

## RECONTEXTUALIZING THE GEORGE BROWN COLLECTION THROUGH CREATIVE CERAMICS

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### *Introduction*

The George Brown Collection has a complex and contested history, reflecting a range of personal and wider socio-political trajectories. Brown largely accumulated the collection between 1860 and 1907, whilst serving as a Methodist missionary in Oceania. The collection has had a number of homes over the years, exercising the endeavours of a variety of people. In 1986, the majority of it was controversially sold by Newcastle University to the National Museum of Ethnology (NME), Osaka, Japan.

Between January and April 2013, I was the recipient of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) international placement which took place at the NME. Although my doctoral project, of which the placement formed part, focuses on Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens' (SMWG) collection of mainly nineteenth century Sunderland pottery (see McHugh 2013), researching the George Brown Collection enabled me to further test my approach to collection and community, albeit in a substantially different setting.

This paper will reflect upon my attempt to investigate, through creative ceramic practice, what status and role the George Brown Collection has within the community at its current home in Japan. I will also explore parts of the collection which, for various reasons, remain in UK museums. It is hoped that these insights will contribute to discussions of how collections can be rejuvenated and reinterpreted in alternative ways, particularly through arts practice, leading to increased access and collaboration.

### *Background*

George Brown (1835–1917) was an avid collector of ethnographic and natural history specimens, collecting for himself as well as on behalf of other individuals and institutions. What has become known as the George Brown Collection is his personal trove of over 3000 ethnographic artefacts, acquired from a

variety of locations including Samoa, Fiji, the Bismarck Archipelago, Tonga, and the Solomon Islands. While his biography and collecting practices have been discussed in depth by himself (Brown 1908) and others (e.g. Gardner 2006; Reeson 2013), a brief account of his early life and the history of the collection reveals how its genesis is linked to the north east of England almost as much as it is to the various communities in Oceania from where the objects originate.

Born in Barnard Castle, County Durham in 1835, the adolescent Brown worked in a chemist's shop in Sunderland before being apprenticed to a draper in Hartlepool where, after work, he would smuggle contraband through the port (Brown 1908: 7–8; see also Gardner 2006: 25). In 1851 he decided to run away to sea to seek adventure and served on a variety of merchant and troop ships in Europe and North America, before finally returning home. Unable to settle, he sailed to New Zealand in 1855 where, influenced by Methodists, including his uncle the Reverend Thomas Buddle, he converted and was accepted for mission work, beginning his career in Samoa in 1860.

Ostensibly incomparable, both the George Brown Collection and the Sunderland pottery collection are intertwined in the history of British colonialism. George Brown was part of a broader trend of people emigrating to the colonies at this time. My work in Sunderland shows that, but for the 'guiding hand of God' (Brown 1908: 16), his path might just as easily have been taken by any number of young people from the north east of England who travelled abroad to seek their fortunes.

Sally Hyde, a New Zealand based occupational therapist and amateur potter, originally from Barnard Castle, has undertaken detailed research into her family history (Hyde 2012; see also McHugh 2013: 83). Her great-great-great-grandfather William Milburn (1771–1849) was a master potter at Scott's Southwick Pottery (1788–1896), Sunderland. Hyde shows that two of her ancestors, descendants of the Milburn family, relocated to New Zealand in the nineteenth century. Morris Milburn, her great-great-uncle, emigrated from Sunderland to New Zealand in 1859, four years after Brown, to prospect for gold. Milburn, a settlement in Otago, is named after him. His nephew, William Legender Milburn, followed in 1885 but died tragically in a drowning incident four years later. Sally regards this family history as a precedent for her own move to New Zealand and it is also clear that in the nautical imagery and verse of Sunderland pottery, she sees an embodiment of the pioneer spirit she feels she has inherited from her ancestors. As she notes:

'[...] a family pattern seemed to be emerging and a spooky connection and resemblance to my own life experience. Emigrating across the world looking for a better life is perhaps a family trait. [...] I am especially interested in the pieces [of pottery] with a nautical theme which, for me, is inspired by my ancestors that follow from William Milburn who were seafarers. There is a family tendency to sail to foreign shores.' (Hyde 2012)

Similarly, Howard Forster, another participant in my research, has discovered that his great-uncle, the indentured potter Robert Crinson (1846–?) also ran away from his apprenticeship, only to be lost at sea, a fate which Brown narrowly avoided (Brown 1908: 11).

