The 'Manchester Together Archive': researching and developing a museum practice of spontaneous memorials

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Abstract

On 22 May 2017, a homemade bomb was detonated in the foyer of Manchester Arena as people were leaving an Ariana Grande concert. Twenty-three people (including the bomber) were killed and over 700 were injured. Within hours of the attack, people of Manchester began to leave flowers, candles, soft toys, balloons, written notes and other items in St Ann's Square and other locations around the city. In June 2017, the Manchester City Council tasked Manchester Art Gallery to oversee the removal and collection of material objects from St Ann's Square. Manchester Art Gallery ultimately stored more than 10,000 objects to form what is now known as the 'Manchester Together Archive' of the public response to the Manchester Arena attack. An associated research project was co-designed by the author with Manchester Art Gallery staff. The project aimed to document creatively the evolving thinking, interactions with different stakeholders and decision-making about the archive, as well as the impact of those decisions on institutional life, policy and practice.

After reviewing the literature on museum practices around spontaneous memorials, this paper goes on to critically reflect on how cultural professionals in Manchester addressed the gap in their experience with spontaneous memorials by adapting or diverting from standard collecting processes. It aims to demonstrate that this was a creative process of negotiating the interaction between their professional ethics and a strong sense of civic and social responsibility, which led to a new museum practice altogether. The paper argues that this museum practice was also the result of accepting and inviting the migration of the memorial's characteristics (as a public, spontaneous and mass participation heritage performance) into the resulting Manchester Together Archive and the collecting process itself. This meant that the archive was not a 'collection' of the spontaneous memorial, but another form and manifestation of the memorial itself. The paper concludes with some brief thoughts on how this new museum practice around the Manchester Together Archive is impacting already on Manchester Art Gallery's broader policy and practice and its process of rethinking its spaces, activity and engagement with its publics.

Key words: spontaneous memorials, collecting, Manchester Together Archive.

Introduction

On Saturday 10 June 2017, a small group of museum and cultural professionals, students of the MA Art Gallery and Museum Studies at the University of Manchester and myself gathered in the old, unused fire station next to Manchester Piccadilly train station. It was one day after the clearance of the spontaneous memorial in St Ann's Square (figure 1). The memorial formed shortly after the terrorist attack in Manchester Arena on 22 May 2017, which left 23 dead (including the bomber) and more than 170 people injured. The group, led by Amanda Wallace, deputy director of the Manchester Art Gallery (MAG), started removing objects from

the crates and laying them down on polythene sheets in the temporary holding site of the fire station. They included damp, dirty and muddy written notes, cardboard signs, t-shirts, candles with written messages, and medals from the Great Manchester Run, which had taken place a few days before (figure 2). A truck from Harwell Document Restoration Services was coming from Oxford later that morning to collect a representative sample of items to take away for dry freezing and conservation; the rest would be disposed of.[1]

Figure 1: The spontaneous memorial in St Ann's Square. Manchester, June 2017. Image by Manchester City Council

Figure 2: Items from St Ann's Square at the London Road Fire Station. Manchester, June 2017. Image by author

Very quickly, however, it became clear that the group did not have any strong selection criteria to distinguish the objects that should be kept and sent for conservation from those to be disposed of. Nor was the salvage site of the fire station 'an ideal space to be having those conversations and those considerations'.[2] The group paused and after a short discussion, reached a decision. Everything would be sent to Harwell; from the elaborate letters and notes, to a coffee receipt on which someone had written '#westandtogether', one of the hashtags used after the attack; from a single guitar, to the dozens of pebbles with Manchester bees painted on them; from a framed photograph of one of the people who were killed, to sketches of them that someone did based on photographs that circulated in the media. Two years since that Saturday at the fire station and largely as a result of the decision that morning to send everything to Harwell, the roughly 10,000 items from the spontaneous memorials in St Ann's Square, Victoria Station and Manchester Arena have formed what is now known as the 'Manchester Together Archive' (hereinafter, MTA).[3]

'Spontaneous memorials' (also termed 'spontaneous shrines', 'makeshift memorials', 'ephemeral memorials', or 'temporary memorials') are, as Haney *et al*. note,

> a public response to the unanticipated, violent deaths of people who do not fit into the categories of those we expect to die, who may be engaging in routine activities in which there is a reasonable expectation of safety, and with whom the participants in the ritual share some common identification (Haney *et al*. 1997: 161).

Such memorials are not a new phenomenon. They have appeared after events such as the death of John Lennon (1980), the Hillsborough Disaster (1989), the World Trade Center bombing (1993), the Oklahoma City bombing (1995), the September 11th attacks (2001), and the more recent attacks at the Boston marathon (2013), Paris (2015), Brussels (2016), Nice (2016), Melbourne (2017), Stockholm (2017), Manchester (2017), Barcelona (2017), Las Vegas (2017), Christchurch (2019), and El Paso (2019). All these and other violent events have led to the formation of large-scale, public spontaneous memorials, consisting often of thousands of flowers, candles, notes, cards, photographs, flags, signs, t-shirts, scarves, religious icons and other objects. Such memorials have now become an expected contemporary expression of public and ritualized grief and memorialization (Doss 2010; Eyre 2006; Grider 2015) and part of what Doss calls 'memorial mania': 'an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent, excessive desire to express, or claim, those issues in visibly public contexts' (Doss 2008: 7).

Spontaneous memorials have been the subject of different disciplinary and interdisciplinary investigations. They have been studied as spaces of cultural negotiation of public grief (Doss 2008; Senie 2006); for their commemorative and performative roles (Santino 2006); as forms of secular and liminal ritual, which, by promising continuity and certainty in a time of chaos, negotiates the early stages of public and private grief (Jorgenson-Earp and Lanzilotti 1998); as rituals of gift-giving and the material culture of mourning (Hallam and Hockey 2001); as both monuments of mourning and grassroots performances of social and political action (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011); as political protest and death rituals (Marchi 2006); as sites of controversy and power over who should be memorialized (Doss 2002); as counter-narratives to 'official' memory and a vehicle for bringing justice and raising awareness (Milošević 2017); as examples of mass mediation of disaster and tragic death (Dayan and Katz 1994); as forms of temporary public art and a critique of urban spaces distinct from permanent monumental structures (Haskins and DeRose 2003); and as the expansion of spontaneous remembering on social media (Harju 2015).

