Physical Encounters: What do we mean by condition and access?

Monday 30 March 2009, 9.30 – 17.00, Room 612, UCL Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London, WC1H 0PY.

ABSTRACTS (Draft)
(in order of programme)

Joel Taylor, UCL Centre for Sustainable Heritage
Introduction to condition demonstration

‘Condition’ is often defined by observable indicators of change to heritage objects, such as corrosion. It is a general term that incorporates various concepts and is not necessarily used or understood clearly. There are different interpretations of the meaning and importance of these concepts and indicators, so ‘condition’ can be perceived in various ways. This talk discusses a practical session, held on the day, where delegates assess the condition of heritage objects. Techniques to measure variation in assessment will be used to discuss the extent of, and possible reasons for, difference in the way people perceive ‘condition’.

Joel Taylor recently completed a PhD about condition surveys, and has published various articles about condition, subjectivity in the condition survey process and looking at causes and effects of deterioration. He is currently Course Director for the Sustainable Heritage MSc at the Centre for Sustainable Heritage, University College London.

Susanne Kuechler, UCL Anthropology
The materiality and potential of an object.

My paper will examine the role of materials and materials-based technologies in artefacts; I shall survey approaches to uncover the sensory modalities which the materiality of artefacts harbours as potential and situate such approaches in an analysis which regards artefacts as bodily prostheses and as means to distribute personhood on extended spatio-temporal networks. My talk will conclude with a consideration of the material specific aging of artefacts as intentionally situated, and thus as resource of information about the ‘vehicular’ capacity of artefacts whose potential to elicit and transmit ideas has been all too often restricted to considerations of form.

Susanne Kuechler has conducted long-term research in the Pacific and has written widely on art, material culture and design, both in relation to Oceania and also in relation to specific materials and material technologies, their uptake and impact on society.

Jonathan Ashley-Smith, Royal College of Art
What is condition?

There are several reasons for reporting on the condition of a museum object. The motive for recording the condition determines the meaning of the word, leading to several different interpretations. Although it may be desirable to think of an absolute definition of the current state of an object, it is difficult to avoid relative interpretations relating to suitability or fitness for a given purpose.

Jonathan is an independent teacher, researcher and consultant in the area of collections risk. He is Visiting Professor in the Conservation Department at the Royal College of Art. Author of Risk Assessment for Object Conservation he was formerly Head of Conservation at the Victoria & Albert Museum.
Frances Halahan, Halahan Associates
Condition and management decisions

This presentation will provide a brief look at how assessing the condition of objects can be used to make management decisions relating to the care and use of a collection. It will look at how condition may be assessed and additional information that is needed alongside the condition assessments and show some of the condition assessment ‘tools’ or programmes. The advantages and disadvantages of condition assessment will be discussed.

Frances trained as a conservator at UCL Institute of Archaeology, she has extensive conservation teaching experience at both West Dean College, and at City and Guilds of London Art School, and now heads a group of consultants specialising in collection surveys, conservation planning and exhibition work.

Ylva Dahnsjö, The National Trust
What is acceptable condition

The National Trust provides direct and virtual access to historic and natural environments. Collections are therefore shown in context, whether real or constructed. This presentation will examine the parameters for acceptable condition and how they inform remedial and preventive conservation decisions for objects and interiors.

Ylva Dahnsjö has a MA in Mediaeval English from King’s College London. After several years as a university lecturer, she trained as a rare book conservator at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts (University of the Arts). She was Chief Conservator of the Book & Paper Conservation Studio, University of Dundee for 13 years, and is currently Territory Conservator South of the National Trust. (Formerly: Chair of SSCR, President of ECCO, Trustee of Dundee Rep Theatre, Member of Funding Panel for Wellcome Trust).

Deborah Novotny, The British Library
Using Surrogates

Abstract Forthcoming

David Howell, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
Digitisation and the demand to see ‘real’ objects

Digitisation of collections within libraries with special collections has some fundamental differences to digitisation in museums. Some material within a library will be of interest simply for the words it contains and in an ideal world this material can be made available digitally without the need to resort to the physical object. Examples will be given where information is being discovered in the Bodleian Library that may never have come to light without the Google digitisation of nineteenth century material.

Other material within a library may contain widely available text, but it is the object itself that is of main interest, and a different approach to digitisation is required; expensive high grade digitisation. There are several projects at the Bodleian where this type of exercise is being carried out.

In either case digitisation may actually increase the demands on the physical collection. Mass low-level digitisation increases the knowledge that information exists but often the data is not complete and requires further investigation. Making high quality surrogates can give greater access to virtua’ material, but often scholars still need to have access to the material object. Objects are still required for exhibitions. Digitisation is making library material available to a much greater audience than was ever possible before, which must be a massive advance in the libraries education mission. However it would be dangerous to be complacent and ignore the fact that the process may actually cause an increase in attrition to our collections.

