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# Contemporaneous Collecting: A New Trend in Field Collection

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**Contemporaneous Collecting: A New Trend in Field Collection**

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Master of Arts in Museum Professions

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## **Abstract**

The collection of contemporary materials has become more common in the museum field since the 1980s. Many institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century acquire contemporary material culture of all kinds, including t-shirts, posters, computers, sports equipment, photographs and other ephemera. Much finds its way into collections through the traditional means of donation and purchase. Museum professionals also engage in fieldwork of sorts, attending events such as rallies, protests, marches, sporting events, the aftermath of natural disasters and other tragedies in order to gather materials onsite, essentially capturing history as it happens. In this paper, the former will be referred to as rapid response collecting, while the latter is contemporaneous collecting. A nationally-distributed survey created by the author seeking both quantitative and qualitative data demonstrates that there are many challenges associated with the practices that prevent many from engaging, including lack of space, staff, time, or connection to an institution's mission. Concurrently, the survey results highlight the benefits related to community engagement experienced by those who do pursue such activity. It is proposed that institutions with relevant missions, including history museums of varying foci, should engage in rapid response and contemporaneous collecting to better preserve contemporary materials for the future and enhance engagement with the public through socially responsive exhibitions and the diversification of representation.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Not to rise to this challenge [of collecting contemporary culture] is to convert the museum into a mausoleum, a monument to a past age, completely out of touch with its own time.”<sup>1</sup>

*Anna Steen, (“Samdok: tools to make the world visible”)*

Rapid response and contemporaneous collecting have impacted the acquisition methods of museums in the twenty-first century. The practices allow institutions to expand their traditional role as keepers of the past by permitting them to keep pace with the rapidly-changing present. Imagine a visitor walking into a museum and seeing a sign not much different from one she made just a year ago for a Women’s March. This visitor would immediately relate to the items on display and therefore have a greater connection with the institution. There are, however, challenges inherent with choosing to acquire such materials. Posters, t-shirts, hats, packaging, brochures: many of these items are considered ephemera, which by definition are not meant to last. So why collect them? Based on the results from my nationally-distributed survey, this thesis proposes that despite its challenges, rapid-response collecting, which includes field collection, should be undertaken by institutions with applicable missions, which typically include different types of history museums. Engaging in such activity better preserves contemporary materials for the future and enhances engagement with the public through socially responsive exhibitions and the diversification of representation.

Both rapid response collecting and contemporaneous collecting are aspects of contemporary collection, however, a distinction needs to be made between them. The former refers to all acquisition of contemporary material whether through donation, purchase, or field collection. Contemporaneous collecting is a type of rapid response collecting but refers specifically to field collection by professionals attending events such as rallies, protests, marches, sporting events, the

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Steen, “Samdok: tools to make the world visible,” in *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Simon J. Knell (New York: Routledge, 2004), 196.

sites of natural disasters, and other tragedies. Neither form of acquisition is new; the former arose in the early twentieth century, and the latter has roots as far back as the early nineteenth century. That being said, contemporaneous collecting did not become common until the 1980s and significantly increased in the early twenty-first century. Although it occurs globally, this paper focuses on institutions in the United States.

Rapid-response collecting and contemporaneous collecting in particular signal two shifts in the museum field. The first concerns the way these materials are brought into the museum. No longer content to wait for donations or for the sale of appropriate materials, some institutions are attempting to acquire history as it happens to better preserve those items and the information associated with them. In the minds of some—including museum professionals—what constitutes “history” has changed. It is no longer based on events that happened a century or even a decade ago; it can be two weeks past. The second shift relates to the types of items being gathered. Historically, institutions often both intentionally and unintentionally told the stories and acquired the objects of the upper classes, in part due to items’ relative durability, as noted in later chapters. Rapid-response and contemporaneous collecting provide the opportunity to assist in the process of making museums more reflective of and welcoming to diverse populations.

Much of the literature on the history of collecting considers the motivations of specific individuals and the types of materials they owned. Susan M. Pearce, in *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (1994), describes broad modes of collecting: “‘souvenirs,’ ‘fetish objects,’ and ‘systematics.’”<sup>2</sup> She describes collections studies as encompassing three primary topics: collecting policies; the history of collecting; the motivations people had for collecting and the types of

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<sup>2</sup> Susan M. Pearce, “Collecting Reconsidered,” in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994), 193-194.

collections they amassed.<sup>3</sup> Pearce also wrote *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (1995), which focuses on the methods of those currently living in Europe as well as those of European descent outside of Europe, and serves as an “investigation into collecting as a set of things which people do, as an aspect of individual and social practice which is important in public and private life as a means of constructing the way in which we relate to the material world and so build up our own lives.”<sup>4</sup> While there is fairly extensive research on the acquisition practices of individuals, a comprehensive history of institutional collecting seems to be lacking.

The study of contemporary collecting specifically has many facets. Some scholars examine the different reasons why museums have turned to it and the methods they use in doing so. In *Contemporary Collecting: Theory and Practice* (2011), Owain Rhys gives an overview of different approaches from the early 1900s to the early 2000s in the United States, United Kingdom and Sweden. His ultimate goal in writing was “to provide a working model for the future of contemporary collecting in Wales based on relevant debates and theories, and on past and current practices...”<sup>5</sup> Although his model focuses on Wales, many of his recommendations are applicable for museums everywhere.

There are also multiple edited compilations of articles focusing specifically on rapid response collecting and the various challenges and opportunities it poses. *Extreme Collecting: Challenging Practices for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museums* (2012), edited by Graeme Were and J.C.H. King, arose from workshops held at the British Museum debating the topic. Extreme collecting, by their definition, is “a term used to denote those difficult objects that lie at the fringes of what is normally considered

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 193-194.

<sup>4</sup> Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Owain Rhys, *Contemporary Collecting: Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Museumsetc, 2011), 11.

acceptable practice in museums.”<sup>6</sup> A second compilation of essays, Simon J. Knell’s *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2004), examines different theoretical and practical aspects of contemporary collecting, including projects undertaken by specific museums; gathering in difficult situations such as wartime and archaeological sites; acquiring popular culture; and collecting from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in museums. Knell also discusses the changing role of objects in the more audience-focused museum.<sup>7</sup>

Some literature explores the benefits and challenges of amassing contemporary materials, regardless of method. In 2004, Anna Steen wrote about Sweden’s Samdok network (1973-2011) and whole heartedly supported contemporary collecting. She states that museum professionals who neglect to collect contemporary materials are “underestimating their own competence and the museum’s capacity to create new knowledge and denying future historians an invaluable resource. To put it more strongly, they will be betraying their profession.”<sup>8</sup> Steen argues that museums should gather contemporary material following the example of Samdok.

There is a significant amount of scholarship on contemporary collecting as a whole, but less has been written generally about field collection, probably due to its relative newness. The writings that do exist, however, are by museum professionals who describe experiences specific to their institutions. Steven Miller, in his article of 1985 entitled “Collecting the Current for History Museums,” outlined both the benefits and the challenges of contemporaneously collecting in relation to his experience at the Museum of the City of New York, and gives reasons why materials should be acquired. He cites a few examples, such as influential books, bell-bottom blue jeans, and posters

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<sup>6</sup> Graeme Were, “Extreme Collecting: Dealing with Difficult Objects,” in *Extreme Collecting: Challenging Practices for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museums*, ed. Graeme Were and J.C.H. King (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Knell, “Altered values: searching for a new collecting” in *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Simon J. Knell (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Steen, “Samdok: tools to make the world visible,” 196.

publicizing local events, and the rationale for taking them.<sup>9</sup> Pamela Schwartz of the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando has written extensively about her involvement assembling materials following the Pulse Nightclub Massacre in 2016.<sup>10</sup> In 2017, Barbara Cohen-Stratynier developed rules for documenting materials and the events from which they were gathered. Information prepared both beforehand and onsite allows institutions to establish the most complete provenance possible for the object and context about the event.<sup>11</sup> Much has also been written about the individual and combined collecting efforts of museums after the 9/11 attacks in New York City, which will be discussed below in Chapter 2.

This thesis furthers our understanding of the state of rapid response and contemporaneous collecting. As part of my research into the status of the practices in 2019, I compiled a survey and distributed it to museum professionals across the country in order to assess current attitudes towards them and to distinguish trends and methods. I targeted those who work with collections in particular by sending it to the American Alliance of Museum's Collections Stewardship listserv, while also sending it to listservs with broader viewership. This ensured that the experiences of a wide variety of professionals from different types of museums would be included. (See Appendix A for a copy of the full survey). The survey was designed to determine which types of institutions are involved in this type of collecting, the benefits of doing so, and the challenges they have experienced in the process. Questions focus on whether an institution acquires contemporary material culture items, how often they do so, and the approximate numbers of objects in their collection acquired in this way. A distinction was made in the survey between rapid response collecting and contemporaneous collecting to determine if institutions were engaged in one or the other, or even both. Based on the

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Miller, "Collecting the Current for History Museums," *Curator* 28, no. 3 (September 1985): 165.

<sup>10</sup> Pamela Schwartz, "Preserving History as it Happens: Why and how the Orange County Regional History Center undertook rapid response collecting after the Pulse nightclub shooting," *Museum* 97, no. 3 (May 2018): 16-19.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Cohen-Stratynier, "What democracy looks like: crowd-collecting protest materials," *Museums & Social Issues* 12, no. 2 (October 2017): 88-90

findings from the survey, I will suggest ways of making this type of acquisition more accessible to a wider number of institutions.

Chapter 2 gives a brief history of the ways in which museums have historically built their collection and the proliferation of contemporaneous collection in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It also examines the increased acceptance of the study and display of material culture. Chapter 3 focuses on the quantitative data collected in my survey to demonstrate the breadth of the practice in 2019 by exploring which types of institutions are collecting using these methods and what prevents others from doing so. The fourth chapter analyzes the qualitative data gathered in the survey, delving into the criteria used for event and object selection, the kinds of items acquired, and the benefits and challenges of participating in the practice. The fifth chapter provides new recommendations for making contemporaneous collecting more accessible to a greater number of institutions through the development of cross-organizational collaboration and profession-wide policies. It also examines why this is important in the context of the social role of museums in their communities, including how this method of acquiring materials can facilitate a connection with contemporary visitors. Rapid response and contemporaneous collecting present an opportunity for museums with relevant missions to better engage with their communities now and in the future through the telling of more complete and inclusive stories with contemporary materials.

## **Chapter 2: The History of Institutional Collecting and the Growing Acceptance of Material Culture**

Rapid-response and contemporaneous collecting in the twenty-first century need to be understood within the larger context of more traditional collection methods in order to demonstrate the drastic shift that these approaches represents for the field. Museums have always been closely associated with the acquisition and preservation of objects, such as art, artifacts, and samples from the natural world. The act of gathering materials on site at the time they are created dates back to the early nineteenth century, although it was unusual at the time. Contemporary practices differ from those of the past not only in how items are obtained, but also in the type of articles amassed. Rapid-response and contemporaneous collecting often aim for material culture, that is, artifacts or ecofacts that reflect or define “culturally determined behavior” of the era.<sup>12</sup> Types of items can include clothing, tools, pictures, and signs. The focus is both the object itself, but also its cultural context. This chapter presents an overview of the ways in which museums have traditionally built their collections and explores the growing prevalence of acquiring contemporary material culture.

### **Traditional Collecting Practices**

The museums of today stem, in part, from the curiosity cabinets of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, known as *Kunst und Wunderkammer*. These private collections typically juxtaposed fine art such as painting and sculpture with exotic natural specimens, often in an attempt to create a microcosm of the world.<sup>13</sup> Middle class and princely collectors alike organized their possessions according to categories, but because they typically sought curiosities, or rarities, they were not acquiring materials necessarily representative of the society in which they lived. The idea of

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<sup>12</sup> “What is Material Culture?,” *National Park Service*, accessed May 3, 2019, [https://www.nps.gov/archeology/afori/whisar\\_matc.htm](https://www.nps.gov/archeology/afori/whisar_matc.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Sharon MacDonald, “Collecting Practices,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon MacDonald (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 81.

classification is still very important today, though the categorizations used are quite different. The goal of public institutions today is not to create a microcosm, per se, but completeness within a certain category or object type is often taken into consideration. A primary concern for many museums when considering new additions is whether it fills a gap in their holdings.

Amassing a collection has always been a sign of wealth, whether private collectors or princes, and whether Old World or New World. Collecting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries differed from the quest for “curiosities” of the previous century. There were three new approaches to selection: finding objects that tell a story of a particular event or individual; accumulating private property and real estate for its value in the “monetary exchange economy”; and classifying an object “within its place in a systematic order” in nature, especially in relation to natural history items.<sup>14</sup> By 1793, the idea of the public museum had emerged with the founding of the Louvre Museum in Paris. Not only princely collections but also those of private individuals were made accessible to all classes. In the United States, for example, Charles Willson Peale founded the Philadelphia Museum in 1786 after first opening a portrait gallery in his home in 1782.<sup>15</sup> The opening of institutions to the public—specifically those dedicated to fine art—positioned them as educators of the masses.<sup>16</sup> This pattern continued in the twentieth century with The Frick Collection and the Morgan Library and Museum in New York and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, whose collections of “fine art” in the form of paintings, manuscripts, sculpture, and decorative arts housed in or near the collector’s own palatial home was considered the epitome of taste and refinement in the grand European tradition.

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<sup>14</sup> Pearce, *On Collecting*, 114.

<sup>15</sup> Irwin Richman, “Charles Willson Peale and the Philadelphia Museum,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 29, no. 3 (1962): 257.

<sup>16</sup> Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 11.

Not all institutions formed out of personal collections displayed fine art. The Mercer Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, for example, opened in 1916 to showcase what may be defined as material culture, or “the physical manifestations of human endeavor, of minds at work (and play), of social, economic, political processes affecting all of us.”<sup>17</sup> The institution displays tools predating the Industrial Revolution that were once in the private collection of archeologist Henry Mercer. Historically, a firm distinction was made between “high” (“elite”) culture and material or popular culture. Collections of fine art were in many cases “tied to taste, race, and class,” and they became the “foundation of what ‘good art’ looks like,” while items that were more functional were excluded and seen as inferior.<sup>18</sup> This point of view continued through the later twentieth century when Edith Mayo of the National Museum of American History noted in 1981 that preserving popular culture will likely result “in less of an ‘elite’ collection than exists today in most museums. That will necessarily be the case if we truly wish to preserve that which is most representative of the culture and its value system.”<sup>19</sup> Attitudes began to change, however, with exhibitions such as the controversial “High & Low” at New York City’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1990, which sought to demonstrate the relationship between popular culture and painting and sculpture and how modern art and popular culture impact one another.<sup>20</sup> By the early twenty-first century, collecting contemporary materials was more widely recognized as representing an opportunity to develop a fuller picture of present-day society for future generations, not only in the types of objects, but also the stories of their previous owners.

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<sup>17</sup> Helen Sheumaker and Shirley Teresa Wajda, “Introduction,” in *Material Culture in America: Understanding Everyday Life*, ed. Helen Sheumaker and Shirley Teresa Wajda (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2007): xxi.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Raicovich, “Museum Resolution: Dismantle the Myth of Neutrality,” *Walker*, January 8, 2019, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/soundboard-museum-resolutions-laura-raicovich>.

<sup>19</sup> Edith Mayo, “Connoisseurship of the Future,” in *Twentieth-Century Popular Culture in Museums and Libraries*, ed. Fred E.H. Schroeder (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Roberta Smith, “Review/Art; High and Low Culture Meet on a One-Way Street,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/05/arts/review-art-high-and-low-culture-meet-on-a-one-way-street.html>.