Such memorials are temporary and ephemeral and removed after some time, the length of which varies from case to case (e.g. in Barcelona it was after two weeks, while in Nice after several months). The timing and manner of removal depend on factors such as weather conditions, decay of objects, security issues, official investigations, or pressure by residents and businesses for the space they occupy to return to everyday use (Margry 2011; Maynor 2015; Milošević 2018). As will be explained later in the paper, most often this removal leads to the formation of an archive or a collection of items left in the memorials by museums, libraries, archives, or related cultural and community organizations. Such archives can be seen as a contradiction to the ephemerality of such memorials, which themselves are a contradiction

in Western memorial practices, as discussed by Haskins and DeRose (2003) and Forty and Kuchler (1999). Trying to explain this movement from a temporary memorial to a permanent collection, Doss approaches the memorial items as a bond between the living and the dead, a material presence of an embodied absence that needs to be preserved (Doss 2008). Maynor adds to this interpretation, stressing that

> increasingly, there is an expectation that some, if not all, of the condolence and temporary memorial items will be kept or saved in some way for future generations to look back upon to help document the event and the public outpouring of grief and sympathy that followed (Maynor 2015: 583).

This transition – from a spontaneous memorial to a collection or archive – raises a number of issues about the professional practices, agents and impact of managing, documenting and using such collections. In the case of spontaneous memorials, such as the one in St Ann's Square in Manchester, cultural organizations are faced with challenges of rapid collecting and documentation, which most often fall outside usual acquisition, collecting and management frameworks. In this context, what is collected, documented and archived (or not), when, by whom and what/who for, are questions that need to be addressed, in order to reveal the agency in the formation of a spontaneous memorial's archive and how it interfaces with existing museum or archiving practices.

Despite the increasing number and frequency of spontaneous memorials and their archives in recent years, and despite the value and roles that spontaneous memorials have played in constructing personal and collective memories of tragic events, there has been little emphasis either in academic research or professional practice on the interaction between such memorials and existing museological processes. As Maynor points out, 'the practical, logistical and archival concerns of such collections […] are largely eschewed in favor of discussions that explore the materiality of grief, the role these objects play in our collective consciousness and cultural memory' (Maynor 2015: 584). Indeed, as this paper aims to demonstrate, even work concerned with museological issues around spontaneous memorials tends to focus largely on practical guidance on what and how to collect. In contrast, there are very few studies that examine the impact that these memorials have on local museums, libraries, archives or related cultural organizations tasked with their collection and documentation. As this paper will argue, such an examination is significant because of the impact they have on and the challenges they pose to established museological methods and timeframes.

In this context, and following the clearance of St Ann's Square in June 2017, the author co-designed with MAG a piece of research that aimed to capture and reflect on the discussions and decision-making about the future of those items. Through participant observation, qualitative interviews, auto-ethnography and documentary photography and filmmaking, the research aims to document critically and creatively the evolving thinking, interactions with different stakeholders and decision-making about the archive, as well as the impact of those decisions on institutional life, policy and practice.

Although this examination includes issues and practices of conservation, documentation, display and public engagement, due to space limitations, this paper focuses specifically on the decision-making and impact of collecting the spontaneous memorials. It starts by examining literature that deals with issues and processes of collecting spontaneous memorials. The paper goes on to discuss how museum professionals in Manchester addressed the gap in their experience by adapting or diverting from standard collecting processes. It aims to demonstrate that this was a creative process of negotiating the interaction between their professional ethics and a strong sense of civic and social responsibility, which led to a new museum practice altogether.

The paper argues that this museum practice was also the result of accepting and inviting the migration of the memorial's characteristics (as a public, spontaneous and mass participation heritage performance) into the resulting physical space of the MTA and the archiving process itself. MAG staff, in other words, did not see the MTA merely as a record or by-product of the spontaneous memorial, but rather as another form and manifestation of the memorial itself. This redefinition collapses the distinction between the formation of the MTA and its future uses and blurs the boundaries between the temporary memorial and its permanent archive.

The paper concludes with some brief thoughts on how the museum practice that emerged in the process is impacting already on MAG's broader policy and practice and its process of rethinking its spaces, activity and engagement with its publics.

Collecting Spontaneous Memorials

An examination of the literature on collecting practices around spontaneous memorials reveals three main points. First, despite the unfortunately increased number of such cases over the last twenty years, there seems to be an idiosyncratic professional response, which is exacerbated by the lack of an agreed professional framework and of specific expectations by governing institutions and audiences alike. This was, indeed, observed in the case of Manchester too, as will be discussed later in the paper. Secondly, existing literature tends to focus on the outcome and outputs of initiatives to collect and document spontaneous memorials, rather than the process, negotiation and decision-making taking place in and among organizations, professionals and audiences. In the case of Manchester, an effort was made from the outset to address the latter and this paper is an outcome of this process. Thirdly, despite the gaps in the literature, there is still strong evidence coming through it that museum processes are becoming challenged, calibrated and adapted to meet the needs of the memorials and the perceived expectations about the role they are to play as museum collections. Indeed, the paper builds on that and goes on to discuss in more detail how the collecting practices around the MTA got adapted and the impact of those actions on the archive itself and on MAG.

Idiosyncratic museum response

Although disaster, or 'rescue', collecting (Dale-Hallett and Higgins 2010) is often placed on the margins of museum practice (Besley and Were 2014), museums are not strangers to documenting, researching and exhibiting tragic events and natural or man-made disasters (Williams 2007). This 'collecting history literally as it happens' (Rivard 2012: 87) relates to broader museum developments in contemporary (Pearce 1998; Were and King 2012; Rhys and Baveystock 2014) or rapid-response collecting (Tindal 2018; Etherington 2013; Chan and Cope 2014). The Victoria and Albert Museum's rapid-response collecting (and its homonymous gallery that opened in 2014) is perhaps the most well-known example of this shift in the museum practice toward documenting contemporary issues and events at both local and global levels.