As a self-professed ‘pioneer-missionary and explorer’, skirmisher-cum-ethnologist, Brown’s life seems a materialization of the jingoistic derring-do and adventure present in much of the nautically themed Sunderland pottery. His participation in naval action in the Dardanelles (Brown 1908:11) just prior to the Crimean War (1853–1856), resonates with the many items of Sunderland pottery which commemorate this campaign, while his Methodism is matched by the prevalence of depictions of John Wesley on Sunderland plates and plaques.

After Brown’s death in 1917, in accordance with his will (Gardner 2006: 150), the collection was sold to Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, arriving in 1920. For financial reasons it was sold to King’s College, Durham (now Newcastle University) in 1954 and was later transferred to the Hancock Museum (then part of the university and now the Great North Museum: Hancock) in 1974. In April 1986 certain items (mainly *malangan* carvings), due to be sold to the NME, were subject to an export hearing as their valuation was over £16,000 each. As the minutes of the hearing show, six of these were bought by the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, four by the British Museum, and one by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (Reviewing Committee 1986). Some items remain in the Discovery Museum, Newcastle, and several ‘duplicate’ items were swapped with the Pitt Rivers Museum when the collection was still at the Bowes Museum.

Given this history, the collection offered much potential to carry out a comparative study of its relative status and role at its main home in Japan, as well as at a range of venues in the UK. Although Sunderland pottery production is no longer a living tradition, the SMWG’s collection is remarkable for its close contextual association with its historical originating community. The descendants of its makers still live in the area (and further afield) and possess a sense of connection to their roots. In contrast, the George Brown Collection is notable for a high degree of detachment from its origins. This disarticulation of collection and community was in sharp contrast to the continuity of the Sunderland collection, posing challenges but also providing opportunities for a creative recontextualization through ceramics.

Although museum objects generally come from the past, they are experienced in the present and often endure into the future. The material world is experienced as a ‘rich palimpsestal present’ (Olsen 2010: 126) composed of remnants of a profusion of pasts. Each item in a museum collection represents a unique ‘material trajectory’ (ibid.: 126) or story. As Jim Specht (1987: 2) noted with regard to the collection’s chequered career, the original cultural relevance of ethnographic artefacts is not easily ‘transplantable’ into a new context. However, an artistic reinterpretation may attempt to find ways of ‘activating’ such objects

from the past, making them ‘things’ of the present by exploring thematic or aesthetic connections through space and time. Artists can add to this heritage by making new material culture that will, in turn, pass into posterity as the past experienced in the present.

*The George Brown Collection at the NME*

The NME, known in Japan as Minpaku, a shortened version of its Japanese name, was opened in 1977 on the site of the 1970 Japan International Exposition (Expo). Artist Okamoto Taro, the Expo’s ‘Theme Building’ producer, had a vision to display ethnographic objects from around the world in order to ‘present the past, present and future of humankind’ (Yoshida 2001:94). Between 1968 and 1969 the ‘Expo ’70 Ethnological Mission’ travelled the world collecting about 2600 objects for display. In addition to the Expo acquisitions, the NME has ethnographic collections from the University of Tokyo and items from the Ministry of Education’s Department of Historical Documents, largely comprising folk tools from Japan and East Asia (ibid.: 88–93). The NME focused its accessions policy on everyday goods and utensils, ‘trash’ rather than ‘treasure’, as Umesao Tadao, the founding director-general of the museum, described them (ibid.: 100). The displays were intended to be as open as possible and touch was encouraged. By juxtaposing vernacular objects from Japan and Europe with ethnographic specimens from ‘foreign cultures’ (ibid.: 97), the museum wanted to avoid the dichotomizing idea of ‘otherness’ often prevalent in ethnographic museums in the West. It is clear that this ethos of collecting in the present for future generations continues to be important, with the museum’s sculptural central patio being called *Relics for the Future*.