## The Study of Material Culture

Increased scholarly interest in the study of material culture was demonstrated in the 1980s through the founding of the *Winterthur Portfolio*, a publication sponsored by the Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library of American decorative arts as well as through the establishment of graduate programs centered on the topic at the University of Delaware, the University of Notre Dame, and Boston University.<sup>21</sup> However, the acceptance of the study is still not fully embraced. Some historians, for example, still focus on texts as opposed to objects. In 2008, the collection of other forms of ephemera specifically was still questioned by some because of the cost associated with “acquiring, preserving and making accessible ephemera for which there is no demand from a specific academic field.”<sup>22</sup> There is, however, a professional organization—The Ephemera Society of America<sup>23</sup>—dedicated to the topic as well as programs, such as the Center for Ephemera Studies at the University of Reading in the United Kingdom.<sup>24</sup>

The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) gathered in February 1987 for what was called “The Common Agenda Conference.” It brought together staff from history-based institutions across the country to “identify common problems, solutions, and opportunities for collaborative action that would improve the nation’s history museums and set new standards for care and interpretation of the nation’s artifactual heritage.”<sup>25</sup> There were frequent mentions of the collection of contemporary materials, in addition to a few references to contemporaneous collecting.

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<sup>21</sup> Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1.

<sup>22</sup> Georgia B. Barnhill, “Why Not Ephemera? The Emergence of Ephemera in Libraries,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Cultural History* 9, no. 1 (2008): 127.

<sup>23</sup> “The Ephemera Society of America,” *The Ephemera Society of America*, accessed March 23, 2019, <http://www.ephemerasociety.org/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Centre for Ephemera Studies,” *University of Reading*, accessed March 10, 2019, <https://www.reading.ac.uk/typography/research/typ-researchcentres.aspx>.

<sup>25</sup> Lon W. Taylor, “Introduction,” in *A Common Agenda for History Museums: Conference Proceedings, February 19-20, 1987*, ed. Lon W. Taylor (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1987), 3.

The introduction to the written record of the conference recognized the increased interest in the academic study of material culture. That being said, as of 1987 when the conference took place, Nicholas Westbrook of the Minnesota Historical Society, author of one of the conference papers, noted that the increased academic interest in the topic had not greatly impacted museum exhibitions or collection research, as the focus remained on written materials as opposed to objects.<sup>26</sup>

The study of material culture not only examines objects as a source of evidence, but also investigates their relationship to those who made and used them. This presents some particular challenges due to certain inherent qualities of “modern material culture,” identified by Thomas J. Schlereth: “differences as to material (new synthetics), type (electronic machine-readable data), scale (the artifacts of industrial or commercial archaeology), quantity (due to mass-production and mass-distribution), and function (planned obsolescence and disposable ephemera).”<sup>27</sup> Since the Industrial Revolution began in the mid-eighteenth century, materials have been mass-produced in large quantities, but often lack the durability of pre-modern objects. They can be purposefully ephemeral.

The expansion of material culture collecting in the 1980s thus reflects its acceptance as a valid area of study in the mid to late twentieth century. The term refers not just to objects, but also to the meanings they possess for both individuals and groups based on context.<sup>28</sup> Fine art such as paintings or sculpture was to be valued for its “purely aesthetic and principally visual qualities,” while decorative arts, which can be aesthetically pleasing, also have a function, such as furniture or

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<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Westbrook, “Needs and Opportunities: Interpretation and Collections,” in *A Common Agenda for History Museums: Conference Proceedings, February 19-20, 1987*, ed. Lon W. Taylor (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1987), 21.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Schlereth, “Defining Collecting Missions: National and Regional Models,” *A Common Agenda for History Museums: Conference Proceedings, February 19-20, 1987*, ed. Lon W. Taylor (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1987), 24.

<sup>28</sup> Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, “Writing Material Culture History,” *Writing Material Culture History*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

ceramics.<sup>29</sup> The field is interdisciplinary and means something slightly different depending on the discipline: “from anthropology it has garnered that material culture ‘expresses and mediates human and social relationships, from social history it has inherited an interest in the non-elite, and from art history and the decorative arts, the field has developed close attention to aesthetics.’”<sup>30</sup> The study is, therefore, closely associated with the study of popular culture, which includes the non-literate. It allows for scholars today to glean information from these materials to learn about their owners based on what was bought, sold, and used.<sup>31</sup>

### **Museum Collecting and Display of Contemporary Materials**

The collecting of present-day ephemera has impacted the methods of acquisition for institutions. This started to occur in the mid- to late-twentieth century as more emphasis was put on gathering current materials; rather than waiting for donors or sellers to approach them with items, museum professionals began attending events such as protests and rallies themselves. It was not an entirely new phenomenon, as the New-York Historical Society had collected materials—specifically those related to the American Revolution—as early as its founding in 1804.<sup>32</sup> The term “contemporary collecting” is, however, itself somewhat problematic. As Owain Rhys notes, there is not a standard, profession-wide definition for what contemporary is.<sup>33</sup> For some it may be anything within the current year and, for others, anything within the past thirty years. This question of definition will be examined in Chapter 4 with regard to survey responses.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Yonan, “Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies,” *West 86<sup>th</sup>: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2011): 234.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Harvey, “Introduction,” *History and Material Culture: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.

<sup>31</sup> Scholar Henry Glassie noted how all people throughout history use objects, while not all write in Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter,” 3.

<sup>32</sup> Jan Seidler Ramirez, “Present Imperfect: The New-York Historical Society’s Collecting Odyssey of 9/11/01,” *New York Journal of American History* 65, no. 1 (January 2003): 51.

<sup>33</sup> Rhys, *Contemporary Collecting*, 14.

Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore do not address contemporaneous collecting when describing field collection in the 2010 edition of the *Museum Registration Methods*, where I would argue it is most applicable. Field collection, they write, “may be a series of purchases acquired during an expedition.”<sup>34</sup> The rest of the definition applies to scientific and archeological specimens. This would seem to leave out contemporaneous collecting of everyday objects or oral histories. Their definition of expedition needs to be clearer, and reference to seeking objects and oral histories should be elaborated on in the “Field Collection” section, or be considered in its own section. As already noted, amassing contemporary materials—and even contemporaneous collecting—are not new practices, which makes their absence from profession-wide codes and best practices troubling.

Purchasing is one of the five primary ways in which materials are acquired by museums today (the others being gifts, bequests, field collection, and conversion).<sup>35</sup> It facilitates quicker acquisition and could prevent missed opportunities as museums wait, hoping for materials to eventually be donated. This is especially the case with the collection of everyday objects. Purchase may almost be preferred to waiting for desired items to be offered, because there is no way of ensuring they ever will be. The local museum is likely not the first place that comes to mind when someone has objects used daily that they no longer need. Conversely, making a call for everyday items could result in a deluge of donations, many of which may be unwanted.

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<sup>34</sup> Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore, ed., *Museum Registration Methods 5th Edition* (Washington, D.C.: The AAM Press, 2010), 47. The full definition given is: “Field collections are made more frequently by science, anthropology, history, and archaeology museums than by art museums. They may be a series of purchases acquired during an expedition, or they may be collections of scientific or archaeological specimens that are collected in a field research project or archaeological excavation. Purchases are generally made from persons who made or used the objects, and the recording of provenience, materials, techniques and use are vital to the purchase record. Archaeological material should be accompanied by complete field notes. Field collections are increasingly subjected to legal restrictions, particularly regulations on export from the country of origin and laws dealing with repatriation to Native American or native Hawaiian groups and endangered species. (*See chapter on NAGPRA.*) The museum must be aware of all potential restrictions and obtain applicable permits and customs releases before bringing material from the field to the museum. The registrar should, with help of legal counsel, research the legal title to the collections returned to the museum before they go through the acquisitions process and are accessioned into the permanent collection.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

The practice of collecting contemporary items lacks full support by some museum professionals and community members despite the fact that some institutions have been doing so since the end of the nineteenth century. There are many reasons for that, which will be discussed in greater detail in the analysis of survey responses in Chapter 4. One common qualm, however, is simply the multitude available. How do we decide, in our own time, what is most important and deserves to be saved? It is such a difficult practice “because of its overwhelming and multifaceted nature, and because we are collecting things that reflect our own society, which we know to be complex. Collecting historical material only seems easier because there is less of it, we know it less well, and because historians have constructed narratives which value one thing above another.”<sup>36</sup> The notion that it is harder to collect that which we know better is somewhat counterintuitive. Yet, there is something to it. For example, is bias—or the potential for bias—more significant with things we see and use every day, or those related to news stories heard daily, than objects from before our time? In collecting contemporary material, museum professionals do not have the ability to anticipate future interest in an object. We are in a sense deciding what will remain.

Multiple attendees at the previously mentioned AASLH “A Common Agenda Conference” in 1987 argued that professionals in the field are well equipped to face the challenge of deciding what will remain significant. Staff need to be trained to evaluate trends and not to doubt their ability to do so.<sup>37</sup> One speaker suggested museums should inform their audiences about the increased interest in the field in collecting contemporary materials, and then work with them to meet these needs.”<sup>38</sup> Doing so would allow for greater communication between institutions and the communities in which they are located, allowing for them to better help one another. The suggestion was made thirty years

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<sup>36</sup> Knell, “Altered values,” 34.

<sup>37</sup> Schlereth, “Defining Collecting Missions,” 28.

<sup>38</sup> “Collections,” in *A Common Agenda for History Museums: Conference Proceedings, February 19-20, 1987*, edited by, Lon W. Taylor (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1987), 9.

ago and, in some cases, institutions are still struggling with this today, specifically with regard to visitors not understanding why everyday items are acquired. This topic will be covered further in Chapter 4 in relation to survey responses.

Contemporary materials have the power to fundamentally change the makeup of a museum's collection. Susan M. Pearce characterizes three basic modes of collecting: "collections as 'souvenirs,' as 'fetish objects' and as 'systematics.'"<sup>39</sup> Historically, private collectors, such as Henry Clay Frick and J. P. Morgan engaged in "fetishistic" or "obsessive" collecting, as decisions were based on their own individual needs and wants. Systematics refers to acquisition based on classifications. An item is selected as an example of all others like it. Materials collected based on each of these three motivations are seen in museums today, but it seems as if engaging in contemporaneous collecting has the potential to increase the number Pearce describes as souvenirs. As items associated with a single individual or group, she argues that, "Souvenirs are samples of events which can be remembered, but not relived." They "speak of events that are not repeatable, but are reportable...they help to reduce a large and complex experience...to a smaller and simpler scale of which people can make some sense."<sup>40</sup> The events professionals have attended (or gone to in the aftermath) are often spontaneous, responding to events such as tragedy, political policy changes, or climate change. The posters created for women's marches across the country following the 2016 election, for example, reflect issues people were most concerned about at that moment. They provide a snapshot in time. While similar events may occur later, none will be exactly the same.

Common materials began to grow in importance for museums and private collectors in the late twentieth century in Europe and the United States. In 1967, Ellis Burcaw, former Director of the University Museum, University of Idaho, argued that, "history museums should collect everyday

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<sup>39</sup> Pearce, "Collecting Reconsidered," 194.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 195.

objects: tin cans and bread wrappers, pizza pans and sneakers, toys, wallpaper samples ... [and should] photograph the interiors of refrigerators, pantries and kitchen cupboards...homes and places of work' for future generations.”<sup>41</sup> One result of such a collection approach can be seen in the People’s Show Project in the 1990s, undertaken by Peter Jenkinson at the Walsall Museum and Art Gallery near Birmingham and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Canada. For this project, the compilations of local private collectors such as baseball caps, McDonalds toys, and train tickets were shown in museums.<sup>42</sup> To do so, “each venue [drew] on the collections within their local community and [organized] their own show in their own way.”<sup>43</sup> The project attracted individuals who would not normally be involved in museums, and made them excited to participate. While using a slightly different method, there are institutions across the United States becoming more responsive to their communities and the stories and materials they have to share through community access galleries. History-focused institutions, in particular, are a natural fit. One model is the Minnesota History Center’s Irvine Community Gallery. It is “dedicated to exhibits on socially responsive topics and issues that are relevant to Minnesotans today. Exhibitions are co-developed with local community groups and students.”<sup>44</sup> The next temporary exhibition in 2019 will feature stories of twenty-two immigrants who now call Minnesota home using images, wall text and the like. Thus, rapid-response collecting is not limited to objects, but also oral histories, which can often provide greater context for collection objects as well.

Most historical examples of contemporary collecting demonstrate individual institutions working alone. A prominent—though exceptional—example of a combined effort is Samdok, a

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<sup>41</sup> Ellis Burcaw quoted in Rhys, *Contemporary Collecting*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> Jo Digger, “The People’s Show,” in *The Collector’s Voice: Critical Readings in the Practice of Collecting, Volume 4, Contemporary Voices*, ed. Susan Pearce and Paul Martin (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2002), 76.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

<sup>44</sup> “Community,” Minnesota History Center, accessed February 3, 2019, <http://www.mnhs.org/historycenter/activities/community#irvine>.

network of cultural history museums in Sweden. Founded in 1977, it initially focused on the “collecting of artefacts,” later adding the larger goal of the “recording of present day life.”<sup>45</sup> The organization ultimately had around eighty members and was active until 2011. The name of the network—an abbreviation of *samtidsdokumentation*—itself highlights their goal: “contemporary documentation.”<sup>46</sup> The formation of the organization coincided with the centennial anniversary of the Nordiska Museet, Sweden’s foremost cultural history museum and host of the network.<sup>47</sup> At that time, it was discovered that most of the institution’s holdings fell primarily between 1750 and 1870 and focused on “agriculture and pre-industrial craft activities,” drastically under-representing—or not representing at all— “lower social groups and industrial activity.” This was a major concern, as it is considered the “national memory bank of the Swedish people,” seen as responsible for preserving Swedish history, and some of that history was not being reflected.<sup>48</sup> There was an overwhelming belief in the importance of filling this gap, which included collecting mass-produced items in the country, sometimes directly from production companies as well as belongings from individual households such as furniture, photographs of a home’s interior and exterior, and hobby equipment.<sup>49</sup> This provided clear provenance for the materials regarding when they were created, how they were created, and by whom. Information about an item’s uses and cultural significance was often gathered through oral histories.

Samdok’s members emphasized collaboration in order to make the task of collecting contemporary materials more manageable as well as to share responsibility. Membership in the

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<sup>45</sup> Eva Fagerborg, “Samdok – from innovation to integration,” in *Proceedings of CIDOC06* (Gothenburg, Sweden: September 2006), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Rhys, *Contemporary Collecting*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Bodil Axelsson, “Samdok – Collecting and Networking the Nation as it Evolves,” in *Proceedings of Current Issues in European Cultural Studies Conference* (Norrköping, Sweden: Linköping University Electronic Press, June 2011): 177.

<sup>48</sup> Steen, “Samdok: tools to make the world visible,” 198.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabet Stavenow-Hidemark, “Home thoughts from abroad: an evaluation of the SAMDOK Homes Pool,” in *Museums in the Material World*, ed. Simon Knell (New York: Routledge, 2007), 56.

network was voluntary and divided into pools, comprised of different types of institutions such as local and national. Museums could “choose to join particular pools based on their collections, the economic structure of the county, and/or their special field of interest.” Some examples of pools are the “Home Pool” and the “Group for Cultural Encounters Pool.”<sup>50</sup> Members conducted research projects and fieldwork, resulting in publications and exhibitions. These pools were a resource in themselves because members could learn from one another about past projects and ways to improve them. It also connected industry professionals from different parts of the country and from institutions with unique types of collection materials who might not otherwise have met. Samdok was a noteworthy network for many reasons. It solidified the importance—even necessity—of collecting contemporary materials, and provided institutions with a reliable framework for doing so. Though Samdok is an example from outside of the United States, it demonstrates a way organizations can collaborate to collect contemporary material that can be used as a model by cultural history museums in the United States—even if done on a smaller scale. It also provides an example of staff examining an institution, seeing flaws, and finding a way to improve in order to better reflect the society in which it is located.

Contemporary collecting was becoming more prominent in the 1970s in the United States as Samdok was developing in Europe. Materials from the U.S. social movements of the 1960s—such as women’s liberation, anti-war, and civil rights for ethnic minority groups—were starting to be collected, with an emphasis on the artifacts of political opposition groups.<sup>51</sup> In some cases, they were accumulated specifically for the purpose of an exhibition. For example, in November and December 1978, Professor David G. Orr and student Mark R. Ohno planned an exhibition at the University of Pennsylvania of anti-Vietnam War political buttons and related items they had gathered themselves

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<sup>50</sup> Steen, “Samdok: tools to make the world visible,” 199-200.

