Introduction

‘Object Lesson: An example from real life that teaches a lesson or explains something.’

This book explores the interface of digital and analogue media within museum practices and technologies of exhibition, classification, archiving and collection. It is an invitation to think about digital in historical and material context, and to meditate upon how collections are made, and remade, over and over again. The term ‘object lesson’ means more than simply using artefacts for teaching purposes. Rather, object lessons are arguments about the world made through things. They are educational, performative and fundamentally material. As Lorraine Daston describes, object lessons are ideas brought into being by things, not just as communicating vehicles, but as sites of meaning animated by their materiality.

Museums are the perfect sites for the production and dissemination of object lessons. They are curated spaces, often curiously set apart from our everyday lives, in which we, the public, are invited to learn very particular things about the world. The neo-classical sculpture hall, the white cube contemporary art space and the reconstructed period room have become sites of learning within which visitors may lose themselves in the text of labels and display panels, the narratives of audio guides and guided tours. The power of these spaces is evident in the global surge of museum-building projects: nation-states, corporations and local communities are investing more and more in spaces to collect, curate and exhibit their histories, narratives and identities. Object lessons constitute powerful subjectivities in museums – for instance, forging experience and understandings of ‘the public’, ‘participation’ and ‘citizenship’. In all of these museum projects, object lessons emerge in the ways in which collections are placed together, framed, strategically narrated, contextualised in architecture, and in language, and sensuously experienced in order to generate a vision of ‘real life’: the material generation of a view
of the world that we can believe as true. Object lessons are therefore both ontological (they tell us something about what there is) and epistemological (they help us interpret and explain what there is).

And yet, the relationships between collections and displays in museums, and notions of real life have to be carefully constructed within the period rooms of decorative arts museums, the halls of ‘Africa, Oceania and the Americas’, in stores and archives, in the community curated...
gallery, and in the overcrowded shelves of the teaching collection. Here, ‘real life’ is created inside the collection through technologies and techniques of display as much as it is by the materiality of the artefacts. In these spaces, which are prone to wear and tear, dust and disintegration, digital technologies are often experienced as shiny and new, without precedent, layering new forms of interpretation and experience onto historical collections. As I will show here, as much as digital media brings new ways of looking at and understanding collections, it also represents, and refracts, earlier representational techniques. Holograms, virtual reality and interactive touch screens continue the reality effects, and object lessons, of model-making, dioramas and period rooms. These are all technologies that purport to capture the outside world and bring it into the space of the museum, and they all also produce new ways of being in, and learning about, the world.

It is quite common to imagine the digital as immaterial – as a set of experiences or form of information sequestered somewhere ‘in the cloud’. To counter this there is a vibrant emerging literature focused on the material infrastructures that underpin digital networks and which enable digital media to circulate and pulsate its way around the world – from the electrical grid to server farms and undersea cables. New academic fields such as Platform Studies and Format Theory aim to ground ephemeral philosophies of the digital by paying careful attention to the socio-political, historical and material forms that structure digital media. This book aims to do the same for our understanding of digital museum objects – to fill the lacunae that imagines digital objects as fundamentally immaterial and to explore more fully what kind of objects, and collections, they are. The definition of a digital object slips between digital files that themselves serve as their own kind of ‘objects’ and the technologies (screens, phones, kiosks) that deliver them. The continual slippage in definition around digital objecthood helps us to recognise that what Daston describes as ‘common sense thing-ontology … chunky and discrete’ does not generally extend to the digital in museums. We often have trouble describing the digital using the language of museum collections, focusing more on concepts such as knowledge, networks and media. By proposing a reorientation of our awareness of digital media in museums, I argue here that we need to think about the digital not only as material, rather than immaterial, but also in terms of a trajectory of materiality that links our commonplace understandings of the digital to the analogue, information to material, systems to structures, knowledge to form. Object lessons – the deliberate harnessing of the material world to create knowledge – bring materiality and knowledge
together into many different forms. In fact, as I shall present here, imagining the digital/analogue as a divide (rather than a continuum) is not a particularly productive way of understanding the particular materiality, and historicity, of digital practices and objects in museums.

