

The Aquarium



Image courtesy of Perth Museum and Art Gallery

Disconcertingly, daylight appears to stream through the windows of the aquarium in the photograph. This room is in the basement, and no natural light has reached this space in the years that I have worked there – and much before. A room that was once light and filled with the living and the aquatic is now dry and dark and stacked with bicycles, farming equipment, chests, dolls houses and lightbulbs. It is the social history store, and holds the history of the area through objects not crafted as fine art, nor pulled from the earth as archaeology. Somehow the earth has crept up around this room, or the museum has sunk into the ground. Regardless, the room's relationship with light and air and space has changed. The space is no longer public and the aquarium remains in name only.

A curator mentioned a few weeks ago, over his cup of tea in the staff room, that there was never any record kept at the museum of anyone being employed to care for the fish in the aquarium, nor is there any record of its removal. There was a flood in the nineties in which the waters of the adjacent river poured through the museum stores, but the fish had disappeared decades before that. They had not, as I asked the curator, been emancipated by the floodwater to populate the River Tay with wild and exotic new species of fish.

If I were responsible for the fish in the museum, I would ink each one with the mark of the collection and enter it into the database. After death, the fish would be preserved – in formaldehyde perhaps, or stuffed and mounted. At the very least, skinned. Perhaps they should be frozen, suddenly, choosing to preserve an instant of life, rather than wait till death (but how to choose the right moment?). It seems irresponsible to allow these items of museum property to escape eternal preservation and their expected contribution to the telling of history. It is surprising that the living should get off so lightly, being allowed to return to the world and continue an existence within the understood cycles of life and death.

Other ethical dilemmas present. Should the fish tank be cleaned, and by whom? Surely this should be the work of the conservator, not the fish keeper. The dirt in the water is part of its narrative – the water holds the marks of the fish and tells a story of the organism and the practice of keeping fish. It should be maintained according to the ethics of conservation, not the ethics of animal cruelty (we do not worry about object cruelty in the museum). Normal use should not be maintained within the museum. What of the offspring of these aquatic organisms? Perhaps longevity is being met by a monitored cycle of life: the individual fish is not part of the collection, but the genetic line is what is being preserved and collected.

It was fashionable for a time for museums to show the living amongst the dead or silent. Museums contained small zoos and menageries. Some museum have retained the creatures: The Horniman for instance, where I spent most weekends as a child. Apparently there is a museum in the Midlands that has a beehive built into the museum's glass front. There are still trace acknowledgements of life that is otherwise unsupported by the museum.

Miriam Mallalieu