<sup>51</sup> Rhys, *Contemporary Collecting*, 52-53.

at demonstrations during the 1960s and 1970s; additional materials from protest movements worldwide were solicited through calls and letters.<sup>52</sup> In these letters, Orr and Ohno “invited groups to contribute their thoughts in order to maintain a balanced outlook.”<sup>53</sup> They did face some backlash, stating, “Critics have accused us of plying our material as ‘instant nostalgia’ aimed at thousands of demonstration ‘veterans’ for their particular self-gratification and ego trip. Nothing could be farther from our own basic desires.”<sup>54</sup> The potential for such negative responses is inherent when collecting contemporary material, despite best intentions. This is particularly true with political and other more controversial items, but also with those related to a difficult event such as a tragedy. Regardless, possible criticism should not deter institutions from engaging in this activity. Bringing more such artifacts into museums provide a space to discuss what is going on in society.

Contemporaneous acquisition by some institutions takes the form of “disaster collecting”, that is, springing into action in the wake of natural disasters or “moments of crisis in the nation that need to be carefully preserved.”<sup>55</sup> This is what happened in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001. Less than a month later, on October 4, museum professionals representing thirty “history-based” institutions—including the Smithsonian National Museum of American History (NMAH), the New-York Historical Society, the New York State Museum, the New York City Fire Museum, and the New Jersey Historical Society—gathered at the Museum of the City of New York to coordinate a response.<sup>56</sup> They had major concerns with regard to collecting materials, wanting to

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<sup>52</sup> David G. Orr and Mark R. Ohno, “The Material Culture of Protest: A Case Study in Contemporary Collecting” in *Twentieth-Century Popular Culture in Museums and Libraries*, ed. Fred E.H. Schroeder (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), 41.

<sup>53</sup> Rhys, *Contemporary Collecting*, 54.

<sup>54</sup> “Orr and Ohno, “The Material Culture of Protest,” 37.

<sup>55</sup> Courtney Rivard, “Collecting Disaster: National Identity and the Smithsonian’s September 11 Collection,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 31, no. 2: Special Issue: “The Materials of American Studies” (December 2012): 88.

<sup>56</sup> Seidler Ramirez, “Present Imperfect,” 60.

be respectful of those who lost loved ones and not “appear ‘ghoulish in the face of bereavement.’”<sup>57</sup> They were also concerned about gathering items “associated with an active criminal investigation...and a smoldering funeral pyre.” In addition, questions arose “about how foraging for artifacts uncured by time, saved by virtue of their availability, might bias later explanations of the causes and consequences of September 11.”<sup>58</sup> How do industry professionals remain sensitive and not interfere with recovery efforts? Many such challenges remain today with this type of collecting.

There was also the question of what to select, as there was no shortage of material related to the tragedy and the aftermath. The Washington, D.C.–based NMAH decided to collect “a small representative group of objects” within a “chronology of events—what issues led to the attack, the attack, the recovery, the cleanup effort, and lasting impact of the events of September 11, 2001.”<sup>59</sup> Most fell into four primary categories: rescuers’ tools; articles belonging to victims; uniforms worn and tools used by firefighters and police officers; and items from temporary memorials.<sup>60</sup> Along with the objects, stories of their former owners or those who used them were also logged, providing the objects with greater context so that a more complete story could be told beyond the fact that they were associated with the day. Mementos were also saved from memorials and shrines, demonstrating how people grieved and honored the lives lost.

By 2001, the internet functioned as an invaluable venue for collaboration. A significant result of this collective effort was the creation of the website [www.911history.net](http://www.911history.net) by the Museum of the City of New York and the NMAH in Washington D.C., which enabled quick and respectful

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<sup>57</sup> Rivard, “Collecting Disaster,” 90.

<sup>58</sup> Seidler Ramirez, “Present Imperfect,” 60.

<sup>59</sup> Rivard, “Collecting Disaster,” 90.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 92.

communication about what was being collected in the aftermath of the attacks.<sup>61</sup> This provided a way for participating institutions and the public to follow the progress being made. Museums could also use the site to point donors in the direction of the appropriate institution. Collaboration was crucial in this situation as it helped to prevent rivalry. Combined objectives and a “steering committee” allowed the group ultimately to have more access to the site.<sup>62</sup> Somewhat inherent in the phenomenon of contemporaneous collecting is the potential for competition. In the case of 9/11, working together from the outset prevented each museum from acting in their own self-interest and resulted in a more respectful response.

Though the scale of collaboration was unprecedented in the United States, contemporaneous collecting per se was not a new practice for many of the New York City-based institutions. As previously mentioned, the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS) had been acquiring contemporary materials from as early as 1804. They had even “branded” the activity, calling it their “History Responds” initiative. In fact, the organization was uniquely prepared to respond to the tragedy because the staff had been practicing “drills for swift collecting” for the previous eighteen months, part of a larger strategy for better engaging with their public.<sup>63</sup> The N-YHS still engages in the practice today, and the institution is extremely active, gathering items from events like women’s marches and other protests, as well as Matthew “Levee” Chavez’s *Subway Therapy* in the form of Post-it notes covering the walls of the Union Square subway station in New York City after the 2016 presidential election.<sup>64</sup> The Museum of the City of New York began contemporary collecting in the late twentieth century. Some acquired materials demonstrate the changing society as a whole, such as

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<sup>61</sup> The Museum of the City of New York and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History Behring Center, “Collections,” Nine Eleven History Dot Net. Accessed November 16, 2018, <http://911history.net/collections.htm>.

<sup>62</sup> Seidler Ramirez, “Present Imperfect,” 61-62.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Claire L. Lanier, “Preserving History, One Sticky Note at a Time,” *New-York Historical Society*, accessed February 3, 2019, <http://behindthescenes.nyhistory.org/preserving-history-one-sticky-note-at-a-time/>.

a typewriter no longer used in offices and a gender-neutral road construction sign from the mid-1980s that says “People Working;” other items show how New York City itself is changing, through photographs of various neighborhoods then and now, along with other artifacts.<sup>65</sup>

Since the late twentieth century, there has been an attempt to widen the scope of who gets represented in the holdings of a socially responsible museum. In the past, the stories told through objects tended to focus on the wealthy elite, disregarding the stories of common people. How do institutions keep their existing collection relevant and at the forefront, while also addressing this significant and extremely important shift in focus to audiences? Stated simply: rapid-response collecting. More modern collecting practices have served to rectify, or at least make progress towards rectifying, this “problem.” There are multiple ways in which museums have engaged with contemporary collecting in order to increase diversity in its exhibitions and programs. Contemporaneous collection does not have to be limited to objects. In some cases, oral histories are taken by museums as they are contemporaneously collecting objects; in other cases, they stand on their own.

Many museums today—as long as it is a mission fit—have begun acquiring contemporary material. Typically, these are certain types of history museums, such as those focusing on state and local history as well as sports. Contemporaneous collecting presents a drastically different form of collecting than has traditionally been performed. The practice is rooted in the early nineteenth century with the New-York Historical Society’s acquisition of American Revolution-related materials, but it was not fully embraced by the profession until the late twentieth century. So what is the current state of rapid-response collecting and contemporaneous collecting specifically, in the

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<sup>65</sup> Miller, “Collecting the Current for History Museums,” 165.

United States? The next two chapters will explore this through the analysis of my nationally distributed survey. Chapter 3 will examine its quantitative data.

### **Chapter 3: How Many, How Often, How Widespread: Results of a Survey on Contemporary Collecting**

Chapter 2 demonstrates that contemporaneous collecting as a form of rapid-response collecting is not new.<sup>66</sup> Museums have been engaged in this activity for decades. Chapter 3 addresses the state of this type of acquisition in the United States today based on a survey I devised. It was distributed to institutions nationwide, seeking both qualitative and quantitative data from museum professionals. (For the full survey, see Appendix A.) Chapter 3 analyzes the survey's quantitative data. The assessment reveals that museums of all sizes and locations in the United States are engaging in contemporaneous collecting, and that even museum professionals at institutions not doing so are interested in the practice.

The title—"How Many, How Often, How Widespread?"—summarizes my survey's three major areas of inquiry: how many museums participate in this form of collecting? How many events have staff members attended? Approximately how many objects in their collection were acquired in this way? The question of "how widespread" also refers to which regions of the country engage in the practice most actively. The survey further seeks to determine if these three categories were impacted by staff size. How does the number of full-time employees and location relate, if at all, to the undertaking of this type of collecting?

#### **Distribution of the Survey**

The survey was distributed to museums using three methods. It was posted to the "Museum Junction" forum sponsored by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM); sent to the listserv of the AAM Collections Stewardship Committee (CSAAM); and shared with the Seton Hall University

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<sup>66</sup> Rapid response collecting refers to all collection of contemporary material whether through donation, purchase, or field collection. Contemporaneous collecting refers specifically to field collection by museum professionals attending events such as rallies, protests, marches, or the aftermath of natural disasters.

Master of Arts in Museum Professions Program (MAMP) listserv, which includes current students, professors, and hundreds of alumni. These specific venues were chosen in order to access the knowledge of museum professionals in all regions of the United States. As the AAM website states, the organization has 35,000 members connected to museum operations.<sup>67</sup> Posting the survey on the AAM site allowed for the greater possibility of more responses not only from across the country, but also from museum professionals of more varied backgrounds and expertise. The survey was sent to the CSAAM Listserv for the perspective of those involved in collections management and acquisitions specifically. It was disseminated to the Seton Hall University MAMP listserv as it had the potential to connect me to museum professionals nationwide at various points in their careers working in different museum departments, reflective of the Seton Hall program's four tracks (registration, exhibitions, education, and management). Ultimately, 38 individuals fully completed the survey, and an additional 28 partially completed it.

### **General Interest in Contemporaneous Collecting**

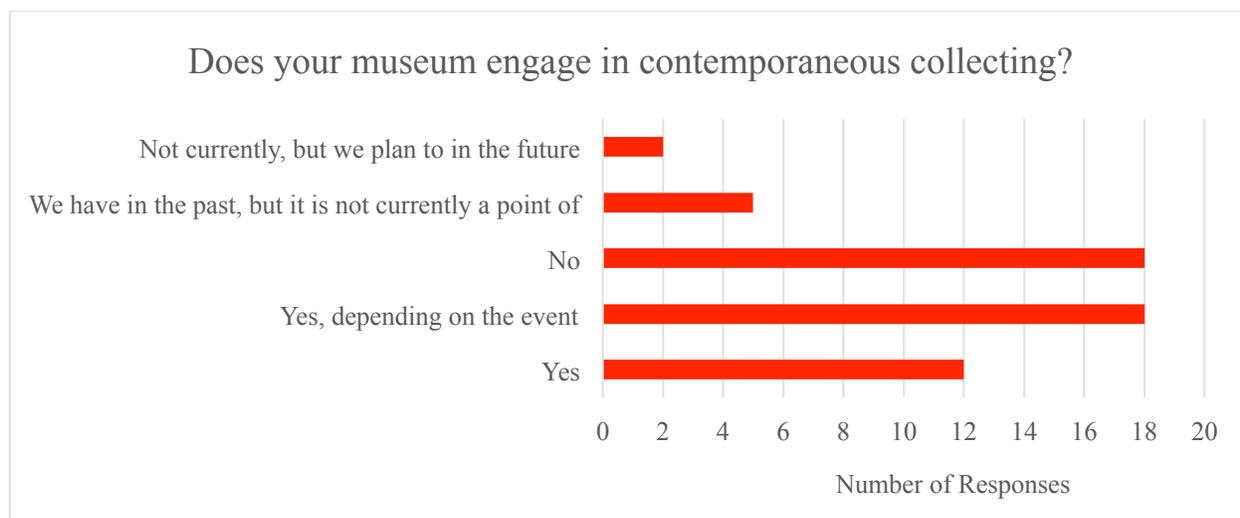
Survey responses indicate an overall interest in contemporaneous collecting, although support is by no means unanimous. (See Figure 1.) Thirty-three percent of survey participants indicated that their museum does not acquire materials this way. The same percentage responded “yes, depending on the event.” An additional 22% gave an unqualified “yes” to the question. The difference between “yes” and “yes, depending on the event” is that the former implies a more recurring effort towards this contemporaneous collecting, while the latter represents institutions that undertake the practice only when specific events occur. About 4% of respondents noted that their institutions were not currently gathering materials this way, but that they planned to in the future.

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<sup>67</sup> The organization's efforts benefit “more than 35,000 individual museum professionals and volunteers, institutions, and corporate partners.” “About AAM,” American Alliance of Museums, accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-aam/>.

This appears to reveal the growing interest in contemporaneous collecting, as more institutions are acknowledging its benefits. There were, however, five institutions that engaged in the practice previously, but now no longer do so. While the decrease could indicate a change in priorities at the institutions, it could also point to its associated challenges.

**Figure 1:**

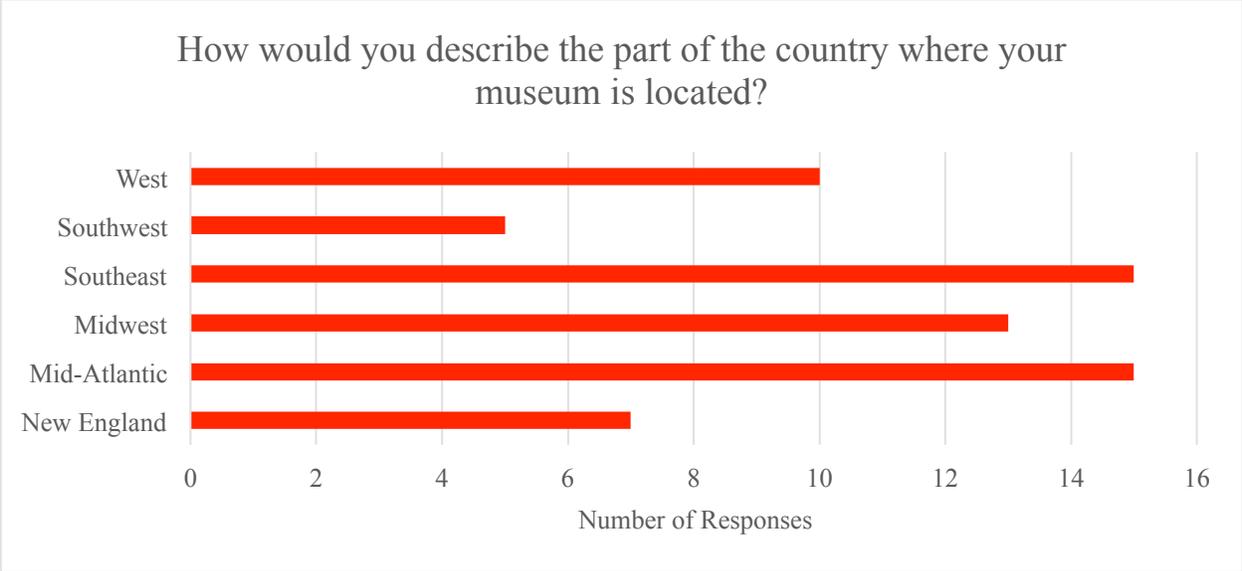


The goal of casting a wide net was reached, as respondents represented museums from across the country. Survey takers were asked to indicate the location of their institution from the following categories: New England, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, and West. These categories were derived from those used by the AAM in order to use designations with which professionals would be familiar.<sup>68</sup> Survey responders represented all six regions. The Mid-Atlantic and Southeast were most prominent, with fifteen participants from each region, although not far behind was the Midwest at thirteen (See Figure 2). The wide range of geographic representation demonstrates the relevancy of rapid-response collecting and contemporaneous collecting nationally. As will be

<sup>68</sup> “Council of Regional Associations,” American Alliance of Museums, accessed December 15, 2018, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-aam/council-of-regional-associations/>.

discussed in the following pages, not all respondents work at institutions engaging in these practices; however, members in the field across the country believe that it is an important topic to discuss.