The George Brown Collection was purchased to augment the NME’s existing Melanesian collections (Ishimori 1999: 8) and contains a wealth of quotidian objects from these communities. However, as the largest collection held by the NME with direct links to a European colonial history, it is a somewhat incongruous addition to the museum. In 1999, about two thirds of the collection was displayed to the public in *Cultural Heritage of the South Pacific: The George Brown Collection*, a special exhibition at the NME which attracted almost sixty thousand visitors (ibid.: 8). In compliance with the conditions of sale, which sought to keep the collection together and guarantee public access, a representative sample of the objects forms a permanent exhibition in the NME’s Oceania gallery (Figure 1). Nevertheless, conversations with the academics most closely responsible for the collection at the NME, ethnographer Isao Hayashi and Peter J Matthews, curator of the Oceania gallery, suggested that there was little awareness of the George Brown Collection in the local community. Although the Oceania gallery features a photographic display of Pacific Islanders who live in Japan, it is not clear how much they have engaged



*Figure 1. The permanent display of the George Brown Collection in the Oceania gallery at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka. From a photograph taken by Christopher McHugh. Courtesy and copyright, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan.*

with the collection. Given this, there was a sense that the collection was, to some extent, lying dormant, waiting to be rediscovered.

### *Approaching the collection in Japan*

While the NME has worked with artists in the past who have drawn inspiration from its collections (for example, there has been a project with contemporary Ainu artists), this project marked the first artistic recontextualization of the George Brown Collection. As with the Sunderland pottery collection, I began my residency with a gradual immersion through observation of the collection in the gallery and store. Although contemporary resonances emerging from the relationship between it and the community of Osaka were less obvious than they had been in Sunderland, this openness was liberating to some extent, enabling me to focus more on my own encounter with the materiality of the objects.

Whereas my 'embeddedness' in the SMWG gave me ready access to the collection and archive, my status as a 'visiting researcher' at the NME meant that

the process for viewing the collection was more bureaucratic, although a similar procedure was also required when arranging to view George Brown items at institutions in the UK. Initially, it was necessary to select the items I wanted to access using an online database, whereupon some days later these pieces would be brought out of storage by members of the museum staff. While this system no doubt functions efficiently for visiting scholars who need to view a specific range of items, the variable quality of the database images, together with my lack of specialist knowledge regarding Oceanic material culture, meant that my initial attempts at selection were eclectic, ranging from Solomon Island lime containers to Fijian pottery and other items whose vessel-like forms immediately seemed to lend themselves to a contemporary ceramic reinterpretation.

After negotiation with the museum staff, the procedure was modified so that I was able to enter the ethnographic store alone and access the whole collection *in situ*. Shelves of decorated bark cloths, ornately carved Trobriand canoe prows and Fijian clubs jostled for my attention. Although initially bewildering, this ‘mining’ of the museum afforded a more organic and flexible encounter with the collection, where material and thematic connections between a range of items gradually became apparent. In regard to her residency at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in 2006 as part of the exhibition *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia, 1760-1860*, Rosanna Raymond (2009: 127–128) notes that her initial plan was simply to ‘go into the space and see how the space talked to me’. This seemingly *ad hoc* approach gave way to a form of transcendence resulting from her personal connection to the originating communities of the items on display. Although as an outsider, I was not privy to the objects’ spiritual resonance, through the sensory experience of handling and photographing them, it was possible to feel the weight of history and something of the presence of those who had made them and, subsequently, cared for them over the years. Some objects remained in the Perspex trays in which they had been displayed during the exhibition in 1999 and I imagined it was possible to reconstruct a micro-archaeology of how the collection had been accessed since this point through its ‘stratigraphy’ on the shelves.

Christopher Frayling (1985: 159–160), commenting on Eduardo Paolozzi’s *Lost Magic Kingdoms* exhibition at the Museum of Mankind (British Museum) in 1985, likens the process of an artist entering a museum store looking for creative inspiration to a ‘safari’ or, referencing the Steven Spielberg film, a metaphorical passage into the Temple of Doom. Similarly, ceramicist Stephen Dixon (2014) invokes the Hollywood blockbuster, *Night at the Museum*, to communicate his sense of enchantment at being given free rein at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) during his residency in the archives and refurbished ceramics galleries. Although Grayson Perry (2011: 12) was concerned not to be seen by the curators as ‘an arty-farty Erich von Daniken or Thor Heyerdahl’, creative intuition as much as contextual awareness guided his selection of British Museum artefacts in his show *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. Malcolm

McLeod (1985: 42–43), curator of *Lost Magic Kingdoms*, and vocal opponent of the George Brown sale, likened Paolozzi's approach to selecting objects from the ethnographic collection as one akin to divination. Just as the diviner and client actively negotiate meaning through reference to the divining materials, invariably reflecting their own preoccupations, an artist or curator involved in arranging a museum display might make meaning through the arrangement of museum objects in an attempt to investigate a topical issue or represent a particular community. As with divining materials, each museum object or artwork can 'carry a range of meanings both as individual pieces and when 'read' in combination with other items' (ibid.:43).