Many people understand digital technologies – particularly those that produce the expansive internet, sometimes referred to as Web 2.0 or more recently as the semantic web – as extending the civic capacities of museums, opening access, democratising curatorial authority and destabilising values of authenticity and the aura of singular artefacts. The digital components of contemporary museum practices are often presented as radical alternatives to the historical form of the museum itself, provoking a powerful sense of undoing the heavy stasis of the museum artefact with a new kind of materiality, a digital poetics that can be used to unpack the politics of museum collections. ¹¹ This, I believe, is only half the story. In this series of chapters, each taking a single object as a starting point, I work to make sense of digital collections as objects in their own right, and locate them within the object lessons that predate the ubiquity of digital technologies within our cultural lives. In so doing I undo many of our assumptions about the nature of the digital. This is not a reactionary argument against the new, or against the digital, but rather an exhortation to take the digital seriously in more than just its own terms – to unpack the assumptions and perspectives that are built into digital museum projects.

The contemporary object lessons I explore here inhabit a ‘contact zone’, where old museum collections and new technologies come together, tracing the translation and extension of collections from card catalogues, storerooms and display cases into digital websites, imaging platforms and collection management systems. James Clifford’s influential rendition of Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of contact zones in the context of museums defines contact zones as spaces where multiple communities are drawn together, within unequal power relations, around collections. ¹² The contact zone highlights the politics that draw knowledge and meaning from collections through representational practices of classification and recognition. Here, I extend the notion of the contact zone and pose a challenge to the epistemological framework we use to define the digital by exploring how the representational politics of the contact zone may be understood as a continual process of remediation. As collections extend into digital form – books, images and paper archives migrate into databases and relationships are refigured as digital social networks – the stakes are high. What is the value of older collections, shut in expensive unwieldy storage, locked
into exhibitions that are out of date before they open, trapped in often troubled, colonial histories? Equally, how do we deal with the problems raised by new digital collections? How do we approach problems of promiscuous circulation, expensive infrastructures, the liability of obsolescence, dependency on technical expertise, and the capacity to engage audiences comprised of digitally literate consumers at the possible expense of others, often understood to be on the wrong side of the so-called ‘digital divide’?

These obvious questions – of infrastructure, accessibility and skill – mask some even more fundamental questions about the ways in which digital objects produce knowledge and meaning both in and of the world. I write at a time when the celebratory capacities of digital technologies seem to be unlocking the museum in unprecedented ways. As you will read about in the chapters that follow, websites can make entire collections available across the world in an instant, robots can allow so-called source communities to curate collections from afar and 3D-printing technologies permit us to recreate objects destroyed by war and extremism. These projects seem to highlight how digital media are the future form of collections, and indeed of museums. More broadly, our cultural world is increasingly interacting with the ‘internet of things’, smart technologies and big data. The digital has become a core medium of cultural production, from the co-option of broadcast media by social media through to the dependence on cultural expression on digital platforms. Lev Manovich has described this as ‘software taking command’.

However, one of the key lessons of museum anthropology and museum studies as academic disciplines is the deceptively simple point that museums are sites that produce as well as represent knowledge about the world. We need to ask what kind of world the digital produces and how different it really is from the world that existed before. What tools do we have for understanding and appreciating the digital in a context beyond that of its own making? What kind of collection will these digital projects become? What kinds of object lesson do digital technologies, media and practices provide?

The chapters that follow each start with a specific object. They represent a personal exploration of contemporary museum object lessons that trace my own trajectory as a curator, researcher and museum visitor. I suggest that this approach reflects a broader way in which knowledge is built up in museums by their visitors, who create their own connections, while simultaneously following established narratives and curated pathways. My own work over many years as a scholar and curator demonstrates both the serendipity and
happenstance, the discipline and dialogue, that occur as we move around objects in museums, from collections, archives and storage into exhibition halls, websites and other digital projects. My role as a researcher, teacher and curator working with some very unique collections has allowed for a certain amount of audacity and experimentation in both the creation of new kind of object lessons and in the intervention into old ones. These personal pathways demonstrate how object lessons emerge at the interstices between the personal, the idiosyncratic, the biographical, the political and the governmental.

