabinet* acquisitions and took accompanying photographs for the collection's digital collection. As my project progressed, I researched and visited other teaching collections in and around UCL, as well as considering matters of materiality, obsolescence, and the role of teaching cabinets in object-based learning. Instead of observing and recording how individuals respond to object-based learning – which is not quantifiable – I instead considered the ways in which teaching collections could facilitate haptic interactions between student and media item. Additionally, I considered and conducted research on the ways in which redundant media can take on new functions, and how this *contradicts* their obsolescence. When items do not operate as they once originally did, we may better assess their materiality; how their components fit together, how they once operated, and the ingenuity behind their design. Moreover, the descriptions of the *Cabinet* items uploaded to the website will not only document the *Cabinet* acquisitions but will provide key information on media that is now seldom used or known about, ensuring that these intermedia items will not fade into obscurity.

Cabinet Acquisitions: 2018-2019



** Glass negative, stereoscopic glass slide, Daguerreotype, poster*

From the 29 items that were acquired between 2018 – 2019, the majority are image capture devices; 4 are Polaroid cameras. The collection includes the Polaroid Sun 600, featuring a foldable integrated flash suitable for taking images in low-light levels, first marketed in 1981. Animation devices and film viewing devices have been categorised separately; though they both facilitate moving images, they operate in entirely different ways. The differences and similarities between the objects cannot always be known through image or text alone, and are better observed through a a personal encounter with the objects.

Mass Produced Media

We can consider the ways in which we engage with mass-produced items; in particular, how we may connect to the individuals involved in the creation of standardised media. These items are derived from urban environments; they are created with cheaper materials, and require people to work in factories. In a factory, an assembly line is required; on this assembly line, factory workers perform simple repetitive tasks. Additionally, the components required for these media are made of different materials, which must be sourced from many places; for instance, the precious metals found in cameras must be extracted from ore, a natural resource.
Additionally, planned obsolescence affects how mass-produced items are made; cheaper and flimsier materials that are used are prone to breaking. Moreover, many of the materials are used are non-biodegradable, so once the item is broken, it contributes to landfill.

Methodologies

The methods I used to compile information for my project were varied from textual resources to interactions with the *Cabinet* objects. My descriptions for the media objects were informed by science and technology journals and articles, as well as entries on hobby websites and other intermedia collections. My research pertaining to obsolescence and teaching collections was facilitated by academic publications, as well as weekly discussions led by my supervisors. For more information on how other teaching collections operated, I contacted and met curators. For instance, the head curator of the UCL Ethnographic Collection, Delphine Mercier, provided key information that allowed me to make distinctions between the *Cabinet of Obsolete Technologies* and other teaching collections – such as students being allowed to hold *Cabinet* items without the standard protective curatorial gloves. Additionally, whilst handling, describing and picturing the *Cabinet* media items, I acquired knowledge about the materiality of the items; how they operated, how to hold them, and how their designs were echoed in their subsequent iterations. The *Cabinet* teaching collection facilitates different individual approaches to the objects, which brings about new ways of learning.

Acknowledgements

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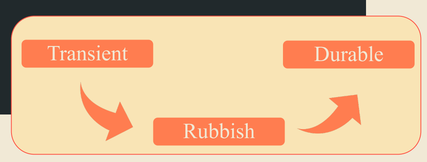
Rubbish Theory

Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory* (1979) stipulates that, for a transient (less valuable) item to become durable (more valuable), it must first become rubbish. Thompson considers a rubbish item one that is imbued with the ability to become an object of worth; much in the same way as an obsolescent media may take on a new function. I believe that obsolescence allows an object to be found again, to be repurposed and appreciated. Long after an item is in prime 'working order' can it be considered of value; the item may be reactivated through haptic interactions and focused discussions, to assist study and research.



The Renewal of Obsolescent Media

Obsolescence is a transient state. It is not fixed, as obsolescent items can become useful and valuable to individuals, within certain contexts. For instance, Polaroid cameras have seen a recent resurgence among novice and professional photographers alike, as no digital camera can replicate the sound and feel of these devices – nor can they emulate the appearance of Polaroid photographs.

	Museum	Teaching Collection
Location	Often in a large, public building of historical significance	Non-site specific; can often be found in Universities, houses or studio spaces
Collection	Estate collections, bought, archaeological digs	Donations, online bidding, antique shops
Function	Display historical items Preservation and conservation	For teaching and research purposes
Are items displayed or stored?	Displayed, usually with an archive as well	Usually stored, with some items displayed

The table *(left)* details the key differences between museums and teaching cabinets. I have made the distinction between these two spaces, as a way of indicating how objects operate differently in different contexts, circumstances, and institutions. From this table, we may come to understand why teaching cabinets are better at renewing obsolescent objects. The items in teaching collections are not displayed in a way that influences our perception of the value of the item – there is no hierarchy among the objects. Furthermore, teaching cabinets emphasise the individual's experience with and understanding of specific items. Through haptic contact with the objects, the individual may accrue object-based knowledge, such as the feeling of the object, the materials it is composed of, and how it once would have operated.

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