My own passage into the Temple of Doom involved changing into undersized plastic slippers and donning oversized white cotton gloves, before I could move into the liminal zone of the cavernous ethnography store. In Sunderland the themes present in the collection had suggested target communities with which to collaborate, leading to the creation of new artwork. However, in Osaka, like Perry above, I was often inspired by objects which resonated with previous work and ideas. Thus, the shrine format for *Grow Jesus* (Figure 2), a ceramic rendition of a story told to me by a soldier about how he had passed time in Afghanistan by growing and shrinking a water-expandable Jesus figurine (see McHugh 2013: 77), was partially inspired by a Fijian spirit house I had photographed from the NME collection. My interest in the elaborately incised lime containers and printed bark cloths came from an existing interest in surface decoration developed from working with the transfer-printed Sunderland collection. Unlike the 'studious production' (ibid.: 75) which had characterized my approach to the SMWG's pottery archive, my encounter with the George Brown Collection was perhaps guided more by formal and aesthetic qualities than by my contextual awareness. Nevertheless, the store became a primary site of creativity and production, where I gathered a range of visual information.

### *Approaching the community in Japan*

The decontextualized nature of the George Brown Collection meant that the task of identifying target communities with which to work was more problematic than it had been in Sunderland. One criticism of the NME, albeit made some time ago, was that the permanent exhibition lacked 'any channel for the peoples being exhibited to represent themselves' (Yoshida 2001: 97). The 1999 exhibition appears to have provided a chance for the invited Pacific Islander guests to identify accession inaccuracies in the George Brown catalogue (Vusoniwailala 1999: 6). Since my placement, the museum has begun a review of the collection which partly aims to make the items more accessible to researchers and members of the originating communities through a proposed interactive website.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2. One of the five shrines which form Grown Jesus. Stoneware, porcelain, ceramic decals, pink lustre. Approx. 25 x 15 x 10 cm. Copyright of Jo Howell, 2014. Courtesy of Christopher McHugh.

My original plan had been to attempt a modified version of the focus group approach from *Revisiting Museum Collections* (Collections Trust 2009) which I had found effective in working with the Sunderland collection and community (McHugh 2013: 75–79). I hoped to do similar workshops using objects from the George Brown Collection with Pacific Islanders living in Osaka and the Kansai region. While such groups do exist (for example, I was informed that Fijian rugby players seasonally live in Osaka), the timing of the AHRC placement and the fact that community-related exhibitions and outreach projects at the NME usually require at least one year's notice<sup>2</sup> meant I was somewhat limited.



Through the Osaka-based Association of South Pacific Area (ASPA), I was introduced to a small community of postgraduate students from Papua New Guinea, as well as a group of Japanese nationals interested in the region. This connection raised the possibility of holding a focus group where the students and the Japanese volunteers responded to items from the collection. However, the students, one of whom was a software engineer, were not necessarily familiar with the objects, and I felt there was a danger of forcing the issue, resulting in a tokenistic form of engagement. Whilst it had been possible to develop community partnerships and facilitate object-handling sessions in conjunction with the learning and outreach teams at SMWG, such engagement activities at the NME are largely the responsibility of the Minpaku Museum Partners, a group of dedicated volunteers. During my placement, all their resources were committed to the outreach for the temporary exhibition *Zafimaniry Style: Life and Handicrafts in the Mist Forest of Madagascar*, and they were unable to collaborate with any activities relating to the George Brown Collection.