David Howell is Head of Conservation and Collection Care at Oxford University Library Service based in the Bodleian Library which he joined in 2004. A graduate in Chemistry and English Medieval Studies he was previously the conservation scientist for Historic Royal Palaces for over 20 years.
David Prytherch, *Birmingham City University*

**Touching ghosts in museums: how real is a virtual object?**

Main points:

- Why virtual objects might contribute to a useful strategy for conservation
- What is haptics - Human Haptics and Machine Haptics
- How might a virtual simulation work?
- Haptic Interfaces - pros and cons
- Current Interfaces
- Possibilities for Museums
- Economic 3D scanning
- 3D Scanning workflow
- Results of Pilot study investigating visitor response to touching virtual museum objects
- An interesting and useful perceptual anomaly - The power of the brain

Senior Research Fellow in Haptics and Computer Interface Design at Birmingham Institute of Art & Design. Research interests include Haptic (tacit) learning and teaching, haptics in skill development and implications in activity satisfaction and motivation and issues of tool use and material embodiment with regard to computer interface systems development.

Irit Narkiss and Helena Tomlin, *The Manchester Museum*

**10 year olds crack the ‘Catch-22’**

Using our recent project ‘The Museum of Me’ as a case study, we will explore the process of engaging children with the real-life dilemmas of museum professionals. A class of Year 5 children from Manchester were involved in working with Museum staff to explore how they might interpret, display and care for objects in their own classroom; these included the children’s own prized objects and artefacts made with a group of artists. The presentation will analyse what frameworks and resources are required to develop skills to successfully resolve the dilemmas created by the access/conservation Catch-22.

*Helena Tomlin* joined The Manchester Museum as Curator of Learning in 2006. She has a degree in Art History from The Courtauld Institute and an MA in Fine Art. As a practicing artist and educator her work crosses different fields of enquiry. After twenty years of leading teams of educators in museums and galleries, she now researches the ways that children learn within the museum environment.

*Irit Narkiss* (ACR) started out as an archaeologist and later studied conservation at UCL Institute of Archaeology. After much project work and teaching she studied for an MA in Museum Management at Nottingham Trent University. She joined The Manchester Museum as Conservator of Objects & Access in 2004 and investigates new ways of engaging visitors with museum objects.

Andrew Lamb, *Bate Collection, University of Oxford*

**Why do we play historical musical instruments when we have perfectly good modern ones?**

This talk is to explore why there is a demand from musicians and researchers to play historical musical instruments in public collections. Currently the presumption is that these objects should only be played in very special circumstances and not simply to hear ‘what they sound like’. However, despite recent technological advances, there is still no universal method of describing or quantifying the first-hand experience of playing an instrument. So what does the visiting researcher get from the experience?

Trained as a musical instrument conservator, Andy Lamb now works with one of the foremost collections of European orchestral instruments in the world. Having also worked as a semi-professional musician he has gained unique insights into the needs of all areas of the wider museum constituency.
Paul Sullivan, Bristol Museums
Towards a Touch Policy for Bristol’s Museums, Galleries and Archives

Main points:
- We are making a new museum which will tell the story of Bristol and its people for the last 1,000 years
- This has provided the opportunity for a discussion about a touch policy for the new museum and the wider service
- Why do we need a touch policy?
- What form has the discussion taken?
- What have been the results?
- What happens next?

I have been working in the Museum Service in Bristol since 2006. For 12 years before this I was an Access Officer at Bristol University, providing training and support for staff, students and external organisations. I’ve been blind since birth and am a graduate of Birmingham University.

Julie Dawson, Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge
The close-up look

'Meet the Antiquities', an informal gallery programme of the Fitzwilliam Museum’s Department of Antiquities, will be described and discussed. The aim of the programme is to offer individual visitors a close encounter with an object. Often, this is a piece that is under study or treatment by the curator or conservator who is hosting the session. Detailed visual examination, discussion and the handling of associated materials are all encouraged, but the visitor is not permitted to touch the object.

Julie Dawson trained as an archaeological conservator and has worked in Scandinavia, the Far East and Egypt. She is Senior Assistant Keeper (Conservation) at the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge. Her particular areas of interest are the technology and conservation of ancient Egyptian material.

Francesca Monti, University College London
Collections for people

I will discuss, on behalf of Suzanne Keene, some findings from the ‘Collections for People’ research project (UCL). Drawing from the results of a survey of 181 museums in England and Wales, I will focus on how much stored collections are currently used by members of the public, the way in which they are used, what promotes access and what hinders it.

With a BA in Egyptian Archaeology and a postgraduate qualification in Museum Studies, I have a keen interest in the visitor-object encounter, and in the expressive potentials of objects, with emphasis on inconspicuous objects from Egyptology and archaeological collections. I am currently applying for funds for post-doctoral research, while working as a museum consultant.