Perry-Kessaris, Amanda (2016) *Collecting value/valuing collecting.* London Review of International Law, 4 (1). pp. 211-214. ISSN 2050-6325.

Collecting Value / Valuing collecting
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To curate a collection (or special issue) on a particular theme is to imply that there is inherent value in that theme, and in each exhibited item (1). But the intention in making a collection is not only to expose existing value. It is also to generate different value such that, as Kurt Koffta is said to have put it, the whole is other than the sum of its parts. How so?

There is intellectual value in identifying and attributing old threads, and in developing new ones. The gathering together of a range of voices to focus on a particular theme generates potentially valuable attention for that theme (2). To the extent that this attention can be measured and evidenced, it also has value within the economy of contemporary public intellectual life. That value is measured relatively, and often numerically, in visits, downloads, citations and what any institution or person is willing to pay to support or access it (3, 4).

Perhaps more than all of this, a collection has the potential to create expressive value. John Berger observed in 1972 that people often 'pin pieces of paper: letters, snapshots, reproductions of paintings, newspaper cuttings, original drawings, postcards' on boards in their homes. Within each board 'all the images belong to the same language and ... have been chosen in a highly personal way to match and express the experience' of their creator (5).**

Today this practice is extended online through bookmarks, Pintrest and so on. For Berger these intimate collecting practices are emancipatory, and could 'replace museums' (p. 30). And now Google and the British Museum have teamed up to offer the Google Cultural Institute, an online tool that allows anyone anywhere to curate anything. At first glance, such developments appear to answer designer Jan van Toorn's demand that 'museums should relate to the public as a partner in dialogue not as a teacher' (6).***

But to open a dialogue is more than merely to widen access to a collection, or to the means of reproducing its contents. (7) It is to reveal inconsistencies and gaps, creating space for the audience to be both 'activated' and 'liberated' to take part. It is to facilitate critique, which is in turn to expose, enhance and question value.
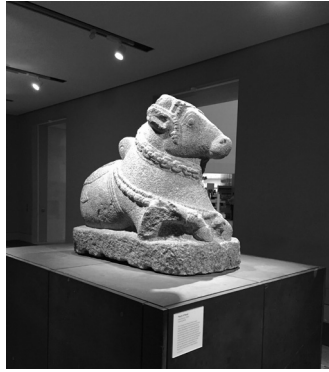
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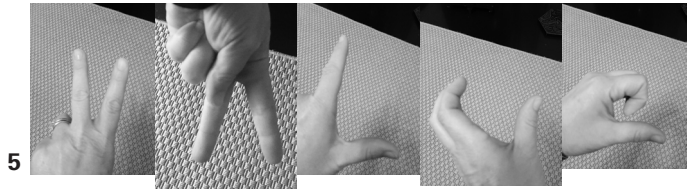

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So a collection
only realises its full value
when its contents

are brought into dialogue
with each other
and with its readers.