Given these challenges, I decided to work with existing contacts, holding several object-handling sessions where I invited a variety of makers, artists and a gallery professional to experience the collection in the NME's ethnography store. These informal workshops raised awareness of the collection and explored its affective and inspirational potential for artistic reinterpretation, sometimes triggering contemporary resonances. Morikatsu Inoue, a wood carver and kimono designer based in Kyoto, was particularly interested in the printed designs of the extensive bark cloth collection, identifying a similarity in form between the wooden beaters used to make these tapa and those used to prepare kimono fabric. Although regular visitors to the NME, fine artists Sawako Tanizawa and Tomoko Nishimura had not previously been aware of the George Brown Collection and were interested to hear about its complex history. In feedback, both said they valued the sense of discovery and proximity to the collection afforded by examining objects in the store.

Although these sessions did not result in the generation of new imagery or contextual information as those with the Sunderland collection had, they demonstrated that the collection was of interest to the local arts community and the possibility of a future artistic project was discussed with Hayashi Isao and Peter J Matthews. In interviews at the end of the project, both expressed a desire to continue artistic approaches to reinterpreting the collection, perhaps involving invited artists from the originating communities as well as those based locally. Peter, in particular, was interested in a project comparing and contrasting the formal qualities of prehistoric *Jomon* pottery and some of the wood carvings in the collection. Although my use of the collection for engagement activities was limited, the placement yielded a wealth of visual and contextual information for future creative work, as well as providing useful comparative input which informed my main project on the Sunderland collection.

*Approaching the collection in the UK*

A museum collection can perhaps be regarded as an index of loss (Adams 2014) and this is particularly true of the George Brown material. Comprising objects initially removed from their originating communities by Brown, and having been sold three times and housed in several different venues on three separate continents, it has been described as ‘one of the most mobile collections in the world’ (Gardner 1999: 7). Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums (TWAM) still possess records relating to the collection and its sale. These poignant traces of the absent presence of the collection include correspondence and the original card index catalogue. They chart the widespread opposition to the sale, providing evidence of how the collection became entangled in complex person-object relationships, demanding much attention throughout its pre-sale career. From this material, I developed a changing perception of the George Brown community, where curators and other museum professionals emerged as an alternative target for potential engagement.

Tracing the whereabouts of the eleven items for which export licenses were not granted provided an opportunity to talk to those who were involved at the time, encouraging them to revisit their memories of the sale and their opposition to it. Tony Tynan former Curator of the Hancock Museum, recalled feeling excluded from the decision making process and has a vivid memory of a pantechicon arriving one day, into which most of the collection was loaded. Peter Davis, another member of the Hancock staff at the time, although responsible for editing the George Brown Catalogue, felt similarly disassociated from the sale. Tynan remembers attracting the ire of Laurence Martin, the university’s Vice-Chancellor, for granting out of hours access to the collection to Malcolm McLeod, then Keeper of the Museum of Mankind (part of the British Museum) and Expert Adviser to the Department of Trade and Industry.<sup>3</sup> This is supported by a trail of correspondence between Martin and Tynan in files at Discovery Museum. Martin, presumably keen to expedite the sale, appears to have been resistant to McLeod, an opponent, accessing the objects. Michael Brown, a Newcastle-based descendant of Joseph Dixon (1816–1897), George Brown’s uncle, has an ambivalent attitude towards the collection. He described how his mother had remembered the collection arriving in Barnard Castle and how she felt it should have been kept in the family. Nevertheless, on a visit to the NME in 2000, he was pleased as he felt it was being well looked after<sup>4</sup>.

As a result of these enquiries, some ‘fugitive’ items from the collection have been ‘rediscovered’. For example, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery has been able to update its database concerning the *malanggan* mask (1988A216) it bought in 1986. Although correctly labelled in the display as having been collected by Brown, in the database the acquisition source had been incompletely identified as Sotheby’s, failing to show its George Brown provenance. Finding a delivery receipt from Sotheby’s for the return of a case of butterflies collected

by Brown, which was not part of the lot, also led to the relocation of this unaccessioned object in the Great North Museum Resource Centre, Discovery Museum, Newcastle.

### *Creative ceramics*

The premise of my approach is that creative ceramic practice offers a particularly suitable means through which otherwise unconstituted narratives of person-object interaction can be materialized. Wet clay may be used to mimic other materials, such as bamboo or plastic, in a process akin to transubstantiation (see Gosden 2004: 85). Clay can be invested with meaning through form and surface decoration and is transformed into an enduring material once fired. Even an uncovered sherd has the potential to be ‘a cultural trace that transports a sense of immediacy across the centuries’ (Adamson 2009: 36). Whilst it seemed only natural to reinterpret the historical Sunderland pottery collection through the medium of ceramics, the George Brown Collection offered the possibility of responding to objects made in pre-industrial communities from a wider variety of materials.