In contrast, collecting the *public response* to such disasters is far less often discussed. More often than not, particular decisions on whether, what and how much to collect are taken without a clear or binding strategy. In some cases, most, if not all, non-organic items of spontaneous memorials are kept, such as after the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 (Doss 2008) and, indeed, in Manchester, as will be seen later. In others, such as in the Virginia Tech Campus Shooting in 2007, the collection consists of a representative sample of the memorial material, while the rest was disposed of (Maynor 2015; Purcell 2012). And in the case of 7/7 2015 London bombings, no collecting took place soon after the event or, indeed, the next 6 years (Kavanagh 2014).

The rationale for such decisions is often dependent on practical issues, such as storage capacity or perceptions of sensitive collecting practice. In the Brussels attack, for example, written messages on paper and cardboard were archived, while objects such as candles, soft toys, flags or other textiles were not, as it was deemed impractical to keep them (Bouquet and Van Eeckenrode 2018). Nor were images and photographs of the bereaved collected, for fear of disrespecting them and their families. Collecting such images was, also, seen as 'an invasion of "sacrality" attached to these objects by the persons who placed them' (Milošević 2018: 60). In other cases, though, such as in Manchester, families of the bereaved who visited the Manchester Together Archive were particularly interested in any material related to their family members, including images. This response demonstrates the different approaches to the value and significance attached to similar items in different memorials and explains the diversity of collecting decisions.

In many such cases, museum professionals 'feel their way' and improvise. However, the resulting vagueness about the purpose, use and future of the collections can create difficulties in the aftermath. As Schwartz puts it with reference to the One Orlando Collection,

'we forged ahead to document and collect, not realizing how it would assist our community in both its grieving and healing, or how it would affect our own' (Schwartz *et al.* 2018: 106). The task of articulating such aims is usually postponed for the future; as Shayt admits, only time will determine the usefulness of the Smithsonian's Hurricane Katrina collection (Shayt 2006). Besley and Were explain the problem succinctly with reference to the Queensland Museum and State Library of Queensland in the wake of the floods in 2011: 'the two institutions faced a *tabula rasa*; an unprecedented scenario of urgent contemporary collecting where direction and policy had to be developed as the disaster and recovery unfolded' (Besley and Were 2014: 42).

Faced with such unprecedented scenarios, cultural organizations tend to deal with the ensuing uncertainty by falling back to their standard museum processes and treating such memorials as any other collecting project. Indeed, Purcell notes: 'The selected material became an archival collection – arranged, described, preserved, stored, and accessed just like any other collection that is housed in the special collections department of the University Libraries' (Purcell 2012: 234). In some cases, such as the collecting after the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando by the Orange County Regional History Center (Schwarz *et al.* 2018), museums would consider the collecting of spontaneous memorials as part of their mission statement, which is a standard museological approach in dealing with new acquisitions. Accordingly, in her 'A Museum's Reference Guide To Collecting Spontaneous Memorials', Morin highlights a need for just such a collections policy (Morin 2015), as do Besley and Were (2014). In the absence of a collecting policy, many organizations would try to draft such a mission, scope, and selection statement on the spot, as it were.

Yet, the effort to generate and stick to selection criteria rarely goes according to plan. Shayt (2006), discussing the Smithsonian's Katrina Collection, stresses that although the museum had made a list of things that were considered to belong in an ideal material record of the storm, in the end serendipity played a more important role. The same result followed the Queensland Floods in 2011: a 'wish liSt of the types of objects and themes that the curators of the Queensland Museum wanted to collect proved to be over-optimistic (Besley and Were 2014).

Although the above approaches to collecting spontaneous memorials might be considered idiosyncratic, non-standardised and context-specific, they are, nevertheless, considerate and reflective. As the paper will aim to demonstrate in analysing the case of the MTA, this adaptation of collecting practices is a creative process of negotiating the interaction between institutional contexts, professional ethics and social responsibility.

Focus on best practice and practical guidance

The above analysis demonstrates the lack of a shared museum practice with regards to spontaneous memorials. Indeed, most relevant academic literature provides brief or limited descriptions of the collecting practice involved (see for example, Doss 2002; Milošević 2018; Sánchez-Carretero *et al*. 2011; Truc 2018). To address the issues that arise from the largely anecdotal accounts and the lack of a professional framework of reference, some authors have aimed to offer best practice advice and practical guidance on managing spontaneous memorials.[4] Eyre (2006), Morin (2015) and Whitton (2016; 2017) offer such guidelines, including 'dos and don't's' on different steps and timeframes in collecting and managing spontaneous memorials. Maynor provides the most detailed discussion of the 'practical and logistical considerations of how to manage such a crisis and the flood of condolences that follow' (Maynor 2015: 618). She discusses some of the actions that archivists, librarians and academics took in the cases of the 1999 Texas A and M Bonfire Tragedy, the 2007 Virginia Tech Campus Shooting, and the 2012 Sandy Hook School Tragedy. Doss makes similar points, remarking that expectations to save and provide access to spontaneous memorials raise practical and ethical questions, which museum professionals struggle to answer (Doss 2008). Should museums, for example, remove such material from public spaces and store them in less accessible archives at all? Such practical guidance literature represents both an acknowledgement of a lack of shared professional practice and an effort to codify some of the processes involved. These are especially useful in helping institutions and cultural professionals map out logistical challenges.

In some cases, this literature offers a more personal account by cultural professionals or researchers who managed the aftermath of spontaneous memorials. This perspective is useful

in gaining a better understanding of the challenges they faced and the decisions they made. For example, Purcell outlines how the archival collection at the University Libraries at Virginia Tech (after the Virginia Tech shooting on 16 April 2007) evolved, some of the challenges of managing such collections, and the role or archivists in documenting relevant events (Purcell 2012). Similarly, Schwartz *et al*. offer a personal account of their experience developing the One Orlando Collection after the Pulse Nightclub massacre on 12 June 2016 (Schwartz *et al*. 2018). They describe the process of collecting, the information documented about the items, the content of the public exhibitions and some reflections on the psychological impact of this project on the people involved. Similarly, Brown provides an account of the development of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Archives after the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed, including the formation of the task force that oversaw the collecting, storage and documentation plan (Brown 1999).