**Figure 2:**



Regional location appears to have an impact on whether an institution is involved in contemporaneous collection. The practice is most common among organizations located in the Southeast. (See Figure 3). Eleven institutions from the region engage in the practice: five answering “yes” and six answering “depending on the event.” Not too far behind was the Midwest with seven institutions involved, although the responses were not as evenly split—only one organization put “yes,” while it depended on the event for the other six. It is important to note that these two regions—the Southeast and Midwest—accounted for the most people responding to the survey at fifteen and twelve individuals respectively, which could contribute to these higher results.

**Figure 3:**

*Cross-tabulation of survey questions 4 and 10*

|  |              | Does your museum engage in contemporaneous collecting? |                             |    |   |   | Total |
|--|--------------|--|-----------------------------|----|---|---|-------|
|  |              | Yes  | Yes, depending on the event | No | We have in the past, but it is not currently a point of emphasis for us | Not currently, but we plan to in the future |       |
| How would you describe the part of the country where your museum is located? | New England  | 0  | 0                           | 4  | 0   | 1   | 5     |
|  | Mid-Atlantic | 0  | 2                           | 4  | 2   | 0   | 8     |
|  | Midwest      | 1  | 6                           | 3  | 1   | 1   | 12    |
|  | Southeast    | 5  | 6                           | 4  | 0   | 0   | 15    |
|  | Southwest    | 2  | 1                           | 0  | 1   | 0   | 4     |
|  | West         | 4  | 3                           | 2  | 1   | 0   | 10    |
|  | Total        | 12   | 18                          | 17 | 5   | 2   | 54    |

Survey data shows that contemporaneous collecting is more common among urban institutions. Eight urban institutions answered “yes” to contemporaneously collecting, which is double the response of suburban museums, and eleven answered “yes, depending on the event,” a little over two times the number of suburban respondents. No rural organizations responded “yes” and only two said that it was dependent on the event. (See Figure 4). Those are quite drastically different numbers. That said, the sample size for urban institutions is almost double that of suburban institutions; therefore, on a national scale suburban institutions may be engaging in the practice at the same level as their urban counterparts, even if museum professionals from urban institutions responded in greater numbers to the survey. The same could be said about rural institutions. Sixty-three percent of those surveyed classified their institution’s location as urban, while just 9% identified their institution as rural. It is important to note that location did not seem to have an impact

on whether or not an institution planned to engage in contemporaneous collection in the future, but urban institutions were much more likely to have done so in the past, even if no longer doing so.

**Figure 4:**

*Cross-tabulation of survey questions 3 and 10*

|  |          | Does your museum engage in contemporaneous collecting? |                             |    |   |   | Total |
|--|----------|--|-----------------------------|----|---|---|-------|
|  |          | Yes  | Yes, depending on the event | No | We have in the past, but it is not currently a point of emphasis for us | Not currently, but we plan to in the future |       |
| What best describes the location of your museum? | Urban    | 8  | 11                          | 8  | 4   | 1   | 32    |
|  | Suburban | 4  | 5                           | 7  | 1   | 0   | 17    |
|  | Rural    | 0  | 2                           | 3  | 0   | 1   | 6     |
|  | Total    | 12   | 18                          | 18 | 5   | 2   | 55    |

### Staffing Impact on Contemporaneous Collecting

An assumption I made prior to sending out the survey was that museums with a larger staff would be more likely to engage in contemporaneous collecting because of the additional staff time necessary to acquire these materials. It was anticipated that museums with a smaller staff would simply not have the capacity to engage in the practice. Moreover, most of the coverage on the topic in non-academic (i.e., mainstream) media references larger institutions, such as the New-York Historical Society, the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, and European institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.<sup>69</sup> The data collected in the survey demonstrates that this is not, in fact, the case. Contemporaneous collection proved most common

<sup>69</sup> Graham Bowley, “In an Era of Strife, Museums Collect History as it Happens,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/01/arts/design/african-american-museum-collects-charlottesville-artifacts.html>.

among museums with a staff between 6 to 15 members, the second most common being institutions with 1 to 5 staff members (See Figure 5). While it is possible that institutions with fewer staff members are actually more involved in the practice, part of what could account for this is the lower numbers of respondents from larger institutions more generally. Only three respondents had a staff of more than 200, one had 151 to 200, and none had 101 to 150. Nearly half had either between 1 to 5 or 6 to 15 staff members—totaling about 48% of those who filled out the survey.

**Figure 5:**

*Cross-tabulation of survey questions 5 and 10*

|  |   | How many full-time staff members does your institution have? |      |       |       |       |        |         |         | Total |               |
|--|---|--|------|-------|-------|-------|--------|---------|---------|-------|---------------|
|  |   | 1-5  | 6-15 | 16-30 | 31-50 | 51-70 | 71-100 | 101-150 | 151-200 |       | More than 200 |
| Does your museum currently engage in contemporaneous collecting? | Yes   | 2  | 2    | 3     | 2     | 1     | 1      | 0       | 0       | 1     | 12            |
|  | Yes, depending on the event   | 4  | 7    | 1     | 2     | 1     | 1      | 0       | 0       | 1     | 17            |
|  | No  | 7  | 3    | 3     | 0     | 2     | 1      | 0       | 1       | 1     | 18            |
|  | We have in the past, but it is not currently a point of emphasis for us | 1  | 2    | 0     | 0     | 1     | 1      | 0       | 0       | 0     | 5             |
|  | Not currently, but we plan to in the future                             | 1  | 0    | 1     | 0     | 0     | 0      | 0       | 0       | 0     | 2             |
|  | <b>Total</b>  |  | 15   | 14    | 8     | 4     | 5      | 4       | 0       | 1     | 3             |

### Onsite Collecting

Over half of survey participants noted working at institutions that had attended events to collect materials, while 33% of respondents noted that their institutions had not collected at events at

all (See Figure 1 above.) Although the survey's sample size is small, the fact that a little over one-third do not engage in the practice does signal that while institutions may be collecting contemporary items through more conventional means, actively going outside the institution to do so is not being pursued. It could also be that the practice is beginning to increase in 2019, as the most common answer was between 1 and 10 events. The low number of events visited could also demonstrate that while there is clearly an interest in the practice at these institutions, they do not have the staff time or storage space to go to more events. Three participants answered that staff from their institutions had collected at 11 to 20 events, while just two had gone to 21 to 30. While one respondent noted that their institution's staff had gone to several hundred events, this was nowhere near the norm. Based on the results from this survey, it appears that contemporaneous collection has been eagerly embraced by some institutions, although others are just starting to undertake the practice, are unable to, or do not see it as a priority at this time.

## **Acquisition**

The next logical step after analyzing how many events museum staff have attended to collect materials is to look at how many items have actually been collected. The most common response was a total of 1 to 100 objects, at 44% of responses. This seems a manageable number of objects to be collected at 1 to 10 events. That being said, the number of items collected does depend on many factors such as object size, the nature of the event, and the number of staff that attend. The topic of material types collected and criteria for decision-making will be discussed further in Chapter 4. Four survey participants noted having 101 to 300 pieces in their collection acquired through contemporaneous collection, while just one said their institution had 301 to 500 or 701 to 900 items. Twenty-four percent of respondents had not collected any materials. While there are those few

examples of large numbers of contemporaneously collected materials in museum collections, it appears presently that they do not make up a large part of collections at most institutions.

The survey made a clear distinction between contemporaneous and rapid response collecting, and sought to determine how many pieces have been collected by each method. The number of respondents who have no materials in their collection from rapid response, versus contemporaneous collecting, differs slightly. Fourteen said that they have no materials in their collections by way of the latter, while ten said that they have none by way of the former. This would seem to signal that there are institutions collecting contemporary materials, just not by actively going out themselves. In responses for both iterations of collecting, the most respondents stated that their institution has 1 to 100 objects in their collection by both types of collection—55% said so for rapid response collection and 44% for contemporaneous collection. Each type of acquisition had three participants reporting that their museums' collections had 101 to 300 objects. Interestingly, there was one institution that has 701 to 900 contemporaneously collected objects in its collection, while the same could not be said for rapid-response collecting. A few participants noted, however, that it was hard to assign a number or estimate because rapid-response was the basis for all of their collecting and the number would be quite large.

One of the characteristics of contemporaneous collection is the fairly rapid selection of objects. When given the option of hours, days, or weeks, 60% of respondents said that they typically spend hours actively selecting materials. If an event is a single day in duration, this faster selection is necessary, as waiting would likely result in missed opportunities simply because of the necessity of removing them from the site. Such situations have been highlighted in media coverage on the topic. For example, in May 2018, Brenda Malone, a curator at the National Museum of Ireland, climbed lamp posts to collect campaign posters following the country's greatly debated abortion

referendum.<sup>70</sup> Once the referendum occurred, there was not a reason for these posters to line the street anymore, having served their purpose. Clean-up crews would likely come through not long after. In situations like this one, and events such as marches or demonstrations, acting quickly is a necessity.

Most survey takers noted making quick decisions when selecting materials. However, “days” and “weeks” were each cited by 20% of respondents. What might account for these much longer timelines when responding to events? While an event may occur on a single day, its repercussions can last longer. Some institutions conduct contemporaneous collecting after natural disasters and tragedies. The ramifications of natural disasters such as hurricanes and tornadoes can reverberate for weeks and even months. As discussed in the previous chapter, the response after 9/11 was a concerted effort over time. Following the Pulse Nightclub massacre in Orlando, staff from the Orange County Regional History Center spent more than a month on-site collecting materials for their “One Orlando” Collection.<sup>71</sup> Sometimes, depending on the nature of the event, organizations have the advantage of sustained access when contemporaneously collecting for their collections.

Longer decision-making periods could also be related to rapid-response collecting more broadly, as opposed to contemporaneous collecting more specifically. There are institutions that collect contemporary materials in the more conventional sense of receiving donations instead of proactively gathering in the field as well as by attending events. The New-York Historical Society, for example, posted a call for items related to the 2016 presidential inauguration on their website, and

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<sup>70</sup> Alex Marshall, “Posters, Banners, Boarding Passes: Museums Try to Get a Head Start on History,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/arts/design/rapid-response-collecting-ireland-berlin.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Pam Schwartz, Whitney Broadway, Emilie S. Arnold, Adam M. Ware, and Jessica Domingo, “Rapid-Response Collecting after the Pulse Nightclub Massacre,” *Public Historian* 40, no. 1 (February 2018): 106.

made a subsequent call regarding women's marches and protests across the country.<sup>72</sup> Staff from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture attend events to acquire materials on site, but also contact attendees in the aftermath to gather items they brought home.<sup>73</sup> Obtaining contemporary materials in this way allows for more time to discern an object's appropriateness for the collection.

This chapter serves as an analysis of the scope of contemporaneous collecting. In summary, responses from the survey demonstrated that the practice is most common at urban institutions; institutions in the Southeastern United States; and at museums with a staff between six and fifteen people. Contemporaneously collected material does not account for large percentages of museum collections at this point, and while it is fully embraced by some institutions, this is not the norm. While Chapter 3 answered the questions "How Many? How Often? How Widespread?", Chapter 4 will examine what influences an institution's decision to collect contemporaneously, the benefits and challenges they have faced while doing so, and how it has affected the exhibitions and programming.

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<sup>72</sup> New-York Historical Society Staff, "Donate Items from Inauguration, Women's Marches, and Nationwide Protests," *New-York Historical Society*, January 23, 2017, <http://behindthescenes.nyhistory.org/donate-items-from-the-womens-marches/>.

<sup>73</sup> Bowley, "In an Era of Strife."

## Chapter 4: Why Contemporaneously Collect?

This chapter addresses how the practice of contemporaneous collecting has impacted the institutions that engage in it. To be examined are ways in which they have benefitted, the challenges they have faced, the influence on their exhibitions and programs, types of materials acquired, and visitor response. Also examined are the reasons why museums cannot—or choose not to—engage in this form of acquisition. Lastly, the question of whether the practice should be pursued in the future is posed. It appears that those engaging in rapid response and contemporaneous collecting are profoundly impacted by them because of their many advantages. There are, however, associated challenges, which prevent some from engaging in the practices.

### Issues of Space, Staffing, and Focus

There are many reasons why a staff decides not to contemporaneously collect, from the lack of connection to mission to limitations of space, staff, time and funding. The most common, accounting for about 25% of respondents, was “it does not fit our collecting profile.”<sup>74</sup> The range of institutions represented by the survey included (but were not limited to) art, local and state history, military history, science, material culture, facets of American history, sports history, natural history, and anthropology. A museum professional from a suburban New England institution noted that its profile is “local art and historical objects,” so they wait for donors to approach them with older items as opposed to gathering onsite.<sup>75</sup> Another respondent, from a small rural museum in the Midwest, pointed to the lack of a defined policy or procedure as a reason not to contemporaneously collect. While this is in reference to mandates at the institutional level, it suggests that profession-wide guidelines could be created by the American Alliance of Museums or another professional

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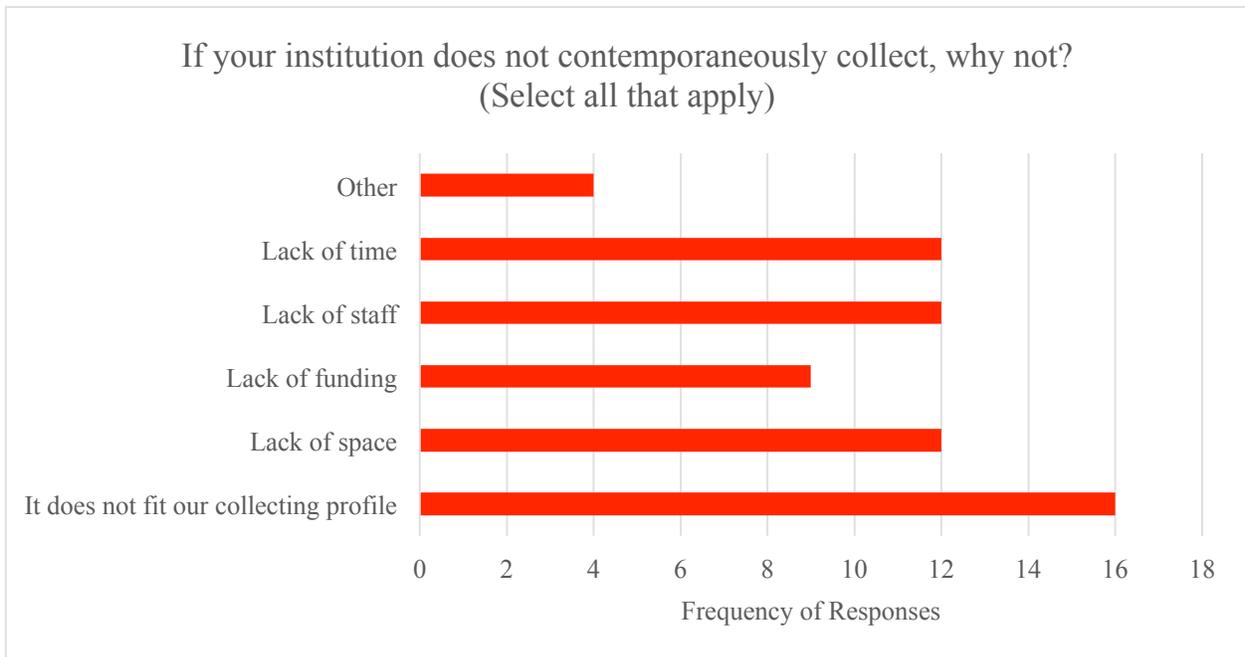
<sup>74</sup> Participants were given multiple options in my survey, including a personal comment (See Figure 1.)

