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Collectors, Museums, and the Life of Things

On the problems of object agency and
why we collect

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Tämän maisterintutkielman aiheena on yksityiset keräilijät, heidän kokoelmansa ja näiden kokoelmien elämä, so. esineiden elämä. Tutkielman pääasiallinen tutkimuskysymys on: miksi me keräilemme esineitä? Tämän tutkimuskysymyksen kautta tämä tutkielma toivoo saavuttavansa oivalluksia meidän yleisestä suhteestamme esineisiin ja esineiden elämästä, so. mitä on olla ihminen esineiden keskellä.

Tässä tutkielmassa esiintyvät keräilijät ovat keräilijöitä, jotka ovat perustaneet yksityisen museon kokoelmilleen. Antropologisia tutkimuksia keräilijöistä tai yksityisistä museoista on harvassa, vaikka keräily yksityisellä ja institutionaalisella tasolla sekä omaisuuden kasaantumisen yleiset ongelmat ovat molemmat merkittäviä aikamme kysymyksiä. Museo instituutiona yhdistää keräilyn ja kasaantumisen formaaliin keräilyyn, säästämiseen, säilömiseen ja esineiden kerryttämiseen määrittelemättömästi ja näennäisen loputtomasti. Museot ovat taksonomialla varustettuja institutionaalisia keräilijöitä matkalla rajattomaan kasvuun. Kaikki tämä ansaitsee lisää antropologista huomiota.

Tämän tutkielman pyrkimys on ajatella kokoelmien kanssa, oppia niiden kautta, samalla pohtien keräilijöiden ja museoiden omistajien kautta minkälaisia tarkoituksia ja päämääriä asiat ja esineet täyttävät niiden utilitaaristen roolien sekä itsestäänselvien merkitysten ulkopuolella, ja minkälaista transformatiivista potentiaalia sisältyy immanenttina museoon, keräilijään ja kokoelmaan, jos minkäänlaista. Materiaali tähän tutkielmaan kerättiin puolistrukturoitujen haastattelujen ja osallistuvan havainnoinnin muodossa, ”osallistuen” ja ”havainnoiden” museotiloissa ja kokoelmia, eli esineitä tutkien. Tämä oli usein hyvin käsinkosketeltava dialektiikka, jonka kautta objekti ja subjekti paljastuvat molemmat prosesseiksi erillisten, rajattujen olentojen sijaan. Eletty esineiden ja asioiden maailma paljastuu ”tulemisen” tilaksi ”olemisen” sijaan. Nämä perspektiivit aiheeseen avautuivat fenomenologian kautta.

Kenttätyö tapahtui kolmen kuukauden aikana kesällä 2019 osana isompaa kirjaprojektia, joka keskittyi niin kutsuttuihin ”mikromuseoihin”. Yhteensä kuudessakymmenessä museossa vierailtiin aina Lapista eteläiseen saaristoon. Yhteensä 37 museonpitäjää tai keräilijää haastateltiin. Lokaatiot ja kokoelmat valokuvattiin myös laajalti. Tutkielman tuloksista käy ilmi syyt keräilyyn: pyrimme

tarttumaan menneeseen, säilömään asioita muille ja luomaan kokoelman, esinekoosteen (assemblage) tai asioiden yhteenliittymän, joka kestää kauemmin kuin itse keräilijä. Keräily ja museo näyttäytyvät tutkimuksessa relationaalisina ja kollektiivisina toimijoina. Ihmisyys esineiden keskellä paljastuu ambivalentiksi olemassaoloksi, suhteemme esineisiin haasteelliseksi ja ristiriitaiseksi.

The subject of this master's thesis is private collectors, their collections and the life of those collections, i.e. things. The main research question is why do we collect things? Through this question this study hopes to gain insight into our general relationship to things and the life of things, i.e., what is it to be human among things.

The collectors in this study are ones who have established a private museum around their collections. Anthropological studies about collectors and private museums are relatively scarce, although the image of the collector and the question of the accumulation of possessions are both of great contemporary relevance. The museum as an institution fuses these two aspects into a formalized endeavor to collect, to save, to keep and accrue objects indefinitely and seemingly without limits. Museums are institutional collectors bound for limitless accumulation with taxonomy. All of this merits further anthropological scrutiny.

The object of this study is to think with the collections, to learn from them, and attempt to discern from collectors and museum proprietors what purposes and needs things fulfill beyond their strictly utilitarian roles and the obvious meanings we give to them, and what sort of transformational potential is immanent in the museum, the collector and the collection, if any. The material for this study was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, where the "observing" and "participating" happened within and with the collections and museums, often a very tactile dialectic through which the object and the subject are revealed as processes rather than strictly separate aspects of existence, the lived world of things revealed as a state of becoming rather than being.

These perspectives were opened up through a phenomenological approach to the study. The fieldwork was conducted during three months in the summer of 2019, as part of a larger book-project focused on so-called "micromuseums". Sixty museums were visited around Finland from Lapland to the southern archipelago. Interviews were conducted with the proprietors of 37 museums. The locations and collections were also photographed extensively. The results of this study were that the reasons for collecting are an endeavor to grasp the past, to preserve things for others, to create a collection, an assemblage or coming-together of things that would outlast the collector. Collecting and the museum show themselves to be profoundly relational and collective. Being human among things is revealed as an ambivalent existence and our relationship to things challenging and contradictory.



Figure 1: C. W. Peale (1822). *The Artist in his Museum*. (Wikimedia Commons).

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1 Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the collector and their collections, their things. The habitus, disposition, and passion of the collector are subjects of which much has been said throughout the years by many prominent writers and thinkers. In fact, many who have delved into the subject have been avid self-confessed collectors themselves. Sigmund Freud surrounded himself with his collection of antiques, the sight of which made him feel at home during his exile in London (Forrester, J. 2004; Poore, B. 2015). Walter Benjamin had his old books, of which he so famously and eloquently gives an account in his “*Illuminations*” (1992 [1968]), but there are countless other such academic figures, many of whom are mentioned in myriad classic analyses and treatises of collecting such as Maurice Rheims’ *The Strange Life of Objects* (1961). My thesis, following the work of these and other scholars, is an anthropological investigation on the things in our lives and how we share and make our lived space with them. I will approach this theme through the figure of the collector who accumulates things into a collection. I will consider the motivations and habitus of the collector, but also try to discern the life of the things that end up in said collections. The philosophical practice of phenomenology has a long history and has strongly influenced even anthropological work on the subject of things and objects and our relationship to them (more on the difference between these two terms later), so the phenomenological lens is one that will also give its focus to this exploration of the subject. In addition, the wider concern of object agency will be considered.

The impetus for this thesis began with the reading of Fiona Candlin’s (2015) intriguing book *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums*, an ethnography of museums of sorts, which lays out the case for studying what she calls micromuseums, i.e., small independent museums. Through various case studies, she contemplates how we see museums, what functions they play in society, what sort of reciprocal relationship we have with the museum and can our notions of them change when we look through the prism of these micromuseum. This led me to think of the things in such museums, how these collections arise, what they mean to people and what kinds of relationships people have with things.

The fieldwork for this work was conducted during a three-month trip across Finland during the summer of 2019. Over sixty museums were visited, and 37 eventual interviews conducted. An interesting subset of the locations presented itself as the perfect material for my thesis: private collectors who had established a museum for their collections. There were 14 such locations, most of whose collectors-cum-museum proprietors I had interviewed extensively as we visited each location.

This introduction will be followed by an elaboration on methods and research ethics, with some thought on my role as a researcher. The structure of the paper is as follows: in chapter two I will explore the history of our relationship to things through a look at the history of museums and in particular the history of collecting in depth and consider the birth of the contemporary museum institution and the rise of 19th century ‘modernity’ and its effects on our relationship to things, with a regard to the inextricable connection between the collector and the museum. At the end of chapter two I will also briefly consider anthropology’s relationship to the subject of museums and collecting. Chapter three will delve into the theoretical discussion, and the life of things, the phenomenological approach to our relationship to things with consideration to the subject of the object agency.

My first and main research question is simply: why do we collect things? In chapter four I will analyze in conjunction with the relevant theoretical texts my interviewees’ ideas about collecting and collections, with some considerations on the idea of the museum in respect to their collections. What gives things their allure? Chapter five will sum up my findings and give some concluding remarks along with possible future avenues of investigation while also stating some general considerations about the relationship between the ‘western’ culture of capitalist growth and accumulation and the practice of collecting.

The ever-growing heritage and museum industry, the obviously disastrous relationship we currently have with accumulation, and the proliferation of academic writing on the subject of object-person-society relationships make this thesis a relevant contribution to the various ongoing academic discussions. By analyzing the extensive fieldwork material and by taking advantage of archaeological, anthropological and philosophical texts in addition to various more general works I

hope to bring about a wide-ranging perspective and contribution on the subject. And as Joshua Bell (2017, abstract) has noted: “Anthropology has always involved collections and collecting. Collections helped give rise to the discipline’s formation and were integral to theoretical perspectives rooted in hierarchies of race and technology in the nineteenth century. With the disavowal of these perspectives, collecting, and its resulting collections, remained an ongoing but unacknowledged activity.” In this light it seems pertinent to bring back our focus to the practice of collecting. In addition, there have been relevant calls (Olsen, B. 2010; Ikuya, T., et al. 2018; Basu, P., et al. 2017; Adams, R. 1997; Boivin, N. 2008; Harman, G. 2018) to bring back a general focus on things to the social sciences. These calls are arising from many different theoretical and pragmatic concerns, not the least of which is modernity’s critical overconsumption and the resulting mountains of waste. As the life of things so readily ends in a heap of trash, we should just as readily concern ourselves with our relationship to said things, and this work tries to do just that.

1.1 On Methods and Ethics

In this section, I will discuss the planning and execution of my fieldwork and subsequent selection of material for my thesis. I will explain how and why I chose the museums I did, what criteria I used. The selected museums will be introduced and their applicability and significance for this study briefly analyzed. The material for the thesis was gathered in conjunction with a larger project on small, independent museums that will eventually become a book. I interviewed the museum proprietors and recorded nearly all interviews, and examined the collections and museum spaces, while my wife, Matilda Gronow, who accompanied me on the project, photographed the objects, spaces and people. All photographs shown in this work are taken by her. I will also expand on our roles and briefly discuss questions of privacy and anonymity in the research context.



Figure 2: A wall full of wooden pulleys from old sailing ships at the Pulley Museum in Iniö

Our journey began in May 2019, when we set out from Helsinki with our livable van. At the end of three months, we had driven approximately 10,000 km and covered most of Finland. We usually contacted the museums a week or two ahead of our arrival, but as the summer wore on, we sometimes did not notify them at all before we came in through the door. For the first month, we changed locations nearly every day, sometimes visiting two museums per day. There was a reason for such a tight schedule, and it was that most of the museums in Finland are located in the southern part of the country; the further north one travels, the longer distances between habitation and potential museums, and the longer everything takes. In the south, we could cover 150 km in two days and visit four museums, while in the north we had to drive approximately 1,300 km just to visit four museums, and it took us over a week with many pitstops on the way.

From the museums we wanted to visit, we left out local history museums, or what the Germans would call Heimat-museums (kotiseutumuseo in Finnish). They are the most ubiquitous kind of museum that exists in Finland, and they are more or less the same everywhere; the same rural paraphernalia from the past 150-200 years, with minor variations in object design and building architecture, found in every

municipality, located in an old farmhouse of some kind. They are repositories for the everyday items salvaged from emptied attics and cellars, barns, and sheds. That is not to say they are without interest, but I felt they make up a separate category of museums, perhaps meriting a separate study, something that for example Barbara Knorpp (2009) has done in her paper *Heimat Museums and Notions of Home*. We also did not visit any museum dedicated to a specific person, of which there are countless in Finland, as there are elsewhere in the world. Dead presidents, writers, scientists, military men, all sorts of persons deemed nationally or locally significant have a museum dedicated to them, usually in a house they inhabited at one point in their lives. I wanted our museums to be purely focused on objects, not specific people, though of course person-oriented museums also carried sacralized objects from the men's (and it is mostly men) past. Another reason to discount the above categories of museums was that such places, though small in many ways, are usually professionally run institutions. Perceived to be of national importance, they are the domain of museum professionals. We were after small independent amateur museums, "micromuseums" (Candlin, F. 2015), places unconstrained and unguided by official museum doctrines and mandates, though this distinction proved to be rather porous in the end, as I will elaborate later.

As I have mentioned, the museums we visited were geographically scattered all over Finland. I felt this to be important, as I imagined it would be of greater interest to a wider audience if all the different regions of Finland were represented in some way in the project. This was not so important for the present thesis, however, and the museums analyzed in this work are scattered entirely arbitrarily, having been chosen for the simple reason that they were the domain of private, individual collectors, or had been originally, as some of the original owners had deceased.

The 14 collector's museums principally used in this work are as follows:

The Accordion Museum in Sysmä: A house in the middle of a small village in southern Finland.

Kaarre's War Museum in Lohja: the owner's home, a vast gated area with a grand villa and other buildings.

The Cannons at Torp in Inkoo: A conglomeration of small warehouses in a remote area by a small highway in southern Finland.

The Bottle Museum in Orimattila: the original owner's home, a house in a small village in southern Finland, now just a museum and storage for the collection

The Baby Carriage Museum in Akaa: a grand old farmhouse, the owner lived next to it in a newer house.