George Brown was active as a collector from the 1860s onwards, a period when Sunderland pottery was at its apogee. A desire to establish links between the two collections led to an interest in ‘transitional’ artefacts, in which influences from both the originating community and the European colonizers were manifest. At the NME, a series of bamboo tubes (Figure 3) from Malaita in the Solomon Islands scrimshawed with scenes of European and indigenous encounters were of particular interest as they reminded me of some of the maritime imagery from Sunderland. During follow-up research at the British Museum, Curatorial Assistant Jill Hasell showed me a similar bamboo piece (Ethno-Q90 Oc42), possibly carved by the same maker (see Yoshida and Mack 1997: 169). It contained George Brown’s calling card, suggesting it had been presented as a gift, perhaps when he visited London in 1908. The NME and British Museum objects were displayed together as part of *Images of Other Cultures*, an exhibition curated by Yoshida Kenji and John Mack at the NME in 1997. Although contextual information regarding their provenance is scant, these items seemed to speak of the ‘creolization and hybridity’ (Hodder 2012: 90) characteristic of the colonial experience.

These, as well as several bamboo lime containers, also from the Solomons (Figure 4), inspired one of my own responses to the collection in the form of the *George Brown Series* (Figure 5). These slipcast porcelain vessels of various sizes were made from a mould of a section of bamboo. The porcelain cast retains much of the bamboo’s surface texture, incorporating something of its essence. They collage a range of visual and archival information in order to communicate something of the complexity of my experience of encountering



Figure 3. Details of bamboo tubes from Malaita, Solomon Islands, decorated with what George Brown described as ‘imitative etchings’, perhaps as one of the vessels has this term carved onto its surface. Left and middle: H138595, right: H138596. From photographs taken by Christopher McHugh. Courtesy and copyright, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan.

this historic collection of Oceanic objects in the contemporary metropolis of Osaka. In this way, the approach is perhaps comparable to that taken by Maori carver Lyonel Grant in *Pare/Waharoa (door lintel)* which, commissioned for the National Museum of Scotland by Dale Idiens in 1999, combines Celtic and Maori designs (Knowles 2003: 62–64).

Archaeological studies of how European and British ceramics were adopted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by hunter-gatherers in north western Canada and Alaska, for use in potlatch celebrations and the like, shows how ‘material culture participates in processes of cultural change’ (Marshall and Mass 1997: 275; see also Barker and Majewski 2006: 228). An interesting Melanesian example of this is a *dala* head ornament from the Solomon Islands



Figure 4. A selection of bamboo lime vessels from the Solomon Islands in the George Brown Collection, NME. In parts of Melanesia, powdered lime is chewed with betel leaf and nut. From a photograph taken by Christopher McHugh. Courtesy and copyright, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan.



Figure 5. A selection of vessels from the George Brown Series. Porcelain, ceramic decals, mixed media. Each vessel approx. 30 x 12 x 12 cm. Copyright of Jo Howell, 2014. Courtesy of Christopher McHugh.

(Ethno: 1900, 1008.1; Yoshida and Mack 1997: 172) at the British Museum. Collected by Charles Woodford in 1900, it incorporates a willow pattern plate of Staffordshire origin. It is not inconceivable that some Sunderland pottery might have made it to Oceania. The recovery of mid-nineteenth century sherds from excavations near the former Dutch trading enclave of Dejima, Nagasaki, shows that at least some Sunderland pieces travelled as far as Japan (Matsuzaki 2002: 150–151). The *George Brown Series* exploits this conceit, imagining what a fusion of Solomon Island lime containers and Sunderland pottery might look like filtered through twenty-first century Japan.