<sup>75</sup> Author’s survey, 2019.

organization. If not guidelines, at least advice for initiating contemporaneous collecting would help. This issue will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Survey results demonstrate that a combination of additional factors contribute to the inability to contemporaneously collect. Lack of space, staff, and time each made up around 18% of total responses. (See Figure 6.) This is predictable considering the higher number of survey participants working at smaller museums, with about half having 15 or fewer staff members. Limited staff typically means that each staff member has a wider variety of responsibilities compared to professionals at larger organizations who have more specialized roles. When a staff numbers less than five, collecting at events onsite, even if desired, would likely not always be a priority or even feasible.

**Figure 6:**



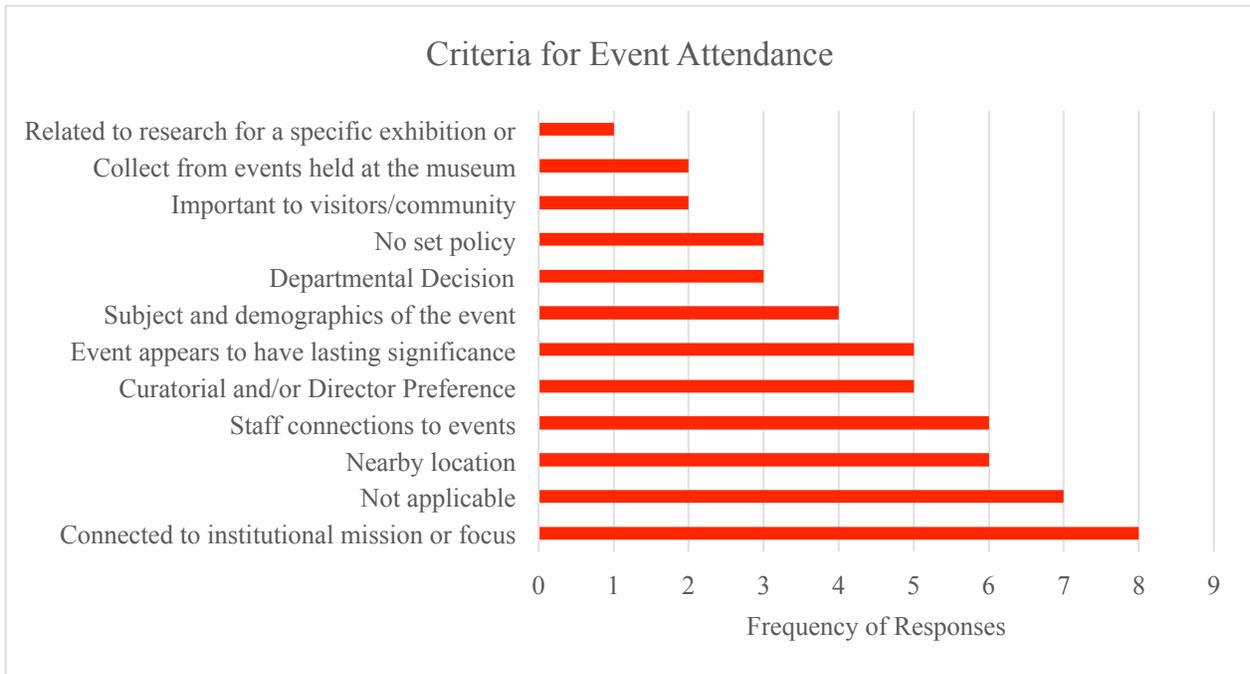
## Criteria for Event Attendance

### *Mission*

How do institutions choose which events are worth attending for contemporaneous collection? The survey reveals that criteria used can vary between the impromptu and premeditated. The most common cited in the survey were: direct connection to their institutional mission or focus, nearby location, staff connections to events, curator or director preference, and the event's projected importance. Figure 7 below diagrams the preponderance of common answers. While some responses fall under just one of the categories, others fit in more than one. Out of all of the responses, the events' relation to mission or focus was the most common criterion: an unsurprising result. Everything a museum does should, in theory, reinforce and further its purpose; if an event does not, it is likely that its associated materials will not be relevant to their exhibitions and programs.

Many respondents cited the relation to mission as a criterion for both deciding which events to attend as well as what to gather once there. However, a majority—a sizeable 70%—stated that rapid-response collecting was not addressed as part of their institution's collections management policy, although 16% said that they have thought about adding it. The results concerning contemporaneous collecting in museum policy are slightly different. Although the majority of respondents said that their institutions do not address it, a solid 31% do, and about 15% were considering it. The fact that more include contemporaneous as opposed to rapid-response collecting is logical; the latter refers to the acquisition of contemporary materials generally, so institutions do not feel the need to distinguish between the acquisition of present-day and historical materials. Contemporaneous collection, on the other hand, requires increased planning because of its proactive nature. The high number of “no” responses about its inclusion in an institution's collections policy could be related to the number of respondents working at museums not engaged in the practice in the first place. With adherence to mission playing such a crucial role in any decision regarding event attendance, it is surprising that on site collection is not usually included in most collecting policies.

**Figure 7:**



### ***Event Location***

An event's location is a primary concern in evaluating whether or not to attend. Many survey respondents work at institutions that center on state or local history. As such, many focus on and attend happenings in the region, such as sporting events, natural disasters, or political rallies. A respondent from an urban museum in western Canada wrote they selected those nearby that demonstrated "the fabric of the city."<sup>76</sup> Proceedings that take place nearby are likely to be more related to their mission, and also could be more relevant to visitors. Some even collect materials from events held *at* their institution. For example, a survey participant from a technology-centered museum on the West Coast noted "external clients" connected to their institution's focus using their space regularly for events, and offering both old and new items for the collection.<sup>77</sup>

### ***Staff Availability***

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Many rely on the connections of staff, board members, and volunteers—outside the museum in both official and unofficial capacities—in event selection. This may account for the fact that many small institutions are engaging in the practice; despite having a small staff, they attend events themselves or send their volunteers to attend on its behalf. As a staffer from an urban institution in the Mid-Atlantic with 6-15 full-time employees eloquently put it, their institution tends to “be reactive, not proactive,” and they rely on event participation by staff, board members, and volunteers alike.<sup>78</sup> While some events are planned in advance so museums can be proactive, this is not the case for tragedies or natural disasters. Museums need to be both proactive and reactive, planning for the planned, and ready for the unexpected. It may not always be possible or wise to send a staff member in an official capacity if there is not a guarantee that it will be worth their time. Effort in relation to potential return must always be considered.

### *Potential Significance*

A decision to engage in onsite collecting relies on a bit of anticipatory evaluation to determine whether an event feels historic and might be interesting to visitors or of use to researchers in the future. Of course, there is no way of truly knowing if an event will have lasting significance, but museum staff can consider the subject of the event and the demographics of its participants in deciding whether or not to attend, as well as observe community members’ responses to it in the case of acquisition in an event’s aftermath. Some focus on what is important to the local community, while others also consider how it relates to what is happening in the state and nation. A participant from a small urban institution in the West specified that they attend events “which are clearly

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

extraordinary expressions of the current zeitgeist.”<sup>79</sup> In some museums, a curator or director makes the call on whether to attend, while at others it is a group decision by a collections committee.

### **Criteria for Object Selection**

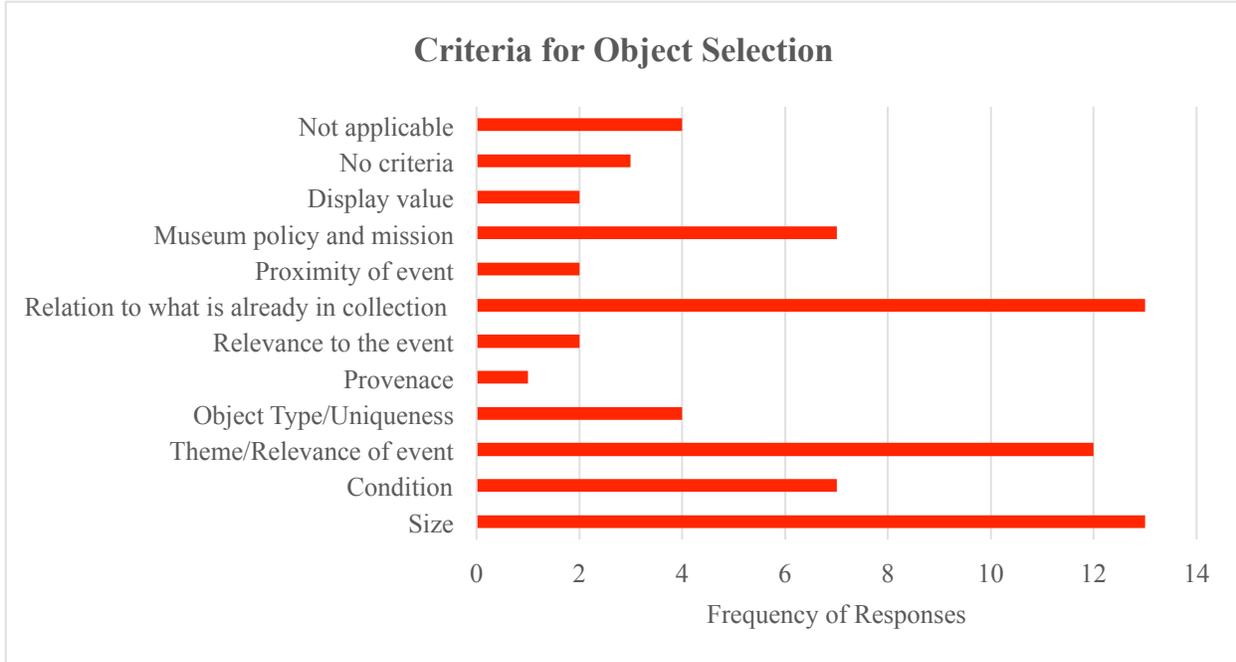
Museum staff members are often confronted with a multitude of materials for potential acquisition. For example, following the 2016 Women’s March in Boston, it took five people from Northeastern University three hours to unload a van full of signs gathered, which totaled around 6,000 items.<sup>80</sup> With so many possibilities, institutions cannot, and should not, take most of the items they come across on site. Just as staff take into account many aspects of an object—provenance, size, and condition to name a few—when it is brought in as a conventional donation, the same is true when engaged in contemporaneous collection. In the survey, suggested considerations such as the theme of event, proximity of event, size of objects, and relation to materials already in a collection were provided, but participants could expound on these options. The most common criteria for selection were in fact object size, theme or relevance of the event, and relation of the item to what is already in their holdings. Each of these suggested responses were frequently cited, in addition to the others listed below in Figure 8. These three benchmarks mirror some of the major issues facing the museum world in 2019, namely, rising concern about storage space (or, more accurately, lack thereof), and how to maintain ongoing relevance. Some museum professionals said that their institutions do not currently have policies related specifically to selecting objects at events, but simply consider their overall ability to care for materials. Others are planning to write or are in the process of updating policies.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Barbara Howard, “Saving the Signs from the Boston’s Women’s March,” *WGBH News*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.wgbh.org/news/2017/01/23/local-news/listen-saving-signs-bostons-womens-march>.

**Figure 8:**



### ***Size and Condition***

An object's size and condition directly relate to an institution's ability to care for it. Space remains a primary concern. Most respondents who mentioned size said that they tend to take smaller items such as buttons, flyers, t-shirts and hats that are representative of the event. A respondent from a large urban museum in the Midwest did note that they occasionally make exceptions for larger objects if they are "very iconic."<sup>81</sup> A less frequent response than size was condition. Are there inherent difficulties because of its materials? Most participants simply stated condition in their response, although one person from a small rural institution in the Southeast added that artifacts were chosen "based on conservation longevity," meaning they would "choose a textile over hard-to-care-for-paper crafts."<sup>82</sup> Museum staff must also consider if materials are dilapidated from use and being exposed to the elements. Following the Pulse Nightclub massacre in Orlando, Florida, on June 12,

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<sup>81</sup> Author's survey, 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

2016, employees from the Orange County Regional History Center contended with the summer heat and rain, and had to remove bugs, dead flowers, mold and moisture before bringing items in.<sup>83</sup> These are important considerations because the institution would have a responsibility to care for it, a task made more difficult from the start if a piece's condition is already deteriorating. The impact of an object on the safety of items already in the collection must also be considered.

### ***Relationship to Current Holdings***

Unsurprisingly, one of the most commonly cited criteria for object selection was the relationship to current holdings. This guideline closely aligns with the standards for acquisitions outlined in “A Code of Ethics for Curators” (2009) of the American Association of Museums Curators Committee (CurCom). The code states:

Curators develop the collection under their care in conjunction with the museum's stated mission and other institutional policies, procedures, and documents. They identify deficiencies in the collection, review potential acquisitions, and provide compelling reasons for adding objects to the collection in accordance with the acquisition policy of their institution.<sup>84</sup>

This requires a strong understanding by staff of what is already well represented in their collection, along with a keen awareness of areas that can be strengthened. A staff member at a suburban museum in the Southwest mentioned that they actually have a list of artists and items missing from their holdings guiding their acquisition of new items. Preventing duplication and filling gaps relate not only to types of objects themselves in a collection, but also whose stories are being told. Given the other criteria for acquisitions in the CURCOM Code of Ethics, it was somewhat surprising that relevance to mission and museum policy did not rank higher amongst survey responses. This does not necessarily mean they are less important. Some may have assumed that mission was a given in

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<sup>83</sup> Schwartz, “Preserving History As it Happens,” 17.

<sup>84</sup> The Executive Committee of the Curators Committee of the American Alliance of Museums, “A Code of Ethics for Curators,” American Alliance of Museums, 2009, <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/curcomethics.pdf>.

addition to institutional policy regarding collections management, along with the assumption that when staff are acquiring materials—regardless of method—mission and these policies and procedures are always prioritized.

### ***Significance of Event***

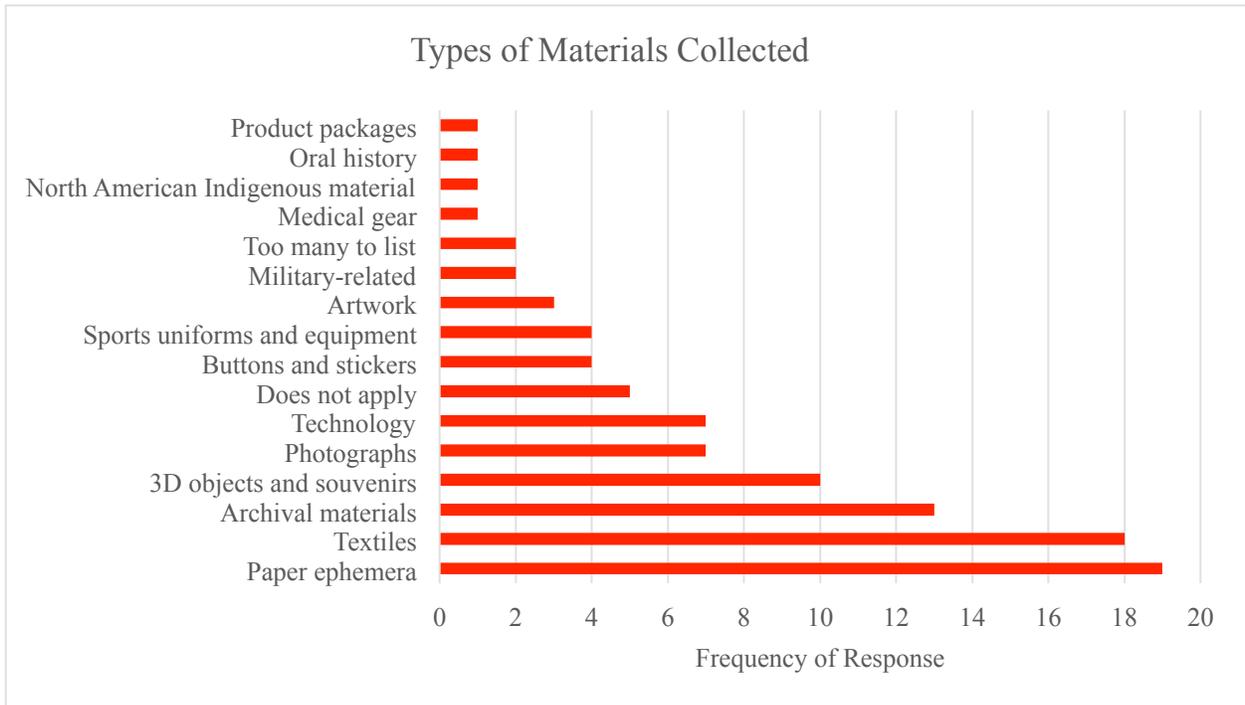
Objects not of a type in the collection may be deemed as important representatives of an event that is anticipated to have ongoing importance. The discussion of significance earlier in this chapter as related to criteria for event attendance can be applied here as well. Items are selected because of their ability to demonstrate the event's importance. This connects to the idea of uniqueness. While some select items based on the relevance of the event itself, others look at the impact the event had on the object, particularly related to natural disasters or athletic events. An urban institution in the Midwest focusing on sport pays attention to which players are doing well and those popular among fans, as well as any breaking or setting of records, and reacts accordingly when collecting uniforms. A few participants also noted selecting materials for their potential exhibition value and ability to tell a story.