The point I am raising here is that although such focus on challenges, guidelines and best practice is appropriate and necessary, yet it might divert attention from the creative friction between spontaneous memorialization and museum practices, which some of the above personal accounts reveal. The former looks for museological answers to questions that spontaneous memorials raise; the latter puts emphasis on how museums and their practices adapt and change in the process. It is the latter that this paper focuses on through an in-depth, contextualized and longitudinal research into the discussions, decision-making and impact of such decisions on spontaneous memorials, audiences, users and organizations. In other words, rather than just talk about good or best practice, to what extent can we talk about the emergence of a museum practice of spontaneous memorials?

Emergence of a museum practice of spontaneous memorials

In the 2018 Special Issue on *La Gazette des archives* of the Association of French Archivists (which focus on the memorials after the Paris, Brussels and Nice attacks in 2015 and 2016), the editors Maëlle Bazin and Marin Van Eeckenrode, ask whether we are witnessing the emergence of a new archival practice (Bazin and Van Eeckenrode 2018). Similar points and arguments are made in related, yet limited, literature. Perhaps the most detailed examination of the challenges that spontaneous memorials present to museum practice is by Gardner and Henry, in their 2002 article 'September 11 and the Mourning After: Reflections on Collecting and Interpreting the History of Tragedy'. There the authors explore 'the dilemmas of collecting materials to document the tragedies, as well as the challenge to museums to present exhibitions and public programs that respond appropriately, sensitively, and in a useful way to the terrorist attacks and their aftermath' (Gardner and Henry 2002: 38). Although this article deals with the spontaneous memorials after 9/11, it raises several broader questions as well, such as what to collect (if at all), when to start collecting, and how to resolve the conflict between the preservation and protection of the material, as opposed to its memorial use. As the authors put it, this was a

> task of ushering the tragic present into the historical past, [which] proved to be professionally and personally a trying one [...]. It should not be surprising that many historians experienced a kind of professional crisis of conscience, at least briefly. An epidemic of professional squeamishness seemed to be looming (Gardner and Henry 2002: 39-40).

Similarly, several of the authors referenced above, after highlighting the actions that they or others took, go on to raise questions that those actions pose for museum practice. Maynor asks, 'for whom are these items being kept? What purpose does each archive serve? Does each have a future value and use?' (Maynor 2015: 585). Schwartz et al. ask 'how will the community react to our collecting?' 'What about our current projects of planning the entire museum's redesign?' 'When is too soon to collect? To exhibit? To interpret?' (Schwarz *et al.* 2018: 106). Addressing such questions offers, then, an opportunity to explore how the adaptation described above can be seen as a new museum practice altogether, at the same time revealing the ripple effects of such practice on cultural professionals, organizations and audiences.

In most cases such analysis tends to take the form of retrospective reflection, rather than a documentation of the practice as it unfolds within specific cultural and institutional frameworks. However, the purpose of this article is not to bemoan a lack of systematic studies on collecting spontaneous memorials. Instead, it is to argue that collecting and using spontaneous memorials constitute a new practice altogether, one that is informed by standard museum practices, but that also challenges and goes beyond them. Even more, the practice emerging from it is prompting museum and archive professionals to reflect on their own assumptions and to re-think their own institutions' spaces, activity and engagement with its publics. I will now turn to the MTA to discuss these issues in more detail.

Methodology

In Summer 2017, I co-designed with MAG a research project with the aim of capturing and analysing – both in real time and longitudinally – the process, agents, decision-making and impact of collecting, conserving, storing, using, digitizing and making accessible the MTA. Over the last two years, the research has followed a mixed-methods approach that includes: participant observation in MTA-related meetings and museum activities; qualitative interviews with MAG and Manchester City Council staff, as well as other people involved in different capacities in the development of the archive (such as photographers, filmmakers and artists); interviews and systematic self-observation (Rodriguez and Ryave 2002) of volunteers of the MTA; auto-ethnography and documentary photography and filmmaking; and social media content analysis.

Through these methods, I aimed to document critically and creatively the evolving thinking, interactions with different stakeholders and decision-making about the archive, as well as the impact of those decisions on institutional life, policy and practice. I also undertook a six-month research residency in MAG and together with three MA students conducted a pilot documentation of roughly 400 items of the MTA, which aimed to identify issues, challenges and possible directions for the documentation and digitization of the full collection. The residency led to co-designing with MAG a documentation and access strategy and plan of the memorial material.

Writing just months after 9/11, Gardner and Henry stressed that 'our sense of obligation to the historic nature of the events and their aftermath combines uneasily with the sense that we are still too close to them to be able to judge clearly what is truly historically important' (Gardner and Henry 2002: 38). The use of ethnographic methods and the combination of practice-as-research and research-as-practice mentioned above helped to address this challenge (Smith and Dean 2009). In addition, I drew on Schon's 'reflection IN action' approach. As Schön argues, 'reflection ON action' – namely the process of reviewing the experience afterwards – often misses, inadvertently conceals, or does not expand enough on challenges and issues that emerge in a piece of practice (Schön 1983). Instead, 'reflection IN action', allows the researcher to identify, document and critically reflect on various stages of a project. Participant observation, auto-ethnography and filmmaking were particularly relevant and useful here.

The project and its methodology raised a number of ethical issues, hence I requested and was granted ethical approval by the University of Manchester Ethics Committee to conduct the research. The main issues included being both participant and researcher, anonymity of research participants and the possible distress that talking about the spontaneous memorials and the event they relate to might cause participants. To address these, I developed a research methodology protocol on data collection, analysis and use, according to the ethical research guidance and policies of the University of Manchester. This included procedures and steps to remind participants about my dual role, expressed permission to record conversations, asking non-intrusive questions, taking breaks during interviews, and de-identifying data (unless the participant had given permission for their name to be used). It is worth mentioning that the urgency and speed of the project's initial stages of rescue collecting challenged the standard timeframes and processes of applying for and receiving University ethical approval, which can take several weeks or months. This paper is not the space to discuss this in more detail, but perhaps it is useful to report that the project initiated a discussion at the University about introducing speed ethical approval processes for cases like this.

