

Prototyping Heritage: Collections, Materials and Emerging Approaches to Engagement

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Increasingly museums and archives are looking at digital technologies to find innovative ways to engage audiences with their collections, particularly with those items not usually publicly displayed. This paper presents an emerging approach to the curation of collections that subverts traditional paradigms of conservation intended as preservation of an immutable original condition. Instead, it is based on the creative reassembling of elements of the collection adopted as unprocessed materials to prototype devices or patterns of exploration. This approach is located at the convergence of two recent phenomena. First, there is the tendency in the Digital Humanities to apply computational tools such as data visualisation and data mining to all sorts of archival material. Secondly, some artists and designers are becoming familiar with practices of hacking, low-tech making and prototyping to develop experimental devices. Two examples are introduced to illustrate how this approach can be articulated in different ways. The first one concerns a research project aimed at designing a range of exploratory interfaces and material artefacts to engage researchers and the public with the archive of a poetry publisher. The second one involves the use of a collection of geological specimens to create new musical instruments and performance opportunities. The way in which collections became a primary resource for further creative work in these examples is grounded in the different aspects of their materiality and suggests their inclusion in a system of values substantially divergent from many criteria more commonly at the origin of the formation of a collection.