### **Types of Objects Selected**

The categories of contemporary materials assembled are quite diverse, as is made evident in the chart below (See Figure 9). Items in numerous media, of varying sizes and shapes, and addressing different subject matter are collected. Most objects are smaller, due in part to the decreasing space in museum collection storage areas. Most respondents had succinct lists of contemporary materials they have acquired, while others were more broad, mentioning three-dimensional objects or even saying “too many to list.” The latter is understandable; collecting in the

moment, or at least not waiting to evaluate the significance, provides museum professionals with a plethora of possibilities for their collections.

**Figure 9:**



Paper ephemera, textiles, and archival materials are the most common forms of collected material. Paper ephemera comprises items of material culture such as signs, posters, fliers, brochures, booklets, and pamphlets. In the context of survey responses, the overall category of textiles most commonly refers to clothing and accessories, especially t-shirts and hats. Archival items were put in a separate category as it was broadly noted by multiple survey participants. Others cited specific archival items such as documents, books, and newspapers. Many respondents wanted to collect materials that really captured the spirit of the event, such as t-shirts emblazoned with an event logo or dates—which could also be found on posters, buttons and stickers, which are also frequently collected. Some survey participants mentioned gathering political signs and posters created specifically for an event, while others did not specify. Homemade signs or even clothing created by

event participants can express the feelings of the day. Photographs, which are also commonly acquired, provide a visual record of the event that can be displayed alone or accompany related event materials.

Most of the materials already mentioned are associated with a particular one-day event such as a rally or protest. But some of the contemporary items collected were often connected to events of longer duration. They ranged from sports equipment (baseballs, bases, bats, uniforms, golf clubs, golf balls) to technology-related objects (cellphones, tablets, and manuals) to military items (uniforms, honors and vestiges of base closures) to Native American materials. A small urban museum in the Mid-Atlantic collects items related to medical research such as “gear to treat Ebola patients...prostate molds and 3D printed animal cages...and objects from demonstrations about AIDS.”<sup>85</sup> It is evident that the potential associated with acquiring contemporary materials is vast.

### ***Deaccessioning***

A major concern often mentioned in current literature is the possibility—even likelihood—that contemporaneous collecting and the acquisition of contemporary materials more generally will lead to an increased need to monitor for deaccessioning in the future because of their often ephemeral nature.<sup>86</sup> The outcome of the survey question on whether or not acquiring contemporary items will result in added future deaccessioning prove inconclusive. The response with the highest number of votes was “probably not,” with ten, but “might or might not” followed as a close second with nine votes. There was not a resounding consensus either way. Interestingly, one respondent from a suburban institution in the Southeast mentioned “thoughtful deaccessioning” as a *benefit* of rapid-response and contemporaneous collecting at their museum, since materials previously had been

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<sup>85</sup> Author’s survey, 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Rhys, *Contemporary Collecting*, 26.

accepted largely based on a donor's reputation as opposed to how they complemented the existing collection and their mission.<sup>87</sup> In order to assess whether their institutions have room for new acquisitions, staff may evaluate what is already in their possession: how much is incompatible with the mission and collecting policies and could therefore be deaccessioned? Evaluation facilitates the identification of gaps existing in their holdings, which is helpful in the acquisition of new items.

## **Benefits of Rapid Response and Contemporaneous Collecting**

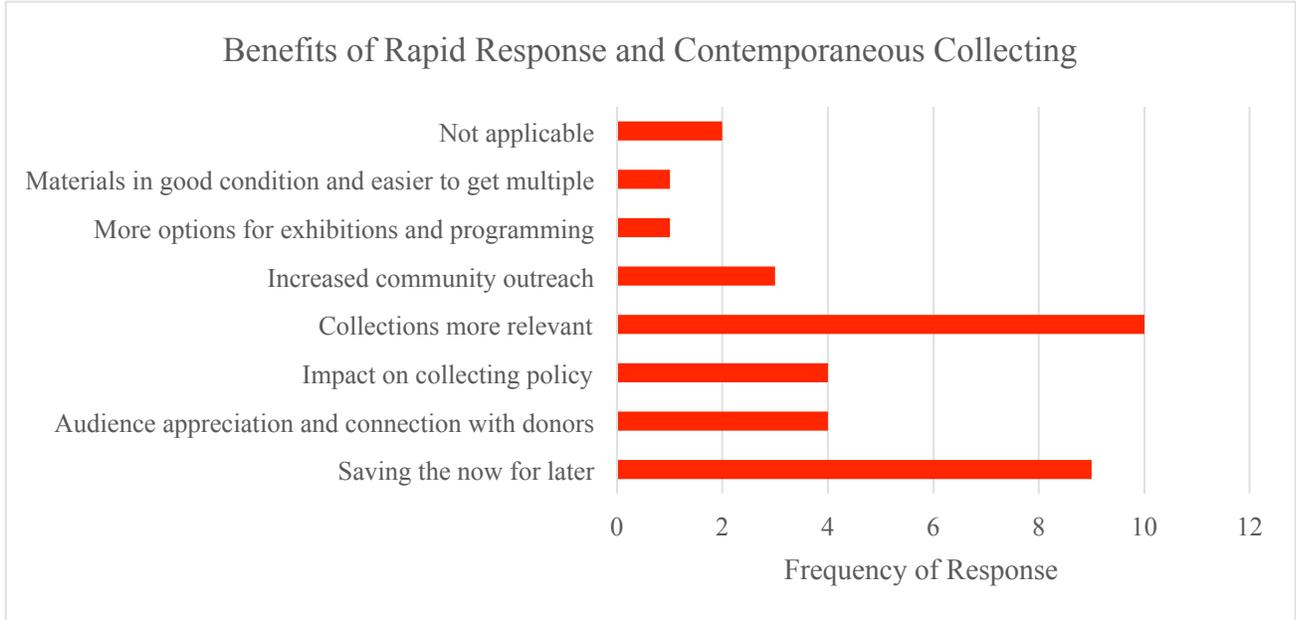
### ***Connection with Community***

The advantages of contemporaneous and rapid response collection are very much related to their impact on an institution's programs and exhibitions. (See Figure 10.) The most common advantage of these forms of acquisition is that they make their holdings more relevant to the audiences they serve. It allows museums to connect current events to those of the past and more fully tell the story of their community. Overall, it keeps what they do current. Contemporary collecting of all kinds also promotes inclusivity and engagement: materials of historically underrepresented community groups can influence both the narrative established by the object and attract new visitors. Some institutions also noted audience appreciation of their inclusion of content relevant to events and causes with which they are familiar. Rapid response and contemporaneous collecting expand the content and topics covered in exhibitions and programs. In addition, these materials can be used to connect with audiences on social media. A rural museum in the Midwest highlights specific items in their collection, including contemporary items, in online posts.

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<sup>87</sup> Author's survey, 2019.

**Figure 10:**



Collecting contemporary materials has the capacity to connect museums with new donors and extend relationships with current ones. A professional in the Mid-Atlantic noted how such connections have resulted in more than one donation from multiple individuals, some of whom also suggest other potential donors. An archaeological and anthropological institution in the same region, which no longer collects in this way, previously worked with the creators of pieces “to learn more about their history and the story behind the art.”<sup>88</sup> In this way, stronger relationships between museums and community members may be built.

### ***Impact on Institutional Policy***

Multiple survey participants noted the various types of impact on their collecting policies as an advantage of contemporary collecting, although the exact impacts differ. In some instances, it has made their collecting more focused. A staff member from a small urban institution in the West noted this benefit, stating that they now “focus more intensely on under-interpreted areas of city life,”

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

which will ultimately strengthen the objective to more “strongly exemplify the interests of [their] community” and to be more inclusive in their holdings.<sup>89</sup> This approach only applies to the relatively few institutions that already include the topic in their collecting policies. However, another institution, which has not participated in much rapid response collecting thus far, stated that it will likely be addressed when they review their collecting policies and procedures.

### *Saving the Now for Later*

The second most common benefit of contemporary collecting is acquisition before deterioration. Participants noted that a more proactive approach ensures that today’s contemporary materials will arrive in (relatively) good condition and survive for future generations. By extension, so, too, will the stories of the events from which they came or societal trends to which they relate. A staff member from a suburban Southeast institution, which collects in the aftermath of natural disasters, remarked that the items they acquired are ephemeral or have “low monetary worth—things people might throw away without realizing their interpretive value.” For example, “in [their] collection is a heavily stained t-shirt quickly printed for the clean-up volunteers to wear after Hurricane Ike.”<sup>90</sup> If the museum did not save materials like this, they would likely not be considered worth saving by the general population and therefore would not exist in the future. A professional from an urban museum in New England noted not only how items may have been lost if they did not collect them, but also that their “stories might have been forgotten.”<sup>91</sup> Treating oral histories as collected materials as well, taking them “in the moment” likely results in more accurate information, as one’s memory diminishes over time. By saving the histories, museum staffs are better preparing themselves and their successors to interpret the accompanying items.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

Contemporary items acquired at events are often ephemeral in nature, but this is not necessarily the case with items gathered through rapid response collection. Some contemporary materials arrive in pristine condition, especially when institutions receive them directly from manufacturers. Thanks to mass-production, it is possible to acquire multiple identical pieces. A survey participant from a rural museum in the Midwest said that they are able to obtain more than one of the same item for their research library or education collections.

### **Impact on Exhibitions and Programming**

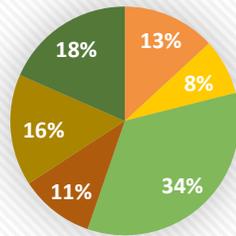
There are four primary impacts of rapid response and contemporaneous collecting on the institutions that engage in the practices: greater connection to the community, deeper discussions about contemporary events, stronger links between the past and present, and better specific exhibits or programs. Thirty-four percent of responses were related in some way to improved connections with the community. (See Figure 11.) These relationships come in various forms. Staff acquire materials in most cases for their permanent collection directly from community members and some exhibit them soon after. As such, they are often increasingly relatable to visitors. Materials found onsite ensure that holdings and the museum as a whole are more relevant. It can promote better representation of historically underrepresented groups and overlooked topics. At an urban museum on the West coast, for example, it “fills gaps in [their] collection, particularly relating to communities of color and social action. It is a way to connect with people who may not think they are interested in what we do and might not otherwise have anything to do with us.”<sup>92</sup> The relevance provided by acquiring contemporary items demonstrates to community members that the museum is an inclusive space for all.

### **Figure 11:**

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

### Impacts on Programs and Exhibitions



- Collection done for a specific exhibit or program
- Facilitates discussion about contemporary events
- Greater connection to the community
- Helps create links between the past and present
- No impact currently, but hope/expect to in the future
- No impact

Staff at some institutions collect contemporary material primarily for the purpose of a specific exhibition or program. Contemporaneous collection in this instance becomes part of the exhibition process. A university museum in suburban New England routinely exhibits artwork by faculty, staff, alumni, and students every 10 years. An urban institution in the Midwest had a small pop-up exhibition on women’s history featuring images and a Pussy hat from the 2016 Women’s March that was later donated. Exhibitions and programs with such items help foster discussion about associated events. Acquiring contemporary objects from the community allows for more effective discussion of what is happening there as well as regionally, nationally or internationally. It demonstrates that they are “not just a museum of old stuff,” as a respondent from the suburban Southeast stated.<sup>93</sup>

Contemporary items provide a connection between the past and present in two key ways. Firstly, they provide increased context for older materials in an organization’s holdings,

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

demonstrating continuity between phases of social movements, such as items from historic women's movements along with those from present-day Women's Marches. Secondly, the inclusion of contemporary objects helps to tell more complete stories, providing comparisons between the historical and the contemporary. A sports team-centered museum in the Midwest has exhibits on historic team stories as well as displays with items from present-day players, which brings all fans together for a "current shared experience."<sup>94</sup>

A total of 34% of respondents noted that rapid response and contemporaneous collecting had no impact on their exhibitions and programs. The relatively high number is likely due to the fairly large amount of respondents working at institutions that do not engage in contemporary collecting, either in the form of rapid response or contemporaneous collecting. However, this was not the case for all respondents reporting no impact; of the 34%, 16% noted that while their institutions had not seen effects as of yet, they either hope or expect to in the future. This may be due to museums just starting to collect contemporary materials or institutions that have collected at very few events and therefore have few items thus far. The fact that some participants said there was no impact at their institution but that they anticipate that to change signals a growing interest in the practice and an openness to its possibilities.

## **Challenges of Rapid Response and Contemporaneous Collecting**

### ***Lack of Space, Staff and Time***

Even organizations that actively benefit from acquiring contemporary materials face a variety of challenges in doing so. Somewhat predictably, the most common obstacles align with those that prevent other institutions from undertaking the practice in the first place. The top three challenges are

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

storage, staff, and time. (See Figure 12). They were mentioned previously in the discussion of why institutions choose not to—or cannot viably—engage in rapid response or contemporaneous collecting. Issues related to staff members were brought up in two ways. They often need to attend events to contemporaneously collect outside of business hours, and there must be sufficient personnel to process and care for the new items. As one museum professional from an urban institution in the Southwest mentioned, acquiring contemporary materials may result in large numbers of ephemera; this is confirmed by the materials commonly collected, as discussed above. Furthermore, many contemporary events can be spontaneous with limited lead time for planning. Museum professionals need to evaluate whether an event and the materials that come from it will (potentially) be appropriate for their institutions. A staff member from a sports-centered institution got to the heart of it, saying, “with golf events all over the world, we cannot be everywhere. We have to be selective about what we choose to collect, otherwise it would be weekly.”<sup>95</sup> Selectivity is key to successful contemporaneous collecting.