Furthermore, I needed to think about my own wellbeing in undertaking this research. Archiving and working with material from spontaneous memorials can be emotionally challenging for those involved in the process (Maynor, 2016; Morin, 2015; Schwartz *et al*. 2018; Whitton 2016; 2017). This has been highlighted in the growing literature on trauma, grief and affect in archives (e.g. Caswell 2014; Cifor 2015) and the vicarious or secondary trauma that cultural professionals and researchers experience when working with people who have experienced a traumatic event, or with archives and collections that are linked to traumatic and difficult histories (Sloan, Vanderfluit and Douglas 2019; Gilliland 2014). Accordingly, early in the project, I requested and received emotional support and guidance from specialist psychologists of the Manchester Resilience Hub, a service set up to support people with mental health related problems following the Manchester Arena attack. This was especially helpful in normalizing getting emotional (which happened a few times in project meetings and conferences) and processing those emotions in a positive way, by acknowledging rather than suppressing them.

Because of space limitations and the fact that much of this research is still ongoing, the following discussion draws on data from participant observation of museum processes around the material and interviews with Amanda Wallace (MAG's deputy director), as well as some of the filmmaking undertaken.

From St Ann's Square to the Manchester Together Archive: towards a museum practice of spontaneous memorials

The paper will focus on three main issues in the emerging museum practice around the MTA, which are mapped against three phases of the MTA's development. Phase 1 lasted through the spontaneous memorialization, its completion as the square was cleared on 9 June 2017, and the immediate actions taken with the material after the square was cleared, mainly related to collecting, temporary storage and conservation. This period took place between June and November 2017. The turning point during this period was MAG's decision to preserve everything from the memorial. Phase 2, from November 2017 to May 2018, the first-year anniversary, focused on the refurbishment of a space in MAG, which has now become the home of this archive. This space was conceived — and continues to serve as — a physical embodiment of St Ann's Square's spontaneous memorial, as the paper will argue. Phase 3 is the period since June 2018, in which MTA has begun to settle in MAG and more systematic work with users and audiences has started to take place. I briefly discuss the development of this work below and how the existence of MTA has impacted already on MAG.

Phase 1: Collecting as a 'cultural re-enactment of trauma'

As we have seen already, the decision to keep all non-organic material from St Ann's Square, rather than apply collecting criteria to it, was something that happened in other cases too. In that respect, MTA is not at odds with how cultural professionals have reacted elsewhere — although there are also cases where collection criteria were applied. Indeed, Gensburger, in reference to the Paris 2015 memorial, says that collecting 'resulted in the destruction of several elements, including many flags considered 'redundant' because repetitive' (Gensburger 2019: 220). Instead, in Manchester, rejecting representativeness and embracing completeness was a professional museological defence against the uncertainty of which among the items from St Ann's Square was significant, why and for whom. Sending all 10,000 items to Harwell for dry freezing both stopped the deterioration of the items and gave MAG able time to consider their future. As Wallace puts it, 'we want to save and preserve, and document as much as possible, so we can then make an informed choice about what we do with the masses of stuff that we have'.[5] In this case, professional museum instincts and ethics 'kicked in', which were amplified and further complicated by a heightened sense of civic and social responsibility. MAG staff felt that they had been entrusted with the future of a highly sensitive body of material, of a kind they had no previous experience with. As Wallace says,

> [It is important that] people are really assured that there are people who have taken on that role as custodians, who are taking that responsibility of dealing with it sensitively […] But, also, we are prepared to make decisions about things that won't be kept when that time comes, as well. And that people can be reassured that the decision has been made on a clear basis.[6]

In some respects, the decision to send the items to Harwell for conservation can be seen as a standard museological response, from which it was more difficult to 'escape'. It removed them from the ephemerality of the spontaneous memorial and brought them closer to the status of museum objects.

Yet, the decision to keep everything (all written notes, all balloons and the various other objects) was not simply a postponement of a final or inevitable decision, but an acknowledgment that in this case selective representation would not capture the scale of the memorial, nor the circumstances of its creation as it was effectively co-produced and experienced. Instead, MAG approached what happened in St Ann's Square as a mass participation event that needed to be preserved as such. Indeed, reflecting on the decision to keep everything Wallace says,

> We started to understand that the material was essentially a single memorial, with thousands of constituent parts: from notes written on scraps of paper and thousands of cards and letters, to poems, pictures, soft toys, school art projects, football shirts, and personal tributes. It was all important, and we felt that a decision on what should be kept – and what shouldn't – would have been arbitrary, and detrimental to the meaning and importance of the memorial.[7]

This decision has led to two main developments in terms of museum practice: First, it infused the process of museum collecting with what Sturken calls 'cultural re-enactment of trauma' (Sturken 2007). Sturken approaches the repetition of 9/11 images (such as the twin towers or the photo of a fire-fighter holding a dead child) in tourist souvenirs, new architectural designs and new artworks, as a constant re-enactment of the 9/11 events and images; a 'cultural re-enactment of trauma' as she calls it:

> Repetition is a means through which cultures process and make sense of traumatic events. It is caught up in kitsch and the relentless recoding of trauma into popular culture narratives, yet it is also evidence of the ways that cultures re-enact, sometimes compulsively, moments of traumatic change (Sturken 2007: 28-29).

In a similar fashion, the repeated placing of similar items in St Ann's Square (e.g. written notes, t-shirts, objects with the Manchester bee etc) was a form of cultural re-enactment too: a way to make sense of what happened through the repetitive and participatory form of spontaneous memorialization. In this sense, when Wallace calls the 10,000 items of St Ann's Square a 'single memorial', or when she stresses that selecting a sample to preserve 'would have been detrimental to the meaning and importance of the memorial', she approaches the act and content of the spontaneous memorial as a cultural re-enactment of trauma. By extension, a selective and representative collection would have ignored the 'prescribed emotional content' (Sturken 2007: 20) of each of the items deposited in St Ann's Square (from the mass produced to the very personalized). In contrast, keeping everything constructed the MTA as a record of the way this repetition and use of everyday objects worked as both an individual and collective process of 'making sense' of the event. The MTA is thus not a collection of the materiality of the spontaneous memorials, but of people's embodied and performative participation in them; their cultural re-enactment of trauma. It injects the ritualized code of mourning into a code of museum practice.