Here, digital ceramic decals synthesize imagery from the collection and autobiographical photographs I took of my life in Osaka using Instagram, a photo-sharing application. Often taking several photographs each day, these images provide a record of my encounter with the collection and city. Accompanied by brief textual explanations, the photographs are perhaps reminiscent of a visual haiku (Gibson 2013 cited in Were 2013: 217), enabling me to distil transitory experiences and share them online. In firing these decal transfers onto the surface of tactile ceramic vessels, the immaterial digital information is materialized and made ‘graspable’ (cf. Connerton 2009: 124). This translation into ceramic can be seen as a reaffirmation of the materiality of photography, where surface image and material form become fused (Edwards 2009: 334). This approach is not dissimilar to that of ceramicist Paul Scott in the development of his *Cumbrian Blue(s)* range, where historical imagery from pottery engraving plates is ‘collaged’ with contemporary photography. In this way, ‘historical differences are blurred, and recent images are given the requisite illusion of age’ (Brown 2001: 28–33 cited in Scott 2010: 127). In the case of the *George Brown Series*, however, it is not historical engravings but designs derived from ethnographic items which are recontextualized alongside scenes of contemporary Osaka and Sunderland. The fired ceramic decals sink into the surface patina of the unglazed, high-fired porcelain, allowing blemishes and scratches picked out with yellow ochre and black stain to show through, thereby linking old and new in a similar evocation of age.

Some of these vessels also incorporate surface decoration based on daily readings I took while I was in Japan using a Radangel radiation detector borrowed from Kromek, the Sedgefield-based developer (Figure 6). This device plugs into a smart phone or computer and the measurements can be uploaded to an online radiation map of Japan, indicating the presence or absence of harmful Caesium 137, together with the time, date and location of each reading (Kromek 2014). This auto-ethnographic record of my time in Japan was an attempt to include some tangible empirical information in my creative response to the collection, whilst also addressing the ongoing contamination problem in certain areas of Japan caused by the Fukushima disaster of 2011.

Insights gained from researching the collection in Japan and the UK have informed my work on the Sunderland pottery collection, providing a chance



Figure 6. A porcelain vessel from the George Brown Series, incorporating imagery based on measurements taken with the Radangel radiation detector. Top right: the slippers used to access the ethnography store. Approx. 30 x 12 x 12 cm. Copyright of Jo Howell, 2014. Courtesy of Christopher McHugh.

to rethink the connection between material endurance and memory. This has helped me reconcile the loss of *Crinson Jug* (see McHugh 2013:83), one of my central research pieces, which went missing in March 2013 after being sent for display at an art fair in Shanghai. Like the New Ireland *malanggan* carvings in the George Brown Collection, which both initiate and form a record of social interaction, the jug became charged, or ‘gradually imbued’ (Gell 1998: 224), with meaning through decoration and firing, as well as being invested with provenance by instances of display. Although its ‘death’ was unintentional and the reasons for making it are different, it continues to exist as a digital ‘memory trace’, or ‘internal skin’ (ibid.: 228), in the form of a blog describing the making process (McHugh 2012). This, like the *malanggan*, provides ‘a generative, image-based resource’ (Küchler 2002: 190-191), continuing to ‘gather’ (Heidegger 1971: 168–174; Hodder 2012: 8) enquiries from the



*Figure 7. Flotsam and Jetsam (Portmanteau) on display as part of Wordsworth and Bashō: Walking Poets, a group exhibition at the Wordsworth Museum, Grasmere, 24 May–2 November, 2014. This piece was inspired by a manuscript of Wordsworth’s The Ruined Cottage and a haiku composed by Matsuo Bashō when he visited the abandoned castle of Hiraizumi (near Kesennuma, Iwate) in 1689. Porcelain, terracotta, glass and mixed media. Approx. 120 x 60 x 50 cm. Copyright, Colin Davison, 2014. Courtesy of the University of Sunderland and the Wordsworth Trust.*

descendants of the Sunderland potters as a locus of remembrance and ‘social creativity’ (Chua and Elliott 2013: 8). Similarly, *Grow Jesus* can be seen as both the outcome and the record of a process, although here a material ‘skin’ has been generated from a mental image, rather than vice versa. Susan Stewart (1993: 135) argues that souvenirs are necessary for us to apprehend events whose materiality cannot be revisited. As the fate of the original toy is unclear and the direct context of its usage in Afghanistan is denied to me, the artwork is based purely on the soldier’s verbal account. As such, this piece is more a record of its own production and my interaction with him than a souvenir of his original experience.

