

Museums Essentials: Working with Collections - Contemporary Collecting

Introduction

Many museums are already undertaking contemporary collecting of some kind but without a structured approach there are risks to this.

An ad hoc approach can result in the collection of random and less relevant objects than those collected as part of a wider organisational strategy. Collecting without engaging with peers, audiences and communities can lead to unconscious bias or lead to a collection that is not relevant to audiences.

Getting started

- The first port of call should be the collections development policy to review any contemporary collecting element
- Think about any gaps previous collections reviews have identified
- Look at the communities your organisation is collecting for and how they are represented in current collections
- Think about who you will involve in the process to ensure balance, who will make final decisions?



Planning a contemporary collecting approach

- You may need to take a different approach for different disciplines, for example contemporary collecting for social history is likely to need more of a community input.
- Consider how much material you are likely to collect and think about the costs of this. Natural History collecting is likely to generate more objects than contemporary art collecting and the costs will lie in the process of generating and storing material rather than on the object itself.
- Gather the people who you wish to involve, ensure this includes internal and external voices and democratise the process.
- Consider the process once collecting decisions have been made, allocate time for acquisitions to be undertaken correctly and the relevant information to be recorded.



Who should you involve?

- Peers from your own organisation, consider involving other departments, volunteers and leadership
- Peers from other institutions, engaging with this group can ensure you are not duplicating work and leaving a legacy of over-represented objects in collections
- People from audiences and groups you aim to represent, they will bring a valuable perspective to collecting



Critical Points

- Communicate your approach to contemporary collecting throughout the organisation
- If you involve a variety of internal and external voices in the process, for example through the make up of a collections panel, you can improve the relevance of collections for future audiences
- The process should be documented throughout to Spectrum standards and ensure you are not creating a backlog.