Second, and largely as a result of the above point, not only is the MTA not a representation of the spontaneous memorial, it is in fact another form and manifestation of the memorial itself. Rejecting some of the premises of what a museum collection is and being open to treating the MTA as a continuation and expansion of what took place in St Ann's Square represented a profound break from usual collecting and museum practices. Keeping everything was a decision that led to a chain of other actions and reactions that would not have been possible had the MTA consisted of only, say, 100 items of a total of 10,000. Take, for example, what happended with the soft toys and the candles. The roughly 2,000 soft toys retrieved from the spontaneous memorials were washed by members of the Women's Institute and then donated to charities (Belle Vue Productions and Arvanitis 2018a); and a candle artist created 22 new candles from those left in the square, which were used in a church mass on the first year anniversary and then offered to the families of the bereaved (Belle Vue Productions and Arvanitis 2018b). Similarly, when some of the families of the bereaved visited the MTA during the first-year anniversary,

they were invited by MAG to take away anything they wanted. Indeed, a few of them did take away objects, such as pebbles and a lantern with a Manchester bee design, dried flowers and soft toys. Sturken, referring to the sending of soft toys from Oklahoma abroad, notes that such an action is a 'radical way for an archive to operate, given that archives normally acquire and retain objects rather than sending them out to circulate in the world. Yet this is not an ordinary archive' (Sturken 2007: 95). It is unlikely that any of this would have happened if MAG had applied strict collecting criteria to the memorial, which would have led to the formation of a 'representative' collection.

Actions such as the above, of removing items from a museum, fall under broader recent developments in ethical de-accessioning and disposal (Janes 2009; Merriman 2008), creative disposal (Fredheim *et al*. 2018), de-growing collections (Morgan and Macdonald 2018), and recycling as ethical stewardship (Marstine 2017). Indeed, they have been observed in other cases of spontaneous memorials too. For example, as part of the 'I Am Hope' project, staff washed soft toys and sent them to children around the world with a message that linked the toys back to the Oklahoma spontaneous memorial (Sturken 2007). But, here, I am arguing that the washing and donating of soft toys, the making of new candles and the passing on items of the memorial to the families of the bereaved were not just part of a museum's ethical disposal approach or, even, a museological 'response' to the memorial, but a memorial performance itself. It enabled the MTA to continue undergoing an active process of change and transformation. In some ways, MAG itself embraced the dynamic nature of the spontaneous memorial and used it to start developing a museum practice that is driven by the capacity of the MTA to continue enacting the memorial's characteristics as a performative, responsive, and public process of heritage making. The archive of this memorial, in other words, embraces and replicates the malleability of the spontaneous memorial itself. By acknowledging and documenting actions such as the journey of the soft toys, the making of the candles and the taking away of items by families (e.g. see Belle Vue Productions and Arvanitis 2018a), the MTA continues to enact some of the qualities of the spontaneous memorialization itself. Those films and photographs are themselves now part of the MTA, which documents its own process of change and evolution.

This change in thinking offers a perspective of the role of museums as memory spaces that are driven by a focus on process, rather than permanence. It also breaks any notion of linear time — a 'before' and an 'after' — between the formation of the archive and its future uses, by blurring both the spatial and temporal boundaries between the memorial and its archive. In this sense, the MTA functions as an ever active and changing memorial. And this has been possible exactly because of the decision to deal with the whole body of the material from St Ann's Square on equal terms, rather than assign different values (representative, interpretive, aesthetic, or otherwise) to different items of the MTA. Capturing and documenting this reflective process of museum practice in action also extends the memorial into the archive in an analogous way.

Phase 2: MTA as a physical manifestation of St Ann's Square's spontaneous memorial

From about November 2017 up to the first anniversary of May 2018, when the items were returned to MAG after being conserved by Harwell Document Restoration Services, the Gallery went through a process of refurbishing a space in its basement to house the MTA. The decision-making around this process has been captured in the research and requires more space than is available here to expand on it. However, one important outcome of those discussions relates specifically to how the MTA is not only a material and performative manifestation of St Ann's Square's memorial, but also a physical one. The room of the MTA in MAG's basement (see figures 3-5) was fitted with cabinets and chests of drawers, in which the items were placed. Written notes were put in boxes, scented candles, plastic flowers and other items in cabinets, t-shirts, scarves, school projects and artworks in drawers. Clear boxes with tea lights and balloons were stacked against a few of the walls (see figure 6). MAG staff had a few photographs of the spontaneous memorial in St Ann's Square enlarged and hung on the walls. A number of tables were also positioned around the room, where items from the memorials were placed during the first year anniversary, when some family members of the people who were killed visited the MTA (figures 7-9). A sofa, armchairs and a coffee table were purchased and placed in the space, again to cater for the family visits.
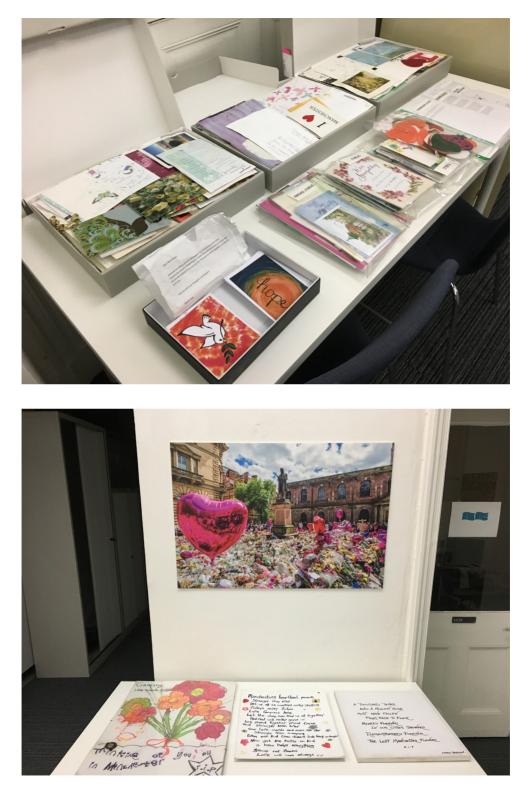
Figures 3-5: The Manchester Together Archive in Manchester Art Gallery