The Bicycle Museum in Teuva: an old storage facility on the outskirts of a small town. The building also housed other things kept in storage by the village association.

The Museum of the History of Photography in Rauma: the owners' home in a suburb of the city of Rauma.

The Pulley Museum in Iniö: a small building in the yard area of the owner's home on an island in the southern archipelago. It had previously been a bed & breakfast.

The Nostalgia Museum in Marttila: a large area with many buildings in the middle of some fields in southern Finland.

The Tractor Museum in Sastamala: a large warehouse on the outskirts of the town of Sastamala.

The Plastic Bag Museum in Perniö: A large old workshop in the yard area of an old farmhouse by the highway near the town of Salo.

The South Ostrobothnian Tractor Museum: a large warehouse complex on the outskirts of the city of Seinäjoki.

The Model Railway Museum in Kouvola: an old school building next to the main train station in the city of Kouvola.

The Tattoo Museum in Varkaus: the middle floor of the house of a Finnish tattoo artist near the city of Varkaus.

In addition to these 14 museums, I will of course use knowledge and insights gained in all the other museums that we visited as well as general perspectives gained from a life of visiting museums. I will not explicitly reference all interviews or collections in the coming text, but they will be a strong influence on any analysis, nonetheless.



Figure 3: The current owner of the Bottle Museum enjoying what is now his collection

Every participant's consent was asked and without fail received, both to use the pictures taken and all recorded interviews as such in the thesis and the book. Most museum proprietors, and especially collectors in my experience, seem more than happy to proudly harangue anyone about their passion for any length of time; they also seemed happy for the potential publicity, though this was more implicit; we are talking about businesses after all (though not all the museums have an admissions fee). Many had given interviews before and some had even been on television. Besides, it would be exceedingly difficult to make the museums, and thus also the proprietors, unidentifiable; how could I ever refer to the only museum in Finland that is dedicated to plastic bags in a way that would be unrecognizable? I have promised to keep in contact with the interviewees informing them of the project's development, and a majority seemed eager to see the result in book form, though they remained

more aloof about the prospect of appearing in an academic study. Notwithstanding all of the above, there are of course bits of personal information I will keep anonymous during my analysis for reasons that will be obvious to the reader.

In addition to the singular collectors whose private passions and possessions most of the museums in the above list are, I have included three interesting exceptions. The Tractor Museum in Sastamala was originally established by a private collector of tractors and cars. He had since passed away, however, and had set up a foundation tasked with keeping the museum running. In this case, I met with the current head of the foundation.

The second exception is the Bicycle Museum in Teuva, the collection of which was originally acquired by a local bicycle repairman, who set up the museum and gave over the administration of the museum to the village association, the representatives of which I met and interviewed.

The third exception is similar, but in this case, the original collector of the Bottle Museum, upon passing away, had given the reins of the museum to his nephew, who confessed to being a bit of a collector himself.

I wanted to include these exceptions to have an idea of what can happen to the things in a collection and a museum when the original collector passes away. It seemed interesting to ask what such changes do to the relationship between people and things; how the objects are handled thereafter and what the new proprietors make of the whole process, how they come to terms with the museums and objects. All the other museums were the domains of one person, the original collector, male in all cases except one.

One more minor exception is the Plastic Bag Museum, which is no longer open to the public due to fire safety concerns from the municipality, but the collection and the original museum space remain, and I talked at length with the collector about his reasons for collecting and establishing a museum, and his relationship with the collection and the accumulation of things in general.

Most micromuseums are only open during a brief summer period, usually from midsummer to the beginning of August, the Finnish holiday season. Some have even stricter opening schedules than this though. The Bottle Museum has traditionally been open to the public for one day, the first of May, though the new proprietor is thinking of expanding the opening hours somewhat. The History of Photography Museum is generally open for one week, during the Rauma Lace Week, but people are welcome to visit during other times provided the proprietor is home. The Model Railway Museum, the Tattoo Museum, and Kaarre's War Museum are all open year round, the first being the main source of income for the hobbyist-cum-collector, the second existing in connection with a tattoo parlor, and the third being the palatial home of a retired fireworks magnate, who now spends his spare time guiding visitors through the museum. Almost all collectors had other jobs than the museum or were retired, living off pensions or other assets. Only one of the museums was financially profitable, most of the others making just enough to pay utility bills and other running costs such as property taxes etc. Only the Tractor Museum in Sastamala and the Bicycle Museum in Teuva received any kind of financial support because they were part of associations or foundations and thus were eligible for a wider array of financial aid in the Finnish grant systems.

The museums are mostly quite remote and require a car to access them easily. Information about them was sometimes difficult to gather, and one museum, the History of Photography Museum in Rauma, was nearly impossible to locate at all. We only had second-hand information from a newspaper article that it even existed. We finally managed to track down the owner by searching phone numbers under his name in Rauma; we found four under the same name, and, if I remember correctly, the second one we called turned out to be the right person, who then gladly welcomed us to his establishment.

1.2 Interviews with Collectors

I conducted semi-structured interviews in all but two of the museums listed above. In the beginning of our journey, our roles were more blurred, and the dynamic of visiting the museums and interacting with museum proprietors was still searching its form, but it quickly became apparent that my wife had to devote her attention entirely to the photography, while I conversed with the collectors. We then began to

make this separation clear to the collectors upon arrival. She would often stay behind to take pictures while the interviewee and I would tour the museum looking at the collections.

The two places where a semi-structured interview was not per se employed were the Tattoo Museum and the South Ostrobothnian Tractor Museum, the first of which we visited in the spur of the moment on our way to another museum. The Tattoo Museum is very new, and I did not know beforehand that the collector would even be present. Luckily, he was, however, and after he gave a little group of visitors a tour of the museum, we had a conversation about his collecting habits and his reasons for setting up the museum. Though I did eventually ask him many of the same questions as the others, the conversation was not recorded, and I will have to rely on memory. In the South Ostrobothnian Tractor Museum I had but a brief conversation with the collector, an octogenarian still eagerly working on his beloved tractors.

Most interviews were in Finnish, but there were exceptions to this as well. From the museums pertinent to this thesis, Cannons at Torp, a museum of militaria of all sorts, is located in the Swedish-speaking region of Uusimaa in southern Finland. I initially introduced myself in Finnish, but soon switched to Swedish, as the collector had trouble understanding my questions and I had trouble understanding his replies in Finnish. The other exception is the Tattoo Museum, whose collector was a British man who did not speak any Finnish or Swedish, so we spoke English.



Figure 4: The owner of the Cannons at Torp Museum sitting among his collection

2 On the Inclination to Collect and the History of Collecting and the Museum

In this chapter I will focus on the history of collecting and the ideas surrounding collecting. I will analyze how the changing times and culture have affected the discourse and practice of collecting and the general accumulation of things.

We collect things, gather them around us, use them, abuse them, construct our lived environment with and through them, but also, importantly, we get rid of them, destroy them, make them invisible once more; objects move about, changing status and meaning, they have trajectories parallel to our own. Commonly we conceive of doing things *with and to them*. One thrust of this thesis will be to unravel the discourse surrounding the entangled agency of things, *what they might do with and to us* (Appadurai, A. et al. 1986; Boivin, N. 2008; Ingold, T. 2010; Basu, P. 2017.) We are surrounded by objects from the moment of our birth; swaddled in cloth, Finnish children are soon after birth literally put to sleep in a state allocated cardboard box that came to them full of objects, their very first personal things. From that moment on we make, receive, gift, find, steal, gather and collect various objects throughout our lives, generally only discarding things, rather reluctantly (as shall become

evident), the object finally disintegrates sufficiently, or, finally, we die. A typical Finnish home has anywhere from ten to fifty thousand objects, and hundreds of those remain unseen, often even unused, unthought-of - which of us has not lugged along a useless kitchen appliance from apartment to apartment (Kinnunen, V. E. 2017)? It has been said (e.g. Andersson, D. T. 2001; Baudrillard, J. 1996 [1968]; Cornell, P. 1993) that objects become visible to us only in particular circumstances, before and after their life in everyday use, in the shop window or the museum cabinet, set on display, separated from their function. Claes Oldenburg captures the ephemeral potential of displaying intriguingly: “I thought I had discovered a new world. Everywhere I began to enter different stores as if they were museums. I saw things that they displayed in the windows as priceless artwork” (Quoted in Cornell, P., p. 88, *my translation*).

Collecting things has not always been seen in a favorable light. The French 17th century philosopher and moralist Jean de La Bruyère wrote the following on the need to acquire the rare and fashionable “objet”: “it is not a pastime but a passion and often so violent that it is only inferior to love or ambition in the pettiness of its aims” (quoted in Rheims 1961, p. 7). In a similar vein to La Bruyère’s exhortations from the 17th century, many writers from many different times have suggested that collectors and collecting are somehow pathological, as Susan Pearce (2013) poignantly notes in her work *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*. Even the famous French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1996 [1968]) made a similar claim when speaking of the motivations of collectors; he treats them as sexually repressed, fulfilling in their search for objects some unconscious lack of sexual gratification. Even collectors themselves may sometimes employ similar language. Björn Lindqvist, an avid collector and a founder of a small museum has said of collecting: “the eagerness to collect is a sickness, but the one that has it does not suffer from it. The collector enjoys wandering around among all things. It is the ones that survive [the collector] that gradually suffer” (Kronqvist, D. 2020, *my translation*). Here we also notice an allusion to one aspect of the power of things, the potential of things to become what Sasha Newell (2014) has referred to as “spirited possessions”.

Here I am not interested in any sort of value judgment contra collecting of course. Instead, in addition to following the well-worn but interesting path of previous writers on why we collect, what we collect, and how we collect, and of approaching this from an anthropological perspective as a recent contribution by van der Grijp (2006) has done in *Passion and Profit: Towards an Anthropology of Collecting*, I will tread a parallel path, following the objects themselves, or, rather, "things", following Tim Ingold (2010) in his text on *Bringing Things to Life*. I will try to unravel not only the collector's psychological / cultural motivations and the nature and structure of their curious collections as such, but the "meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement" (Ibid: 3) that the things in our lived environment form, things brought to life, so to speak. Ingold (ibid) cautions against the rising tendency to speak of material agency which I have often encountered researching contemporary literature on this subject. He feels this is a "consequence of the reduction of things to objects and of their consequent 'falling out' from the processes of life," (Ibid: 3). Ingold is of course strongly influenced by Deleuze and Guattari (1988), all of whose work I will also consider in the next chapter which elaborates on the theoretical discussions surrounding things.

The history of collecting is very much also a history of displaying things. And in fact, the "[i]mmmediate origins of the cabinet of curiosities can be found in existing ecclesiastical practice" (p. 40), i.e., displaying things in a sacred context. Displaying things has, thus, a long history in the context of the sacred. This tendency to display of course culminated in the birth of the museum institution. I have always been intrigued by museums, our strange temples against entropy, vast houses filled with vast collections of things, traditionally set on display in glass cabinets, but displays can take on various innovative forms of course. Museums hold the past frozen, they purport to inform us of "beauty, truth, and meaning" (Kalman, M. 2013), they have been seen as sacred spaces holding sacred things (Buggeln, G. 2012). Moreover, museums are now absolutely everywhere! At least everywhere in Europe and the offshoots of European colonial conquest. They are ubiquitous to such an extent that they have long since become in a manner invisible, taken for granted parts of our society and culture. They could be said to be social facts, to use Durkheim's famous concept, or at the very least engender social facts, and Björnar Olsen (2010) reminds us that Durkheim considered things to be social facts as well, though he did not

concentrate on any lengthy analysis on the subject. A typical Finnish person, for example, knows from a very young age what a museum is, how one is to behave in a museum, what is expected from the visitor, and what to expect as a visitor, and thus acts accordingly (such embodied practices are implicit and can of course be challenged). Hardly anyone seems to find it a fundamentally odd project to house innumerable things in more or less grand palaces so that innumerable people can come and gaze at things on display. Of course, the small museums, or micromuseums, in my study are anything but grand palaces, but we shall see, the fact of them being labeled museums carries for visitors much the same expectations and sociocultural gravitas as any national institution does. And not just the visitors! The proprietors/collectors construct their establishments and collections often very seriously, taking the received wisdom of the museum institution as a starting point for their collecting practices. I will also consider the effect that the location and museum buildings have on the collection displayed. For if the glass vitrine can be said to be a parergon in Derrida's sense for the displayed object (von Zinnenburg Carroll, K. 2017), I would argue the building housing the objects is also a parergon of sorts, framing the objects in a specific, meaningful, and supplementary way (more on this later).



Figure 5: A view from the porch of the Baby Carriage Museum. Some of the chandeliers of the collection are visible here.

In collectors that establish museums for their collections, two realms of object-relations become entangled, one private, the other public in nature. Though the reasons for collecting objects are complex and varied, there may be something of an avoidance of death in the endeavor. An attempt at setting it beyond us, for a moment at least, for the objects will easily outlast us, especially as a collection, which is seen as something potentially complete, something whole, certainly transcending the sum of its parts. A collection has transcendent properties (Cardinal, R. 2004; Ireland, T. 2016; Smeds, K. 2019; van der Grijp, P. 2006.) There is also an aspect of seeking to control chaotic reality, which is what the official museum institution certainly does. The museum/collection freezes time and contains it, keeps the chaos out, belligerently, and methodically opposes entropy. Through the museum object, made visible in the vitrine or the shelf, time itself also becomes tangible to us, visible. Our traces are set out before us; the temporal dimension is laid out as linear and legible (Svanberg, F. 2009; Pearce, S. 1997.) The museum might be seen as our attempt to avoid the fate so melancholically articulated by Horace Smith:

We wonder,—and some Hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness
Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What powerful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.