### ***Donations***

Positive, negative, and indifferent audience responses to contemporaneous collection efforts have each posed their own kinds of challenges with regard to both overeager and uninterested donors. Interesting to note on one end of the spectrum are indifferent community members who do not think of the items engaged with in their daily lives as worthy of collecting. Even when the museum reaches out with a specific request, people are not inclined to donate them. On the other hand, one would not expect challenges to arise from positive audience responses, but in fact it may be possible for community members to be *overly* responsive, offering unwanted items of no interest, including those the museum does not believe are important to acquire or that it already has in

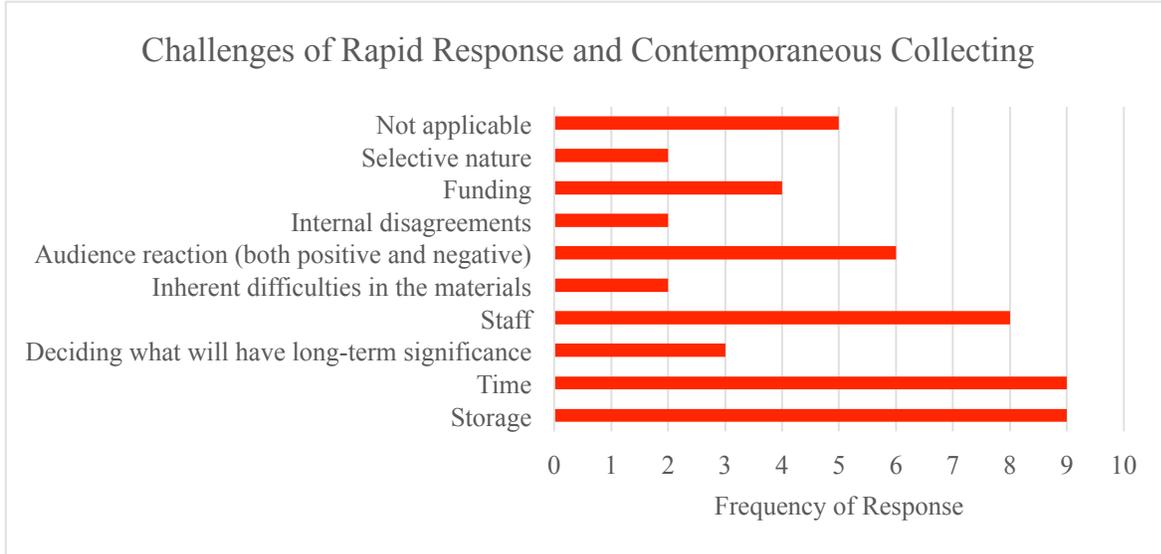
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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

abundance. Donors can be insistent that their materials are unique for one reason or another and deserve to be in the museum's collection. Having an enthusiastic community seems like a positive challenge: people are clearly connecting with the museum with greater frequency and at a new level of involvement. That being said, institutions cannot accept everything they are offered. So how do staff encourage community members to think of what they have as potentially historic and worthy of donation, while also preventing an onslaught of unusable items? While there really is not an easy answer, the plans of one Midwest institution that has had a limited community response to their rapid response collecting efforts is useful to consider. In order to increase interest, they plan to communicate with the community in very precise terms on the scope of the project and goals. Sharing this information with the community may peak people's interest, while also clearly outlining which types of materials are sought.

Despite some negative reactions to contemporaneous and rapid response collecting, overall the response gleaned from museum visitors has been neutral. Notably, not one respondent described their audience as reacting very or somewhat negatively, although both "somewhat" and "very" positive each garnered 25% of responses. How can this be interpreted? In some ways, it reflects the challenge of indifference mentioned previously. It could also signal that residents of a community may not know as much about the practice as professionals do. As such, a neutral reaction could simply reflect a need for improved sharing of information with the public about engagement in the acquisition of contemporary items through both rapid response and contemporaneous collection. The fact that there are only positive responses (besides neutral) is favorable to the collection of contemporary materials.

**Figure 12:**



### ***Concepts of History***

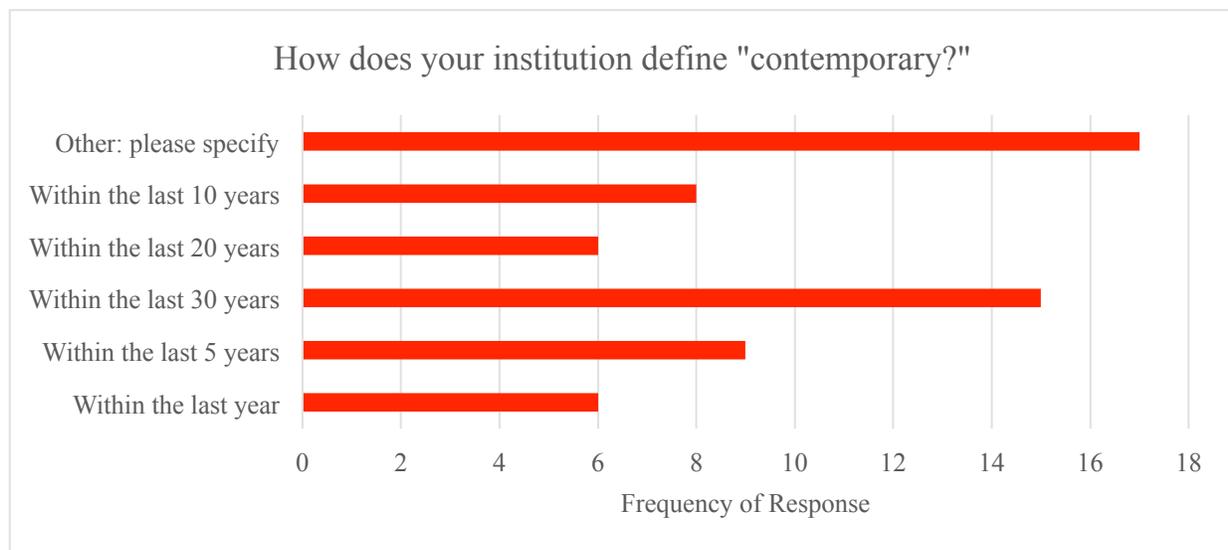
Negative responses regarding the acquisition of contemporary materials have come from community members as well as staff. Some museums have faced criticism for certain contemporary items accumulated because of their political or generally controversial nature. For example, an institution in the Southeast owns an item that belonged to a notorious serial killer, and some members of the public do not understand why it is there. Elsewhere, locals do not believe that museums should collect materials that are not “history.”<sup>96</sup> But this begs the question, what can (or should) be considered “history?” For some, it could even be an event that happened yesterday. The question of what is considered “history” is directly related to another posed in the survey: “how does your institution define contemporary?” The answers varied widely. Although the most common answer (25% of respondents), was “within the last ten years,” there were many with both shorter and longer time frames. (See Figure 13.) Some defined it as within the previous year; others considered materials from 1965 as contemporary. Many did not even have a definition. There is no way of

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

creating a profession-wide standard because it is really dependent on an institution's topic or focus. A disjunction appears, because for many individual community members what constitutes "history" and "contemporary" may seem mutually exclusive; however, in museums this is not the case generally. That being said, similar debates were observed within museums as well, such as differing opinions on collecting practice as well as lack of support from staff and board members about the acquisition of objects that are not considered historical.

**Figure 13:**



### ***Predicting Relevance***

Another difficulty associated with contemporary events is the problem of predicting which will be relevant for future visitors. One survey participant from the rural Midwest described an event considered for contemporaneous collection, which has since proven to not have lasting significance despite preliminary indications otherwise. To address this issue, at another institution in the Southeast some of the acquired materials were catalogued as part of temporary collections, ultimately delaying the decision to fully accession them. This approach allowed more time to evaluate their suitability and durability for the long term. While choosing events to attend is ultimately a guessing game,

based on the cited benefits and positive impacts on exhibitions and programs described above, it is worth the risk.

### ***Collaboration***

One somewhat startling result of the survey relates to collaboration with museums and other organizations, or rather the lack of it. Eighty percent of respondents whose institutions engage in contemporaneous collecting said that they have not collaborated with other museums or organizations in doing so. This represents a missed opportunity in multiple respects. For one, museum professionals at an institution having little experience with the practice could reach out to others who do. If staff from multiple institutions go to a single event, collaboration can facilitate the orderly selection of materials. The collective response of local museums following 9/11 in New York provides a good example. The importance of collaboration and further examples of it will be explored in Chapter 5.

The survey ended with a final overarching question: “Do you believe that contemporaneous collecting is a practice that should be pursued more widely by museums?” Responses were overwhelmingly positive. Around 31% said “definitely yes” and 28% said “probably yes.” Nonetheless, the most frequent answer was “maybe” at about 33% of respondents, but only 8% said “probably not.” What accounts for all of the “maybes?” Notes in the additional comments make important points, with many stating that institutions should only engage in the practice if it fits their mission. A few respondents said that while it does not fit the collecting profile of their institution, it should be undertaken by others. The practice may not be a necessary or even viable practice for all, especially when considering a museum’s mission and collecting focus. The practice must be assessed at an institutional level.

This chapter has examined the many benefits and challenges of contemporaneous collecting. It can offer clear advantages for an institution's exhibitions and programs, which in turn can result in improved connection to audiences. Some of the challenges of this practice are associated with the larger issues currently facing museums today—lack of staff, funding, and space—while others are related specifically to this form of collecting: namely how to predict which events will have a long-term impact and the debate about whether objects that are not “history” should be collected. While this chapter revealed the value of contemporaneous collection as related to audience engagement, Chapter 5 will explore ways in which contemporaneous and rapid response collecting connect to the social role of museums.

## Chapter 5: Contemporaneous Collection and the Social Role of Museums

The survey results examined in the previous two chapters with regard to the current state of rapid response and contemporaneous collecting in the United States demonstrate that there is much general interest in the practices across the field today, especially among history museums of various foci, regardless of the level of actual participation in them. Interest is largely connected to the benefits that these forms of acquisition provide for increasing the connection to patrons and to the communities at large. As such, it is intricately linked with the active role museums seek to play in society. Are there ways to make these types of collecting more feasible? Chapter 5 will discuss the ways in which contemporaneous collecting enhances the social role of museums and provide recommendations for those undertaking the practice based on survey results.

### Development of Professional Standards and Best Practices

The museum profession would benefit from the codification of contemporaneous collecting through the establishment of a standard definition and professional guidelines that could make the practice more systematic. As noted in Chapter 2, the act of going into the “field” to gather materials in this manner is not mentioned in the fifth edition of *Museum Registration Methods* (2010), a manual widely trusted across the profession and often referred to as the registrar’s “Bible,” both in reviews and in the book’s actual description.<sup>97</sup> This omission is surprising considering that institutions were engaging in the practice, albeit infrequently, at least as far back as the early 1900s. There will likely be another edition of the authoritative book in the future, and the term contemporaneous collection—or another term chosen by the author(s) connoting the practice—should be included in the section on institutional acquisition of objects. It could be added to the

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<sup>97</sup> “Museum Registration Methods,” Goodreads, accessed March 10, 2019, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/8325250-museum-registration-methods>.

section on field collection, as it does involve going into the “field,” but it could also have its own category. Incorporating the term in the next edition would bring it into the profession’s common vernacular and contribute to the legitimacy of the practice because of the book’s extensive use across the field.

Guidelines or standards about collecting in an effective and respectful manner could, and should, also be put together by professional organizations such as the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). The AAM already has “Guidelines” for other collections-related matters as part of their Collections Stewardship Standards.<sup>98</sup> Standards established by a nationwide organization would provide a broad look at how the practice should be undertaken. That being said, as evidenced by survey results, contemporaneous collecting is not applicable for all museum types. Consequently, it may be advisable for type-specific professional organizations such as the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), Association of Academic Museums and Galleries (AAMG), Association of Art Museum Directors, or Oral History Association (OHA) to create guiding principles as well. Those set by the AAM would relate to overall considerations regarding the practice, while creating resources about best practices in more specialized professional organizations would allow for more topical adaptation. Having general and specific guidelines in place that can be easily followed would assist institutions in responding with greater readiness to events and acquire materials more effectively once there.

Some museum professionals have published their own guidelines for event-based collecting. In 2017, Barbara Cohen-Stratyner outlined rules for the documentation of what she refers to as “crowd-collected artifacts.”<sup>99</sup> These rules are broken down into five sections: background of the

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<sup>98</sup> “Collections Stewardship Standards,” American Alliance of Museums, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/collections-stewardship-standards/>.

<sup>99</sup> Cohen-Stratyner, “What democracy looks like,” 88-90.

event itself and how the institution learned about it; images and media; source of artifacts; identifying the information to be discovered from objects; and additional questions regarding a material's preservation needs and its potential use in exhibitions. These principles provide a concise list of what museum professionals should document about materials gathered on site in order to create the most complete record possible about the objects, the event, and the individual institution's involvement. Doing so is important for preserving the provenance of the items collected as well as explaining the rationale for attending the event itself to prevent the duplication of similar ones in the future. Cohen-Stratynier's rules provide excellent questions for staff to ask, and although she writes specifically for events related to political activism, they are relevant to other occasions as well. The profession would benefit from rules like these for natural disasters and other tragedies as well.

While establishing best practices for contemporaneous collecting will benefit the profession at large, the actual gathering of contemporary materials will be unique to each institution. Consequently, individual museums would benefit from naming the practice in their own acquisition policies and including its methodology in procedures. Responses amongst my survey participants highlighted that this is not currently the norm, although contemporaneous collecting is mentioned more often than rapid response collecting. Some museums can function as models for reference. For example, London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London's Collections Development Policy from January 2015 begins with the central role that contemporary materials play at the institution. The policy briefly references materials already acquired in this way, while explaining why they seek contemporary materials and their criteria for selection. The policy also makes it clear that materials they have accumulated in the past "inform" their gathering of new ones.<sup>100</sup> This

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<sup>100</sup> "Collections Development Policy: Victoria and Albert Museum," Victoria and Albert Museum, revised January 2015, <https://vanda-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/2016/09/29/14/25/43/0ef149fc-de8d-4c49-a29b-eb9fdb171a22/VA-COLLECTIONS-DEVELOPMENT-POLICY-2014-rev1.pdf>.

demonstrates a way in which museums can remain relevant and insert themselves into the discourse on political and social issues facing the cities and societies in which they are located, as well as the world at large.

## **Collaboration**

Seeking advice from other organizations is one way in which collaboration serves to benefit in the acquisition of contemporary materials. Cooperation is also possible in the actual collection of materials as well as in the evaluation of exhibitions and programs. There are precedents for cooperation related to contemporaneous collecting, such as the collective effort following the events of September 11, 2001, discussed in Chapter 2. In that case, collaboration among multiple institutions prevented competition for objects and ultimately resulted in a more respectful response with regard to selection as well as communication with survivors and those cleaning up in the aftermath. It is important during any event—be it protest, natural disaster or tragedy—that it never becomes about the museum itself. The ultimate goal of collecting materials is to tell a story and engage with the community. In doing so, staff need to make sure they are not a distraction to participants, taking away from the actual event.<sup>101</sup> This delicate balance was handled very effectively in the aftermath of 9/11.

The often spontaneous nature of contemporaneous collecting might seem to be a roadblock to collaboration among institutions. Indeed, it may not be possible in all situations. On the other hand, increased cooperation could help to prepare institutions for the unexpected. Networks similar to those in Sweden's SAMDOK (1977-2011), previously discussed, could be created.<sup>102</sup> Such a system on

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<sup>101</sup> Kathleen Lawther, "How Should Museums Equip Themselves for Rapid Response Collecting?," *Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists (ARCS)*, January 31, 2017, <https://www.arcsinfo.org/news-events/entry/2285/how-should-museums-equip-themselves-for-rapid-response-collecting>.

<sup>102</sup> Steen, "Samdok: tools to make the world visible," 199-200.

the national level may not be plausible considering the number of museums in the United States, but it would make great sense locally among those with a common interest or collecting focus, for example, those in regions where a certain type of natural disaster like hurricanes is prominent. Because severe weather is increasingly common in certain geographical areas, having a collective plan for how to respond could be beneficial. Staff at experienced institutions can serve as a resource and all involved can work together to create effective practices.

Collaboration need not be limited to arrangements between institutions; organizations such as branches of the military or universities can be leveraged as well. For military museums, materials could be—and in some cases are—acquired during deployment. The National Army Museum in London began doing this following their exhibition *Helmand* in 2007-2008, at which oral history interviews with soldiers as well as video footage and photographs of the front line from cellphones and hand-held cameras were included.<sup>103</sup> The exhibition was created in close partnership with members of the British military. It proved so successful that their collections policy was updated in relation to material from modern conflicts. They continue to receive items from soldiers during deployment including objects, photographs, videos and blogs.<sup>104</sup>

The United States Armed Forces have also collected contemporary material for at least twenty-five years. The Marine Corps in particular has a History and Museums Division with a Field History branch.<sup>105</sup> One respondent to my request for survey participants gathered artifacts and conducted oral history interviews with soldiers as a field historian for the Marine Corps.<sup>106</sup> Materials

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<sup>103</sup> Jo Wooley, “Examining Contemporary Conflict,” in *Inspiring Action: Museums and Social Change* (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc., 2016), 97-98.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>105</sup> “Marine Corps History and Museums Division, Washington, DC,” *Naval History and Heritage Command*, published June 26, 2014, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/research-guides/source-guide-entry-by-state/district-of-columbia/marine-cops-history-and-museums-division.html>.