Two chapters focus on objects housed within the collection to which I have privileged access as curator: the UCL Ethnography Collections. One chapter draws on my experiences as a visiting researcher at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while one chapter draws on my experiences as a visitor to the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. In choosing these objects I have tried to draw upon many of the subject positions that collections gather together: visitor, artist, researcher, student, curator, stakeholder. The objects I reference are housed in New York and London, but they are situated within networks of production and exchange that extend from the South Pacific to Europe and North America, and through the World Wide Web’s technological networks and infrastructures of both hardware and software. Each of these chapters traces these transformations, interconnections and remediations, emerging from a complex global web of connections, collaborations and conversations.

The objects I explore here fall into two broad categories: first, those that belong to the classic ethnographic collection (an effigy and a cloak); and second, those that seem to belong more to the technology of collections (a box and a pen). However, these categories dissolve as quickly as I can type the words to describe them on my computer, for objects are transformed into ‘ethnographic collections’ through the powerful exercising of museum technologies, and the tools used to do this are rendered cultural as they become entangled in the social worlds of meaning-making that characterises human engagement with objects. With my first object, a box, I describe a collaboration with artist Caroline Wright that explores the consolidation of knowledge and meaning in the form of specific artefacts. Working with deaccessioned objects, Wright asks whether value – and knowledge – is moveable, situated around the object, or located within the object. By decomposing objects into drawings and into their ‘base’ materials, her project raises important questions about mimesis and
replication that are vital to our understanding of how the digital remediates collections.

My second object is the opposite of the wooden box: a digital device, a pen, that has become an integral part of the visitor experience of the newly reopened Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York. The pen is a tool that aims to connect the visitor to the digitised museum catalogue. By exploring how this animates a particular perspective on design, it becomes clear that this new digital tool continues a trajectory that was established by the creation of the decorative arts as a particular museum and collecting genre in the nineteenth century. The relationality of digital databases is prefigured in the decorative arts collection, which creates image-based connections across different materials and media, allowing for their remediation through a broad process of design.

My third object continues the discussion about how artefacts make meanings by exploring multiple understandings of a Rambaramp funeral effigy from Vanuatu in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This chapter asks how artefacts might embody multiple perspectives and draw together contradictory provenances. I explore how existing knowledge systems may, or may not, be represented digitally and expose a dominant perspective of many museum digital imaging projects that efface rather than uphold the capacity of digital media to represent, or even encode, multiplicity.

My fourth object is a Māori cloak, also in the UCL Ethnography Collections. This beautiful cloak, Tukutuku Roimata, has drawn together artists and interaction designers, museum professionals, anthropologists and Māori communities in London and Aotearoa New Zealand. The cloak's mediation, through both imaging technologies and social media, prompted a conversation about how digital technologies might be understood within different cultural registers and challenged us to unpack our assumptions about virtual replication using Māori notions of wairua, or spiritual energy.

Taken together, these chapters explore the object lessons that are produced within museum processes of digitisation. The border zone of translation, or remediation, between our understandings of old and new collections draws our attention to the interdependence of object lessons (creating knowledge from the real world) and reality effects (the use of objects to mimetically create an understanding of the real). The moment when one kind of technological mediation gives way to another is also the moment in which we learn about what we consider to be ‘natural’ (or real) and what we perceive to be ‘socially’
constructed. As collections themselves shift across platforms, what counts as a real object, worthy of preservation and care, subject to property regimes and the call of sovereignty, is also drawn into question. Moments of remediation are more than just processes of translation – they are moments in which knowledge and meaning itself are produced. Here, I work hard to counter the perception of indexicality that increasingly accompanies digital museum objects – the perception that digital reproductions are somehow more real than other representational technologies, that social networks within digital space are somehow more social and more networked than those previously facilitated by the museum. Rather, I explore how understandings of the social, of the ways in which the digital shapes our embodied encounters with collections, and of the ways in which the digital itself is emerging as a knowledge system, can at times be curiously reactionary as well as opening up conversations in truly novel and exciting directions.\textsuperscript{16}