(1818)

The International Council of Museums, ICOM, lists at least 55,000 museums in 202 countries. There are surely many more. Often micromuseums are not part of national museum associations, and are therefore not listed officially (Candlin, F. 2015). They are in fact, as Candlin (*ibid*), and later I came to realize, sometimes exceedingly difficult to find, requiring either local knowledge or some rudimentary detective work. Museum studies, or museology, has historically focused mostly on professionally run museums, which is also reflected in attempts to define museums. Eugene Dillenburg's (2011) article *What, if anything, is a Museum?* gives an overview of these attempts, but his finally articulated reduction of all definitions comes down to "an institution whose core function includes the presentation of public exhibits for the public good" (p. 11). He is of course talking of professional museums, but in so doing his definition leaves out an untold number of non-professional museums, which might never have given a passing thought to the "the

public good” in all their many years of existence (that is not to say that many of them haven’t). The professor of Museology at Umeå University Kerstin Smeds (2019) has what I feel is a more apt ‘definition’ that takes in all museums. She has said that the only thing all museums have in common is simply that “someone has something they wish to show others”, which is indeed what separates the mere collector (who may keep his collection private and hidden from the public) from the collector turned museum proprietor. Such a statement is hard to dispute, for that is precisely what museums do: someone shows some things to someone else. And really, the only quality separating many micromuseums from an art gallery or a general exhibition of whatever object or subject is that someone thought to call it a museum (often objects from micromuseums could be for sale). One could ask if micromuseums are “really” museums, but what else are they if not museums? I must add that even Dillenburg (2011) does concede that the one inalienable attribute of museums is that they have and hold exhibitions. In other words, they show something to someone! I would add to this and reiterate the point made above: anything is a museum if the owner calls it a museum. The act of naming brings about the museum.

In most European countries there seems to be no restrictions on what can be called a museum. That is certainly the case in Finland. One of my interlocutors had actually been worried that she would not be allowed to call her collection a museum, but upon investigating found out that there are no such restrictions. This is undoubtedly one of a myriad reason for the explosive proliferation of private museums. Already in 1987 Robert Hewison famously warned us of the encroaching “heritage industry”, which was slowly museifying the world, or at least to his mind Great Britain. Of course, he was not talking simply of museums, but the rich mosaic of heritage sites and practices, through which the past is made static and put on display in one way or another. Today, with the rise of intangible heritage, the proliferation of UNESCO World Heritage sites, nationalistic endeavors, and the exponential rise in global tourism, we can truly speak of a “Heritage Industry” (Galla, A. 2012; Hewison, R. 1987; Smith, L. et al. 2008). Pierre Nora’s and Lawrence D. Kritzman’s (1996) seminal work *Realms of Memory* is also useful for tracing the discussion of our relationship with the past through heritage sites, which could to my mind encompass micromuseums, as these are often a sort of micro heritage site, a micro realm of

memory, lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, or perhaps even ‘real’ sites of memory, milieu de memoire, in Nora’s sense.

Though their number is hard to estimate due to what is their ephemeral nature, in addition to about three hundred professionally run museums and the same number of subsets of said museums, there are at least three hundred privately- or association run museums in Finland alone¹. These museums together hold millions of objects. One of the museums I visited, the Nostalgia Museum, alone had a collection of approximately twenty-five thousand objects, and though the amounts vary considerably between museums; collectors are remarkably aware of the number of objects in their possession. They attempt to neatly catalog and categorize! When taking into consideration the “Western” world in its entirety, it is indeed hard to come up with an object category or theme that does not have a small museum dedicated to it somewhere. There exist museums of death, of spoons, of horses, of witchcraft, of wooden pulleys used in sailing ships, plastic bags, bottles, contraception and abortion, sex, dogs, tattoos, vaginas, penises. Any comprehensive list would go on for untold pages (some of the above are included in this study). Often these private museums are the domain of individual collectors who have established a museum for their collections, to make their hard-won objects visible to others. So, what is it that we are doing with these objects and these museums? Why do we “collect” as a society and as individuals? Why and how do we make the collections visible in a museum setting? What is the “museum” to us, what is it about, and can it be about many things? Who are the people behind the museums? What is their relationship with the objects in the museums? These questions will be addressed below.

“Mass-produced items are everywhere, each one an example among many thousands [...] It is fascinating that we under such circumstances are so attached to things; how emotional such bindings are and how impossible it is to rid ourselves of them” (Allan McCollum quoted in Cornell, P. 1993, p. 21, *my translation*). McCollum’s idea binds well to the findings of this thesis and especially to one exemplar, which is the Nostalgia Museum (more on that below). During my interviews it was an often-noted

¹ According to the Finnish Museums Association and Finnish Heritage Agency.

reality that people want to give things to museums that they do not really want to part with but cannot keep for various reasons. They are gifted to the museum for safekeeping in perpetuity (of course the museum often cannot accept these gifts for reasons elaborated on later).

These gifts have multiple fields of value, the owners are ambivalent about parting with them in the first place and are very satisfied if the museum accepts them, takes them off their hands as it were. Sometimes, as the director of the Radio and Television Museum said (my interview 2019), people do get angry when the museum cannot accept their precious things. The things after all have also acquired “habit memories, memories stored in the body [as opposed to the brain]” (Olsen, B. 2010, p. 8), which make them especially dear. Thus, precious things often come to the end of their life span and end up in the landfill, which is usually the last leg of the life of things.

Reverence, silence, awe, these are often exerted through the museum buildings and exhibition layouts. I witnessed a scene where two elderly ladies were nervously whispering and frantically trying to shut their ringing phone in a museum, as if the contemplation of old art would require absolute focus from all visitors. As stated above, the museum and the things it houses are often seen as sacred spaces (Buggeln, G. 2012.) This aspect will also be considered below.



Figure 6: A few of the dozens of clocks from the collection at the Nostalgia Museum.

2.1 The Collector and the Museum

The individual collector as much as the museum institution is a character that is often seen to defy the inevitable currents of time in an attempt to disrupt the process of life. As Roger Cardinal (2004, p. 1) says, “[t]he collection is the unique bastion against the deluge of time”, and the collector thus the keeper of the past.

A museum, including a small, private museum, is, to my mind, a slow institution, the temporal dimension seems somehow different, outside of the normal flow of life. This does not mean to say that they are stale, dusty, and forgotten, crypts filled with useless miscellany, but, rather, in some ways, antagonistic towards modernity and modernity's pursuits. Nostalgia, as Angé, O. et al (2008). and Johannisson, K. (2001) show, certainly plays a part in this, a longing for things lost, times gone by, but again, that is not the whole picture. There is something very active in this antagonism, something alive and dynamic, a constant reorientation within modernity's framework, a constant "becoming" anew, as opposed to being (more on this conceptual dichotomy in the next chapter). Not static, but a dynamic relationship with things, while disrupting time, creating entropic disruption, the radical refusal of entropy.

Elsner and Cardinal (2004) posit the myth of Noah as the ur-collector, who inhabits all the characteristics that define a collector in the modern sense as well: "desire and nostalgia, saving and loss, the urge to erect a permanent and complete system against the destructiveness of time" (p. 1). Salvation from the inevitable destructiveness of time is a recurring theme for collectors – though of course Noah wasn't escaping time but the wrath of God, which amounts to very much the same thing. "Here is saving in its strongest sense, not just casual keeping but conscious rescuing from extinction - collection as salvation" (ibid, p. 1).

Collecting also goes hand in hand with classification, for they both engender and need each other. Without classification, be it of any kind, the accumulation of materials is seen as simply that, accumulation, hoarding. "The science of classification is", in Stephen Jay Gould's words, 'truly the mirror of our thoughts, its changes through time [are] the best guide to the history of human perceptions'" (Quoted in Elsner & Cardinal 2004, p. 2). Collecting is the material embodiment of this. We put things in order, set them apart and create a chronology and a narrative. The objects are then often displayed in an orderly fashion, in rows on shelves. "To collect up to a final limit is not simply to own or to control the items one finds; it is to exercise control over existence itself through possessing every sample, every specimen, every instance of an unrepeatably and nowhere duplicated series" (ibid, p. 3). Of course, the complete set more often than not eludes the collector for many

reasons. The collection nearly always remains “incomplete”, there is always that next thing, the ephemeral horizon just outside of reach.

Baudrillard (1996 [1968]) has said that an object can be utilized or possessed. Not both. A “possession cannot apply to an implement since the object I utilize always directs me back to the world. Rather it applies to that object once it is divested of its function and made relative to a subject.” Furthermore, he states that a utilized object has a social status and the object divested of its function has a purely subjective status. The object ceases to be what it was and becomes an “object”, a “piece” (ibid.) This seemingly clear distinction is not in reality so clear cut as Baudrillard would have it, as we shall see below. But one thing Baudrillard does distinguish correctly is that strong passions are involved, for it must be said that these objects are “the cause or subject of a passion” (ibid), as nothing less would suffice in the building of a true collection. It requires time, patience, commitment and, very often, loads of money. This we shall also see below in the analysis of the fieldwork material.



Figure 7: Hundreds of plastic bags from the collection of the Plastic Bag Museum

Just as the collection/cataloging event transforms the status of the object, the museum display has been seen to exercise an almost magical quality over the object. “At the museum things become fetishes and items for veneration and desire”

(Cornell, P. 1993, p. 97, *my translation*). They acquire value anew, value they never possessed and never shall possess but through the act of display. As Cornell says speaking of Marcel Duchamp's artworks: "it is a magic that he [Duchamp] only can perform with the help of the museum, which like the philosophers' stone can transform trash into art and gold" (p. 97, *my translation*). The function and role of the museum, though often explicitly didactic in the modern nation state, contains these mysterious elements that move things between the realm of the sacred and the profane. The collector functions in very much the same way, and the collector and museum are inseparable elements of each other. The independent museums in this study varied greatly in how far they had taken the process of cataloging and 'museifying' their spaces and things. Some allowed the objects to be touched for example, others did not, some had labeled the things in the collection, some had not, etc. Small independent museums and their collections are thus somewhat liminal museums and are approached as such by the visitors and the owners, as we shall also see. The museum in general can sometimes be seen as liminal in another sense as well. As Paul Salopek (2017) has said of the Mikhail Frunze Museum in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan: "The place is a liminal artifact: a wormhole made of concrete, a street address out of time. It is a monument to forgetting as much as to memory," and further "a museum that belongs in a museum" (*ibid*). This is very aptly said and could apply to many of the places I visited during the 3 months of fieldwork. The Village Store Museum (*kyläkauppmuseo*) succumbing to mold and decay, the Potter's Museum whose rafters had collapsed, and a bird fluttered from the opening in the roof, even the Heimat Museum next to the bicycle museum in Teuva. Undoubtedly many others too. Joshua Pollard (2004) has indeed made the case that, considering the assumption of material stability, theories and ideas concerning things should take into account the inevitable decay of all things. The idea contained in the words "monument to forgetting" apply even more generally to museums, for of course there is always a strong connection between forgetting and remembering, after all "remembering isn't the opposite of forgetting, more like its mirror image" (Marker, C. 1983²).

² From *Sans Soleil*, a documentary film. Original in French.

It has been said that “[...] the objects in our lives, as distinct from the way we make use of them at a given moment, represent something much more, something profoundly related to subjectivity: for while the object is a resistant material body, it is also, simultaneously, a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone. It is all my own, the object of my passion” (Baudrillard, J. 1996 [1968]). I would somewhat contradict this feeling on the basis of my findings, because, though of course things are our own in the strict possessive sense, they are profoundly relational always and, in every case, their meanings not at all “governed by myself alone”, not even to myself. I will return to this discussion in my theoretical discussion. An object is of course also always a part of a set of objects, which the collector longs to possess. Baudrillard (2004) continues: “and without exception, even in circumstances where no fetishistic perversion is involved, they will maintain about their collection an aura of the clandestine, of confinement, secrecy and dissimulation, all of which give rise to the unmistakable impression of a guilty relationship” (p. 24). This sentiment from him is clearly wrong in many cases. All collectors cannot be said to harbor an “aura of the clandestine” etc. On the contrary, most of the collectors in this study were exuberantly extroverted concerning their collections, literally opening their doors for anyone to walk in and see the things so painstakingly collected and displayed. I would say, in contrast to Baudrillard and many others, that collecting is much more than an individual psychological process. There is something collective about collecting, as there is about museums. Constructing the self, the lived environment, and making sense of the world around oneself. This is especially evident in the case of museums by collectors.