<sup>106</sup> “Response to: Rapid-Response Collecting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: MA Thesis Survey,” *Museum Junction Open Forum*, <https://community.aam-us.org/communities/community->

are collected in combat zones as well as during relief efforts; for example, field historians were sent to Haiti following the 2010 earthquake to document Marines assisting in the recovery effort.<sup>107</sup> For institutions with related foci and missions, there is the potential to work with branches of the military and establish official ties to encourage the donation of contemporary materials. Relationships with those directly involved in contemporary conflict will visually improve the stories museums tell about it now and in the future through physical evidence and personal accounts.

Museums could also work with universities. “Art of the March” started by chance as five professors from Northeastern University in Boston saw a plethora of signs propped up against a fence in Boston Commons following the Women’s March on January 21, 2017. The group decided to take action upon discovering that city park workers intended to throw them away. They ultimately saved around 6000 signs; photos were taken of each and posted in an online archive.<sup>108</sup> They were later donated to an institution in New York City. This presents a promising possibility for future practice. The fact that members of the university—especially professors and students—digitized the materials presents a great model. The process of digitizing collections is in fact becoming a priority across the museum field, but it is also time consuming. Although this project was undertaken spontaneously, it sets a precedent for museums working with local university professors and students. Institutions with smaller staffs would especially benefit from such assistance in the collection of materials, however, they would still need to do the accessioning themselves.

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[home/digestviewer/viewthread?GroupId=31&MessageKey=96e430fb-3163-44b1-8cce-Id1522dac78a&CommunityKey=d34b2dfb-4151-4629-a59a-553d0ae428d9&tab=digestviewer.](https://www.quantico.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/608782/history-division-preserves-promotes-marine-corps-past-present/)

<sup>107</sup> Cassandra Brown, “History division preserves, promotes Marine Corps past, present,” *Marines*, July 15, 2015. <https://www.quantico.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/608782/history-division-preserves-promotes-marine-corps-past-present/>

<sup>108</sup> Art of the March, “A Documentary Project,” Art of the March, accessed February 4, 2019, <http://artofthemarch.boston/page/about>.

Museums with similar goals would benefit from collaborative efforts—or at least increased communication—regarding their use of contemporary materials in exhibitions and events. The Curator’s Committee of the American Alliance of Museums (CurCom) worked with eight other professional networks in spring 2017 to survey their members’ approaches to audience engagement with their collections. They discovered that most institutions develop their programming independently. On the one hand, this results in more unique programs, but on the other it makes the development of best practices virtually unattainable.<sup>109</sup> While this survey focused on the broad use of collections by museums for the public, its results related to the lack of collaboration are helpful in the discussion of contemporaneous collecting practices. Assessing the various methodologies for gathering items on site may open the door to the sharing of ideas and eventually contribute to an industry-wide way of evaluating the practice.

### **The Social Role of Museums**

After discussing ways to make contemporaneous collecting increasingly plausible for more institutions through collaboration and the creation of profession-wide standards, this question begs to be asked: why is acquiring contemporary materials so important? As mentioned in Chapter 4, contemporaneous collecting (and the collection of contemporary materials more generally through rapid-response collecting) provides an excellent way for institutions to connect with their communities. It matters because of the shift in focus within museums generally and their changing role in today’s society. Once defined and guided almost exclusively by their collections, museums have become increasingly audience-focused, aimed at educating the public.<sup>110</sup> It is no longer always the prevailing view that objects have an inherent value—instead, “Visitor interest and attention is determined not by an object’s inherent appeal but its relevance to their own framework of knowledge

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<sup>109</sup> Redmond Barnett, W. James Burns, and Eliza Phelps, “Audience Engagement through Collections” *EXHIBITION* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 102.

<sup>110</sup> Stephen E. Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 28-29.

and experience.”<sup>111</sup> Collecting and displaying contemporary materials will help museums to be increasingly relevant to more visitors.

There are differing opinions amongst members in the field on this move from an almost exclusive focus on collections to audiences, from whole-hearted support to skepticism and wariness about the implications of such a shift. Josie Appleton, representing the dissenters, a minority today, asserts in “Museums for ‘The People?’” (2001) that when museums put the potential audience at the center of what they do, “the collection will quite naturally lose its importance and value.”<sup>112</sup> Others argue that the evolution toward to a more audience-centric outlook does not mean that the collection is any less important. The role it plays is simply reassessed with the belief that collections can be used to improve people’s lives as well as the community.<sup>113</sup> For example, several New York City museums such as the Frick Collection hold programs for members of law enforcement to improve visual observation by looking at paintings.<sup>114</sup> Institutions will be better able to serve their community if they have diverse materials to which visitors can relate. Contemporaneous collecting has the potential to appease those who fully support the shift and those who do not.

The collection of contemporary materials through both contemporaneous and rapid response collecting will likely increase the inclusivity and diversity represented in exhibitions and programs. Why are inclusivity and diversity so important? Kevin Jennings, President of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City, summarized the issue by citing lesbian poet Adrienne Rich in his keynote address at the American Alliance of Museums conference in 2018. Jennings quoted Rich stating, “When someone with authority describes the world and you’re not in it, there is a moment of

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<sup>111</sup> Lisa C. Roberts, “Changing Practices of Interpretation,” in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2012), 150.

<sup>112</sup> Josie Appleton, “Museums for ‘The People?’” in *Museums and Their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (New York: Routledge, 2007), 117.

<sup>113</sup> Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 31.

<sup>114</sup> Barnett, Burns, and Phelps, “Audience Engagement through Collections”, 99.

psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.”<sup>115</sup> While Rich is referencing her sexual identity, one can argue that her words potentially relate to many historically (and currently) under-represented groups. The role of museums is changing, but they continue to have intellectual authority. If community members do not see themselves represented on a museum’s walls, the implication could be harmful. One could argue—and correctly so—that people do not only visit museums in order to see themselves, but also to learn about others. The more cultures that are depicted in the museum, the more individuals will be able to relate, while also learning about other cultures. In order to create both temporary and permanent exhibitions on topics that matter to its visitors, museums must consider what is important to their constituents. In doing so, it positions itself as essential to the community and fosters its ability to make change within it.<sup>116</sup>

Collecting contemporary materials now allows museums to tell a more complete story with regard to popular culture now and in the future. What they choose to acquire makes a statement about that which deserves to be remembered. Collecting materials “means conferring value and institutional memory on them (and by inference the context they represent); not collecting them implies disregard for those memories and contexts.”<sup>117</sup> Throughout history, materials relating to groups such as minorities, immigrants, and the non-elite were not amassed, or at least not extensively, in part because items owned by those groups were less durable, and they simply owned fewer things. As such, their stories can be harder to tell or lost all together. Acquiring contemporary materials ensures that the stories of diverse communities within the larger community will be remembered in the future. This increasingly robust form of engagement has the potential to

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<sup>115</sup> “AAM 2018 Opening Session & Awards followed by Keynote Speaker - Kevin Jennings,” YouTube Video, 1:31:43, posted by “AmericanMuseums,” July 6, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSDV1\\_ACEcs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSDV1_ACEcs).

<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth Wood, “Rules for the (R)evolution of Museums,” in *Inspiring Action: Museums and Social Change* (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc., 2009), 33.

<sup>117</sup> Suzanne Keene, *Fragments of the World: Uses of Museum Collections* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005), 92.

encourage more diverse groups to donate materials to the museum in the future as well as increase future involvement overall. By leading to greater inclusivity, collecting contemporary materials may encourage more people to believe that museums are for them.

Some worry that collecting materials in the present has the potential to be controversial or, based on the events that are chosen to be attended, that a museum's staff will be seen as having a political bias. But ultimately, museums are not neutral, nor have they ever been. The materials they decide to collect, the programs and exhibitions they present, their allocation of budget, and even the act of remaining silent about controversial topics are all ways in which institutions implicitly state a point of view. LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski started a campaign in August 2017 called "Museums Are Not Neutral." On Suse Anderson's *Museopunks* podcast, Murawski said, "Every single institution is based on colonialism and white supremacy and all kind of structures that are in place. And they have not been able to escape those structures."<sup>118</sup> Reinforcing inclusion is just one way American institutions can begin to challenge these structures. In addition, many museums are increasingly meant to be places of discourse where people come together. Materials can provide a starting point for dialogue about controversial topics, both historical and current. As such, this is relevant to a broad range of institutions, most specifically history museums of varying emphases, but also to others such as art and science museums. Museums have the potential to serve as safe spaces for discussing controversial topics constructively, where visitors feel comfortable enough to engage with one another and the content.<sup>119</sup>

This chapter has investigated ways to make contemporaneous collecting a more plausible endeavor, and to explain why it is important to do so based on the shift from object-focused to

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<sup>118</sup> LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski, "#MuseumsAreNotNeutral," interview with Suse Anderson, *Museopunks*, podcast, audio, June 28, 2018, <https://www.aam-us.org/2018/06/28/museopunks-episode-27-museumsarenotneutral/>.

<sup>119</sup> Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Pam Korza, and Patricia E. Williams, "Giving Voice: A Role for Museums in Civic Dialogue," *A Museums & Community Toolkit* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2002), 14.

audience-focused institutions that is underway in the field today. The practice can be made more manageable through collaboration, whether with other museums or similar institutions, universities, the military, and other community organizations, as well as through the creation of nationwide and more specialized standards. The acquisition of contemporary materials has the potential to increase diversity and inclusion in museum collections as well as in the stories that are told using them within institutions, now and in the future.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The acquisition of contemporary materials, whether through contemporaneous collecting or through more conventional forms of rapid response collecting, poses challenges for museums. These difficulties, however, are ultimately outweighed by the benefits of increased engagement with the public through socially responsive exhibitions and programs and the diversification of representation. Institutions with missions that lend themselves to this type of collection, specifically history museums of varying foci, should strongly consider doing so. The practice of gathering contemporary materials, especially through contemporaneous collecting, is becoming more common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It presents a radically different type of acquisition than had been the norm since the founding of museums, because it requires staff to react in “real time” to what is happening in their communities as opposed to waiting for items to be donated or purchased. The objects thus acquired, such as t-shirts, posters, computers, sports equipment, photographs and other ephemera, provide a more complete understanding of society as a whole.

Unsurprisingly, the most common reasons given by those who are unable to engage in contemporaneous collection are lack of staff, funding, and space, which mirror the challenges faced by those who do. Institutions that pursue the practice anyway report that its benefits are significant: making a museum’s holdings more relevant to visitors and saving materials that may not survive otherwise. Contemporaneous collection would become more accessible to more organizations through collaboration and the creation of profession-wide and specialized standards. The shifting focus from collection to audience taking place at many museums necessitates this approach and provides a way of keeping both at center stage.

So where can research on this topic go from here? My survey participants represented institutions of varying size from all regions of the country and a wide variety of thematic foci. Much

was gleaned from the responses. However, its sample size was small compared to the number of museums throughout the United States. Thus, it is not completely representative of the current state and future direction of rapid response and contemporaneous collecting. A larger survey involving significantly more respondents might be the next logical step for continued research on the topic. That being said, the survey designed for this paper still proved effective for demonstrating the benefits and challenges of the practice as well as the ways in which different institutions actually go about engaging in the practice. The acquisition of contemporary items through contemporaneous collecting and their use in exhibitions and programs now and in the future presents an exciting opportunity for museums of all types to tell more diverse, inclusive and historically authentic stories.

## Appendix

### Appendix A: Survey: Rapid-Response Collecting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

This survey will address the topic of “rapid-response collecting,” that is, the collecting of contemporary materials. While some materials of this nature enter the collection through donation or purchase, this survey focuses on what I refer to as “contemporaneous collecting,” meaning museum professionals attending events such as rallies, protests, and marches to collect materials for their collections. My purpose is to better understand the practice and its implications for museums.

In the survey, “rapid-response collecting” refers to all collection of contemporary material whether through donation, purchase, or field collection, while “contemporaneous collecting” refers specifically to field collection. Thank you for your participation.

1. **What best describes the location of your museum?**
  - a. Urban
  - b. Suburban
  - c. Rural
2. **How would you describe the part of the country where your museum is located?**
  - a. New England
  - b. Mid-Atlantic
  - c. Midwest
  - d. Southeast
  - e. Southwest
  - f. West
3. **How many full-time staff does your institution have?**
  - a. 1-5
  - b. 6-15
  - c. 16-30
  - d. 31-50
  - e. 51-70
  - f. 71-100
  - g. 101-150
  - h. 151-200
  - i. More than 200
4. **What is the collecting focus of your institution?** \_\_\_\_\_
5. **Name of institution (optional):** \_\_\_\_\_
6. **How does your institution define “contemporary?”**
  - a. Within the last year
  - b. Within the last 5 years
  - c. Within the last 10 years
  - d. Within the last 20 years
  - e. Within the last 30 years
  - f. Other → please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
7. **Does your museum currently engage in rapid-response collecting?**

- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. We have in the past but it is not currently a point of emphasis for us
  - d. Not currently, but we plan to in the future
- 8. Does your museum currently engage in contemporaneous collecting?**
- a. Yes
  - b. Yes, pending the event.
  - c. No
  - d. We have in the past but it is not currently a point of emphasis for us
  - e. Not currently, but we plan to in the future
- 9. If your museum does not engage in rapid-response collection, why not? (Select all that apply)**
- a. Does not fit our collecting profile
  - b. Lack of space
  - c. Lack of funding
  - d. Lack of staff
  - e. Lack of time
  - f. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- 10. If your museum does not contemporaneously collect, why not? (Select all that apply)**
- a. Does not fit our collecting profile
  - b. Lack of space
  - c. Lack of funding
  - d. Lack of staff
  - e. Lack of time
  - f. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- 11. Is rapid response collecting addressed in your institution's collecting policy?**
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Not currently, but we are working on adding it
- 12. Is "contemporaneous collecting" addressed your institution's collecting policy?**
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Not currently, but we are working on adding it
- 13. At how many events has your museum at collected overall?**
- a. None
  - b. 1 –10
  - c. 11 – 20
  - d. 21 – 30
  - e. More than 30→how many? \_\_\_\_\_
- 14. How does your institution decide at which events to attend and collect materials?**
- 15. Approximately how many items in your collection have been collected through rapid-response collection?**
- a. 0-100

- b. 100-300
  - c. 301-500
  - d. 501-700
  - e. 701-900
  - f. Over 901 → How many: \_\_\_\_\_
- 16. Approximately how many items collected through rapid-response collecting were through contemporaneous collection specifically?**
- a. 0-100
  - b. 101-300
  - c. 301-500
  - d. 501-700
  - e. 701-900
  - f. Over 901 → How many: \_\_\_\_\_
- 17. What is your criteria for deciding what to collect at events?**
- 18. If your institution engages in contemporaneous collecting, have you ever collaborated with other museums or organizations?**
- a. Yes
  - b. No
- 19. How has the response from your community been to collecting materials in this way?**
- a. Very Negative
  - b. Somewhat negative
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Somewhat positive
  - e. Very positive
- 20. How does rapid-response collecting, and contemporaneous collecting more specifically, impact the exhibitions and programs put on by your institution?**
- 21. When engaging in “contemporaneous collecting,” how much time is typically spent actively selecting materials?**
- a. Hours
  - b. Days
  - c. Weeks
- 22. Do you believe that contemporaneous collecting will necessitate an increase in deaccessioning in the future?**
- a. Definitely yes
  - b. Probably yes
  - c. May or may not
  - d. Probably not
  - e. Definitely not
- 23. What have been the benefits of “rapid-response collecting,” as well as “contemporaneous collecting” more specifically at your institution?**
- 24. What challenges has your institution experienced related to “rapid-response collecting,” as well as “contemporaneous collecting” more specifically?**

**25. Do you believe that contemporaneous collecting is a practice that should be pursued more widely by museums?**

- a.** Definitely yes
- b.** Probably yes
- c.** Maybe
- d.** Probably not
- e.** Definitely not

**26. Any other comments?**

End of Survey

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