Linda Sandino (2004: 284) has observed a paradox in contemporary art practice, where ‘trash becomes durable, and in some cases ‘endurable’ as museum object’. It is also ironic that the *malanggan* carvings—objects whose social efficacy relies on their eventual immateriality—have been preserved in western museums (Küchler 2002: 114) and, indeed, were the main items of the George Brown Collection to be retained in the UK. Work made since the



placement has attempted to explore this tension between absence and presence. For example, *Flotsam and Jetsam (Portmanteau)*, my contribution to *Wordsworth and Bashō: Walking Poets*, a group show at the Wordsworth Museum, Grasmere, ‘responds to themes of memory and the ephemerality of the human condition’ in the works of both poets (McKay 2014: 106). This installation develops upon a piece made during the placement in Osaka which sought to commemorate the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in northern Japan, and consists of repurposed found objects and hundreds of individually distressed and ‘scarred’ ceramic components (Figure 7). It references the *ad hoc* commemorative practices often observed after such disasters (see Petersen 2013: 78) and, in particular, exploits how ‘missing, broken or unfinished artefacts and their ambiguous nature as both present and absent, [may serve] as common materializations of loss’ (Hastrup 2010: 100).

### Conclusion

Although my attempts to articulate the community and collection in Osaka were less successful than they have been in Sunderland, this was partly the result of logistical issues, and there exists much scope for continued exploration. This also illustrates the challenges of working with such a disarticulated collection, where themes and corresponding communities may not be immediately evident. Rather than collaborating with Pacific Islanders living in Japan, I decided to explore the collection’s potential as a source of creative inspiration for local artists. The NME staff I worked with now seem more committed to reinterpretation through creative practice than previously and some of the local arts community have an increased appreciation of the collection. Unlike in Sunderland, where much of the artwork I made responded to my work with the community, the placement in Osaka provided an opportunity to focus more on my own experience of the materiality of the objects, which has influenced my subsequent practice.

Both Matthews and Hayashi expressed a desire to me to create an online resource at the NME which might become a locus for Pacific communities with an interest in the collection. Such ‘digital repatriation’ is increasingly the subject of research and debate. Deidre Brown (2007 cited in Were 2013: 215) observes that digital facsimiles of Maori *taonga* (treasures) may become as potent as the real items, requiring special access protocols, whilst Jenny Newell (2012:303) suggests that museums still ‘privilege material authenticity’. It is likely that these digital resources will, at least in the near future, continue to be regarded as supplementary research tools rather than objects in their own right. Although my own approach to the collection depended on a direct engagement with the objects, the unsolved case of *Crimson Jug* suggests that the significance of objects does not reside solely in their materiality.

In his discussion of the impact of Alfred Gell's (1998) arguments concerning object agency, Nicholas Thomas (2013: 204) suggests that a little considered aspect of how art-objects may exercise agency is in the way they demand attention from museum professionals in store rooms and when mounting displays. It is in this context where 'they mediate past and present intentions, where they provoke revelations', and 'where they precipitate ambience'. He goes on to challenge curators to 'find ways of staging the potentiality of artefacts' that avoid the over-reliance on 'contextualization' which characterized museum display in the 1970s and 1980s. Such approaches, it is argued, served only to exacerbate the dichotomy between aesthetics and context. Rather, museum display should celebrate objects' 'animation and activity', not only their ability to act, but the 'magic of their theatre'. As the follow-up research in the UK demonstrates, the George Brown Collection is a rich source of evidence for such considerations of how people and things become entwined. Through this project, I have attempted to reinstate the 'potentiality' of this collection by exploring its past animation and future reanimation through creative ceramics. Future work on the collection might further address Thomas' invitation by developing ways of dramatizing and materializing these micro-histories of captivation and entanglement which unite context and aesthetics. It is perhaps in this way that the collection can move from being an index of loss to being a locus of remembrance and creativity.

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Notes

1. Hayashi Isao discussed plans for the NME website during a conversation on 7 November, 2014.
2. In an interview with Dr Peter J Matthews on 17 April 2013, he outlined the procedure for planning engagement projects at the NME.
3. The context of the controversial sale of the George Brown collection by Newcastle University was recalled by Tony Tynan (2013) and Prof Peter Davis (2014) in interview.
4. In an interview with Michael Brown at his home on 16 January 2015.

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