2.1.1 Anthropology, Collecting and Museums

In this section I will briefly outline Anthropology’s relationship to collecting and museums. The dim beginnings of 19th century anthropology are strongly connected to the birth of the modern museum institution and the practice of collecting in conjunction with the industrial revolution and the rise of modern nation states (e.g., Abt, J. 2011; Angé, O. et al. 2015; Bouquet, G. 2012; Hodder, I. 2012.) Many intrepid explorers scouring the world sent their vast collections to the newly founded museums around Europe. It was through these things (and writings) that early armchair anthropology extrapolated much of its theory concerning the state of

humanity elsewhere in the world, musing on the nature of the Other (e.g., MacDonald, S. et al. 2011; Pearce, S. 2013 [1995].) However, coming into the 20th century the winds would turn and the explicit connection to museum-work would begin to sever. Malinowski and others spoke against the old museum anthropological practice of the 19th century, they felt objects should not be taken out of their lived environment, that such practice made the objects unintelligible. This did not, however, stop them from acquiring large personal collections of ethnographic objects from their time in the field (Bell, J. 2017.) The academic tides seem to have turned once more though, and as Bell (ibid) would have it, the 1980's brought about the material turn, or (re)-turn. He also advocates a view that old anthropological collections, instead of being swept under the carpet of remembered history, can be seen and investigated as “generative sites of cross-cultural engagement” (p. 244), but this would surely apply to museums in general and the museum institution in itself could perhaps also be seen as generative sites of cross-temporal/cross-cultural engagement. Many of the independent museums in this work explicitly strived for some sort of engagement with the past, a temporal mythmaking of sorts, according to the disposition of the collector himself. The past is a foreign country after all, whence we endeavor to snatch relevant narratives for contemporary meaning, culture-making, and world-building, a generative ontological realm as it were.

Joshua Bell (2017) also mentions the possibility of collections and museums as collaborative projects. This resonates very strongly with my own findings as we shall see, and also relates to the discussion of the role of the public, i.e., visitors, in museums and collections on display. What and how do they engage with the collection and possibly also the proprietor. What does this do to the collection and/or the museum site? I will consider these questions in chapter four within the analysis of my fieldwork material, where I gather a sense of the museum as an act of sharing, sharing in the sense of creating ties and connections, upholding relations between things and people. This network, or “meshwork”, of relations could be compared to what Sarah E. Lamb (2000) articulates as that which “[...] collectively makes up what Bengalis call their *samsar*, the assembly of people and things that “flow with” persons as they move through their lives” (p. 42). This brings us to the idea of things as processes in the flow of life, which I will consider in the next chapter.

3 Theories Concerning the Thing and the Object

This chapter deals with the academic discussion surrounding the nature of the object and our relationship to it. I will explore the thingness of the thing as it were, what a thing is and how it affects us, how it has the power to “amicably ambush us”, as Cornell (1993, *my translation*) would have it. Webmoor and Witmore (2008) have discussed the etymology of the word “thing”, which in one sense is revealed to be a “gathering”. This etymological tidbit is an apt analogy for my theoretical approach as well. They ask: “[t]aking an etymological tack on the thing as a gathering, what, we may ask, is gathered together into a pair of eyeglasses?” The answer to which is of course exceedingly complex, but I will attempt to construct a general answer to the question of what is gathered together in a thing through my theoretical discussion. First of all, a pair of eyeglasses can be a “bundle of relations”, an “assemblage”, a “rhizome”, or a strand within a “meshwork”, a line of becoming, “emergent, indeterminate”, they are “imbricated” (Basu, P. 2017; Bell, J. 2017; Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. 1988; Ingold, T. 2010). What all of these theoretical concepts have more or less in common, though representing widely different theoretical backgrounds and purposes, is that they can be seen to describe a process or processes, some more explicitly than others, and, at the very least, immanent in these concepts lies the idea of potential. Simon Schama (1991) aptly paraphrases Thore in regard to paintings of things. Thore thinks “still-life is a misnomer, for these things are alive, they respire” (p. 11). Paul Claudel thought that “caught them at their topmost: the zenith before the fall, the moment of perfect ripeness before the decay” (quoted in Schama, S. 1991, p.11). He termed it their “*elasticite secrete*, secret elasticity”. This secret elasticity is one more concept that can be applied to the thing's thingness, its potential for becoming within and with the meshwork of life.

I shall begin with a brief historical glance at our conceptions of the relationship between humans and things and a consideration of what bearing western philosophical, artistic, and scientific meanderings might have on our conception of things, our everyday practice with things, our affects towards things?



Figure 8: A helicopter and the administrative building of the Cannons at Torp Museum

Frank Trentmann has said that “Karl Marx believed that Western capitalism divorced humans from the world of things. The rise of the West, in this influential view, entailed a unique ability to look at an object as an abstraction, a lifeless thing that could be exchanged for money, in contrast to tribal cultures which fetishized goods for their magical powers.” (2016). Marx (1955) was also of the opinion that a commodity was a thing full of “metaphysical subtlety”. Things have often in history been taken to represent other things or ideas, as symbols for something else, references and signs (Cornell, P. 1995; Olsen, B. 2010). Thomas Aquinas put this explicitly: “objects are bodily metaphors for spiritual things” (quoted in Cornell, p. 41, *my translation*).

Some of the above are part of the complex reasons why Edmund Husserl (Cornell, P. 1993) demanded a return to things-in-themselves. Husserl’s phenomenological reductionism has attempted this return to “things in themselves” echoing Immanuel Kant (2001 [1781]). Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy has been continued by Martin Heidegger (1968) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]), with Jean-Paul Sartre (1969) offering a further conceptual continuation in this phenomenological

tradition. Husserl had a desire for philosophy to return to the lived-in-world, “lebenswelt”, to the practical everyday world, where things are used, and through usage things can be felt. As Cornell (1993) put it: “It is instead the intertwining between things and consciousness that Husserl wants to explore” (p. 31, my translation).

Jean-Paul Sartre’s protagonist on the one hand is bewildered by the power of the thing: “Objects should not touch because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts” (Sartre, J-P. 1969).

In recent years this phenomenological tradition has been an inspiration to theories of extended minds, distributed cognition, object ontology, and object agency. John Sutton (2002) tells us that “since brain traces are dynamic, we often leave information out in the environment using the world as its own best representation” (p. 131). Sutton is very much against the old Cartesian dichotomy of mind and world, the dictum of cogito ergo sum that, according to many, has been the root of many of our problems in the western world (e.g., Ingold, T. 2010, 2014; Latour, B. 1993). He elaborates that “[e]ach component in the larger system is continuously responsive to the activity of the other components, and at the same time feeds back its own influences into the web of causal complexity” (Sutton, J. p. 131). Frank Trentmann (2016) has on the other hand questioned “whether [the Cartesian] dematerialization captures the overall thrust of modernity and whether it led to a distinctly carefree attitude to things in the West” (p. 76), as “even Descartes did not believe in a strict dualism between mind and matter or subjects and objects” (p. 76).



Figure 9: A view of the Kaarre's War Museum. Sounds of gunfire can be heard in the background.

This brings us to the idea of things and people having distinct sorts of life processes, being parts of a “meshwork” (Ingold 2010). The self or the thing is by many not seen as static as suggested by ‘being’ but in flux, constantly ‘becoming’, which is perceived as the “zone between multiplicities” (Brown, M. et al. 2016; Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. 1988; Basu, P. 2017; Ingold, T. 2010). This all harkens back to the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. What is it to be human in a world full of things, they essentially ask? Is everything relational, can a world without relations be conceived? Quantum theory would say that the act of observation creates the event in a sense, echoing the idea of life as a process, as a state of potentiality, constantly in flux and becoming. That concept translates to a relational lifeworld, where everything is dependent upon everything else, and in the act of doing and perceiving lies becoming.

Tim Ingold's (2013) point about learning with instead of from things through the process of making can to my mind be applied to museums and their history. There is a turn towards learning with the objects and collections instead of constructing an authoritative account of reality and history from the collections. But Museums still often have trouble shedding the mantle of grand narrative and authority. The

progressive temporal format certainly lends itself to authoritative grand narratives, when instead we could view time and history and things in various configurations and perspectives, looking at the things in the museum as relational entities, things in eternal flux, history as a potentiality open up through things.

Heidegger (1962), in speaking of the thing kept to a definition of things at hand, present at hand, meaning the colloquial understanding of the word, i.e., any physical, usable thing: apple, pen, book, etc. But he does distinguish two additional meanings in his book *What is a thing?* Those definitions being anything that is not nothing, and any abstract thing, anything that is named, i.e., bravery, happiness, etc. What things are, he says, does not entail an exposition of their qualities as such, which science can answer in some ways more adequately, but what they are as things! That is, we do not ask or want to know what a hammer is vis-a-vis scissors, but what a hammer is as a thing? What makes a thing a thing, not what makes a hammer a hammer. He makes the case that this is a radically different question than what the sciences attempt to answer, that it is not a difference in degree but in kind. (ibid.)

Tim Ingold has developed the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari by refining their concept of rhizome by referencing rather a mycelial network, a meshwork, as he puts it. (Ingold 2010, 2021). He contrasts this to a Latourian network, where everything that is living is concentrated on the nodes of the network, and the lines are simply connections between them. In a meshwork it's not about connecting points, it's about the entanglement of lines. He (2010) gives the analogy of a spider-web: "a web of trails", a "mesh of trails". It is being spun while the spider moves around. Ingold (2021) contrasts his thought with Gibson's, who would separate elements as in air, earth, and substrate in between. But Ingold says even these elements mix and mingle. The same is true in a wider sense of all things in this world. We mix and mingle. The world is a realm of interpenetration that we inhabit, an *Umwelt* (ibid). Earlier he has applied a similarly holistic perspective to the idea of landscapes: "To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past" (Ingold 1993, p. 152). This sentiment is later echoed by Jake Phelan (2014): "places not only are, they happen", he says, and Barbara Bender (2006 [1998]): "[...] once you start to

think your way into landscape you discover that it permeates everything. ... We talk and walk landscape every moment of our lives.” This could be said of all things. Things permeate everything, we walk and talk things every moment of our lives. Even a landscape is made of things after all.



Figure 10: The owner of the Plastic Bag Museum among his collection.

Joshua Bell (2017) has spoken of objects as processes in similar vein to those mentioned above. Things are alive in the action of becoming, and this is always as

opposed to the concept of being. This is what Ingold (2012) conceptualized as the mycelium-meshwork. The myco-metaphor could conceivably be taken quite far. Unlike the rhizome of Deleuze & Guattari (1988), immanent in the mycelium lies a transformative, processual nature, for it is decomposing, recomposing, symbiotic, parasitic, the basis of everything, without which there is nothing, the foundational relational thing in the process of life (McCoy 2006). Even Goethe, waxing poetic, touches upon a similar idea: “things we call parts in every living being are so inseparable from the whole that they may be understood only in and with the whole” (quoted in McCoy, P. 2006, p. 27).

This brings to mind the extended cognition system constituted by the swarm of autonomous “flies” in Stanislaw Lem’s (1964) novel *The Invincible*. An entity that becomes more than the sum of its parts. To work at its full potential, it needs to come together through a continuously shifting process, a processual matter-mind. Thus, even we are also cleverer through and with objects than without, which is of course somewhat tautological, for there is no world without objects, there is no world without world. Nonetheless, we may perhaps be said to conceive of the world more fully through things as they become part of conceptual and experiential meshwork.

In addition to such philosophical musings, as mentioned before, there have been avid calls by many to bring back the study of things, or objects, as a meaningful part of the social sciences. Bjornar Olsen (2010), among others, considers this to be lacking and sees an urgent need for it. Michael Schiffer has said: ““ social scientists” have ignored what might be most distinctive and significant about our species... [that] human life consists of ceaseless and varied interaction among people and myriad kinds of things” (quoted in Olsen 2010, p. 2). The same sentiment has been echoed by many others, as I mentioned before. Bruno Latour (2005) has also famously said that “[m]uch like sex during the Victorian period, objects are nowhere to be said and everywhere to be felt. They exist, naturally, but they are never to be given a thought, a social thought. Like humble servants, they live on the margins of the social doing most of the work but never allowed to be presented as such” (p. 73). There is always a reciprocal relationship between academia and the arts, and Cornell (1993) indeed notes that “poets, artists and philosophers have occasionally taken as their task to

return [things] to visibility, for in the most inconspicuous thing have they seen a treasure where the secret of its being shines forth” (p. 8, my translation).

Paul Basu (2017) in *The Inbetweenness of Things* has an argument against going back to “things in themselves” and he wants to move forward from the proponents of the old phenomenological perspective. He argues that the thing, due to its being in between, its state of becoming, the thing is fundamentally, perhaps, ungraspable, because things are always “in-between”, a term he borrows from Deleuze and Guattari. Thus, the thing-in-itself is perhaps nothing but a potentiality. As he puts it: “But things are not only material metaphors that evoke, express or represent ideas; as a number of the exhibits in this cabinet of curiosities demonstrate, things also have agency [...] – they act in the world, and here again their inbetweenness is key” (Ibid, p. 2). This is very similar to Tim Ingold’s (2010) ideas in *Bringing Things to life*.

The things in the lived world create that world. The example of the movie *Goodbye Lenin* is good anecdotal evidence for this: the characters recreate the past for the woman - who wakes from a long-time coma - through the things of the eastern bloc and the familiar DDR paraphernalia. This is of course true of movies in general vis-a-vis the audience, or of the Opera and theater, where the illusion of other worlds and different temporal dimensions are created through things. Things are nearly always the reference point through which we understand what is going on and where and when. This is self-evident to the degree that it is invisible to most discourse.