Figure 6: Clear boxes with tea lights and balloons, Manchester Art Gallery

Figures 7-9: Tables with items from the Manchester Together Archive, Manchester Art Gallery

MAG's intention was manifold: to create a storage space for the MTA, allow staff continue their day-to-day duties as they move through the Gallery, and to offer an environment where families could be received and be given access to the MTA material. In other words, this space was not intended to be an exhibition of the MTA, or an open storage display, or a publicly accessible space, though one can argue that the space, as described above, has elements of all these. Haskins and DeRose point out that 'the preservation of street memorials in photographic or digital form, although acknowledging their potency as images of public response to the trauma, does not preserve the spatial context that surrounded the drama these memorials enacted for their audiences' (Haskins and DeRose 2003: 383). In Manchester, this spatial context was, indeed, offered through the combination of elements: photographs from St Ann's Square; the clear boxes with the balloons and tea lights, which created a visual link with the photographs and gave a sense of scale; and the positioning of the cabinets and drawers, which interestingly, though not intentionally, created a circular path reminiscent of the memorial in St Ann's Square (see figure 3). Even more, the scent of the candles and the items laid out on the tables contributed a multi-sensory experience to people who visit the MTA. In that sense, the MTA space has become a three-dimensional embodiment of the spontaneous memorial in St Ann's Square.

In the case of Orlando, Schwarz *et al.* point out that 'our work became, for the hundreds of visitors with whom we interacted, a real part of the memorials themselves' (Schwarz *et al.* 2018: 111). In the case of 9/11, Rivard says that the September 11 Collection 'effectively functions as a national memorial' (Rivard 2012: 91). Doss, too, approaches the memorial items as a bond between the living and the dead, a material presence of an embodied absence that needs to be preserved (Doss 2008). In the case of MTA, it was not just the work, the objects or the knowledge that it contains all the items from the square (either materially or through visual representation in the case of flowers and soft toys) that turned it into a physical manifestation of St Ann's Square's memorial, but the design and experience of the space itself.

This effect of the space accounts to some degree for the reactions of the people who have 'visited' the MTA so far; namely families and friends of the bereaved and Manchester City Council officials. Many of them have felt overwhelmed and emotional by just being in the space.[8] Santino refers to spontaneous memorials as places of communion between the living and the dead (Santino 2006). Similarly, Clark and Franzmann argue that, 'there is material evidence at the memorial sites that communication with the deceased takes place, and that the deceased is believed to be present in some way and capable of receiving the communication' (Clark and Franzmann 2006: 588). This effect was also witnessed during the family visits to MTA. Family members kept looking for traces of their loved ones in the material (e.g. mentions of them in notes), opening drawers and spending time to read some of the written notes. The mother of one of the children who died in the attack said that she felt her child's presence in the space; and another family member said that he intends to visit the MTA every year on the anniversary.

In her list of best practice guidance, Maynor points out that 'while working to create an adequate historical record of the response, keep in mind that even the best archive cannot recreate the visual and emotional experience of the memorial itself' (Maynor 2015: 617). Also, Azaryahu (1996) argues that spontaneous memorials communicate a sacrality, which disappears when the memorials are dismantled (Margry 2011). But based on the above analysis, it could be argued that in the case of Manchester the MTA offers a visual, material, sensorial and performative link to the spontaneous memorial in St Ann's Square. It does not aim to recreate the memorial or its sacrality, but it extends, performs and embodies it. This was an outcome of the choice to keep all items from the memorial, as well as the decisions about its physical layout.

Approaching the MTA as a manifestation and embodiment of the spontaneous memorials raises several issues about the museum's putative impartiality, authority, its search for authenticity and ability to be critically reflective. For example, in the case of the 9/11 collection, Rivard argues that 'viewers are guided to *feel* an emotional connection with objects as they represent the loss of precious life, rather than to think about the larger historical and political those objects existed' (Rivard 2012: 92). Gardner and Henry critique the National Museum of American History's first-year anniversary of 9/11 as more memorial than interpretive, despite the museum's claim that it wanted to engage 'in interpretation and providing historical perspective, not memorializing the past, which they saw as an exercise in evoking emotion, not providing meaning' (Gardner and Henry 2002: 50). The authors go on to pose the question:

> At a time of tremendous, almost overwhelming outpouring of public grief, this has been, on all sides, a hard line to tread. How do museums maintain critical distance without seeming coldhearted? How do we remain compassionate without sacrificing the perspective that our institutions bring to the process of understanding the past and the present? (Gardner and Henry 2002: 50).

These are questions that MAG will need to address too.

Phase 3: Consultation, impact and the future of MTA

The most recent phase of the MTA's evolution has taken place since June 2018, in what I have termed 'Phase 3'. This still-ongoing period is marked by extensive consultation with different groups about the value, role and possible current and future uses of the MTA. This discussion includes the involvement of more MAG staff about the role and impact of the MTA on the institution, its audiences, the city and other stakeholders. What does it mean for an archive like this to be part of an art gallery? What impact might the archive have on its identity, purpose, space and activity? Already, as this paper aimed to argue, we can trace shifts in MAG's practice, such as in the (non) collecting of the memorial. As Wallace has put it,

> It's very different to what we're used to dealing with in museums and galleries and [it] challenges usual collection management processes. We're on a journey with this material and, by focusing on the meaning and usefulness of it in the present (the here and now), we've consciously avoided imposing any constraints on how it is how it is used and handled.[9]

Conversely, being part of an art gallery has already informed the development and use of the MTA. As early as the 12 June 2017, three days after the clearance of the square, Wallace was already trying to understand, if not to justify, the MTA in an art gallery framework:

> I'd also really like to think about commissioning an art photographer as well, to create an archive of visual material […] I think, with the balloons, for instance, as well as the teddy bears, we need to commission a series of photographs, which does something with them in a way that then becomes part of the archive. And that's actually, probably, the sort of thing that can come into our collections as well.[10]

Indeed, MAG went on to commission photographers Shaw and Shaw to take an artistic photograph of the 2,000 soft toys, after they were washed by the Women's Institute and before they were sent to charities. Also, the commissioning of a candle artist to repurpose some of the candles of the square (Belle Vue Productions and Arvanitis 2018b) emerged from the same considerations.