We also create embodied behavior through things, objects. To show the point anecdotally, my wife has worked as a school photographer. The girls being photographed inevitably try to pose for selfies as soon as they see a camera. The smartphone and social media mode of taking pictures with a phone have created a type of bodily behavior, an embodied reaction to a thing. The phone as an extension of the mind is not very far fetched for other obvious reasons as well.



Figure 11: A view of one of the vitrines at the Bottle Museum

The idea of things being ‘alive’ has long roots and interpretations in various cultures and historical times. There are many terms to connote such an idea, such as hylozoism, panpsychism, animism. “For Deleuze and Guattari [for example] the affirmation of hylozoism is crucial, because it avoids anchoring life in a transcendent principle and instead seeks purely immanent principles.” (Critical introduction to a thousand plateaus. p. 3). Deleuze’s philosophy is about the continuity of the sensible

and intelligible, a point perhaps contradicted somewhat by phenomenology and also Platonic philosophy. What is this crucial problem of becoming and being? And the distinction between the two and their relations? It is an old problem. Ancient Heraclitus was for continued change, Parmenides for an unchangeable essence of being. As I understand it, Deleuze is for becoming and the old tradition of phenomenology, which he opposed, for being, though of course the phenomenological tradition inspired many who indeed are proponents of the processual world, of 'becoming'.

To reiterate, the trouble with things is they have two contradictory properties according to philosophy, stability, and change, permanence and porousness. Deleuze and Guattari (1988), and among others Paul Basu (2017) and Tim Ingold (2010) in slightly different terms, make the case that things are neither here nor there, they are constantly in between states of being. This should also include entropic aspects, which are immanent in all things. "While Heraclitus and Parmenides sought to minimize either stability or change, Plato responded to the problem by strictly separating these two properties into the discontinuity of the sensible and the intelligible" (Adkins, B. 2015, p. 11).

How do reflections relate to the question of authenticity, which often plagues museums, collectors, and collections? Isn't the idea of a state of becoming antithetical to ideas of authenticity, the illusion of permanence, of being. The Ship of Theseus is still the ship of Theseus after all the parts have been changed, but it is so much more than that, it is constantly in a state of becoming. For the Chinese, in this sense, authenticity is much more ambivalent than in the West. Things are their relations, and the singularity of an object is not viewed quite as strictly, as Byung-Chul Han (2017) has said among others.

Graham Harman (2018) has an amusing anecdote that touches on such questions of authenticity: "In writing these stories, Doyle tried to house his detective at a fictitious address on a real London street: namely, 221B Baker Street. Yet the very real London thoroughfare called Baker Street was later extended to go as far as the 200s, thereby putting the fictional flat of Holmes and Dr Watson within the range of real-life city addresses. Indeed, it happened that first one real building and then another

claimed to be the ‘true’ site of the Holmes/Watson flat. It is said that some of the Sherlock Holmes fans who visit the currently accepted address, now home to a gift shop and museum, labor under the misconception that the detective was a real historical person” (p. 33). Thus, even the imaginary can become authentic, though contentiously so. Graham Harman (2018) also follows the path of dismantling the Cartesian dichotomy through his Object-Oriented Ontology. He thinks there exists, due to Descartes’ legacy, an “implausible taxonomy between human thought on one side and everything else in the universe on the other” (p. 55-56).

3.1 On the Difference Between the Thing and the Object

I have throughout this entire thesis used the words object and thing quite interchangeably, but I should touch upon the possible differences between them. For example, “Heidegger employs the word ‘thing’ to mean the hidden thing in its own right, beyond any false objectifications of it, while ‘object’ is its negative inverse: the thing reduced to our perception or use of it” (Harman, G. 2018, p. 42). Apparently Husserl used the term object much more freely (ibid). There is also a larger discussion on what an “object” is reducible to - it cannot be reducible downwards to its component parts, but what about upwards, to the effects it has on other things. Knowledge about an object consists of two parts: what it is made of and what it does, in the sense of what its function is (ibid). Tim Ingold (2010), “loosely” following Heidegger as he says, also distinguishes between the object and the thing: “The current emphasis, in much of the literature, on material agency is a consequence of the reduction of things to objects and of their consequent ‘falling out’ from the processes of life” (p. 4) and he continues by stating that “the object stands before us as a *fait accompli*, presenting its congealed, outer surfaces to our inspection. It is defined by its very ‘overagainstness’ in relation to the setting in which it is placed [...]. The thing, by contrast, is a ‘going on’, or better, a place where several goings on become entwined” (p. 4). This brings to mind the assemblage discussion from the beginning of the chapter, concerning eyeglasses, which could indeed be described as a “place where several goings on become entwined”.

What are we then to make of all this talk of becoming and agency? Rane Willerslev (2007), for example, has used this philosophical tradition to contemplate ideas of personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs. According to him “[o]ur practical

involvement with things is prior to the cogitating ego, confronting an external world “out there”, and that which is revealed through involved activity is ontologically more fundamental than the context-free properties revealed by detached contemplation. This is apparently what Heidegger means by “[s]elf and world belong together in the single entity . . . self and world are not two entities, like subject and object . . . rather self and world are . . . in the unity of the structure of being-in-the world” (quoted in Willerslev 2007, p. 297). And if personhood ““rather than being an inherent property of people and things, is constituted in and through the relationships into which they enter”, “a potentiality of their being-in-the-world, which might or might not be realized as a result of their position within a relational field of activity” (ibid, p. 21), then a thing, to my mind, can be construed very much in the same manner. What then, is a thing? According to Adkins (2015) “we can think of “assemblage” as an answer to the venerable philosophical question” (p. 10), which brings us, once more, back to the beginning.

To bring this theoretical discussion to a close, I will leave us with Husserl once more:

"Philosophy is not, as it generally believed itself to be, a neutral system for thinking about the world. How we inhabit, describe, and think about the world when doing philosophy is, Husserl argued, is different from how we do so in our day-to-day lives. Most of our normal interactions with the world are ‘pre-cognitive’. We don’t think about a chair as a collection of ‘sense data’ and debate its existence, its hardness or its colour before we sit down – we just sit down. We don’t live in a world of ‘objects’ (of which we ourselves are one), about which we are forced to assess, define and interact with mentally – we live in what Husserl memorably called ‘the flowing thisness’. When we stop to do philosophy, the mere act of stopping to do philosophy changes our way of interacting" (Peter Salmon 2022, Aeon web).

Or as Cornell (1993) might add, “being itself is not a visible thing; it is a nothing, present in everything. Being is that which all things have in common in the fact that they are” (p. 5, *my translation*).

4 Fieldwork analysis

In this chapter I will analyze the findings of my fieldwork interviews and observations, while also including some other examples pertinent to this study. I will

consider the previous chapter's theoretical discussion in light of my own material. Herein I will consider the life of the things in the collections that I visited, how the things end up in collections and what the collector's say about their endeavors. I will try to follow the parallel paths of persons and things. I will begin by looking at the allure of things, how things affect my interlocutors and in what ways their lives are drawn together with their things. That will be followed by an analysis of their collecting practices and some of their ruminations on the idea of the museum institution, and finally I will consider the ideas of accumulation in our society in a wider context through - following the collectors' contemplations on the nature of time - objects and the impossibility of saving everything.

4.1 The Power of Things

"I actually found a piece of paper written by Panu that he used to leave on his car's dashboard saying that 'I've entered the building [being demolished] of my own free will and If I should die it will have been worth it, because the things that I could have found would have been fabulously valuable'."

(Lauri³⁴)

I wanted to begin with this striking, though amusing, anecdote from one of my interviewees to give an idea of the level of passion and commitment some collectors have towards building their collections, and a feeling for what the power of the thing can be. Though the above note was undoubtedly written with tongue in cheek, it still portrays a man willing to die, to suffer discomfort and danger for the things he is after, things which in the above case often had no general monetary value or even any "sentimental" value to most people. He was after broken or intact old glass bottles after all, what could be considered trash by most of us. The current owner mentioned the question of value explicitly, saying that the collector's dilemma is that in certain circles a stone can be a priceless artifact, while in others it would be trash, another person's trash is another's treasure.

³ All interviews quoted in this work are translations by me from either Finnish or Swedish.

⁴ There is a list of all interviewees quoted in this work at the end of the bibliography.



Figure 12: The owner of the Pulley Museum in front of one of the museum buildings.

This passion of the collector, their intense relationship with the things in their possession, or the thing they endeavor to possess, was made explicit in any manner of ways with most of my interlocutors. For example, it was interesting to see how almost every interview repeated a similar pattern in one respect: the passion for the objects, their stories, their singularity in some cases, are strongly present, while all allusions to practical things like money, time-use, or questions of what it is like to live a collector's life, are quickly dismissed and the fascinating monologue on things in the collection continues. The things speak through the collectors. The collection is everything. The things have voices. As the owner of the Nostalgia Museum said: "I don't want anything from flea markets, because they don't have a story" (Aila), or as one of Jane Bennet's (2012) interlocutors has said, "things speak to me". In many museums I had the distinct feeling that the owner would have liked to go through all the objects one by one, introducing them to me, as it were. Most locations had thousands of objects, so the introductory process could be daunting at times.

The collecting habit was often mentioned, and all collectors except two confessed to collecting all sorts of other things in addition to the museum collection. The current owner of the Bottle Museum mentioned that "there's a bad collecting habit in our

family... It probably flows in the blood and genes that collecting thing. Panu [the original museum owner and current owner's uncle] also started collecting at a young age..." (Lauri). So, things can have had this allure on many from an early stage, while others get into collecting much later in life, through some sort of an event, not necessarily in any way a remarkable event, but something, a first impetus, a catalyst, perhaps the first object, which then engendered more of the same, as happened with the owner of the Baby Carriage Museum. She said that the collection began "innocently" from their first carriage for their son and another carriage that someone gave for preservation in their large country house. Once there was no need to keep it for practical purposes, she found it was impossible to get rid of it. "They [the owner of the loan-carriage] said to take it to the dump and I told 'em there's no way am I gonna take such a fine carriage to the dump" (Eija). Even she had since acquired a habit of collecting many other things as well, such as crystal chandeliers.

Once things start to accumulate, it is as if they call more things to them. This is what Sasha Newell (2020) also found studying hoarders in the USA. Objects draw others to them. He also found that the things dead people leave behind are often the seed for hoarding. It is difficult for us to get rid of the things of dead people. Hoarders, as I mention above, are collectors without taxonomy, many of the same motivations drive them, though often of course these motivations are beyond articulation. Just to draw one example from Newell's subjects, one hoarder said that they felt a "duty to preserve antique objects" (ibid). Similarly, the owner of the Nostalgia Museum said that "I believe that I'm preserving the past for future generations" (Aila). For her, as for many of Newell's interlocutors, the call of things began with the death of first her husband's parents and then her husband. Things were left behind that one could not let go of. The "crowding of clutter" began (Newell, S. 2020).

The collection process itself is often emphasized, the actual finding of the things, the searching, the hunt for the object. Such stories were abundant with most of the collectors I interviewed. A collector's instinct in acquiring objects of interest and value is cultivated and cherished and this is something that van der Grijp (2006) found as well. Some stories might be described as a narrative of sacrifice for the exotic, the singular find. This also reflected heavily on the collection itself, as the owner of the Bottle Museum said: "this isn't any old collection, this is a completely

unique thing” (Lauri). Any singularity notwithstanding, the number of things in the collections was vast. When asked if she had time to go through all the things in her collection-cum-museum, the Owner of the Nostalgia Museum mentioned having many things stored at home, and there were some newly arrived boxes full of various things that needed sorting as well, hundreds of uncatalogued and uncategorized things. That particular museum housed object categories in the hundreds: cameras, skis, clothe-irons. 30 binders full of unsorted postcards, barrels, toys. In her own words: “Here we have those barrels, upstairs too, some came a week ago. Should organize. And here are some tools from a carpenter’s workshop. Then we have washing machines, mangles, washing boards, manual things. Then there’s saws, all sorts of tools and carpentry planes” (Aila). As long as the thing was old, the thing was there. She said that she doesn’t usually refuse to take in anything, and people had the habit of dropping off things by the museum’s gate. The museum was located in the middle of some fields in the countryside.

This proliferation seen above, this “crowding of clutter”, was often the norm. The bottle museum had so many other things in the basement than bottles, that it was in a way difficult to notice many of them. The eye doesn’t catch them as there are things everywhere alongside walls and shelves and piled on the floors. It was always a delightful cornucopia to go through, a contemporary Wunderkammer of sorts. The same could be said of Cannons at Torp, a military museum, with many buildings full of militaria and cannons and vehicles out in the yard. There was even an old fighter plane that I had the privilege of sitting in the cockpit of and a helicopter in the yard!

Some had much more conscious objectives in collecting things. The military history museum Kaarre’s War Museum was explicitly devoted to the Finnish Winter War and the Continuation War. The things there made up an entire other temporal realm. The owner, through collecting militaria, had eventually built what amounted to a holistic “war experience” for the visitor. He had installed sound effects and made the museum spaces look authentic in the minutest details. Here the things were given a very different sort of life anew. The owner said that visiting children often love playing with the weapons and are very excited about the whole experience. One could indeed feel what it was like sitting in a cellar during a bomb raid, bombs blasting and air raid klaxon screaming. I must say it was a rather impressive entirety.

The owner of the Plastic Bag Museum had also made use of his collection in many artistic projects over the years. He had held consumer-critical exhibitions for example, engaging visitors in challenging ways. There, as in many other locations, it became evident that one way things call to each other is through the idea and existence of a museum. Many of the collectors I spoke to mentioned that they had received multiple donations over the years. This would not necessarily have happened to the same degree if they were simply one more collector among many, but as they had established a museum, people saw them as caretakers of those particular things, as keepers of the past, ones that could be trusted with other collections, and so even the Plastic Bag Museum had received donations from other plastic bag collectors to make up the current collection of over ten thousand plastic bags.



Figure 13: A view of the Pulley Museum building.

A field of multiple relations could be discerned with many of the objects in the collections, and this is what Joshua Bell (2017) argues as well. In his abstract to *A Bundle of Relations* he explicitly makes the case that “Objects are profoundly relational”. Some things were on loan, or kept for someone else temporarily, some things were lent out to others, some were in active use by others. A pattern on a tablecloth, for example, was recognized and replicated from the collection in the

Nostalgia Museum. Traditional patterns can survive this way and some skills related to things kept alive, while also creating sociality, a “field of relations” (ibid). Sasha Newell (2014) suggests that people’s attics (which accumulate half-remembered things) could be seen as a “physical space that works as an extension of unconscious mental processes, or even makes possible ontological alternatives denied in conscious articulations of the self and the world” (p. 188). The same could certainly be said of these collections and museums. Bell (ibid) says that due to being composed of relations, objects are processes that “are essential to people’s understanding of themselves and others” (p. 246). Collections thus form a sort of “distributed personhood” (Bell, J. 2017; Newell, S. 2014), leaving traces of past actions that persist after the person’s own death in the form of things. As mentioned above, this is one reason why it is difficult to get rid of things, and how many collections or hoards begin.

Interestingly the one time a gendered aspect was mentioned by any collector was by the only woman collector I met, the owner of the Baby Carriage Museum. While recounting visitor experiences she said that women had expressed particular joy at there being something for them as well, and that “there really isn’t anything for women, other than Doll Museums and such. I’ve seen many tears, when someone remembers, when they pushed their own first-born around in a carriage like this” (Eija).

Christopher Gosden (2004) says the act of displaying turns a thing into an object, i.e., a sort of dead thing, which brings to mind the theoretical separation that Tim Ingold (2010) makes between the two terms in my theoretical discussion. Turning things into objects is a process of taking it out of the lifeworld, making it inert, lifeless, but this is certainly not the case for the things in small private museums, and I would argue is not the case for almost anything anywhere through the act of displaying at least, though the act of displaying certainly may “single[.] out things from the general flow of life offering them up for contemplation and thought” (Gosden p. 35). And it has a power to transform things and their trajectories, as we have seen. Gosden (ibid) continues: “Prehistoric display may have been an unusual and powerful social force” (p. 40). This is what we saw Peter Cornell (1993) arguing in

the previous chapters, and this is certainly what I found to be the case in all of the museums that I visited. Displaying does have power over things.

What is it that people collect, then? It is evident from my fieldwork material and others' analysis that we collect anything and everything. As Maurice Rheims (1961) said: "However varied in form or matter of workmanship, any product of the human imagination can qualify as an objet de curiosite, a collector's piece of some kind" (Intro, xiii). This of course isn't adequate because it seems to allude to only 'human-made' objects. One can, however, collect ants, rocks, butterflies, any 'thing', which can of course be construed also as products of the human imagination in a metaphysical sense. Whatever the collectible thing-category turns out to be, one thing seems always certain, the oldest and presumably also the rarest item is the prized one.

As I mentioned in my introduction, the budding cultural anthropology of the early 20th century had a rather difficult relationship with collecting and museums, and while Malinowski himself spoke against sacralizing and fetishizing objects, taking them from their use-environment and putting them on display, the phenomenon of collecting and (Malinowski of course was speaking of things appropriated from colonial contexts) displaying as I saw it does not strictly do this. It opens the things to new paths, like building new neurons in a brain-system, it simply expands the "field of relations" that Joshua Bell talked about. We are, after all, "all things engaged in the ecology of life" (Ingold, T. 2010).

4.2 Creating a Collection, Creating a Museum

"I've been a collector all my life, but when every corner at home started to be overwhelmed with stuff I felt that I have to put them on display in some way" (N. Hansson 2019, *my translation*).

The above quote is from a man who donated hundreds of thousands of village-store related paraphernalia to the Museum Center (Museokeskus) in Turku, Finland. The museum professionals could of course not accept such an abundance of things, but he apparently managed to get them to take the "most important ones" (Hansson 2019, *my translation*). He also created his own museum, the convenience store museum in the old Turku Market Hall, as he felt a strong need to save his collection for posterity

as he was getting older (ibid). This is a recurring theme with the collectors I spoke to as well. The future of the museum, i.e., the collection concerns most of my interlocutors. The future of the Accordion Museum, for example, worried the owner who was then in his nineties. He is the sole owner and proprietor. There have been suggestions to move the museum to another town, but the owner would like it to remain in Sysmä as it's always been there, ever since 1993 when it was established. The emotional bond to a place he created is very strong, the museum is part of the town's landscape.



Figure 14: A view of the main building of Kaarre's War Museum. The building was also the owners' home and the museum was located in the basement.

The creation of a museum in the first place for their collection is one way of trying to make sure a collection outlives a collector, and, importantly, that the collection stays coherent, that their life's work stays intact. After all, as one collector said, "everything is cataloged precisely, every piece of information is noted in those notebooks and during the winter we try to find out more" (Jukka).

The owner of the Pulley Museum emphasized the legitimacy of his collection by following official museum guidelines and procedures in labeling and providing provenance to the things in his collection. But in addition to this he also stressed his

independence from official institutions, and the chance to follow his own inclinations rather than some museum professional's. The things in his collection are not to be touched, they are cleaned upon arrival and put on display. The case was very similar in the Bottle Museum, whose owner was in fact a friend to the owner of the Pulley Museum, collectors, it became evident, often know each other. Notwithstanding his independence, the Pulley collector tries to act according to guidelines given to him by the Museum Center (Museokeskus) of Turku. He photographs the things with numbered tags. This and the Bottle Museum are in a sort of liminal state between an official museum and a collector's collection. There is an attempt at relevance and meaning through the legitimizing process of museifying, creating a 'true' museum, making 'true' history.

As a collector almost never sticks to one object category, the collection inevitably expands, and a kind of curiosity cabinet is formed. This engenders the need to do something with the collection, to put it on display, as we saw above. The idea of the museum is a very natural thing to focus on as a reference when considering what to do with a bunch of old (or new) things. Some, like the owner of the Nostalgia Museum, had even worked at a museum previously, or volunteered. A museum was an obvious thing to do for the collection, the sort of cultural go-to mode of displaying things to a public.

Creating a museum for a collection also roots the collection geographically, for a museum is a place much more than a 'mere' collection of things is. We saw this already with the Accordion Museum, and the owner of the Pulley Museum was very explicit on this matter, saying that "an absolute requirement is that the Pulley Museum stays in Iniö. It could be anywhere, but it is an integral part of Iniö, in the middle of the ocean and by the sea. And it's good that when people come by bus to see the church for example, I often work as a guide, then it's only a hundred meters to the other location" (Jukka). In most places that I visited, the area and buildings were an absolutely integral part of the collection and the museum, which made it rather unthinkable that the things in the buildings would be moved to another location. The Nostalgia Museum for example had built several buildings and planted trees in the middle of a previously empty stretch of field; to my mind, the buildings

were things too, not even simply parerga, a framing device, as discussed briefly in my introduction.

The Nostalgia Museum (including its name) is a prime example of people's need to preserve the past; there the relations that Sasha Newell (2014) felt could be seen as kinship ties to things are revealed. The importance of things in our lives comes to the forefront, but also their ambivalence. Due to the wealthy capitalist societies' proliferation of stuff, we now also need to get rid of things, because there are astounding amounts of stuff that often have no more use-value or monetary value or simply are switched to a newer one. That is why the Nostalgia Museum alone received close to 2000 objects in the autumn of 2018. Someone had even left two basketfuls of stuff by the gate during the week prior to our interview. This was apparently very typical. In spite of this she was adamant that she wants to be able to give an account of all the things in the museum herself, not wanting to put extensive labels on the things. "I'll tell you, there's so much, if I tag everything, I don't like that, I like to tell myself. I want to invigorate by telling..." (Aila). In other words, she wants to be able to articulate - at least some aspects of - the field of relations, or the trajectories within Ingold's (2014) meshwork. This is also related to what she said about some visitors: "I admire people that come and pick up an object and look at it, reminiscing about owning such a thing when they were young. Takes a lot of time" (Aila). She enjoys the things' life worlds being revealed through the tactile visitor experience. In a wider context this is also related to the idea of manual work where the tactile experience is often emphasized. The owner of the Nostalgia Museum said she admires old skills and tools and would like to keep up such skills through the objects, keep the things alive through stories but also through doing, working. She wants this to be a holistic experience (not her words). She also had an interesting answer to the question of touching the things in the collection: "You can [touch the objects] here, that's what the old-timers like. *This is not a museum*" (Aila, *my emphasis*). It's something else, something more? For her, at least, it is a "hobby, a way of life" (Aila).

The owner of the Accordion Museum also began his pursuits as a simple hobby to play the instrument, but he started buying more of them at an early stage every time one came around and he had the money. From the beginning he had them displayed

in the window of the village bank, so it was a matter of display, and the collective part of collecting was prominently present from an early stage. Eventually the instruments got their own building, which became the Sysmä Accordion Museum. The museum opened its doors in 1993 and has been looked after ever since by the owner of the collection. Here we also see the power of things to draw more things to them, as about a tenth of the 200 accordions have been donations. One German visitor donated 6 accordions and 15 harmonicas for safekeeping in the museum, an extended attic if you will, in Newell's (2014) terms.



Figure 15: A view of the Tractor Museum in South-Ostrobothnia

His collection is also meticulously displayed, all the objects are in glass display cases. Nothing is to be touched. The objects are labeled, and their year of manufacture is visible. Some other information is usually included as well. The museum space has other things too. Pictures of famous players, short histories of particular instruments or players. There is an emphasis that the accordion is a strong part of culture and history, not just an obscure instrument/object category. There is information on accordion factories and manufacture in Finland and the owner knows a lot about the old factories, their histories and the stories of people who worked in them. Vyborg [now in Russia] had one for example, which ties the history of accordion manufacture to lost identities and cultural practices. The accordion, as many other instruments, needs to be used to stay in playing condition. On display its leather parts become stale and the instrument becomes unusable. In this case the things seem to simply be display-objects, examples of an instrument. A stilleben. The owner even mentioned this explicitly: “and one more thing, these aren’t played here. These are here for display” (Tauno). Still, the things are inextricably linked to personal histories, stories, familial knowledge, historical events. Through the accordions a whole world of human fates, life paths and societal history, all the way from the loss of Vyborg to journeys to the new world (New York). The owner recounted a story of someone who had kept their accordion with them all through the winter war. The owner in this case often didn’t remember where he got the instruments but had an uncanny ability to recollect stories connected to them. The functions and expectations a museum engendered came up when speaking of visitors: “and then, when these people visited, they asked if there are any Russian instruments, and when I showed them, they were happy to see familiar instruments from home in a museum” (Tauno). Such utterances reveal what we expect from a museum and what values museums hold for us.

The same holds for many of the other museums. The new owner of the Bottle Museum said that he hasn’t even thought about the potential monetary value of the things, but rather the historical value. On display is simultaneously the history of breweries, pharmacies, soda factories, social and cultural history of the past few hundred years, all in the form of old glass bottles. Multiple ways of inhabiting the world of the past, which are revealed through glass bottles and a myriad of other things. After the original owner of the Bottle Museum died there was a worry that

people would lose interest, that the place would be personified to such a degree into the original proprietor that the collection would die with him. The opposite was true however, and they had a successful May Day just before our visit. They had created many activities for visitors with some of the things in the museum, and this was a recurring theme in most small, independent museums. The Tractor Museum had undergone a similar process of passing on his collection and museum. These places had a desire to bring history to life in some ways with the help of old things, to create an embodied experience. Many of them had held or were planning to hold other events, like traditional days, when they could show visitors how to make rope for example. The owner of the Nostalgia Museum told me that “usually young folk aren’t interested, but then there are those that are really interested. It’s the mobile phone, they are born with phone in hand. I tenaciously believe I’m preserving things to see for future generations, for people need to know where they’re coming from. These days everything is too easy. But then there’s some couple in their fifties that comes here, ‘oh, we had these, but they’re all gone’. Then they mull over everything that’s gone” (Aila).