Wallace, above, points to the relationship between the MTA and the MAG's art collections. In the early days, this relationship was interpreted mainly through opportunities to invite an artistic response to the MTA, which would transform it into an 'artwork'. Such measures would induct the MTA into the familiar (to the art gallery) institutional and curatorial process of art production and collection. This process would have served to 'translate' part of the MTA into a body of material, of a kind that the gallery has established procedures and policies for. As Wallace explains above, the results would be the sort of thing that could be accessioned into the MAG's collection. As it stands, the MTA is not formally accessioned as part of the MAG's collection; instead, it exists separately from it in the gallery's collections management system.

More recently, however, the discussion in MAG about the relationship between MTA and the gallery's art collections and spaces has evolved further. Wallace's emphasis, for example, in 'the meaning and *usefulness* of it in the present (the here and now)' [my italics] is an attempt to frame MTA in MAG's new direction as a 'useful museum', a museum 'created by and through its usership', which is the vision of Alistair Hudson, MAG's director.[11] Decisions and discussions such as the above are part of a process to consider the implications of the existence of the MTA in an art gallery context.

This consideration about the use and value of the MTA has also extended to its digital presence. In Summer 2018, MAG, the University of Manchester and Archives+ were awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF; recently renamed National Lottery Heritage Fund) 'Our Heritage' grant to digitize the MTA. As I have argued, the performative, responsive, personal and collective characteristics of the spontaneous memorial have affected the formation of the physical MTA. Subsequently, the HLF project is considering whether and how the MTA as an extension and embodiment of the spontaneous memorial might impact on and possibly be translated into a digital environment. Digital archives of spontaneous memorials elsewhere have aimed to capture a variety of details about the objects affected, such as location, description, material, language used, etc.[12] MTA's digital archive will aim to examine the possibility of going beyond the material or aesthetic characteristics of the items as the basis of the digitization. Instead, it will be led by the interpretive, performative and embodied actions that the physical objects carry, and through filmmaking, oral histories, crowdsourcing, creative workshops and digital storytelling, it will examine the interaction between the physical and digital archive.

Conclusion

This article offers an overview of how managing archives and collections of spontaneous memorials has been discussed in relevant literature. It argues that much of the literature focuses on the outcome and outputs of initiatives to collect and document spontaneous memorials, rather than the process, negotiation and decision-making involved. There is, nevertheless, strong evidence that spontaneous memorials have frequently challenged museum processes for the better, to the extent that they have had to reflectively adapt to meet the needs of the memorials or perceived expectations about the role of these memorials as museum collections.

The formation of the Manchester Together Archive, offers four main arguments and advances on the current state of thinking. First, MAG staff, by keeping everything, adapted and diverted from standard collecting processes, and this decision entailed a creative process of negotiating perceptions of professional ethics and civic responsibility. Second, keeping everything constructed MTA as a record of the materiality and performativity of the spontaneous memorial. This decision led to a museum practice that is driven by the capacity of the MTA to continue enacting the memorial's characteristics as a performative, responsive, and public process of meaning making. Third, the decisions around the design of the space to house the MTA have turned it not only into a material and performative manifestation of the St Ann's Square memorial, but, also, a physical and sensorial one. And fourth, the formation of the MTA in an art gallery context has brought the two into conversation, and there is already evidence of on MTA's impact on MAG policy and practice and vice versa.

Reflecting on the archival formation of Virginia Tech's memorials, Purcell says: 'There are some moments that can define us, but we still have the power to define those moments' (Purcell 2012: 241). Undoubtedly, the same sentiment pertains to the MTA and to the people involved in developing it over the last two years. The discussions and decision-making about the value and meaning of the material from the spontaneous memorial saw MAG staff treading between perceptions of civic responsibility, personal feelings and professional ethics and experience. The MTA is an outcome of this negotiation. What emerges is a material, digital, performative and three-dimensional snapshot of St Ann's Square's memorial, which will continue to adapt and change in response to the values and uses that it will acquire for both MAG and different people over time.

On a more personal note: Maynor talks about how Professor Sylvia Grider transformed the scope of her research activity when she began working with the Texas A and M Bonfire Memorabilia Collection. She quotes her: 'I knew then, that this was going to be my new research project – to deal with the artifacts in that shrine and to understand what that shrine was all about' (quoted in Maynor 2015: 587). I can certainly understand that. The Manchester Arena attack and the events that took place in St Ann's Square were defining moments for me, both personally and professionally. The ongoing research that this paper describes is a collaborative process designed to assist museum and archive professionals reflect on the emerging museum practice of spontaneous memorials.

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Notes

[1]   The only exceptions were potted plants and flowers. The former were replanted around the city and the latter used for compost to plant 'Trees of Hope' for the first year anniversary of the bombing.

[2]   Amanda Wallace, interview by author, digital recording, 10 June 2017, Manchester

[3]   These were three main sites of spontaneous memorials in Manchester. Smaller memorials appeared in different places in the city and beyond.

[4]   See also Longin 2018 for a related discussion about the slow mobilization of archivists in cases of spontaneous memorials and the possible reasons for this.

[5]   Amanda Wallace, interview, 10 June 2017

[6]   Amanda Wallace, interview, 10 June 2017

7   Amanda Wallace, interview, 19 November 2018

8   Those responses were mentioned by MAG staff, who were present in the visits, during their interviews with the author.

9   Amanda Wallace, interview, 19 November 2018

10   Amanda Wallace, interview, 12 June 2017

11   Civil Society Futures. 2017. 'Building a user-generated museum: a conversation with Alistair Hudson' https://civilsocietyfutures.org/building-a-user-generated-museum-a-conversation-with-alistair-hudson/, accessed 2 July 2019.

12   Such as in the cases of the Barcelona archive https://www.barcelona.cat/memorialrambla17a/en/ and Paris archive http://archives.paris.fr/f/hommages/mosaique/?

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