Regarding questions of value, be it monetary or symbolic, many collectors emphasized the historical dimension. As the owner of the Bottle Museum said, “the, like, historical value that this museum has, that’s immeasurable. But that, well, would someone buy this, well, that’s another thing entirely” (Lauri). The ideas of value also relate to what Sasha Newell (2014) termed the “material and temporal specificity of the object” (p. 188) turning these things on their head, and doing it rather playfully - for the authenticity and singularity by which institutional museums live is revealed and deconstructed through collections with no widely recognizable historical or monetary value, where a hundred pieces of the same object can be displayed in a meaningful sense (Nostalgia Museum for example), or what for many would be trash, i.e. pieces of old glass bottles, ancient Baby Carriages etc. The museum has the power to shape what is to be remembered, as Louis Silva (2012) points out in her article *Ethnographies of Heritage and Power*. The question for her is “What kind of power relations are woven into heritage and how?” (Ibid, p. 1). That a museum has power can be seen in how the collectors went about creating theirs. For example, the owner of the Baby Carriage Museum told me that what gave her the idea to start a museum was when “someone started telling me that I shouldn’t just

admire these by myself. That I should put a sign by the road, and I was like well... Then someone said that *you should start a museum*, as you've got those *old* carriages... *So, I started asking if I need a permit if I can use the term Museum*. They told me to go ahead" (Eija). In labeling themselves museums, they imbue certain characteristics, discourses of power and relevance. In addition, as mentioned, they often explicitly attempted to emulate certain museum practices, doctrines, and dogmas to create the sacred aura that a museum institution gives to things. Kenneth Foote (1990) has said that museums and other such historical things are viewed as a sort of civil religion, sites of pilgrimage. Society and the individual need to forget and remember, to keep objects and purge them from their lives, a balance between minimalism and hoarding, eternal dichotomy between remembrance and oblivion. And, as so often with official museums, the bulk of the collection is always in storage, out of sight, As the owner of the Bottle Museum said, "so we have here now... could it be three, four thousand objects on display, and, and well, this is maybe ten percent of all the objects in the collection" (Lauri).

Graham Black (2011) has said that museums choose what is history by choosing what to collect. Private collectors often fill the gaps felt by bigger institutions. Museums don't just display in a neutral way, they create knowledge through the feeling of a museum, its modes of display and how and in what light something is shown to the visitor. "When people go to museums, they bring their life experiences with them. Often, their encounter with the objects in the museum brings back vivid recollections, half-remembered places and emotions which would otherwise remain forgotten" (ibid, p. 418). Since the inception of the museum there has been a sustained critique over this mode of living with the past. Quatremere de Quincy's critique of museums was especially poignant and oddly contemporary: "placed in the foreign context of the museum, the objects are meaningless caricatures. The museum then attests to the failure of the present to construct a reasonable relationship with the past" (quoted in Black, p. 420), or, from an actual contemporary critique, "Their "network of ideas and relations" has been forsaken" (Russel, I. 2006, p. 277) This would give the feeling that the museum isn't such a healthy way to deal with our collective or individual pasts. Even Pierre Nora (1996) described "museums, memorials and archives as "prosthetic artifacts to replace natural connections to reality"" (p. 420).

Taking such critiques into consideration, the contemporary museum attempts to move from official past to multiple perspectives, memoryscapes in a way. Certainly, the private museum often subverts the tendency of the official institution for selecting objects of the elite for preservation - the bottle museum, the motor saw museum, and all the rest display objects that are either working objects or what most would consider outright trash, sometimes literally from the dung heap. I would argue that on some occasions, and contrary to what Pierre Nora said above, the private museum could be said to be a ‘real’ *milieux de mémoire* in Nora’s sense instead of a *lieux de memoire*. Perhaps the private museum at least attempts to transcend that distinction and occasionally creates a real *milieux de mémoire*, a lived environment of memory, a “landscape pregnant with the past” (Ingold, T. 1993).



Figure 16: A view of the collection of the History of Photography Museum. The owner stands in the foreground.

Janis Wilton (2006) in her article *Museums and Memories* brings out what sorts of processes for remembering the past are revealed in the local museum. Her article talks of the possibility of ‘wrong’ labeling of objects and discusses its significance, if any. She argues that even ‘wrong’ narratives can be learned from and are an integral part of processes of remembering, though many museum proprietors insisted to me

that they have done rigorous research and have clearly absorbed various narratives or narrative structures about museum work and the preservation of the past in a didactic sense. The Igor Museum (a museum that we visited which is dedicated to the preservation of the memory of the Soviet occupation of the Porkkalanniemi headland in southern Finland) is a good example of ongoing, ambiguous memory-work, the processual, relational meshwork that has been discussed. A becoming with a dialogue with former soviet visitors and also Finns who had originally been displaced from the area. Multiple truths are revealed in excavating such processes, multiple narratives and trajectories within which the things also find themselves. Such contemplations lead us to profound ideas on questions such as What is truth? Is it the curator's truth, the visitor's truth, the thing's truth? Such questions also reveal the profound "[...] vitality and significance of involving museum visitors as an integral part of the museum experience..." (Silva, L. 2012, p. 66), something small, independent museums often excelled at, as I found. A strong component in this is of course the fact that the owner of the collection is usually there personally, narrating his collection to the public.

As I have mentioned, the museum location and building are important factors to consider in this "bundle of relations" that I've examined. The museumscape itself can be a relocated building, an object, a thing, even the only thing 'in' the museum, as was nearly the case at the Potter's Museum in Somero, which was essentially just an empty dilapidated shack by the roadside, though apparently in its original location. It was a part of the landscape. A location can work in multiple ways being in a state of flux itself, with the things, as a thing of becoming. For example, in the context of the Igor-museum, the museum itself becomes the mimetic locus of an erased past, the soviet era in Porkkala. Visitors can visit that lost space and their own memories through the museum in a condensed form. This echoes what Setha Low (2017) had to say in *Spatializing Culture*.

I previously touched upon the perceived problems of modernity and the much-derided Cartesian divide as the source of our problems, and this has also to do with the questions of how memory and forgetting work in contemporary society. Paul Connerton (2009) has said that "A crucial reason... [for the preoccupation with memory] is that modernity has a particular problem with forgetting" (p. 1). This,

again, is related to the argument I and others have made about the reasons for collecting and establishing museums. It can be seen as fundamentally contra modernity, an effort to slow the pace of time and hold onto things, skills, memories, events, people, keep kin alive and not to be swept away by modernity's deluge, where "consumerism has become disconnected from the labor process" (ibid, abstract). and the entirety of the production cycle of any product is obscured and opaque, thus presumably also making the relational meshwork of things obscured and opaque. Connerton (ibid) contrasts this explicitly with the ancient art of memory, which is in a way dependent on stable loci. The art of memory is, after all, embodied memory, even if it is structured with imagined places, for the mind-body walks the memory palace.

As I have touched on before, many of my museums are in danger of disappearing altogether as they are bound to the singular character of the collector, who indeed by collecting is himself trying perhaps to transcend his own existence. The need to keep the things and the collection intact and stable culminate in the museum that they have created. As the current owner of the Bottle Museum said when asked if his uncle, the previous owner, wanted to keep the museum going after his passing: "yeah, absolutely, this was a little bit of a, this was like a child to Panu this museum... *a great object of passion*" (Lauri).

With all of the above questions in mind, can we see a feeling of nostalgia at work in the museum? Perhaps, but not always and not self-evidently if nostalgia implies an implicit wish to return to the past, not just commemorate and remember, live with the past as it were instead of living in the past. David Berliner and Olivia Angé (2014) have followed the path of nostalgia through the centuries to modernity's moment, when, in the 19th century, nostalgia lost its clinical connotation and shifted towards its modern use at the same time as the industrial revolution gained momentum and the first institutions dedicated to this acceptable form of nostalgia were born, i.e. the museum! This is interesting to contrast with the idea of modernity's effect on thing relationships and the question if it really was such a fundamental change, something Frank Trentmann (2016) argued against, as I showed earlier, but so many others argue for. Anthropology itself has a long history with nostalgia: the first ethnographies were "fueled with a longing for vanishing societies and ruptured

equilibriums” (Berliner, D. et al. 2014, p. 4). The temporal linearity of museums is something that I feel engenders a feeling of nostalgia, it turns our attention to things lost, or, at least, the things’ potential to be lost, a past that is no more and never can be again, and this linear progression is usually immanent in all historical exhibits, but also in some art museums. How does the museum project and affect our notions of time and society? According to Pomian “museums seem to take over a role of the churches as a locus where - at least in principle - all members of a society can communicate with the numinous” (quoted in van der Grijp, P. 2006, p. 82). This would indicate their impact on us is significant to say the least.

4.3 A World Full of Things

Here I will consider the trouble with things, their proliferation, and their seemingly endless accumulation. How do we deal with the things that clutter our world? We - in the West - seem to be in a constant dichotomous relationship with the desire to get rid of stuff and keep and accrue more stuff. Arjun Appadurai (2006) has made the case that this problem is indeed a Western one, and that Indian society does not suffer from it to the same extent. He is of the mind that the social life of things is radically different in Indian and US societies, for example. In India, he believes, things have a sort of personhood, which is what Newell (2014) spoke of in relation to the African societies in his study and what Rane Willerslev (2007) found among the Yukaghir in Siberia, while in the USA Appadurai claims society has been thoroughly colonized by the market logic, where the modes of production and consumption has distanced us from the lives of things, but I would argue that there are pockets of resistance to this alienation, if such a thing can be said to exist in our society. An active antagonism, as it were, to the seemingly all-consuming commodification process epitomized by the collector figure or the hoarder, as Newell (2020) can be said to have found, though he has previously asked “[w]hen did north Atlantic societies lose a culturally explicit place for personhood of things? Perhaps as north Atlantic societies became immersed within the capitalist market, indexical association with personhood had to be ideologically cut out of the recognition of object value [...]” (Newell, S. 2014, p. 208). Appadurai (2006) has almost a reductionist or essentialist view of the US in this sense, while extolling that “[t]he second important feature of this profusion [of things in India] is that it recognizes no

sharp line between people and things” (ibid p. 17). The logic of the market hasn’t, according to Appadurai (ibid), completely penetrated the materiality of objects in India. And what’s more, he says “[t]here is hardly any interest in minimalism [in India]” (ibid, p. 17). As to the question of becoming, Appadurai’s things seem to be constantly frozen in moments, whereas Ingold’s and Newell’s are processes, they are in a state of becoming.



Figure 17: A view of the gigantic model railway at the Model Railway Museum.

This dichotomous relationship with things that Apparudai (2006) speaks of in relation to US society is discernible even in the museums that I visited. The proliferation of things is such that they have a hard time keeping up with the flow of things, some must be discarded from time to time, others must be refused to begin with, space is running out, every nook and cranny is full of things, the metaphysical weight of matter rests heavily on the shoulders of the collectors, as it were. The accordion museum, for example, had a notice in the window saying “Accordions for sale”. The owner said that he would sell them all if someone would only buy them:

“Me: I just noticed that you have a notice saying accordions for sale. You sell them here as well?

Owner: Sure, I’d sell ‘em all.

Me: you’d sell them all?

Owner: Sure.

Me: So, anything in the collection could go?

Owner: Sure, except the ones that are donated, I wouldn’t sell those.”

(Tauno)

This, I thought, was an interesting aside considering all the stories and memories and the entire emotional journey through things that he went through in the two hours we were talking to him. He had, after all, just moments before made plain that he thought the museum was an important and integral part of the town of Sysmä, and that he wished it would stay there as a coherent collection even after his death. The Nostalgia Museum was suffering from similar dilemmas. The museum was running out of space. There were simply too many objects coming in. There is also no one to carry on the work. She had preserved the entire fixtures of village stores and pharmacies and takes in almost everything anyone brings to the museum, so the accumulation of things is profound. She even mentioned explicitly that she would give the entire museum and collection, lands, buildings, and all, to someone for free if they only promised to carry on the museum work and keep the place open for the public. Things can be a burden. This is of course something that is evident in the periodical minimalist craze, currently being propagated by the likes of Marie Kondo (2014; 2016).

There is, I feel, a somewhat privileged aspect to these questions of accumulation and minimalism. The choice to discard things according to whim, or inversely accumulate and store things often requires both means, time and space, which everyone does not have in equal measure. Generational memory is often tied to specific places such as family summer houses and farms, grandparent's homes etc. Such generational transference of objects, places and generally things is, I would surmise, often easier and more prolific for the wealthy, though perhaps things are then more of a burden. Is such generational memory only for the wealthy and the privileged then? How does societal status affect our relationship with objects? Of course, what is collected probably changes. But keeping a collection also implies a space where that collection is stored, be it a museum, warehouse, or any sufficient space. People who do not have these storage spaces often try to give their old objects, to them heirlooms and memorabilia, perhaps even memento mori of sorts, to museums, which more often than not have to turn them down. This leads to frustration and even anger. People are disappointed and surprised that their precious old radio, or chair is not worthy of a place in a museum. It must then be discarded, and something else is clearly discarded with it, a tie to a thing and its relational field, a separation from the "mesh of trails" (Ingold, T. 2014) that emanates from and through the thing. The commodification of objects, the mere volume of material these days, and the interchangeability of objects - one TV is much like the next, and not many are very special anymore - perhaps indeed makes them less likely candidates for embedded value and meaning, just as Appadurai (1986; 2006) argued above.

Why do people then visit museums? Amy Levin (2017) has an answer: people go to museums "to be entertained by the beautiful, the bizarre, the rare and the captivating" (Intro, xii). While this is certainly true in many cases, in focusing on the aesthetic aspects of visitor experience, it fails to capture the myriad of relational motives visitors might have. I would surmise from my findings that people also go to museums to remember, to create and uphold their relationship to the past, to skills, to knowledge, to other people of the past and the present, and all of this is related to my main question of why we collect. If "objects are profoundly relational" (Bell, J. 2017, abstract), so are museums and all things. I did not in my study talk to visitors more than summarily at times, but there have been other studies about museum visitors

and their motives and there must of course be a myriad of cultural and individual reasons at play. Amy Levin (2017), echoing Newell (2014) says that museums are society's attics, storages of our past, where we know to look for a connection to the past or some phenomena. So, the museum is a place that keeps for us, holds the things and the past in a living web of relations through an act of taking the things out of other active webs of relations. We outsource some of the dichotomous process of discarding and keeping in our private lives to the museum, and the museum, the collector, as much as any thing, is "engaged in the ecology of life" (Ingold, T. 2010).

A museum that intriguingly upended our notions of things worth saving and valuing was the now sadly defunct Plastic Bag Museum. As the owner said, "a lot of things are given a monetary value in society, but the plastic bag is an exception" (Timo). And of course, it is not simply a question of monetary value. A plastic bag in our society is indeed the commodity's commodity, worthless, voiceless, trash waiting to happen, literally, in Finland at least, used as a trash receptacle after its original use as a temporary carrying apparatus for 'actual' things. Due to all these considerations, it is a highly interesting object, and creating a museum for it works precisely that magic which Cornell (1993) spoke of in relation to Duchamp. The museum attaches meaning to trash, making it visible for us, engaging us in its thing-life. The plastic bag is a coming together of vast societal, economic, and cultural processes, from its very inception and implication in the oil extraction and refinement industry to its everyday function, so ubiquitous in our lives. It is implicated in various global "meshworks". It is a capitalist commodity par excellence. Almost every instance in the world has its own plastic bag. The EU parliament, the local grocery store, the national museum, etc., the list could go on ad infinitum.

The Plastic Bag Museum makes explicit the fine line between trash and museum item, the thing valued and preserved, and the thing not seen and discarded. The bag is a vehicle of communication, carrying other things, a symbol for action and ideas, trash. And as the owner said, "plastic is a very democratic material, even the poor can afford it and plastic can emulate many other materials" (Timo). As I mentioned in the introduction, the owner of the Plastic Bag Museum/collection was very explicit in his endeavors to critically reveal certain aspects of our consumer society through putting his bags on display in various settings and in his museum. As he said, "when

you focus on them their meaning multiplies. When a normal thing is taken into focus, it becomes special and you can find universality in it” (Timo). The owner and his wife often did this rather playfully, subverting people’s expectations of what a museum is and how it functions: “Timo had the idea that a museum has to have an entrance fee, so we made the fee five plastic bags, and every time we remembered we added a note saying who gave the bag and if there was a story behind it” (Timo). They even gave out “museum items” to visitors: “here you can grab a trash bag, they’re fourth or fifth duplicates [of bags in the collection]” (Timo). Surprisingly many keep plastic bags from various places and occasions. Why keep a plastic bag from a trip? Why keep anything? They are of course mementoes, perhaps not even very clearly thought of or articulated. They work as mimetic memory items. The things have mimetic properties of the original place and space, they have pictures/texts printed on them, connecting them to places and phenomena, making it a collectible in that they are not all identical within the object category. The same goes for tram tickets, subway tickets, little trinkets that people bring from their travels. Everything in any museum or any home is of course trash waiting to happen in a sense. The museum is as ephemeral as the thing-trash it holds. Though the plastic in the plastic bags will take decades to decompose, entropy eventually takes even the plastic bag. Sunlight has already begun to corrode them through the small window in the attic where the collection is kept.

What is waste, then, what is trash? This is precisely the question that Greg Kennedy (2007) has tackled in his book *An Ontology of Trash*. The dilemma of disposability and our struggle to come to terms with it is an enduring one and the ways we handle society’s refuse tells us a lot about our relationship to things and this is something the collectors and their museums deal with constantly, turning ‘trash’ into objects worth preserving and encountering anew, weaving between the lines of value for things. To what extent they create a private world of their own and to what extent it is socially shared and resonates in the visitors’ minds, is of course a question they face. That relationship is clearly a struggle in many ways. Even the crucial fad of minimalism can be seen as an attempt to live in a disposable world, though of course it has complex philosophical and historical/cultural roots. Sasha Newell’s (2020) “crowding of clutter” is, I feel, precisely a rejection of the commodity and a (re)-

establishment of the social relationship of things, though uncontrollably due to sheer volume and mode.

I will leave this chapter with a rather striking mis-en-scène from Heather Rogers' (2005) book *Gone Tomorrow*, which serves as one more reminder of our struggle with the disposability of our thing-world:

“Its [a gargantuan landfill] south facing side is encrusted like a giant mosaic with items employees have plucked from oblivion. Matted stuffed animals frolic with sun-faded plastic gnomes. Toys, old Christmas decorations, and unusual items like a cowboy hat, an antique lamp and a sunken disco ball fill out the ever-expanding composition. ... It resembles a spontaneous altar, the kind that might form on a street corner where someone was killed in a car accident. It is a form of folk art that's simply a human response to witnessing so much waste” (p. 20).

5. Conclusion

Why do we collect, and what does collecting and museums tell us about our relationship to things and the life of things? These profound questions hardly found a definite answer within this study, but some useful insights have hopefully been gained. Here I will go through my findings, some possible future avenues of investigation, and any problems or weaknesses that may affect the strength of my findings.

To briefly delineate the weakness of my argument and analysis; they are that I have only a rather cursory perspective from the collector on their collection and articulations about possible visitor experiences, with a brief personal visual analysis of the collections and museums. I have no first-hand information from visitors themselves, i.e., the ones that experience the collection and museum in a normal setting. In addition, I did not have any real long-term engagement with the museum locations or activities therein or any practical experience of collection pursuits myself. For such perspectives I have had to rely on other sources.

These limitations notwithstanding, some valuable insights seem to have been gained from what the collectors I interviewed had to say about collecting and keeping a

museum, and some further theoretical insights may be ventured from said perspectives. The process of collecting things and showing that collection to others, especially within what is then called a museum, is certainly fraught with ambivalent interpretations and polysemic dimensions about the nature of our relationship to things and what, if anything, can be meant by the idea of the life of things, their possible agency and other ontological dimensions. One of the most obvious aspects about our relationship to things is the Western preoccupation with the problems of accumulation and proliferation vis-à-vis the need to throw away and discard, losing things vs. gaining things, which has been discussed above. But even in the minimalist camp, such as Marie Kondo, whose obsession and passion it is to “tidy up” our lives, “objects feel things, too” (Hess, A. 2019). Amanda Hess brings to our attention that Kondo “writes of old books that must be woken up with a brush of the fingertips and socks that sigh with relief at being properly folded” (ibid), creating a decidedly spiritual and anthropomorphized dimension to our thing-relationships. It has also been suggested that discarding things, the new capitalist modus operandi of the latter half of the 20th century, did not come naturally to us, but rather had to be taught (Trentmann, F. 2016).

Frank Trentmann (2016) further gives a brilliant account of the history of consumption and our attitudes towards it. From the late middle ages’ aversion to consumption and accumulation of things and wealth to the renaissance ambivalence and later times, when consumption began to mean innovation and a drive forward. Progress was invented, so to speak. Progress meant more things. More things meant more problems, more waste, more over-consumption. These are now global, societal problems as well as individual ones that we all have to grapple with in one way or another.

In the middle of these large questions stands the figure of the collector, unremittingly caring for and growing their object collections, saving from the dung heaps of history, from the mountains of waste and reluctantly discarded ‘stuff’ whatever thing that happens to be the subject of their passion. Things undoubtedly call to us all, but the collector answers that call with a fervor the rest of us can only marvel at, uncaring of any sort of minimalist persuasion.

G. Ellis Burcaw, the one-time chairman of the museum studies program at the university of Idaho has said: "... history on the continent is dead, beautifully embalmed, but dead..." (quoted in Anderson, J. p. 285). He was in this case contrasting the old continent's perceived tendency to museify everything, creating what amounts to a static and separate history from living reality as it were, whereas, according to Anderson (ibid) there is a great trend in the USA to create history anew through "living museums", recreations of the past, as though it were possible to step into the world of the past (ibid.) Quoting Deetz, Anderson answers the question "can museums live?" by pointing out that to actually be "thrust into the past" would induce a culture shock, something akin to suddenly teleporting oneself from Helsinki to New Delhi. As quaint as they are, he says, living museums do not live, they are "pseudo-events", because the past is a radically different reality, which he discerns by for example simply looking at the things that were sold in the 1982 Sears Roebuck catalog. The past is indeed a foreign country! The past cannot thus be recovered, and by this logic the re-enactment is no more the real past than a resurrected mammoth would be a real mammoth. The idea is raised here that living museums, or museums in general offer a reprieve from "future shock", i.e., the effect of capitalist modernity is reduced by wrapping our minds in relational realms with the very things said mode of living has produced in such vast quantities and then discarded so wantonly.

Theodore Adorno has said that the German word *museal*, museumlike, "describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship, [...] in the process of dying", and that "museums are the family sepulchers of art" (quoted in Witcomb, A. 1997). As we have seen, small, independent museums are hardly "family sepulchers of art", nor do they in my opinion house objects that are "in the process of dying" any more than the average home stores things that are inevitably disappearing and disintegrating, which of course they are. In this conceptual world of Adorno's, there would perhaps be a difference between small, independent museums and the grand State-, and professional institutions. The latter would in this perspective be a mausoleum taking things out of the processes of life; the former a place vibrantly alive by multiplying the web of relations for the things in their collections. To my mind even such a reading is a simplifying one, and the role and potential of museums and collections, be they State-run institutions or private conglomerations of things is

in the very vibrancy and state of “inbetweennes” of the things themselves that we have seen. John Martin Fischer (2022) has said that "the now is necessarily structured by horizons of the past and the future. So every way of inhabiting the now (including ‘being here now’) is also a way of taking up the past and orienting ourselves to the future" (paragraph 25). In other words, in inhabiting the now, we take up the past, and we often do this through the medium of the world, i.e., things. Perhaps museums are a necessary medicine to modernity and capitalism, and perhaps collections and collecting grasping at things, is just that, a medicine for our ills, but it is a very ambivalent medicine in that case, just as the things themselves are ambivalent, full of potential meanings and trajectories that can steer us with them into unknown futures. There is a quote attributed to the tragic poet Agathon: “not even the gods can change the past”. We, however, change the past constantly through our engagement with the things in our lives and the things from past lives. There is one thing the collector is not, and that is the tragic figure inhabited by an infant mind. van der Grijp (2006) efficiently exposes such fallacies of the reductionist and oddly antiquated notions discussed in my introduction. These psychoanalytic tendencies of imbuing the infant mind to the collector, and what’s more, equating both with the mind of the so-called “primitive man” are entirely without merit.

Nearly all of us collect to some degree, and most of us collect rather unwittingly, for we store a multitude of things in our homes and lived environments. Some of us see rather deeper, and attempt to create some order into our thing-worlds by collecting, categorizing and displaying. The collectors I interviewed all self-confessedly felt like the custodians of the past, or at least some small, hopefully controllable fragment of the past, our common past.

Are words enough in studying so-called material culture? I have here included photographs of the locations and the objects to give a better “feel” for the places and things, but that is certainly worth thinking on critically. How is one to describe material things adequately when the tactile, somatic experience is so vital in our relationship to things and the world. We are not cogitating entities free of physicality, we are a mind-body being that, as we have seen, extends that mind to its environment and the things in it. One very concrete way of doing this is through collecting those things, as perhaps we discern the “spirit of matter rather than the spirit in matter”

(Peter Pels quoted in Newell, S. 2014). And perhaps Giorgio de Chirico was right when he told us that “it is important to understand the mysterious in things that are normally seen as meaningless... to live in the world as if in a large and strange museum” (quoted in Cornell, P. 1993, p. 77, *my translation*). Gaining a sense of wonder for our lived environment is hardly ever a bad thing, and when it concerns the things that we share our everyday lives with, it seems rather pertinent.

There is still much to be gained and learned from collectors and collecting, whatever the future avenues of object agency and the spirit of matter is, for our relationship to things is crucial in understanding the fraught world we live in today. Collecting may have something to tell us about what we can do to survive in a world of over-consumption, where we practically drown in things. The material re-turn is warranted if there indeed was a lack. After all, as Douglas and Elisabeth Rigby (1944) wrote over half a century ago:

“[...]it must strike the investigator as increasingly strange that its domain should have been so sparingly reported by anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists; *for the roots of the phenomenon of collecting are the roots of man himself*, and they nourish many of us today through the practice of this ancient pastime” (quoted in van der Grijp 2006, *my emphasis*).

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Appendix: list of interviewees quoted in this work

Aila Aumala: owner and caretaker of the Nostalgia Museum and its collection.

Eija Mäenpää: owner and caretaker of the Baby Carriage Museum collection.

Lauri Hakama; current caretaker of the Bottle Museum and collection.

Jukka Torikka: owner and caretaker of the Pulley Museum and collection.

Tauno Ylönen: owner and caretaker of the Accordion Museum and collection.

Timo Lapila: owner and caretaker of the Plastic Bag Museum and collection.